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Secret Signals from Another World: Walter Benjamin's Concept of Innervation

Matthew Charles

Abstract

Walter Benjamin refers to the “idea of revolution as an innervation of the technical organs of the collective” as one of the articles of his politics. The significance of this assertion has received relatively little attention in the philosophical reception of his political thought compared to the alternative model of revolution – made famous from the paralipomena to the late theses ‘On the Concept of History’ – as the emergency handbrake of history. Drawing on some of the debates and tensions generated by the work of Miriam Bratu Hansen, this discussion aims at an exegesis of some of the lesser known intellectual sources that influenced Benjamin’s theory of innervation. The purpose in doing so is not an attempt to reconcile or integrate these sources with dominant philosophical reconstructions of what is sometimes characterized as Benjamin’s “Western Marxism” and elaborated, in the more familiar context of Surrealist innervation, as a synthesis of Freud and Marx, but rather to reveal an alternative constellation of Soviet biomechanics and reactionary anti-capitalist *Lebensphilosophie*, united in their shared rejection of Freudian psychoanalysis.

Contributor's Note

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In Convolute W of the unfinished *Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin refers to the “idea of revolution as an innervation [*Innervation*] of the technical organs of the collective” as one of the “articles of my politics.”¹ The idea is repeated in material related to the second version and the French translation of Benjamin’s ‘Work of Art’ essay from 1935/6 but expunged – along with the context of first and second technology through which it is explained – from the final version, written in the late 1930s.² The significance of Benjamin’s assertion has received relatively little attention in the philosophical reception of his political thought

I would like to thank my colleague at the Institute for Modern and Contemporary Culture, David Cunningham, and the anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments on and criticisms of earlier versions of this article.

¹ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, W7, 4; hereafter indicated in the text as *AP*.

² Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, 133; hereafter indicated in the text as *CE*; cf. Hansen, “Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street,” 313-4.

compared to the alternative model of revolution – made famous from the paralipomena to the late theses ‘On the Concept of History’ – as the emergency handbrake of history.³ The latter tends to equate more straightforwardly, almost tautologically, with the messianic figure of interruption with which Benjamin’s thought has become synonymous, although perhaps only at the risk of conflating the political and the theological in his work.

Conversely, Benjamin’s more affirmative idea of revolutionary innervations has received more attention in film and media theory, primarily in the pioneering work of Miriam Bratu Hansen, where it tends to remain isolated within the context of the history of cinema. Drawing on some of the debates and tensions generated by Hansen’s work, this discussion aims to rectify this omission through an exegesis of some of the lesser known intellectual sources that influenced Benjamin’s theory of innervation, and focusing on the theory of bodily innervations as well as his extension of this theory into the collective domain of technology. The purpose in doing so is not an attempt to reconcile or integrate this account with dominant philosophical reconstructions of what is sometimes characterized as Benjamin’s Western Marxism,⁴ but rather to reveal a less familiar and largely repressed set of intellectual sources, ranging from Asja Lacis’s proletarian children’s theatre, Vsevolod Meyerhold’s biomechanical training, Sergei Eisenstein and Sergei Tretyakov’s theory of expressive movements and V. M. Bekhterev’s collective reflexology in the Soviet Union, as well as debates about bodily rhythm associated with the reactionary anti-capitalist *Lebensphilosophie* of Rudolf Bode and Ludwig Klages in Germany. What connects these theories is a critical rejection of the bourgeois “subjective psychology” of Freudian psychoanalysis, problematizing attempts to frame Benjamin’s politics in terms of the

³ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Volume 4, 402; hereafter indicated in the text as SW followed by volume and page number.

⁴ See, for example, Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, 54 & 89-90; Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, 3. Neil Davidson writes that “Western Marxism is the category to which Benjamin’s work has the most obvious affinities, and Anderson certainly regards him as one of its representative figures, arguing that Benjamin shares their characteristic obscurity of language involving ‘a gnomic brevity and indirection’” (“Walter Benjamin and the classical Marxist tradition”). Davidson goes on to question this association, as does, to a certain extent, Esther Leslie in *Overpowering Conformism* (9-10).

synthesis of Marx and Freud typical of Western Marxism. In Benjamin's work, it will be argued, these intervened bodily gestures provide a political model for a utopian will whose "secret signal of what is to come" is "not so much a signal of the unconscious, of latent processes, repressions, or censorship (as the psychologists like to think), but a signal from another world" (SW2 203-6).

Psychoanalytical Conversions: Contra Freudian-Marxism

Hansen, who offers the most extended and developed discussion of Benjamin's theory of innervation, suggests that the concept emerged with "selective resource to psychoanalysis, including the neurological, anthropological, and surrealist fringes of Freud" (CE 134). With cautious reservations, her work frames Benjamin's theory via psychoanalytical models of the psychic apparatus, noting how in Freud's early writing the term describes the normal conversion of "an unbearable, incompatible psychic excitation into '*something somatic*'" (CE 136).⁵ As she explains, it is most likely a residue of older neurological discourse and is used by Freud in a similar sense to mean the transmission of energy along the nerve system, specifically the *effluent* system where it is discharged in the muscular stimulation of organs (CE 135).

In doing so Hansen follows Sigrid Weigel, who argues that Benjamin's use of this term is one of several traces of a "less systematic and conscious, but for all that no less intensive reception" of Freud in his earlier work.⁶ In her brief discussion of the concept, Weigel sees it as further evidence of Benjamin's attempt "at reformulating problems derived from Marxism with the aid of a way of looking at things that has been through the school of psychoanalysis." Weigel's interpretation is situated within the context of Benjamin's reception of Surrealism around 1929, focusing on his the discussion of "bodily collective

⁵ Cf. Freud, "The Neuro-Psychoses of Defence," 49.

