The Correspondence(s) of Benjamin and Adorno

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The Correspondence(s) of Benjamin and Adorno

Jeremy Arnott
Abstract

This thesis develops the concept of “correspondence” as a means by which to read the work of Benjamin and Adorno. The term will be taken to entail at once explicit correspondence, in the sense of the letters written to each other (1928-1940), alongside the implicit constellations structuring their relationship. Beginning with Benjamin’s early writings (-1924), I will trace the development of Benjamin’s immanent method of criticism, followed by Adorno’s re-direction (or appropriation) of this method towards his own Marxist concerns, and notions of “critical theory.” This will be shown as a “translation” of Benjamin’s early work, in which Adorno’s re-direction reveals a political capacity inherent in Benjamin’s (original) method. Following this I present their respective readings of Kafka (Benjamin, 1934; Adorno 1954), as a means by which to contrast their respective notions of messianism, politics, and criticism. This will be presented as a moment of “dis-correspondence,” in which their divergent notions of criticism, and messianism are in full repose; however, such a disagreement will be shown to be underpinned by a shared understanding of the possibilities inherent in tradition. Finally, Benjamin’s 1938-39 work on Baudelaire will be presented as emblematic of his “dialectical image,” and historical methodology more generally. Adorno’s infamous letters surrounding this piece will be analyzed, and he will be noted as an important contributor to the development of Benjamin’s methodology, culminating in his own “negative dialectic.” Each chapter presents an isolated argument related to a constellation of particular texts, yet can also be seen in the larger mosaic of the development of correspondence.

Keywords

Benjamin, Adorno, Frankfurt School, Brecht, Scholem, Dialectical Image, Correspondence.
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The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gerschom Scholem: BSC

Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence*: BC

Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*: AT

Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*: ND

Benjamin, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*: “Trauerspiel”

Benjamin, *Selected Writings 1-4*: SW (Vol): (pg. #)

Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*: GS (Vol): (pg. #)

All reference to *The Arcades Project [Passagen-Werk]* are denoted by fragment numbers in square brackets, the respective letters refer to the convolute in which the citation is found. For example, [N2, 2], refers to “Convolute N, subsection 2, number 2.”

A Note on the text:

Architectonically, this project proceeds in sections and subsections which frame and forward the argument. Section breaks are noted by another section or ***. In addition to this it employs both “Parentheses” and “Excurses” which are designed to clarify specific ideas and formulations. Parentheses clarify specific ideas relating to the main argument of the section, while Excurses demonstrate modes by which these formulations could move beyond this specific project. The end of each is denoted by ***.
“Is it so terrible if Benjamin from whom I have learned so much is supposed to have learned something from me?”

- Adorno to Scholem, 1968

“With Adorno, too, the reciprocal interaction [with Benjamin] ought to be studied in both directions, beginning with the seminar the young Privatdozent Adorno devoted to Benjamin’s book on the German Trauerspiel in 1929 and extending to the works Adorno published after the war in which the authority of Benjamin is often evoked.”


“‘He who seeks to mediate between two bold thinkers,’ [Nietzsche] writes in The Gay Science, ‘stamps himself as mediocre: he has not the eyes to see uniqueness: to perceive resemblances everywhere, making everything alike, is a sign of week eyesight.’ The morality of thought lies in a procedure that is neither entrenched nor detached, neither blind nor empty, neither atomistic nor consequential. The double-edged method which has earned Hegel’s Phenomenology the reputation among reasonable people of unfathomable difficulty, that is, its simultaneous demands that phenomena be allowed to speak as such—in a “pure looking-on”—and yet that their relation to consciousness as the subject, reflection, be at every moment maintained, expresses this morality most directly and in all its depth of contradiction. But how much more difficult has it become to convince oneself of the identity of subject and object, the ultimate assumption of which still enabled Hegel to conceal the antagonistic demands of observation and interpretation. Nothing less is asked of the thinker today than that he should be at every moment both within things and outside them…And then the salaried philosophers come along and reproach us with having no definite point of view.”

Introductory Remarks

“One needs a peculiarly dispassionate and steady gaze to consider relationship. The more fleeting glance can easily be mislead by analogy.”


Approaching Correspondents (Or, what is an encounter with the Idea)

To the Reader,

This project began as an attempt to interrogate the correspondence of Benjamin and Adorno in the explicit sense of the letters the two wrote to each other from 1928-1940. I began with their most famous exchange, the 1938-39 letters surrounding Benjamin’s “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” which have gained a degree of infamy due to the perceived harshness of Adorno’s tone. Such a beginning was perhaps due to my pre-established notion of each as a thinker—of Adorno as a Marxist critical theorist, alongside Benjamin as an esoteric critic—and I was guided by such conceptions to explicit moments of correspondence (mostly dis-agreements). It soon became apparent that in order to understand this seemingly isolated encounter I had to go further, into their respective texts and letters, and the intertwined dynamics of their thought. In a sense I realized that focusing solely on correspondence (in the sense of letters) hid a manifold of other affinities and relationships—that it was a fetish of deeper “constellations,”¹ that justified and underpinned what was said. In interrogating correspondences, I found myself chasing constellations with no established method by which to proceed. Hence, what will be proposed is an expanded notion of “correspondence:” one that encapsulates both their explicit textual encounters, alongside the manifold of constellations underpinning their thought. This method seeks at once to understand each in their respective thought, while developing a new conception of intellectual history—of thinking figures in correspondence—that is, of embracing the manifold of constellations latent in every intellectual position. What will be demonstrated in

¹ This notion will be elaborated throughout (Ch. 1), though can be defined provisionally here in the sense of Benjamin’s “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” (Trauerspiel)—“Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars” (34). That is, the Idea arises immanently from the material it apprehends, and constructs relationships (in language) between these material elements, demonstrating them as something larger than themselves. As individual stars become more than themselves when constructed in constellation. When objects are seen in different constellations they are endowed with a radically different sense—in this respect, viewing intellectual development “in constellation” allows one to understand singular thinkers in the broader context of tradition and history, and with respect to other thinkers. Benjamin will further note the Idea as “experienced;” that is, beyond the “intentional” realms of standard (logical/deductive) philosophical contemplation.
the following project is the possibility of such a conception—of understanding the practice of thinking as a constellation of synchronic points, which cites elements from throughout history, and is constantly capable of recombination. In employing such a method, one must break with both a static view of authorship, and a linear view of intellectual history; a destruction which opens the multifarious affinities inherent in every intellectual position. In what follows, such a method will be developed, and justified as immanently arising from Benjamin’s work. It will also be enacted in a performative sense: the manifold of affinities and relationships described in this project are demonstrative of the possibility of thinking in constellation—of embracing correspondence, and Ideas, as opposed to determinate intellectual categories.

Benjamin described the Idea (or constellation) as “beyond intention:” that is beyond the reach of concepts, or deductive intellectual understanding. The Idea is a philosophicalexperience [Erfahrung], the encounter one has when approaching a figure (or epoch) immanently. This project attempts to embrace such experiences, a testament to Benjamin’s late assertion: “In the fields with which we are concerned, knowledge comes only in lightning flashes. The text is the long roll of thunder that follows it.” [N1,1]

I. A “Correspondence” Theory

In what follows the “correspondence(s)” of Benjamin and Adorno will be developed—this term will be taken at once to mean explicit correspondence (in the sense of letters), alongside the manifold of implicit affinities existing between elements of their thinking. Such a project is meant to rectify that tendency within intellectual history which treats academic influence as a “one-way street:” subsuming a manifold of kinships and constellations under a linear narrative in which one thinker surpasses another, often times simply because of their diachronic position. At least since Hegel (and possibly as far back as Plato) such a view has been (philosophically) discredited in favour of a “dialectical” conception, in which truth develops in a historical process, and each moment is thought as equally important in such an un-folding. Despite such assertions, talk of refutation resounds louder than “sublation”

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2 As Hegel writes, describing the dialectical process, as opposed to the vulgar view of “truth” and “falsity”: “The more conventional opinion gets fixated on the antithesis of truth and falsity, the more it tends to expect a given philosophical system to be either accepted or contradicted…It does not comprehend the diversity of philosophical systems as the progressive un-folding of truth, but rather see in it simple disagreements. The bud disappears in the bursting-forth of the blossom, and one might say that the former is refuted by the latter…yet at
[Aufhebung], and few have taken such imperatives seriously for the practice of intellectual history.

With respect to Benjamin and Adorno: most studies on the former hardly mention the latter, and if they do it is in the context of various disputes throughout the 1930s, generally asserting that Adorno did not understand Benjamin’s ideas, or his historical-material circumstances. Against such claims, Adorno will be asserted as a philosophically important interlocutor for Benjamin, one who contributed directly to the development of this thought, particularly in a more “systematic” direction. Likewise, from the Adorno camp (and the “Frankfurt School” more generally), Benjamin is mentioned as an important early interlocutor only to be surpassed by the more orthodox guidance of Horkheimer.

Against such conceptions, the early correspondence of the two will be shown to be the philosophical (epistemic) “origin” of the Frankfurt School, via Adorno’s reformulation of Benjamin’s immanent model of criticism towards his own conception of “critical theory” (Ch.1). Primarily, this project will centre around the development of Benjamin’s dialectical image—from its early formulations as the Idea (1914-26), to its instantiations in his late work (1937-40)—asserting at once a continuity (contra “Marxist break”) in Benjamin’s thinking, along with a persistent role played by Adorno in his development as a thinker. The role of Brecht and Scholem (in Ch. 2), in the development of Benjamin’s thinking will also be noted, specifically regarding his attempt to span the two poles of “theology” and

the same time their fluid nature makes them moments of an organic unity in which not only do they not conflict, but in which each is as necessary as the other; and this mutual necessity alone constitutes the life of the whole.”—Hegel, The Phenomenology of Spirit, 2.

3 Most notably: Sam Weber’s, Benjamin’s – Abilities, and John McCole’s, Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition. Both present cohesive readings of Benjamin with little mention of the philosophical importance of the Institute, or Adorno. More common are studies as Jennings’s Dialectical Images, or Wolin’s, An Aesthetic of Redemption, which treat Adorno, though he is “contained” as an isolated incident. These issues of intellectual reception will be dealt with more substantially in Ch. 1.

4 “Systematic” will not be taken in the orthodox sense of a philosophical, or metaphysical system (especially given Adorno’s aversion to such forms), rather as reproducible, or “applicable”—as one “applies” “critical theory” to a given text or phenomena. Adorno was one who developed Benjamin’s methods in such a way, into his own “negative dialectic.” Adorno developed an applicable model of criticism which he applied to a diverse range of phenomena, that is somewhat pre-supposed, hence betrays Benjamin’s commitment to immanence. This will be developed in more detail in Ch. 1.

5 This is endemic to most studies of the Frankfurt School as a generalized, or homogenous entity, notably Martin Jay’s, The Dialectical Imagination, and Rolf Wiggershaus’s, The Frankfurt School.
“materialism” in his 1934 writings on Kafka. Once this has been demonstrated, Benjamin’s conceptions of eschatology and criticism can be placed in contrast with Adorno’s so as to demonstrate each in their respective singularity, and the growing divergence in their conceptions of criticism. The final plateau (Ch. 3) of correspondence will explore Benjamin’s late writings on Baudelaire (1938-39) as demonstrative of his dialectical image, alongside Adorno’s now infamous response to the essay. Here the dialectical image will be justified as a constellation of divergent elements from throughout Benjamin’s thought, alongside a consistent role played by Adorno (as an interlocutor) in its development, a role which culminated in the development of his own “negative dialectic.”

This project attempts to span two poles of its own: intellectual history and philosophical exegesis, demonstrating the interlinked, or corresponding nature of each. The notion of correspondence provides a way to think the two in an immanent sense: with respect to their own work, each other, and the philosophical tradition—as active thinkers of import for our present moment. Susan Buck-Morss’s work should be taken as path-breaking in this respect, specifically her 1979 study, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, which demonstrates the possibly of understanding intellectual relationships in both a historical and philosophical sense, against the static notions of intellectual historicism. As Chapter 1 will demonstrate, it is such a re-thinking of “origin” that allows experimentations such as the present study to take place. In her foundational reading of Benjamin’s *Arcades, The Dialectics of Seeing* (1989), Buck-Morss takes such methodologies further, illustrating the possibility of reading Benjamin not along “quasi-dialectical” or linear developmental lines, but rather of reading Benjamin’s thought in “constellation:” that is, as a mosaic of synchronic elements centering on the development of the “dialectical image.” Such a method recognizes that Benjamin’s thought did not develop chronologically—“as beads on a rosary”—but rather episodically, synchronically, and in an often retroactive way, with early methodologies gaining a radically

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6 This is seen decisively in method of the work, which presents an intellectual history of the development of the Frankfurt School in a historical-biographical sense, alongside a synchronic history of the development of “negative dialectics” via Adorno’s engagement with Benjamin, Horkheimer, and the philosophical tradition more generally.

7 As she writes: “To the mind that would comprehend intellectual phenomena in terms of logical or chronological development wherein one thing leads to another…his [Benjamin’s] work offers little satisfaction. It is grounded, rather, on philosophical intuitions sparked by cognitive experiences reaching as far back as childhood. These “develop” only in the sense that a photographic plate develops: time deepens definition and contrast, but the imprint of the image has been there from the start.” (*The Dialectics of Seeing*, 7).
new sense when employed in different contexts. Such a form of development accounts for much of the terminological inconsistency and ambiguity throughout Benjamin’s work—one cannot say his early Idea is overcome in the dialectical image (though each contains elements of the other)—his thinking develops in constellations, and correspondences, blasting open the continuum of linear intellectual history. Such a method is particularly useful in approaching Benjamin, who throughout his life, sought to redefine the possibilities of philosophy to include a broader range of experiences (both intellectual and otherwise). Benjamin should be seen as the thinker who sought to maintain an openness to influence and encounters, and to reflect such experiences on the level of thought—it is in this sense that he should be considered a fundamentally immanent thinker, one who sought to collapse ridged distinctions between life, correspondence, and work.

In the present study the notion of “correspondence” will be proposed as an *immanent* method of reading both the life and work of Benjamin and Adorno: a notion that at once arises from the work of Benjamin, and provides a means by which to re-think their relationship, and perhaps intellectual encounters more generally. In a primary sense, the correspondence of Benjamin and Adorno entails the letters the two wrote to each other from 1928-1940 on topics ranging from personal finances, to the dialectical method. However, such encounters are underpinned by deeper affinities that are beyond the reach of a simple comparative study, based on a shared *experience* of history and tradition. Put otherwise, one cannot comprehend their explicit correspondences without a deeper understanding of their implicit philosophical correspondences. Such deeper affinities will now be justified via a reading of Benjamin’s early work on language.

i. **Language, Relationship, Correspondence**

Following Cacciari, it can be argued that Benjamin’s thought centres on the persistent question of (re)presentation [*Darstellung*]: the mode by which thought should relate itself to language (or rather, express itself in language). From his early work onwards, Benjamin

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8 Throughout this study the notion of “synchronic” (contra “diachronic”) will be taken to mean a notion of intellectual history based on constellations, or correspondence(s). That is, one that forms affinities between divergent moments in time (as in Benjamin’s historiographical model), hence is not based on a linear (diachronic, historicist) notion of intellectual development.

9 See Cacciari, *The Necessary Angel* Ch. 3. Throughout this project *Darstellung* will be taken to mean representation, presentation, and even performance. This is in reference to Benjamin’s imperative of philosophy.
will assert “truth” [Wahrheit] as inextricably bound up with (re)presentation—it is not seized by, but rather emerges from within language. In this sense, one could place a consistent question over Benjamin’s work: an attempt to interrogate the relationship of (re)presentation to criticism, history, experience, and thinking more generally. Hence the importance of “style” throughout Benjamin’s work, and his continual interrogation of the writing of philosophy—an imperative that the form in which thought is carried out is interlinked with the method, and the practice of philosophy. Many of Benjamin’s disputes with Adorno centre on such questions of representation, with Adorno criticizing Benjamin’s employment of surrealist montage, or Brechtian “alienation-effects” as stylistic choices. Adorno, instead, upheld his own method, informed by the enlightenment practices of the Institute. In this way, Adorno could be said to contribute to Benjamin’s thought by aiding in such questioning of representation: their letters (and Benjamin’s letters more generally) can be read as, sights of experimentation and interrogation, as to the proper form the practice of philosophy should take. Or, put in Benjamin’s terms, how the Idea should best be rendered in language. Such experimentations will be demonstrated as particularly important in the development of Benjamin’s own reflections on the dialectical image. Further, it is because Benjamin and Adorno’s relationship occurs in language that it is elevated above a mere intellectual “similarity.”

In an early fragment, “Analogy and Relationship” (1920) Benjamin warns of the danger of conflating superficial “analogy” with “relationship.” The former designates the simple awareness of “similarity,” while the latter aims at a fundamental constellation of essences: “Relationships are not established by similarity. Only where the latter shows itself superior to analogy [“similarity”]—which ultimately must be shown everywhere—can it

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as the (re)presentation of Ideas. For more on this see Jacobs, “Benjamin Topographically Speaking,” in Theoretical Questions, 6.

10 As he writes in the Trauerspiel, “It is characteristic of philosophical writings that it must continually confront the question of representation [Darstellung]” (28). He goes on to assert the treatise (prose form) as the mode by which philosophy encounters “truth” (which is beyond intention), given that it places representation [Darstellung] at the forefront. Further, as he writes in “Berlin Childhood around 1900,” describing the literary text as an enfolded sock—as the “folding” of form and content: “It taught me that form and content, veil and veiled, are the same. It led met to draw the truth from literature as warily as the child’s hand retrieved the sock from ‘the pocket’” (SW 3: 374).
indicate relationship, which can be directly perceived only *in feeling* (neither in intuition, nor in reason).”\textsuperscript{11} While “analogy” bases comparison on a determinate judgement of categories (causality), or on metaphoric relations; “relationship” aims at something higher. For Benjamin this is “expressionless, non-sensuous similarity;” as a parent is related to the child, not in a causal, or determinate sense, *but directly* in terms of an affinity. Such a relationship is *experienced* (“in feeling”), and does not take place on the level of reason, or intuition. It is such a “relationship” that is aimed at in the present study: one not based on causal, or determinate categories, but on the implicit affinities, experiences, and correspondences linking Benjamin and Adorno. Benjamin will elaborate this conception of relationship further in his text “On the Doctrine of the Similar” (1933), writing:

> It is now language which represents the medium in which objects meet and enter into *relationships* with each other, no longer directly, as once in the mind of the augur or the priest, but in their essences, in their most volatile and delicate substance...in other words: it is to writing and language that clairvoyance has, over the course of history, yielded its old powers.\textsuperscript{12}

Such a relationship of essences occurs in language—as a constellation—and it is language that marks the “-ability”\textsuperscript{13} of such relationships to be to be created across history, and experimented with anew. The essay interrogates not only the ability of art works to relate mimetically to the world they apprehend, but the general ability of the human to create and perceive similarities; yet in order for such similarities to be termed as robust encounters they must occur in *language*. That is, in order for them to be elevated above the mythical similarity of nature, affinities must be presented in language as “relationships.”

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\textsuperscript{11} Benjamin, “Analogy and Relationship” *SW 1*: 208. The fragment begins cryptically, as Benjamin admits that “analogy” and “similarity” are conflated throughout. Elsewhere in the fragment, he defines “analogy” as a “metaphoric similarity,” or a relationship based simply on what objects have “in common.” This is opposed to “relationship” which is established “non-sensuously” through the conflation of essences—as the son’s relationship to the father is not based on ‘similarity,’” rather on a relationship of essence.

\textsuperscript{12} Benjamin, “Doctrine of the Similar,” *SW 2*: 697-8. This text was published (first) in the same year as “On the Mimetic Faculty” (1933); the texts deal with the similar thematic of “mimesis,” though Benjamin may have considered the later a “second draft” of the former. However, the relationship is more complex (especially given the theme of mimesis), and should be considered a “re-writing,” as opposed to simple a second draft. See, Anson Rabinbach “Introduction to Benjamin’s ‘Doctrine of the Similar’.”

\textsuperscript{13} For Samuel Weber, “-ability” [-*barkeit*] is of great import throughout Benjamin’s work, in that he is concerned not so much with the content of specific translations, or critiques, but with the broader “ability” to partake in such gestures. Weber grounds this by pointing to the persistence of concepts such as “reproducibility,” “citability,” “translatability” and “criticizability” throughout Benjamin’s oeuvre. See *Benjamin’s -Abilities*, Ch. 1-7.
In the revised “On the Mimetic Faculty” (1933), Benjamin speaks of the world of “resemblances” perceived by the child—a world of reconciliation in which words and things are interchangeable. This world is also that of myth and nature, which produces mere similarity: “the human gift of seeing resemblances is nothing other than a rudiment of the powerful compulsion in former times to become and behave like something else.”\footnote{Benjamin, “On the Mimetic Faculty,” \textit{SW} 2: 721.} Despite nature’s production of similarities, Benjamin insists that the human production of resemblances has the ability to elevate and “awaken” mute nature—a movement away from sensuous resemblances (nature), into the non-sensuous realm of language.\footnote{The relationship between “sensuous” and “non-sensuous” similarity in Benjamin is extremely complex, and deserves a more serious treatment than is afforded here. Benjamin will insist that all human speech, and language, contain within them an element of the original world of reconciliation (before the “fall” into language)—this is what he will call the originary power of “the name” (the Jewish \textit{tikkun}). See “On Language as Such” (1916). In both 1933 essays Benjamin asserts that even after the fall, language contains and “image” [\textit{Bild}] of this world of reconciled similarity—that language communicates itself, and a time of reconciliation. An affinity is evident here with Wittgenstein and his “picture-theory of meaning,” and an extremely productive study could interrogate this relationship.} This relates back to his early essay, “On Language as Such and the Language of Man” (1916), where he asserts that humans have “fallen” into language; though in this fall they gain the additional ability to produce relationships above mere similarity, and it is such possibilities (relationships, constellations, correspondences), which allows history to progress beyond mere nature. Because such relationships occur in language—unbound from the “mere similarity” of nature—a new possibility of experimentation and construction is opened in the human mimetic capacity; non-sensuous similarities contain within themselves the additional power of re-arrangement (citation), or the re-inscription of meaning.\footnote{In his “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” Benjamin will define the Idea (constellations) as such a possibility—that because “non-sensuous” similarity occurs in language it possesses the ability to be destroyed or recombined and experimented with. Because of this, criticism for Benjamin contains a substantial “destructive” moment—a “burning of the husk” (33), or destruction of its external form—that is, as destruction of previous constellations, and “non-sensuous” similarities, in the formation of new relationships.}

In his late work on Baudelaire (1938-39), Benjamin examines the means by which Baudelaire’s poetry attempts to “awaken” the mute “second nature” of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century—creating “correspondances”—which attempt to rise above the mythologies of commodity capitalism. What is essential is not so much the success or failure of such endowments, rather the capacity, or “-ability,” of new experimentations and constellations. A tragic sort of hope exists in Baudelaire’s poetic gestures, the ability to create affinities against the mere
similarity of mechanical reproduction. It is in language, and through language that such relationships, correspondences, and experimentations are able to take place.

Evoking such a mimetic capacity, Fredric Jameson will assert Adorno’s relationship to Benjamin as “liberation by mimesis:” “…as the practical demonstration of the possibility of another kind of writing—which is to say another kind of thinking.”\textsuperscript{17} Through the mimetic capacity of language, one learns to play, while discovering the ability of (re)construction in the present moment. In aiming at such relationships, what is allowed is not simply an understanding of the similarities (or differences) between the two thinkers, but an attempt to (re)present them in a way that allows experimentations to take place—that each contains with them a manifold of constellations, which can be re-combined, endowing them with a radically new sense. Thus they are thought not in the historicist sense of “once upon a time,” as static figures, but in an active sense for our present moment. Describing Benjamin’s work on Baudelaire (1938-39), Terry Eagleton describes this ability as “re-constellation,” that is the ability for the past to always be re-combined, and experimented with.\textsuperscript{18} The present study takes such a model of language as its starting point, viewing Benjamin and Adorno in “relationship,” as figures that can be constructively interrogated (or “re-constellated”).

ii. On Method
At this point, it is useful to clarify the usage of several terms which will be employed throughout this project, and also to describe of the way by which it will proceed more generally. The notion of “correspondence” will be expanded to include the notion of “constellation”—allowing for an expanded notion of intellectual history to be thought. “Constellations” will be taken in the sense of Benjamin’s “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” (Trauerspiel, 1925): as immanent assemblages of phenomena arranged under the Ideas (in language). Through such linguistic assemblages, these material elements are elevated out of

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{17} Jameson, \textit{Late Marxism}, 52. Though his mention of Benjamin is brief, the work focusing mainly on Adorno, what is essential is that Jameson does not think the relationship between the two in “historicist” terms, rather elaborates the two in a mimetic constellation. For more on the role of mimesis in the work of Adorno and Benjamin, see Nicholson, \textit{Exact Imagination, Late Work}, Ch. 4 This relationship between mimesis, and experimentation will be clarified in Ch. 2 through a reading of Brecht.\textsuperscript{18} Eagleton, \textit{Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism}, 119.}
mere particularity, and are able to participate in the “genuine unity of truth”\(^{19}\)—that is, in a broader philosophical conversation (or tradition). Thinking correspondence in this sense allows thinkers such as Benjamin and Adorno to be approach *immanently*, thinking them not as static figures, but rather as constellations of divergent entities that can be experimented with and re-combined. Benjamin was not simply a thinker who lived from 1891-1940, but an assemblage of correspondences and constellations with his contemporaries and thinkers throughout history (as is Adorno).

Closely related to this is Benjamin’s later “dialectical image,” the development of which will frame this project. Arising as the major methodological tool for his late work (*The Arcades* (1927-40), Baudelaire (1938-39)), it will be shown as continuous with his early formulation of the constellation, though applied to a greater range of phenomena (the 19\(^{th}\) century), and utilized against dominant historicist frameworks.\(^{20}\) It will be taken as the constellation of historical entities with the “time-of the now” [*Jetzt-zeit*], as the “flash” that occurs when historical entities are recognized (or become “legible”) from the perspective of the present moment (Ch. 3). This will be shown as a mode by which history can be re-written (or re-constellated), from the present moment; and a method through which Benjamin and Adorno can be re-thought from *our perspective* today. Hence what is proposed is a turning of Benjamin’s methodology upon himself, Adorno, and intellectual relationships more generally.

This project will proceed as a genealogy of the major episodes of the Adorno-Benjamin correspondence from 1928-1940. These episodes will centre on the development of Benjamin’s methodology (constellation to dialectical image): examining its unfolding in his texts and correspondence, alongside Adorno’s various utilizations of it. Such developments are by no means linear, and should be seen as synchronic with the main chronology of the text. What will be argued is that Adorno formulates his own model of criticism (the negative dialectic), based on Benjamin’s early writings, and concept of immanent criticism.

\(^{19}\) “Phenomena do not, however, enter into the realm of Ideas whole, in their crude empirical state, adultered by appearances, but only in their basic elements, redeemed. They are divested of their false unity so that, thus divided, they might partake in the genuine unity of truth.” Benjamin, *Trauerspiel*, 33.

\(^{20}\) Such a reading will go against the trend of asserting a Marxist “turn” in Benjamin (1933-34) following his encounters with Brecht. As will be demonstrated, Benjamin does not break with his early method to embrace Marxism, rather recognizes a possible affinity of Marxist concerns with his own early writings, seeking to apply his methodology on a larger scale; that is to history and politics. For more on the relationship between constellation and dialectical image see Jennings’s, *Dialectical Images*, particularly 164-65.
Throughout their correspondence, Adorno will hold fast to many of these early distinctions, presenting them as imperatives to Benjamin, who constantly sought to elaborate his thinking in new directions in line with his program to establish an expanded notion of experience. Many of their disputes can be said to arise from such divergent notions of method; or the fact that Adorno held somewhat of a static methodology throughout his life, while Benjamin constantly sought new outlets and applications for his. Due to this, Adorno’s objections to Benjamin gain a consistency throughout their correspondence, as he constantly issued imperatives from the perspective of his own early reading of Benjamin—in a sense citing Benjamin against himself, forcing him to confront and come to terms with his own intellectual development.

The notion of correspondence as constellation invites one to consider new modes by which phenomena are able to be grouped, and different modes by which intellectual relationships can be thought. The main senses in which the relationship between Adorno and Benjamin will be thought in this study will be stated here for reference throughout:

1. As Constellation: this in the sense of Benjamin’s 1925 “Epistemo-Critical Prologue,” in which Ideas are defined as constellations: as immanent groupings of phenomena held together in language. Primarily, this refers to the sense discussed earlier of thinking the two as constellations of divergent entities—that is, as assemblages of experiences and interactions with each other and tradition. Related to the earlier discussion of “similarity” and “relationship,” constellations are groupings of elements not based on what one has “in common,” in fact Benjamin will assert them as the contrast of the “unique and the extreme,” that is, of wildly divergent entities. This will allow the two to be seen as correspondents of “difference:” that despite fundamental disagreement on issues of aesthetics and politics, correspondence allows them to be held together (in constellation) as interlocutors. This will become particularly evident with regard to their respective readings of Kafka, and Adorno’s disagreements with Benjamin over his Baudelaire study. Despite disagreement (difference), the two are held together in correspondence—they continue a relationship in an attempt to clarify their respective position. In a different sense, constellations allow one to experiment with divergent combinations of phenomena,

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21 As Benjamin writes: “The Idea is best explained as the representation of the context in which the unique and extreme stands alongside in counterpart” (Trauerspiel, 35). This will be discussed as the phenomenon of “origin” (Ch. 1), by which an entity “sets itself apart” (as unique) from other entities in the stream of tradition. As Benjamin will write later in the “Prologue,” it is such “extreme” entities which oftentimes define a genre most aptly—that difference is more apt for defining entities than similarity.

22 This is in stark contrast to Benjamin’s relationship with Scholem, in which there are times of dis-agreement (1933-40) where the two ceased to write to each other (or wrote seldom). Though there are periods of the cessation of correspondence between Adorno and Benjamin, during their most profound disagreements, the two continue to write to each other—specifically following Benjamin’s 1935 Exposé, his 1936 essay on the “Work of Art,” and his 1938-39 Baudelaire studies.
hence their letters become a site of experimentation in which the two perform or act out possible readings and interpretations.

2. As Translation: this sense arises from Benjamin’s 1923 “The Task of the Translator,” which defines translation as a mediation between the way of meaning of two different texts—as a creative interrogation of the “original” in the reproduction. Adorno specifically, will translate many of Benjamin’s ideas into spheres beyond the reach of Benjamin’s original intentions (music, sociology, philosophy), endowing the “original” with a radically different sense. Adorno’s applications of Benjamin’s method, specifically in the spheres of Marxism, will be shown to “awaken” Benjamin to many of the capacities inhering in his work.

3. As Correspondance (Baudelaire): for Benjamin’s Baudelaire, correspondence is a means by which to act poetically (allegorically) within the fallen world—creating new associations—endowing “second nature” with radically different meanings. Historically speaking, Benjamin and Adorno’s relationship emerged at a moment in which such intellectual relationships became impossible—during the rise of Fascism, and destruction of experience and the tradition inherent in it. Such relationships held out hope for the possibility of reconciliation, of a time in which intellectual encounters could un-fold without historical turmoil. As Benjamin wrote to Scholem in 1939, “Every work we succeed in publishing now could be said to have been wrested from the forces of darkness.” The same could be said of his letters to Adorno—that such relationships held out hope that the world could be different.

These possible relations should not be seen as exhaustive, or mutually exclusive and the reader is invited to forge his or her own “correspondences” between the two. What is essential is the ability to read the two in correspondence, and to show them as constellations which are re-citable in our present moment, and throughout history.

Historicist notions of intellectual history—alongside static views of authorship, or the unified notion of a “school”—cover over the manifold of affinities present in every intellectual position. Benjamin is at once in dialogue with Adorno, Plato, and the tradition more generally, citing a diverse array of figures in constellation. By presenting Benjamin in constellation with divergent thinkers, one is able to understand his thinking in a fundamentally different sense; the same is true of Adorno, or any thinker for that matter. This will be demonstrated as particularly relevant with respect to the “Frankfurt School,” allowing it to be thought not as a past-event, but as a manifold of affinities which can be re-cited, or fulfilled today. This project will proceed chronologically (1914-40), through episodes centring on particular periods of time demarcated by particular texts; while recognizing that

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23 BSC, 262. Adorno elaborates the utopian possibility contained within the letter: “Writing letters creates a fiction of life within the medium of the frozen world” (234); and further “…for him the letter letter represented the wedding of something in the process of disappearing and the utopia of its restoration.” (“Benjamin the Letter Writer,” 236).
Adorno and Benjamin’s thinking developed in constellation: that is, not in a linear sense, but through the creation of diverse experimentations across history in a synchronic sense. Thus oftentimes the true significance (or “truth content”) of their thinking is not realized until it is placed in repose with elements of “pre” or “post” history, both with respect to their own work, and in the larger sense of tradition.

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The story is told that the two were introduced at the urging of Kracauer in 1923; speaking retroactively, Adorno described “…Benjamin as one of the most significant human beings that ever confronted me.”24 Despite fleeting encounters throughout the decade, their explicit (written) correspondence did not begin until 1928-29, specifically following the “Königstein program” (1929): a meeting later described as “world-historical” where the two laid out a program for a shared prima philosophy, based on many of the formulations in Benjamin’s Trauerspiel study, which Adorno as a Privatdozent, had begun to teach in 1929. Despite the prolific nature of their correspondence, the two met rarely throughout the 1930s, especially following Hitler’s 1933 rise to power.25 One could assert that their intellectual relationship developed in spite of this lack of physical proximity; more likely, it is perhaps because of the absence of physical proximity that their relationship developed in the way they did: both understood the essential nature of their correspondence and sought to fan the spark of this relationship through the medium of language. This is especially clear when one considers Benjamin’s relationship with Brecht, with whom Benjamin spent large amounts of time throughout the 1930s (often times summering at his home in Svenborg, Denmark). However their relationship was more of a “one-way street,” with Brecht exercising considerable influence upon Benjamin’s materialism, with little evidence of this being a reciprocal interaction.26 Speaking to the idea of “relationship(s)” being defined in language: Benjamin

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24 Adorno Erinnerungen (1964), 67. Quoted in Buck-Morss, Origin of Negative Dialectics, 6. At the time of this meeting, Benjamin was 11 years senior to Adorno.
25 The two met most intensely between 1927-29 when Adorno frequented Berlin. Following Hitler’s rise to power (1933), Adorno fled to London (1934), and onwards to New York in 1937-8 while Benjamin remained predominantly in Paris (the two met there in 1936, and in San Remo in 1937). Their most important meetings will be argued as the 1929 “Königstein Program,” alongside their 1937 conversations in San Remo due to the intellectual “agreements” inaugurated in each.
26 Benjamin first met Brecht in 1929, as Scholem notes, though the two shared an affinity regarding the possibility of theatre, Brecht seems to have influenced Benjamin more directly: “Brecht was of a harder nature and seemed to have made a deeper impact upon the more sensitive Benjamin, who entirely lacked athletic qualities.” The Story of a Friendship, 129. This is further demonstrated by the importance Benjamin placed on
and Adorno’s relationship developed in the way it did because it had to occur in language—that is in texts, and letters—producing philosophical encounters above mere “similarity.” Because of this, the letter form itself became a site of experimentation where the two elaborated and preserved daring theoretical formulations.

As Adorno correctly identified, Benjamin was a prolific letter writer, engaging in non-monogamous correspondence (both implicit, and explicit) with a variety of figures, most notably Brecht and Scholem (Ch. 2). Interestingly, Benjamin sought to keep his correspondents compartmentalized, particularly Brecht, whose influence he would attempt to hide, specifically from Adorno but also from Scholem. Benjamin’s letters to Scholem resound in a decidedly intimate tone, speaking of a friendship rooted in early intellectual encounters and in the Jewish tradition. His encounters with Brecht (to Adorno’s dismay) centred around questions of Marxist politics, and the role of the critic (and artist) in the class struggle, positions which in many ways clashed with his early writings. What then is the specificity of Adorno as a correspondent? In one sense—though he did not join officially until 1938—Adorno embodied many of the ideals of the Institute for Social Research, and persistently mediated between Benjamin and figures such as Horkheimer and Pollock: attempting to interest the Institute in Benjamin’s thinking, and Benjamin in the Institute’s program of critical theory. This position as a mediator was afforded by the fact that Adorno was interested in Benjamin’s thinking as such—beginning with his seminar in 1929 on Benjamin’s Trauerspiel Adorno sought to apply and further Benjamin’s ideas—fully endorsing Benjamin’s program to articulate a broader notion of experience along systematic

Brecht’s opinions regarding the topics (Kafka, Baudelaire), and political character of his work. Specifically see, “Diary Entries” (1938) SW 3: 335-343. One could speculate that this relationship occurred the way it did because it did not occur in letters, rather centred on physical interactions.

27 Speaking to Benjamin’s prolific correspondence, and “talent” for intellectual friendship, Adorno writes: “Within himself and in his relationships with others he gave unreserved primacy to spirit, and this, rather than immediacy, became his form of immediacy” (“Benjamin the Letter Writer,” 234).

28 This is particularly evident with the extremely Brechtian “Author as Producer” (1934), which Benjamin kept from both Scholem and Adorno.

29 For Scholem’s elaboration of this intellectual friendship see Walter Benjamin, The Story of a Friendship, which is particularly insightful with respect to Benjamin’s early writings (1916-1923), and the role played by Scholem in the formulation of Benjamin’s early views on language (“On Language as Such” (1916) was originally formulated as a letter to Scholem to resolve a dispute). As will be demonstrated in Ch. 2, correspondence with Scholem was essential in developing Benjamin’s reading of Kafka (1933-34).
lines (Ch. 1). Not only did Adorno praise the topics of Benjamin’s inquiries (Kraus, Kafka, The Arcades), but he sought to comprehend and supplement Benjamin’s methodology: specifically, his conception of immanent criticism, and his historiographical notions of the dialectical image, notions that Adorno would develop into his own formulations of critical theory, and the negative dialectic.

Despite this, their methodologies should by no means be conflated, as profound differences will emerge between them throughout the 1930s; but such differences emerge in stark response only because of the profound (and prolific) correspondence existing between the two, because the two maintained their differences in language and correspondence. It has become far too commonplace to emphasize the differences between the two, over what they had in common—oftentimes presenting Adorno as a contrarian zealot, as opposed to one who proposed a genuine reading of Benjamin’s work. An aspect of this study will be the destruction of such an image of Adorno: presenting him as a genuine reader of Benjamin’s work, with consistent criticisms regarding what he felt to be the overemphasis on Brechtian and surrealist categories in Benjamin’s writing. Further, he will be shown as an important translator of many of Benjamin’s ideas, in that he experimented with them in contexts differing from their original use, leading to his own Marxist notion of criticism, and forcing Benjamin to consider the political implications of his own work. Adorno read Benjamin in an active sense from the perspective of his own situation. He did not engage as a passive receiver of tradition; rather, as Benjamin’s “storyteller,” he sought to experiment and further Benjamin’s ideas in his present moment. Hence, it will be shown that Adorno was an ideal reader of Benjamin, in that he took Benjamin’s imperatives of immanence and experimentation seriously, and in doing so provides a model by which we might approach past figures in our present.

Benjamin and Adorno’s letters, texts, and encounters, contain traces of events that would later become “world-historical:” the rise of fascism, the crises of modernity, alongside technological innovation. While these texts should not be reduced to a mere product of such circumstances, such events should be seen as an integral part of their composition. Such a

30 This often entails pointing to the fact that Adorno maintained the formal pronoun “Sie” (contra “Du”) in his letters to Benjamin; while Benjamin addressed Adorno more cordially (“Du;” “Dear Friends” (to Gretel and Adorno)). However, such a superficial reading ignores the depth of the philosophical engagement the two shared—and it is perhaps this personal distance that allowed such an engagement with Ideas.
questioning of authorship’s relation to historical circumstances is integral to Benjamin’s conception of criticism: namely the development of a constructive view of authorship, over and against a “symbolic” (cultic, or reductive (historicist, materialist)) understanding of the author’s role. In his 1924 “Goethe’s Elective Affinities,” Benjamin takes aim at figures such as Gundolf, whose biography (Goethe, 1916), resulted in the creation of a “mystical author cult” around Goethe—presenting Goethe as an ideal and mythical figure, clouding over the historical elements in Goethe’s text. Benjamin will level a similar criticism against Max Brod’s presentation of Kafka as a “saintly figure” (Ch. 2), which masked the dissonant elements of Kafka’s work within a uniform theological interpretation. Against this, Benjamin will assert that “works like deeds are non-derivable:” that the task of criticism is not to reduce or explain the work by history or myth, but rather to seek “the precise interplay” of these aspects within the work (Ch. 1). Benjamin instead proposes a “constructive” view of authorship which illuminates history from within the work, examining the historical traces scattered throughout the text, and locating the work in the context of tradition (its “pre” and “post” history)—the text is related not reduced to its material and authorial conditions. This view can be supplemented by Adorno’s own—specifically his 1933 Kierkegaard and the Construction of the Aesthetic, and his later Aesthetic Theory (1969)—where works of art are analyzed as “ciphers” to their historical circumstance: the “truth content” of a work lies not only in itself, but in its hieroglyphic relation to its own time and, tradition more broadly.31

This project will commence by dispensing with such symbolic determinations of authorship, attempting instead to develop images of these figures immanent to their lives and texts. This involves the destruction of pre-conceived notions regarding Benjamin and Adorno: that Adorno should not simply be seen as a contrarian who hated jazz, and was out of touch with the concerns of the students; nor should Benjamin be seen simply as an esoteric critic with little to offer in the service of politics. Further, this entails recognizing the historical and personal circumstances the two found themselves in at the time of their writing, without wholly reducing them to such determinations. Thinking the two in correspondence allows such a constructive view of authorship to emerge, and the two to be

31 In his 1933 Kierkegaard study Adorno will assert the “truth” of Kierkegaard to be not simply his affirmation of subjectivity, or his poetic view of authorship, but his insistence on such tendencies as an aspect of the broader crisis of idealism and its reversion to myth. The “un-intentional social truth” being these broader historical and philosophical elements. Adorno’s view of the “truth” of a work will be elaborated in Ch. 1.
thought in dynamic sense from the perspective of our time. These thinkers must be recognized both within tradition, and in relation to each other, but not reduced to wholly to any particular determination. As far as I can tell, no study has aimed to established a constructive theory of the relation of the two to each other, to “set apart” Benjamin and Adorno, not only with respect to tradition, but with respect to each other. The majority of current interpretation with respect to these thinkers is based on pre-mature conflation, or historicist over-determination. What is needed instead is a productive means to theorize their intellectual relationship: one that does not assert them as wholly similar, or different, but recognizes them as mutually intertwined—as a constellation of mutually determinate entities. As Benjamin attempted to “set apart” tragedy from baroque Trauerspiel, recognizing that the latter sees itself “in constellation” with the former, so too must Benjamin and Adorno be comprehended in correspondence (constellation), so as to demonstrate each in their singularity.

Despite this, such traditional interpretations cannot be dispensed with hastily and must be worked through. As will be argued in Chapter 1, Benjamin’s model of criticism asserts that an aspect of a work (at its “origin”) is fundamentally historical—thus the importance of the interconnected dimensions of “pre” and “post history.” Works (and commentaries) that follow the original resonate backwards in history, endowing the original with new valences. Hence the reception (“post-history”) should be thought as relevant to the original work, as it often times reveals (or develops) new senses not grasped by its contemporaries. In this project, commentaries on Adorno and Benjamin will be read as relevant elaborations of their original works, alongside the primary texts. Both thinkers come to us in a tradition, and this tradition must be worked through and not simply dis-regarded, so as to discern the relevant new senses given to the works through their reception.

Both thinkers provide a different means by which tradition (the past) can be thought from the perspective of the present. From his early work, Benjamin sought to establish a mode of criticism by which to unfold history immanently from within a work, while also establishing tradition as a valuable means to preserve phenomena (and works) from transience and decay. However, following his encounters with Brecht and surrealism, Benjamin became interested in the potentials afforded by the “destructive character” of technology, and the potentials inherent in the tabula rasa of the avant-garde. This dual character of Benjamin’s relationship to tradition will be un-packed and explored throughout
this project. Adorno can be seen as a last defender of the bourgeois tradition against the horrors of the 20th century, attempting to reconcile the negativity of the work of art with the historical dissonance of the Shoah. Few have defended the autonomous art work as valiantly as Adorno, and his work provides a means by which tradition can be employed as a means to resist the fascism and conformity of capitalist social relations, while pointing the way to new political possibilities. Simply because he lived longer than Benjamin (to 1969), Adorno witnessed (and facilitated) the incorporation of Benjamin’s work into the tradition associated with the Frankfurt School, while he also saw the bearing out of many of Benjamin’s predictions regarding the dark-side of modernity.32 Elements of Benjamin’s thought can be seen throughout Adorno’s major works (Aesthetic Theory, 1970; Negative Dialectics, 1966), and this project will interrogate Adorno’s re-direction of Benjamin’s model of criticism towards his own negative dialectic, inquiring as to whether this redirection or translation foreclosed something of its original power.

Finally, it would be a mistake to draw a rigid distinction between explicit texts and the “correspondence” surrounding them, as Benjamin and Adorno’s letters should be seen as their most explicit theoretical justifications of their work. This is especially true of Benjamin, who scorned forthright methodological statements, instead resorting to expressing his method in presentation [Darstellung].33 The editors of the English editions of Benjamin’s Selected Writings (Jennings et al.) are correct in their inclusion of many of Benjamin’s exchanges with Adorno alongside his “original” texts. Often times Benjamin’s letters serve to clarify aspects of his major works, yet should also be seen as philosophical texts themselves—as an essential aspect of Benjamin’s project of thinking an expanded conception of philosophical experience (Ch. 1).34 For Benjamin, the letter form allowed for further experimentation, and the “re-constellation” of ideas based on a shared philosophical relationship.

32 Controversies surrounding Adorno’s reception of Benjamin will be dealt with in Ch. 1. Further, Adorno lived to see the later development of many of the figures Benjamin treated in his work, most notably Kafka, who Adorno saw surpassed by figures such as Beckett. Such receptions of Kafka will be dealt with in Ch. 2.
33 Following his writings on photography (“Little History of Photography” 1931), Benjamin will assert an imperative to “stop saying, and start showing.” Much of his work can be defined as a meditation on such a possibility of thinking in images, outside of conceptual determinations, continuing his persistent questioning of the representation of the Idea.
34 One cannot draw a rigid distinction between finished texts, and letters or drafts with respect to Benjamin. In fact, many of Benjamin’s texts began as letters, notably his 1916 “On Language as Such,” and important aspects of his 1934 (and 1939) essay(s) on Kafka. Hence his letters and drafts (as The Arcades) should be considered philosophically relevant in themselves.
Adorno’s (often lengthy) criticisms and comments should be seen as fundamental to the unfolding of Benjamin’s work, locating it both in context of tradition, and the framework of Benjamin’s oeuvre.35 Adorno will also be shown to persistently urge Benjamin to clarify his writing in a more programmatic direction (often to the standards of the Institute), and Benjamin will often speak of the validity of Adorno’s systematic assertions and his points of criticism more generally.36 Further, Benjamin will employ many of Adorno’s own ideas throughout his own writings, most notably Adorno’s concept of the Intérieur (Kierkegaard, 1933) which would play a substantial role in his own Arcades project; along with Adorno’s 1937 reading of Wagner as phantasmasoria which would inform Benjamin’s understanding of commodity fetishism. There is substantial evidence that Benjamin attempted to incorporate Adorno’s objections and considerations into his own work, most notably the presence of citations from Adorno’s works and letters amid “Convolute N” of The Arcades (N5,2; N2, 7), demonstrative that these (at the very least) resonated methodologically.

II. Outline of the Project

Each chapter of this project can be seen episodically on its own terms, as an essay presenting a reading of a given constellation of texts, yet also as part of the broader mosaic developing the notion of “correspondence.” The project “progresses” in two different senses: the first exploring the relationship between the two thinkers historically, while the second examines the “development” of their thinking through a myriad of constellations and affinities, many of which are non-linear and retroactive. The chapters proceed chronologically, through the development of Benjamin’s conception of criticism: from its early (1915-26) instantiations as the Idea (constellation), to its later formulation, and historiographical application, as the dialectical image (1937-40). His writings on Kafka (1934) will be noted as an important “mid-point,” in which Benjamin experiments with his method along Brechtian and theological lines. Underpinning this linear progression, a manifold of constellations will be demonstrated as the true synchronic development of their thought. That is, their thinking

35 In this sense they could be said to embody Benjamin’s own method of criticism, where-by critique “completes” the work in “truth”; that is it justifies it in the context of history and tradition. See Benjamin, “On the Concept of Criticism” (1919). The full valences of this will be un-packed in Ch. 1.

36 As will be shown, following Adorno’s critique of his 1934 essay on Kafka, and 1935 Arcades Exposé, Benjamin will ascertain the validity of Adorno’s objections (specifically regarding the relationship between myth and enlightenment), and redirect his preceding studies in a more explicitly historical (materialist) direction (Ch. 2 & 3).
develops in a non-linear and oft-times retroactive way, forming constellations with their own works, and the philosophical tradition more generally. Though this project progresses in a linear sense, Benjamin and Adorno’s thought should be thought as “developing” in the sense of “…images which are imprinted by light on a photosensitive plane;” [N15a,1], that is, in constellations where past elements become “legible” only through events that come after. In what follows, each chapter will be outlined in more detail for reference throughout, specifically in the sense that each relates to the concept of “correspondence.”

1) Correspondence and Critique: The “Origins” of Critical theory (1915-1933)
This chapter will locate Benjamin’s conception of immanence (and immanent critique) as the philosophical “origin” of critical theory. Beginning with his understanding of an immanence to history (influenced by the German Youth Movement), Benjamin’s model of immanent critique will be developed up to its formulation as Idea in the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” of the Trauerspiel (1925). Of particular importance will be his early formulation of the “truth content” and “material content” of a work, along with the intertwined practices of “commentary” and “criticism” (“Goethe’s Elective Affinities,” 1921-22). These early concerns will be noted as decidedly against concrete political projects, and seen rather as an attempt to uphold the higher dignity of the Idea. Following this, Adorno’s early readings of Benjamin will be analyzed, specifically his 1931 address “The Actuality of Philosophy.” This text will be read as an early formulation of Adorno’s “negative dialectic,” a model which seeks to employ Benjamin’s early model of criticism in a political (Marxist) direction. Adorno moves Benjamin’s method further, demonstrating that his thinking could be employed as a “historical image:” fusing it with insights from sociology, and employing it as a means of ideological critique in the analysis of existing social relations. It is in this sense that Benjamin’s theory of criticism is the hidden “origin” of many of the Frankfurt School’s notions of critical theory. Adorno demonstrates such possibilities further in his 1933 Kierkegaard and the Construction of the Aesthetic, which provides a model of dialectical analysis by which to read an individual work for “ciphers” of its historical conditions. In this episode, correspondence can be thought in terms of “translation:” that Adorno’s reading (or appropriation) of Benjamin’s method reveals an “-ability” inherent in the original work—the possibility of its application in the services of materialist politics, a possibility Benjamin himself began to explore in his 1931 writings and encounters with Brecht. This early
encounter will be decisive throughout their correspondence, as Adorno holds fast to many of the distinctions in Benjamin’s early model, specifically his reading of Benjamin’s distinction between “commentary” and “criticism” which he will advocate for in correspondence throughout the decade.

2) On Parables: Reading Kafka with Benjamin and Adorno (1934-39/1952)
In this chapter Adorno and Benjamin’s respective analyses of Kafka will be read to reveal broader trajectories in their thinking, specifically in relation to Messianism, politics, and the task of political critique. The chapter begins by developing Benjamin’s reading of Kafka as it is presented in his 1934 text “Franz Kafka: on the 10th Anniversary of his Death:” a work which combines Benjamin’s engagement with theology (Scholem), and the practical materialism of Brecht. Benjamin utilizes theological categories as a means to open the present moment as a space of political action. With respect to criticism: this will be argued as a movement away from several of his early distinctions (“commentary,” “criticism”), towards a more Brechtian model, and his later theory of the dialectical image. Hence Benjamin’s reading of Kafka should be seen as an important juncture in his thought, as Benjamin began to consider the potential historiographical and political implications his theory could have. Following this, Adorno’s criticisms of Benjamin’s essay will be analyzed, alongside his own 1952 essay on Kafka. It will be shown that Adorno reads Kafka in a decidedly more Marxist direction, holding a more orthodox notion of Messianism, and the task of criticism. It will also be shown that Adorno attempts to hold Benjamin to many of his early distinctions (regarding “commentary” and “criticism”), while Benjamin is developing beyond these. Many of these disputes will be shown to anticipate those surrounding The Arcades, and Baudelaire. Though the two will be shown to be in “dis-correspondence” with respect to theoretical formulations, such conceptions will be argued to be underpinned by a common philosophical relationship—a shared understanding of the radical potentials inherent in tradition. This essay also marks the influence of “other correspondents” (specifically Brecht and Scholem) in the development of Benjamin’s dialectical image, as he continued to think through his method of criticism.

3) “Correspondences of Modernity:” Adorno, Benjamin and the Dialectical (Materialist) Method (1935-40)
This chapter deals with Benjamin’s 1938 essay “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire” as exemplary of his late formulation of the dialectical image. It will be shown that Benjamin uses Baudelaire as an immanent image by which to “read” the 19th century. Following this, Benjamin’s historical model more generally will be elaborated through a reading of The Arcades and his other late works (1937-40). Such a reading will proceed by analysing Benjamin’s engagement with surrealist, and Marxist historiographical categories—demonstrating his re-thinking of the “base/superstructure” binary along the lines of the phantasmagoria. Along with this, Benjamin’s re-thinking of Marxist eschatology will be demonstrated, as an essential temporal formulation for his dialectical image. Following these exegeses, the dialectical image will be presented as a theoretical practice of “citation” which utilizes the past to open the present as a site of possibility (“now-time”), allowing history to become “legible” and “re-citeable” from the present moment. After Benjamin’s late method has been demonstrated, Adorno’s objections will be analyzed and utilized to clarify aspects of Benjamin’s methodology. This will also demonstrate a certain “dis-correspondence” of Benjamin with respect to his own early method: though he continues to employ a method of immanent critique, his mode of presentation has altered substantially. Adorno’s criticisms will be demonstrated as consistent through a genealogy of their correspondence surrounding Benjamin’s 1935 Arcades Exposé, and his 1936 “Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility.” These objections also relate to Adorno’s own rootedness in Benjamin’s early model of criticism, antinomies he attempted to rectify in his own negative dialectic.
1. Correspondence and Critique: The “Origins” of Critical Theory

(Or “Critical Theory” and the Question of Immanence)

The Historical task is to disclose this immanent state of perfection and make it Absolute, to make it visible and dominant in the present
-Benjamin, The Life of Students.

I have discussed the most recent history of philosophy, not for general intellectual history orientation, but because only out of the historical entanglement of questions and answers does the question of philosophy’s actuality emerge precisely. And that simply means, after the failure of efforts for a grand and total philosophy: whether philosophy is itself at all actual.
-Adorno, The Actuality of Philosophy.
Throughout the first half of 1969, Marcuse and Adorno engaged in a (now infamous) exchange surrounding the Institute’s relationship with the German student movement, or rather the relationship between the Institute’s notion of critical theory and contemporary exercises in politics (praxis). Marcuse urged Adorno to endorse the student’s activities (and disruptions) as a moment in which “…theory is pushed on further by praxis,” while Adorno held to an autonomy of theory independent of such “revolutionary situations,” going so far as to assert critical theory as opposed to such Leninist and Brechtian imperatives. For Adorno, theory (as art) opposed exchange society by its mere existence, thus the exercise of thinking was in itself a gesture of resistance against the current order of things. Given Adorno’s death in August of 1969, this tension was not resolved, and many of its echoes resound throughout contemporary critical and social theory: should theory take its cue from contemporary social movements (from praxis), or should it serve as the “autonomous faculty,” freed from practical imperatives? Further, has critical theory itself become a form of traditional theory—as calls abound that critique has “run out of steam” or become “cynical”—has the Frankfurt School itself become a “jargon of authenticity,” an enlightened justification of what exists, out of touch with existing concerns? Or was this un-timely character what made the “school” critical in the first place?

In 1972, amidst the release of the first volumes of Benjamin’s collected works, Habermas was invited to give a lecture commemorating what would have been Benjamin’s 80th birthday. The title of the lecture, “Walter Benjamin: Consciousness Raising or Rescuing Critique,” alludes in part to the direction the address would take: after providing an extensive gloss on Benjamin’s oeuvre, Habermas linked many of Benjamin’s early linguistic concerns to his later “materialist conversion,” while arguing Benjamin’s concerns to be of a conservative bent (a “rescuing critique”), against the “consciousness raising” critical theory of a figure like Marcuse. Habermas’s reading went against many in the student movement (1968-69) who attempted to apply Benjamin’s thinking to their own political paradigm, emphasizing the Marxist dimension in his thinking; yet for Habermas, such political elements ultimately collapsed under the weight of Benjamin’s esotericism. Latent in such a dismissal is Habermas’s own “authentic” conception of critical thinking, one rooted in enlightenment rationalism, with explicit imperatives for politics—a spirit found more in Horkheimer and Marcuse, than in

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1 Marcuse to Adorno, “Correspondence on the German Student Movement,” 125.
Adorno\textsuperscript{2} or Benjamin. For Habermas, esoteric thinkers such as Benjamin represented a betrayal of critical theory’s originary spirit, and theory should return to its authentic origin in the unfinished project of the enlightenment. Such episodes present the divergence of opinion surrounding critical theory and its origins, and the antinomies one must contend with upon return.

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“The origin is the goal” – Karl Kraus

Where then to begin; or rather, how to return? Can one speak of a return to origins that is not marred by such “jargons of authenticity,” what Adorno would later call a “provincialism” of thinking? Does the category of “origin” itself act as a device of domination, of the transcendental against the historical, or the settler against the refugee? Likewise, can one speak of the “relevance” of a school of thought without invoking a hasty understanding of one’s present moment? It is such questions that Robert Hullot-Kentor broaches in his 1989 essay “Back to Adorno,” an attempt to re-kindle Adorno’s legacy in the United States, and many of his reflections can be used as a guide for a return to both Benjamin and Adorno. Following Adorno’s criticisms of “first philosophies,”\textsuperscript{3} Hullot-Kentor asserts that the notion of “origin” must be cleaved from its solid foundations and thought in a \textit{historical sense}—following Kraus’s dictum, “origin” is thought \textit{as active}, as created and transferred by the “goal”—an “originary spirit” that is located in constellation with the present moment. One does not summon the past in a historicist sense—returning to the primordial archetype of “once upon a time”—rather seizes upon the possibility, or unfinished spirit of the past: “The only legitimate “back to”

\textsuperscript{2} Habermas levels similar criticisms against Adorno, specifically what he feels to be Adorno’s “distortion” of many of the enlightenment categories in \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment} (1944); that Adorno supressed Horkheimer, making the text a Nietzschean repudiation of reason. In a sense Habermas’s own project (of communicative rationality) arises out of an attempt to rectify this distortion. See, “From Lukács to Adorno” in \textit{The Theory of Communicative Action}, Vol. 1, 339-403.

\textsuperscript{3} “The full scope of Adorno’s work can begin to be described as a study of the “origin” that is asserted in the radical critique of origin” (Hullot-Kentor, \textit{Things Beyond Resemblance}, 8). Such a method is seen in Adorno’s persistent criticisms of “first” or “authentic”, philosophy’s specifically phenomenology: that they failed to understand the objective dissolution of philosophy after Idealism, and claimed to return to an authentic (“original”) givenness. For Adorno, if philosophy were to begin in any meaningful sense, it must foreclose such originary gestures, understanding itself historically. Only in Art does Adorno hold that a possible reconciliation with the world can occur— “Origin is the Goal, if anywhere, then in Art” (\textit{AS}, 66). That is, Art must come to understand itself historically via Aesthetics.
is one that calls for a return to what was never reaching in the first place. If one were to attempt a return to critical theory, such a sojourn should not be guided by some “authentic” beginning, nor by some “awareness” of the present moment, rather by an attempt to capture something of it “originary spirit,” and what remains to be decided therein. These reflections begin with the assertion of something un-finished at the “origin” of critical theory; or rather, critical theory’s inability to understand its own “origin” in the early writings of Benjamin, and their correspondence with Adorno’s early work. At stake in this chapter, and perhaps in this project in general, is nothing less than a radical re-thinking of the “origins” of the Frankfurt School and its notion of “critical theory,” along the lines of correspondence, and constellation.

In what follows, a series of provocations and experimentations (constellations, historical images) will be proposed, centered on the “origins” of critical theory. These origins will be located in a dominant perspective of immanence (or immanent critique) present in Benjamin’s early writings (up to 1926) and conception of criticism (II). Following this, the “post-history” of these conceptions by way of Adorno will be examined, noting the mode by which he metamorphoses Benjamin’s ideas towards his own concepts of criticism, inaugurating a new tradition associated with the Frankfurt School (III). Further, this perspective of immanence will be located as a framework that allows tradition to be continually re-written, or experimented with from the perspective of the present moment (I), hence has important imperatives for the practice of intellectual history. It is such an “originary” epistemic position—that one is at the “midpoint” of history—that allows critical theory to pose questions of its actuality in a dynamic way, overcoming the polarities of “authenticity” and “relevance.”

Hence these considerations could be said to have a dual focus: at first to demonstrate that what today is considered “critical theory” contains wizened elements of Benjamin’s thought within itself (he serves as the “hunchback” who guarantees

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4 Ibid. 23.
5 It should be noted that these considerations centre on the “philosophical” or epistemic origins of critical theory; a similar origin could be located “sociologically” in the writings of Horkheimer (see “Tradition and Critical Theory” (1932)). A study is warranted on the interconnected dimensions of the crisis of German metaphysics, and the early 20th century turn to sociology in figures such as Simmel, and Weber—notably their engagement with Neo-Kantianism.
“historical materialism’s” perpetual victory (“Thesis I’’); and in a broader sense, to re-think the question of “origins” along the lines proposed by Benjamin’s work, allowing one to think a more expanded notion of intellectual history from the perspective of immanence. Following this, the political application of Benjamin’s work can be broached, specifically the mode by which Adorno applies the models of the *Trauerspiel* in the services of “critique” of *existing social relations* and modes of thought, marking a decided turn away from Benjamin’s engagement with antiquated works. Though this may seem somewhat circular, it should be noted that the methodology employed *immanently arises* from Benjamin’s analyses of origin—Benjamin’s work will be approached via the methodology advocated in his early writings.

Heuristically, it will prove useful to define “immanence” (in Benjamin) at the outset: as the rejection of any fixed philosophical starting point (ontology etc.), or any transcendent(al) metaphysical realm. Instead it proposes groupings or “constellations” of phenomena which arise *immanently* by way of hidden affinities. One should note the active role the “subject” plays in the construction of such historical constellations, though (as will be shown) this should not be conflated with “subjectivism”6 or “historicism,” rather has more in common with the practice of “collecting;”7 an allegorical practice of the critic who arranges tradition so as to reveal its hidden contours and affinities. In the terms of idealism (specifically Hegel), such a conception rejects the possible reconciliation of “reason” and “being” on the higher plane of history, and is haunted by a generalized distrust of totality, and systems. Such a starting point will lead Benjamin to radically re-think the notion of “truth,” and its relation to the work of art and criticism more generally. Such a conception arose out of Benjamin’s immanent conception of history, informed by his early metaphysical writings on the German Youth Movement (to 1915).

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6 Benjamin’s allegorical immersion in the texts is described in the following quote, in which he advocates an erasure of subjective traces from his work: “If I write better German than most writers of my generation, it is thanks largely to twenty years” observance of one little rule: never use the word “I” except in letters.” (“Berlin Chronicle,” *Reflections*, 15).

7 Pierre Missac notes the “gallery of types” in Benjamin’s work which could be immanently re-fashioned to describe his method of criticism: “the collector,” “ragpicker,” “gambler,” all of which emphasize different aspects of his thought. See “Homo Scriptor,” *Walter Benjamin’s Passages*, 42-81.
From the perspective of “correspondence,” these early encounters will prove to be decisive in both a philosophical and personal sense. Philosophically, they define a certain direction of application that would resonate throughout the years to come: namely Adorno’s application of Benjamin’s immanent model of criticism in arenas which Benjamin did not consider (music, philosophy, sociology, Marxism), and because of this, the articulation of this model in a more (philosophically) systematic direction. As will be shown, Benjamin’s model for a “coming philosophy” was one which could articulate ephemeral experience in a systematic direction, Adorno will be shown to be essential for this latter pole. Regarding this specific encounter, Adorno’s early applications demonstrate the possibility of the application of Benjamin’s method to concrete historical objects in a critique of ideology, alongside an analysis of contemporary modes of thought (phenomenology, Lebensphilosophie). Such an application was a definite influence on Benjamin, and it was after these early engagements with Adorno that he too began to broaden the scope of his analysis to contemporary social phenomena—“awakening” to the political potentials inherent in his methodology. This is further exemplified in a personal sense as the two met in October of 1929, in Königstein in the Taunus mountains, for conversations that “brought [an] epoch to an end,” leading Benjamin to realize the necessity of a materialist direction for *The Arcades*.

It was my conversations with you in Frankfurt, and particularly that concerning “historical” matters in the little Swiss hut, and afterwards the certain *historical* one at table with you, Asja, Felizitas and Horkheimer, which brought that [Berlin] epoch to an end. There would henceforth be no more rhapsodic naïveté.\(^9\)

The two seem to have agreed that an immanent conception of history (and critique), informed by materialist imperatives, must be taken seriously against the “relativism” of

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\(^8\) Benjamin to Adorno, May 31, 1935, *ABC*, 87-91. This letter is decisive, as in it Benjamin describes the various correspondents surrounding *The Arcades* (Brecht, Adorno et al.), describing the methodological genesis of the work in the early 1930s.

\(^9\) The continuation of the quote, alluding to the retroactive definition of these events as historical: “…This romantic form had been overtaken in a raccourci of development, but at the same time, and for some years to come, I still had no idea of any other possible form…Then followed the decisive encounter with Brecht, and with it the culmination of every aporia connected with this work, which even then I still refused to relinquish.” (Benjamin, *ABC*, 88).
historicism, hence Buck-Morss will define it as the “Königstein Program.”

These early intellectual encounters will prove decisive throughout the following decades (Ch. 3), as an event, they could be said to “become historical” given the relationship of correspondence that would develop out of it (as “post-history”). However, as will be shown, both thinkers understand this “original” agreement in a different sense—each projecting a different origin, based on their interpretation of events, and the other’s methodology. It could be said that correspondence in fact began in “dis-correspondence,” or out of this minimal divergence held together by the projection of a shared “origin.”


“Only he who can destroy can criticize.”
- Benjamin, One-Way St. (SW I: 460)

When considering the “origins” of critical theory (Frankfurt School) intellectual histories exhibit certain general tendencies, often times beginning as follows: beginning with Kant (or Hegel), one traces the development of the concept of “critique” (its three Kantian instantiations, and fourth Marxist one), as a (linear) dialectical movement culminating in the “Frankfurt School” and its notion of “critical theory.” The enlightenment arrogance of this view is self-evident—entailing a nonsensical view that thought develops in a linear way (diachronically)—and further that such trajectories can be categorized into recognizable “genres.” When one examines the “extremes” of such genres, their absurdity enters into further relief—the figures left out (Löwenthal, Kracauer, Benjamin…) demonstrate these histories as tenuous, and as serving a present history (or telos) of critical theory. This is seen most prominently in the figure of Benjamin, where it has become common intellectual parlance (if he is treated at all), to present him as a melancholy and mythical figure (Jay, Jameson, Arendt)—a Dionysian slip before one adopts the sober enlightened (and communal) position of Adorno, Marcuse, or Habermas.

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10 See, The Origin of Negative Dialectics, 53/23.

11 As Benjamin writes in the Trauerspiel: “The Idea is best explained as the representation of the context in which the unique and the extreme stands alongside its counterpart.” (35). The animating “Idea” of the Frankfurt School should perhaps be considered its “extreme” manifestations, rather than the conventional, or orthodox members. This notion of the “extreme” or “exceptional case” can also be read as a coded reference to Carl Schmitt’s “state of exception” (Political Theology, 1922), in which the decision regarding the “exceptional case” defines the power of the sovereign as such. Benjamin was engaged with Schmitt at this time, and the full valences of their relationship (specifically with regard to the Trauerspiel) has yet to be un-packed.
The reaction from the Benjamin camp is perhaps no better, where it is common to think Adorno as a “derivative thinker”—one who appropriated his (immanent) method from Benjamin, and was unwilling to return the favor in an intellectual or personal sense. Such traditional historiographies cover over what Benjamin would later refer to as the “…revolutionary moments in the occurrence of history” [N9a, 5], the dis-continuous, or non-identical moments in which history can be thought in an *active* sense.

Three intellectual histories of the Frankfurt School are of particular note, the first being Martin Jay’s pioneering *The Dialectical Imagination* (1973), a work which solidified a dominant narrative of the school. Jay focuses particularly on the figure of Horkheimer, alongside a more orthodox and consistent mode of critical theory, held together by the unified notion of a “school.” Hence he glosses over the manifold of discontinuities, and non-identical figures (Benjamin,12 Kracauer, Adorno), treating them as momentary lapses before an orthodox Marxist analysis was re-established. Further, Jay treats the “birth” of the school as a set of particular historical actions on the part of individuals (Felix Weil’s 1922 “Marxist study week”), and fails to locate it with respect to larger historical and philosophical tendencies (the crisis of the Idealist tradition, alongside Marxist movements in Germany). Rolf Wiggershaus’s, *The Frankfurt School* (1986) does not move beyond Jay in a structural or theoretical sense, but simply via the addition of newly accessible historical material (notably the Adorno-Kracauer correspondence), and the treatment of a larger historical scope. In Wiggershaus, Adorno and Benjamin are treated in a more substantial sense, though he too must contain “non-identities” within a homogenous “school.” It is in Susan Buck-Morss’s 1979, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics* that such historiographical practices are put into question. She explicitly moves beyond Jay: having had access to Adorno’s early writings (specifically his 1931 “Actuality of Philosophy”), she recognized the origin of Adorno’s project in Benjamin’s conception of criticism. The study is essential in that it conceives the School not as a fixed set of events, or as a homogenous entity, but as an *intellectual and* 

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12 Though Benjamin is broached in the study, it is only with respect to his “disputes” with Adorno and the Institute; these however are not presented in equal terms, as Jay seems only interested in Benjamin as he related to the Institute (Horkheimer). Thus Benjamin is presented as an irrational Brechtian who refused to tow the party line. This is seen in Jay’s offhand dismissal of Benjamin’s dialectical image for the “more stable” notion of critical theory (203). See *The Dialectical Imagination*, 197-212.
philosophical encounter (between Benjamin and Adorno)—an event independent of specific historical occurrences. With such a re-thinking of the concept of “origin,” she provides the means by which the Frankfurt School can be seen as an immanent “setting apart” from tradition, transmuting the intellectual spirit of Benjamin’s work into intellectual history. Though she considers the role Benjamin played in the development of Adorno’s negative dialectic, she fails to consider the role Adorno had in the development of Benjamin intellectually, hence she covers over much of the potential contained in this dynamic. The goal of this project could be set as the presentation of the two in proper “correspondence” (or constellation).

Such receptions of Benjamin have become far too commonplace, to the extent that a reactionary response against Adorno (and the Institute) has developed; chastising not only their appropriations of Benjamin’s thought under the larger umbrella of “critical theory,” but also implicitly asserting that their lack of support led to Benjamin’s death (1940). Hannah Arendt (1968) accused Adorno of selectively editing Benjamin’s letters (Briefe, 1966) and works (Illuminations/Reflections, 1955) along the lines of his own thinking, and of deliberately failing to mention the dire state in which the Institute’s funding left Benjamin.13 Few came to Adorno’s defense, with the exception of Scholem, to whom Adorno wrote the following: “Is it so terrible if Benjamin from whom I have learned so much is supposed to have learnt something from me?”14 In defending his practices, Adorno broaches a more general truth in the history of Benjamin’s reception: thinking him as a figure in correspondence. This will later be shown to be possible due to Benjamin’s commitment to immanence, but Adorno’s statement alludes to a dynamic of intellectual interaction, not reducible to simple “one-way streets” of intellectual application or appropriation. Thinking a figure in correspondence, allows the manifold of intellectual affinities and encounters to emerge, while not reducing him or her to any one interaction—that one may correspond to many, influencing and being influenced, while maintaining one’s fundamental difference.

Alluding to such receptions of Benjamin’s oeuvre Pierre Missac locates two dominant tendencies in Benjamin scholarship, which could be extended to treat dominant tendencies in intellectual history more generally—the first, treating a figure as wholly autonomous; the second, as a moment in a broader trajectory of thought:

While some critics attempt to get close to Benjamin’s oeuvre and run the risk of falling into imitation or tautology through this sympathetic or empathetic method, others, no doubt with the same intention of reaching the truth of the oeuvre, place certain tools, intended to facilitate the reading, between the work and their own gaze—magnifying lenses of various kinds, perhaps, or tinted spectacles that will give the work a dominant tonality. 15 For Missac, such histories miss what he defines as the play of “distance and closeness” (the aura) central to Benjamin’s work, which contains both systematic and a-systematic elements, and is both indebted and autonomous with respect to tradition. Further, such criticism covers over the immanent and “collaborative” (or correspondence) model of criticism at the heart of Benjamin’s work—one must not impose, rather must “collaborate” with the text and other elements of tradition.

Such diachronic histories miss the complex of affinities and correspondences hidden within every intellectual position, that they contain at once both progressive and regressive elements. One does not simply respond to one’s contemporaries, rather one blasts open the continuum of history, creating immanent constellations with a disparate array of thinkers (one is as much responding to Plato as to Žižek). Throughout Benjamin’s work one encounters “secret agents” (Baudelaire, Kafka, Kraus), those who testify against their own time with their un-timely meditations—those who have become old or young too early. Such figures serve to warn that progress does not de facto entail enlightenment, or an understanding or overcoming of what has come previously; rather that the practice of philosophy is perpetually “blasting open the continuum of history.”

It is precisely this “blind spot” in intellectual history (and history more generally), which Benjamin attempts to overcome in his rethinking of the category of “origin” in his work on the baroque Trauerspiel. Tragedy (and historical categories in general), do not

15 Missac, Walter Benjamin’s Passages, 16.
develop along teleological or transcendent(al) lines—rather, forms and categories are immanently reconfigured in each era. *Trauerspiel* was not simply a re-assertion of antiquated tragedy; rather it saw itself in constellation with the past, reconstructing elements of thought in its own moment. Hence Benjamin insists that, “Origin [*Ur-sprung*]…has nothing in common with emergence [*Entstehen*, “beginnings”]…Origin stands in the flow of becoming as a maelstrom that irresistibly draws the stuff of emergence into its rhythm.”16 Hence “origin” should be thought “historically,” as that which re-inscribes itself anew in each era. This leads to his formulation of “Natural history”17 with the interconnected dimensions of “pre” and “post history.” Thinking emergence as a “setting apart” from the stream of history, does not entail a total rupture, rather the splitting of the work at the sight of “origin” giving it a fundamentally historical dimension. The “post-history” (or reception) of a work becomes an aspect of the work itself, the mode by which the work is “restored” in tradition:

“Origin” [*Ur-sprung*], although an entirely historical category, has nevertheless nothing in common with emergence [*Entstehen*]. In Origin what is meant is not the becoming of something that has sprung forth [*Entspringen*], but rather that which springs forth out of coming-to-be and passing-away. Origin stands in the flow of becoming as a maelstrom [*Strudel*] that irresistibly draws the stuff of emergence into its rhythm. In the bare manifestation of the factual the original is never discernable, and its rhythm is accessible only to a dual insight. It is recognizable on the one hand as restoration, as reinstatement, and precisely in this as on the other hand incomplete, unfinished.18

The metaphor of the “stream” ("flow of becoming") is instructive for thinking the immanence of tradition: it presents history as nature, as a natural force in which one is

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16 Benjamin, *Trauerspiel* (Weber trans. *Benjamin’s Abilities*, 133-34). This view is contra Herman Cohen who supposed certain transcendental historical categories. *Entstehen* connotes “arising”; *Entspringen*: “emergence.” It should be notes that Benjamin does use the term *Geburt* (birth) along the lines of Nietzsche. *Sprung* also has the additional connotation of “crack” or “split.”

17 This formulation allows Benjamin to think “nature” historically (as “natural history”), as he reads the baroque as context in which history is petrified in the natural setting. This also allows him to understand historical-philosophical concepts as having a “natural life,” hence of being capable of decay and decomposition as nature.

18 Benjamin, *Trauerspiel*. Samuel Weber’s trans. in *Benjamin’s Abilities*, 134. My emphasis. Jennings’s translation, clarifies the relation of this quotation to Benjamin’s distinction between “material” and “truth” content: “Origin is a whirlpool in the stream of becoming and in its rhythms it swallows the material involved in the process of its genesis” (*Dialectical Images*, 143). This distinction will be developed in the proceeding section (II). Both translations clarify a sense not present in Osborne’s 1970 translation.
constantly being borne along. One is always within history, always present at its “midpoint,” and from within this position one can create “maelstroms” (Ideas, constellations), by forming the material of tradition. Yet such immanent Ideas are transient compared to the eternal passing of history. Such Ideas occur in language, and in creating constellations one presents a legible entity against the “flow of becoming”—combining the “material content” of history into the “truth content” of origin. One can never step in the same river twice, and tradition will always be recombined differently in each present moment (“now-time”). One is now compelled to ask who or what drives such a history, and further, who is harnessing its power? Is it being used in the service of a dominant narrative, and could it possibly be re-directed for critical purposes? Continuing with the metaphor of the stream in his later writings on Baudelaire (1938-39), Benjamin reflects on such a possibility:

The sources flow as abundantly as one could wish, and where they converge to form the stream of tradition, they flow along between well-laid out slopes as far as the eye can reach. Historical materialism is not led astray by this spectacle. It does not seek the image of the clouds in this stream, but neither does it turn away from the stream to drink “from the source” and pursue “the matter itself” behind men’s backs. Whose mills does this stream drive? Who is utilizing its power? Who dammed it? One does not begin “from the source” (“authenticity”), nor does one search for some transcendent logic (“the image of the clouds in the stream”), rather one stands at the midpoint of history, recognizing that objects and thinkers come to us embedded in tradition. It is this view which allows one to combat the over-determination of the “destructive character” (deconstruction) in receptions of Benjamin’s work. It does not entail an enlightened disregard for tradition in favor of a pure space of construction; rather a recognition of the dual character of each work, one cannot simply return (or re-cite) a concept without recognizing its erosion in the hands of tradition, as oftentimes

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19 One can note the prevalence of the “stream” as a metaphor throughout Benjamin’s work: a similar analogy is utilized to describe “astonishment” in Brechtian theatre (“What is Epic Theatre?,” 1931), in his considerations on surrealism, Benjamin speaks of the German critic “gaining power” from the stream of forces surrealism unleashed.

20 Benjamin, “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” SW 4: 63. And further: “For it is an illusion of vulgar Marxism that one can determine the social function of a material or intellectual product without reference to the circumstances and the bearers of its tradition.” (ibid. 64). Such analyses of reception and tradition will be argued as important for Benjamin’s re-thinking of Marxism in Ch. 3.
such erosion polishes texts into new “citable” formulations. It is well recorded that Benjamin was fond of asking Pollock or Brecht about Marx, perhaps more so than he was of actually reading Marx. One should not prematurely dismiss this gesture: with such actions did Benjamin not gain access to the refraction of Marx by his era, to the relevance of his ideas with respect to tradition? Benjamin did not reject “tragedy” in favor of “Trauerspiel,” but rather sought the point at which the two were set apart—one must place the “original” and “historical” in repose with each other so as to gain a better perspective on each. With such gestures Benjamin perhaps overturned Plato’s primacy of the “original” over the “copy,” opening the intellectual field in a dynamic new way.

Transposing this to the field of intellectual history, a certain immanent position will be located at the heart of “critical theory:” as both its explicit origin in the work of Benjamin, and as the condition of possibility for such a contemporary application. Because of an immanent perspective with respect to tradition, it can be constantly re-inscribed and experimented with from the perspective of the present moment. This allows the expression of numerous affinities hidden within this movement, but more so, allows one to understand “critical theory” in an active sense (not as a fixed idea)—one that can be renewed in each era, and contains within it elements bestowed by tradition. Today we approach Benjamin’s early work, traveling upstream, from the lens of his “late work” or more specifically from his embeddedness within a dominant conception of (Marxist) critical theory. What will be demonstrated is that such a (Marxist) interpretation of his work owes more to its “post-history” in the hands of Adorno than it does to his “originary” intentions; to gain a proper representation of each thinker, they must be “set apart” in the stream of tradition. In fact, if one takes such an idea of “immanence” seriously one cannot be a Marxist or a Kantian in any deliberate sense; rather one gains the possibility to wander and collect one’s way through various streams and discourses. At stake is not a nostalgia for the past, or an authentic conception of critical theory—rather the point is to demonstrate that the originary force of critical theory lies in a certain immanent epistemology, a capacity which is at risk of being eroded by the stream of history, yet also provides a possible means by which to reconfigure critical theory for our era.
II. Benjamin’s conception of Immanence (-1926)

“I positively felt a wish to explore its depths, even at the sacrifice I was going to make, and my principle
grief was that I should never be able to tell my old companions on shore about the mysteries I should see.”

- Edgar Allen Poe, A Descent into the Maelström

At this point the development of Benjamin’s immanent epistemology will be traced,
specifically as it is developed in his early writings (to 1926). As early as 1918 (“The
Program for a Coming Philosophy”) Benjamin was engaged in a reformulation of (Neo)Kantian metaphysics in an attempt to “…undertake the epistemological foundation of a
higher concept of experience”21:

The problem faced by Kantian epistemology, as by every great epistemology,
has two sides, and Kant managed to give a valid explanation of only one of
them. First there was the question of the certainty of knowledge that is lasting,
and, second there was the question of the integrity of an experience that is
ephemeral.22

This remark should be taken as foundational for Benjamin’s own “Coming Philosophy:”
the articulation of a broader conception of experience extended to include the spheres oft
downgraded as “dogmatic” (lacking critique) by Kant. The (Neo) Kantian insistence upon
enlightenment had created a justified epistemology in which “…naked, primitive, self-
evident experience…seem[s] to be the only experience given—indeed the only
experience possible.” 23 Benjamin sought to move beyond such a narrow conception,
arguing that philosophy must seek to justify experiences in realms such as “art,
jurisprudence, and history,”24 and above all the realm of “myth.” In this sense, Benjamin
reads the Kantian critical pronouncement not as a rejection of future metaphysics, rather
as a prolegomenon: that metaphysical (“mythological,” “irrational”) experience could be
justified if one recognized it as fundamental to experience, and justifiable within a system
of knowledge.

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22 Ibid. 100.
23 Ibid. 100. Given that the subject stands before the “mere appearance” of enlightenment epistemology,
Benjamin notes that this has much in common with myth, in which the subject stands before a primitive
fetish of experience, un-aware of the historical origins of such modes of thought. In this sense Benjamin
anticipates many of Adorno’s later insights in Dialectic of Enlightenment (1944), regarding the mythical
character of enlightenment.
“Myth” was a sphere of particular importance for Benjamin, here allying with Ernst Cassirer and Herman Cohen in the elaboration of a “phenomenology of mythical forms” (ethnology): one that attempts to articulate such forms (immanently), and not reduce them to an enlightened or irrational system. The transmission of such mythical forms, via the passing on of “doctrine” [Lehre] broaches what is perhaps Benjamin’s more fundamental concern—that of history. Myth is not assumed to be a-historical, but rather is thought as “a doctrine” which is transmitted from generation to generation, hence myths can be “read” historically. The mode by which this will occur is language: through the “naming” (or becoming legible), of myth, one endows them with a historical origin, allowing it to become transmissible (or re-citable) across history. Working through an immanent critique of Idealism, Benjamin attempted to develop a model by which one could “experience” (Erfahrung) history and tradition in the present moment: “Thus, the demand upon the philosophy of the future can ultimately be put in these words: to create on the basis of the Kantian system a concept of knowledge to which a concept of experience corresponds, of which the knowledge is the teachings [Lehre].”

As will be later demonstrated (Ch. 3), much of Benjamin’s work undertakes to “historicize” the myths that abound in the present moment (modernity, The Arcades)—in this sense, history can be experienced, or glimpsed in the present, a conception of history based on immanence. With this re-thinking of experience, one comes to the realization that tradition passes through the present moment, that one is immersed in the stream, and at every moment one is standing and receiving tradition.

This re-thinking of tradition was spurred by Benjamin’s involvement with the German Youth Movement (to 1915) which elaborated the sentiment of “Youth” as a means by which to revitalize or experience the pure Geist of tradition, beyond the confines of the state or university. Youth found itself perpetually at the midpoint of

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25 Exemplary of this is Cassirer’s Language and Myth (1925). Benjamin was also influenced by Lehman’s comparative mythology. What is endemic to this thinking is its stance against “vitalism” and romantic conceptions of myth. Benjamin will also take aim at the “myths” related to aesthetics and the autonomous work of art, endowing them with a history “origin,” so they are able to be read historically.

26 Benjamin, “Program for a Coming Philosophy,” SW 1: 106. Benjamin employs the German Lehre, which connotes the “teaching” of doctrine in a theological sense (transmission across time), this opposed to Wissenschaft which would connote a “scientific” (a-historical) understanding. This anticipates his encounter with Brecht, who developed Lehrstücke (teaching-plays), in attempts to “transmit” ideas from performer to audience.
history, as a perspective from which to “awaken” the slumbering tradition from its oppressive confines (because they could “experience” tradition). In his 1914-15 “Life of Students,” Benjamin asserts that such an experience becomes possible when the students realize the historical nature of their experience, as both receivers and transmitters of knowledge they stand in the middle of history: “… as an image of the highest metaphysical state of history.”

As such they have the ability to “re-awaken” the potential of tradition, framing it as a force of relevance in the present moment.

It is such an immanence to history (and tradition) that will become fundamental in the development of Benjamin’s model of criticism, a mode by which one can intervene upon tradition and one’s present moment in a meaningful way. In these early writings, Benjamin will reject historicist and idealist teleology, which assert the “Absolute” as the endpoint of a larger historical dynamic. For Benjamin, the “Absolute” exists in the present moment, if one recognizes oneself in “constellation” with another time, as both the sender and receiver of tradition, in a continuity of historical experience: “…only in teaching [Lehre] does philosophy encounter something Absolute, as existence, and in so doing encounter that continuity in the nature of experience.”

Such a position has the potential to be used in a critical sense; the task of the critic must be to disclose the present as the “true state of exception,” by revealing the historical forces latent in the present, or dormant in a work: “Critique gathers historical forces and concentrates their energies in a focal point (Brennpunkt), a utopian image, in order to ignite ‘the crisis…that leads to decision’.”

Politically, statements regarding the “awakening,” or revitalization of tradition are ambiguous; and many in the Youth Movement (such as Wyneken, Benjamin’s mentor)

27 Benjamin, “The Life of Students,” SW 1: 37. The Students are the “highest metaphysically” in that they are able to construct history (ideas) from their perspective in the present, or rather are able to act with respect to the past. Benjamin elaborates the power of the constellation of the present with tradition in a letter to Scholem: “Doctrine [Lehre] is like a surging sea, but for the wave (if we take it as an image of the human being) everything depends on giving oneself over to its motion in such a way that it crests and overturns, foaming. The tremendous freedom of this overturning is education… [it is] tradition becoming visible and free.” Benjamin Briefe, 146. Quoted (and translated) in McCole, The Antinomies of Tradition, 77.


29 Commentary and quotation from “Life of Students” (GS II: 917) quoted (and translated) in McCole, The Antinomies of Tradition, 63.
rushed at the opportunities WWI provided for such a revival. Hence Benjamin would abandon his explicit allegiance to the movement, attempting to think “Youth” (and immanence more generally) in a purer or “un-conditioned” sense (as in Schelling’s *On University Studies*), beyond all specific instantiations. The (early) Benjamin adopted such a non-instrumental position above all political struggles, declining Martin Buber’s invitation to contribute to his *Der Jude* on the grounds that language would be “degraded” into “…a mechanism for the realization of the correct Absolute,” and adding further, “[u]sed as a means, it is usurious.”  

Philosophy (criticism) should not reduce itself to political concerns, rather it should aim at the more fundamental concern of expressing experience, and doing justice to particular phenomena. In this sense, the early Benjamin remained on the level of esoteric and epistemic concerns, declining to apply his method to explicit political programs (as Marxism). Despite this reluctance to engage in concrete political projects, one can discern a political dimension in Benjamin’s early work, by removing language from the sphere of political exchange, one is able to formulate a “pure” Idea of language (as Mallarmé’s *poésie pure*) able to perform the more fundamental task of criticism: of rescuing, and harnessing the active force inherent in tradition. The problem was that the students wished to degrade *Geist* (the Idea) into a specific manifestation; for Benjamin the Idea could not be reduced to such specificity as criticism had a more fundamental task.

It is such a perspective of immanence that will allow Benjamin to develop his model of criticism more robustly throughout the 1920s, in an attempt to move away from many of the vitalist (*Lebensphilosophie*), and irrationalist elements of the Youth Movement.  

In “The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism” (1919), along with *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama* (1925), Benjamin distilled many of his early concerns, elaborating a framework of immanent critique. Benjamin’s dissertation, “The

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30 Benjamin Breife, 127. Quoted in McCole *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* 72, and Jennings’s *Dialectical Images*, 111. One may object to this, pointing to 1921’s “Critique of Violence” as an explicit political statement, though upon reading the essay, it is clear that it is not an explicit political treatise, but an attempt to elaborate the criteria (or language), that could discern the successful use of force [*Gewalt*]. It is written for intellectuals, not political actors.

31 As McCole is careful to note, “…Benjamin’s recovery and critique of early Romanticism set the coordinates for all his subsequent writings.” Much of his later engagements with Surrealism, and Romanticism, deal with the same elements he found problematic in the Youth Movement—its irrationalism, and problematic political stances. See *The Antinomies of Tradition*, 82.
Concept of Criticism…” attempted to redeem aspects of the early Romantics (Schlegel, Novalis) theory of criticism, while continuing the articulation of his “coming philosophy.” Romantic criticism allowed Benjamin to develop his concept of experience further: that criticism of art (or an object more generally) could unfold the highest levels of “reflection,” higher than those capable of being reached by the Kantian or Fichtean ego. For Fichte, the world was the imposition of a self-positing transcendental subject: the progression of history was considered as the process of “reflection” of this subject upon itself; the “Absolute” entailed the coming to self-consciousness (the “thinking of thinking”) of this self-positing “I.” The Romantics (and Benjamin) criticized Fichte for such an “egoism” along with the narrow notion of self-consciousness he reached—that Fichte halted reflection at the subject, and did not extend reflection into the experiences of art or history. If the Kantian (Fichtean) turn allowed a reflection on the conditions of possibility of subjective experience, romantic reflection upon the work allowed the subject to reflect on reflection itself; that is, on the possibilities of historical experience. For the early Romantics, “criticism” became a mode by which one could utilize the object to experiment (and reflect) upon an expanded notion of experience.

In Romanticism, critique became a mode of completing the work, grouping disparate fragments (via the Idea) so as to reflect the thinking of thinking (“reflection”), and the ideals of art. In this sense the work is “absolutized” in that it is understood in the context of the greater un-folding of tradition. As a work it is shown to have aspects of tradition within it which are fundamental to its constitution, given that an aspect of its “origin” is fundamentally historical—“…the past work is incomplete and criticism, in completing the work goes beyond it.” The critic becomes a vehicle for the completion of the work, and the practice of criticism entailed: “…an experiment on the work of art through which its reflection is awakened and is brought to consciousness of itself.”

Working immanently within the work and with respect to tradition, one is able to “set apart” (represent [darstellen]) the work vis-à-vis tradition, allowing both to become

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32 “It is clear: for the Romantics, criticism is not so much judgment of the work, as a method of completing it.” Benjamin, “The Concept of Criticism,” SW 1: 159.
active forces for the present: to understand the work with respect to the Absolute (tradition), and the Absolute in the work. Following Novalis’ dictum—“The reader [critic] must be the extended author”—Benjamin sought to demonstrate how an understanding of tradition could be un-folded *immanently* from within the work, but also that the “truth” of a work lies inextricably in its “origin” with respect to tradition. Romanticism allowed Benjamin to move from an immanent conception of history into an immanent concept of criticism that utilized the forces of history in a critical sense: “Romanticism is the last movement which once again rescued and brought over tradition…madly orgiastic opening up of the secret sources of tradition.”