⁶ Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space*, 107.

innervation” at the end of ‘The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia’ and of “motoric innervation” in his ‘Notes on a Theory of Play’ from the same year.⁷ In the former, Breton’s *Nadja* is said to “convert” the energies and tensions of intoxication (discovered in the shocking, the beloved, the immoral and, most famously, the outmoded) into revolutionary experience and action, through a conjunction of bodily innervations and the “the long-sought image sphere” which is opened up when politics, stripped of its moral metaphors, becomes action that “puts forth its own image” (*SW* 2: 217). In the ‘First Manifesto of Surrealism,’ Breton associates the poetic technique of automatism with the blurring of reality and dream into “a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*, if one may so speak,” and attributes the rediscovery of this realm to Freud.⁸ As in Margaret Cohen’s *Profane Illumination*, Benjamin’s sought-after interpenetration of body and image is therefore understood, in a context determined largely by familiarity with the French avant-garde, as a synthesis of Marxism and psychoanalysis.⁹

Unlike Weigel, Hansen remains undecided as to “whether Benjamin borrowed the term from Freud” and acknowledges that its physiological dimension prevents unproblematic translation into Freudian theory (*CE* 137). Despite these reservations, however, Hansen goes on to frame her reading of innervation via psychoanalytical discourse, following Weigel in comparing it to Freud and Breuer’s early and more specific description of *somatic innervation*, before contrasting this with Freud’s later account of anticathexis (*Gegenbesetzung*) in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. The first concerns the hysteric’s

⁷ *Ibid.*, 111 & 174n17.

⁸ Breton, “Manifesto of Surrealism (1924)”, 14 & 10. The sought-after interpenetration of dream and reality – associated here with the Surrealist experiments in automatic writing begun with Breton and Philippe Soupault’s *The Magnetic Fields* (1920) – has, of course, a longer literary history that encompasses German Expressionism and Romanticism, and Benjamin’s interest in this topic predates his interest in Surrealism. Even within Surrealism, however, the influence of Freud is ambiguous and complex and it is worth noting Louis Aragon’s much more ambiguous relation to psychoanalysis: *A Wave of Dreams* (1924) only mentions Freud in passing and it is metaphysical rather than psychological accounts of Surrealist reverie that predominate in and *Treatise on Style* (1928) and *Paris Peasant* (1926), the most direct source for Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, which describes in mocking tones the Passage de L’Opéra as presiding over ‘the double game of love and death ...played by *Libido* whose temple, these days, is built of medical books and who has recently taken to strolling around with the little puppy-dog Sigmund Freud at his heels’ (Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, 34).

⁹ Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space*, 111; Cohen, *Profane Illumination*.

attempted discharge of the unbearable psychic charge associated with an incompatible idea, which, taking “the wrong route,” undergoes a somatic conversion and becomes lodged as a mnemonic symbol (the repetitive movements or hallucinations associated with hysterical symptoms). This persists, Freud claims, until reconverted into psychic thought-activity and then successfully discharged through the process of Beuer’s talking cure (*CE* 135-6).¹⁰

Hansen contrasts this with the distinct description of anticathexis offered by Freud as a reaction to the repetition-compulsion (the death drive’s compulsion to repeat, demonstrated by victims of traumatic shock following the First World War) in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which Benjamin makes reference to in his most sustained engagement with Freud in the late essay ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’. Whereas innervation attempts the discharge of excitation (but takes the “wrong route” in hysteria), anticathexis is, in contrast, the investment of another kind of energy by the ego to bind and control the mass of excitations associated with a traumatic breach in perceptual consciousness, an investment that takes place at the expense of an impoverishment of the rest of the psychic system. As Hansen notes, “the term *innervation* does *not* appear in this context, and for good reason, because it refers to the very process that is *blocked* ...the kind of discharge that alone could undo and counteract the anaesthetizing effects pinpointed by Benjamin” (*CE* 136).

Having established this Freudian framework, Hansen positions Benjamin’s expanded concept of innervation as an alternative both to the therapeutic re-conversion and discharge of neurotic somatic traces and to the adaptive but impoverishing reaction to machinic shock offered by psychoanalysis. Drawing on and developing Susan Buck-Morss’s interpretation in *The Dialectics of Seeing*, Hansen defines Benjamin’s innervation as a “*two-way* process or transfer, that is, not only a conversion of mental, affective energy into somatic, motoric form but also the possibility of reconvert[ing], and recover[ing], split-off psychic energy through

¹⁰ Freud, “The Neuro-Psychosis of Defence,” 349; cf. Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space*, 9.

motoric stimulation” that takes place via “a mimetic reception of the external world” (CE 150). In doing so, Hansen expands the role of the sensorially blasted cortical layer of “perceptual consciousness” beyond its function as a protective shield in Freud’s later account to that of a two-way matrix or medium of interplay between inner and outer, psychic and somatic. This positive, mimetic *therapy* constitutes an “empowering ...active response” to technological experience in contrast to a negative, passive and “defensive mimetic *adaptation* that protects at the price of paralyzing”. In particular, Miriam Hansen declares herself “sceptical” of attempts, especially by Mark Hansen in *Embodying Technesis*, to “assimilate Benjamin’s speculations to contemporary media theory ...and the subject’s inevitable abdication to the a priori regime of the apparatus” (CE 146 & n48). Both identify “the alignment of innervation with image content” as “the hallmark of Benjamin’s [earlier] surrealist phase” and regard this as “irreconcilable” with the concept of technological shock developed in Benjamin’s later essay ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’, although they differ in their respective privileging of these accounts.¹¹

Leaving to one side the accuracy of Hansen’s account of innervation, it should be noted that there are a number of problems connected to the interpretative framework used to develop this, problems that relate to a more general tension generated by psychoanalytical contextualisations of Benjamin’s theory. Whilst Weigel, for example, argues that “the older, neurological variant of psychoanalysis, in which bodily processes were attributed greater significance, evidently played a role in Benjamin’s earliest studies of Freud” (Benjamin attended Paul Häberlein’s seminar on Freud whilst at Bern in 1918), she fails to acknowledge that Benjamin is generally critical of Freud in these early writings, where he has a tendency to side with the madness of the analysand rather than the rationalism of the analyst and to

¹¹ Hansen, *Embodying Technesis*, 237-8.

identify Freud's concept of the unconscious with the religious structure of *Schuld* (guilt/debt) that underpins capitalist modernity (*SWI* 288-291).¹²