Benjamin’s 1921/22 essay “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*” should be seen as an application and extension of this model of immanent criticism, a mode of “illuminating the work in the light only the work could provide,” a testament to Benjamin’s assertion: “[Criticism] does not consist of reflection *on* a work, which could not…alter the work essentially, but in the unfolding of reflection *in a work.*” The task of criticism entailed the “absolutizing” of the work, reflecting upon the historical traces within the work—its relation to tradition and the history of art more generally. In so doing, criticism destroys the illusion of the autonomous work, disclosing that it is not a self-contained entity, and that the work points beyond itself into the greater stream of tradition. Hence Benjamin will criticize mythical, and symbolic (a-historical) characterizations of authorship, specifically Gundolf’s biography, *Goethe* (1916), which presented Goethe as a mythical and inspired figure, neglected the historical aspects of the work’s “origin.” This relates more generally to Benjamin’s dictum: “Works, like deeds, are non-derivable,” criticism can demonstrate historical, or mythological tendencies operative within works, yet one cannot fully reduce a work to any such determination. “Form” (or medium) is where

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36 Benjamin, “The Concept of Criticism,” *SW 1*: 151. And further, speaking to the role critique has in preparing the work for un-folding in truth: “The past work is incomplete and criticism, in completing the work, goes beyond it” (ibid. 154).
37 Benjamin, “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*,” *SW 1*: 321. Gundolf, was a member of the circle around the symbolist Stefan George, whose mythical notions of authorship and aesthetics Benjamin was highly critical of. Despite this he expressed a reverence for George himself, despite his fascist political leanings. Benjamin’s concept of criticism does not “reduce” the work wholly to a set of historical circumstances, rather seeks the precise interplay of historical elements in a specific work, viewing the individual work as a site of tradition and history.
historical reflection oftentimes takes place most explicitly—as forms and genres alike come down to the individual artist from history and tradition. To understand a work’s relation to tradition, one can reflect upon the contents relation to its formal expression. Here one can see an emergent modernist tendency in Benjamin’s work: that of understanding the form, or mediums (photography, cinema) relationship to history, utilizing it as a mode to “read” history in the work.

While working on the essay (1920-21), Benjamin’s own situation mirrored that of Goethe’s novel: his own marriage (to Dora) was collapsing, as he fell for Julia Cohen—Julia was represented by the figure of Otillie experimenting upon Eduard (Benjamin) and Charlotte (Dora).38 Despite this, or perhaps because of this, Benjamin will insist, “the subject of Elective Affinities is not marriage,” rather “…the moral content of this work lies at much deeper levels than Goethe’s words lead one to suspect.”39 The novel is read by Benjamin as a “cipher” to the bourgeois decline in values and regression to myth, not as the naturalization of marriage, or human “chemistry.” Benjamin reads Goethe’s prose as a struggle against such bourgeois values via their rational articulation as “myths” in the work (specifically in the novella contained within).

As Benjamin is careful to assert, the task of criticism is not to “destroy” the illusion of the work, “stripping away the veil” and reducing the text to a sham of bourgeois consciousness; rather it is to seek the “precise knowledge of the veil,” the moment at which “material” [Sachgehalt] content and “truth” [Wahrheitsgehalt] content are interlinked. Hence Benjamin will distinguishes between “commentary” and “criticism:” the former aiming at “material” content, or the way of meaning in a text, while the latter (criticism) aims at the higher goal of reflection, establishing the work in relation to the Absolute, and tradition.40 Given that, “Only the material content of the life

38 “There developed a situation which, to the extent that I was able to understand it, corresponded to the one in Goethe’s novel Elective Affinities.” Scholem, Walter Benjamin, 94.
40 As Benjamin writes: “For critique ultimately shows in the work of art the virtual possibility of formulating the works truth content as the highest philosophical problem.” (SW 1: 334), and further: “Critique seeks the truth content of the work of art; commentary, its material content…. the more significant the work, the more inconspicuously and intimately its truth content is bound up to its material content” (SW 1: 297).
[Work] lies open…and its truth content is hidden," commentary must prepare the text for criticism, establishing what the materiality of the text is; criticism then reflects upon this *same material*, establishing its relation to the Absolute (history, tradition). The “truth” content of a work emerges *immanently* from within the work itself. The true task of “criticism” becomes the provocation of reflection via the creation of immanent constellations of material elements.

As is already clear, this distinction is essential for the early Benjamin—as it will become for Adorno—though throughout his life the distinction between “commentary” and “critique” will change substantially, becoming unified in the practice of “citation” (the dialectical image). At this point it can be noted that the processes are not so much distinct, as both occur on the *same material*: criticism creates constellations (in language) with the material defined by commentary. Or rather, critique relates elements of the work to the “truth content” of tradition.

Benjamin further formulates this model as “the Idea” in the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” (*Trauerspiel*, 1924), hence the infamous formulation of the “constellation:” Ideas are arrangements of empirical phenomena constructed or represented [*Darstellung*] in a monad. With this Benjamin inverts Plato, and to a certain extent Kant: Ideas are able to be empirically experienced, the *noumena* can be perceived (or experienced) in the *phenomena*. Following Plato, the Idea is of a fundamentally different world from what it apprehends, though it participates (or persists) in the material or empirical world—through criticism (as the creation of Ideas), the critic is able to experience the metaphysical fragments of tradition in one’s time, in individual elements. Benjamin employs a distinction between “truth” [*Warheit*], and “knowledge” [*Erkenntnis*], the former lies “beyond intention,” in that it is not intellectually apprehended, rather is *experienced* [*Erfahrung*] when one employs an immanent understanding of history. This is not to say that “knowledge” is un-important, functioning as “commentary,” it prepares the way for the true practice of philosophy (“criticism”), which is the reflection on the particulars position within the Absolute. What is essential to note is that “truth content” is experienced in the critical interaction with the work—as “beyond intention”—it is not

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41 Ibid. 325.
textual “truth” as arrived at through knowledge, nor is it the Marxist (or materialist) truth of the historical conditions underpinning the work. It is an experience of the work and its unfolding in tradition.

According to John McCole, one cannot comprehend Benjamin’s understanding of criticism without understanding his conception of “allegory,” the redemption of which is a central theme of Benjamin’s work on baroque Trauerspiel. Continuing his criticism of Romanticism, and Idealism, Benjamin takes aim at their conception of the “symbol,” which was thought as a timeless manifestation of the Hegelian “Idea” in the work of art; allegory was downgraded as subservient to this—as mere particularity. For Benjamin, it is precisely this creaturely, or contingent material element which expresses history (as transience) most aptly: “…the experience of all that is un-timely, sorrowful and un-successful,”\(^\text{42}\) that is the experience of an era as Absolute, as part of a broader unfolding of history and tradition. Symbol sees art as expressing timeless values, while allegory grasps the immanence of art and value to history, as exemplary of the “ruin of progress.” Under the allegorical gaze, “…the profane world…is both elevated and devalued,”\(^\text{43}\) an era is seen as historical (contra myth), yet such a realization is also recognized as a moment of danger, as epochs and Ideas are at risk of passing away into history. Benjamin will elevate the tasks of “criticism” and “commentary” against this threat of nihilism: phenomena are in constant danger of transience via history, hence must be “redeemed” (via the Idea) anew in each era. This model has a dual capacity: regarding an epoch like the baroque (or modernity) that is seemingly without history (“natural”), the critic must search for the “downcast elements,” which he or she then reflects upon to demonstrate the presence of history. In a second sense, one must recognize that phenomena are also at risk to this history, that an epoch not grasped by the present (as Idea) is at risk of passing away. In the Trauerspiel, the “material content” is demonstrated by Benjamin as the

\(^{42}\) McCole, The Antinomies of Tradition, 136. McCole further argues that the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” should not be read as an independent text (as it often is), rather as immanently arising from the material it attempts to comprehend. Hence the sections “Trauerspiel and Tragedy” and “Allegory and Trauerspiel,” provide the “material content” out of which the “truth content” (The Idea, allegory) of the prologue can arise.

\(^{43}\) Benjamin, Trauerspiel, 193.
baroque mourning play, the “truth content” of which is allegory (and history),\(^{44}\) which can be redeemed out of its specific epoch, and employed more generally. This immanent model of criticism allows linear temporality to be blasted open—one exists perpetually at the “midpoint” of history—overcoming the notion of eras of “decadence” and “decay.” Each epoch exists as an aspect of the Absolute.

Given that Ideas must arise immanently with respect to experience, or phenomena, the sphere of (intellectual) history is opened anew to experimentation with divergent constellations (Benjamin-Adorno; also, Benjamin-Deleuze...). Allowing one to give a radically different sense to the present by re-arranging the tradition supporting it. This space of experimentation, or the re-write-ability of tradition, is informed by a further valence in the German “sprung,” which connotes a “crack” or “fracture” that occurs when an entity “sets itself apart” from the stream of tradition (in its “origin”).\(^{45}\) This fracturing at the site of emergence means that entities are incomplete in themselves, and gain a full sense only within the stream of history (“pre/post history”). Citing an element elsewhere allows elements to take on a profoundly new sense given a new constellation.

The affinities of such a view with those of the later Frankfurt School (or many in the Marxist tradition) is highly evident, though from the preceding genealogy it can be asserted that Benjamin’s early model of criticism is decidedly not Marxist, thought it employs elements of such a tradition. At stake is not a simple reduction of works to a “material” base, rather an understanding of the persistence of history and tradition in individual works. Truth is beyond intention, even a Marxist one. However, Marxist analysis does play a role in these conceptions, as Benjamin asserts Lukács as a figure who is “…very important, particularly for me.”\(^{46}\) Specifically, Lukács’s analyses of

\(^{45}\)See Weber, Benjamin’s – Abilities, 134. For Weber, because of this incompleteness of the work at the site of origin it becomes constantly “re-writable,” or “re-citable,” given different historical constellations. Hence is emblematic to the “-ability” he reads as central to Benjamin’s work.
\(^{46}\)BC, 248. Writing to Scholem in 1924, Benjamin speaks further of the importance of Lukács” History and Class Consciousness to the methodological genesis of the Trauerspiel study (see BC, 246-251). Lukács should be noted as an important “correspondent” to both Benjamin and Adorno, though the present study cannot elaborate this relationship in full. For Benjamin, his analyses of “reified thought” and literary genre, provided epistemological tools to interrogate modern thought. While for Adorno, Lukács provided a model by which philosophy (or “critique”) could be employed to “de-reify” existing reality, that is to demonstrate
“second nature” (*Theory of the Novel*, 1920) which provided a means by which to read mythological manifestations historically. Acknowledging this affinity, Benjamin writes the following to Max Rychner in 1931:

Now this book [*The Trauerspiel*] was certainly not materialistic, if at the same time [it was] already dialectical. However, something which I was unaware of at the time of composition became soon after more and more clear to me: that proceeding from the standpoint of my very unique *philosophy of language*, there exist points of contact [*Vermittlung*]—however strained and problematic—with the methods of dialectical materialism.

Despite the engagement with political thinkers (Schmitt, and Lukács), Benjamin conveys that the point of *Trauerspiel* was not simply to develop a critical materialist-historical method, rather to elaborate an immanent method (via his philosophy of language or *Darstellung*) through which tradition can be thought anew: as perpetually re-writeable or citable from the present moment. One could attempt to assert the “truth-content” of the work to be the “material” in the sense of Marx, but this glosses over the metaphysical aspects of history Benjamin is attempting to redeem in his early writings. For example, though Benjamin “comments” upon the mythical elements of the “bourgeois” in his analysis of *Elective Affinities*, the point of his critique is the legibility of myth with respect to history more broadly—a demonstration of the capabilities (“-ability”) of critique to illuminate a work via history.

Further, if one takes such an immanent method seriously, one cannot *be* a Marxist, only inhabit discourses so as to bring about a greater unfolding, and throughout much of his work in the 1930s Benjamin will attempt to amend such vulgar Marxist conceptions which a fuller understanding of metaphysics. As will now be demonstrated, many of the “materialist” aspects of Benjamin’s model of criticism are perhaps more a product of their “post-history” at the hands of Adorno, who utilized Benjamin’s method it as historical and malleable. For more on the relationship between Lukács and the Frankfurt School see Andrew Feenberg’s 2014 work, *The Philosophy of Praxis: Marx Lukács and the Frankfurt School*.  

in the critique of existing capitalist social relations, and the eventual formulation of his own negative dialectic. If Benjamin’s thinking can be identified with later developments of critical theory, this is due to the origin of many of its conceptions in Benjamin’s writings. Further, if critical theory is said to draw power from its interaction with tradition, this is due to its employment of Benjamin’s immanent model of critique.

III. **Post-History: Adorno’s early writings (-1933)**

“The life of the mind only attains truth when discovering itself in absolute desolation.”

—Adorno *Minima Moralia*, 17

By 1931 Adorno was employing Benjamin’s work extensively towards his own critical project. In a letter to Benjamin, he praises his work on the baroque for having “…redeemed induction [immanence].” 48 Susan Buck-Morss elaborates this statement by Adorno, noting that in his work the concept of “redemption” entails the Hegelian *Aufhebung*: a preservation and negation (re-construction) of former elements. Adorno is at once asserting that Benjamin had redeemed the traditional model of induction, 49 while at the same time reconfiguring Benjamin’s method in his own political direction. Especially in these early writings, Adorno is theoretically extremely close to Benjamin, though he is operative at the limit (or extreme) of Benjamin’s own applications of his work. Adorno is useful in defining and clarifying many of the tendencies operative in Benjamin’s thought, while he moves them into divergent spheres. In this sense, he could be said to “translate” Benjamin’s thinking: the reproduction revealing something new within the original; in these early works, it was a capacity for Marxist critique. At this point, Adorno’s early negative dialectic will be un-packed, demonstrating it indebtedness to Benjamin’s model of criticism.

Adorno thinks of immanence in a Hegelian direction—as the unfolding of “truth” in history, and the tradition of philosophy—yet, as Buck-Morss will stress, Adorno emphasized the tension, or non-identity, of “truth” with history. For Adorno, the idealist conquest of the “real as rational” missed materiality and particularity, hence the

48 Adorno to Benjamin, December 5, 1934, *ABC*, 62.

49 Traditional induction is not so much opposed to deduction—rather entails working from particular phenomena with the presupposition of certain universals—Benjamin’s allegorical starting point presupposes no such position.
“historical truth” of the failure of idealist categories must be brought to bear on these same categories.\(^5\) Philosophy must be made to realize its own “non-identity” with reality, that the world cannot be grasped in a systematic or total fashion. For Adorno, the “historical truth” of idealism is only realized in its failure, that the attempt to articulate the “real” via “rational” categories was false from the start, and such symbolic aspirations should be read as the mere transience of allegory.

The concept of “historical truth” (or “social truth,” “truth”) is ambiguous in Adorno and can be taken in several senses, all of which mark a significant movement away from its formulation in Benjamin’s early work. Thinkers such as Jameson (*Late Marxism*, 1990) have read this concept in an explicitly Marxist direction, arguing that Adorno’s criticisms attempt to oppose the “identity” thinking which mirrors capitalist social relations (“exchange-value” over “use-value”)—arguing that “truth” for Adorno is a version of Marx’s “economic base.” However, such a view misses the complexity of Adorno’s materialist engagement with the history of metaphysics, specifically Kant and Hegel. For Adorno, the “truth” of such systems is not simply their class-status, but rather their domineering, and oppressive character, that such enlightenment systems are based on the suppression of nature, and (mythical) elements “non-identical” to the system. Marxism becomes a mode of critique by which to understand the alienation inherent in such systems, and to comprehend the particular “non-identities” foreclosed in Idealism. Jay Bernstein (*Disenchantment and Ethics*, 2001), rightly emphasizes the ethical dimension inherent in such thinking—an attempt to focus on concrete particulars (i.e. the human, material suffering, “non-identity”), against the categorical abstractions of idealism. Hence Adorno’s negative dialectic could be said to have a dual character: firstly, it attempts to elevate particularity (“non-identity”) from its downcast position, yet also understands the ethical imperative of an ideological critique—that philosophy is obligated to expose the systems of domination, breaking the spell of reification, while creating space for meaningful political action. What is essential to note is that “truth

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\(^5\) As Adorno writes in *Negative Dialectics*: “Having broken its pledge to be as one with reality or at the point of realization, philosophy is obliged ruthlessly to criticize itself.” (3). Adorno felt “the point of realization” of philosophy to have been the potential power of Marx (specifically *Theses on Feuerbach*, # 11), as critically harnessing (or realizing) the powers of idealism. Adorno’s project is one that attempts to think through the possibilities of a “critical” philosophy after its objective failure in the writings of Marx.
content” for Adorno is not simply the material base, but those “non-identical” elements in excess of the general economy, alongside the mode by which ideological systems obfuscate and leave out such elements. Adorno will employ Benjamin’s constellational method in the service of such an ideological critique, moving it away from its originary intentions. The complexities of this engagement will now be un-packed.

Adorno redeems materialism after the dissolution of idealism as a means of elevating the material particularity not found in such systems—yet his was a Marxism sans proletariat—one which presented a mode of cognition akin to Benjamin’s immanent allegorical vision, one that understood the transience of history. Hence, Adorno “…virtually equates materialism with the construction of Ideas,” recognizing that after the failure of the idealist project, concepts from idealism must be redeemed out the oppressive totality, and re-directed towards “non-identity,” or material particularity. To do this, Adorno employs Benjamin’s constellations, as a mode by which philosophy can turn towards “non-identity,” yet also act as a critical tool to expose the “historical truth” of idealist categories. Or rather, it can be employed as mode of ideological critique in the services of specific political imperatives.

Adorno’s 1931 address to the Frankfurt philosophy faculty, “The Actuality of Philosophy,” elaborates imperatives for the practice of “critique” after the dissolution of metaphysics. Buck-Morss emphasizes that a continuity between this inaugural lecture and his later Negative Dialectics (1966) can be drawn; much of Adorno’s thinking attempted to immanently work through the ruin of idealism to discern what critical power still remained in such a tradition. What is remarkable is the continuity of Adorno as a thinker: he ostensibly held the same skepticism to positive representation (and affirmation), before and after Auschwitz.52

51 Buck-Morss, The Origin of Negative Dialectics, 93. And further: “How does Benjamin’s early, non-Marxist philosophy provide the key to Adorno’s own dialectical materialist method? The answer involved following Adorno in a double procedure, translating Benjamin’s original conceptions into a Marxist theoretical frame, and grounding Marxist theory philosophically with the aid of those conceptions in order to prove immanently that dialectical materialism was the only valid structure of cognitive experience” (ibid. xiii).
52 As Adorno will write in the preface to Negative Dialectics (1966): “To the best of his ability the author means to put his cards on the table—which is by no means the same as playing the game,” (xix) he goes on to emphasize the “dis-continuous” (or negative) continuity that exists between his late theoretical treatise,
In such a critique of idealism, Adorno will employ Benjamin’s immanent model of criticism in an explicitly political sense (“Marxism”\(^{53}\)), towards contemporary social relations and modes of thought. Adorno was the first to employ Benjamin’s method beyond the epistemic, or textual domains of his early writings, into the realms of sociology, music, and empirical analysis. Yet with this application, Adorno crystallizes many of Benjamin’s concerns into a more “applicable” (systematic\(^{54}\)) method of criticism—what he terms the “historical image”—utilizing “constellations” to break “the spell” \([\text{der Bann}]\) of reification. With his betrayal of Benjamin’s aversion to concrete politics, Adorno immanently reconfigures Benjamin’s thought in the direction of what is conventionally known as “critical theory:” utilizing Benjamin’s expanded notion of criticism and tradition in critique of present forms of domination.\(^{55}\)

In 1931’s “The Actuality of Philosophy,” Adorno takes Benjamin seriously, asserting that philosophy must rethink its “actuality” historically: “…only out of the historical entanglement of questions and answers does the question of philosophy’s actuality emerge precisely. And that simply means, after the failure of efforts for a grand

and the various texts throughout his life which employ this method. Thus a negative unity can be drawn throughout Adorno’s work—and one can read the majority of his writings as an attempt to employ his modified dialectical schema; a continuity existing between his writings on Music, literature, popular culture, philosophy, and sociology.

\(^{53}\) As argued earlier, Adorno should not be seen as a “conventional” Marxist, as many categories (such as the proletariat) are absent from his work. Of particular importance for Adorno is Lukács’ analysis of “reified thought” \((\text{History and Class Consciousness}, 1923)\), and much of Adorno’s method of critique attempted to break the “spell” of reified thought through philosophical categories. For an elaboration of this see Buck-Morss, \textit{The Origin of Negative Dialectics}, 25-28.

\(^{54}\) Though Adorno had a professed aversion to “systems” in their Idealist sense as founded on the suppression and domination of nature (\textit{See Dialectic of Enlightenment}), his method of philosophy did contain substantial systematic, or consistent tendencies (if only negatively). For a specific elaboration of this see \textit{Negative Dialectics}, “Introduction,” 3-61.

\(^{55}\) Though Adorno did not officially join the Institute until 1938, many aspects of his thinking (and his appropriations of Benjamin) became dominant in the orthodoxy of the school (especially following the 1944 \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment}). Hence, via “post-history,” Benjamin unwittingly became more entangled with “critical theory.” Such an employment translates Benjamin’s model of criticism \textit{explicitly} into the realm of ideological critique, moving away (via Lukács) from Benjamin’s a-political concerns with tradition, and genre. For Adorno critique should aim primarily at “de-reification” (a breaking of “the spell”), and should not focus primarily on locating the work in tradition (as Benjamin). However, throughout his life Adorno sought the modes by which tradition could be used against itself; the mode by which “traditional” elements could be utilized in ideological critique of existing social relations.
and total philosophy: whether philosophy is itself at all actual.”\textsuperscript{56} After the failure of metaphysics (idealism), was philosophy still possible? Could it still claim to act meaningfully upon the world, or assert a task of enlightenment? For Adorno, it could, pending its abandonment of metaphysical, or idealist aims of constructing systematic modes of thinking. If it is to remain “actual,” if it is still to have force in the world philosophy must awaken its power of \textit{criticism}: distorting existing reality so as to reveal spaces for political action,\textsuperscript{57} returning to the critical spirit found in figures such as Marx and Kant. Philosophy had not become aware of its impotence in the face of material suffering, of its own role in the destruction of the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, rather it acted in a defeatist manner, simply justifying existing reality. It should be stressed that this is not simply an ideological critique from Adorno’s perspective, but rather an assertion of the \textit{objective situation} of philosophy after the failure of idealism—that the conquest of the real as rational had failed, and thought must abandon such attempts at reconciliation.

Despite this historical situation, such projects continued (positivism, Neo-Kantianism, phenomenology), and Adorno sought to demonstrate their entanglement in the idealist tradition, demonstrating their place in a convention turned to ruin. As noted, one cannot oppose such systems externally—posing some “authentic givenness” (as phenomenology)—instead one must immanently \textit{work-through} the problems of metaphysics, recognizing the symptoms of the tradition of domination therein, and in so doing, Adorno will employ Benjamin’s model of criticism.

Adorno is particularly critical of phenomenology (Heidegger, Husserl), insisting that Husserl’s imperative of a “return to the things-themselves” represented a regression of the Copernican revolution of thinking to a mere cult of the mind: a “provincialism” of thinking with little awareness of history, and its own entanglement with idealist categories. Husserl attempted to overcome the idealist “subject/object” distinction, though maintained a latent distinction between “reason” and “reality” (a Cartesianism).

\textsuperscript{56} Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy,” 124.
\textsuperscript{57} In such critiques, Adorno again is not a conventional Marxist, nor does he simply deride the Idealist project as failed. Rather he demonstrates that such systems failed by their \textit{own imperatives}. As Susan Buck-Morss writes, “He [Adorno] wanted to show that precisely when the idealist project of establishing the identity of mind and reality—failed, it expressed, unintentionally, social truth, thus proving the pre-eminence of reality over mind and the necessity of a critical, dialectical attitude of \textit{non-identity} toward it—proving in short, the validity of dialectical materialist cognition” (\textit{The Origin of Negative Dialectics}, xiii).
He attempted to rectify this paradox through “intentionality:” the notion that knowledge always presents as knowledge of something. However, this resulted in a doubling of the object into the “object of thought” and the “object itself,” resulting not only in a regress, but a re-inscription of the idealist distinction between “reason” and “reality.” Husserl’s attempt to overcome idealism resulted in the relocation of “objectivity” in the subject, yet could not account for thoughts relation to the external world other than through the “mediation” of reason. Hence Adorno will assert, “…every one of the Husserlian analysis of the given rests on an implicit system of transcendental reason.”\footnote{Adorno, “Actuality of Philosophy.” 122. For more on Adorno’s specific criticism of Husserl see Against Epistemology (1934-37); Susan Buck-Morss notes the “un-intentional social truth” of Adorno’s analysis: that Husserl’s failure demonstrated the problematic of straightforward rational cognition of social reality, an imperative Adorno would take up in his own analyses—that philosophy should now seek to apply itself “critically.” See The Origin of Negative Dialectics, 71-72.} For Adorno, Husserl’s phenomenology was simply a continuation of the idealist attempt to conquer the “real” by way of the “rational.”

Adorno’s criticisms of Heidegger begin with a similar premise: that Heidegger’s “fundamental existential” analyses are based on an idealist suppression of the very particulars he attempted to bring into philosophy;\footnote{As Adorno writes: “All that is needed is an understanding of the narrowness of the Heideggerian existential categories of throwness, anxiety and death, which are in fact not able to banish the fullness of what is living.” (“The Actuality of Philosophy,” 124). Heidegger will be a persistent interlocutor throughout Adorno’s life, most notably in The Jargon of Authenticity (1964), and “Part 1: Relation to Ontology” of Negative Dialectics.} that Dasein, despite its anxieties did not possess the contingency (“spontaneity”), or historical awareness of an actual human being. Thus Heidegger’s analyses should be seen as what they are: an idealist unfolding of the concept of Being, in which “non-identity,” history, and the human are absent. These criticisms should be seen as exemplary of Adorno’s own immanent model of criticism: the use of categories from within a philosophical system to demonstrate its historical un-truth, that phenomenology, despite its claim to describe reality authentically, suppressed this same reality. Despite its assertions of “historicity,” phenomenology could not understand (or overcome) its own historical origin.\footnote{As Adorno will later state in his 1965 Lectures on Negative Dialectics: Heidegger’s system draws it appeal from the fact that it deals with seemingly complex phenomena without recourse to conceptual machinery (as idealism). Though for Adorno, the concept of Being contains within it wizened systematic elements which allow him to overcome the “ontic”/ “ontological” distinction (see p. 38).} In his 1932 work “The Idea of Natural History,” Adorno further criticizes phenomenology from what could be termed...
his own “historical philosophical perspective”, while developing his concept of “Natural history” beyond its employment in Benjamin’s Trauerspiel. Adorno asserts that such a “return to givenness” (nature, “authenticity”) became possible only within the reified context of capitalist social relations, within Lukács’ “second nature,” which describes “…the false mythical appearance of given reality as a-historical and Absolute.”61 The phenomenological project arose in a context that suppressed history (as Benjamin’s baroque), along with its own origin in idealism. For Adorno, as a thinker of immanence, one must reject any “authentic” philosophical starting point—specifically ontology, or any fixed “natural” categories—as following Lukács and Benjamin, such “natural” categories always emerge at a certain point in history. It is essential to note that such immanent critiques of philosophical systems are integral to Adorno’s own rejection of totality, that philosophy must exist negatively, as a critique of existing totalities.

In “The Actuality of Philosophy,” Adorno is also careful to distance himself from historicism (Dilthey), and “irrationalist” Lebensphilosophie (Simmel), as for Adorno, such thinking cedes the autonomy of the individual to history or some greater force, denying one’s ability to act meaningfully with respect to reality. Referencing Simmel, he writes: “…[he] has admittedly maintained contact with the reality with which it deals, but in so doing has lost all claim to make sense out of the empirical world which presses upon it, and becomes resigned to “the living” as a blind and unenlightened concept of nature.”62 For Adorno, philosophy must at once describe existing reality, while at the same time, it must emphasize the ability of the subject to act, or come to a rational understanding of his or her social situation. Adorno saw the relationship to theory and practice to be inextricably linked, a rational articulation of the myths of current reality already provided the means to move beyond them. As will be demonstrated (Ch. 3), Adorno will level a similar criticism against Benjamin, that his “mythical” analysis foreclosed possibilities of political action.

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61 Lukács, Theory of the Novel, 62.
62 Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy,” 121. Benjamin attempted to refashion many of Simmel’s categories in his later work on Baudelaire (1938-39), which Adorno will be highly critical of, the bases of his criticism can already be seen in these early writings.
Such critiques are essential aspects of Adorno’s thinking, and one must recognize that philosophical problems are immanent to history and tradition. In 1931, this entailed a recognition of thought’s entanglement with idealism, and the crises therein. In favor of a rejection, or repression of such an entanglement, Adorno would embrace and radicalize the “subject/object” polarity inherent in idealism (specifically Hegel), recognizing the contradictory, yet intertwined nature of the two poles—that aspects of the social existed in the subject, yet by thinking in opposition to oneself, one possesses the ability to shape the social world. Much of the research of the early Frankfurt School entailed a reflection upon the failure of Marxist doctrine to seize the “masses”—both throughout the 19th Century (1848, 1871), and in Germany during the Spartacus revolt (1919), and the rise of Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei Deutschlands (SPAD). For Adorno, such a failure was not so much political as intellectual, caused by the lack of an understanding of the ways in which modes of thought upheld the social world. For Adorno, such a relation was first broached by Lukács with his conception of “reification” (History and Class Consciousness, 1923), in which aspects of social reality appeared as fixed and given due to the categories of bourgeois thought. However, Adorno criticized Lukács’ insistence that only the concrete action of the proletariat could break such a spell; for Adorno, dialectical theory could break open existing reality, revealing it as historical, and malleable. Or rather, it could reveal the “origin” of such social relations. Yet following Lukács, Adorno recognized that one must think against oneself, given that one’s own consciousness supports aspects of administered reality. In a text entitled “On Subject and Object” (1954), Adorno radicalizes the Kantian antinomy between the “empirical” and “transcendental” subject—the former expressing one’s spontaneous subjective capacities, while the latter conveys aspects of subjectivity given to one by society (Marx’s “socially necessary labor time,” Max Weber’s “bureaucracy”). Hence, “The subject’s reflection upon its own formalism is a reflection upon society;” in recognizing the “primacy of the object,” one comes to reflect upon the ways in which one’s own consciousness is

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63 Adorno, “On Subject and Object,” 257. This marks an important movement away from Lukács for Adorno. In History and Class Consciousness, Lukács accords a semi-messianic role to the “proletariat,” arguing that if they are able to come to consciousness of their “reified” position this will enact a negation of existing social relations. For Adorno, criticism can aid in “de-reification,” but no such guarantee of revolution can be asserted, all that exists is the “impossible-possibility” of thinking.
immanent to the social world, tradition, and history. Vis-à-vis this splitting of subjectivity, one has the ability to act against this objectivity, via the critical power of thought. As Adorno will later put it, “To use the strength of the subject to break through the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity.”

Hence in 1931, Adorno will stress sociology as a means for philosophy to come to terms with its own dissolution—to perform psycho-analysis upon itself—recognizing which of its categories are given to it by the social, and attaining a self-consciousness of itself in its own ruin. Adorno contrasts this with Heidegger, for whom philosophy aims at what is fundamental (ontological), whereas sociology simply “burgles” such insights. For Adorno, after the ruin of such foundational projects, all that is left is what has been taken, the fragments of the critical power of metaphysics. And further, philosophy must now work alongside other (empirical) disciplines, such as sociology, whose research into the material-social world philosophy must interpret. With such an academic division of labor, Adorno is closer to Benjamin than the orthodoxy of Horkheimer, applying Benjamin’s model of “critique” to the social world. Summoning Benjamin’s distinction between “commentary” and “criticism”—alongside the distinction between “truth” and “material” content—Adorno will write: “The idea of knowledge [Wissenschaft] is research, that of philosophy is interpretation.” As commentary for Benjamin, research must undertake to present existing reality in empirical assemblages; presenting data within a framework as knowledge. Philosophy then must interpret such assemblages, creating “constellations” by which knowledge can be reflected upon, so as to reveal it in “truth,” that is, in history and tradition.

The task of philosophy is not to search for concealed and manifest intentions of reality, but to interpret the unintentional reality in that, by the power of constructing figures, images, out of the isolated elements of

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64 Adorno, Negative Dialectics, xx.
65 “For the house, this big house [Idealist systems], has long since decayed in its foundations and threatens not only to destroy all those inside it, but to cause all the things to vanish which are stored within it…if the cat burglar steals these things, these singular, indeed often half-forgotten things, he does a good deed, provided they are only rescued.” (“The Actuality of Philosophy,” 130). Adorno goes on to write that the sociologist (burglar), does not always know the worth of his societal insights, hence the philosophy must employ what has been looted from such idealist systems.
reality, it negates questions whose exact articulation is the task of knowledge.  

Philosophy, then, “negates” mere knowledge, moving beyond simple understanding, and in doing so illustrates the possibilities that reality could be different; it creates “constellations” (Benjamin’s Idea) and images of existing reality, demonstrating the historical nature of reified social relations. As Adorno will demonstrate in his 1966 *Negative Dialectics*, such a theoretical gesture is itself already “praxis” in that it breaks the spell of existing reality, pointing to the fact that things could be different. The task of criticism for Adorno is to point the way for such possibilities. “Materialism has named this relationship with a name that is philosophically certified: dialectic,” Adorno re-fashions the “dialectic” from historical materialism (via Lukács, and Benjamin): he suggests that philosophy must demonstrate individual fragments, or moments of time, as part of a larger process of history—that they have a historical “origin”—hence can be molded or overcome (negated) in the present moment. Instead of attempting to grasp at totality, philosophy is able to allegorically grasp a fragment, demonstrating history in the present era. As Adorno states at the outset of the lecture, “For the mind is indeed not capable of producing or grasping the totality of the real, but it may be possible to penetrate the detail to explode in miniature the mass of merely existing reality.”

Adorno will call such constructions “historical images,” the truth of which is demonstrated when reality crystalizes around them in “exact fantasy”—that is, categories which arise immanently from the phenomena they attempt to apprehend—this against idealism which employs general categories, negating the critical power of particularity. Interpretation (“criticism”) entails the experimentation with such arrangements, an attempt to construct an interpretation which could be seized upon politically: “The point of interpretive philosophy is to construct keys, before which reality springs open.”

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67 Ibid. 127. On this point Jameson will argue that Adorno’s model has immense power for the development of an “ethically” driven sociology; one driven by the imperative that the humanities and social-sciences must not merely describe existing reality, but open avenues for it to be overcome from a leftist perspective. See *Late Marxism*, 5.
68 Ibid. 129. A further valence of this is that philosophy must always see itself in process (historically), it cannot start from scratch without thinking through tradition, and the problems of philosophy therein.
69 Ibid. 133.
70 Ibid. 130. The ambiguity of this formulation should be noted, “for whom” reality “springs open” for is ambiguous in Adorno.
Adorno’s “interpretative-gaze” has much in common with Benjamin’s “allegorical-gaze,” which sees present day symbols already as ruins, as already decayed by history, and contains within it the power to awaken one from the “charnel house of rotted interiorities.”  

He [Benjamin] is driven not merely to awaken congealed life in petrified objects—as in allegory—but also to scrutinize living things so that they present themselves as being ancient, “ur-historical” and abruptly release their significance.  

Allegory at once de-mythologizes the present, and also opens up the space of construction that is history, allowing the construction of new constellations (“Ideas”). For Benjamin, the Idea must arise immanently from within the work, its guarantee of “truth” is its esoteric ability to unfold the work beyond itself in the practice of reflection. For Adorno, the “historical image” finds its guarantee of truth in its exoteric relation to material and historical circumstances, its “truth” is found to the extent that it de-reifies existing reality to the extent that it elicits practice. For Benjamin, “commentary” prepares the way for “criticism,” in which textual elements are entered in the “truth” of tradition; for Adorno, commentary (knowledge, sociology, research), is negated into the “historical image” which finds its truth in its opening up of reality for political purposes. For Adorno critique has a straightforwardly “objective” relationship with the social world, such a relation is not so for Benjamin at this point.

What is essential for Adorno is a constant tension between “subject” and “object,” one which understands historical circumstances (via constellations), yet also is able to meaningfully think and act (politically) in the present moment. This slight alteration of Benjamin’s dialectical method will prove significant later in their correspondence (1938-39), and his fixation of the dialectical poles (“subject/object”) betrays something of the fundamental immanence of Benjamin’s method—a mode of thinking which tolerates no fixed starting point, even a dialectical one. One could ask if this move forecloses something of the “originary” force of Benjamin’s method—though it performs an

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72 Ibid. 191.
important task (critique of present social relations), it perhaps has the tertiary effect of solidifying Benjamin within a dominant narrative of “critical theory.”

In 1931, Adorno gives an example of what such a construction of an objective historical constellation would entail. In *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), Lukács asserted Kant’s problem of the “thing-in-itself” to be the result, not of a metaphysical antinomy, but of the inability of reified thought to grasp existing reality. For Adorno, Lukács’s insight into the “social truth” of Kant’s categories (through the introduction of the “ideal type” of the commodity form), demonstrates the historical “origin” of supposedly eternal metaphysical questions. “Like a source of light…,” the critical constellation constructed by the critic illuminates present reality as changeable through political action, demonstrating that “eternal categories” too have a history (or “origin”).

Already in 1931, Benjamin recognized the affinity of Adorno’s address with his own concerns: in reference to Adorno’s statement regarding “the task of philosophy…” Benjamin writes, “I can subscribe to this proposition. Yet I could not have written it without some reference to the introduction of my book on Baroque drama.” Adorno will acknowledge this oversight, while pointing to an emergent intellectual solidarity. Benjamin too will confess this convergence, writing to Adorno after reading his work on Kierkegaard: “Thus it is true that there is still something like a shared work after all; that there are still sentences which allow one individual to stand in for and represent another.” Despite this claim of solidarity, neither could anticipate how such a solidarity would unfold over the coming years. This early “translation” will be of particular importance for Adorno, given its consistency with his later named “negative dialectic” (1966), and it could be said to define the dominant direction for much of their later correspondence: namely Adorno’s reading of Benjamin’s “constellations” as objective in his employment of them to critique existing social relations.

The influence of Benjamin’s model of criticism is seen most explicitly in Adorno’s 1933 *Kierkegaard and the Construction of the Aesthetic*, a text which would

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74 *ABC*, 10. Here one could speculate that the “origin” of critical theory is Adorno’s (un-intentional?) plagiarism of Benjamin.
75 *ABC*, 19.
prove influential to Benjamin’s later formulations of the dialectical image, (Ch. 3) and is exemplary of Adorno’s own conception of the “historical image.” For Adorno, the “truth” of Kierkegaard’s work lay in its “un-intentional historical elements,” in the images of bourgeois life upon which his existential dramas were staged. Hence Adorno elevates (constructs) the “bourgeois intérieur” out of the ruin of Kierkegaard’s texts, and such an image is demonstrated as the condition of possibility for Kierkegaard’s existential subjectivity—that it rests on a mythological suppression of the conditions to which gave rise to it, that Kierkegaard responds to historical alienation, in an a-historical, and theological sense. As Adorno writes, “The concrete self is for Kierkegaard identical with the bourgeois self.” 76 Despite this absence, or disavowal in Kierkegaard’s work, history is still there, and can be read by the interpretive gaze of the theorist. Yet Adorno also reads this historical cipher as emblematic of a greater historical philosophical trend: of the regression of idealism to myth, a regression which is readable only in the extremes, or in the “late works” of the tradition. Thus the “truth content” of Kierkegaard’s work is not his affirmation of subjectivity, or his poetic pseudonymity, but rather the relation of such gestures to the decline of idealism—the fact that Kierkegaard’s gestures can be read to reveal a greater social truth. Kierkegaard is not reduced to a set of material circumstances, rather is read as a cipher to greater historical and ideological processes.

Methodologically the work is extremely dense and vague; Adorno’s method of criticism is so immanent that he does not employ an introduction or conclusion, nor does he define his methodology, but rather elaborates it out of extensive readings of Kierkegaard’s texts, elevating their detritus elements to explain the whole. The methodology employed is clearly Benjaminian, and is perhaps the most extreme commitment to his model of immanent criticism, as Adorno attempts to unfold Kierkegaard further through criticism, while using him as a lens to view earlier trajectories of thought (idealism). It is in this work that Adorno develops his “historical image” with respect to the work of art (the “aesthetic sphere” in Kierkegaard): art acts as a “cipher” to existing reality without being subsumed by it, the precise relation of which must be “decoded” by the critic. Art, as other detritus objects, remain “non-identical” to

76 Adorno, Kierkegaard and the Construction of the Aesthetic, 49.
ideological appropriations, and dominant narratives—though they can be incorporated, they are never fully reduced. For Hullot-Kentor, this is the appearance of “truth” in the “extreme” in Benjamin’s sense: that the truth of an era (or genre) is found more in what it excludes than includes—for late bourgeois society, the artwork is excluded from exchange by dint of its being art, hence it is afforded special insight, or has the ability to “reflect” upon the reality from which it is autonomous. The precise relationship of this reflection must be read by the critic, who demonstrates the refraction of social reality in the work, yet also its prismatic quality: as “non-identical” to the existing world, it refracts that things could be otherwise. As Adorno writes, “…no truer image of hope can be imagined than that of ciphers, readable as traces.” That such ciphers, and the possibility of decoding them, points to the fact that things could be otherwise; that reified society has a historical origin, which can be revealed and moved beyond, in the work of art such semblances of hope flash up, as a “firework.” Such insights will be elaborated more fully in his later *Aesthetic Theory* (1969), though it is important to note that seeds of Adorno’s later thinking are already latent here.

Benjamin responded to the text enthusiastically with a review in the *Vossische Zeitung* (1933), asserting that Adorno had developed a new model for historical analysis of the 19th century—that he had unearthed a hidden panorama of affinities linking the epoch. Despite Adorno’s employment of his categories, Benjamin is clearly impressed by the applications the young Adorno had made with respect to his method—specifically the practice of endowing myths (images, artworks) with historical power, of reading ciphers (“historical images”), so as to reveal broader trajectories. Citations from this text

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77 As was argued earlier in defining Benjamin’s “Idea” as the constellation of the unique and extreme. See, Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance*, 77-94.

78 Adorno, *Kierkegaard*, 126. This relates more generally to the “dual-character” of art in Adorno’s work, that works of art are both “autonomous” and “heteronomous” with respect to society: that the conditions for autonomous (or non-exchangeable) art, where themselves created within exchange society, hence autonomous art relates to a particular epoch dialectically. Put otherwise, they have a material content within a given epoch, but an ideal existence outside of it as art. In this definition, one can see many of Benjamin’s early formulations relating to the Idea. For more on this character of art see *AS*, 3-22.

79 “And no cultural history of the 19th century will be able to compete with the vividness with which, from the very centre of his thinking Kierkegaard is here linked with Hegel, now with Wagner, now with Poe, now with Baudelaire” (*SW* 2: 704). One can see how Benjamin’s later analyses of Baudelaire employ a similar method of reading an epoch out of a single work or figure. A study of more depth is warranted on the specific relationship of Adorno’s *Kierkegaard* and Benjamin’s work. This relationship will be broached again in Ch. 3.
were found in “Convolute N” [N2, 7] of Benjamin’s *Arcades*, testaments to Adorno’s influence on the development of his own dialectical image in a potentially political sense.

Benjamin’s 1931 “What is Epic Theatre?” mark some of his first comments on Brecht, and one can read the text itself as cipher to the influence of Adorno in the development of his thinking in a political direction; though to Adorno’s dismay, it was in a Brechtian sense. In his reading of Brecht’s *A Man’s a Man* (1931), Benjamin comments upon Brecht’s “Alienation effect” in fashion that anticipates Adorno’s analyses of Kierkegaard: “[b]ut there exists a view in which even the most usual scenes of bourgeoisie life appear rather like this [as estranged].”\(^{80}\) In the same way Adorno’s historical image estranged one from the myths of the bourgeois intérieur, revealing them as historical, Brecht’s performances revealed the world as constructible—as capable of being molded by political action. In his translation of Benjamin’s method, Adorno may have unwittingly pushed Benjamin further towards Brecht, whose influence will be clearly demonstrated in the next chapter.

IV. Concluding Remarks: A Betrayal of Immanence?

Peter Sloterdijk’s 1983 *Critique of Cynical Reason* describes the mutation of critique throughout the 20th century into an “enlightened false consciousness”: “critique, in any sense of the word, is experiencing gloomy days. Once again a period of pseudo-critique has begun, in which critical stances are subordinate to professional roles”\(^{81}\). For Sloterdijk, the main culprit of this movement is Adorno (and his post-history in the hands of Habermas)—those who moved “critique” away from its “originary” stance into a cynical, dogmatic, and self-sufficient enterprise. For Sloterdijk, the critique of the existing order of things has itself become an aspect of such an order of things. Whether or not Adorno is to blame for such a movement cannot be decided here; what can be said is

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\(^{80}\) Benjamin, “What is Epic Theatre?” *Understanding Brecht*, 9. Though the fragment remained unpublished, it is dated to this period due the presence of Brecht’s 1931 *A Man’s a Man*. Through chronologically before Adorno’s 1933 Kierkegaard study, as synchronic constellations between the two is evident. One can speculate that Benjamin was “awakening” to the political potential inherent in his method, that critique could act as Brecht’s “alienation effect,” distancing one from existing social conditions, and demonstrating them as malleable. It is further interesting to note the proximity of Adorno and Brecht on this point, as Adorno’s “historical image” preforms a similar function to Brecht’s “alienation effect.” In their later correspondence surrounding Baudelaire (Ch. 3.), Benjamin will cite remarks from Adorno’s Kierkegaard as emblematic of his own “dialectical image.”

\(^{81}\) Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, xxxvi.
that he was one of the first to inaugurate such concrete applications of Benjamin’s method. If one were to argue for “critique’s” present actuality—of a redemption of Marxism, or dialectics—one should take seriously the immanent and constructive perspective first illuminating it as a meaningful gesture. At stake is perhaps an inquiry into what is to be redeemed (in both Benjamin and Adorno) for our present moment, a question which considers both a history of reception (via tradition), while allowing for reconstruction in our “now-time.”

Chastising contemporary movements of “pseudo-critique,” Sloterdijk glosses the figure of Benjamin as one who inaugurated such a critical movement, yet also perhaps provides the key to it re-thinking via his recovery of the space (“-ability”) of construction. In modernity, things have become too close for “disinterested” or removed (theoretical) contemplation, one must recognize one’s immanent position to both the present, and tradition. In this way Benjamin (like Socrates) exhibits “dialectical thinking” in its true sense (dia-logos—movement of the “word”): there can be no fixed positions (even dialectical ones), what matters is perhaps the recovery of this immanent space of (re)construction. Benjamin describes the decline of the “removed” Kantian critic, while alluding to the new possibilities opened by a perspective of immanence:

Fools lament the decay of criticism. For its day is long past. Criticism is a matter of correct distancing. It was at home in a world where perspectives and prospects counted and where it was still possible to adopt a standpoint. Now things press too urgently on human society. The “un-clouded,” “innocent” [disinterested contemplation] eye has become a lie, perhaps the whole naïve mode of expression sheer incompetence.82

This early encounter between the two will prove decisive over the coming years, and for the remainder of this project, with Adorno holding largely to this early model of criticism, with Benjamin seeking new applications for his critical methodology. This will entail an application of his model of immanent criticism to a wider range of phenomena—specifically the historical and political potentials therein.

82 Benjamin, One Way Street. SW 1: 476.
2. On Parables: Reading Kafka with Benjamin and Adorno*

“This divine power [violence] is not only attested by religious tradition but is also found in present-day life in at least one sanctioned manifestation. The educative power [study], which in its perfected form stands outside the law, is one of its manifestations.”