Although references to psychoanalysis proliferate in his work from 1930 onwards, the notion of the 'collective unconscious', elaborated alongside that of 'collective bodily innervations' in the *Arcades Project*, is closer to the depth psychology of C. G. Jung than Freud, as Adorno worriedly cautions (*SW3* 56). Indeed, this theory of dreams proceeds on the assumption of a "extravagantly heightened inner awareness" in the sleeper's dream-consciousness to "his own body, and the noises and feelings of his insides, such as blood pressure, intestinal churn, heartbeat, and muscle sensation" (*AP* K1, 4), which has more in common with pre-Freudian, physiological accounts of dreaming. As John McCole has concluded, Benjamin's "understanding of the temporal relationship between dreams and waking ...separates him fundamentally from the founder of psychoanalysis."¹³ Even in 'On Some Motifs', which represents one of his most sustained positive engagements with psychoanalysis, Benjamin has to practice what has been called a "strong misreading" of Freud in order to draw his Proustian distinction between two kinds of memory (*Erinnerung* and *Gedächtnis*) and so rescue a non-conservative and dynamic account of remembrance (*Eingedenken*).¹⁴

Given her attempt to construct a positive therapeutic account of innervation in earlier versions of the 'Work of Art' essay, in contrast to the negative adaptation to technological shock she finds in Benjamin's last writings, it is therefore odd that Hansen proceeds from a Freudian framework that only becomes adopted in those later writings. For in projecting that schema back into the earlier writings, she can give no explanation as to why Benjamin would seek to construct an alternative model of therapeutic discharge over and against Freud's

¹² Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space*, 111 & 106. Scholem notes that "Schreber's book appealed to him far more than Freud's essay on it" (Scholem, *Walter Benjamin*, 57; quoted in Sarah Ley Roff, "Benjamin and Psychoanalysis," 119). Cf. Hamacher, "Guilt History," 98.

¹³ McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, 294-5.

¹⁴ Hansen, *Embodying Techne*, 234.

privileging of the talking cure as the privileged process of re-conversion and discharge, nor why it is when he does turn more explicitly to Freud that the therapeutic element of innervation is dropped.

Although the concept of innervation resurfaces in the 1929 essay on Surrealism, it is therefore unsurprising that the term precedes this work, nor that it is absent from his earlier essay on Surrealism, 'Dream Kitsch', written in 1925. As Hansen and Weigel make clear, it first enters his writing in relation to the new "cycle of production" that is inaugurated with *One-Way Street* (written 1923-6; published 1928). Nor is it surprising that Hansen is compelled to admit that, "imagined as a two-way process, Benjamin's concept of innervation may have less in common with Freudian psychoanalysis than with contemporary perceptual and behaviourist psychology, physiological aesthetics, and acting theory, in particular the Soviet avant-garde discourse of biomechanics" (CE 140). Like Susan Buck-Morss, who similarly notes how Benjamin's "theories of *mimesis* and innervation ...resonate intriguingly with discussions of biorhythmics and biomechanics among Soviet theatre and film directors like Meyerhold and Eisenstein,"¹⁵ Hansen does not develop her insight beyond a few lines, relegating most of her discussion to the footnotes and apologetically reflecting that "recourse to neurophysiological and reflex psychology may not be as sophisticated as the insights of psychoanalysis" (CE 137).

Yet it is possible that an appeal to sophistication is itself a consequence of the current dominance of psychoanalytical theory within Western culture, Western Marxism and the contemporary fields of literary, cultural and media theory to which these contributed. If this is the case, one danger of such translation is that we bring Benjamin's thought into the familiarity of our intellectual present – including that of the European avant-garde – too

¹⁵ Buck-Morss, "Walter Benjamin: Between Academic Fashion and the Avant-Garde," 79.

seamlessly, jettisoning the friction and tension that may be produced in striking the underground currents of what is now unfashionable or derided.

From Repression to Expression: Biomechanical Release

In both the *Arcades Project*, begun in the late 1920s, and its near-identical formulation in the ‘Work of Art’ essay from the mid-1930s, Benjamin compares the collective “efforts at innervation” on the part of the technological body with how “a child who has learned to grasp stretches out its hand for the moon as it would a ball” (SW2 124, n10). It is this figure of the bodily gestures of the learning child that directly connects the first appearance of the term innervation in *One-Way Street* with its resurfacing at the end of the decade, not in the essay on Surrealism but in the ‘Programme for a Proletarian Children’s Theatre’. Benjamin had promised to formulate these “theoretical foundations” after expressing “tremendous interest” in Asja Lacis’s children’s theatre when they first met in 1924, but he only completed them after they were reunited in Berlin, following his trip to Moscow, sometime in 1928-9.¹⁶

As Justine McGill has argued, dominant interpretations of Benjamin’s life and work typically overlook how the shared fascination for theatre drew Benjamin and Lacis into a productive intellectual, as well as erotic, relationship.¹⁷ The proletarian theatres upon which Benjamin and Lacis’s ‘Programme’ is based, established by Lacis in Orel in 1918, in Riga and Moscow in the early 1920s and then attempted unsuccessfully in Berlin in 1929, performed plays by, among others, the avant-garde director and producer Meyerhold, who Lacis had first encountered during her studies at the Bekhterev Institute in St. Petersburg, and performances would likely have been modelled on the biomechanical techniques of

¹⁶ McGill, “The Porous Coupling of Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis,” 62.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

Meyerhold, Eisenstein and Tretyakov that Lacis would have experienced whilst attending the Fyodor Komisarjevsky theatre studio in Moscow.¹⁸

Eisenstein and Tretyakov claimed, in their 1923 essay on ‘Expressive Movement,’ that their biomechanical theatre training was rooted in a theory of “expressive movement,” which divided all gestures into “subconscious, instinctive, the pure biological” *reflexes* (such as the internal bodily movements associated with breathing, digestion and the heartbeat, and the involuntary muscular responses to bodily stimulus, such as the grasping and startle reflexes found in infants) and “the conscious, controlled, co-ordinated, and restrained” *movements*.¹⁹ For the actor, Eisenstein and Tretyakov write, “Expression is always a motor element ... a process...and ...from the very mechanics of this process, one can single out the moment of ‘fixation’ – the moment when the forces are balanced, after which the expression passes over either into a real act, symbolized by the expression (victory of the reflexive thrust), or into a state of repose (victory of the voluntary stimulus).” The “fixation” of the expression of grasping, for example, symbolized by the crooked fingers of the hand, can lead either to the completion of the reflex of grasping or to the conscious relaxation of the fingers.