“It’s not that the students don’t ‘get’ Kafka’s humor but that we’ve taught them to see humor as something you get—the same way we’ve taught them that the self is something you just have.”
- David Foster Wallace, Laughing with Kafka

“Many complain that the words of the wise are always merely parables and of no use in daily life, which is the only life we have. When the sage says: "Go over," he does not mean that we should cross over to some actual place, which we could do anyhow if the labor were worth it; he means some fabulous yonder, something unknown to us, something too that he cannot designate more precisely, and therefore cannot help us here in the very least. All these parables really set out to say merely that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and we know that already. But the cares we have to struggle with every day: that is a different matter.

Concerning this a man once said: Why such reluctance? If you only followed the parables you yourselves would become parables and with that rid yourself of all your daily cares.

Another said: I bet that is also a parable.

The first said: You have won.

The second said: But unfortunately only in parable.

The first said: No, in reality: in parable you have lost.”

-Kafka, On Parables

*A version of this chapter was published as “On Some Motifs in Kafka (that they exist…): Reading Kafka with Benjamin (Brecht, Scholem) and Adorno.” in Reclaiming Walter Benjamin for Revolutionary Times, Heathwood Journal of Critical Theory, 1.3, pp. 61-84.
I. Only a Parable?

“And what had been the point of all his studying! He had forgotten everything; if he’d had to take up his studies again here, he would have found it very hard.”

-Kafka, Amerika

Reading Kafka with Adorno and Benjamin is already quite a crowd, and their respective readings summon up a further polyphony of voices: Scholem, Brecht (at least), and further, Siegfried Kracauer, Werner Kraft, and Max Brod—a veritable community of interpreters and commentators. Adorno and Benjamin’s respective considerations of Kafka (Benjamin 1934, Adorno, 1952-53) can be used to date the emergence and decline of this interpretative industry that arose following Kafka’s death in 1924. In confronting Kafka, one is thrown into this community of readers, forced to choose which religion (Marxism, existentialism, Judaism) Kafka is authoring parables for. Kafka of course would be in a unique position to appreciate the ironies of such endeavors, and it seems his work does much to provoke such ambiguity and discord—each motif seems to convey, yet withdraw in perfect simultaneity. In Kafka we encounter a writer of a distinctly modern sensibility: one profoundly aware of various interpretative industries, along with the weight of tradition, and perhaps even the levelling to which these forces would subject his stories. In this sense, a Kafka as himself is difficult to reach, and perhaps this was never intended.

Treated in these considerations then will not be Kafka’s work, but rather two readers of Kafka (Adorno, Benjamin), and the (dis) correspondence this encounter demonstrates. For Benjamin and Scholem, Kafka provided a stage upon which a complex theological (-political) dispute could unfold—yet what did his work stage for Adorno and Benjamin? Adorno claimed that Kafka presented “…our agreement on philosophical fundamentals,”1 yet this is clearly not the case, as their respective readings reveal profoundly divergent notions of utopia (Messianism), politics (Marxism), and perhaps the dignity of philosophy (critique) as such. Hence Kafka becomes the ideal terrain upon which the dis-correspondence of these two thinkers can be articulated, and each better illuminated in their respective singularity as correspondents of difference. This episode demonstrates Adorno’s further employment of Benjamin’s model of criticism (along

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1 ABC, 66.
Marxist lines); beside the development of Benjamin’s dialectical image along materialist (Brechtian), and theological lines (Scholem). Despite this divergence, it will be shown that the two share a conception of the radical potential of tradition, and the possibilities therein.

In what follows these respective positions will be articulated and juxtaposed: beginning with Benjamin (II), it will be demonstrated that his Kafka entails an attempt to bridge theological tenets formulated against Scholem with the “practical” materialism of Brecht, all in an attempt to recover a certain sense of (action in) the present moment. Following this Adorno’s response (III), along with his own reading of Kafka will be elucidated (IV): despite his claim of accord, it will be demonstrated that Adorno utilizes Kafka in a critique of capitalist social relations. Fundamentally, each thinker interprets Kafka from the perspective of his own thought—the parallaxes in their respective readings relate to a broader chiasmus in their thinking in general. These center broadly on models of “resistance”—where hope exists in Kafka’s world, and what type of agency is granted to the subject. Of particular import for Benjamin will be resistance to the mythical basis of “the law,” and the potentials afforded in Kafka’s work for such a task. More fundamentally, this episode questions the role “theory” should play in the formulation of a coming philosophy, or a coming politics. Formulated in these considerations are two models of “revolutionary criticism”—following Benjamin’s “The Author as Producer” (1934)—“the critic” must take a stand in the literary struggle, formulating (collective) images of critique and resistance from within tradition. Each utilized Kafka to illustrate their own position in such a literary struggle, demonstrative of their respective understandings of the relationship between art, criticism, and politics.

II. Benjamin’s Kafka (1934-39)

“The decisive moment of human development is continually at hand. This is why those movements of revolutionary thought that declare everything preceding to be an irrelevance are correct—because as yet nothing has happened.” -Kafka, The Zürau Aphorisms, #6, p. 8

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2 Though Adorno’s “Notes on Kafka,” was written after Benjamin’s death in 1952, much of its original content was likely developed as early as 1925, and is clearly further influenced by Benjamin’s 1934 essay, and early models of criticism. However, by the 1950s Adorno was more established as a critic, supplementing Benjamin’s early model with an “enlightened” mode of critique, attempting to provoke an understanding of social conditions so as to allow their overcoming.
It is likely that Benjamin encountered Kafka as early as 1915, though an active concern for his work did not begin until 1925, with his reading of “Before the Law” (and the subsequent Trial). For Benjamin, Kafka was a distinctly modern storyteller: one who expounded the transmutations of his childhood fables under the morose gaze of modernity. It is in this sense that Benjamin would locate Kafka “…at the crossroads at which my though had taken,” a figure who articulated the materialist and theological sentiment his thinking would take after 1934. On April 19, 1934 Benjamin conveyed his desire to Scholem to write a major statement on Kafka, one akin to the Kraus study he had published three years earlier (1931). Scholem facilitated this via Robert Weltsch (editor of the Jüdische Rundschau), who agreed, and by the ninth of May, Benjamin had commenced work enthusiastically.

Benjamin began working on Kafka ten years after his death (1924), a time in which an “author cult” (spearheaded by Max Brod) had begun to emerge, centering on a dominant (Judeo-) theological reading of Kafka’s work. Because of this proximity, Benjamin is at once writing on Kafka and upon the context of criticism. Benjamin’s work distances itself from any unitary symbolic interpretation: Kafka was indeed a writer of Parables, yet these did not refer to, or clarify, some underlying doctrine (Halakhah)—hence could not be “explained” via one interpretation. As he writes, “Kafka had a rare capacity for creating parables for himself. Yet his parables are never exhausted by what is explainable; on the contrary, he took all conceivable precautions against the

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3 BSC. 139. This will be shown as the attempt to develop an immanent model of theology along materialist lines, which allows for meaningful political action in the present moment. Yet from the perspective of his theory of criticism, it marked an essential movement of his early theory of criticism away from his earlier distinctions (“commentary” and “criticism”), towards critical formulations informed by Brecht.

4 The largest circulation of Jewish publication at the time. In the end only the sections “Potemkin” and “The Little Hunchback” where published, and Benjamin was (to his dismay) paid a mere 60 marks for his work.

5 Benjamin took a decisive stand against such “Jewish” readings of Kafka, though did attempt to redeem his own theological interpretation (as will be demonstrated), asserting to Scholem: “My essay has its own—though admittedly shrouded—theological side.” (BSC, 128). This mania of interpretation is embodied in Benjamin’s difficulty in procuring a copy of The Trial, which had vanished from his library. This absence is persistently mentioned in correspondence with Scholem to the extent that Scholem sent him a copy in Denmark.

6 The Haggadah (parable) seeks to the clarify the Law (Halakhah), yet as a parable it does not exhaust (or articulate) the law fully. As Jesus told parables which clarified Christian doctrine, but did not reify it into a specific “law.”
interpretation of his writings.”7 This foreclosure of symbolic interpretation leads Benjamin to an allegorical8 reading of Kafka: treating his texts as incomplete “ruins” upon which new meanings can be enacted (or constellated). However, Benjamin’s reading of Kafka marks a substantial shift from his earlier model of criticism. His reading is clearly immanent: he develops motifs from throughout Kafka’s oeuvre, utilizing these as lenses by which to un-fold Kafka further. However, these motifs do not attempt to “reflect” Kafka with respect to the greater un-folding of tradition (esoterically), but to develop imperatives for political action in the present moment (exoterically). The influence of Brecht is clear, as Benjamin reads Kafka’s as provoking “astonishment” at mythical conditions, while providing potential models of resistance. Kafka is not resolved with respect to tradition, but an element from tradition read (criticized) so as to provoke a resolution in the present moment. It is an element of tradition, read in constellation with the present, the former presenting imperatives for the latter. This entails a collapse of Benjamin’s early distinction between commentary and criticism, a model which become more unified in his (re)presentation of Kafka’s work. Benjamin also introduces anterior elements into Kafka’s work, though not as an attempt to reduce it, rather to heighten its parabolic quality.9

The completed work, “Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of his Death” (1934), contains two distinct scenes corresponding to the two major interlocutors Benjamin engaged with during the essay’s composition. In his theological sentiments, Benjamin is clearly engaged with Scholem, and their prolific correspondence over the year allowed Benjamin to articulate his own views. In the early summer Benjamin travelled to Denmark to stay with Brecht, hence his more materialist influence is seen in the discussions of the “nature theatre” and “gesture.” Both of these correspondents are

8 As defined in the Trauerspiel, (contra symbol) as ceding meaning to be immanent to history, as a ruin that can be endowed with meaning in each epoch. See Ch. 1.
9 Notably Benjamin’s “own parables:” the Pushkin story with which he opens the essay, and the “Little Hunchback” who is revealed to be Scholem. On the introduction of “external” elements so as to heighten the parabolic quality of the work, Benjamin writes in “Goethe’s Elective Affinities,” with the “stranger” referring to the parable: “Let us suppose that one makes the acquaintance of a person who is handsome and attractive but impenetrable, because he carries a secret within him. It would be reprehensible to want to pry. Still, it would surely be permissible to inquire whether he has any siblings and whether their nature could perhaps explain somewhat the enigmatic character of the stranger” (SW 1: 333).
actively engaged with Benjamin during his writing process, and the essay itself crystallizes many of these points. It can be read to discern the current state of Benjamin’s model of criticism (in 1934), and as an early experimentation of his attempt to resolve the dialectical image along theological and materialist lines (Ch. 3.). During the composition of the essay, Benjamin did his best to keep these two anxieties of influence from each other, though the essay (and his own thinking) attempts to bridge something of their two perspectives: a rethinking of a sense of political action in the present moment along theological and materialist lines.

i. Corresponding Theodicies: Benjamin and Scholem

“It is only our notion of time that allows us to speak of the Last Judgement, in fact it is a court martial.” - Kafka, The Zürau Aphorisms #40, p. 41.

Anson Rabinbach notes that Kafka facilitated Benjamin and Scholem’s discussion of the inner most messianic elements of the Jewish tradition, a medium through which the two could maintain a friendship, though holding divergent notions of theology and revelation. Many of their views are articulated in correspondence; hence to understand the full valences of each, they must be articulated in repose. For Scholem—despite his authorship in German—Kafka did not belong to the Germanic tradition, rather to the redemptive tradition of Zionism, hence his work should be read prophetically, as a foreshadowing (or negative image) of an eventual redemption. For Benjamin, Kafka was one who belonged to both traditions, in fact his thinking could be described as the collapse of this distinction—an elaboration of the modes by which the profane (historical), could be thought as messianic. Despite this schism, both thinkers agreed that Kafka presents a

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10 This is likely out of fear of disagreement. Brecht repeatedly criticized the mystical elements of Kafka, while Scholem expressed that he could not comprehend the discussions of “Theatre.” Benjamin further kept the explicitly Brechtian “Author as Producer” (1934) from Scholem during the year, perhaps out of fear of straining the friendship. This relationship is also borne out in a “spatial” sense, Benjamin wrote the 2nd half while in Denmark with Brecht, and these sections are decidedly Brechtian.

11 “Introduction,” BSC. As has been noted, these letters are decidedly more intimate in tone than those with Adorno, though Scholem expresses continual dismay at Benjamin’s aversion to explicit Jewish readings of Kafka.

12 In a letter from December 17,1934, Adorno claims this utilization of Kafka against the theological tradition to be “decisive” (ABC, 67). Here both are unified in a shared understanding of the radical potential of tradition. It should be emphasized that despite maintaining a “theological” reading of Kafka, Scholem is by no means a conventional zealot of the Kafka cult, in fact many of his statements can be read as attempts to demonstrate the relevance of Jewish categories in modernity.
fractured relationship between The Parable and The Law (Haggadah and Halakhah). Kafka was not the founder of a religion; thus the fundamental question became: what is to be deciphered (or decided) in Kafka’s world? Would there be a last judgment, or redemption of the profane realm (in a Marxist or more secular sense)? Or more fundamentally, is there a Law (Halakhah) that can be discerned behind Kafka’s Parables (Haggadah)?

Parenthesis: The Law


“The Law”¹³ should be understood in a multivalent sense: as a primordial, or un-bounded force [Gewalt]; as that which the parable seeks to clarify, but can never articulate or exhaust fully. As a primordial entity, the law gives sense to its various manifestations (both legal, and religious), but is not reducible to its particular instantiations. During his summer in Denmark (1934) Benjamin wrote to Scholem: “I hold Kafka’s steady insistence on the law to be the blind spot of his work, by which I only want to say, that it appears to me impossible to put it interpretively into motion by way of this notion,” the drafts of the letter go further in disavowing “the law” as “…the drawer of a mystery-monger.”¹⁴ Readers of Kafka’s work will likely find such statements puzzling, especially given the primacy of the legal process in his writings. Such bewilderment is likely due to the conflation of definite and indefinite denotation (i.e. “laws” with “The Law.”¹⁵); indeed Kafka depicts legal proceedings with clerk like clarity, yet the telos or force of such proceedings is rarely broached. The force or basis of “the law” is read by Benjamin as the central aspect of Kafka’s work, hence the “semblance like character…” of its particular instantiations (laws), “…that in truth are only for display.”¹⁶ The “enigmatic” or “semblance-like” character of the law demonstrates not that it is unimportant, rather

₁³ For more on Benjamin’s relationship to the law in Kafka’s work see: Gasché’s “Kafka’s Law: In the Field of forces between Judaism and Hellenism,” and Agamben’s Potentialities, “The Messiah and the Sovereign: The problem of the Law in Walter Benjamin.”
₁⁴ 11.9.1934. Ibid. 135-136. The phrase “mystery-monger” is a modified phrase of Brecht’s describing the mystical elements of Benjamin’s reading, betraying his growing influence upon the text. Benjamin, GS II 3, 1245.
₁⁵ Benjamin employs this distinction via Werner Kraft who argues for a distinction between “the law” and “laws” in Kafka’s work. Benjamin asserts the “laws” to have merely a “semblance like character,” focusing instead on the primordial “force” of the law. See GS II 3, 1250 (trans. Gasché).
that it draws its authority (or force) from some ambiguous else-where, what Gasché will define as the “…lawless character of the law”\textsuperscript{17}—a mythical and “law preserving violence [\textit{Gewalt}]” (as in Benjamin’s 1921 “Critique of Violence”).

For Benjamin this is due to the fundamental metamorphosis undergone by the law in modernity, and Kafka’s work presents such a transformation. Kafka’s world exposes a context of sovereignty in which the law has regressed to the mythical forces of “pre-history”—to the pure force, of the law presented as “second nature”—everywhere it appears as “open” (as in “Before the Law”), yet by merging with the setting it continues to govern through the mystical ambiguity of \textit{fate} (“pre-history”). Here Benjamin alludes to the work of Bachofen, whose studies present the matriarchal “swamp-world” as the basis of modern patriarchal authority, a world ruled by arbitrary and mythical decrees.\textsuperscript{18} For Benjamin, Kafka’s world demonstrates that such a mystical origin of authority has not been overcome, and the law still governs through such mystical forces of “pre-history.” What Kafka presents is the mythical “truth” of authority.

Such a regression of capitalist-modernity to mythology is discussed in Benjamin’s 1921 “Capitalism as Religion:” “[c]apitalism is probably the first instance of a cult that \textit{creates guilt}, note atonement.”\textsuperscript{19} Capital enacts a metamorphosis of personal obligations into those of exchange, rendering them relations of creditor and debtor [\textit{Schulden}] by disseminating guilt [\textit{Schuld}] (and accusation) generally. This processes is seen in Kafka through the conflation of laws from various spheres: the law of the father, and the last judgment amount to the same thing. As Benjamin puts it, “the sin of which they [the fathers] accuse their sons seems to be a kind of original sin.”\textsuperscript{20} These various spheres have been combined into one terrifying law, which determines guilt through accusation.

\textsuperscript{17} Gasché, “Kafka’s Law,” 979. An affinity is evident here with the “a-moral” origin of morality throughout Nietzsche’s work, that the categories of “good” and “evil” are founded upon deeper power relations. Specifically, \textit{Genealogy of Morals}.

\textsuperscript{18} Johan Jakob Bachofen, a 19\textsuperscript{th}-century Swiss philologist and legal theorist notable for his 1861 text \textit{Mother Right}, which argued that modern patriarchal authority gained its “force” from the mythological power of the mother in more “primitive” times. This conception of “pre-history” will be elucidated in more detail in Ch. 3. For more on Benjamin’s relationship with Bachofen see “Johan Jakob Bachofen,” \textit{SW 3}: 11-23.

\textsuperscript{19} Benjamin, “Capitalism as Religion,” \textit{SW 1}: 288.

\textsuperscript{20} Benjamin, “Franz Kafka,” \textit{SW 2}: 796. For an elaboration of the relation between guilt and debt see Nietzsche’s \textit{Genealogy of Morality}, specifically the “Second Treatise: Guilt and Bad Conscience.”
and to which none have access: “It is characteristic of this legal system, that one is sentenced not only in innocence, but also in ignorance.”\(^{21}\) What is essential to note in Benjamin’s analysis of myth and its relation to capitalism and modernity is that he does not date them as specific, or historical epochs—rather, he describes such forces in a strangely primordial, and archetypal sense. This point will become central in his discussions with Adorno, for whom critique must demarcate the emergence of such myths as specific historical material circumstances so as to break the spell of reification, allowing them to be overcome.

Justice [Recht] will be of little help either (one need only recall Joseph K’s fate in The Trial). As Benjamin argues in “Critique of Violence” (1921): myth bastardizes “divine violence” in the creation of the law\(^{22}\)—hence what appears as “justice” is in reality a “violence crowned by fate,” the “law preserving violence” at the heart of the law. In Kafka’s world, the law is presented as equally un-just [unrecht], yet it is perhaps this corruptibility that provides the semblance of hope in Kafka’s world—one must employ cunning, and other means of deferral, rather than attempt to get justice on one’s side. K. grasps something of this in his discussions with Titorelli (The Trial)—one will not be proved innocent, yet can prevent the trial from reaching conclusion, the small hope that exists in deferral: ““What is common to both methods is that they prevent the accused from being sentenced.” “But they also prevent him from being really acquitted” said K.”\(^{23}\) Thus the truth of the law in Kafka’s world.

In this horrific world of myth explicit law may be of some help, a mode of structuring existence against the myths and fate of “second nature”—“…written law being one of the first victories scored over this world”\(^{24}\)—yet not as a moral victory, simply as a mode of deferral. For the Jews in exile such written law (The Torah, Kabbalah), provided a way of dealing with the force of the divine, and their condition as

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\(^{21}\) Benjamin, “Franz Kafka,” SW 2: 797. Kafka’s The Judgment can be read as demonstrative of this conflation of legal levels (the father and last judgment). The son’s condemnation by the father is also his damnation, and cause his death in the stories final scene.

\(^{22}\) “Once again all eternal forms are available to pure divine violence, which myth bastardizes with law.” Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” SW 1: 252.

\(^{23}\) Kafka, The Trial, 115.

émigrés—remaining on the level of the Haggadah in an attempt to glimpse the Halakhah. In this sense it could be taken as a textual “truth” underlying various parables, the doctrine that permeates any religious articulation or expression. It is this relationship of explicit law (or critique) that will become important in Benjamin’s discussions with both Scholem, and Adorno.

The question can now be posed, what is to be done with respect to this law? Should one attempt to understand it rationally in the form of critique (as the “man from the country” in Before the Law)? Or can other modes of resistance be elaborated that allow one to shed guilt and act meaningfully in the present moment? For Benjamin, within this context resistance will not come from enlightenment or articulation of this law, for it has regressed into pre-history and myth instead one must formulate new gestures of resistance, models of which Benjamin finds in Kafka’s interstitial “assistants.” To understand the radicalism of Benjamin’s model it is necessary to articulate it against Scholem’s more orthodox theology, in which the possibility of an articulation of “The Law” still exists, however slight.

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For Scholem Kafka’s world is a nihilism in need of redemption—the “nothingness of revelation” (Nichts der Offenbarung)25—or rather, the nothingness prior to redemption. The scripture (Law) of its understanding is not “lost,” yet cannot be deciphered at this moment. It relates allegorically to the exile of the Jews own tradition: an exile outside of life, and outside the village—into a finitude of understanding. The task of thinking becomes a certain “redemptive quietism” in this dissolution—the scouring of these Parables for a glimpse of the (true) law and a judgment that may (or has already) occur(ed).26 Writing to Benjamin, Scholem describes the world in which revelation appears as a “nothingness,” as that which manifests as “force without signification:”

25 “Kafka’s world is the world of revelation, but of revelation seen from the perspective in which it would be returned to is own “nothingness”” (BSC, 127). In this sense it is a revelation that even if it did occur, would likely remain un-noticed. Though it still exists as a possibility to come.
26 Scholem asserts that such moments exist in Kafka, as the priest in The Trial who provides possible interpretations of the parable “Before the Law.” For Scholem this is testament to the existence of the law in Kafka’s work, though it is glimpsed only slightly.
You ask what I understand by the “nothingness of revelation”? I understand by it a state in which revelation appears to be without meaning, in which it still asserts itself, in which it has validity but no significance [Force without significance]. A state in which the wealth of meaning is lost and what is in the process of appearing (for revelation is such a process) still does not disappear, even though it is reduced to the zero point of its own content, so to speak.²⁷

Scholem will later write, describing the possibility of a future deciphering of the law:

Those pupils of whom you speak at the end are not so much those who have lost the scripture…but rather those students who cannot decipher it.²⁸

For Scholem (and later Adorno), this element of “decipherability” (contra absence) holds open the possibility that redemption may in fact manifest itself, though its content cannot be recognized at this moment. Hence a hermeneutic importance is placed upon “study:” through engagement with “the law” (in Scholem’s case the Torah) one can catch a glimpse of the messianic moments hidden in the present. In this sense Scholem’s nihilism (“nothingness”) is not absolute, revelation appears as “force without signification,” as a form in which could potentially be filled with content (a site of deferral). Theologically, Scholem’s view is more orthodox, entailing a dialectical messianism (negative theology), that the further the world moves toward nihilism, and away from redemption, the greater the possibility the messiah (“Angel of History”) will manifest itself. One could elaborate such a conception to point to a broader dialectical (materialist) messianism endemic to “critical theory:” hope exists that some future “enlightenment” (class consciousness) will liquidate present mythologies. A critique of such positivist thinking will be shown central to Benjamin’s formulation of meaningful political action (Ch. 3.). Writing to Benjamin, Scholem poetically articulates this gesture further: though the law cannot be discerned at this moment there is a possibility (as-if²⁹) placed over the profane present.

“Thus alone teaching that breaks through semblance

²⁷ BSC, 142.
²⁸ Ibid. 127.
²⁹ A concept employed by Jacob Taubes to describe a certain utopian function constantly maintained—the maintenance of the potential of redemption, as a function of critique, art or philosophy. See Taubes, The Political Theology of St. Paul, 70.
Enters the Memory  
The Truest bequest  
Of hidden judgment.”30

In this sense redemption—though absent and indefinite in its arrival—is something deferred. Regardless of its actuality, its potential still exercises influence upon the present moment: “Oh, we must live all the same // Until your court examines us.”31 For Scholem, redemption—though wholly other—can occur in an absolute and Messianic sense. All action in the present must exist in pious anticipation (study) of this arrival—the time in which Kafka’s crooked world will be made straight. There is hope in this deferral, in the future possibility that a slight alteration could reveal the law in its totality. Hence Scholem will critique Benjamin’s view that the true Law (or revelation) is absent in Kafka’s world. It is absent, but not foreclosed as a possibility.

For Benjamin, this hope exists, but perhaps not for us. Hope in Kafka” world is different: it exists only for those fringe figures, the assistants, the students, Karl Rossmann. The figures endowed with “the small and nonsensical hope”32—those for whom the “nothingness of revelation” has come, and perhaps catch a glimpse of this, “…nothing which makes anything possible.”33 Hope comes only for those who ally themselves wholly with immanence. For Benjamin, the law is not indiscernible, it is lost: hence there is no “as-if” of redemption, only immanent “life.”

…you take the “nothingness of revelation” as your point of departure…I take as my starting point the small nonsensical hope, as well as the creatures for who this hope is intended and yet now on the other hand are also the creatures in which this absurdity is mirrored…Whether the pupils have lost it [the law], or whether they are unable to decipher it comes down to the same thing, because without the key that belongs to it, the Scripture is not scripture but life. Life as it is lived in the Village at the foot of the hill on which The Castle is built.34

30 BSC, 124.  
31 Ibid. 125.  
32 Ibid. 134. Those for whom the “nothingness of revelation is intended,” that is those who take seriously the nihilism of the present world, and do not hold out for redemption or some world to come, they simply do their duty in the present moment.  
34 Ibid. 135.
(For Benjamin) Kafka is uninterested in providing a model by which the last judgment could be transplanted upon the profane, rather he begins to think redemption in a wholly profane and immanent sense. Kafka depicts the impotence of Messianism (redemption), while this non-existence fractures into the category of “life:” a newly awakened power of “weak messianism” in Kafka’s individuals.\(^{35}\) They remain upon the level of the profane (immanence), and attempt to win “victory over that nothingness,” as Kafka attempted to “…feel his way toward redemption.”\(^{36}\) With this foreclosure of the redemption to come one can perhaps gain a renewed sense of the present moment.\(^{37}\)

Excursus: Brod, Scholem and Benjamin.

“Martyrs do not underestimate the body, they allow it to be hoisted up onto the cross. In that way they are like their enemies.” Kafka, *The Zürau Aphorisms*, #33, p. 33.

In 1938-39 Benjamin was working predominantly on Baudelaire, though he continued to read (literature on) Kafka intermittently. In mid- June of 1938 he sent a review of Max Brod’s *Franz Kafka: A Biography*\(^{38}\) to Scholem, attempting to interest Salman Schocken in a full-length book on Kafka. Though the endeavor failed, the letter depicts Kafka in a somewhat divergent light than 1934. Benjamin presents Kafka (perhaps via Baudelai re) as a thinker of the modern urban experience, one who witnesses the malaise of tradition in the Metropolitan setting. One could read this essay as a mode of thinking the changed relationship to tradition occurring in modernity. For Benjamin, Kafka uses tradition against itself: “[he] does not simply lie down…rather cuffs tradition [via Parables] with a weighty paw.”\(^{39}\) In this employment of the parable, Kafka (and Benjamin) shock tradition out of complacency, allowing it to be re-combined, and re-cited in the present moment. One should not use the parable to clarify some “truth,” rather as a critical tool to open the present for political action.

\(^{35}\) Not all come to this realization—of his hero’s perhaps only Karl Rossman, and the assistants and clerks who do their duty as they can. Joseph K. fails in this realization, holding out for the revelation of justice (*The Trial*), and a “way” to the Castle (*The Castle*)—failing in both endeavors.  

\(^{36}\) *BSC*, 129.  

\(^{37}\) Scholem is frustrated at Benjamin’s refusal to be explicitly religious and remaining on the “profane” side. “You had the moral world right before your eyes with its abysses and dialectics.” *BSC*, 127. Though one could argue that Scholem misses the possibilities of “profane illumination” Benjamin is advocating.  

\(^{38}\) This letter was later published as “Some Reflections on Kafka” (in *Illuminations*) along with a review in a similar tone, “Review of Brod’s *Franz Kafka*,” *SW 3*: 217-19.  

\(^{39}\) *BSC*, 225.
Following this, the letter turns savagely upon Brod’s treatment of Kafka, claiming that Brod attempted a pious reading of Kafka for his own purposes. Hence the work contains little beyond “Kafkaesque ignorance and Brodeseque Sagacity,” a “…soul searching on the part of the biographer.” Benjamin further criticizes Brod’s control over the execution of Kafka’s estate: his attempt to “save” Kafka had proved destructive, due to his inability to grant Kafka adequate distance, and his shrouding of Kafka in a mystical religion. Though not as polemical as his criticism of the mystical Goethe cult, these considerations contain common imperatives for the development of a constructive view of authorship: to allow the author to speak on his/her own terms, and to not impose a category of myth (symbol) from outside so as to miss the struggle against myth in every literary work.

Via Kafka and Brod it is possible to think through the question of correspondence and its mutation into the execution of an estate: how will one be thought retroactively by way of one’s correspondence or correspondents? Despite Brod’s elegy of saintliness, Benjamin wants to emphasize that Kafka should be thought as a failure—“to do justice to the figure of Kafka one must never lose sight of one thing: it is the purity and beauty of a failure…One is tempted to say: once he was certain of his failure everything worked out for him en route as though in a dream. There is nothing more memorable than the fervor with which Kafka emphasized his failure.” However it is this failure, or incompleteness at the site of origin (Ch. 1), that allows the work to be endowed with radically new senses via tradition, that is, experimented with via the formation of constellations.

Given the circumstances under which Benjamin authored this statement, it is not difficult to glimpse that Kafka’s failure is Benjamin’s own. In a sense Benjamin is

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40 The main thesis of the work being that “Kafka found himself on the road to Sainthood.” Ibid. 218.
41 BSC, 216.
42 Ibid. 221.
43 “He [Brod] is clearly making an effort to be-little any future writing on Kafka” (ibid. 222).
44 BSC, 214. This idea evokes Kafka’s “Imperial Message,” in which the letter does not arrive, though the recipient dreams it to completion; suggesting that its arrival is not what is essential.
45 It could be said that the conditions imposed by political upheaval, and exile marked Benjamin as a “failed” intellectual. He was unable to complete many of his planned works (The Arcades, Baudelaire), yet continued to work out of an understanding of the pure process (failure) of intellectual activity. Scholem is
providing a means by which to approach his own elegy. He should not be thought as a
divine or complete thinker (Marxist or mystic), but rather as fragmentary, and
incomplete—one shrouded in failure and melancholy. With this rejection of totality
(transcendence) Benjamin managed to regain a sense of immanence: a “weak
messianism,” and a purity of means by which one could act and create in the present
moment, without reference to the future. This sentiment is echoed in one of the last letters
to Scholem: “Every line we succeed in publishing today—no matter how certain the
future to which we entrust it—is a victory from the forces of darkness.”46 With this one
glimpses a certain sense of the pure process, which is Benjamin’s writing. It is not an
attempt at saintliness, or intellectual grandeur; rather the development of the autonomy of
thinking for the present moment. This could even be asserted as Benjamin’s identity as a
correspondent: his letters are not written for the Other, or some estate (as Adorno), rather
they are immanent and genuine attempts to encounter the Idea. As in Kafka’s “Imperial
Message,” the letter will perhaps never arrive, but it is the purity of means which counts,
the dream that will see it to its conclusion.

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ii. Studying Outside the Law

“Perhaps these studies had amounted to nothing. But they are very close to that nothing which alone makes
it possible for something to be useful—that is, they are very close to the Tao.” Benjamin, “Franz Kafka”
SW 2: 813.

Given the theological sentiment of the absent or indecipherable Law, the gesture of
“study” must undergo a fundamental metamorphosis. What form can study have if it is
taken outside the law?47 Further, can such a model provide meaningful avenues of

similarly moved by this understanding, and his care for the estate of Benjamin can be seen in his Walter
Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship—the crafting of an image of “friendship” (contra Adorno) around the
figure of Benjamin.
46 BSC, 262.
47 For Benjamin this is also the question of “criticism” in modernity. How is the critic to relate to the text in
the absence of “truth” as the guarantor of meaning? As has been shown, Benjamin’s model of criticism
attempts to embrace the transience of history (tradition) within ever work. With respect to this, Benjamin’s
work can be said to anticipate many of the insights of deconstruction, see Weber, “An Afterlife of –
abilities: Derrida,” Benjamin’s –Abilities, 122.
resistance to myth? In response to these questions, Benjamin draws attention to Kafka’s *Amerika* (1927), a text oft overlooked, and tonally different from the rest of Kafka’s work: “That *Amerika* is a very special case is indicated by the name of its hero… he undergoes a rebirth and acquires a new name.”

“Joseph K.,” is metamorphosed into the inquiring and optimistic Karl Rossman, a man who attempts to get by in America, yet stumbles upon the “nothing” which conditions all things in The Nature Theatre of Oklahoma (the books final chapter). In one particular episode—after fleeing his (ex) assistant Delamarche—he interrupts a student reticently studying: “Am I disturbing you?” Asked Karl, “of course of course” yet it is unclear what has been interrupted, as the studies to not seem to be getting anywhere.

In fact, the dimly lit environment, and the student’s readiness to interact with Karl cast doubt on his diligence, and Kafka does much to convey that the end (telos) of these studies may be beside the point. The student’s gestures resemble a monotonous form of prayer, an ascetic repetition, which reaches far beyond the normal range of “study.”

For Benjamin, these students are part of the interstitial class that inhabits Kafka’s world, “…a clan which reckons with the brevity of life in a peculiar way.” This includes “the assistants”, the hunger-artists, the gatekeepers; those who attain a certain quietus through the monotony and immensity of their tasks. Or it is these tasks which keep them from being accused. As Benjamin is apt to note, it is these figures who understand the logic of Kafka’s world—the way to The Castle, the law, or the means to avoid The Trial—and this is because the elect only to do what is in their power. In an extremely Taoist moment Benjamin writes regarding the students: “perhaps these studies had amounted to nothing. But they are very close to that nothing which alone makes it possible for something to be useful.”

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50 As Benjamin later asserts: “The crowning achievement of asceticism is study.” “Franz Kafka,” *SW* 2: 813.
51 Ibid. 813. This student is perhaps Kafka himself, as it is mentioned he is a clerk by day, and a “student” by night; Kafka too was a clerk by day, writing stories (or studying) in the evening.
52 Ibid. 813.
revelation), these figures awaken the power of “life” in the present moment—of a life lived as “means” for itself.

It is precisely because their gestures are “useless,” that they are the most essential—because they do not aim for some future goal, they come to understand what “life” could mean as lived for itself in the present. In their monotony they catch a glimpse of the “nothingness of revelation”—the insight that “hammering is real hammering and at the same time nothing”53—that is, the space of construction that is the present moment. Through repetitions such as “study,” or “hammering,” they come to understand “nothingness” not as empty, but as something which could be filled with meaning through human action, not divine revelation. In the reversal of the students (against progress, telos) the messianism of Scholem is fractured into the weak messianism of Benjamin.

Speaking to the possibilities afforded by this nothingness, Eli Friedlander writes: “In the condition in which nothing can be achieved, fulfillment can only be realized in what has already been achieved.”54 Repetitions, such as study, move against progress (or teleology), as Klee’s Angel of History, enacting a reversal in hope is placed in the past. With this turn away from progress, the students ally themselves with the past (via the present), yet as Benjamin’s “Little Hunchback” they do not overextend themselves beyond what is necessary, rather they reckon to change only what is in their power. In this sense they are Kafka’s messiahs, those who remain reticent, yet do not overreach their redemptive capacities: “weak messiahs” par excellence.

For Samuel Weber, Kafka’s reversal recovers the pure Mittleilbarkeit (Ability-)55 of language: a language of means (life): one outside the law of religious doctrine, or ends as such. This is the language Benjamin attempts to harness so as to adequately speak (politically) of the present moment. This would entail the transmutation of “study”

54 Friedlander, Walter Benjamin, 217.
55 Weber stresses this as the “pure potential” of language as such, that is the “–ability” of language to become “iterable” (Derrida) and re-inscribable. He further asserts that “pure-language” in the sense of Benjamin’s “On Language as Such” is just this progression, or infinite translatability of language. See Benjamin’s -Abilities, 53-95. In foreclosing future revelation one gains the “-ability” of reconstruction in the present moment.
outside the Law, and perhaps Kafka’s parables are attempts to enact this; to articulate a life that could be lived at the foot of The Castle in the absence of doctrine or dogma.

After all Kafka’s parables take a swipe at the authority of the text—at myth—and through a certain cunning of storytelling can aid in the maintenance of the present moment as the site of construction. Such stories must always be retold from the perspective of the present, employing the past in constellation so as to open the present as sight of fulfillment. Speaking to this ability of the parable, Benjamin writes:

Kafka’s genius lay in the fact that he tried something altogether new: he gave up truth [The Law] so that he could hold to its transmissibility, the [parabolic] haggadic element. Kafka’s writings are by their nature parables. But that in their misery and their beauty, that they had become more than parables. \(^{56}\)

In giving up truth, Kafka gained the possibility of trying something new—of experimentation. As Brecht does, he sacrifices the plot (via the parable form) so that individual gestures can become meaningful for a coming politics. In this context such repetitive gestures gain a further revelatory quality: they become informative to the habits that abound in modernity, the “optical unconscious” that conditions human action.

Through the interruption and repetition of gesture one glimpses the theatre that is played at in Kafka’s world (and modernity): “The Nature Theatre (of Oklahoma).” \(^{57}\) This theatrical sentiment is exemplary of Brecht’s influence upon the piece in the latter half of 1934, and one can see that much of the piece entails a response Brecht’s imperatives regarding Kafka.

### iii. Recovering Gestus: Brecht

“The true path is along a rope, not a rope suspended way up in the air, but rather only just over the ground.

It seems more like a tripwire than a tightrope.” Kafka, *The Zürau Aphorisms*, #1, p. 3.

Benjamin’s *Notes from Svenborg* (1934) recount conversations and experiences with Brecht surrounding the composition of the Kafka piece. Due to its dialogical form, it is difficult to discern from whom each point is generated—thus the text itself could be considered a text composed in correspondence. The importance of Brecht’s opinion is

\(^{56}\) *BSC*, 225.

\(^{57}\) In the text Benjamin subtly switches terms from the “The Nature Theatre of Oklahoma” (*Amerika*) to the “Nature Theatre” (of Modernity). Evoking the perpetual theatre of modernity.
emphasized throughout, and it is clear that Benjamin’s stay in Denmark heavily influenced many of his conceptions of Kafka. For Brecht, Kafka was a great artist, yet a failure in a more fundamental sense: there is great artistic merit, but it is overly mystical containing little of practical value for resistance or politics. As Brecht argues, “[y]ou will find a number of very useful things. The Images are good. The rest is just mystery mongering. It is nonsense. You must ignore it. You cannot make progress with depth. Depth is simply a dimension; it is just depth—in which nothing can be seen.”

For Brecht, Kafka bestows little agency for politics, the image of which is a “…man who has fallen at the wheels,” who “… offers scarcely any resistance; he is wise.” Benjamin is clearly affected by Brecht’s biting remarks, which are directed against an esoteric thread he sees running through both Benjamin and Kafka. This mysticism beclouds the materialist human agency Brecht perceived as necessary for political action. Given these criticisms, it becomes possible to read much of Benjamin’s essay as a response to Brecht’s imperatives—demonstrating that theology and materialism can be brought together in a meaningful sense. As aforementioned, Benjamin’s theology restores a sense of “pure-means” in the present, revealing the nothing, which would make any action (political or otherwise), meaningful. Put otherwise, Kafka aids in recovering a certain dignity of the present moment (“weak messianism”) which is essential for any “practical” action.

In this sense, the discussions of “gesture,” and “theatre” throughout the piece entail an attempt to bridge these two realms (theological, political), and the two figures (Scholem, and Brecht) associated with these concerns. Providing an image of such a resolution, Benjamin recalls the final scene from Amerika:

[In Kafka] …man is on the stage from the very beginning. The proof is the fact that everyone is hired by the Nature Theatre. What the standards for

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58 Benjamin, “Notes from Svenborg,” SW 2: 786. Brecht poses, “What is he doing” (ibid. 786) as the question to ask in approaching Kafka, question his texts in terms of concrete political applicability.

59 Ibid. 787. This picture had limited use for Brecht, though he thought The Trial to be an important depiction of the political situation in German (with its secret police and trials).

60 Ibid. 787. Brecht derides this as a sort of “Jewish Fascism”, a mystification of real political action.

61 Brecht is critical of the style of Benjamin’s piece, as a diary style akin to Nietzsche. Both should supplement such musings with concrete historical materialism.
Admission are cannot be determined…all that is expected of the applicants is
the ability to play themselves.\textsuperscript{62}

Upon his entrance to the Nature Theatre, Karl becomes “transparent, pure, without
character,” an individual who is aware of \textit{nothingness} of all things, or rather the theatre
that is perpetually being played.\textsuperscript{63} For Benjamin, this summons Brecht’s “Chinese
Theatre” “…which is a theatre of \textit{gesture},”\textsuperscript{64} in which actions are endowed with meeting
via their episodic context, they are a \textit{nothingness in themselves}. Kafka’s stories should be
read as “plays” performed in the “Nature Theatre.” They do not have a definitive
symbolic (historical) meaning, rather an allegorical or episodic nature; relating not to a
specific idea, rather (self-referentially) to the practice of \textit{gesture or action as such}.\textsuperscript{65} In
fact these gestures generate a narrative around themselves, and are perhaps the condition
of all narrative. As Benjamin asserts, “Each gesture is an event—one might even say a
drama—in itself. The stage on which this drama takes place is the World Theatre, which
opens towards heaven.”\textsuperscript{66} The immensity of individual gesture in Kafka opens past the
individual story or parable which contains it, demonstrating the power of gesture itself—
“…the gestures of Kafka’s figures are too powerful for our accustomed surroundings and
break out into wider areas.”\textsuperscript{67} Reminiscent of the Brechtian image of “Astonishment”
(alienation effect):\textsuperscript{68} the overtly dramatic nature of these gestures shocks one into an
analysis of the conditions of ones own \textit{Gestus}, of the social relations constraining
“action,” while eluding to the modes by which they may be overcome.

\textsuperscript{62} Benjamin, “Notes on Kafka,” \textit{SW} 2: 804.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid 801. Benjamin associates this with Franz Rosenzweig’s “Chinese Sentimentality” (\textit{The Star of
Redemption})—those who are aware of the roles played in Modernity. This recognition of “nothingness”
gives new sense to the alternate title of \textit{Amerika}—\textit{The Man Who Disappeared}. In \textit{The Trial}, Joseph K.
comes to this realization too late, with his exclamation in the final chapter, “What Theatre are you playing
at?” shortly before his death.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid. 801, and further: “One of the most significant functions of this theatre is to dissolve elements into
their gestural components” (ibid. 801).
\textsuperscript{65} “…the author tried to derive such a meaning from them in ever-changing context and experimental
groupings” (ibid. 801).
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid. 802.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid. 801.
\textsuperscript{68} Specifically, the “becoming animal” in many of Kafka’s stories in which humans are suddenly
metamorphoses into creatures. For Benjamin, this “divests human gesture of its traditional supports, and
then has a subject for \textit{reflection without end}” (ibid. 802).
Thus it is seen that “studying” (theology) and “acting” (gesture) amount to the same thing: a repetition which leads to a realization of the “nothing” which conditions all possibility. For Weber, this element of repetition (or re-staging) allows a certain perspective, or freedom regarding the possibilities of the present moment. In reinventing a subject with a minimal distance from itself, one is able to regain a sense of sovereignty: the possibility of a definitive action other than the course of things. As Kafka’s allegory always contains the possibility of an “about-face” at the last moment, we too discover the singularity of the “now-time,” the existence of the present as the “true state of exception” for sovereign action. This is the sense of Benjamin’s pronouncement in “The Author as Producer” (1924): that the chance of Epic Theatre lies in its ability to “…expose the present moment,” and the possibilities therein.

For both Brecht and Benjamin, modernity exposes the body to various forms of reproduction (and automation) divesting it of its traditional models of support. Yet this destruction of human “aura” opens the new possibility of experimentation—one gains the possibility to reconstruct oneself, and tradition anew. It is this site of pure possibility: of the nothing which makes everything possible, that Kafka’s gestures recover. The students not only study the law in their gestures, but recover the difference of themselves in their repetitions. Hence the inflation of the most minute gestures in Kafka’s work: clapping can appear as “steam hammers,” (“Up in the Gallery”) and study can recover the potential inherent in the present moment.

Thus the figure of resistance in Benjamin’s Kafka (and his thought in general) is the assistant, student, or hunch-back: one who forecloses future revelation to return to the space of construction in the present moment. As will be demonstrated in Ch. 3, such a space of construction can also be accessed via constellations with possibilities in the past. Such a re-thinking of the present moment is essential for Benjamin’s position on utopianism, and perhaps his fundamental difference from Scholem and Adorno. In his “Theologico- Political Fragment” (1921/37) Benjamin banishes Messianism (Utopia) from the historical realm—“Therefore, the Kingdom of God is not the telos of the

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69 Weber, Benjamin’s –Abilities, 209.
historical dynamic; it cannot be established as a goal.” However, politics must be practiced as “nihilism,” as an embrace of our “weak messianic” capacities in the present against the transience and decay of history. Jacob Taubes locates this separation as decisive—Benjamin maintains the Messiah as wholly other, as something that cannot be hoped for in the future. He does not falter on this distinction, as Scholem who holds the possibility (postponement) of redemption over the present as an “as-if”; or as Adorno who “aestheticizes the problem,” making redemption a function of criticism and aesthetic appreciation. For Benjamin (as Kafka), the messiah was missed, hence Utopia must be banished, so we are able to reclaim our capacities to act in the present moment. It is in this sense that Benjamin cedes all transcendence and should be considered a wholly immanent thinker. Taubes surmises this as follows, alluding to the dis-correspondence between Benjamin and Adorno:

The drawbridge comes from the other side. And when you get fetched or not, as Kafka describes it, is not up to you. One can take the elevators up to the high-rises of spirituality—it won’t help…there is a *prius*, an a priori. Something has to happen from the other side; *then* we see, when our eyes are pierced open. Otherwise we see nothing. Otherwise we ascend, we strive until the day after tomorrow. Adorno can’t let go. He’s an aesthete, after all. Music then has a soteriological role. Neither Benjamin nor Barth could go for such naïve notions.

### III. Corresponding over Kafka: Adorno’s Response

“From the true opponent, a limitless courage flows into you.” Kafka, *The Zürau Aphorisms* # 23, p. 23.