When reflexes and conscious movement come into conflict, false “tensions” may be produced that can cause muscle fatigue, cramps and temporary paralysis, as well as the possibility that “the voluntary impulse and nervous expenditure turn inward, so to speak, disorganizing the reflexive apparatus.”²⁰ Biomechanical training is intended to overcome such psychophysical tensions through the practice of “releasing” exercises, which provide the basis of the biomechanical “postures” used in actor training, directed “toward elimination of false tensions”.²¹

¹⁸ Lacis, *Revolutionär im Beruf*, 12-14; McGill, “The Porous Coupling of Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis,” 59-60.

¹⁹ Eisenstein and Tretyakov, “Expressive Movement,” 173.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 180.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 182.

The dualistic structure of Benjamin and Lacis's 'Program,' which is organized into a Schema of Tension and Release (*Spannung/Erlösung*, the latter translated less physiologically in the *Selected Writings* as "Resolution"), derives, I want to suggest, from this biomechanical theory, which therefore provides a more direct starting point for the two-way concept of innervation that Hansen seeks in psychoanalysis. In the 'Program,' Benjamin characterizes the gestures of the child as an exactly balanced transference between the "receptive innervation" of the perceptual organs and the "creative innervation" of the motor organs, and describes the workshops of the theatre schools as aiming at the "development of these gestures in the different forms of expression" (SW2 203). The theatrical performances, which collectively combine these different forms, enable the tensions [*Spannungen*] of this collective labour to be released [*lösen*] in a manner that becomes educational for both the child performers and the adult audience, since such a performance also "unleashes vast energies for the true genius of education – namely, the power of observation." For Lacis, theatrical training could therefore provide the means "which would completely take hold" of the war orphans she encountered "and set their traumatized abilities free."²²

Significantly, Eisenstein went on to develop these biomechanical techniques, in the context first of theatre in 'The Montage of Attractions' (1923) and then of cinema in 'The Montage of Film Attractions' (1924), into his own theory of the training of collective reflexes through expressive movements, for which Hansen observes, he repeatedly uses the term *innervation* (CE 324, n22). As Lutz Koepnick acknowledges, "Although Benjamin never discusses particular Russian avant-garde film in further detail, his understanding of cinematic communication as a process of shock, disruption, and spectatorial stimulation clearly draws from Eisenstein's early notions of montage cinema."²³ Eisenstein's description of his early method as the "free montage of arbitrarily selected independents effects (attractions)," with

²² Lacis, "A Memoir," 25; quoted in McGill, "The Porous Coupling of Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis," 62.

²³ Koepnick, *Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Power*, 132.

the latter defined as the calculated use of “any element of the theatre that subjects the spectator to a sensual or psychological impact ...to produce in him certain emotional shocks,” will be familiar, for example, to readers of Benjamin’s ‘Work of Art’ essay.²⁴ For Benjamin, the discontinuity of cinematic images dissects expressive bodily gestures into a series of minute innervations, while the continuity of the sequence of images in a filmstrip replicates that of the assembly line within the industrial production process (SW2 94-5). The shock effect produced by this continuous discontinuity inculcates the more tactile experience of reception in distraction around which the ‘Work of Art’ essay is centred (SW2 117-120). As for Eisenstein, who singles out the “lyrical effect” of Charlie Chaplin’s films as “inseparable from the attraction of the specific mechanics of his movements,”²⁵ it is Chaplin’s slapstick sequences that take on particular historical significance for Benjamin, within the context of a “therapeutic release of unconscious energies” that have arisen from the “dangerous tensions” produced by technology: Chaplin’s *Gestus*, his “jerky sequence of tiny movements,” thus integrates “the human being into the film image” (SW2 117-120).

Mimetic Attraction: Collective Reflexology

While there has been widespread acknowledgement of the influence of avant-garde practices of montage in Benjamin’s writing from *One-Way Street* onwards, less attention has been paid to its associated theory of psychosomatic or affective *attractions* and the biomechanical principles of bodily expressive *rhythm* upon which these are based. It is important to recognize, for example, that according to Eisenstein,

the attractionness of an expressive movement (that is, the psycho-physical, previously-calculated effect on the spectator) is assured ...to the extent that each

²⁴ Eisenstein, “Montage of Attractions,” 34.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, cf. also Yutkevich and Eisenstein, “The Eighth Art. On Expressionism, America and, of course, Chaplin”.

phase of ...work attracts the attention of the spectator [through] ...the arousal of the intended emotions in the spectator ...who in turn reflexively repeated in the weakened form the entire system of the actor's movements: as a result of the produced movements, the spectator's incipient muscular tensions are released in the desired emotion.²⁶

The politically directed organization of the actors' movements is designed to produce a corresponding psychosomatic "agitation" or "the moulding of the audience in a desire direction (or mood)."²⁷ A "purely productive tension" in the performer's movements generates an emotion in the spectator which "grows and develops at the expense of the[ir] unused muscular energy," until the point it is eventually collectively discharged. The attraction is, in this sense, a posture staged as a releasing exercise for the audience. The overall combination of such postures is designated as a "montage of attractions," the latter defined as "any demonstrable fact (an action, an object, a phenomenon, a conscious combination, and so on) that is known and proven to have a definite effect on the attention and emotions of the audience."²⁸

Eisenstein later articulates such 'A Dialectic Approach to Film Form' (1929) in terms that broadly correspond to the first two principles of Friedrich Engel's *Dialectics of Nature*, which Eisenstein first read in 1926: the interpenetration of opposites in conflict, or rhythmic tensions, and the quantitative change in energy that results in qualitative transformation, or dynamic expression.²⁹ In his earlier writings, however, they are more directly linked to Meyerhold and, through Meyerhold, to the neurologist Bekhterev. In a list of topics for a programme of study associated with Meyerhold's biomechanical training, the second is on "the nature of expressive movements and actions determined by the biological construction of

²⁶ Eisenstein and Tretyakov, "Expressive Movement," 187.

²⁷ Eisenstein, "The Montage of Attractions," 34.

²⁸ Eisenstein, "The Montage of Attractions," 35; Eisenstein, "The Montage of Film Attractions," 40-1.

²⁹ Eisenstein, "A Dialectic Approach to Film Form," 47; Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, 30; cf. Bulgakowa, *Sergei Eisenstein: A Biography*.

the organism” and includes, “Mimeticism and its biological significance (Bekhterev).”³⁰ Here, the biomechanical model of psychophysical “tension” and “release” acquires a collective dimension through the notion of an “imitative, mimical infectiousness” upon the audience.