In 1934 Adorno was elaborating his own views of epistemology via a reading of Husserl (*Against Epistemology*), continuing to employ elements of Benjamin’s early method. By December of the year he had read Benjamin’s Kafka, to which he pens a lengthy response noting immediately the “extraordinary impression” the work made upon him. Despite his expression of philosophical agreement, there is a hint of melancholy in his

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71 Benjamin, “Theological-Political Fragment,” *SW 3*: 305.  
72 Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 74. Taubes interestingly notes: “…he maintains the Messiah and doesn’t let it drift into neutrality, which isn’t a matter of religious history but an article of faith” (ibid. 74). That is Benjamin maintains the Absolute separation between the historical and the messianic realms. Taubes is one who valiantly demonstrates the power of a religious reading of Benjamin’s work, as will be further argued in Ch. 3.  
73 Ibid. 76.  
74 *ABC*, 66. Adorno further asserts it is his best since the Kraus study (1931).
response—a sentiment that he was too late to influence the essay in the sense Brecht and Scholem were able to do.⁷⁵ The exact character of Adorno’s influence upon the essay is difficult to discern. Adorno had written on Kafka in 1925,⁷⁶ in which he described Kafka as an inverse theologian, viewing our earthly life (photographically) as a negative image from the standpoint of redemption. Through this Adorno insists on a “secret coded character of our theology,”⁷⁷ centered on the absent law which aligns him with Benjamin’s considerations. Yet from the preceding exegesis it is evident that Adorno is mistaken on this point: Benjamin is not advocating a negative theological reading of Kafka (as Scholem does), but rather a reclamation of the concept of “life” with its resonances for action in the present moment.

This dis-correspondence anticipates a later dissonance surrounding Baudelaire (1938-39) and the importance of “dialectical mediation;” as Adorno criticizes Benjamin’s concept of “nothingness” and wants to transcribe it back to Hegelian territory (“being as nothingness”). For Adorno, Benjamin does not mediate his considerations properly as, “images pass as lightening without interpretation.”⁷⁸ This hinges fundamentally on what Adorno terms Benjamin’s “insufficient grasp of the archaic:” the idea that the world of “myth” must be interpreted (dialectically) from the standpoint of enlightenment, or history—a thesis Adorno heavily advances regarding Benjamin’s Arcades (Ch. 3). Hence Adorno is criticizing Benjamin’s description of the law via mythological categories—Adorno argues that Benjamin simply presents such categories, and fails to provide a model by which they might be resisted.⁷⁹ Hence Adorno will view Benjamin’s Kafka as an “incomplete” work, a precursor to the larger

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⁷⁵ This can be read out of the way Adorno is highly critical both of the Brechtian, and mystical elements of the piece.
⁷⁶ These are the early formulation of what would later become “Notes on Kafka” (1954). It is impossible to discern if Benjamin read these early formulations or not, though it seems from Adorno’s tone that he did not. In these Adorno argues for a negative theological reading of Kafka, asserting that he presents early existence from the standpoint of redemption. This is opposed to Benjamin’s reading of Kafka as a nihilistic thinker of immanence.
⁷⁷ ABC, 67.
⁷⁸ Ibid. 68. Though correct from a Hegelian perspective, it is clear that Adorno fails the grasp emerging valences of Benjamin’s dialectic, which will come into further repose in the following chapter.
⁷⁹ Exemplary of Adorno’s enlightenment response to myth is “Odysseus, or the myth of Enlightenment” in Dialectic of Enlightenment. Here myth and dialectic are recognized as intertwined, though cunning is formulated as a means of “redeeming” enlightenment—of allowing an “enlightened critique of enlightenment.”
Arcades Project in which the relationship between the “Archaic” (myth) and “Modern” (enlightenment) would be clarified. What is essential is that Adorno will not grant Benjamin’s (Brechtian) resolution of Kafka’s work, instead holding fast to early distinction between “critique” and “commentary.” It is not enough for Benjamin to simply “present” (comment upon) the myths of Kafka’s world, rather the critic must decode the precise points at which political action could take place. Further, one must endow the subject with (enlightenment) agency with which to overcome such myths. For Adorno, the critic possesses the enlightened key to “decoding” the work of art.

In reference to such a denial of subjective agency, Adorno explicitly critiques the Brechtian “nature theatre”: “Kafka’s novels are not screenplays for experimental theatre, since they lack in principle the very spectator who might intervene in such experiments.” However, with this Adorno is closer to Brecht’s critique of Kafka than he would concede, declaring that Kafka is not bestowing agency upon the individual, rather demonstrating their situation at the mercy of larger forces. With this a final point of discord is broached: Adorno’s Kafka is fundamentally a writer of modernity in a materialist sense, in that he exemplifies the reified context of all social relations, while for Benjamin no specific epoch can be discerned. Hence for Adorno, “What we see in Kafka’s gestures is the self-liberation of the creative which has been deprived in the language of things”—Kafka is a thinker of Marxist sentiment who attempts to break reification by any means possible. Despite this, Benjamin’s influence upon Adorno is clear, as many of these points will be taken up again in Adorno’s 1954 “Notes on Kafka,” where they can be treated with a broader historical scope.

Benjamin does not shy from acknowledging the impacts of Adorno’s criticisms: “I have not only read your letter, I have studied it,” and goes on to concede that the essay does contain an insufficient grasp of the “archaic”—that “myth” must be articulated in a more robust (enlightened) sense. That is, he must seek to determine the historical specificity of the myths he will describe. Despite this acknowledgement, the divergence between the two thinkers will only grow over the coming years, specifically in the debate

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80 Ibid. 70. This point will become central in Adorno’s own consideration of Kafka.
81 ABC, 70. The evocation of “mute” and “mourning” Nature in Benjamin’s Trauerspiel is evident here.
82 Ibid. 73.
surrounding dialectical methodology in Benjamin’s work on Baudelaire (1938-39). Yet at this point (1934) it is clear that even a proclaimed “agreement on philosophical fundamentals” contains a deeper and growing dis-correspondence. Despite divergences and disagreements, Benjamin remarks with great optimism as to the community of readers that has grown to surround the text: “A kind of musical image has come to surround it [the piece] and from which I still hope to learn something.” At this point there is a realization that correspondence (constellation) is able to hold together difference along with agreement.

IV. Adorno’s Kafka (1952-54)

“We are instructed to do the negative; the positive is already within us.” Kafka, The Zürau Aphorisms # 27, p. 27.

Adorno returned to Kafka during 1952-53 with the essay “Notes on Kafka” published in his 1955 collection Prisms. Though the circumstances of his engagement are different, the essay demonstrates the post-history of Benjamin’s Kafka, and the re-direction of its insights towards Adorno’s own model of criticism. Prisms, was a fundamental text in the establishment of Adorno’s “critical style;” describing the image of the “Prism,” he writes: “… the world is perceived through a medium, namely the various objectifications treated in it which are brought to the point of transparency.” The essays contained treat literary and cultural figures (Huxley, Kafka, Spengler, Proust), and establish Adorno’s belief in literature as a “…protest against a social situation that every individual experiences as hostile, alien, cold, oppressive.” Aesthetics is established as decisively against mechanical reproduction. The opening essay “Cultural Criticism and Society,” develops the position of the “critic” as taking a stand against the dominant “cultural industry.” Beginning with the imperative of immanence to tradition developed in Benjamin’s Trauerspiel, the critic must employ elements of tradition to reveal the

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83 Ibid. 66.
84 Ibid. 74.
85 Published in German in 1955 by Suhrkamp, it the first of Adorno’s monographs to be published in English in 1967. This latter publication was intended to commemorate the importance of the English speaking world as a refuge in exile for Adorno.
86 Müller-Doohm, Adorno, 355.
87 Ibid. 356.
ideological supplements mystifying the present moment—breaking “the spell” of reification. This exemplifies Adorno’s employment of Benjamin’s methodology for the purposes of critical theory, employing literature and aesthetics to reveal and displace the estranged world. This perspective is surmised in the final aphorism (Finale) of Minima Moralía (1944): “The only Philosophy that can be responsibly practiced in the face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption.”

The critic must create constellations by which to rethink the current context of social relations. Though Benjamin’s “mystical” elements are excised, redemption comes to mirror a Christian eschatology, in which the prophetic critic will redeem the world. Despite somewhat of an allegiance on the question of historical materialism, their conceptions of the role of the “critic” in the literary struggle are decidedly different; for Adorno the critic must bring enlightenment revelation, while for Benjamin, the parabolic quality of the work must be heightened.

For Adorno, Kafka should be read as all great literature (or art): as a protest against the dominant order of things. As already seen, this entails reading Kafka as a critic of his own time, of the alienation of social relations in capitalist modernity; not as a “sub-archetypal” (mythical) thinker of action as Benjamin argues. This is perhaps due to the fact that Adorno lived to see Kafka surpassed by figures such as Beckett and Joyce, and his work incorporated into the new theologies of existentialism. Over a larger historical scope a different “truth content” emerged vis-à-vis Kafka’s work—and perhaps he did not grasp the full range of alienations described by a thinker as Beckett. Due to this, Adorno’s reading should not be dismissed as merely symbolic, rather as employing a larger historical scope recognizing the historical aspects of Kafka’s analysis that Brecht and Benjamin only glimpsed.

The personal nature of Adorno’s Kafka is highly evident, from the utilization of his own experiences, and its dedication to Gretel, Kafka embodied many of the estrangements Adorno experienced while living in exile. To Rudolf Hirsch he explained:

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88 Adorno, Minima Moralía, 247.
89 In 1958 Adorno worked to have the works of Beckett published by Surkamp, and was engaged with his work throughout the 50’s. Regarding receptions Kafka in this period Adorno writes: “Of what has been written on him [Kafka] little counts: most is existentialism” (“Notes on Kafka,” Prisms, 245).
“I have the feeling that I have written something that more or less corresponds to what I must expect of myself.” Most personally striking is his use of Benjamin, with whom he both mourns and corresponds, attempting to re-kindle Benjamin’s Ideas in his present moment. In what follows Adorno’s reading will be elucidated against the backdrop of Benjamin’s 1934 essay, where it will be demonstrated that Adorno is not simply parasitic, but rather develops Kafka (in correspondence) in his own unique way.

i. Words and Things: Kafka and the Language of Reification

“The fact that the world is only a constructed world takes away hope and gives us certainty.” Kafka, The Zurau Aphorisms # 62, p. 63.

Adorno begins with Benjamin’s idea of Kafka as a parabolic writer (Haggadah), and the fractured relationship of these parables to the Law (Halakhah), yet contra Benjamin, this Law can be glimpsed for it is the law of capitalist social relations. Through the superstructure of Kafka’s alienated individuals, one can come to understand the structural laws of Capital. Adorno locates in Kafka’s language an effect similar to the “alienation effect” [Verfremdungseffekt] in Brecht, by which aesthetic distance is collapsed, and one is thrust back upon one’s material conditions—“It was just this hopeless effort he demanded…irritating the reader out of aesthetic contemplation.” And further:

His texts are designed not to sustain a constant distance between themselves and their victim but rather to agitate his feelings to a point where he fears that the narrative will shoot towards him like a narrative in a three dimensional film. Such aggressive physical proximity undermines the reader’s habit of identifying himself with the figures of the novel …As in fairy-tales, their fate serves not to deter but to entice. As long as the world has not been found the reader must be held accountable.

This shattering of aesthetic distance awakens the reader to a world which has become the Hell of perpetual sameness, as Tittorelli’s paintings (The Trial), all has become

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90 Müller-Doohm, Adorno, 355. Kracauer echoed this sentiment, considering it Adorno’s best work.
91 Adorno described his essay to Scholem as a “Långjager”—a tightly stuffed or compact sausage, akin to Benjamin’s idea of the Parable. A further note: this sections assertions do not intend to pass off Adorno’s reading as simply “Marxist,” rather to assert of a certain over determination of Marxist features in his work.
93 Ibid. 246.
reproducible, and resistance and conformity are inextricably linked. For Adorno’s Kafka, “history becomes hell, and Kafka’s world becomes the moment at which the chance to save it was missed.”

Yet for Adorno, it is the language of Kafka that entails the embodiment of hope: “If there is hope in Kafka’s work, it is in those extremes rather than in milder places, in the capacity to stand up to the worst by making it into language.” Contra Walser, “...there is nothing mad in his prose,” as Kafka reacts in the spirit of Enlightenment against Myth, attempting to rationally articulate the grotesque elements of his world. Against theological readings of Kafka, Adorno asserts him as one who affirms a certain sublime concept of reason (or enlightenment), as a last effort against the storm of progress. In so doing Adorno essentially reads Benjamin’s Kafka essay as “commentary”—that is, as simple description of mythological elements, to which enlightenment criticism must point the way beyond.

Yet this turn to language is difficult, given that in Kafka, words become things with utter regularity. Humans become the “identities” placed upon them, as Gregor Samsa (The Metamorphosis) literally embodies the phrase, “these traveling salesmen are like bugs.” Language is at the point of becoming the total expression of un-truth (capital), and must be redeemed via its non-identical or gestural elements (à la Beckett). Adorno sees this in Kafka’s linguistic turn away from horrendously grotesque elements (as in A Country Doctor), and his incorporation of gesture as a mode of expression. Gestures embody this pure visibility of language that shoots beyond itself: a language that embraces both words and things to express something of the world around. It is only with this realization of reification, that one gains the ability to refashion language: “[e]verything in Kafka is directed to that crucial dimension when humans realize they are

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94 In resisting the law Joseph K (The Trial) still succumbs to the same fate at those who conform, as the true nature of the law is un-known.
96 Ibid. 254.
97 Ibid. 254.
98 Hence for Adorno, Kafka redeems a certain sense of “expressionism” as a supplement to language, specifically the modes in which Kafka’s figures often gesture wildly, and independent of denotative function—as the man waving his arms in the final scene of The Trial.
not themselves, but things.”

In realizing reification, one perhaps gains the minimal distance for it to be overcome. Adorno returns to this model in his late work *Aesthetic Theory*, emphasizing the minimal expressive character of things: “If the Subject is no longer able to speak directly, then at least it should…speak through things, through their alienated and mutilated form” (*AS*, 118; 78).

**ii. Hope for us Critics: Adorno’s Eschatology**

“Belief in progress doesn’t mean belief in progress that has already occurred. That would not require belief.” Kafka, *The Zürau Aphorisms* # 48, p. 49.

For Adorno, Kafka’s world is the wholly immanent context of capital; like Beckett’s *Endgame*, it seems to present no eschatology—“Nowhere does the horizon open.” This realization of immanence to capital—of the awareness of contemporary social relations—as opposed to idealist utopias, is essential to Adorno’s thinking. The realization that there is no hope is itself the negative image of redemption, as it forces one to be realistic about contemporary social relations. Such destructions of utopia mark Adorno’s divergence with thinkers such as Ernst Bloch: “Above and beyond this one could perhaps say in general that the fulfillment of Utopia consists largely in a repetition of the continual same “today.”” The Utopias of capital are essential for its reproduction, hence the rational destruction of these myths are essential to its overcoming. Yet after this, one is left with the figure of “the critic,” one who seems to stand both inside and outside the world, both immanent and transcendent.

After developing such a language by which to speak of alienation, Adorno utilizes Kafka in critique of these ideological systems. In Kafka’s world work has become utterly useless, humans are granted work as a grotesque form of charity (as *The Penal Colonies*, lieutenant), or perhaps stay on “…out of habit.” Mysticism is not an aspect possessed by individuals, but is the defining feature of the conditions of domination. Thus the true danger of Joseph K. (In both *The Trial* and *The Castle*): as a rational (enlightened)

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100 Adorno, “Notes on Kafka,” *Prisms*, 255.
subject he has the power to break the spell of reification (myth), by meeting authority with simple rational questions—his attempts to “survey” the perfect Castle, and his attempt to get justice on his side pose a threat to the mythical order of things. Ideological systems desire nothing that does not resemble them; hence the stranger always poses a danger, and must be integrated (or worse), so as to legitimize the current state of things.  

For Adorno, there will not be a theological redemption, as Kafka’s god is a *Deus absconditus*; nor a heroic overcoming, as K. becomes guilty in his attempt to get justice on his side. It is only the method of cunning, of reason articulated against myth; as Kafka’s Odysseus (“The Silence of the Sirens”), one must cede victory at the outset so as to slip through the cracks—“the subject seeks to break the spell of reification by reifying itself.”  

This is the model of the assistants, Odradek, and the women in Kafka’s world: only those who have become non-exchangeable have a chance to survive. In becoming wholly “identical” the possibility of “non-identity” is glimpsed—that identities can never be total is perhaps the small hope of Kafka’s world.

It would seem with his abolition of redemption Adorno reaches the same conclusion as Benjamin’s “Theologico-politico fragment”—redemption (the future) is banished, so one must act accordingly in the present moment. Yet recalling Taubes’ statement, Adorno is not a thinker of “weak messianism”, rather an “aesthete,” one who is unable to totally banish the possibilities of messianic redemption. As a critic, he aestheticizes the problem, turning emancipation into an “as-if” contingent on the critic as a position outside the current order of things. Or rather, he asserts that art, if read correctly provides the possibility of redemption, while for Benjamin, not even this is assured. This is seen clearly in “Finale” (*Minima Moralia*), where Benjamin’s wholly absent theology is transformed into the (Christian) redemptive eschatology of the Critic. As Scholem, who holds the future judgment over the current order of things, Adorno holds critical redemption over the present. Though he comes close to Benjamin’s

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103 We see this in the two fates of Joseph K. In *The Castle*, he comes to survey the realm which they claim to be already organized, though throughout the work K. encounters apparent disorder. In *The Trial*, it is after he articulates the question of the Law (and justice) that he is necessarily condemned. For Adorno, it is because of his enlightened knowledge of such contradictions that he is condemned.

immanence, he withdraws to the aesthetic and the function of the critique—it is as if the Messiah can be coaxed to come, not at the first, but perhaps the last critique.

In a primary sense, the two converge with a shared understanding of the potentially radical potential hidden in tradition, though for Adorno, this has more to do with art as such (or dissonant art), than it does with the specific character of Kafka’s work. For Benjamin, Kafka provided a means by which to think through an alternative resolution for his concept of criticism: a means of employing criticism to open the present moment as the site of the “now.” He was further captivated by the specificity of Kafka as a thinker of immanence with respect to resistance to the law: Kafka did not hold out for future revelation, but sought to demonstrate the possibilities of action in the present. Such a conception of the present is foreclosed for Adorno due to his insistence on a Christian eschatology of redemption, based on the messianic function of the critic. Such divergent notions of temporality will prove decisive in the coming chapter.
3. Correspondences of Modernity: Adorno, Benjamin and the Dialectical (Materialist) Method*

“The guests that come last to the table should rightly take the last places; and will you take the first? Then do some great and mighty deed—the place may be prepared for you then, even though you do come last. You can explain the past only by what is most powerful in the present.”
–Nietzsche, The Use and Abuse of History, 40.

“July 4. Last night. Brecht (during a conversation about Baudelaire): “I am not, to be sure, against the asocial—I am against the non-social.””
-Benjamin, “Diary Entries” SW 3; 337.

“Nevertheless, Baudelaire’s rebellion is always that of the asocial man: it is at an impasse”
-Benjamin, The Arcades Project, 1939 Exposé.

*A version of this chapter was presented as a Theory Session (under the same title), at the University of Western Ontario, in February, 2016.*
I. Philosophico-Biographical Panorama

“To write history means giving dates their physiognomy.” -Benjamin [N11, 2]

Upon the realization of “Absolute Spirit”—the telos of his phenomenology of consciousness—Hegel speaks of Spirit (history) “emptying itself into time,” which then progresses cinematically as a “gallery of moving images,” each containing within itself (as a monad) the fullness of world spirit.¹ At this point, the progression of Spirit “recollects” [erinnern] itself in all its moments—the reconciliation of subject and object, nature and history, past and present: the resolution of the messianic and the historical realms. Hegel infers that the process must begin again (or was a ruse from the start)—that the fullness of the Absolute persisted in each of spirits individual moments; each existing as an immanent state of perfection.

Some years later (1839), the Daguerre Panorama burned down amidst the Parisian Arcades.² Prior to this it had provided viewers with a similar experience of the end of world history—history had been realized in Paris, the capital of Modernité, and viewers could experience natural images of such as progression within the “second nature” of the Arcade. Smelling a ruse, Marx would deride such projections as ideological phantasmagoria (fetishes), mere holograms of capitalist exchange relations inverted and writ large. Such images were simply narcotic, thus should not distract one from the material nature of social relations. Yet for Baudelaire, such images contained within them a collective resonance, a flash of a new collective power afforded by a curious mix of nature and technology—“These things, because they are false, are infinitely closer to the truth.”³ Thus the chiasmus of the 19th century: should such expressions, phenomena and

1 Hegel describes the “cinematics” of this as follows: “History is a conscious self-mediating process—Spirit emptied out into Time; but this externalization, this Kenosis, is equally an externalization of itself; the negative of the negative itself. This Becoming presents a slow moving succession of Spirits, a gallery of images, each of which, endowed with all the riches of Spirit, moves thus slowly just because the Self has to penetrate and digest this entire wealth of its substance.” Hegel, The Phenomenology of Spirit, 492.

2 Panorama’s where proto-cinematic devices into which viewers could gaze (seated around it circularly), viewing projections of natural landscapes, and distant empires from the comfort of urban modernity. Daguerre (famous for his photographic “Daguerre-types”), operated the main Panorama in early 19th century Paris.

3 Baudelaire quoted in: Benjamin, The Arcades [Q4a,4]. Benjamin elaborates the constellation between the “Panorama” and the dialectical image: “The interest of the panorama is seeing the true city—the city indoors. What stands within the windowless house is true. Moreover, the Arcade, too, is a windowless house. The windows that look down on it are like loges from which one gazes into its interior, but one
wish images be derided as ideological ruse—as the eternal return of the same—or as furnishing the potential for something genuinely new, of the potential for new forms of thinking and collective experience? It is such an antinomy that Benjamin attempted to span in his later writings (1937-40).

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On August 28, 1938, Benjamin sent Max Horkheimer the completed text of “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” intended for publication in the forthcoming issue of the Institute’s journal [Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung], one that would include Adorno on Husserl, and Grossman on Marx. The tonal dissonance of Benjamin’s piece alluded to the growing divergence between his concerns and those of the institute, though monetary and political circumstances had forced him to rely on them for financial and intellectual support. The essay itself, along with the infamous written commentary provided by Adorno, explicitly describe the intellectual positions Benjamin held in his late work (1937-40), notably, the idea of the dialectical image. Benjamin intended this essay to be the second chapter of a proposed book on Baudelaire (Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Age of High Capitalism), “[a] book…meant to set down the decisive philosophical elements of the Arcades project in what I hope will be definitive form.” The essay (and Adorno’s response) can be read to illustrate larger affinities in Benjamin’s thinking in general. The first of these affinities being the current state of The Arcades (in 1938), and

4 Though it was never completed, it was intended to have 3 parts: (1) Baudelaire as Allegorist; (2) The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire; (3) The Commodity as Poetic Object. Though only the second chapter was completed, fragments for the Arcades provide “ciphers” as to the direction this project would take (see “Convolute J: Baudelaire,” or “Central Park” (SW 4: 161-199) or “The Study begins with some Reflections on Les Fleurs du mal” (SW 4: 95-98). The first section (alternately titled “Idea and Image” in Correspondence) would treat the idea of “correspondences” in relation of allegory to a theory of “Modern” Art. The Second (completed, though alternately termed “Antiquity and Modernity”) treats the revelation of Antiquity in Modernity. And the Final section (alternately “The New and the Immutable”) would examine Baudelaire in constellation with Blanqui and Nietzsche, as a thinker of the “new” with respect to the Eternal Return (or the eternal return of the different).

5 Benjamin to Horkheimer, 28.9.1938. BC, 573. And, further: “…that it is becoming an extensive treatment in which the most important motifs of the Arcades converge” (ibid. 556).
its relation to Benjamin’s studies on Baudelaire: was an inquiry into the figure of Baudelaire to encompass the concerns of The Arcades more generally? More fundamentally, could Benjamin’s methods of immanent criticism—in which a work (or figure) is unfolded so as to “reflect” its historical circumstances—be utilized for the whole of the nineteenth century? Related to these internal movements is the relationship of Benjamin’s thinking (and The Arcades) to Adorno and the Institute more generally. Beginning with the Königstein Program (1929) through to Benjamin and Adorno’s 1937 meeting in San Remo, the institute expressed considerable interest in the completed project, provided Benjamin could formulate his concerns with adequate theoretical rigor. This hinges on the relationship between the Institute and Benjamin more generally, his reliance on their “financial support” forced him to engage with projects related to their concerns (notably, his 1937 “Edward Fuchs” Study), though the influence of such necessities upon the direction of his thought cannot be deduced with certainty. It is common parlance to analyze this dispute from the perspective of Benjamin’s disagreements with the Institute’s intellectual positions, specifically its brand of “historical materialism.” This is emphasized by pointing to the explicit philosophical dis-correspondence in Benjamin and Adorno’s letters. However, such commentary misses the emergent affinity of Benjamin’s concerns with those of the Institute⁶, alongside side the essential role Adorno played in the development of Benjamin’s theoretical formulations (specifically with respect to the Arcades).

In what follows, Benjamin’s “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire” (1938) will be analyzed as exemplary of his late method of criticism (II). Alongside The Arcades, this essay will be read as exemplary of Benjamin’s dialectical image: (IV), a model which emerged out of a convergence of Marxism and theological concerns. In unpacking the dialectical image, Benjamin’s immanent criticism of both Marxism, and surrealism will be noted, alongside the historiographical ramifications of such a method.

⁶ During 1937-38 Benjamin increasingly expressed and pursued solidarity with the Institute, particularly by way of Adorno. This is likely due to economic necessity, and philosophical convergence. According to Scholem, Benjamin expressed concern regarding several of the Institute’s positions regarding theology, and “actual” Marxism, though both seemed in agreement that Adorno had the interests of his thought in mind. This was echoed by Scholem after his visit to New York in 1937. See, Scholem Walter Benjamin. 215-16. Also see Benjamin’s “A German Institute for Independent Research” (SW 3: 307-17), which speaks favorably of the Institute’s program of critical theory in general.
(III). In analyzing Benjamin’s method of criticism, a convergence will be noted between his early and late work: both entail an attempt to develop an immanent model of criticism, and a questioning of the representation of particular phenomena via the realm of Ideas. Following this, Adorno’s criticisms of Benjamin’s method can be analyzed; in the context of their larger correspondence these objections can be seen not only as justified, but as important in the development of Benjamin’s theory of criticism (V). Adorno’s own negative dialectic can be read as a continuation of such a project along greater systematic and philosophical lines (VI).

If one focuses specifically on Adorno’s response to the first Baudelaire essay,⁷ his criticisms seem unnecessarily harsh and strangely personal in nature, especially given Benjamin’s political and financial circumstances. However, this apparent “dis-correspondence” has a lengthy history, and seen in repose with the rest of their correspondence, Adorno’s response is justified from the perspective of his thinking. The “origins” of this dispute are difficult to locate, yet three main plateaus of explicit theoretical confrontation can be distilled: Adorno’s response to Benjamin’s 1935 “Exposé” (Arcades); the correspondence surrounding Benjamin’s “Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility” (2nd edition, 1936); and the 1938-39 dispute surrounding Charles Baudelaire (1st and 2nd editions). Yet reading the two in the context of correspondence entails that the relationship goes back even further, into their shared conceptions of a philosophical program (Königstein, 1929), and respective readings of the history of philosophy. Hence what appears in isolation as the site of radical divergence—dis-correspondence—is in fact a trace of a larger philosophical engagement that had been in development for the past decade. This late period sees Adorno and Benjamin crystallize into correspondents of difference: held together as interlocutors while holding divergent philosophical views. In this sense, the two no longer “agree,” but rather confront in an almost dialectical fashion, removed from the spell of sameness they are able to exercise genuine criticism of each other’s formulations. In holding to his own conception of “critique” (informed by Benjamin’s Trauerspiel), Adorno is able to

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⁷ As Agamben does in “The Prince and The Frog,” Infancy and History. Susan Buck-Morss’s The Origin of Negative Dialectics (148); provides a better gloss of the complexities, and origins of the exchange. The present study will elucidate the exchange with respect to the valences of correspondence.
exercise a legitimate structural imperative to Benjamin throughout the 1930s, namely that he articulate his dialectical image in a clearer, and more systematically (socially) defined manner. Hence if this dispute is seen “in correspondence,” a fuller image of each in their respective intellectual positions can be developed.

Related to these considerations is the question of intellectual biography, along with the question of authorship in general: to what extent can history be read out or, into an individual work, or text? This is particularly relevant when considering Baudelaire as a figure in the 19th century: how should one relate his work to the historical context in which it was written? The relationship of works to their material circumstances concerned Benjamin throughout much of his work, as has been demonstrated throughout these considerations. Beginning in 1924 (“Goethe’s Elective Affinities”), he criticized Gundolf’s biographical creation of a mystical “Goethe cult” which reduced historical complexity to mythological inspiration. Instead Benjamin favored a “constructive” idea of authorship which sought to illuminate the work in the context of history and tradition (its “pre”/“post” history)—the text is related, but not reducible to its historical circumstances.

Such affinities are relevant for Benjamin’s reading of Baudelaire, but should also be taken as imperatives for a contemporary approach to these thinkers. It cannot be understated that these thinkers found themselves immersed in events which would later become “world historical” (especially in this later period)—the crises diagnosed in their work (of lyric poetry, aesthetics) should be seen as inextricably linked to the crisis of modernity unfolding around them. Regarding the 1938 Baudelaire essay, Benjamin writes: “I do not have to tell you under what circumstances I worked on this project over the last two weeks. I was in a race against war,” and to Adorno, he notes “…the collision of historical events and editorial deadlines.”8 Despite this, Benjamin seems to discourage an overtly historical reading of his work: “I have made every effort to keep any trace of these circumstances out of the work, even in its external aspects.”9 Regardless of his

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8 Benjamin to Adorno, BC, 574.
9 Ibid.
intention, the epochal significance of this essay is highly evident—it is a treatise on historicism, and lyric poetry at the precise moment of their impossibility.

It is this constellation of circumstances and experiences which must be considered in approaching “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” (along with Adorno’s response) and Benjamin’s late work more generally. In what follows, the essay will be unpacked, analyzing Benjamin’s use of the figure of Baudelaire to “express” the 19th century; following which broader questions can be posed related to Benjamin’s historiography (the dialectical image), and the relationship of such theoretical concerns with Adorno’s own.

II. Baudelaire (As a Figure in Benjamin’s Work)

“Assuredly, therefore, he [Baudelaire] was not a saviour, a martyr, or even a hero. Be he had about him something of the mime who apes the “poet” before an audience and a society which no longer needed a real poet, and which grants him only the latitude of mimicry.” -Benjamin, “Central Park,” SW 4: 166.

As early as 1914 Benjamin (then twenty-two years old), began translating individual poems from Baudelaire’s cycle Les Fleurs du mal, a project he undertook intermittently, and which crystallized in his 1923 translation of Tableaux parisiens prefaced by the famous statement “The Task of the Translator.”10 The essay presents “translation” as a practice which recognizes the mediation, or distance, between the “way of meaning” of two texts. Translation entails a questioning of mediation or distance, inquiring as to the historical distance between the translator’s own time and that of the work. For Benjamin, this entailed an inquiry into the distance between his own Weimar Era and that of the Second Empire, one which illuminated a strange affinity between the two epochs. The capitalist modernity of the twentieth century understood itself in constellation with its own “pre-history” in the nineteenth century, hence to understand the origin of such pathologies (the crises of modernity) their historical emergence must be located in “pre-history” [Vorgeschichte]. Given Baudelaire’s presence in his epoch, he provided Benjamin with a prematurely developed image of trajectories which would become fully realized in the twentieth century, namely the crisis of modernity, and the destruction of

10 Benjamin’s “translation” and reading of Baudelaire move decidedly against other receptions at the time. T.S Eliot employed Baudelaire as one who romantically overcame the alienation of the “wasteland,” while Stefan George emphasized a pro-fascist and archetypal reading of Baudelaire in his translation. Against this, Benjamin emphasizes Baudelaire as a poet embodying his social context in both form and content.
experience therein. As a monad, he could be imminently read to deduce the dreams and pathologies of his age, and it is this epochal significance which accounts for his prevalence in Benjamin’s *Arcades* (see Convolute J).

In addition to this historical affinity, Benjamin felt an immense personal correspondence with Baudelaire: as broke Bohemians exiled from their respective times, they both wandered *The Arcades* (or archives) of Paris at the precise moment when the *Flâneur* would become an impossible figure. They turned to poetic existence, and sought epic experience (*Erfahrung*) in the midst of a generalized “poverty of experience”—when the independent man of letters was being replaced by its mechanical reproductions. Indeed, one could locate a certain *becoming Baudelaire* in Benjamin’s life and work: he sought actively to recreate many of Baudelaire’s experiences in his own time, this is seen most notably in his experiments with hashish, and continual residence in Paris. Yet such experiments should not simply be regarded as idle curiosity, or nostalgia, rather as genuine attempts to perceive his own time dialectically. To see it in constellation with another epoch of the past, giving voice to the dreams of the nineteenth century, while examining how these had become a nightmare in the present. Benjamin’s fundamental interest in Baudelaire was as a cipher to his historical epoch, a poet of urban capitalist modernity who embodied the spirit of his times, often against his expressed intentions.

i. **The Poet of Modern Life: Representing Modernity**

“For the perfect idler, for the passionate observer, it becomes an immense source of enjoyment to establish his dwelling in the throng, in the ebb and flow, the bustle, the fleeting and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel at home anywhere; to see the world, to be at the very center of the world, and yet to be unseen of the world. Such are some of the minor pleasures of those independent, intense and impartial spirits, who do not lend themselves easily to linguistic definitions.” –Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life.*

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11 For Baudelaire, this occurred when Haussmann redesigned the city (1857-70) (widening the streets) so as to make the erection of Barricades impossible. Inadvertently this made the aimless wandering of the Flâneur difficult, if not impossible, as the city was re-designed in a utilitarian direction. Haussmann’s redesigns however did not prevent the rise of the Paris Commune in 1871. Benjamin’s wanderings in the Paris archives where made difficult, due the onset of the war, and the invasion of France by the Nazis.

12 Much of Benjamin’s experiments with Hashish can be read as attempts to recreate Baudelaire *Artificial Paradises* (1860), or to invoke a similar thematic of “intoxication.” See Marcus Boon, “Walter Benjamin and Drug Literature,” in *Walter Benjamin on Hashish.*
Baudelaire’s “Painter of Modern Life” (1863) heralded Constantine Guys as the artist with the courage to represent modernity—“the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable”—the splitting of (aesthetic) experience, the replacement of genius by fashion, the space in which all that is solid melts into air. In this sense, Guys was a “modern” artist. He did not dwell in the aura or a nostalgia for the past, but turned his attention upon his own time: “The pleasure which we derive from the representation of the present is due not only to the beauty with which it can be invested, but also to its essential quality of being present.”

For Benjamin, it was not Guys, but Baudelaire who should be thought as the “poet of modern life;” one who undertook the heroic task of (re)presenting modernity—“In Baudelaire’s terms, nothing in his own century come closer to the task of the hero of antiquity than the task of giving form to modernity.” Yet Baudelaire did not simply describe such transformations on the level of content (as Hugo), rather he embodied them in his struggle with representation, providing a physiognomy of his age in both form and content. He did not describe the emergent commodity form, or the decline of auratic art, but embodied the process (perhaps against his knowledge) on the level of form. The allegorical nature of his poetry mirrored the evacuation of meaning surrounding him, and the struggle of the individual against such a process. In an early lecture on Baudelaire, Benjamin likens him to a photographer, one presenting “negative” images of modernity to which only he possesses the means to read. Yet perhaps these backward facing images can be read allegorically—on the level of both form and content—to provide an image of the nineteenth century.

ii. The “Image” of the 19th Century in Baudelaire.

La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles;

14 Ibid. 25.
15 Benjamin to Horkheimer, BC, 557.
16 For Benjamin, Baudelaire embodied the Second Empire in both form and content in that his lyrics attempted to preserve the “epic experience” [Erfahrung] of modernity that was in fact the destruction of experience and particularity under the commodity form (“shock experience” and the dissolution of Erfahrung into Erlebnis). Baudelaire described in epic terms an era in which such meaningful expressions where no longer possible. Baudelaire bestowed an epic “form” upon an alienated and atrophied “content.”
For Benjamin, the poetic formulation of the nineteenth century must begin with an experience of *immanence*: of the immersion in the crowd, from which there can be no transcendent(al) point of view—one is always jostled backwards by the newly emergent masses (the Other)—this is the experience of modernity *as such*. Baudelaire is one who “developed” an afterimage of this encounter with the “crowd”—a negative image of the “shocks” and crisis experience [*Schockerleibnis*] which caused the disintegration of *Erfahrung* into *Erlebnis*. 17 In other words, Baudelaire attempted to “experience” the loss of experience that occurred in modernity. Baudelaire presents a prematurely developed “after-image” of his own age—he saw modernity as already “antiquated,” as a ruin—an age become old via the perpetual new of the commodity form, a perpetual hell of the return of the same. Baudelaire would be read as the tragic poet of this new antiquity for an age to come. As a dialectical image, Baudelaire can be *read* for insights into the developments and pathologies of the century—a negative image of the century (as already ruined) emerges under his allegorical gaze. Following his early imperative of unfolding history from within the work (“The Concept of Criticism,” 1919) Benjamin describes his aim as follows:

> If I might use one image to express what I am planning, *it is to show Baudelaire as he is embedded in the 19th century*. The Impression he left behind there must emerge as clearly untouched as that of a stone that one day is rolled away from the spot on which it has rested for decades. 18

Here, one glimpses the Janus faced nature of Benjamin’s project: Baudelaire must be understood (cited) *within the 19th century*. Yet the century is best critically unfolded—in its dual character as both dream (utopia) and nightmare (repression)—under the melancholy gaze of Baudelaire’s prose. 19 It should be

17 *Erlebnis* refers to fragmentary “shock” experience, while *Erfahrung* entails a more significant experience, persisting in memory—of something “lived through,” not momentarily experienced. See Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (*SW* 4: 313-355), which elaborates the alterations of experience in modernity.


19 This is perhaps a latent critique of Engels, for whom “the 19th century was a creation of Balzac.” Benjamin would likely contend it was Baudelaire, in that his poetry allowed the construction of “critical moments” which were covered over by realism.
emphasized that such a reading does not take place on the level of content—Baudelaire did not provide a sociological or political analysis of his time (as Marx, or Hugo did), rather he *embodied* these forces on the level of *form*. Baudelaire is the image or cipher of a bourgeois conscious in languish with itself, raging against growing standardization, and the revolt and repression of the century.

There is little point in trying to include the position of Baudelaire in the fabric of the most advanced position in mankind’s struggle for liberation. From the outset, it seems more promising to investigate his machinations where he was undoubtedly most at home: in the enemy camp. Very rarely are they a blessing for the other side. Baudelaire was a secret agent—an agent of the secret discontent of his class with his own rule.20

Baudelaire’s texts stage the dramas of his age: the rise of the newspaper, and novel—the changing shape of authorship in general, 21 with its dedicated “readers” (subscribers); prostitution and its dispersal of Eros throughout the crowd. Most fundamentally, the commodity, with its standardization and mystification of all aspects of life. Even in his later turn to *l’art pour l’art*, Baudelaire did not resist such tendencies, rather immersed himself in them, channeling their intoxicating power. As Benjamin writes, “Baudelaire knew the true situation of the man of letters: he goes to the marketplace as a *flâneur*, supposedly to take a look at it, but in reality to find a buyer.” 22 Specifically in the posthumously published (1869) collection of verse poems *Le Spleen de Paris (Les Fleurs du Mal)*, nowhere are these dramas articulated as content; the crowd is rarely mentioned, rather has merged with the setting, becoming expressed as “nature.” 23 An affinity is broached here with Lukács” notion of “second nature,” which describes the reification

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21 The 19th century saw the rise of the Novel as a prevalent literary genre; alongside the “newspaper” which created a new type of dedicated reader (the subscriber). See Benjamin, “The Newspaper”; “The Author as Producer.”
22 Benjamin, *PSB. SW 4*: 12.
23 In the final cycle of the 1869 *Les Fleurs du mal*, “La Mort,” Baudelaire depicts the poets final voyage (specifically “Le Voyage”), one which reflects upon the epic territory the poems have traversed. For Benjamin, though the voyage occurs in a natural setting (into the sea), there is reason to suspect its true setting is modernity (specifically the city), the sea can be read as the crowd into which the poet of modern life (Baudelaire) begins his final voyage. Benjamin reads the “voyage” upon the rhythm of the sea as poets voyage upon the shocks of modernity, As Baudelaire writes: “Un matin nous partons, le cerveau plein de flamme./Le cœur gros de rancune et de désirs amers./Et nous allons, suivant le rythme de la lame,/Berçant notre infini sur le fini des mers” (168). The affinity is evident here with baroque Trauerspiel where history merges with the setting and must be read as “natural history” by the critic.
Verdinglichung] of consciousness so that capitalist social relations appear as “natural” (independent of human interaction). Capital reproduces itself not only through commodity exchange, but via the naturalization of such repetitions, such that they appear as a fated, natural, and mythical force.24 This forest of signs and symbols (the crowd, the streets, the city) comes to replace nature as that which is eternal and natural, it reverts to the mythical realm of “pre-history,” against which human action (history) must take place. Yet as “second nature” (myth), it is not nature in the Hegelian or Marxist sense through which the human is able to realize himself (via labour); rather it provides a false-consciousness of the perpetual same, a governance of humans by the forces of “pre-history.” In a vulgar materialist sense, this could be demonstrated to mirror the processes of the economic “base” (growing standardization, mechanization), on the superstructural (cultural) level via standardized and mechanized cultural products—the emergence of “Mass Art” (film, photography, the novel) for the newly created “masses” (the public, das Mann).25

Already in the 19th century, Benjamin saw a movement away from such a mimetic, or straightforward relation between material and cultural products. With the pervasiveness of the commodity form things appeared as “distorted” as products began to take on a life of their own. Thus the emergence of “phantasmatic experiences,”26 the pervasiveness of the commodity form leads to the generalized “fetishism of commodities” described by Marx,27 though as Margaret Cohen28 notes, Benjamin’s use of the phantasmagoria (technology) is meant as a latent critique of the Marx’s Camera

24 As Benjamin writes: “Within the crowd, nature exercises its fundamental right over the city” PSB, SW 4:36. This issue will later become prominent in Adorno, specifically in Dialectic of Enlightenment (1944) in which enlightenment regresses into a mythical “rationality of domination”—or urban modernity regresses to nature.
25 Victor Hugo is the embodiment of this for Benjamin, for who the masses where his “constitutes.” Much of Benjamin’s presentation of Baudelaire is enacted against Hugo, who explicitly addressed such concerns, but did not embody them on the level of form, as Baudelaire.
26 The Phantasmagoria was an optical, light projecting device which employed smoke and mirrors (alongside the audience’s fantasies) to create frightening, and often demonic scenes.
27 “The commodity-form, and the value relation of the products of human labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material relations arising out of this. It is nothing but a definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the phantasmagoric form of a relation between things” (Capital, 165), Benjamin’s specific usage of the term comes via Adorno’s 1937 In Search of Wagner, specifically Ch. 6, “The Phantasmagoria.”
28 See Margaret Cohen, Benjamin’s Phantasmagoria.
Lucida—of the simple presentation of culture as an “inversion” of the economic base. For Benjamin, the phantasmagoria accounts for the element of fantasy present in commodity consumption, the mystical experience with “the new” and technology. “The world dominated by phantasmagorias, is—to use an expression from Baudelaire—Modernity.”29 Commodities become mystical fetishes in themselves—distorting their relations to their material production—taking on a life of their own, and intoxicating the consumer. Hence Benjamin’s decisive move away from Marx, who provides little analysis of consumption, focusing instead on the sphere of (re) production.30 If Benjamin’s late work is to be employed for the services of “political economy” it would be with respect to his analysis of consumption. Thus, for Benjamin, any analysis of cultural production in the 19th century must take into account such mystical and (dis)enchanting aspects of the commodity form.

The pervasiveness of the commodity form in all aspects of life has further implications on the level of consciousness, leading to a generalized “reification” of thought—all “use values” are subsumed under the dominant logic of exchange. For Simmel, such economic standardization is mirrored on the level of consciousness: as a response to the “shocks” (Nervenleben, Schockerlebnis) of modernity, consciousness develops as a “protective organ”31 against the onslaught of affective experiences one finds in the metropolis. One has to create “standards” against the environment, and these are overwhelmingly based on the predominance of intellectual calculation (Verstand, blasée attitude) over the use-values of everyday life. For Cacciari, this rational abstraction mirrors that of capitalist commodity exchange itself (rational “exchange value” over affective “use value”)—the processes of capitalism are laid bare on the phenomenal

29 Benjamin, The Arcades 1939 Exposé.
30 Exceptions to this can be found in Marx’s work, specifically the “fetishism of commodities” (Capital Vol 1.), alongside isolated segments of Capital Vol. 2 (“Part III: The Reproduction and Circulation of Aggregate Social Capital”). Overwhelmingly Marx (as most classical political economists) focuses on the sphere of production (supply), as opposed to consumption (demand).
31 As Simmel writes: “The deepest problems of modern life flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society, against the weight of historical heritage and the external culture and technique of life” (The Metropolis and Mental Life, 9).
level—“The shock-existence which the passer-by has in the crowd corresponds to the existence of the worker at the machine.”32 As Cacciari elaborates:

The crowd, as well as the Metropolis that provides its structure, thus both lead back to the moment of production, to labor, mirroring one another as each other’s common formulation…rather than relating the factory types to social types and the laws of circulation, Benjamin sees the society itself as laying bare its own origin. The Image of shock reveals its own class status.33

It may appear that the notion of phantasmagoria is in contradiction with such presentation—yet the point for Cacciari (and Benjamin) is that forms of consciousness are themselves distorted representations of social conditions (phantasmagorias), not in a determinate sense, but in that they furnish traces of social conditions. For Benjamin, this manifestation of social relations on the level of appearances and consciousness becomes a key concern for “theory;” utilizing Baudelaire he illustrates how critique should operate in a time when, “Peoples [a and things] inner qualities can be deduced from their outward appearance.”34 Given rationality’s role in domination, one cannot assume a straightforward enlightenment model of critique, and his writings on Baudelaire can be read as commentary on the possibility of a theoretical (or sociological) method which applies categories to phenomena from a perspective in remove. It is in this sense that one should read his comments upon Baudelaire and the “detective story.”

The detective story—originating in Poe, and translated to Europe by Baudelaire—grew out of a discontent with urban life. Modernity is experienced as a disparate ruin of the individual, a series of shocks, but we find solace in the “truth” the detective discovers: that the criminal, as individual will be caught, or located via his individual traces.35 It is the story of the commodity form, of the victory of rational articulation (the intellect) over and against the emotional affects of the everyday—that the plot will win out against irrationality. One can see traces of the “detective” in much

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33 Cacciari, Architecture and Nihilism, 21.
34 Benjamin, PSB. SW 4: fn. 105.
35 Benjamin notes the emergence of the detective novel alongside “les intérieurs” in which one could leave “traces,” that is fragments or marks of individuality. See The Arcades, Convolute I, “The Interior, the Trace.” Speaking to the illusory and ideological character of the detective story Benjamin writes: “This is an indication of how the detective story, regardless of its sober calculations, also participates in the phantasmagoria of Parisian life” (PSB. SW 4: 22).
critical theory: one who is able to abstract beyond this ruin of particularity to a transcendent(ental) logic which explains the phenomena presented. Yet Benjamin notes, Baudelaire was “too good a reader of de Sade” to fully identify with this detective; his subject is shattered by shocks, fetishes, and intoxication. In the crowd each is a detective, seeking his/her individual “new” or commodity, and every street corner is the “scene of the crime,” the site of the destruction of that individual. The detective (who searches for the unique, the aura) is replaced or reproduced by the pure immanence of modernity itself, which allows for no “outside” from which theory can gaze, and all are the usual suspects.  

Benjamin’s Baudelaire is one keenly aware of this, upholding the figure of the “poet” over and against the detective theorist—one who is able to maintain a semblance of individuality via poetic existence, “…enjoy[ing] the incomparable privilege of being able at will, to be himself and another.” The poet confronts the (dis)enchantment of the world with poetry, allegorically raging against phantasmagoria. This is the idea of “correspondance” in Baudelaire’s work: within the “second nature” of capital (emptied of signification by the commodity form), the subject is able to allegorically “awaken” the world anew, endowing such ruins with poetic evocations. In so doing, the subject is able to maintain a semblance of autonomy against the forces of standardization, though as Benjamin asserts, such a chance is slight, and such gestures have much in common with the tragic hero of antiquity who battle, who battles fate: “the hero is the true subject of La Modernité. In other words, it takes a heroic consciousness to live in Modernity.” Instead of battling the fate of the gods, and the necessity of nature, the modern poet battles the “second nature” of modernity: comprised of both the semblance of nature that is the crowd, and the generalized fate of mechanical reproduction. The modern heroic task is bearing the immanence of modernity, of finding a way to overcome this neo

36 As Benjamin describes in his “Little History of Photography” (1931), under the photographers gaze every street corner becomes the “scene of the crime,” that is the site where the individual was destroyed, as individual, in favor of the larger mass. SW 2: 527.
38 Benjamin, PSB, SW 4: 44.
39 Benjamin emphasizes that “Baudelaire wanted to be read like a classical poet,” for an age to come which would see his age as antiquity—as Benjamin would see the 19th century as the “antiquity” or pre-history of the 20th century (ibid. 45).
baroque epoch, from which there is no perspective of remove, and traces of history flit by in the crowd (as Baudelaire’s *À une passante*). In his *becoming* Baudelaire, Benjamin clearly saw this heroic task as an imperative for criticism; remarking on the changing function of “critique” in modernity he writes:

Criticism is a matter of correct distancing. It was at home in a world where perspectives and prospects counted and where it was still possible to take a standpoint. Now things press to closely on human society. The “unclouded,” “innocent” eye has become a lie.  

Within this immanent context, one must embrace *distortion*—the ambiguous and Janus faced nature of the “truth” of modernity: that chances of redemption are slight, and may perhaps arrive too late. A new importance is now thrust upon language (allegory), and the immanent refraction of commodities and cultural products so as to reveal the distorted and slight image of Utopia. Despite the affinity with antiquity, this task is not tragic in a classical sense—where the hero is sacrificed creating an ethic for a time to come—rather, “…[h]eroic modernity turns out to be a *Trauerspiel* in which the hero’s part is available.” One is sacrificed to *history* (perhaps a worse fate), and it is unclear if one will be rescued from the “ruin” of an era. Benjamin understood the immensity of this task, and ceded that suicide and ruin hang over the individual in this era. The dark fashions of modernity mark the funerary hell of the eternal return; “we are all attendants to some kind of funeral,” namely the one for ourselves (as individuals) at the hands of standardization and larger social processes.

### iii. Resistance and Gesture

“If an agitator is to achieve lasting results, he must speak as the representative of a body of opinion…Engels must have realized this on his first visit to Paris.”  

Despite such bleak prospects, there are heroes in this era, but they are not of the revolutionary type one would expect—not the Marxists but the “Bohème’s”—those “provocateurs” who plotted against the Second Empire of Napoleon III. Benjamin begins his 1938 essay by associating Baudelaire’s verse with such types; both embody an ambiguous, and mystery mongering sentiment, but above all, a spirit of revolt. Such

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40 Benjamin, *One-Way Street, SW 4*: 476.  
41 Benjamin, *PSB, SW 4*: 60.  
42 Ibid. 61.
figures are placed in repose with Marx, who found such provocateurs, and professional revolutionaries (Blanqui) “dubious”—“bourgeois revolutionaries” who did not understand their own class status. Yet, for Benjamin such conspirators provided physiognomies of their age, embodying a generalized feeling of revolt, and attempts to liberate “gesture” from growing standardization. Baudelaire embodied this spirit on the level of language, as a “provocateur”:43

Another would light a cigar next to a powder keg, to see, to know, to tempt fate, forcing himself to display proof of energy, to play the gambler, to experience the pleasures of anxiety, for nothing, through caprice, from idleness.44

What disturbed Marx about such provocations was their Janus faced, or doubled nature: “It had an ear for the songs of the revolution and also for the “higher voice” which spoke from the drumroll of the executioners,” and further “[Baudelaire’s] verse supported the oppressor though it espoused not only their cause, but their illusions as well.”45 Though they resisted the existing order, their lack of “collective” (Marxist) awareness forestalled the development of class consciousness. What Marx saw as unprincipled Anarchism, Benjamin saw as a scathing criticism of such collective possibilities. That the atrophy of consciousness (Erfahrung into Erlebnis) in modernity, had destroyed such explicit political solidarities, and perhaps it was only through a semblance of “spontaneous” gesture that a subject could express itself consciously. The “crowd” was not unified, but a perpetual rabble of competing interests, disparate passers-by on the street [Straßenpublikum].

Both of Benjamin’s essays on Baudelaire (submitted to the Institute) can be read in this sense: as treatises against such unified notions of class consciousness.46 In fact much of Benjamin’s general inquiry into the 19th century entailed a recognition of the

43 Describing his language of provocation, Benjamin writes: “What Baudelaire expresses could be called the metaphysics—and the idea of the “provocateur”” (ibid. 64).
44 Baudelaire, “The Bad Glazier,” 43.
45 Benjamin, PSB. SW 4: 12.
46 As Susan Buck-Morss argues: “Rather than affirming the empirical consciousness of the worker, he was presenting an image of the historical “origin” of that consciousness and an explanation of why it was necessarily false: if the proletariat could not experience reality… it could not become aware of its own objective position… urban existence thus worked against the development of class consciousness” (The Origin of Negative Dialectics, 161).
disjuncture between “social reformers” (Fourier, Saint Simon, Marx), and the actual consciousness of individuals—a recognition that such theorists were unaware of the alterations brought upon consciousness by modernity, and the position of their own ideals in such movements. Adorno will later chastise Benjamin’s employment of psychoanalytic categories (in the Arcades), specifically that his notion of a collective “un-conscious,” forecloses the dialectical possibilities of class consciousness. However, here Adorno is correct despite his intentions: Benjamin is asserting such dialectical narratives to be out of sync with the collective “shocks” of modernity, and theory must instead develop a mode of politics in rapport with such atrophies: a mode of theorizing which understands the collective nature of such shock experiences.

The “Gestus” of these provocateurs is a familiar concept in Benjamin’s work, recalling his reading of Kafka’s “Nature Theatre” where: “Each gesture is an event—one might even say a drama—in itself” and further, “…the gestures of Kafka’s figures are too powerful for our accustomed surroundings and break out into wider areas.”47 The “astonishment” [Verfremdungseffekt] and sometimes violent nature of these gestures has the capacity to shock, and reveal social conditions in the viewer (Brecht). Yet they are not defined according to a given political paradigm (Marxism) as they are in Brecht; they are spontaneous, and sometimes conducive to “unethical” political programs. The notion of “Divine violence” (via Sorrel) embodies this ambiguity—a gesture that is both outside the law, and not definable by it—a “law creating” violence that instantiates its own logic. It should be noted that this violence has much in common with the (destructive) practice of citation.

Baudelaire did not provide a critique of his age, nor a consistent model for political action—he was not a “social poet” as Pierre Dupont—rather, he enacted the greater task of representing (in the sense of Darstellung) modernity in its contradictory formations. He presented his age (on the level of form), and the contradictions and ambiguities of consciousness therein. In doing so, in becoming modern, he created a citable history of gestures capable of stopping the day. In preserving in language the heroic gestures of his time, Baudelaire provides a model for a critical historiography. As

Benjamin writes, “To interrupt the course of the world that was Baudelaire’s deepest intention.” Yet he does not do so through a grand revolutionary gesture, rather through preserving something of the gestures of others *in language*. In a memorable passage, Benjamin cites an account of Blanqui’s “inventory” of his anonymous troops, a heroic gesture un-known in its own era. Benjamin then comments: “Baudelaire’s poetry has preserved in words the strength that made such a thing possible.” That is, Baudelaire represented (or cited) it in language.

This poetic practice (of episodes, citations) opposes that of “linear historiography,” which covers over the epic moments of history with its plots. Baudelaire and Benjamin preserve such citations, those that could be brought to “the now,” blasting it open with critical potential. Further, this is a form of historiography in rapport with the fractured (or episodic) consciousness of the century, one which gives such consciousness a critical turn.

[traditional historiography] … cover[s] up the revolutionary moments in the occurrence of history. The places where tradition breaks off—hence its peaks and crags, which offer footing to one who would cross over them—it misses. [N9a, 5]

It is important that Benjamin places such gestures in repose with Marxism—after all it was the “provocateurs” who erected the first barricades in the Paris Commune—the first to *lash out* in resistance to sovereign power. Marx himself modeled the “Dictatorship of the Proletariat” on the Paris Commune (1871), which was occupied predominantly by Anarchists and Blanquists, those who scorned a sober notion of class consciousness by their heroic gestures of individual resistance. Baudelaire provides a means by which to reclaim such gestures from the narratives of Marxism. Perhaps Benjamin’s assertion to Horkheimer: “This [2nd Chapter] is perquisite of a Marxist interpretation, but does not on its own fulfill its conception…,” can be read along these lines: that Marxism entails the appropriation of a spontaneous heroism (gestures of resistance), by a unified notion of

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49 Benjamin, *PSB, SW 4*: 63.
50 Benjamin to Horkheimer, *BC*, 573.
“class”, and a dialectical methodology— the replacement of theoretical immanence by transcendental categories—“primitive accumulation” par excellence.

III. Drawing the Bow: Benjamin’s dialectical (Materialist) theology

“Nor should we adhere too strictly to the words of Marx, who often uses terms only figuratively.” – Benjamin [N, 17]

“...But in remembrance [Eingedenken] we have an experience that forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally a-theological, little as it may be granted to us to try to write it with immediately theological concepts.” - Horkheimer [N8,1]

At this point it is possible to turn to a broader analysis of Benjamin’s dialectical method—one which attempts to span the opposing poles of materialism (Brecht, Adorno) and theology (Scholem)—and informs the specifics of his engagement with Marxism in his late work. Such a presentation is necessary given the limited theoretical statements surrounding his work on Baudelaire (the exception being the “Addenda” to the 1938 piece), an issue that would become prominent in his correspondence with Adorno surrounding the piece. In reference to the composition of his 1934 Kafka essay, Benjamin penned the following to Scholem, an image which could be stretched across his thinking more generally: “It remains to be seen whether I will ever be able to arch the bow so that the arrows zings into flight…The Image of the bow suggests why: I am confronted with two ends at once, the political and the mystical.”

Benjamin’s later thinking (1937-40) marks an attempt to induce such a flight, to utilize theological notions of temporality in the service of politics, and the practice of history more generally. As can already be glimpsed, such an image speaks to Benjamin’s attempt to apply his early linguistic-critical concerns to the sphere of politics, and concrete historical phenomenon. The success of this method cannot be judged deductively, and Benjamin’s employment of an “image” eludes to the non-conceptual nature of such a resolution. In fact, the disjunction, or tension between these two elements will be demonstrated as the critical power of this method.

Due to his death in 1940, much of Benjamin’s late methodology remains ambiguous. One is left with an array of fragments, the key to which has been lost, yet from these it is possible to glimpse dominant trajectories. Such theoretical ambiguities

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51 Benjamin to Scholem. BSC, 143.
will be taken up extensively in his (now famous) correspondence with Adorno surrounding the 1938 Baudelaire essay (V), and provide valuable texts by which to further elucidate this methodology. The 1940 “Theses on the Concept of History,” is often times read simply as a methodological treatise for the practice of history; however; given Benjamin’s commitment to an immanent model of criticism, the 19th century must be read on its own terms, that is by the light it provides for itself. Thus it will be argued that it is in Benjamin’s work on Baudelaire (and the corresponding Arcades) that one receives a true image of the application of his historical methodology. Syncronic to the development of this method are Adorno’s objections to Benjamin’s surrealist and Brechtian tenets (V); these will be dealt with following a discussion of Benjamin’s dialectical image, though they should be seen as relevant imperatives in its development.

In what follows, Benjamin’s late dialectical method will be elucidated, laying the groundwork for an interrogation of the dialectical image. The first two sub-sections (i/ii), deal with Benjamin’s refashioning of Marxist and surrealist categories, along with his re-thinking of Marxist eschatology, both of which should be seen as immanent criticisms necessary for Benjamin’s re-elaboration of the 19th century in the dialectical image (IV). Section i, deals with the specifics of Benjamin’s later engagement with Marxist categories, presenting a reading of *The Arcades*, as a spanning of surrealism and materialism, following which, it examines the way Benjamin re-thinks Marx’s base/superstructure distinction. Section ii, deals with Benjamin’s re-thinking of Marxist eschatology as essential for the development of his own “critical” historiography, and formulation of a genuine conception of “progress.” This will entail a reading of Benjamin’s “Theses on the Concept of History” (1940), alongside the “Addenda” to the first Baudelaire essay. Once such a framework has been presented, the final exegesis of Benjamin’s dialectical image can proceed.

52 As John McCole argues, Benjamin’s “Theses on the Concept of History” (1940) negates much of the active potential he accords to history in the “fragmentary” Arcades project—Baudelaire should also be thought as a figure from which one can gain an active sense of his historical method, that is of the the possibility of re-writing history from the perspective of the present. As McCole writes: “The Image of history as a piling up of ruins itself derives from the allegorist gaze in the Trauerspiel study. In the Arcades project, Benjamin projected an image of history both rich and threatening. “On the Concept of History,” however tends to level those differences; in the end, each rebus yields the same image: history is the simple dismal permanence of catastrophe” (*The Antinomies of Tradition*, 303).
i. Benjamin’s “Historical Materialism”

“Must the Marxist understanding of history necessarily be acquired at the expense of the perceptibility of history? Or: in what was it possible to conjoin a heightened graphicness to the realization of the Marxist method? The first stage in this undertaking will be to carry over the principle of Montage into history.” AP [N2, 6]

Benjamin’s engagement with Marx and “historical materialism” can be termed both ambiguous, and un-orthodox, one marked by an emphasis on “theory,” as opposed to real world instantiations (German SPAD, Soviet Communism). As early as Moscow Diary (1927), he expressed skepticism to Marxism’s rigid (aesthetic) orthodoxies, and the hierarchies endemic to party leadership. Despite this, references to “historical materialism” permeate his later writings—though his usage cannot be claimed as the materialism of Brecht, or that of the Institute—and one is left speculating as to why he maintains the term. Given Marx’s role in many events of the nineteenth century, he is cited throughout The Arcades (Convolutes N, X, a, k); and such quotations demonstrate a substantial turn towards materialist models in his later work, as these fragments are dated later than earlier surrealist considerations. However, as T.J Clark argues, Benjamin cites many “cliché passages” from Marx (the “fetishism” of commodities (Capital Vol 1.), man’s relation to nature (1844 Manuscripts)): demonstrating a shallow knowledge of political economy informed by secondary anthologies compiled by Hugo Fischer, Karl Korsch and Otto Rühle. It is known that Benjamin shifted The Arcades (and his thinking more generally) in a materialist direction throughout the 1930s; though Clark questions if this engagement came at the expense of the depth of his early thought? One could likewise post the opposite question: was Benjamin materialist enough, or did he lapse into the mystical categories of surrealism? Perhaps most fundamentally, did Benjamin’s move towards materialism constitute a “break” in his thinking?

53 Susan Buck-Morss, argues that this has to do with Benjamin’s care regarding “over-naming” and a desire to “redeem” Marxism, as a concept—that is re-appropriating its critical aspects. On the danger of “over-naming,” Benjamin writes: “They have nothing to say with such an urgency that it could determine the coining of their words,” “On Language as Such” SW 1: 65. See further, The Origin of Negative Dialectics, 156.

54 Clark goes further asserting the “Marxist turn” in the Arcades to be a detriment to the project as a whole: “…Marxism got in the way of the wonderful poetic-ethnological simplicity of the Arcades Project as first conceived in the later 1920s. It muddied, multiplied, and mechanized the projects original outlines; so that finally, essentially Marxism can only be seen as a cancer on Benjamin’s work.” (32) Scholem echoes statements such as this, expressing his dismay that Benjamin abandoned theology in favor of materialism. See Walter Benjamin the Story of a Friendship, specifically “Crises and Turning Points” (1930-32).
On this topic, scholarship and commentary widely diverges: one camp claims materialism to have been a detriment to his early theological, and linguistic interests (T.J Clark, Scholem, Adorno); while another derides Benjamin’s “mystery-mongering” and underdeveloped understanding of political-economy (Adorno\textsuperscript{55}, Wolin, Brecht). Firstly, both camps are misguided in assuming a turn to Marxism necessarily involved a break with his earlier immanent model of criticism—this rests on a misunderstanding of Benjamin’s method as a whole, and the relationship of such a method to historical materialism (Ch. 1 & Ch. 2). Secondly, both camps fail to recognize the immanent relationship of his early method to the material treated—that in redeeming baroque Trauerspiel, Benjamin resurrected its concept of allegory, employing it (as the Idea, constellation), in an analysis of the epoch. Likewise, in immanently writing the history of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, Benjamin sought to work through and “redeem” [retten] elements of its previous historical instantiations (Marxist historiography, positivist historiography) into his own dialectical image. In elaborating the 19\textsuperscript{th} century through images such as Baudelaire, and The Arcades, Benjamin sought to immanently “re-constellate” its previous historiographical instantiations, working through, and not wholly disregarding them.

Parenthesis: The Passagen-Werk as Immanent Critique
At this point a reading of The Arcades will be presented: demonstrating it as an immanent working through of surrealist categories that Benjamin will refashion in a materialist direction. This refashioning will prove essential in the development of Benjamin’s own historiographical model, and will also be shown to contain affinities to his early model of criticism (Ch. 1.).

Following the failure of his 1937 study on Klages and Jung, Horkheimer had suggested to Benjamin that a “materialist study” of Baudelaire that would be of interest to the Institute. At this time Benjamin was also extensively engaged with his Arcades

\textsuperscript{55} The many valences of Adorno’s response to this question will be un-packed in section (IV), though provisionally he can be placed in both camps as one who holds that Benjamin is not Marxist enough, but also that this “pseudo-Marxism” is a detriment to his earlier interests and categories of criticism. Scholem held a somewhat similar view, worrying that Benjamin’s theological insights would be destroyed by a materialist conversion.
studies, and attempted to use Baudelaire to set down the major motifs of the *Passagen-Werk*: “I already foresaw this tendency of Baudelaire to configure itself as a sort of miniature model [Miniaturmodell] of the book [Passagen-Werk] in conversations with Teddie [Adorno]. Since San Remo, this has been confirmed to a greater degree than I had thought…” Despite this desire, the Baudelaire study gained an autonomy of its own, leading many to speculate that Benjamin intended the study to replace the *Arcades*. Yet as will be shown, both Baudelaire and the Parisian Arcades are immanent images by which one can “read” the nineteenth century. Both refract the century differently, though each is equally valid (or legible) as a dialectical image and should be seen as a continuation of Benjamin’s immanent model of criticism.

Much of the aforementioned chiasmus regarding Benjamin’s Marxism hinges on how one reads his unfinished *Passagen-Werk*, or what form did Benjamin intended to present the “wish-images” of the century in. Should the work be seen as a Surrealist montage of found objects; or as an attempt to articulate a broader political economy of the 19th century, one extended to include the phantasmagorical aspects of the commodity form, amending Marx with an analysis of consumption? Examining the methodological genesis of the project (1927-40), it is clear that these views are not necessarily mutually exclusive, as Benjamin attempts to harness elements of surrealist dream exposition in his development of a materialist historiography.

The *Passagen-Werk* itself (specifically in its early phases) can be read as an attempt to present the collective experience of modernity (in both its conscious and unconscious resonances), articulating the utopian and regressive elements of such an experience. The Parisian Arcades (as structures) represented a threshold between “public” and “private” (“Passages”), symbolic of an evacuation of “interior” space endemic to the century in general. Through new technological capacities (photography, etc.), and techniques of construction (iron, glass), humanity was “awaking” to its new productive abilities: its (material and intellectual) aptitude to construct a new collective

56 Benjamin, *Briefe*, 6: 64-65. Quoted in Agamben’s “On Benjamin’s Baudelaire,” 221. Here Agamben elaborates Baudelaire’s specific relationship to the *Arcades* study more generally. The “miniature” model in Benjamin is a prevalent idea, and can be taken as a particular fragmentary assemblage meant to represent the trajectories as a whole (as a monad).
life for itself; to live in Scheerbart’s utopian “glass house,” a collective world without individual traces. Benjamin believed that technology, if fused with a collective political sentiment, could provide a radically new relationship to nature—one overcoming of capitalist alienation (see “To the Planetarium:” One Way St. SW 1: 486-47.). Public forms of art and technology (architecture, cinema) provided models for a new “public” forms of consciousness, in rapport with current technological capacities.

Benjamin saw such capacities in a philosophical sense as well: collective-utopians as Marx and Fourier sought to abolish private (“bourgeois”) modes of thinking in favor of collective political practice (see Theses on Feuerbach, 1845). The century’s political upheavals (1848 Revolutions, the Paris Commune (1871,) and subsequent repressions (The Second Empire) illustrated the potentials and failures of such capacities—the fact that humanity was jerking into awakening, but still found itself under the sway of myth. For Benjamin, the intoxicating power of consumer capital and the commodity form as phantasmagoria prevented humanity from realizing such collective futures. The Arcades themselves can be read as the “dream house” of the century: symbolic at once of a collective awakening of technological capacities, and the co-option of this same potential by the phantasmagoria of the commodity, so that instead of building the classless society, the 19th century built shopping malls (“The Arcades”). Benjamin witnessed the final failure of such realizations—at the end of the “long nineteenth century” (1789-1914), in the destruction of experience that was wrought by the First World War. For Benjamin, this marked the definitive failure of such projects, as the 20th century had been unable to harness such capacities to move beyond myth.

For Clark, after this failure Benjamin’s task became a “collective dream interpretation:” an attempt to understand why the 19th century failed to enact such fantasies—why the revolutionary collective moment that should have occurred was

57 Paul Scheerbart, was a utopian novelist of much interest to Benjamin throughout his life, notably his work “Glass Architecture” (1914) which was influential to many in the Bauhaus, along with his novel Lesabéndio, which described a transparent science fiction future—of the possibilities of fusing technology and nature. Benjamin was interested in applying many of his categories to politics, and did so in a lost fragment, “The True Politician,” and in his 1933 “Experience and Poverty.”
missed. This entailed reading the 19\textsuperscript{th} century as a “ruin” of history, a past of missed opportunities that the 20\textsuperscript{th} century would do well to understand. To understand why the construction of such Utopias failed, Benjamin turned to architectural theory, specifically employing the work of Sigfried Giedion (Building in France 1928), who argued that advancements in building technologies (iron construction, glass), often corresponded to “regressive” styles and excessive ornamentation in terms of design—that architects failed to come to terms with their technological capacities. Benjamin read this on a larger scale, working through humanities inability to come to terms with its own capacities—why the technological capacities of modernity regressed to the ornament of The Arcades. For Benjamin, such utopian capacities where not wholly lost, but existed in fragments of the past—condemned to the wreckage of history by new narratives of progress. The task of The Passagen-Werk entailed a sifting through such wreckage: as a “ragpicker” Benjamin attempted to (re) collect [erinnern] the dream elements of the past, working through the pathologies of their failure, while attempting to import them into his present moment. The Arcades should be read as a collection (citation) of such elements. In attempting to harness the power of such utopian dream energies, Benjamin develops a clear affinity with surrealism. A genealogy of this engagement will now be sketched.

Throughout the 1930s Benjamin continued his immanent criticism of romantic categories through what he deemed to be their contemporary instantiations. This entailed confronting the “intoxicated” practices of surrealism with the more robust framework of historical materialism. However, these early moments should not be seen as “overcome,” rather as sublated [aufgehobt], as Benjamin incorporated insights of surrealist presentation into his “materialist” historiography. He criticized surrealism’s “pernicious romantic prejudices” via materialist structure, while overcoming materialist determinism through the “transposition of montage into history.” [N2, 6] In this sense

\footnote{Adorno’s Negative Dialectics (1966) would enact a similar analysis: attempting to understand why idealism had failed to realize itself in Materialism; or rather, why Marx’s imperatives in the Theses on Feuerbach, had not been taken more seriously en masse in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. See “Preface” \\ & “Introduction.”}

\footnote{McCole argues that much of Benjamin’s work can be seen as an immanent working through of Romanticism, and the issues Benjamin had with the German youth movement, continuing the imperatives developed in his 1919 “The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism.” (See Ch. 1). This also entailed a working through of (pseudo-) romanticism via its 20\textsuperscript{th}-century instantiations, namely Proust, Klages, Jung, and surrealism. See The Antinomies of Tradition, 63-115.}

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The Arcades comes to us as a “montage” of two conjoining aspects of Benjamin’s thought; surrealism and materialism, broaching an affinity between the two.

In surrealism, Benjamin saw the potential to apply his early model of criticism to concrete objects in the world, decoding not the myths of textual authority, but the myths surrounding objects in the social world of modernity. It is this engagement which establishes a gradual tonal shift (contra break) in his writing: a movement away from the esoteric (or textual) domain of his early method, to the exoteric realm of historical truth informed by surrealism and materialism.⁶⁰

From his early writings, Benjamin explored the relationship of works to material-social conditions, reading texts as ciphers of history even when history appeared absent.⁶¹ Alongside this is Benjamin’s persistent imperative of immanent criticism: “to illuminate a work only by the light the work itself provides.”⁶² A proper unfolding of the work does not introduce an “outside” to the text, but rather develops its concepts and formulae so as to provoke “reflection” (Ch. 1). These two imperatives may seem somewhat contradictory: how can one elaborate the expression of material circumstances in authorship without introducing anterior formulae? The solution to this antinomy lies in Benjamin’s re-thinking of the concept of “origin” [Ur-sprung] along historical lines (See Ch. 1.). Here an entity’s emergence as itself—that is into “recognisability” and tradition—is fundamentally historical, and the precise site of this must be “read” by the critic. Much of Benjamin’s early writings can be read as the elaboration of such a method— “[to] forge ahead with the whetted axe of reason” [N1,4]—immanently reflecting upon a text historically, so as to uproot myths of textuality and overturn the illusion of the autonomous work of art, along with the symbolic (mythical) notion of the author. As a method of criticism, it would be fair to characterise these endeavours as

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⁶⁰ Scholarship often emphasizes the “Marxist turn” in Benjamin’s thinking, though following McCole, Missac, and Buck-Morss this should be seen more as a tonal shift, as an application of early epistemic, and textual methods (esoteric) to concrete political and historical events (exoteric). This chapter will demonstrate the shared commitment to immanent critique in both.

⁶¹ As is done in his Trauerspiel study, where nature is read as the “second nature” of the baroque. Describing Benjamin’s method, whereby detached elements where read as “historical” Missac writes: “…however autonomous it may appear to be and however cleanly detached from any context, retains the traces of its origins, and it is simply a matter of discovering and interpreting them.” Walter Benjamin’s Passages, 42.

“epistemic” (critical in the Kantian sense), though Benjamin recognized an affinity of these modes with historical materialism. Benjamin was attempting to develop a method of “historical-philosophical” analysis by which one could unfold a text historically, immanently reading history out of the work, against myths of autonomy.

It was in his engagement with surrealism (“Dreamkitsch” (1925), and “Surrealism” (1927)), that Benjamin first recognized the possible applications of his method to “concrete” objects—artifacts existing in the material world that could be demonstrated as surrounded by the mythologies of modernity. Benjamin praised the surrealist endeavour to “…pursue images, wherever they may occur” evacuating the division between art and life. Through its interrogation of kitsch, dreams, and intoxicants, surrealism endeavoured to demonstrate the myths that abounded in the city, alongside the alterations of human consciousness wrought by technology and atrophies of experience. However, Benjamin expressed skepticism about surrealism’s irrationalist-romantic insistence on “intoxication” (Drugs) as a way to disrupt experience, favouring instead a “profane illumination:” a mode of dialectical criticism capable of disrupting experience in a similar sense. This critique marked Benjamin’s movement away from the major (romantic) tenets of surrealism, and his redirection of their insights in a materialist direction.

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This utilization of surrealism can now be demonstrated to have substantial import for Benjamin’s rethinking of Marxist categories, specifically his re-thinking of the “base/superstructure” binary along the lines of the phantasmagoria. Louis Aragon’s The Parisian Peasant (1926) provided the inspiration for the early drafts of The Arcades—then conceived as a shorter work (with Hessel) “Paris a Dialectical Fairyland” (1927)—yet Aragon, like many other surrealists, fell victim to the same mythologies they identified in modernity, regressing to being a zealot of pre-historical archetypes. For Benjamin, such mythological formulations must be analyzed historically—through a dialectical struggle against such forces of pre-history—the myths of the present must be shown to have an

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63 See his 1931 letter to Rychner quoted in Ch. 1.
64 McCole, The Antinomies of Tradition, 211.
“origin.” An affinity is evident with his earlier analysis of Kafka’s world as that of “pre-history,” yet throughout the 1930s he began to move this analysis in an explicitly Marxist direction, targeting capitalism as a generator of such mythologies. This entailed the development of a more historically situated critique of the specificity of the myths of the 19th century; a movement away from the archetypal mythologies presented in Kafka (Ch. 2). As will be demonstrated in section V, this lack of historical specificity was a repeated point of contention for Adorno, and one can speculate as to the influence he may have had in such transitions.

Such a specific origin was located in the mythical cult of capitalism, which enslaved humanity, placing it at the mercy of the larger dynamics of mechanization and technology (see “Capitalism as Religion,” 1921). Benjamin would employ surrealist dream interpretation, alongside “historical materialism”—though it was a materialism rid of economic determinism, employed in an analysis of myth. Surface mythologies would be “read” as “expressions” [Ausdrucken] of the grander dream theatre of capital. Through this method Benjamin forms an affinity with Marx’s analyses of the “base” (economic) and “superstructure” (cultural), asserting that mythological cultural formations (objects, works) reflect broader mythologies and regressions in society. As Benjamin writes in the 2nd edition of his “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility” (1936):

Since the transformation of the superstructure proceeds far more slowly than that of the base, it has taken more than half a century for the change in the conditions of production to be manifested in all areas of culture…the dialectic of these conditions of production is evident in the superstructure, no less than the economy.65

Despite this terminological use, Benjamin by no mean employs the base/superstructure relation in a structuralist or determinist sense, and as the above quotation illustrates Benjamin essentially collapses the distinction: as phantasmagoria, capitalism presents itself in individual phenomena, which can be read by the critic. Adorno and Scholem will later remark that such a direct reading, or association, between base and superstructure is a “cloudy spot” in Benjamin’s thought, one in need of more robust theory. Yet, if one takes seriously Benjamin’s imperatives for immanent criticism, there can be no

transcendent position from which one can understand economic reality as a whole—only particular phantasmagoric phenomena. These phenomena can be “read” to provide traces of broader economic trajectories, but no definitive correlation can be drawn, only an affinity. Thus in the essay on the “Work of Art…,” Benjamin will deduce broader pathologies of reproducibility, and the destruction of aura, immanently, from individually reproduced works. Benjamin associates a historical trace to commodities, and cultural products: they must be given sense as expressions of certain historical forces. As “Trauerspiel” emerged out of the broader mythos of baroque eschatology, “mechanical reproduction” had a historical emergence in capitalism. Speaking to the distortion of such relations, Benjamin writes:

Marx lays bare the causal connection between economy and culture. For us what matters is the thread of expression. It is not the economic origins of culture that will be presented, but the expression of the economy in its culture…the attempt to grasp an economic process as perceptive Ur-phenomena [Ur-geschichte] [N1a, 6].

As McCole notes, the German Ur-geschichte (pre-history, myth) contains a valence untranslatable in the English: though it does connote “myth,” it is not the antiquated realm of fate (a-historical), rather a sphere of myth that is un-aware of its own mythical character—myth disavowing its historical origin (“ideology” in Marx). In this sense it could be characterized as “regression,” or “repression” (Freud), as myth which represses its historical trace. The task of criticism for Benjamin, becomes the combatting of such myths via a dialectical encounter with the object; its historical traces must be exposed so as to achieve autonomy with respect to mythology governing it. Exemplary of this is the category of “fashion” in The Arcades: its incessant quest for the “new” is exposed by Benjamin as a hell of the eternal return of the same. As a child is held after school and condemned to repeat as punishment, so the 19th century is held in bedazzlement by the “same” masquerading as the “new.” History is hidden by the “naturalization” (“second nature”) of the commodity form, and the Arcades present a passage downward into a mythological state. Benjamin will emphasize the affinity of nineteenth-century

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66 Thus in the 1935 exposé Benjamin will “montage” aspects of the base and superstructure in startling contrast—the rise of the Arcades is associated with that of the textile trade, and alterations in architecture—the reader is left to speculate as to the specifics of the relation. Yet the relationship is also demonstrated as “re-citable” from different historical positions as new perspectives are afforded.
consumerism with that of the baroque, as both transform history into nature, and damn individuals to the fated necessity of their own epoch. It should be emphasised that surface phenomena are not reduced to “symbolic” manifestations of particular material conditions, nor is the relation causal (or inverted à la Marx), rather it is read, and associated by the critic. Benjamin describes such a critical awakening as follows:

The Question is this: if the base determines the superstructure in what might be called the material of thought and experience, but this determination is not simply a mirroring, then how—quite apart from the question of its originating causes—is it to be characterized? As its expression [Ausdruck]. The superstructure is the expression of the base...just as for the sleeper a full stomach is not mirrored but expressed by the dream content, although the stomach may causally “determine” that content. As first the collective expresses its conditions of life. Those conditions find their expression in dreaming and in awakening their interpretation. [K2,5]

The task of the Arcades becomes the articulation of these collective “dream-images,” recognizing at once their regressive character (as aspects of capital), yet also the collective capacities inherent in them—that collective myths could be “awakened” historically and utilized in the construction of a new future together. It is essential to note that Benjamin is not providing a straightforward “ideological critique” (as Adorno), rather analyzing such myths historically so as to awaken their “re-cite-ability” as history; this should be seen as a fundamental point of divergence. The articulation of such images will be defined as the task of the dialectical image, but at this point it has been shown that such a method does not mark a decided break with his early concern of “illuminating the work by way of the light it shines for itself.” It is, simply, a shift to a larger historical focus. The nineteenth century must be brought to bear upon itself, reflected (or refracted) in its own contradictory light. The two “objects” by which Benjamin enacts this reflection are the Parisian Arcades and the figure of Baudelaire. Both present the century in its contradictory and Janus faced light: its promises of collectivity and prosperity, alongside its regression to the mythologies of consumerism. With his immanent presentation of the century, Benjamin is also working through the categories of Marxism. At this point his criticisms of Marxist historiography more generally can be demonstrated.
ii. Marxism and History, or overcoming Marxist Eschatology.

“Doctrine of Blanqui: “No! No one has access to the future…the revolution alone, as it clears the horizon will reveal the future…Those who pretend to have in their pocket a complete map of this unknown land— they truly are madmen.” [a20a,5]

With his utilization of an immanent mode of analysing the century (via the object), Benjamin continues his working through of Marxist methodology, and the radicalism of his own view comes into repose when articulated against the orthodoxy of Marxist historiography and eschatology. Such a re-thinking of historiographical temporality will be shown as essential in the development of Benjamin’s own dialectical image. In the “introduction” to the Grundrisse, Marx asserts what could be deemed the fundamental Marxist historical perspective:

Bourgeois society is the most developed and most complex historic organization of production. The categories which express its relations, the comprehension of its structure, thereby allow insights into the structure and the relations of production of all the vanished social relations of production out of whose ruins and elements it has built itself up…Human anatomy contains the key to the anatomy of the Ape. 67

The problem with this assertion is not so much the latent determinism (natural metaphors), or the “Base/Superstructure” binary, but rather Marx’s allegiance with historical progress: that History de facto entails a liquidation of “myth,” an enlightened understanding of a previous era. Such historicist narratives also emerged in the nineteenth century (Hugo, Comte, Turgot), and for Benjamin, history must be wrested away from such diachronic linear narratives; in fact, he goes so far as to assert that such narratives of progress (or future revelation) are themselves part of the mythologies governing the present. As was shown in Chapter 2, such temporalities mortgage the present for some future revelation. Historicism must be revealed for what it is, an opium of the masses, an intoxication of the century hiding the baroque realities of political repression.

In typical German fashion, 68 Marx saw in the (French) 19th century an immense and progressive energy (as witnessed in the 1848 Revolutions), yet chastised their lack of

67 Marx, Grundrisse, 105.
68 For Rebecca Comay, the German experience of the French revolutionary élan is essential in the development of Idealism, and of much of the 19th century. While the French rushed forward with romantic revolutionary fervor, German thinking tended to advocate a revolution of the mind (as the protestant
theoretical understanding—their inability to grasp the true “materialist” determinations of history had allowed for Louis Bonaparte’s 1851 coup d’état and the creation of the Second Empire. A new mode of revolutionary thinking must be developed, one that deals with the specters of the past and present:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare [Alp] on the brain of the living.  

For Marx, the converted protestant, a redemptive eschatology frames his response to the traumas of the past: though unfinished and still weighing upon the present, the future revolution will bring a redemption and judgment upon previous epochs, one must act in the present so as to enact the movement of “world history.” As Marx continues:

The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself, before it has stripped off all superstition in regard to the past. Earlier revolutions required world-historical recollections in order to drug themselves concerning their own content. In order to arrive at its content, the revolution of the 19th century must let the dead bury the dead. There the phrase went beyond the content; here the content goes beyond the phrase.

Marx provides a revolutionary model for the present in which actors are motivated by the image of their “emancipated grandchildren”—the past will take care of itself, the revolutionary concern is with the future. Engagement with the past is virtually equated with necromancy; such nostalgia is unnecessary, as a model of emancipation has been found in historical materialism. For Jacob Taubes, such a Christian eschatology is reformation had done). See. Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution. Such a tendency is present throughout Benjamin’s thinking, specifically his attempt to appropriate surrealist energies in a more “theoretical” direction.


70 Ibid. 597.
endemic to much of the western philosophical tradition, Marx being no exception, and in fact an exceptional case.  

Taubes views the main culprit of this as Hegel, whom he sees as *secularizing* (not overcoming) the Christian narrative. For Hegel, history becomes the conquest of revelation in the sense of “Absolute Spirit;” and in true protestant form, this Absolute can only be represented “negatively” through the labor of the individual, toiling in alienation in hope of predestination. However, as readers of Hegel well know, how secular his *Phenomenology* is remains to be decided. For Marx too, the overcoming of such alienation was the goal of history: man had *fallen* into nature, and could overcome this exiled alienation through the labor of history. For Marx, redemption will come through the messianic “proletariat”—with is Christological abolition of itself it will redeem humanity into the classless society. As argued in Chapter 2, such futural eschatologies mortgage the present, robbing it of its power as the “true state of exception.” However, Benjamin will concede that Marx proved an important step in the secularization of messianism, though he did not go far enough in ridding himself of Christian dogma. In his 1984 seminar on Benjamin’s “Theses on the Concept of History,” Taubes eludes to the theological “reversal” Benjamin enacts upon Marx, evoking the citations from the *Eighteenth Brumaire*: “Benjamin, on the other hand, presents what-is-past *not as* a nightmare, but rather as an element, *where* what-is-past is charged with the presence of the now. Precisely what Marx rejects as “necromancy,” is for Benjamin the guarantee the revolution will happen.”

In response to such eschatologies, Benjamin’s late work entails the formulation of the “weak messianic” practice of the historian— “…to show what a historical materialism would be like which has annihilated within itself the idea of progress” [N2,2]—a practice based on a citation, and *a redemption of the past*, not a faith in some messiah to come. Yet it is with such a reversal that the past is able to enact meaningful imperatives upon the present. In essence, Benjamin enacts a reading of the first quotation

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71 See “The Eschatology of Marx and Kierkegaard” (184), and “On the Nature of Eschatology” (3) in *Occidental Eschatology.*
from Marx’s *Brumaire* against the second: the past weighs upon us, yet if rescued from transience and decay, its weight contains the power to cleave open the present moment. If the myths of the present can be located as “originating” in the past (via genealogy), or if present concerns are recognized in constellation with the past, the present can be thought as a newly exceptional site. One cannot assume some future enlightenment, rather must carefully work through the myths governing the present moment, following them into the past. Hence Benjamin will pose the question, “…must the Marxist understanding of history come at the expense of an experience of history?” [N2,6] It is precisely such an engagement, or experience of the past, that materialism denies, ceding all concerns to the future. The doctrines of historical materialism must be “worked through” so as to develop a practice of history adequate to particular objects and figures. This is particularly true for the practice of aesthetic criticism, and a model must be developed that allows the work to be experience as embedded in its own time. Such a practice was undertaken in Benjamin’s essay on Baudelaire (1938)—a figure who illustrates the futility of a conventional “Marxist” readings of history, and in the “Addenda” to the piece Benjamin elaborates his own method of criticism. A reading of this will now be undertaken.

Traditional Marxist methods of criticism begin with a “transcendental” theory of capitalist development, based on a linear understanding of the dialectical progression. They then apply such a methodology to historical objects, claiming to locate it “in truth,” as the product of a certain set of social relations—the object is revealed, or “decoded” due to our knowledge of these social relations which we can read into the object. This is due to the “developed” nature of one’s (present) methodology as seen in the quotation from Marx’s *Grundrisse*: that one has a better understanding of previous epochs simply due to one’s diachronic position, and is aware of the “materialist” determinations within another epoch.

For Benjamin, such a method applied to Baudelaire destroys him as a thinker. As has been shown, he was one who refracted his context, testifying against his own class, and embodying the myriad of complexities that was his age: “…what contravenes is precisely that when we read Baudelaire, we are given a course of historical lessons by
bourgeois society.” Baudelaire presents a developed (negative) image of his own time and one must recognize him in relation to this context (and how this context is handed down to us by tradition), not as straightforwardly determined by it. Despite his “bourgeois” position, Baudelaire’s insights provide valuable refractions of the century which cannot be done away with too hastily. For Benjamin, given that there is no history in which the past is citable in all its moments, one must begin (inductively) with “…the Object riddled with error, with doxa.” The critic must “read” the valences of meaning surrounding the object: recognizing it as it is embedded in its own time, and the means by which it is transmitted to us by the stream of tradition (“pre/post history”). In the process of transmission the work acquires a new sense, and in so doing gives a new sense to the works preceding it. Benjamin describes the commitment to immanence in his model of criticism (“historical-materialism”): “sundering truth from falsehood is the goal, not the point of departure of the materialist method.” In beginning with the object, criticism must not proceed with generalized derisions of works as “bourgeois,” it must not reduce the work, but must seek to heighten central motifs present therein. Further, it must seek to deconstruct the various post-histories with which the work is endowed, through an analysis of the history of reception—that is, by thinking through the historical dynamics of origin. As Benjamin elaborates:

The sources flow as abundantly as one could wish, and where they converge to form the stream of tradition, they flow along between well-laid out slopes

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73 Benjamin, *PSB, SW* 4: 64.  
74 Benjamin’s conception of Baudelaire has much in common with Adorno’s conception of Art’s relation to its own time: “[art] becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art. By crystalizing in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as “socially useful,” it criticizes society as merely existing” (AS, 335). In this sense Art is a “cipher” to existing social conditions, but does not mirror them deterministically. For Adorno however, this has more to do with “authentic” art, than the specificity of Baudelaire as a thinker, a distinction which is clearly demonstrated in his “On Lyric Poetry and Society,” which argues for the critical potential of lyric poetry more generally.  
75 Benjamin, *PSB, SW* 4: 63.  
76 Hence Borges’s assertion that Kafka reveals something new in Kierkegaard, and the book of Job. See, “Kafka and his Precursors,” in *Labyrinths*. Put otherwise, works have reverberations retroactively throughout tradition. For McCole, these “meanings” are not extras that must be stripped away from the object, rather, they are fundamental to our understanding of the object as such, hence one must analyze the interconnected dimension of “pre” and “post” history in criticizing a work. See specifically, *The Antinomies of Tradition*, 297.  
77 Benjamin, *PSB, SW* 4: 63.
as far as the eye can reach. Historical materialism is not led astray by this spectacle. It does not seek the image of the clouds in this stream, but neither does it turn away from the stream to drink “from the source” and pursue “the matter itself” behind men’s backs. Whose mills does this stream drive? Who is utilizing its power? Who dammed it? These are the questions that historical materialism asks, changing our impressions of the landscape by naming the forces that have been operative in it.78

The historian must not only analyze history, but the writing or citation of history: “Who is writing,” who is driving the dominant narrative? And further, is such a narrative a historicist justification of the perpetual same, or a “non-identical” (critical) history endowed with the capacities to “stop the day?” For Benjamin, it is enough to see Baudelaire as a late romantic symbolist poet, rather as one who presents possibilities and images from his own time which can be seized upon in constellation. Baudelaire came to Benjamin within a preconceived notion of the 19th century, which Benjamin deconstructed so as to think the century in an active sense. Baudelaire’s complexity as an individual testified against his full codification within any dominant narrative, he remained constantly “non-identical” to each attempt at narration, and it is this disjunction which points to divergent historiographical possibilities.

Such questioning of reception, and of historical progress leads to the more fundamental question: whom is history for? The above quotation from the Addenda evokes the later phrase from Benjamin’s “Theses:” “There is no document of history that is not at the same time one of Barbarism;” the proletariat, as the detritus or kitsch of history remains constantly non-identical to the dominant narrative. Whether or not its labor drives world history, its non-identical position allows it to question the dominant narrative of progress from the perspective of a critical, or citable history. If it awakens to its ability to question, or cite against the dominant narrative, it poses the ability to stop the day, to pull the emergency brake on the locomotive of progress. With this stoppage, the question can be posed as to what a “true” conception of progress would look like, one liberated from positivist eschatology.