Bekhterev’s reflexology explicitly eschewed the “subjective psychology” of Western bourgeois societies, drawing instead on an “objective psychology” that investigated the system of innate (or unconditional) and association (or conditional) reflexes acquired through experience. He proposed that expressive movements could be understood as somato-mimetic reflexes: innate reflex responses to specific stimuli, such as the physiological reactions to irritants characterized by laughter or weeping, that could become conditioned as responses to non-physical stimuli, and that functioned as a mimetic language: a physical expression of physiological-emotional conditions often non-consciously imitated and so experienced by other observers.³¹ Extending this investigation beyond the scope of the individual, Bekhterev’s *Suggestion and Its Role in Social Life* (1908) and *Collective Reflexology* (1921) sought to investigate the “psychical” elements that holds between individuals in social groups and brings human collectives as a composite personality into existence. At the heart of such collectives is the ability to imitate, already present in a new born infant’s reflexive ability to copy the sounds, gestures, and movements of her mother, but also present in somato-mimetic reflexes such as emotion, and involved in the transmission of collective movement over large distances in space and time, such as the spread of revolutions or the revival of historical fashions in the present.³²

³⁰ A further subject, headed “Mimeticism,” lists the following topics: “Study by the actor of muscle movements,” “Movement of torso, arms, legs, head,” “Rationalization of movements,” “Signs of Recoil,” “Tempos of movements,” “Legato, staccato,” “Gesture as a result of movement”, “Large and small gesture,” “Laws of coordination of the body” (Law and Gordon, *Meyerhold, Eisenstein and Biomechanics*, 126-8).

³¹ Bekhterev, *General Principles of Human Reflexology*, 237-241; Bekhterev, “Emotions as Somato-Mimetic Reflexes,” 270-283.

³² Bekhterev, *Collective Reflexology*, 118-9.

For Bekhterev, the “psychic contagion” associated with “unintentional imitation” in groups interweaves closely with the phenomenon of suggestion, “the direct induction of psychic states,” including ideas, feelings, and sensations, “from one person to another ...without participation of the will (attention) of the perceiving person and often even without clear understanding on his part.”³³ Bekhterev discusses such collective suggestion in relation to examples of the ideo-motor reflex known as Carpenter’s Effect.³⁴ Alongside reflexes such as swallowing or blinking in response to a stimulus, the physiologist William Carpenter coined the term ideo-motor reflex to characterize how, under certain conditions of heightened suggestibility, “*Ideas* may become the source of muscular movement, independently either of volitions or of emotions.”³⁵ More generally, as Bekhterev’s reference to such phenomena indicates, the Carpenter Effect characterizes our tendency to unconsciously mimic the movements and implicitly the emotional state of a person we are observing, famous most notoriously in apparently spiritualist and paranormal phenomena such as dowsing, table turning, Ouija boards and telepathy.

As Hansen points out, Benjamin’s interest in innervation was similarly preoccupied with “the notion of a physiological ‘contagious’ or ‘infectious’ movement that would trigger emotional effects in the viewer, a form of mimetic identification based on the phenomena then known as Carpenter’s Effect” (*CE* 137). Carpenter and others attributed such effects to the interruption of the “ordinary *upward* course of external impressions, – whereby they successively produce sensations, ideas, emotions, and intellectual processes, the will giving the final decision upon the action to which they prompt,” an interruption of intellectual and volitional processes that can occur during a state of highly focused attention expectant of a given result and results in a transversal movement of energy towards an automated motor

³³ Bekhterev, *Suggestion and Its Role in Social Life*, 13-15.

³⁴ Bekhterev, *Suggestion and Its Role in Social Life*, 41, 48.

³⁵ Carpenter, “On the influence of Suggestion in Modifying and directing Muscular Movement, independently of Volition,” 152.

impulse. However, Benjamin's interest in innervation, as Hansen makes clear, was preoccupied with the opposite kind of movement: the possibility of a motoric-ideation reflex, in which mimetic stimulation of the sensory or locomotor organs, outside of the conscious intellectual processes such as in receptive states of distraction, might activate a deeper layer of ideas that, combined with present perceptions, could form the basis of an alternative object for the will.

Against Neil Leach's claim that "Mimesis in Walter Benjamin's writing, as indeed in Adorno's work, is a psychoanalytic term – taken from Freud," this suggests an alternative context for Benjamin's account of mimesis in 'Doctrine of the Similar' and 'On the Mimetic Faculty' from the early 1930s.³⁶ While Benjamin's writing on the mimetic faculty returns to an earlier linguistic interest in the dissolution of the dichotomy of subject and object, in his later writings the deduction of an experience of non-sensuous similitude is ultimately founded on a physiological account of "spontaneous mimic-expressive gestures," distinguished from but related to both spoken language and conceptual thought (SW3 83-4).³⁷ For the early Benjamin, "[w]e cannot imagine anything [either animate or inanimate nature] that does not communicate its mental nature in its expression," such that the "language of this lamp, for example, communicates not the lamp ...but the language-lamp, the lamp in communication, the lamp in expression" (SW1 62-3). This expressiveness of the lamp returns in Benjamin's later writing, in the context of the childhood acquisition of language, as a residue of the "now-vanished ability to become similar," where, via these "formative powers [*Bildekräfte*]," the objects that surround the child in youth, "chairs, stairwells, cupboards, net curtains, and

³⁶ Neil Leach, "Mimesis," 94.

³⁷ It is important to note, however, that Benjamin's discussion of such gestures draws on the research of Lev Vygotsky, whose own cultural-historical psychology, while initially emerging out of Bekhterev's reflexology, develops as a critically engaged rejection of its limitations. While Bekhterev tended to regard the origins of thought in terms of a weakly innervated speech reflex (i.e. inner speech), Vygotsky clearly distinguished between the reflexes that innervated speech (and other) organs and, even in his earlier engagement with Bekhterev, consciousness as a transmitter or medium between systems of reflexes or, in his later work, the origins of thought as genetically distinct from that of speech. For a discussion of Benjamin's relationship to Vygotsky, cf. Law & Law, "Magical Urbanism: Walter Benjamin and Utopian Realism in the film *Ratcatcher*," 189-190.

even a lamp,” are formed into the imaginative content of adulthood (SW2 685 & 691-2). The powers that later underlie language are at first directed, Benjamin writes, toward “the most distant things in the deepest, most unconscious stratum of its own existence” and associated with the mimetic activity of play, in which a series of primal gestures enable the child to experiment with and master the basic rhythms of their own bodily nature in a way that transforms shattering experiences into habit (SW2 115-6). Children’s imitative play is therefore understood as constituting a form of physiological training in this archaic mimetic faculty, a faculty which, as we shall see, is regarded as undergoing a fundamental historical transformation whose cosmic implications are described by Benjamin in *One-Way Street*.

Expressive Movement and Formative Power: Left-Wing Klageseanism

Although the influence of the Soviet biomechanics of Meyerhold, Eisenstein and Tretyakov, and Laci, grounded in the objective psychology of Bekhterev, appears to coincide and corroborate Benjamin’s political turn to Marxism in mid-1920s, the remainder of this article will argue that these ideas represent the working through of his own previous political commitments, and should be seen less as a “break” in his work than the articulation of an anthropological materialism Benjamin had been developing since his rupture with mentor Gustav Wyneken in 1915. In other words, what Benjamin discovered, in the radically transformed social context of post-revolutionary Russia, was a technologically affirmative and non-individualist updating of *Lebensphilosophie* debates about bodily rhythm that Benjamin was already familiar with and fascinated by from his earlier involvement in the Youth Movement.

While Eisenstein’s later notion of filmic conflict is formulated in terms of an Engelsian-Marxian dialectic, it nonetheless “resonated with the vitalist models of rhythm so

important for the early 20th century's understanding of the body."³⁸ Indeed, as Robert Leach points out, "the direct physical base upon which Tretyakov and Eisenstein built their system of Expressive Movement" was Rudolf Bode's *Rhythm and its Meaning for Bodily Education* (1920) and *Expressive Gymnastics* (1922), which they translated and adapted.³⁹ Bode claimed in turn that his theory of expressive movement explicitly developed "the line of thought found in [the cosmic vitalism of Ludwig] Klages's work," in which "the *science* of rhythm has taken a decisive step forward," departing from contemporary psychology's rationalistic attempt to define rhythm conceptual, and in response to Bode's endorsement Klages developed these ideas further in his 1923 essay on *The Nature of Rhythm*, written for the *Convention for Artistic Bodily Schooling* in Berlin.⁴⁰ Eisenstein recognized the correspondence between Bode's and Klages's accounts of the "conflict between conditioned and unconditioned reflexes," while criticizing the latter for treating expressive movements in an insufficiently dialectical manner.⁴¹ It was, nonetheless, in Klages's work that Eisenstein first "found reference to the Carpenter Effect," Bulgakowa argues, and so confirmation of his aesthetic interest in the mimetic infectiousness of attractions.⁴²

In *Spirit [Geist] as Adversary of the Soul [Seele]* (1929-32), Klages insists on the thesis which "has guided all our enquiries for the past three decades or so: that body [*Leib*] and *Seele* are inseparably connected poles of the unity of life into which *Geist* inserts itself from the outside like a wedge, in an effort to set them apart from each other, that is, to de-soul the body [*den Leib zu entseelen*] and disembody the soul [*die Seele zu entleiben*], and so finally to smother any life which it can attain."⁴³ *Geist*, in contrast, is regarded as an "acosmic" irruption into the natural unity of human life, one "whose essence is will, the

³⁸ Cowan, "The Heart Machine," 234.

³⁹ Leach, *Revolutionary Theatre*, 153.

⁴⁰ Bode, "Rhythm and its Importance for Education," 53-4.

⁴¹ Eisenstein, "A Dialectic Approach to Film Form," 47.

⁴² Bulgakowa, "From Expressive movement to the "basic problem," 427.

⁴³ Klages, *Der Geist als Widersacher der Seele*, 7; translated in Schnädelbach, *Philosophy in Germany*, 149-150.

enemy and the slayer of life” (SC 182-3). Klages therefore claimed that “excessive rationality or intellectual analysis,” identified with *Geist*, “was a source of ‘arhythm,’ or unnatural, strained, discordant, stifled movement.” Klages contrasts the mechanized and rationalized *Takt* of industrial modernity with the *Rhythmus* of natural reflexes (such as breathing, heartbeat but also the rhythmic movement of tides and planets), associating the latter with a theory of expressive movement [*Ausdrucksbewegung*] first developed in *Expressive Movement and Formative Power* in 1913 and incorporated into later editions of his *Science of Character* (originally published in 1910). Klages’s metaphysical distinction between the arrhythmic repetitions of a rationalized *Geist* and the rhythmic reflexes of the unified *Leib* and *Seele* broadly corresponds, Eisenstein asserted, to Bode’s description of the “conflict between conditioned and unconditioned reflexes” that grounded the biomechanical exercises discussed.

Benjamin had been introduced to Klages’s ideas through his involvement in the *Anfang* wing of the German Youth Movement, associated with educational reformer Gustav Wyneken, and attended the first congress of the movement on Mount Meissner in 1913, to which Klages had been invited to compose an address.⁴⁴ The subsequently published address (Klages was unable to deliver it in person), *Man and Earth*, was, Klages later writes, a “terrible analysis of the rape of nature by humanity in the present day ...[that] sought to prove that man, as the bearer of *Geist*, has torn himself apart along with the planet which gave him birth.”⁴⁵ The year after the congress, Klages gave a lecture to the Free German Students at Benjamin’s invitation; the latter’s work, following his break from Wyneken in 1915 over the latter’s support for the war, which both Benjamin and Klages bitterly opposed, increasingly

⁴⁴ See Benjamin’s pseudonymously published “Youth was Silent” (1913) for a report on the congress and denunciation of the anti-Semitism and chauvinism of elements of the Youth Movement present. Although these elements are present in Klages’s work, they are largely absent from *Man and Earth*, which denounces in more general terms the problematic Spirit manifested in Christianity and capitalist modernity.