78 Ibid. 63. It should be noted that much of this quotation is a re-writing of Brecht’s “Questions from a Worker Who Reads.” Referring to the importance of a history of reception in Marxism, Benjamin writes: “For it is an illusion of vulgar Marxism that one can determine the social function of a material or intellectual product without reference to the circumstances and the bearers of its tradition” (ibid. 64).
Benjamin’s criticisms of “progress” are not simply relevant in themselves; rather, they are an integral part of broader aspects of his thinking. Primarily, a questioning of progress leads to his recasting of history (and temporality more generally) along “weak messianic” lines. Secondly, there has been much scholarly emphasis on Benjamin’s thinking with regard to the past—to the extent that he is often presented as an esoteric “soothsayer” who provides little of import for present-day politics. This is decidedly not the case, as Benjamin criticizes the positivist conception of progress so as to formulate a genuine conception of progress: one founded on the idea of “happiness,” and the satisfaction of material needs, a minimal ethics permeating his late writings. Though presented as distinct, these two concerns are intricately related: through a criticism of “progress” (historicism) Benjamin will formulate a new citable model of history which allows for the redemption of the dreams of previous epoch.79

For Benjamin, Marx was right to point out the “ideal” nature of Hegel’s system: that the conquest of the “real as rational” emphasized metaphysical estrangement over and against “material” (economic) alienation. For Marx, progress should be re-directed to this substrata, and the establishment of a classless society. As aforementioned, this marked a secularization of many of the religious elements of Hegel’s system: essential is not the realization of the metaphysical Absolute, but rather the satisfaction material needs, the historical conditions for which Marx thought to be possible at the time of his writing. As Brecht would later put it: “Food first, then Morality,” material needs should

79 Eluding to this point, Hamacher writes: “Benjamin’s critique of progress—an element of his philosophy of history that currently receives little respect from its admirers—is only radically understood if it is grasped as a critique of time as a transcendental form of perception and thus of the empty form of experience that progresses in it.” “Now”: Walter Benjamin on Historical Time,” 48. Hence an understanding of Benjamin’s critique of progress is essential for his own messianic conception of history.
be thought as primary. For Benjamin, “…Marx secularized the idea of messianic time, and that was a good thing.” Absolutes could now be conceived as a set of concrete conditions occurring in history, the movement for which could be achieved at the proper “revolutionary situation.” However, as Taubes and Benjamin pointed out, Marx did not escape Hegel’s (Christian) eschatology, in which the coming of the messiah (revolution) covers over histories critical moments—“…if history is written with a view to a goal or telos, all epochs are merely preludes.”

For Benjamin, such materialist imperatives for history were a step in the right direction; the problem began with the elevation of this materialism to the status of an ideal by the Leninists, and German SPAD. This elevation culminated in the idea of the “revolutionary situation” (or “state of exception”): the idea that revolutionary judgement would come from beyond (as revelation) as the inevitable telos of the historical dynamic, and that the proletariat, as the “motor of world history,” would (necessarily) abolish itself in the establishment of communist society. For Benjamin, such determinism culminated in the Acedia of historicism: the inability to engage meaningfully with the past, and ceding of autonomy to the necessity of the world historical dynamic; “…the connection, if not the equation, between historical time and the dialectic provided a first class guarantee against an optimism that would induce passivity.” Such historicist readings of Marx reverted to the same idealism which Marx’s philosophy was established as a critique of—it was supposed to elevate material need and suffering, yet recreated the same conditions by creating passive subjects at the mercy of history. It is against this determinist dynamic that Benjamin will “pull the emergency brake;” providing a messianism “…distributed across history and generations,” revealing the present as the perpetual “state of exception” for political action. Following Derrida (Spectres of Marx, 1993), Benjamin could be asserted as providing a “messianism without a messiah,” a

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80 Benjamin, “Paralipomena to On the Concept of History,” SW 4: 401. In this sense, the issue is not with Marx as such, but with the notion of temporality underpinning his system; hence Benjamin seeks to “redeem” many of its critical formulations within his own Jewish-theological notion of temporality.
81 Taubes, “Seminar Notes…,” 204. Put in Hegelian terms, it makes the critical “now-time” into the Hegelian “Augenblick”—that is a moment in a greater process, not thought on its own terms.
82 Missac, Benjamin’s Passages, 108.
83 Taubes, “Seminar Notes…,” 186.
materialist concept of history purged of Christian eschatology. He does not reject Marxism outright, but immanently works through, and refashions its concepts.

Brecht’s *Measures Taken* (1927) depicts the horrors of such teleological notions of justice: the communists urge the passing over of immediate suffering in favour of global revolution—the measures that must be taken to ensure the revolution. In response, Benjamin’s historical materialism should be seen as a, “step by step…opposition to what is plausible in historicism,” a purity of means, over and against the ends of communist society: a critique not from the outside (transcendent), but from an insistence on the originary radical gesture of Marxism, on the immediate and weak messianic capacities (immanent) within our grasp as opposed to the grand teleological narrative.

Benjamin begins Theses IV citing Hegel to declare his Brechtian imperative: “seek for food and clothing first; then shall the kingdom of God be given to you.” For Taubes, this thesis should not be read as crass materialism, but rather as an assertion of the intertwined nature of spiritual and material things, along the line of the biblical Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5: 7). On a basic level, this entails a redirection of progress towards material concerns; yet with this simple imperative, Benjamin questions the entire narrative of progress proposed by universal history, asserting that true progress has not yet occurred. Progress should first be considered in a material sense, if these concerns have not been met, history cannot be considered an advance beyond nature. Yet in a religious sense, there is a spiritual valence to the alleviation of material suffering. As Taubes writes:

Benjamin is interested (in) understanding [or critiquing] the concept of progress as a bourgeois concept that has nothing to do with (a) religious, theological, messianic, apocalyptic concepts, and (b) with historical

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84 Ibid. 208.
86 During the “Sermon on the Mount,” Jesus describes the theological importance of material assistance (towards the “meek”) against straightforwardly theological gestures such as prayer—that in the alleviation of suffering, one glimpses an image of salvation. As Taubes will further stress: for Benjamin “The material and spiritual elements are intertwined” (“Seminar Notes…,” 192).
materialism. Everything is lost for Benjamin, if you don”t understand the concerns as primary. Taubes goes on to criticize those, such as Tiedemann and Wolin, who simply interpret such imperatives as Marxist. For Benjamin, they do have a materialist dimension—yet it is the metaphysical relationship of concern that is of primacy, the theological importance of the fulfillment of material needs, the ethical obligation to perform what is in one’s power.

With such an imperative for “true progress” Benjamin inaugurates a tradition which will continue throughout the Frankfurt School (specifically in Dialectic of Enlightenment): progress in the form of “universal history” is the conquest of barbarism, the slaughter bench of history. As Adorno will later write, “No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the atom bomb.” (ND, 320) Progress thought in a universal, or ideal sense results in the domination of nature, and the regression of enlightenment upon itself. For Adorno, to be rid of such mythical narratives would be a step towards “progress:”

Progress means: to step out of the magic spell [Myth], even out of the spell of progress, which is itself nature, in that humanity becomes aware of its own inbred nature and brings to a halt the domination it exacts upon nature and through which domination by nature continues. In this way it could be said that progress occurs where it ends.

Here Adorno allies himself with Benjamin: the true myth of positivism, or progressive historicist narratives, and perhaps modernity itself is that progress has not yet been made—poverty abounds, and myth still weighs upon the modern subject— “As long as there is still one beggar there is myth.” [K6, 4] Here the constellation between the evacuation of myth and the material alleviation of suffering becomes evident: critical

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87 Ibid. 205. Given the fragmentary nature of Taubes’ text (due to his death in 1984), his intentions are difficult to glean: the quotation is read as asserting that “progress” for Benjamin should be distinguished from its vulgar instantiations in “religious, theological…” terms, alongside those associated with historical materialism.

88 On this point it would be interesting to compare Benjamin’s imperatives regarding “weak messianism,” with Levinas, specifically the ethical obligation to “the Other” which should be thought as first philosophy.

89 Adorno, “Progress,” Can one Live after Auschwitz, 130.
theory must historically destroy myths of progress so that a genuine conception of progress can be formulated.

As aforementioned, positivist eschatology is suspect for Benjamin, entailing the messianic idea that the future will redeem past suffering (à la Marx). Against this Benjamin will forward his own immanent method, with the imperative that, “a genuinely messianic face must be restored to the concept of classless society and, to be sure, in the interest of furthering the revolutionary politics of the proletariat itself.”

This new vision will be founded under the vision: “Nothing is progress which does not mean an increase of happiness…” [N13,3], recalling his Thesis II, “…our image of happiness is thoroughly tied to our image of redemption”—progress can occur in fulfillment of spiritual and historical needs as well, in the rescue [Rettung] of the dreams of previous epochs by the present generations “weak messianism.”

As in his “Theologico- political fragment” (1921/39)—where Benjamin forwards a “profane” model of redemption—theses II & III emphasise a secular model of redemption, a “secret heliotropism” existing between generations. “Happiness” expresses the affect that is felt in the constellation of two epochs, or rather the fulfillment of possibilities across time. As in Proust, “happiness” arises from the memory of wishes fulfilled from the past, of the actualization of past potentialities. Judgement day is perpetually occurring as the present moment is ripe with opportunities for happiness—with the opportunity to preserve (in language), and fulfill the possibilities [Einlösungen] inherent in the past.

As Hamacher notes, the progression of history is just this progression of possibility to actuality: history is moved by the surplus of the possible, by the possibility that missed opportunities could be actualized: “[Weak] Messianic power is therefore nothing other than the implicit hypothesis of the missed possible that there has to be an

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90 Benjamin,”Paralipomena to On the Concept of History,” SW 4: 403.
92 As Taubes writes: “Benjamin’s rejection of final conditions: redemption is possible anytime.
Judgement day is built into time, which can abort. This is the point of Benjamin’s critique of the theological image, and of historical materialism as well, because for both Judgement day is the spectacle of the end” (“Seminar Notes…,” 189).
instance to correct the miss, to do the undone, to regain the wasted and actualize the has-
been possible.” For Benjamin, one must “awaken” to the fact that “…at any point in
time one exists at midpoint of history,” that one has the ability to redeem radically
divergent possibilities from the past so as to significantly alter the trajectory of history. In
fact, it is such “weak messianism” that is the motor of world history. In his 1919
“Concept of Criticism,” Benjamin alludes to this fact, quoting Schlegel’s Athenaeum
fragments: “The revolutionary desire to realize the kingdom of God on earth is the
elastic point of progressive civilization and the beginning of Modern history.”

For Benjamin, progress is not simply the advance over previous generations, rather
our ability to redeem their dreams in our present moment: we progress to the extent that
we have taken their possibilities upon ourselves, that we do not remain bound by the
mythologies of the past. In this sense the nineteenth century has not advanced
significantly beyond the baroque, as myth continues to abound even in the capital of
modernity. Yet due to the radical immanence of history—that “[t]he past only exists
when it is resurrected in the present.”—there is an essential importance placed on the
preservation of these possibilities inherent in the past, as that which does not exist for the
present moment threatens to be lost forever. Hence The Arcades does not present a
triumphant (or linear) history of the working class, rather synchronic and epic moments
of their history are cited, allowing their imperatives to be brought to the present. This
emphasis on synchronicity and citation, over and against linearity and progress, is
endemic to Benjamin’s own dialectical methodology, with its metaphysical emphasis on
the immanence of history with respect to the present moment—we only understand the
past to the extent it is translated in the present. Contra Marx (of the Grundrisse), epochs
are not understandable because of our diachronic position, rather certain epochs share
secret affinities which are conducive to constellations of legibility—there are certain

93 Hamacher, “Now…,” 41. Further, on the relation of such possibilities to language Hamacher
writes: “History presents itself as the afterlife of unused linguistic possibilities, which demand their
redemption by other languages and finally by language itself” (42). See section IV of this project for
a more detailed discussion of language, and its relationship to the dialectical image.
96 Taubes, “Seminar Notes…,” 197.
moments at which “we awake” from a given context and are able to re-think historical objects, as their mythological ciphers can now be read historically. We come to understand that their possibilities can be fulfilled in our time. Referring to such an “awakening” to interpretability he writes:

The Utilization of dream elements in Awakening is the textbook case of dialectical thinking. For this reason, dialectical thinking is the organ of historical awakening. Each epoch not only dreams the next but also, in dreaming, strives toward the moment of waking. It bears its end within itself and unfolds it—as Hegel already saw—with cunning.97

With the overcoming of progressive narratives one can “awaken” to the true power of dialectical thinking, to the power of a “critical” practice of history in the present moment. The problem with progressive, or linear historical narratives is that they deny the autonomy of the present as the true state of exception, and further deny subjective agency to actors in the present—they are thought as passive receivers of tradition, who must simply surrender to a larger wheel of progress. Against this Benjamin will advocate a “setting the table for the past” [N15, 2], akin to Nietzsche’s history written by the “man of action” in the present moment. This method of citing history stands against the empathy and acedia endemic to historicism—a mode of action in the present nourished by knowledge of the past—a model for which will be found in Benjamin’s dialectical image.

IV. The Dialectical Image

“The true image of the past flits by.” —Benjamin, SW 4: 396
“History breaks down into images, not into stories.” -Benjamin [N3, 1]

At this point the ground has been laid for an exegesis of Benjamin’s “dialectical image.” However, given that this method arose from within the 19th century, an exposition of this method has been undertaken latently throughout this chapter, specifically in the reading proposed of Baudelaire (II). In what follows, its major tenets will be clarified, noting in particular its relationship with Benjamin’s oeuvre, particularly its (dis) correspondence with his early model of criticism. Specifically, that he continues to hold an immanent

model of criticism, though he collapses his distinction between “commentary” and “criticism” into the practice of “citation.”

It is useful to recapitulate the genesis of Benjamin’s thought throughout this project. Cacciari notes that Benjamin’s thought is marred by a “Frage der Darstellung;” a questioning of the “representation” of particular phenomena, alongside the role of “presentation” in philosophical argumentation. As stated in his 1918 “Program for a Coming Philosophy,” Benjamin sought to provide a mode of thought that could at once represent particular experiences, while maintaining a systematic character—a careful consideration of language, and philosophical presentation would provide a means to do this. In the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” (Trauerspiel) this took the form of the “Idea”—immanent linguistic constellations of particular phenomena, which allowed justice to be done to them in their particularity, while redeeming them into the realm of “truth” (Ch.1). As demonstrated (Ch. 2 & 3), Benjamin’s later writings should not be seen as a Marxist “break” from these early concerns, rather a redirection of such questions to concrete historical concerns: to a questioning of the representation [Darstellung] of historical expressions [Ausdrucken]. The dialectical image will be the means by which Benjamin will undertake such concrete, and historical (re)presentation. Though he succeeded in overcoming much of the determinism inherent in historicism, and Marxism—providing instead an “experience” of the past in the present moment—the specifics of his immanent methodology lacked clear outlines, and the consistency of an orthodox theory of criticism. Specifically, could one gauge the “truth” or limitations of such a methodology? Had Benjamin truly moved beyond surrealist juxtapositions into the realm of concrete historical truth?

Benjamin himself will concede the ambiguity of his formulations, and throughout his later work formulations of the dialectical image do vary. Of these late writings “Edward Fuchs, Collector and Historian” (1937), “Convolute N” of The Arcades, along with the 1940 “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” can be read as explicit methodological statements on the matter. While the 1938-39 studies on Baudelaire, and

98 See Chapter 3 of Cacciari’s, The Necessary Angel, and the section “Language, Relationship, Correspondence” in the Introduction of this work.
the *Passagen-Werk* in general can be read as explicit *applications* of such a method, despite theoretical variation, one does possess a certain horizon of possible applications. Throughout the 1930s Adorno repeatedly urged Benjamin to clarify and “systematically” revise his methodology, and their correspondence contains many of Benjamin’s most explicit statements on his method. It will be argued that their correspondence allowed (or forced) Benjamin to articulate his method in a more systematic (opposed to experiential) fashion. If one is to define Benjamin’s work as the conquest of a certain representation of the Idea, then Adorno’s objections need to be seen as pivotal in the development of Benjamin’s thinking *as such*. In what follows, Benjamin’s dialectical image will be formulated in response to these concerns, following which Adorno will be noted as an essential figure in the development of such a methodology in a more systematically defined direction (V). This is largely due to the imperatives Adorno upholds based in Benjamin’s own early model of criticism, imperatives which allow one to see the (dis) correspondence of Benjamin with himself: his continued commitment to an immanent model of criticism, though altered many of his early distinctions. Given that many of Benjamin’s late writings were written for the Institute (“Edward Fuchs,” 1937), or with the Institute in mind (“Theses…” 1940), such systematic imperatives need to be considered alongside his work. Benjamin was well aware of their divergent theoretical understandings, hence his formulations should be seen as deliberate provocations or criticisms of the Institute (and Adorno), not as simply esotericism, or intellectual carelessness. Above all, he is attempting to demonstrate the possibility of reading history in an active sense, a possibility he felt was foreclosed by the Institute’s more orthodox categories. It is this commitment, or historical sense, that decidedly sets Benjamin apart from those associated with the Frankfurt School.

The theoretical inconsistency, or ambiguity of Benjamin’s dialectical image(s) has often been noted in commentary: Max Pensky describes it as a “…theoretical promissory note,” and despite its numerous textual instantiations Tiedemann asserts it as “never [having] achieved terminological consistency.” From the perspective of a *conceptual* articulation this diagnosis is correct, yet this also covers over the fundamentally

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99 Pensky, “Method and time: Benjamin’s Dialectical Images,” 142; Tiedemann, “Dialectics at a Standstill” in *The Arcades Project*. 
experiential (non-systematic) character of Benjamin’s method—indeed Benjamin’s method is an attempt to incorporate such “downcast” (or “subjective”) elements into a historical methodology. In this sense, much of Benjamin’s thinking can be described as a linguistic struggle with (re) presentation [Darstellung over Begriff], or rather a struggle against such explicit conceptual thinking (specifically those found in idealism)—an attempt to blast open rigid formulae in favor of a genuine “experience” with the past. As mentioned at the outset, such a struggle is present throughout Benjamin’s work, though in his early writings such a struggle took place in the epistemic or textual domain, with an esoteric conception of “truth” based on textual affinity; his later work can be seen as an attempt to extend such analysis to a broader range of historical phenomena (the 19th century, modernity), which necessitates the incorporation of the insights of historical materialism to his earlier insights: in this later domain, “truth” takes on an exoteric valence in that it must correspond to explicit social and historical conditions. Or rather, it must emphasize the “now” as a site of possibility for the practice of history. When presented in repose with the whole of his thought, one may glimpse a methodological (contra conceptual) consistency. Criticisms of Benjamin on the mysticism of his categories perhaps focus too narrowly on Benjamin’s later writings (1937-40), missing the broader telos of his work as a whole, an attempt to articulate a broader conception of (historical) experience, the later instantiation of which is found in the dialectical image.

Much of the difficulty in defining the dialectical image revolves around Benjamin’s aversion to explicit methodological statements—that the dialectical image is itself an “image.” For Missac, Benjamin did not conceptually articulate his main formulations, rather demonstrated them as images, taking upon himself the photographers imperative to “…stop saying and start simply showing.”100 The domain of truth for the “Image” is different from that of the concept—while the former finds its guarantee in the domain of material and historical associations, the later remains within the sphere of philosophical consistency. It is through such thinking in Images, that Benjamin can

100 Missac, Benjamin’s Passages, 93. Regarding the methodology of his Arcades study, Benjamin writes in convolute N: “Method of this project: literary montage. I needn’t say anything. Merely show.” [N1a,8] He goes on to elaborate how he will redeem a certain “graphology” to the Marxist practice of history, that is develop a mode of philological construction (the dialectical image) which allows history be thought in a radically different sense.
extend his theoretical program into domains not previously explored by philosophy. In his “Program for a Coming Philosophy,” he writes: “…in addition to the concept of synthesis, also that of a certain non-synthesis of two concepts in an other is bound to gain increasing systematic importance, since outside of synthesis another relation between thesis and antithesis is possible.” Commenting on this passage, Sam Weber (50-51) notes that such a “non-synthesis” is afforded by the Image: the ability to bring competing concepts, or trajectories together, allowing both to be maintained in their autonomy and tension. Benjamin’s resolution of the theological and materialist aspects of his thinking—via the image of the “bow”—is one such example. The “dialectical-image” itself calls to mind such a tension: in the Hegelian dialectical movement, the “Image” is that which remains on the level of intuition, that which is singular—flashes and associations, Schelling’s “night in which all cows are black”—that which has not yet been raised to the level of Reason. The dialectic connotes the relation of objects to each other, the process by which individual moments (as Augenblick) are mediated in the greater historical process. Following Freud, the image can be thought as the level of substitution, of affinity and correspondence, over and against the conceptual reason which moves the dialectical process. In the “dialectical image,” the singular is held alongside the greater historical movement, a process involving both “…the flow of thoughts and their arrest as well.” As “dialectical” each image contains within itself the richness of its epoch (as Hegel’s “Absolute knowing”), each is a phantasmagoria of a greater historical process. The dialectical image provides a means of seeing history within one’s own epoch—the greater historical process in singular instantiations. Proceeding allegorically, the critic perceives his own era as already “ruined” with respect to the greater historical process—the myths of the present are revealed to be historical in origin. In citing one’s own era in constellation with that of another one can reveal the historical traces hidden in the present moment, opening the way for political action. Such images must be chosen carefully, as one must construct as a monad, as vision of the hopes and dreams of a previous epoch.

In a provisional sense, the dialectical image can be defined as a practice of citation, and construction, a new mode of thinking which awakens the potential(s)

of the individual to re-write history in the present moment—a practice (or –ability) that occurs in language, and with respect to language, yet accords the possibility for political action. For Benjamin, such a model allows the critic to allegorically experience history, and in doing so recover its power for the present moment. As seen previously, this necessitates a destruction of the progressive dialectical narrative (of orthodox Marxism) in favor of the “downcast” or detritus elements of tradition—as a “ragpicker” who analyzes the small (utopian) fragment capable of blasting open the continuum of history. *The Arcades* themselves do not feature (prominently) the grand historical events of the nineteenth century (1848 revolutions, Franco-Prussian war); rather it contains a montage of found objects, of commodities that contained wizened within them the dreams and nightmares of the century. As *phantasmagoria*, commodities point at once to the context of capitalist exchange, yet also to the collective fantasies these objects excite, a glimmer of “…the utopia that has left its trace in a thousand configurations of life, from enduring edifices to passing fashions.”¹⁰² For Benjamin, it is such immanent utopias which must be seized upon, and allegorically elevated out of their downcast position.

The employment of allegory in Benjamin’s late work represents a substantial change from his view of it in *Trauerspiel*. The devaluation of meaning is no longer the effect of baroque sovereignty, in the 19th century: “the devaluation of the world of things in allegory is surpassed within the world of things by the commodity.”¹⁰³ Capitalist exchange acts allegorically towards individual commodities: divested of their singular significance (“use-value”), they are endowed with meaning only via exchange (“exchange-value”) with the divine money commodity. In “Imperial Panorama,” Benjamin broaches the relationship between capitalism and the evacuation of meaning in

¹⁰² Benjamin, *The Arcades*, 1935 exposé. Pensky emphasizes this “dialectical” character of the commodity form: “…hence the commodity is in itself a dialectical construction, inasmuch as it is the graphic expression of the moment where two opposed concepts, subject and object, reverse. Subjects become transformed into objects through alienated industrial labor; objects through the same process are transformed into subjective beings…for this reason they are sites for the disclosure of a kind of historical truth about modern capitalism” (“Method and Time,”183).
¹⁰³ Benjamin, “Central Park,” *SW 4*: 164.
the object, a tendency one sees repeated in his work on surrealism, specifically with respect to “kitsch” and the “revolutionary power of the outmoded.” However, one should be skeptical about a straightforward equation of allegory with the dialectical image; such a conception misses the “truth content” of the dialectical image (which exists in language), instead fetishizing the ruin, and the exchangeable nature of signification. In sum, the dialectical image does have an allegorical dimension, in terms of the subject writing history, though if reduced to this pole it misses the “objectivity” of Benjamin’s images.

It will be argued the dialectical image contains within it two moments: a “destructive (critical) moment” by which an object is wrested from the stream of tradition alongside a “constructive moment” (write-ability) by which the critic constructs the dream of a previous epoch in language (as a monad). Intertwined with these is a moment of “legibility”, by which a previous historical moment can be decoded in constellation with the now. In “Convolute N,” Benjamin evokes the dialectical image as follows, a quotation which will be unpacked throughout this section:

It’s not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on the past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal continuous one, the relation of what has been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent—only dialectical images are genuinely images (that is, not archaic); and the place where one encounters them is language. [N2a, 3]

Central to this passage is the appearance of the image in language—it is not seen in a phenomenological, or even cognitive (Kantian) sense—it appears, or rather is read in language, in the mode by which language constructs phenomena into an idea. What is

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104 Describing this devaluation and allegorical need, he writes: “Warmth is ebbing from things. Objects of daily use gently but insistently repel us…we must compensate for their coldness with our warmth if they are not to freeze us to death” (One-way Street, SW 1: 454).
105 Both Caygill and Penksy could be accused of doing so. For a more detailed discussion of this see Friedlander’s “The Measure of the Contingent: Walter Benjamin’s Dialectical Image.”
106 Though presented as distinct, these moments do coexist as elements of the same process. For more on the discussion of constructive and destructive moments see Jennings, Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin’s Theory of Literary Criticism, 33-41.
essential to note is that both constructible and destructive moments occur in language, and language informs the limits (or truth content) of these images.

Dealing first with the “destructive” (or even “deconstructive) side of this image, Benjamin remarks that “image is dialectics at a standstill”—thinking in “images” contains within it the ability to stop the dialectic in a temporal sense, to stand against the storm of progress, awakening a new form of historical experience: “recollection” [Erinnerung, Eingedenken] as opposed to the “remembrance” of historicism.

In a primary sense such a gesture entails a “stoppage” in the dialectic as it is described in Hegel and Marx—one does not mediate an antagonism (or constellation) into reason or a linear historical progression, rather maintains the moment of tension, opening space for individual action. This stoppage interrupts the Christian eschatology of both thinkers—the idea that redemption (revolution) will enter upon time and history in the form of “Absolute Spirit;” for Benjamin, following Kafka: it is a summary judgment in perpetual occurrence. As aforementioned, what disturbed Benjamin about these positivist and determinist narratives was that they denied the capacities of individuals and collectives to act in a meaningful sense in the present—instead they must wait until the time is “right,” ceding autonomy to larger dynamics. As Benjamin writes, “Nothing has so corrupted the German working class as the notion that it was moving with the current. It regarded technological development as the driving force of the stream with which it thought it was moving.”¹⁰⁷ The dialectical image is a destruction of such diachronic temporality: rejecting historicist notions that the past can be grasped linearly (as an “eternal image” that will “will not get away from us”), or contains “states of exception” that can be utilized to educe redemption. For Benjamin, such messianic moments must be recognized “synchronically;” as always already occurring, in the judgment and fulfillment of possibilities across time. This entails a re-awakening of the present moment as the “true state of exception”, a synchronic temporality afforded by Benjamin’s practice of citation (or use of language); a gesture which allows one to open the present anew, to experience it as the “time of the now” [Jetzt-zeit] as opposed to a “moment” [Augenblick] in a grander historical progression. “The historical materialist cannot do without the

notion of the present which is not in transition, but in which time takes a stand [ensteht] and has come to a standstill."

Given the embeddedness of objects within the stream of tradition, there is no standpoint of remove by which can write (contra “theorize”) history—historical objects come to us as always already embedded in a context of interpretation. Hence the necessity of a “destructive” (deconstructive) moment: one must wrest an object from tradition, citing it anew, destroying the progressive traces of the original context. In doing so one cites it as a dialectical image—a textual commodity (monad) embodying certain pathologies—certain hopes, dreams, and utopian elements—as a mode of presenting the epoch in the work, and the work as it relates to the epoch. In Convolute N, Benjamin cites a remark regarding Michelet: upon reading quotations from his oeuvre, one forgets that they are encompassed within a larger work. Citation employs its own logic—as Kafka’s gestures “break out and provide a new context”—quotation provides an insight into the pure ability of language as such, of the practice of construction independent of a goal or telos. For Friedlander, quoting reveals the secret affinities inherent in language—by wresting the object from its context of use—one is forced to confront the objectivity (lack of “possession”) of the historical object, and a truth of language more generally: one does not express oneself through language but rather in language. “Lacking the context motivating the utterance, the question of its truth value can be bracketed, and the way of meaning, which, when the utterance is used in this setting, is all but hidden, surfaces with all its particular and striking traits of expression.”

Citing a text elsewhere reveals the hidden affinities always already operating in language, the “intentionless truth” of language. For Benjamin it is such an intentionless character which insures that history can never be written in a final sense, that it will always resound differently in divergent constellations. Through the montage of “intentionless elements” one catches a glimpse of the “truth” beyond intention, of the hidden affinities and contexts of legibility shot through history.

108 Ibid. 394.
Throughout his work Benjamin employed quotation carefully as a means of provocation and shock, a practice akin to Brecht’s “Alienation effect” *[Verfremdungseffekt]*: “Quotations in my work are like robbers by the roadside who make an armed attack and relieve an idler of his convictions.”

On December of 1925, he remarked to Scholem that he had switched the epigraph of his *Trauerspiel* study so as to leave readers “with their mouths hanging open,” a practice of writing meant to induce astonishment in the reader, to awaken them from their pre-suppositions regarding the subject, or a certain epoch of history, and emphasizing the *possibilities* inherent in the present to radically re-think tradition—citation reveals that history exists in the present (as language), alongside the possibility of it being “re-written” or “recited.”

To emphasize this possibility, the critic must utilize a historically informed “destructive character,” to destroy the work (or totality) so as to reveal the potentialities inherent within it: “What exists he reduces to rubble, not for the sake of the rubble, but for the way leading through it.” Such a character is exemplified by Nietzsche’s historical man: he who selects (collects, and even gambles) with the past based on what is most relevant to the present, emphasizing the allegorical “ability” to re-write history in the present. Throughout *The Arcades*, Benjamin employs such a practice, specifically regarding “revolutionary” and working class history (see Convolute a: “Social Movements”). He does not provide a history of triumph, or of inevitable victory; rather destroys the diachronic narrative so as to present a history of “poss-ability.” Such histories provide one with an “epic element;” with potentialities of the past which elicit an imperative upon the future, allowing it to become a moment of possible fulfillment in the present, an explosive *gesture* (akin to Baudelaire, and Blanqui) which blasts open the continuum of history. With such a practice, the line between “construction” and “destruction” is blurred (as in the Hegelian *Aufhebung*), and at this point it becomes possible to describe the *constructive aspect* of Benjamin’s model. Regarding quotation, Benjamin writes the following in his 1931 Kraus study:

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110 Benjamin, *One Way St. SW 1*: 481.
111 “He manipulated rather than used quotation, making it the instrument of a quite exciting but also deceptive play of ideas.” Missac, *Walter Benjamin’s Passages* 64. The success of this method will be the topic of much debate in his correspondence with Adorno.
To quote a word is to call it by its name...In the quotation that both saves and punishing, language proves the matrix of justice. It summons a word by its name, wrenches it destructively from its context, but precisely thereby calls it back to its origin. It appears, now with rhyme and reason, sonorously, congruously, in the structure of a new text...In citation the two realms—of origin and destruction—justify themselves before language.  

It is in the practice of quotation that one first encounters the hidden affinities ("legibility," write-ability) inherent in language as such which allow history to be thought actively from the perspective of the “now,” in fact Benjamin will go so far as to assert, “To write history means to cite history.” Apropos Kraus, the practice of citation opens the present [Jetzt-zeit] as the moment in which history will be decided; in quoting one at once (re) establishes the “origin” of the past, rescuing elements from the detritus of history, yet also condemns other elements which are not brought to bear upon the present. This is the true sense of Benjamin’s “Copernican Revolution” [K1, 2] with respect to historical perception—as Kant forwarded the “subject” as the condition of possibility for perceptual experience—Benjamin does with respect to historical experience. The subject(s) in “the now” is the condition of possibility for history as such, what they choose to cite in the present moment is rescued, yet what is not threatens to flow into the abyss of history.

The literature has perhaps overemphasized this pole of Benjamin’s method, presenting him as a historiographical relativist whereby any present has the (allegorical) ability to radically “re-write” history. There are in fact limits to such historical construction, which relate specifically to Benjamin’s formulation of the “Now of recognizability” [Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit]—the “secret heliotropism” existing between generations, by which a work is unfolded throughout history. The present is not granted enlightened authority over the past; rather certain moments are shot through with moments of “legibility”—an awakening from certain myths, so as to be able to decode them in the past. Benjamin elaborates this with an image: “The past has left images of itself in literary texts that are comparable to those which light imprints on a

114 Erkennbarkeit connotes both actualization and cognitive realization, a realization with both objective and subjective components—this goes against the historicist idea of “the way things really are” (objectively). Hence history as such has both objective and subjective elements. Here Benjamin is making quite a radical claim about the temporal nature of every realization—that there is not “cognition for all time”; only at specific moments, and as a function of subjective experiences.
photosensitive plate. Only the future poses developers active enough to bring these plates out perfectly” [n15a, 1]. At certain points an epoch has enough historical awareness so as to realize the historical origin of myths which abound in both the present, and the past—however oftentimes such realizations come “too late;” only after one myth has ended, and another begins. This also relates to Benjamin’s work on romanticism, by which criticism unfolds the work historically, exposing its reverberations in both the realm of “pre” and “post” history. As demonstrated in Ch. 1, such elements are not “external” to the work, they are an integral part of it via the dynamics of “origin,” hence higher completions of the work can potentially occur many years after the fact. Through re-citing, or re-collecting a work from the past, one can in fact make a work “historical;” as Benjamin describes: “It becomes historical posthumously through events that may be separated from it by a thousand years.”

For Samuel Weber, what is essential is the moment of “legibility” of these images: the instant in which one “awakes” from the myths surrounding objects/epochs and they are able to be interpreted anew. Given immanence to history, there are times at which the object is “too-close,” too shrouded in “aura,” and subjects are un-able to recognize the historical elements therein. As early photographs appear “cloudy” today in the light of digital media, so do previous epochs become legible in a radically different sense by way of events which follow them. Once one has moved beyond such myths, they can be cited as historical, and “re-constellated” anew.

Given this emphasis, on “readability” and “citability” a further importance is thrust upon language—one must preserve a certain dignity of philosophy (Philology)—a conception of language which is able to do justice to particular experiences, both historical and otherwise. One has an ethical obligation to preserve the possibilities inherent in the past, not only for our particular moment, but for those to come. A moment may arise when such a possibility will become necessary for citation by a future epoch.

Receptions of Benjamin also tend to over determine the past against the present, though for Benjamin, the opposite is true: it is the past which can provide the spark for awakening the true capacities inherent in “the now.” The past and the present must be

115 Benjamin, “Paralipomena to On the Concept of History,” SW 4: 397.
brought to bear on each other in *constellation*: “...to seize the essence of history, it suffices to compare Herodotus and the morning newspaper.”\(^{116}\) It is this tension between the past and present which at once endows the present with the essential task of preservation; yet also presents it with an imperative to comprehend its own mythologies—to comprehend one’s own age in history, questioning if one has in fact made progress beyond such past mythologies. Referring to this, Benjamin writes the following in 1931:

> The problem is not to portray works of literature in the context of our times but rather to bring the age which recognizes them—which is our age—to representation in the age in which they originated. Literature thereby becomes an organon of history; and to achieve this, and not to reduce literature to the material dimension of history, is the task of the literary historian.\(^{117}\)

This point cannot be overstated: it is the constellation (or dialectical image) which births “the now”—“awakening” it to its status as the “true state of exception”—not the opposite where the subject simply “writes history from the present moment.” The past compels, in the sense of an imperative, its collection and re-citing in the present. One must begin with the historical object, citing it as “tigers leap” into the past, revealing the present moment as a messianic moment of judgment. If one does not begin with history, Benjamin is presented as a theological mystic, asserting the power of the subject over all the past. Benjamin’s historian is a “weak messiah,” who possesses only a minimal ability to redeem what is in his power. One must cede autonomy to the past, and recognize one’s weakness with respect to, a recognition that “truth...is bound to a nucleus of time lying hidden within the knower and the known alike” [N3, 2].

All of these imperatives must be held to in the moment of “construction” (write-ability): the mode by which the dialectical image is presented, or history is written in a critical sense more generally. “Thinking means for him [the critic]; setting the sails [N8, 1], and “words are his sails” [N10, 1], this moment links together Benjamin’s early imperatives with respect to the (theological) dignity of language, with his later political

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concerns for concrete political truth; an understanding of the myths in which one is ensnared so that resistance can be enacted. This entails constructing images which best demonstrate the hopes and dreams of an epoch, alongside their historical (material) emergence, and regression into myth. The image of the Arcades can at once be read to illustrate the technical capacities of an era (iron and glass architecture), the material emergence of such constructions (the textile trade, consumerism), and the regressive aspect in their existence: that the immense possibilities of a communal and collective life regressed into the myth of the consumer, that true progress had not yet been made beyond “pre-history.” Adorno asserted that Benjamin intended *The Arcades* as a whole to consist solely of quotations (See “Portrait of Walter Benjamin”)—many have disputed this claim, holding that the project necessitated minimal commentary or criticism on the part of Benjamin. Yet in repose with his dialectical image one can see how this practice of citation contains within it both such dimensions—a preservation and negation (Aufhebung) of the past dealing at once with its “material” and “truth” content.

If one were to extract a “political” project from Benjamin’s work it would perhaps lie in his reading of Baudelaire’s cycle “The Ragpickers” “Wine” with its figure of the “ragpicker.” Mirroring the Poet, hunch-back, and Historian, the “ragpicker” sifts through the dregs of a society marred by the sign of progress. As a melancholic, he sees no significance in the ideals of his age—rather focuses on what is immediate (immanent) and accessible to him—one who searches for the secret correspondances which lie in ruin around him. The image of the “hunch-back” or “weak-messiah” is prominent for Benjamin—these are not the historians (like Marx) who herald the coming revolution; rather they sift through the rubble (or Archive), to find that small fragment of hope, or at least a semblance of heroic subjectivity in modernity. This is perhaps the true meaning of bestowing an Erlebnis with the weight of an Erfahrung: endowing something fragmentary with cosmic significance.

V. Correspondence

“I would simply like to emphasize my idiosyncratic dislike for the Idea of the authentically empirical.”
- Adorno to Benjamin, *ABC*, 301

“In this context I shall say only that to my mind the accusations that have been made against Adorno and his critique are ludicrous.” - Scholem, *Walter Benjamin*, 216
Following his submission of his Baudelaire piece (1938), Benjamin penned the following to Adorno: “I felt I was racing against the war, and, despite choking anxiety, I nonetheless experienced a sense of triumph when I finally wrapped up the flâneur after almost 15 years in gestation, and just before the end of the world.” The letter goes on to describe the relation of the essay to the book on Baudelaire (of which it was the “second chapter”), and the Arcades more generally. Tonally, the letter evokes an atmosphere of understanding and complicity (with both Adorno and the Institute), as to how the Baudelaire project, and The Arcades more generally would unfold. Benjamin’s congeniality makes Adorno’s delayed response resound more solemnly—one which has become infamous for the supposed disregard Adorno shows to both Benjamin’s essay, and the materiality of his personal situation. Speaking on behalf of the Institute, he informs Benjamin that the piece cannot be published in his current (methodological) state, yet personally intervenes in recommending the withholding of publication for Benjamin’s “own sake,” though many have enlarged this academic critique into a personal attack.

Several remarks are necessitated at this point: firstly, upon reading the essay (specifically the “Addenda”), it is evident that Adorno does miss some of the points Benjamin is making (specifically with respect to “Marxism”). Further, one could argue that Adorno simply misses the fact that the essay was intended as a “2nd Chapter,” hence should be seen as “prefatory” for the “social resolution” which would come in the 3rd Chapter. Or from a more orthodox view of critical theory, one could just as easily deride Benjamin as a stubborn “mystery-monger” who deliberately denied the Institute’s imperatives. Such assessments are perhaps hasty at best, and intellectually dis-honest at

118 4.10.1938, ABC, 278.
119 Benjamin writes to Adorno with assurance that the major concerns of The Arcades had not been abandoned: “…the decisive thing is that a Baudelaire essay that did not deny its responsibility to the issues addressed in the Arcades, could only be written as part of a Baudelaire book” (ibid. 278).
120 Benjamin wrote to Adorno on 4.10.1938, and Adorno responded over a month later (10.11.1938) stating: “…the reasons are entirely objective in nature. They involve the attitude of all of us to your manuscript” (ABC, 280). At the two’s final meeting in San Remo (1937), both seemed to have come to an agreement on where they stood with respect to the Marxism of the Institute. Though, as Buck-Morss notes, this agreement was “delicate” and perhaps based on a hasty understanding of where each stood. See The Origin of Negative Dialectics, 155.
121 Arendt mentions this episode in particular exemplary of Adorno’s mishandling of Benjamin in both a personal and intellectual sense, both in her preface to Illuminations, and in the journal Merkur.
worst—all miss the complexity of this encounter, the numerous affinities, histories, correspondences hidden within it. If thought from the perspective of “correspondence” this dispute emerges as a pertinent intellectual encounter—as the crystallization of the two as “correspondents”—with each presenting their views in stark repose: a debate hinging on dialectical methodology, and the practice of “theory” as such. Though Adorno’s objections may seem unnecessarily harsh, or un-founded; it should be emphasized that his objections and views have a lengthy history in the two’s correspondence throughout the decade. Most of this centered on methodological debates relating to *The Arcades*—to the extent that Adorno’s statements can be justified from the perspective of correspondence. Similarly, many of Benjamin’s most explicit methodological statements come in the form of these letters, in which Adorno persistently urges him to clarify his thinking in a more systematic matter. 122 Given Benjamin’s aversion to theoretical pronouncements, his letters to Adorno can be seen as some of his most explicit methodological pronouncements related to his late methodology. Thus to articulate the full valences of Adorno’s critique it must be seen in constellation with his response to Benjamin’s 1935 *Exposé* for the Arcades, and his criticism of the second (Brechtian) edition of Benjamin’s “Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936). Both works articulated the methodological framework of *The Arcades* at the time. 123 In what follows Adorno’s main objections will be presented, following which they will be articulated in the larger context of *correspondence*, alluding to a larger (dialectical) methodological gulf between “dialectical images” and the “negative dialectic.”

122 “Systematic,” should not be taken in an orthodox architectonic manner, but refers to Adorno’s imperatives that Benjamin not be wholly immanent with respect to the century, instead employing social categories to explain particular phenomena—as Marx’s (Hegelian) analysis of the commodity, or Weber’s employment of ideal types.

123 The 1935 *Exposé* was commissioned at the request of Pollock and Horkheimer so the Institute could have a grasp of the “central motifs” Benjamin intended to include in the Arcades; hence it is not a draft or outline, but a performative “miniature model” of how Benjamin’s methodology would be enacted on the Arcades material. Seen in constellation with the 1939 *Exposé* one can chart Benjamin’s changing views with respect to the methodology of *The Arcades*. The 1936 essay on the work of art interrogates the “post-history” of aesthetic pathologies beginning in the 19th century (*l’art pour l’art*, “reproduction”) as becoming “legible” in the 20th century. This essay employs the dialectical image as a historical method, by which to read the 19th century. For more on the relation between these essays and *The Arcades*, see Wolin, *An Aesthetic of Redemption*, 173-198.
Much of this dispute centers on the notion of the dialectical image (or “historical image” for Adorno), a chiasmus which returns to the origins of their correspondence (Ch. 1), and their mutual projection of a shared origin. Throughout the 1930s Adorno held somewhat of a static notion of the “historical image,” one routed in Benjamin’s early distinction between “material” and “truth content,” and his own 1931 “The Actuality of Philosophy”. The task of criticism entailed an elaboration of the social mediation endemic to the object or work. Locating it “in truth” entailed recognizing the material, and ideological aspects of its constitution. His 1937-38 work on Wagner emphasized the “social character” of Wagner’s music—that his music was a phantasmagoria, to the dissonance of the bourgeois tradition, and the reversion of this tradition into the “hell” of fascism. Likewise, with his essay “On Jazz” (1936), Adorno interpreted the individual jazz figure, as emblematic of the faux spontaneity of the individual under capitalism. As he grew closer to the Institute (joining officially in 1938), his model of criticism became increasingly Marxist in tone, a mode of understanding figures and works within commodity capitalism.

As has been shown, Benjamin’s dialectical image is not such a static entity, but a dynamic constellation which took on a variety of senses throughout the decade—and could be considered a sublation of it different instantiations. Most notably is Benjamin’s abandonment (or combination) of his distinction between “commentary” and “criticism,” in favor of a mode of montage presentation (citation) which provokes “shock” in the reader. Hence when Adorno will criticize Benjamin’s formulations as “lacking mediation” he is upholding his own view of the early Benjamin (1924) against the Benjamin of 1938. He is citing Benjamin against himself. In effect this entails denying the influence of Brecht and surrealism upon Benjamin’s formulations, and a latent attempt to force a monogamy on correspondence. Likewise, in his response Benjamin will cite Adorno’s 1933 Kierkegaard study as exemplary of his own early methodology, citing Adorno against himself. In this sense, much of this late dispute can be explained by the divergent images the two held of each other, and what they deemed to be the goal of their respective projects.

The years 1938-39 where tumultuous and uncertain times with respect to Benjamin’s intellectual allegiances. He was at once beckoned by the Institute
(specifically Gretel and Theodor Adorno) to travel to New York; by Scholem to travel to Palestine (to work on Kafka), while residing in Paris (to work on The Arcades); and summering in Denmark with Brecht. It was a moment in which he was between many “correspondents,” and each location held the possibility of a different direction in his thinking. Adorno was concerned—perhaps somewhat legitimately—that such polarities would lead Benjamin to sacrifice his intellectual rigor for the “political correctness” of Brecht, or Surrealism, hence took it upon himself to attempt to steady Benjamin against such assaults. Adorno sought to ensure that Benjamin held to his prima philosophy (his early work), of articulating an expanded conception of experience systematically, a project he felt Brecht substantially jeopardized—to the extent that one could argue that Adorno would rather The Arcades and Baudelaire fail than become Brechtian.  

The 1938 dispute centers on the question of style, or rather what form an analysis of Baudelaire (or a figure) in the 19th century should take. As has been noted, Benjamin was committed to an immanent mode of criticism by which the mode of apprehending the object (the Idea) arose from the object itself. Following Benjamin’s insistence on the question of Darstellung ((re)presentation) as fundamentally to philosophy, such formal considerations cannot be divorced from methodological considerations. In the Trauerspiel, he resurrected allegory as a mode of apprehending the mourning plays of the baroque (as “constellation”), for the 19th century he elaborated the shock experience of modernity into the “dialectical image,” and utilized it as a mode of apprehending the century.  