⁴⁵ Klages, ‘Vorwort für die Zeitgenossen,’ *Der Geist als Widersacher der Seele*, Zweite Auflage; translated in Schnädelbach, *Philosophy in Germany. 1831-1933*, 150.

took on aspects of the pessimistic outlook and conceptual terminology of Klages's thought.⁴⁶ In an exchange from 1920, Benjamin praised Klages's theory of dream consciousness (published in 1914 and expanded in 1919), writing that it had "revealed to me extraordinary and, if I may say so, longed-for perspectives"; as Nitzan Lebovic observes, Klages's "response, still unpublished, mentioned other pieces he had written and included an invitation to meet in Berlin the following spring."⁴⁷ In a 1923 letter Benjamin further conveys his enthusiasm for the ideas Klages presented in *Vom kosmogensichen Eros*, excerpts of which appeared alongside an introduction by Sigfried Kracauer on Klages's theory of primal images in the *Frankfurt Zeitung* in June 1922.⁴⁸

Richard Wolin has gone as far as to suggest that this "dangerous encounter" with Klages is the "defining moment of his intellectual trajectory ...key to understanding Benjamin's development."⁴⁹ Werner Fuld and Nitzan Lebovic both argue that this interest in Klages is grounded in a shared rejection of Freudian psychology, and, in her discussion of Benjamin's concept of the aura, Hansen similarly notes that Klages's "implicitly anti-Freudian treatise appealed to Benjamin's interest in eccentric states of consciousness" because of its "emphasis on the phenomenal-sensorial characteristics of dreaming, rather than

⁴⁶ Lebovic, *The Philosophy of Life and Death*, 70.

⁴⁷ Lebovic, "The Beauty and Terror of *Lebensphilosophie*," 28.

⁴⁸ Lebovic, *The Philosophy of Life and Death*, 85

⁴⁹ Wolin, "Walter Benjamin Meets the Cosmics"; cf. Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: an Aesthetic of Redemption*, xxxi-xxxii and Wolin, *Labyrinths*, 64-66. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the full influence of Klages's work on Benjamin here, but it is possible to outline some of these: (1) Benjamin's language theory resonates with Klages's critique of logocentrism, which introduces a distinct theory of the name in order to overcome spirit's false duality between the *concept* and *thing*; (2) Benjamin's "whole notion of *Rausch* is taken ...from the work Klages did on the concept beginning in the mid-1910s [the two parts of *Traumbewußtsein*]" and "most notably developed in Klages's *Eros* work from 1922" (Lebovic, "The Beauty and Terror of *Lebensphilosophie*," 30); (3) from the 1920s onwards Benjamin's texts "are filled with hidden and explicit references" to the revival of Bachofen's work in the circle around Klages, "a fact largely unrecognized in the fertile Benjaminian scene" (Ibid., 4) and, Richard Block suggests, "elements of Klages' thought are clearly consistent with and even enabling the gestures Benjamin performs in 'Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften'," although – he cautions – "the relationship between Benjamin and Klages cannot be cast in terms of simple acceptance or rejection" (Block, "Selective Affinities," 135); (4) his work on nearness and distance, taken up in his formulations of the aura in the 1930s, "recasts Klages's pathic passivity of dreams as an inability to maintain perceptual distance" (McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, 246); (5) Benjamin drew on Klages in formulating the dream theory developed in the *Arcades Project* as references there to the 'collective unconscious and image-fantasy' show (Lebovic, "The Beauty and Terror of *Lebensphilosophie*," 29).

the meaning and interpretation of dreams”.⁵⁰ More specifically, John McCole has suggested that Benjamin’s 1929 essay on Surrealism, in which the innervating interpenetration of image-space and body-space is explored, was in reality “directed at a figure behind Aragon ...Ludwig Klages.”⁵¹

Although the work of Klages is replete with anti-Semitism and modelled on a reactionary anti-capitalism that was adopted with ease by the Right (although eventually rejected by Nazi authorities), its surprising influence on both Benjamin and Eisenstein opens up intriguing points of continuity which helps explain the resonance of the Soviet avant-garde for him. Despite Eisenstein’s criticism of aspects of Klages’s theory of expressive movement, what the latter does introduce into debates about bodily innervation is a metaphysical account of the image, one that was already influential on Benjamin’s thought in the 1920s and came to inform his later concept of the aura, and in relation to which Eisenstein’s montage of film attractions may be said to be a dialectical and materialist revisioning, in line with Benjamin’s own political thought.

According to Klages, the capacity for rhythmic movement is grounded in a drive [*Trieb*] to expression identified with a creative or formative force [*Gestaltungskraft*] inherent to all living organisms and connected both to basic motility (the body’s capacity for self-motion) and to formativeness (the capacity for shaping of forms). What is distinctive about Klages’s vitalism is the connection of this instinctive drive with a theory of primal images [*Urbilden*], derived from the natural philosophy of Goethe.⁵² These vital images are present even in the most basic germ-cell, Klages claims, since “in the fertilized cell there acts, as moulding power, the image of the growing body,” such that “the process of growth and

⁵⁰ Fuld, “Walter Benjamins Beziehung zu Ludwig Klages”; Lebovic, *The Philosophy of Life and Death*, 11; cf. Lebovic, “The Beauty and Terror of *Lebensphilosophie*,” 23-39 & 4.

⁵¹ McCole, *Antinomies of Tradition*, 236; CE 125

⁵² With the “concept of primal phenomenon [*Urphänomen*],” Klages writes, Goethe’s “worldly sensuality” pursued “not to primal things [*Ur-sachen*]” but “primal images [*Ur-Bildern*]” (Klages, *Der Geist als Widersacher der Seele*, 89). For a discussion of Benjamin’s relationship to Goethe, cf. Charles, “Faust on film Walter Benjamin and the cinematic ontology of Goethe’s Faust 2”.

ripening (which is certainly profoundly unconscious) take[s] place by virtue of the power of images.”⁵³ This drive to formative expression is, in later editions, explicitly contrasted with the psychic model Freud advanced, beginning with revisions made to the third edition of *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1911 (in response to criticism by Jung) and developed, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, into the hypotheses of the biological presence of a death drive and account of primary narcissism, which are central to the diagnosis of modern society in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. The “popular view,” equated with “so-called psychoanalysis” (‘so-called’ because, according to Klages, it analyses not the psyche or soul [Seele] but the spirit [Geist]) “goes widely wrong when it seeks the key to the hysterical formation of life in the violence of the repugnance from which the self-esteem of the patient can save itself only by the ‘repression’ from consciousness of the events which cause it shame and disgust” (SC 179 & 289n37). Where psychoanalysis posits *too little* consciousness – the repression of censored desires into the unconscious is to be resolved by conscious working through – Klages attributes hysteria to *too much*, at the expense of psychosomatic expression in feelings and impulse.