Given Adorno’s insistence on introducing aspects from the social totality, his method cannot be considered wholly immanent to the object it apprehends, and as a result he is not able to endorse Benjamin’s dialectical image. In a sense he employs the methodology described in Chapter 1, upholding a distinction between “commentary” and “criticism” against Benjamin’s late “citational” dialectical image. Adorno will deride what he felt to be Benjamin’s insistence on “materialist philology”: that formally,

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124 Adorno’s aversion to Brecht is difficult to fully comprehend, in one sense they are extremely similar—and one could read an “alienation effect” into Adorno’s writings on music, specifically his insistence on Schoenberg’s a-tonal schemas as shocking the listener out of complacency. Above all Adorno was averse to Brecht’s dogmatic insistence on “orthodox materialism,” and his inability to think through the contradictions of this method with respect to idealism. See Adorno, Lectures on Negative Dialectics.

125 For more on the immanence of this method with respect to the century, and Baudelaire see Jennings, Dialectical Images, 39-41.
Benjamin simply “presented” facts as they appeared without mediating them in social totality. In contrast, Benjamin will assert his immanent method as emblematic to the immersed character of the century itself. Despite this affinity between form and content, Adorno does not reject the “content” of Benjamin’s study wholly; in fact, he urges Benjamin to elevate and formally revise several of the main motifs (The Flâneur, the “man of the crowd.”), which Benjamin will do for his 1939 revision “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.” This final dispute should be viewed as an interrogation of theoretical methodology as such, with the two presenting divergent views on how “criticism” should relate itself to a historical epoch.

Adorno’s letter of November 10, 1938 illustrates his main objections to Benjamin’s essay. Though written in “correspondence” Adorno claims to speak on behalf of the institute (Horkheimer, and Löwenthal126), while his criticisms echo earlier concerns regarding Benjamin’s attempt to combine materialism and theology. For Adorno, Benjamin’s attempt resulted in a lapse into “mysticism” and “positivism.” His main objections are surmised in the following quotations:

1) “I regard it as methodologically unfortunate to give particular manifest features from the realm of superstructure a “materialist” turn by relating them immediately to the corresponding features of the substructure. The materialist determination of cultural traits is only possible if it is mediated through the total social process.”

2) “The theological motif of calling things by their names has a tendency to reverse into the astonished presentation of simple facts. If one wished to speak very drastically, one could say that the study has settled at the crossroads of magic and positivism. That spot is bewitched. Only theory could break the spell—your own determined, good, speculative [dialectical] theory.” (ABC, 282-83)

In attempting to bridge the realms of “materialism” and “theology,” Adorno worried that Benjamin resorted to a naïve immediacy which entailed a solidarity with the existing order of things (2)—a phenomenological “astonished presentation of simple facts,” which mirrored the phantasmagoria of commodity fetishism. Though aware that Benjamin

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126 “I speak not only for myself, unqualified as I am, but also for Horkheimer and the others when I say that we are all convinced that it would benefit “your” production…if you surrendered to your own specific insights and conclusions without combining them with other ingredients [Marxism]” (ABC, 284-85).
tended to keep (explicit) theoretical statements to a minimum, Adorno is skeptical to the direct relations Benjamin established between the economic “base” and “superstructural” level (1). Specifically, Benjamin’s interpretation of Baudelaire’s “L’âme du vin” (and its “Ragpicker”), which he associates directly with Marx’s tax on wine, and further elevates to the image of the “critic” in modernity as such. Adorno worries that such a motifs lapse into romanticism, depriving such empirical phenomena of their true “historical weight,” and that Benjamin fails to understand the poem in relation to a historical-political context “…at which even the useless had become subject to exchange.”

For Adorno such individual motifs must be theorized within the “total social process” (1 & 2). Benjamin must mediate his dialectic between the “material” (base) and “theological” (superstructure) spheres by way of concrete dialectical historical analysis. For Adorno this would entail immanently searching Baudelaire’s text for “ciphers” of his material situation, attempting to construct a concrete link between Baudelaire and his historical situation (which one “imposes” upon the object). Instead, Adorno felt Benjamin had simply presented both poles, without attempting to establish a relation between the two, his “Dialectic [was] lacking one thing, mediation.” For Adorno, Benjamin is too immanent with respect to the history of the nineteenth century—his “Motifs are assembled but not elaborated”—Benjamin’s mode of presentation simply presents a

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127 Adorno writes: “As a true connoisseur of your writings I know very well that your oeuvre does not lack precedents for your procedural method” (ibid. 284). Adorno in many ways endorsed Benjamin’s method as an approach to individual figures (Kraus, Kafka), though he was perhaps skeptical to the employment of such a model to the whole of the 19th century (via Baudelaire).
128 Ibid. 284.
129 Susan Buck-Morss differentiates Benjamin’s approach from Adorno’s vision as follows: “Instead of reconstructing social reality through an immanent, dialectical analysis of Baudelaire’s poetic images, Benjamin juxtaposed images from the poet with data particles from objective history in a visual montage, adding the barest minimum of commentary, like captions under pictures” (The Origin of Negative Dialectics, 156).
130 ABC 282. Here “mediation” does not denote a synthesis in the classically Hegelian sense, rather an interpretation within the larger social context, an understanding of the particular with respect to the universal, not as subsumed by it.
catalogue of the century, of individual commodities and figures all endowed with aura.¹³¹

Put in the terms of his own thought (Ch.1), Adorno felt that Benjamin gave excessive “priority to the object,” to the extent that he denied the subjective capacity of the individual to resist such social relations, resulting in a positivist justification of existing capitalist reality. This mirrors Adorno’s criticisms of phenomenology, and the Lebensphilosophie of figures as Simmel: that in their presentation of the “givenness” of the world, or of social phenomena, they deny the historical index of current reality—that individual phenomena are mediated by greater historical and social factors which must be considered. If one does not subscribe a historical index to the myths which abound, one risks lapsing to “behaviouralism,” a justification of the same myths one describes. Here Adorno will uphold the figures of Weber¹³² and Marx, those who attempt to describe particularities within a broader social historical framework (as Marx does in his analysis of the “commodity form”). Yet as was demonstrated in Ch. 2, such a perspective upholds the critic in a perspective of remove from that which is being analyzed, he or she has access to both the universal, and the particular, from a strangely un-defined social perspective. With such critiques of Benjamin’s method, Adorno does not understand the methodological dexterity of the dialectical image; distinguishing his method from phenomenology (specifically Heidegger), Benjamin writes:

What distinguishes images from the “essences” of phenomenology is their historical index. (Heidegger seeks in vain to rescue history for phenomenology abstractly through “historicity.”) …For the historical index of images not only says that they belong to a particular time; it says, above all, that they attain to legibility only at a particular time…Every present day is determined by the images that are synchronic with it: each “now” is the now of a particular recognizability. [N3, 1]

¹³¹ Ibid. 281; and further: “…can such “material” as this patiently await interpretation without being consumed by its own aura?” (281).
¹³² It would be interesting to compare Adorno’s insistence and utilization of Weber, with Benjamin’s employment of Simmel. Adorno was highly critical of Simmel in this instance: “I cannot help feeling here that you invaluable Arcades project requires much more cunningly fashioned instruments than quotations from Simmel can provide” (ibid. 392). Though Benjamin thought of Simmel favorably, citing him as the “first Bolshevik” cultural theorist.
For Benjamin then, each “image” (citation, motif) carries within itself a “historical index,” a moment at which it becomes “legible” in the gaze of another epoch; or more radically, that it becomes historical only via events that come after it. Thus as dialectical images, Benjamin’s motifs on Baudelaire are carefully create constellations, poised in dialectical tension with the “now” [Jetzt-zeit] that comes to understand them as “legible.” It is only as past events (as “ruins”) that one can understand the true significance (or legibility) of Baudelaire’s experiences; Adorno misses this fundamentally in his equation of Benjamin’s method with “phenomenology.” Through the creation of immanent constellations, the critic must construct a monad adequately representing the whole of an epoch, as it is experienced, not as it is perceived from a transcendent theoretical perspective. Benjamin cannot describe the “total social process” because of this perspective because of his commitment to immanence. In modernity, one is immersed within the crowd, with explicit material economic indicators are wizened out of sight. One grasps such truths only in fleeting instances—as Baudelaire’s women passing in the crowd (À une passante)—and for Benjamin an immanent analysis of modernity must mirror this experience. Benjamin associates Baudelaire with Blanqui, and prostitution with the evacuation of eros and the changing economic status of women. Such citations and associations provoke astonishment and speculation on behalf of the reader, inviting him or her to establish the connection, but above all, to experience the past.

From the preceding exegesis of the dialectical image it is clear that Adorno misses the complexity inherent in Benjamin’s conception of the phantasmagoria—a certain mimetic (or direct) relation comes to exist in the capitalism of the 19th century—that the total social process (base) comes to present itself, via the commodity form, on the level of the empirical. It is such a temporal index of legibility that will allow Benjamin to counter Adorno’s objections that his motifs lack historical specificity, that they simply reference some archetypal past. Given that myths become “legible” in constellation with certain epochs, they can be said to have a specifically historical character.

Despite this, Adorno’s (formal) objections are not wholly un-justified, nor should he be seen as a traditional Marxist in his own right. Adorno rightly points out many of the weaker constellations in Benjamin’s analysis, that several of the relationships Benjamin
attempts to establish do not succeed. Further, Adorno felt that Benjamin had forgone his early distinction between “commentary” and “criticism,” lapsing into a mode of “mere presentation of facts,” in which the critic no longer played an active role, but simply surrenders autonomy to irrationalist or surrealist forces. From the standpoint of political praxis, one could argue Adorno is right, that Benjamin’s images did not provide the critical shock necessary to “awaken” readers to the potentials of “the now.” Yet one could equally argue that Adorno’s model dealt in categorical abstractions, and was unable to provide an actual “experience” with the past. In discussing this debate, Richard Wolin will note that the two models are not mutually exclusive, that one could employ elements from each, perhaps the creation of such experimental constellations is the task of our present? 133

In order for such constellations to take place, the conventional image of Adorno as a contrarian Marxist objector to Benjamin must be broken. Adorno’s criticisms should not be read as simply advocating a reified “base/superstructural” model (as Agamben 134), rather his objections aim at the heart of dialectical methodology as such. As a more orthodox Hegelian, Adorno will maintain both the “universal” and “particular” (“subject” and “object”), exploring the interrelation of each without a “positive synthesis” (his “negative dialectic”), or a reconciliation of the two extremes. 135 The most concrete example of this would be Adorno’s own aphoristic *Minima Moralia* (1944-47), which begins with Adorno’s subjective experiences, only to demonstrate the “primacy of the objective,” that is the presence of universal social categories in subjective thought and

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133 See Wolin, *An Aesthetic of Redemption*, 163-207. Benjamin’s motifs could be said to “fail” in that they are unable to “shock,” or come to rapport with the present, yet has been argued throughout, the “truth” of these motifs is not so much at issue for Benjamin, rather the “write” or “cite-ability” of history. It is precisely because of this potential for failure that Benjamin’s method can be deemed “critical:” in resurrecting an object on the verge of disappearing (or becoming out-molded), one demonstrates that history can remain relevant, and can be re-written from the present. Hence Benjamin will speak of the “moment of danger” endemic to the practice of history (Thesis 17), that moments not grasped by the present may be lost forever.

134 See “The Prince and Frog: On the question of Method of Benjamin an Adorno,” *Infancy and History*. In defending Benjamin, Agamben present Adorno as one who holds an “orthodox” Marxist view of the dialectical relation between the base and superstructure, thus missing the complexities inherent in Adorno’s own negative dialectic.

135 As Buck-Morss writes: “Adorno’s pieces “developed dynamically from one pole to another. He used dialectical argument to construct “models” of thought, which, no matter where they began always moved in the opposite direction” (*The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 185).
experiences. Benjamin will forgo such stable polarities, favoring an immanent and allegorical immersion in the object. Such a method is seen in his own “experiential” texts, *Berlin Childhood Around 1900* (1932/38) and *One-Way Street* (1928) in which personal and objective tendencies are intermingled and involved.

Following such intellectual observations, Adorno makes the more personal charge: “solidarity with the Institute has led to violence on your own thinking.” That in attempting to combine the Institute’s “Marxist methodology” with elements of his own thought, Benjamin had sacrificed the robust methods of his early theological work. For Adorno, such a method (particularly his distinction between “commentary” and “criticism”) was better suited for politics: “Your study of Goethe’s *Elective Affinities* and the book on the Baroque are better Marxism than your wine tax and your deduction of the phantasmagoria from the practices of the feuilletonists.” Adorno would rather Benjamin return to his early methodology that attempt to fuse, or elaborate it along surrealist, or Brechtian lines. On this point, it would be fair to charge Adorno with holding a “fixed” image of Benjamin, of attempting to reify him in his early work. However, if this particular exchange is seen not in isolation, but in constellation with their prior correspondence, its gains a sense of consistency not present in isolation. As will now be shown, Adorno leveled persistent objections against Benjamin, specifically regarding his use of surrealist and Brechtian formulations, both of which he felt to be a danger both to Benjamin’s own thought, and the aims of the Institute.

**Parenthesis: A Genealogy of Correspondence**

When examined in repose with the rest of their correspondence, Adorno’s 1938-39 responses to Benjamin appear in a strikingly different tone, one could assert that they

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136 For example, in “Tough baby” (45), Adorno analyzes his own experience of American masculinity, as a cipher to the broader patriarchal domination of American mass culture. That men attempt to compensate for the inadequacy produced in them by culture.
137 For example, in “The Imperial Panorama” (*One Way Street, SW 1*: 450-55), Benjamin presents a “tour” of German inflation, though economic objectivity is intermingled with the subjects changing relationship with the world of objects, and it is unclear how this subject relates to Benjamin himself. A more in depth study would compare Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*, with Benjamin’s own “experiential” texts (*One Way Street; Berlin Childhood*).
138 *ABC*, 283.
139 Ibid. 284-85.
acquire a consistency relating to persistent objections against Benjamin’s transition from his early method of criticism towards Brecht and surrealism. Throughout much of the 1930’s Adorno sought to mediate between the concerns of Benjamin and the Institute, whilst maintaining each in their autonomy. Adorno did not so much criticize Benjamin’s methodology as such, but sought to create the conditions for a successful encounter with the Institute, knowing (perhaps better than anyone) what such an encounter could entail. This was due to Adorno’s own employment of Benjamin’s model towards historical materialism, a practice which he hoped Benjamin would participate in as well. It has become far too commonplace to emphasize the dis-agreements between the two, at the expense of downplaying their underlying relationship and the relevant concerns Adorno had toward Benjamin’s method. Two such examples of the complexity of their relationship will now be developed: Benjamin’s 1935 *Exposé* and Adorno’s objections to its surrealist methodology; along with Benjamin’s 1936 “Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility,” and Adorno’s objections to its Brechtian categories.

In 1935, Adorno and Benjamin had convinced the institute to consider funding Benjamin’s research on the *Arcades*, for which they now requested that he write and “Exposé:” a description of the main motifs and proposed methodology of the study. Writing to Benjamin in 1935, Adorno stresses that the Institute would prefer the *Arcades* to unfold in a “historical-sociological” way: that they would be wary of accepting a work of surrealist montage, one simply presenting motifs that “…avoid[ed] all interpretation.”[^140] However, in the same letter, Adorno stresses that Benjamin “…compose “the Arcades” in a way faithful to their original history,” that Benjamin choose a form of composition that immanently arose from the demands of the material. Adorno further states that he “… would regard it as a mistake if any concessions where made to the institute in this regard.”[^141] Adorno seems to present two contradictory imperatives, but upon closer analysis it is clear that he attempts to present himself as a mediating figure. As such a mediator—one who understood Benjamin’s commitment to

[^140]: *ABC*, 112. Put in the terms of Ch. 1, Adorno states that Benjamin should utilize his distinction between “commentary” and “criticism.”

[^141]: Ibid. 85/84. Adorno further writes, alluding to his own ambiguous relationship to surrealism: “…and the shock which will proceed from the completed work on the Arcades, like that of the surrealists, strikes me as more revolutionary than any bare insights into the un-clarified social character of urban studies” (ibid. 85).
immanence—Adorno is not *apriori* opposed to Benjamin’s use of surrealist montage, or theological interpretations of history: his warning to Benjamin is that such methods may be in tension with the “…apriori [Marxist] approach of the Institute.”¹⁴² Though from the completed expose, it is evident that Benjamin largely ignored Adorno’s warnings.

The expose itself, titled “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century,”¹⁴³ is not so much an outline or theoretical preface, but a miniature elaboration of central motifs in the study. The sections (“Louis Philippe, or the Interior”; “Daguerre, or the Panoramas” …) are strange, and somewhat shocking assemblages of words and things, associating historical events (the July Revolution) with the emergence of certain figures and tendencies (the movement from the private “interior, to the public sphere)—direct associations taking place in the montage fashion of the surrealists. The work describes both the regressive and utopian sides of the commodity form, speaking to a new “collective experience” emerging with technology, alongside the regressions of consumerism. Writing to Adorno, Benjamin justifies his method as immanently arising from the material (the 19th century): “just as the self-contained exposition of the epistemological foundations of my book on the Baroque drama only followed after they had proved their value in the material itself.”¹⁴⁴

Given this disjoint between Benjamin’s mode of presentation, and what the Institute expected of the work, Adorno’s criticisms focused on Benjamin’s overemployment of surrealist methods. His focus on the mystical elements of the commodity and technology denied the possibility of “class consciousness.” For Adorno, in such a “…dreaming collective no differences exist between classes.”¹⁴⁵ Benjamin has simply described collective experience, without specifying how such shocks resounded differently amongst the classes. For Adorno, not only did this harness the ambiguous (anarchist) political project of surrealism, but more problematically, the archetypal idea

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¹⁴² Ibid. 83.
¹⁴³ On can speculate on the relation of this *Exposé* to the later work on Baudelaire, in which the title becomes “The Paris of the Second-Empire in Baudelaire,” eluding to many of the same pathologies, but as described immanently through the eyes of the poet.
¹⁴⁴ *ABC*, 89.
¹⁴⁵ Ibid. 89. Adorno further referred to this as “…an intrinsically un-dialectical conception of collective consciousness” (ibid. 93). That such a collective is determined by greater trajectories, hence has little capacity to resist.
of a “collective unconscious” found in the thinking of Klages and Jung. For Adorno, such
descriptions where not “critical,” in that they simply presented humanity as the victim of
larger mythical forces, offering little opportunity for resistance, only archetypal
description. Instead Benjamin should articulate the historical specificity of these myths
(in the 19th century), presenting them historically so as to reveal their illusory character:
“I reject the idea of the collective consciousness…the interior should be rendered
transparent as a social function and its apparently autarchic character revealed as an
illusion.”146 Though Benjamin described the century as “Janus faced”—containing
within it both progressive (utopian) and regressive elements—Adorno worried that this
mode of presentation ran the risk of lapsing into an intoxication with the myths of
commodity fetishism, unless these myths where articulated historically.

For Adorno, the possibility of resistance comes to the extent that reification
(“second nature”) is demonstrated not as eternal, or mythical, but as historical. Benjamin
must portray the century not as a regression to Bachofen’s “swamp world,” but as marred
by the specific myth of capitalism. It can be noted that this is the same criticism Adorno
leveled in response to Benjamin’s 1934 Kafka essay (Ch. 2), that Benjamin sacrificed the
dialectic between “myth” and “pre-history,” simply presenting Kafka’s world as
archetypal myth, not as historically emergent in modernity. For Adorno a broader
analysis of political economy must be undertaken so as to reveal the historical “origin” of
such conditions of domination: “The specific commodity character of the 19th century, in
other words the industrial production of commodities will have to be developed more
clearly and substantially.”147 Or rather, that Benjamin must understand reification in a
more Marxist sense, so as to avoid the lapse into myth. Adorno is also averse to
determinism he detects in Benjamin’s presentation, that in the expose, individuals are
presented as “arising” from the myths of the century. This leads Adorno to present to
Benjamin his own dialectical theory of consciousness, following the “primacy of the

146 Ibid. 113. Adorno is asserting that Benjamin cannot simply present the two in repose, but must describe
the specific interaction between the two. He cannot simple “comment,” but must “criticize” the relation
between the two.
147 Ibid. 103. Adorno goes on to criticize Benjamin’s assertions regarding the myth of the “new,” for
Adorno the new has become old through the perpetual repetition of the commodity form, hence Adorno is
decoding the myth in a historical economic sense, that is in relation to the specifics of modern capitalism.
Benjamin on the other hand does not date such myths so specifically.
object,” (Ch. 1) the individual must be thought not as wholly determined by ideology, rather as participating in myth through the reification of thinking. The objective elements in individual thinking (or in a work) must be “read” so as to reveal the historical traces inherent in subjectivity. Hence Adorno will object to Benjamin’s association of figures with historical events (in the titles); they cannot be thought as wholly determined so as to hold out a possibility of resistance. However, this chiasmus relates to the broader disagreement relating to resistance and myth, along with their competing notions of the dialectical image.

Adorno endorses the dialectical image in this 1935 exchange, though he attempts to articulate it in a more Marxist direction, over and against what he felt to be Benjamin’s surrealist articulation; though this encounter is haunted by Adorno’s ambiguity towards surrealism more generally. Referring to his earlier conception of the “historical image” (Ch. 1), Adorno articulates such images as: “objective constellations in which society finds itself represented.” That such constellations must be defined in a robust and materialist sense—that they must be objective—differentiating them from the “mere chance” of subjective associations. Adorno is not de-facto opposed to imagistic surrealist associations, though seeks the point(s) of convergence in which such individual associations articulate elements of broader social significance: when surrealist manifestations hit at the manifestations of the universal in the particular.

Adorno’s 1956 “Looking Back at Surrealism” discusses surrealism in light of the horrors of the Second World War, while shedding light on many of the imperatives he lays with respect to Benjamin. For Adorno, surrealism does not succeed if it merely demonstrates the world as “uncanny,” presenting everyday objects as “father-figures,” but only if it awakens subjectivity to reification and allows one to think through meaningful avenues of resistance. As he writes, “The dialectical images of surrealism are images of a dialectical of subjective freedom in a situation of objective un-freedom.”

148 Ibid. 110.
149 Adorno, “Looking Back on Surrealism,” Notes to Literature, 88. For more on Adorno’s ambiguous relationship with surrealism, see the newly published The Challenge of Surrealism: The Correspondence of Theodor W. Adorno and Elizabeth Link (2015), which deals with discussions Adorno had with his student, Lenk, during the 1967-68 student protests regarding the capacities of surrealism and resistance. In many
Such individual juxtapositions must recognize the social aspect of such “associations,” if they do so they cite not a subjective encounter, but a universal “commodity fetish,” thus awakening “subjects” to the “objective,” reified elements in individual thought. Such images hit at the capacity of the subject still to act in the reified world: “dialectical images are constellations between alienated things and injected meanings, resting on a moment of indifference between death and meaning”¹⁵⁰ As allegories, they demonstrate that the subject remains “non-identical” with respect to the social totality. That despite the total reification, fragments of resistance occur which can at once shock individuals into class realizations, and further, that the dream of a rational (enlightenment) articulation of such structures still exists. There are moments in Adorno’s writings on the work of art in which such images seem to be the only hope left for the work of art in the Modern era. In *Aesthetic Theory* he upholds the “firework” as a flash that the world could be otherwise: “They [fireworks] appear empirically, yet are liberated from the burden of the empirical, which is the obligation of duration” they are a sign from heaven yet artificial, an ominous warning, as script that flashes up, vanishes, and indeed cannot be read for its meaning.” *(AS, 81).*

Benjamin responds warmly to Adorno’s considerations stating the validity of his objections, while praising Adorno’s continual presence as a friend and intellectual interlocutor: “…there have been times when you have known how to extend such faith to me and my work.”¹⁵¹ Benjamin specifically concedes that a more complex engagement with Marxism is necessary in his work, and one can see this in his persistent engagement with historical materialism in the coming years; though he does not become “orthodox” in any sense, he understands that he must justify his approach with respect to Marxism (as it has been argued in this chapter). With respect to the dialectical image, Benjamin’s response is more complex, he points to the validity and insightful character of Adorno’s ways this can be read as a continuation of Adorno’s dialogue with Benjamin regarding the dialectical image; a conversation which is never definitively resolved.

conception of the image as an “objective constellation”, yet also rejects Adorno’s charge of his conflation of the dialectical image with the dream of the commodity form:

The dialectical image does not simply copy the dream—I never intended to suggest that. But it certainly does seem to me that the former contains within itself the exemplary instances, the irruptions of waking consciousness, and that indeed it is precisely from such places that the figure of the dialectical image first composes itself like that of a star composed of many glittering points. Here too, therefore, a bow needs to be stretched, and a dialectic forged: that between the image and the act of ‘waking.’”152

Benjamin grants that the dialectical image must contain “objective” elements, yet also that the mythical energies of the commodity first uncovered by surrealism can be used in an “awakening” from reification. As the development of his work will show, Benjamin does not so much abandon surrealism under the weight of Adorno’s materialism objects, but recognizes that the such a conception must be articulated more robustly, a “drawing of the bow” between un-conscious energies, and conscious conceptions of critique. As Benjamin’s later writings on the work of art will demonstrate, it is perhaps possible to harness these energies in the services of “communism,” as opposed to the archetypal rituals of the commodity form, which result in the fascisms of the 20th century.

In the previous chapter, Benjamin’s reading of Kafka was shown to contain within it substantial Brechtian elements which allowed many of Benjamin’s theological notions to be transformed into political affirmation. By 1936, Benjamin had pushed such Brechtian energies further, with his “The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility,”153 he attempted to harness the forces of technology (reproducibility) against the cultic rituals of fascism. Though such a confrontation took place on the level of aesthetics, Benjamin would read changes artistic production as “ciphers” to broader underlying political currents. The 19th century’s move towards l’art pour l’art culminated in the rituals of fascism (“the aestheticization of politics”), while the destruction of aura

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152 Ibid. 119. As he writes earlier (to Gretel Adorno), praising Adorno’s conception of the dialectical image: “Firstly, just how important Wissengrund’s description of the dialectical image in terms of a constellation seems to me to be, but secondly, how indispensable certain elements I pointed out in this constellation appear to be: namely the dream figures” (ibid. 119).

153 Specifically, the 2nd edition of the essay which contained much more Brechtian language before he was forced to revise it into the 3rd edition that was published by the Institute.
through reproduction providing the potential for the formation of new forms of collectivity, via the collective experience of works of art (“the politicization of art.”). Hence Benjamin will advocate for the potential of new mediums, specifically film, as allowing art to have a new collective resonance. These reflections historicized present political imperatives by locating their “origin” in the 19th century, while also demonstrated the “post-history” of the century as resonating throughout the 20th century. That the true implications of the 19th century’s pathologies could not be gripped until the 20th century: “…then this fate therefore has something to tell us because it is contained in the ticking of a clockwork whose knell has first pierced our ears.”

For Buck-Morss, this essay is emblematic of Benjamin’s “constellation”: that “truth was [relative] to the historical present;” that the past must be thought in such a way to “awaken” the present moment to its historical “origin,” whilst also demonstrating the “legibility” of the past in relation to later historical developments.

Adorno’s reaction testifies to the radicalism of many of Benjamin’s assertions, especially in relation to his prior thought which did not advocate such a full-scale evacuation of aura or tradition. In fact, the Institute held off publishing the 2nd edition of the essay due to what they termed to be the fascist elements of its assertions regarding the evacuation of culture. For Adorno, such assertions “…underestimate the technical character of art”<sup>156</sup>; as hasty and generalized (Brechtian) assertions they underestimate the complexity (“non-identity”) inherent in every work, that certain forms of art are not <i>de facto</i> emancipatory or oppressive, and Benjamin cannot make such sweeping judgments of the “autonomus” work of art. As Adorno writes, “However it seems to me that the autonomous work of Art does not itself belong to the dimension of myth…but is inherently dialectical, that is, compounded within itself the magical element with the sign

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<sup>154</sup> Benjamin, <i>Briefe</i> 2: 690. “These reflections anchor the history of art in the 19th century in an understanding of art as it is experience by the present” (Benjamin to Scholem, 1936). Both cited in Wolin, <i>An Aesthetic of Redemption</i>, 186.

<sup>155</sup> Buck-Morss, <i>The Origin of Negative Dialectics</i>, 150.

<sup>156</sup> Specifically, Benjamin does not differentiate within the genre of film (high or low), and simply asserts <i>all film</i> to be in rapport with the masses. Adorno of course will be highly critical of film in his later analyses of the “Culture Industry.”
of freedom.” What Adorno advocates is “more dialectics:” that if Benjamin is going to defend kitsch film as potentially containing political import, he must equally defend autonomous art and traditional figures such as Kafka and Schoenberg, demonstrating the dialectical capacity of works of art more generally. With such assertions, Adorno is in fact criticizing Benjamin from the perspective of Benjamin’s own early work. Reminding him that he too saw such a radical potential in tradition, and that he should avoid such hasty proclamations such as advocating for the total destruction of aura. Latent in this is Adorno’s persistent distain for Brecht, and he clearly felt the need to prevent Benjamin from wholly evacuating his early model of criticism: “my own task is to hold your hand steady until the Brechtian sun has finally sunk beneath the exotic waters.” In somewhat of a response to this essay Adorno will write “On the Fetish Character of Music and the Regression of Listening” (1936), which takes aim at Benjamin’s central thesis regarding the political potential of an aesthetics of reproduction. Specifically, in the domain of music, reproduction (or recorded music), had lead to “regression” of listening and a passivity in the audience, negating the critical potential Adorno thought music to hold. In fact, Benjamin’s 1936 essay became somewhat of a straw man for the articulation of many of Adorno’s own views of art in Aesthetic Theory (1970), where he will defend the “autonomy” of Art, as it most valuable social function:

[Art] becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art. By crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as ‘socially useful,’ it criticizes society as merely existing. (AS, 355)

Adorno’s view actually has much in common with Benjamin’s reading of Baudelaire in the 19th century. Baudelaire is not read in an explicitly political, or avant-garde sense, rather as a cipher to the social conditions of the century. Further, his 1937 essay on Edward Fuchs moves away from such explicitly Brechtian political proclamations, proposing instead a “materialist” version of many of his early categories of criticism. Though it has become fashionable to present Benjamin’s 1936 “Work of Art” essay as his definitive statement on aesthetics, this is not the case when placed in repose with his

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157 ABC, 128.
158 Ibid. 129.
other late works. Adorno rightly points this out as a somewhat Brechtian anomaly, and one can speculate that Benjamin took such claims seriously in the development of his later readings of aesthetics, specifically his 1938-39 essays on Baudelaire.

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Returning to the 1938-39 dispute, Benjamin’s response to Adorno (9.12.1938), defends the dialectical image (“philological attitude”) as it was presented earlier, while emphasizing that his essay should be seen as “prefatory” to the “social resolution” which will come in the final chapter of the work. He grants that Adorno’s objections have merit, but that the theoretical resolution Adorno calls for cannot occur within the essay, as such explicit interpretation would negate the critical power inherent in the presentation (Darstellung) of images. Many have speculated as to what this “social resolution” would entail. Wolin, and Agamben most notably, argue that the Baudelaire essay is the prefatory analysis, or the “material content” (“commentary”), that would later be read (or “critiqued”) to reveal the “truth content” of the 19th century. Indeed, there is basis for such an interpretation, both in the essay, and in Benjamin’s response to Adorno, where he writes: “To use the language of my work on the Elective Affinities, it demands the exposure of that material-content in which the truth-content can be historically deciphered.”

However, such interpretations fail to account for the complexities of Benjamin’s dialectical image (the “philological attitude”), alongside his decision to submit the essay for publication as an autonomous essay. That the essay has such an autonomous status cannot be denied from the preceding exegesis, it contains all the major elements of

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159 As Benjamin writes: “But I am afraid that an outright correction in the spirit indicated above would be extremely problematic. The lack of theoretical transparency to which you rightly allude is by no means a necessary consequence of the fact the philological procedure I have adopted in this section. I am more inclined to see it as a consequence of the fact that this philological procedure has not been specified as such. This apparent deficiency may be traced in part to the rather bold attempt to write the second half of the book before the first” (ABC. 294).

160 Wolin asserts that such a “materialist philology” “…redeems facts in accordance with social emancipation,” asserting the image to have a Brechtian, or “esoteric” resolution. Aesthetic of Redemption, 203. While Agamben reads this resolution “theologically” from the perspective of Benjamin’s early thinking on Language, see “The Prince and the Frog.”

161 Ibid 292. And further: “Only when the poem has come into its own in this way can the work be touched, or even shaken, by the act of interpretation” (ibid. 292).
Benjamin’s late historical methodology. The majority of criticism with respect to this essay, do not treat it substantially, latently ceding that Adorno’s criticisms where correct, and focusing more on the “2nd version” “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (1939). Michael Jennings is one of the few to valiantly defend this essay in its autonomy, stating it to be the performative enactment of Benjamin’s theory of dialectical images. This entails viewing the thesis of the essay not so much as a work on Baudelaire, but as a treatise on the practice of history more generally: on the creation of constellations and dialectical images. Speaking to this point Benjamin responds to Adorno, stating that he had unintentionally grasped the truth of the dialectical image:

> When you speak of a “wide eyed presentation of mere facts you are characterizing the proper philological attitude [or dialectical image]. This attitude was required not merely for the results it brings, but had to be solidly embedded in the construction for its own sake as well. It is true that the indifference between magic and positivism, as you so aptly put it, should be liquidated. In other words, the philological interpretation of the author should be preserved and overcome in the Hegelian manner by the dialectical materialist. Philology consists in an examination of the texts which proceeds by details and thus magically fixates the reader on it…You write in your Kierkegaard study that “astonishment” reveals “the profoundest insight into the relationship between dialectics, myth and image.”…I propose an amendment to it (as I am also intending to do with the related definition of the dialectical image on a latter occasion). I think one should say that astonishment is an outstanding object of such an insight. The appearance of closed facticity which attaches to philological investigation and places the investigator under its spell, dissolves precisely to the degree in which the object is constructed from a historical perspective. The base lines of this construction converge in our historical experience. In this way it constructs itself as a Monad. And in the monad everything that formerly lay mythically petrified within the given text comes alive.

Benjamin asserts that in the practice of constructing dialectical images (constellations)—in citing the past as monad—one overcomes the distinction between “commentary” and “criticism” in the constructive ability of language. In the proper presentation of the past, “astonishment” is evoked, but not in a specifically Brechtian (political) sense, rather as a

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162 See Jennings, *Dialectical Images*, 33-34.
163 *ABC*, 292. As Arendt writes in relation to this: “When Adorno criticized Benjamin’s ‘wide eyed presentation of actualities’…, he hit the nail right on its head; this is precisely what Benjamin was doing and wanted to do” (*Illuminations*, 11).
mode by which the text comes alive; that is, reveals itself as continually citable in
constellation with the present moment. The dialectical image must be constructed in a
sense that revels the past as constructible, as emblematic of the ability to write and cite
history from the present moment.\textsuperscript{164} Here Benjamin justifies his own immanent
perspective as a critic: his task is to present the “material” on its own terms, not to bring
about a dramatic \textit{deus ex machina} of a Marxist “social resolution.” In reading Benjamin’s
essay on Baudelaire, one should not focus on what such a “social resolution” would
entail—if it would be Brechtian, or Adornian, or surrealist—rather the focus should be
thrust upon the dialectical image as a method of construction, of a radically new model
for writing history. What is fundamental is not speculation as to what the Baudelaire
book, or \textit{The Arcades}, would look like in completed form, but the “—ability” to create
such constellations and correspondences, to conceive history (and thinkers as Benjamin
and Adorno) as constructible for our present moment. That they, and the Frankfurt
School more generally are re-writeable based on the manifold of affinities therein.

This letter is perhaps Benjamin’s most explicit statement on his late formulation
of the dialectical image (alongside Thesis XVII), though it further acknowledges the
development of the concept in “correspondence” with Adorno (by citing Adorno’s
\textit{Kierkegaard} study), a quotation which also appeared in \textit{The Arcades} [N2,7]. In effect he
is enacting the constellational method with respect to his correspondence with Adorno,
employing a quotation from 5 years earlier so as to demonstrate even past
correspondences as re-citable, and alive with respect to the present moment. As he
writes, “I will not deny that these may occasionally do some violence to my original
interests,”\textsuperscript{165} though it is such a “destructive character” that allows the past to be “re-
constellated.” It is perhaps as a performative example of the dynamic power of the
dialectical image that lead Benjamin to submit “The Paris of the Second Empire in
Baudelaire” to the Institute for publication, a treatise on the power of the constellational
form.

\textsuperscript{164} As Terry Eagleton will put it, history is “re-constellated:” demonstrating the ability for it to be
constructed anew (\textit{Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism}, 119).
\textsuperscript{165} \textit{ABC}, 291.
The true tragedy of Benjamin’s late work is that many of his imperatives fell on deaf ears, or were realized too late. As he wrote to Adorno: “there was more at stake than solidarity with the Institute, or simple fidelity to historical materialism, namely, a solidarity with the experiences which we have all shared over the last fifteen years.”

Benjamin had attempted to describe something of this experience (of the crises of the 1930s), through an interrogation of its “pre-history” in the 19th century, describing the dangers and utopias of the project of modernity. It was such ambiguity and tragedy that remained with Benjamin until his death in 1940. The Institute did not publish the 1st Baudelaire essay, though Adorno encouraged him to re-write it into “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (1939), an essay which has received much more scholarly attention likely due Adorno’s selection of it for Illuminations (1955). The essay itself is uncharacteristic of Benjamin’s late style, utilizing straightforward argumentation, and failing to include the central motifs of the Passagen-Werk, or his late historiographical imperatives.

Benjamin closes the essay with the motif of Baudelaire (the poet) losing his halo as he is jostled backward in the crowd—a motif emblematic of Klee’s backwards facing angel—the poet is helplessly immersed, un-able to find a rapport with his readers, or give representation [Darstellung] to modernity. A figure reminiscent of Benjamin himself, who found affinity with Baudelaire one final time.

Baudelaire singled out being jostled by the crowd as the decisive unique experience…having been betrayed by these last allies of his, Baudelaire battled the crowd—with the impotent rage of someone fighting the rain or the wing. This is the nature of something lived through (Erlebnis) to which Baudelaire has given the weight of an experience (Erfahrung). He indicated the price for which the sensation of the modern age may be had: the disintegration of the aura in the experience of shock.

V. Post-History: Negative Dialectics

“Is there—and this is the same thing, differently worded—a dialectics without a system? Benjamin’s thesis and task.” -Adorno, Lectures on Negative Dialectics, 23

166 Ibid. 291.
167 As Jennings writes, describing the dissonance of the work with Benjamin’s oeuvre: “[the essay] makes use of a lucid and continuous argument, a discursive form Benjamin otherwise avoids; it uses oversimplified elements of Freudian theory as its theoretical armature; and it consciously avoids the more explosive aspects of the theory behind Das Passagen-Werk” (Dialectical Images, 20).
In conclusion, the “post-history” of Benjamin’s dialectical images (constellations) will be stated by way of Adorno’s own negative dialectic. Though appearing by name in 1960s (*Lectures on Negative Dialectics 1965/55; Negative Dialectics 1966*) Adorno asserts these texts to be “...a methodological account of what I do in general.” An articulation of the “non-systematic system” employed throughout his life, beginning with his employment of Benjamin in 1931: “I want to try to put my cards on the table—in so far as I know what my own cards are, and in so far as any thinker knows what cards he holds.” As has been argued throughout, Adorno is one who employs Benjamin in a “systematic” direction, translating his thinking to spheres not originally intended, yet in so doing revealing new “-abilities” within the original. Perhaps most prominently Adorno sought to employ Benjamin’s model to the history of metaphysics, utilizing his constellational form as mode of thinking through philosophy after its objective dissolution: his own negative dialectic.

As he states in his lectures, “negative dialectics” attempt to demonstrate “...the possibility of philosophy in an authoritative sense without either system or ontology.” In the same lecture (16.11.1965), he relates his own project to that of Benjamin’s 1918 “Program for a Coming Philosophy” (see Ch. 1), with its attempt to articulate a broader notion of experience without reducing it in a conceptual framework. By 1965, Adorno felt that his early assertions regarding the objective dissolution of philosophy to have been empirically verified by the horrors of the 20th Century. Despite this, he still inquired into the possibilities afforded by philosophy, though in a decidedly different sense that Heidegger’s late turn to “thinking.” Adorno’s later works should be seen as attempts to reconcile the possibility of philosophy with the horrors of the century, and in doing so he metamorphosed something of Benjamin’s immense melancholy into the dissonance (negativity) of his philosophical method. Philosophy must be turned towards “non-identity,” attempting to articulate the concrete particulars left out of philosophical systems, and in so doing, exposing such systems as devices of domination.

170 Ibid. 31.
To do this, Adorno breaks philosophical concepts out of their systematic structures (which he asserts are devices of “domination”\textsuperscript{171}), giving them an axial turn towards “non-identity,” that is particular objects left out of the idealist architectonic. In so doing, Adorno utilizes such philosophical concepts to create “constellations”: immanent assemblages of systematic concepts refashioned for “critical” purposes. Adorno resists phenomenology, or any return to “givenness,” instead insisting on a constant dissonance (“non-identity”) between thinking and being. Neither should Adorno be considered wholly as a materialist: he continued to reflect upon the Kantian question of the condition of possibility for individual experience, which for him contains substantial social and ideological elements (“the primacy of the object”). Fundamentally, Adorno utilizes Benjamin constellations as a mode of reading Hegel, reconciling his model of immanence within the Hegelian schema. That is, Adorno read Benjamin’s dialectical image (or dialectic at standstill), as a mode by which to subsist on the level of the “negative” (antithesis), resisting what he felt to be Hegel’s tendency towards positive reconciliation (synthesis), and to continue the self-movement of the notion without reconciliation. This allowed Adorno to develop a wholly negative model of philosophy, one founded on critique, that could attempt to make thought “actual” again.

A study of greater breadth would continue into the many valences of Adorno’s method, specifically his “correspondence” with Benjamin in his reading of Hegel. Much of \textit{Negative Dialectics} can be read as an attempt to come to terms both with Benjamin’s dialectical method, alongside his own responses in correspondence—a conversation that Adorno never seem to reconcile, or conclude. In his final methodological treatise, Adorno demonstrates the possibility of placing many aspects of Benjamin’s thought in dialogue with the broader history of philosophy and metaphysics; a possibility often foreclosed by disciplinary boundaries. One can imagine considering readings of Benjamin in correspondence with Hegel, Schelling, or even Deleuze. Likewise, throughout \textit{Aesthetic Theory} (1970), Adorno continues many of his correspondences with Benjamin regarding the work of art, holding to his heroic defense of the possibilities of autonomous art. One

\textsuperscript{171} That is Idealist categories are based on the repression of nature and myth in favor of the “progress” of history. This is specifically argued in \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment}, and \textit{Negative Dialectics} “The Antinomical Character of Systems.” For more on Adorno’s analysis of the oppressive character of systems with respect to nature see: Deborah Cook, \textit{Adorno on Nature}. 
could conceive of a study examining the specifics of their correspondence on questions relating to aesthetics, and the possibilities therein. In awakening new “-abilities” in Benjamin, Adorno demonstrates that his method could be moved further, and in a multiplicity of directions.

To say that Adorno was influenced by Benjamin, is of course an understatement. Not only did he employ aspects of Benjamin’s method, but he sought to extend it further, translating it from the perspective of his own present; and such extensions are seen throughout Adorno’s major texts of the century. Likewise, Adorno should be seen as an important interlocutor for Benjamin, one who presented him with imperatives, and applications of his methodology. Following Benjamin’s death in 1940, the onset of the war took a personal turn for Adorno: his eulogy, “A Portrait of Walter Benjamin,” provides a moving (though somewhat reified) image of Benjamin as a one who attempted to reconcile hope and hopelessness, searching for the utopia in dissolution. A grand revolutionary overcoming was never demanded, only the modest task of preservation: of collecting, and thinking the past as citable.

Adorno and Benjamin engaged in a profound philosophical conversation, the likes of which has not been seen since, and perhaps the full valences of it have not yet been understood. In his final (dictated) letter, Benjamin wished for such a conversation to continue:

I would ask you to pass on my thoughts to my friend Adorno and to explain to him the situation in which I have now found myself. I no longer have enough time to write all those letters I would have written.

-Walter Benjamin, 25.9.1940
Conclusion

“The work is the death mask of its conception” – Benjamin, *One-Way Street, SW 1*: 459.

This project began as an attempt to integrate the “correspondence(s)” of Benjamin and Adorno, examining both their explicit letters, and the implicit constellations underpinning their thought. The first chapter began by developing Benjamin’s immanent method of criticism, alongside Adorno’s re-direction of it towards his own critical theory. In this sense, the opening encounter can be seen as “originary” behind what is today considered the Frankfurt School. The second chapter interrogated their respective readings of Kafka, noting their divergent conceptions of Messianism, and imperatives for political criticism. The final chapter examined Benjamin’s dialectical image as it is presented in his later work, specifically his “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire” (1938), along with Adorno’s objections and responses to such a method. Latent in this project where several points regarding the development of Benjamin as a thinker which can be recapitulated here:

1) Benjamin’s thinking is marked by a consistent imperative of immanence, by which a work or epoch must be elucidated in the “light it provides for itself.” As the “constellation” arose out of the baroque, so too did the “dialectical image” arise out of the experience of modernity, and the 19th century. Though he did modify his early distinctions (“commentary” and “criticism”), his commitment to immanence remained throughout his work.

2) Related to this, Benjamin’s did not decidedly “break” with his early model of criticism (in 1934), in favor of a Marxist model of critique, rather sought to apply it on a larger historical scope. This entailed immanently working through the reception of the 19th century, which necessitated a substantial engagement with Marxist historiography, and a redirection of its insights to Benjamin’s own critical purposes.

3) Finally, Adorno was of influence to Benjamin’s development as a thinker. He issued meaningful, and consistent imperatives to Benjamin throughout his life, allowing for Benjamin to formulate his thought in new and experimental directions. Though a determinate relationship cannot be drawn, Adorno should be considered an essential correspondent in the development of Benjamin’s thinking.

Likewise, Benjamin’s model of criticism should be seen as essential in the development of Adorno’s own model of criticism (the negative dialectic), and hence can be thought of as “originary” with respect to many categories associated with critical theory.
Of the “correspondences” that have been examined between the two, there are perhaps many more which have not been taken up—both with respect to the two, and the Frankfurt School more generally. One could image similar projects on Benjamin and Brecht/Scholem; Adorno and Kracauer; Pollock and Horkheimer, possible correspondents abound if one decides to approach such figures immanently. One could also imagine the extension of Adorno and Benjamin’s correspondence further, and perhaps this study will serve as a provisional commentary for further criticism. If this study has presented anything it is perhaps this possibility: of embracing the manifold of constellations in every intellectual position, of thinking figures in correspondence.
Bibliography

Primary Texts


Commentary


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