In more complex organisms such as animals and humans, these urges or drives compel the organism to bodily movement through “the unconscious presence of the attractive power of the image which promises satisfaction.” It is this “attraction of vital magnetism” that connects the thirsty horse or hungry cow and the image of water or grass. The “impression *is* not the attraction,” however, “but only stimulates it”: the image, with its capacity for vital action, can operate without, and must be distinguished from, conscious perception, imagination and recollection that Klages associates not with the embodied *Seele* but rather with the intruding *Geist* (SC 172; 175-6). Images, in contrast, are experienced by humans as the “element of mood which is part of every human feeling,” one which “testifies

⁵³ Klages, *The Science of Character*, 172-3; hereafter indicated in the text as SC.

to the connection (now close, now loose) between the *Seele* and the actuality of images” (SC 172-3). The intrusion of *Geist* leaves us “weak in images,” such that “the capacity for movement has grown at the expense of the capacity for formation” (SC 180).

The capacity for expression becomes impoverished to the extent that only the willed impulse to bodily motion remains, no longer associated with the expression of natural *Rhythmus* but instead governed by rationalized *Takt*. Under such conditions, if

the lack of capacity for spontaneous expression is accompanied by a powerful desire after expression, a conflict would arise which would be unendurable in the long run, and especially would prove destructive of the self-esteem of the person in question, were it not that the troubled organism found a substitute in an impulse (of progressively increasing independence) towards representation of states of feeling (SC 169).

Self-esteem is therefore preserved in such instances through the substitution of expressive movement with the mere representation of feelings: the vitality of feelings becomes increasingly atrophied (devoid of the image-content of mood), the impulses of the body are made subservient to a non-formative will (motility without formative expression), and imagination becomes increasingly susceptible to externally-influenced illusions. The “graver forms” of such substitution are characteristic of the “hysterical character” (SC 173-4).⁵⁴

Klages maintains, however, that in the natural state of organisms (such as a healthy human child) there is equilibrium between the capacity for and urge towards expression, that is, between bodily motion and the processes he names the image-creating capacity of life. This equilibrium is still occasionally experienced in those moments of profound rapture or intoxication Klages expands upon in the two parts of his *On Dream Consciousness* (1914 and

⁵⁴ “In the hysteric, self-affirmation is maintained through a protective adaptation: given the incapacity to formatively express the vital drives of the creative impulse, the individual exhibit instead a vital receptivity for comparatively indifferent impacts of impressions ...by means of organic imitations of formative processes” of others. The organism becomes a “reflector reflecting external light only, presenting the image of a mock-life of organic imitation of alien lives” (SC 180-1).

1919) and *On Cosmogonic Eros* (1922). The “elemental or *cosmic*” force of Eros, whose primordial form of consciousness is hinted at in the “night consciousness” of our dreams, “transforms all events that separates bodies [*die Körper*] ...into the omnipresent element of an embracing and encompassing ocean.”⁵⁵ It is also experienced as *Rausch*, the rush of cosmic intoxication or ecstasy, in which the separation of the subject and object is dissolved and the fixed coordinates of “here/there” and “now/then” are replaced by a “perpetual present with a *boundlessly mobile now-point*” and a “*boundlessly mobile ‘here’*.”⁵⁶ In dreams and intoxication it is “the Eros of the distance, which releases us from the tangible world of things, and transports us to the ungraspable actuality of images [*betastende Wirklichkeit der Bilder*]!”⁵⁷ Such experiences accord with Klages’ ‘pagan’ conception of time, which “in complete opposition to logical consciousness, which – feeling its way along the straight line of time – considers each past thing to be destroyed, but in the present sees only repetitions of it, the Pelasgians – bound up with the circle of time – live, know, and teach the *eternal return of the origin* [*ewige Wiederbringung des Ursprungs*].”⁵⁸

Although it is possible that Benjamin’s 1921 fragment ‘Capitalism as Religion’ – with its critical discussions of Nietzsche, Freud and Marx – may already have been influenced by Klages’s similar condemnation of capitalism as the religious consummation of Christianity, it is in the ‘Outline of the Psychophysical Problem’ from 1922-3 and *One-Way Street* begun in 1924 that Benjamin begins most noticeably to reference the Klagesean concepts of cosmic experience, ecstatic trance, an erotics of nearness and distance, and planetary destruction by the *Geist* of technology as part of his own construction of an escape route from the bitter nihilism of the latter’s prophecies about modernity. The tour of German inflation represented

⁵⁵ Klages, *Vom Kosmogonischen Eros*, 52; trans. in Wolin, “Walter Benjamin Meets the Cosmics,” 16. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud famously gives a psychoanalytical explanation for this “oceanic feeling”: the conservation of a feeling of limitless narcissism associated with the breastfeeding infant.

⁵⁶ Klages, “Vom Traumbewusstsein,” 185; translated in McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, 238.

⁵⁷ Klages, *Vom Kosmogonischen Eros*, 92.

⁵⁸ Klages, *Der Geist als Widersacher der Seele*, translated in Bishop, *The Archaic*, 29-30.

in *One-Way Street*'s 'Imperial Panorama,' for example, proclaims that "mass instincts have become confused and estranged from life," producing a "perversion of vital instincts" (SW 1:451), while the concluding visit 'To the Planetarium' singles out the "dangerous error of modern humanity" as the devaluation of our communal cosmic experience [*kosmische Erfahrung*] – achieved by the ancients through ecstatic trance [*Rausch*] in which we are assured "what is nearest to us and what is remotest from us" – to individual, poetic enthusiasm [*Schwärmerei*] (SW 1:486-7). As a result of this, a "new and unprecedented marriage with the cosmic powers" erupts in an uncontrollably destructive manner, "on a planetary scale, that is, in the spirit of technology [*Geiste der Technik*]." ⁵⁹

For Klages, "technology is without the slightest capacity to enrich life," capable only of contributing to what he, in another context, calls a "poverty of experience" that can only be counteracted when the poet's genius of language transports the soul "with almost supernatural magic [*dämonischer Zauberkraft*] ...into a whirl of superhuman [*mehr als menschlichen*] experience" (SC 70). Yet "there is no more insipid and shabby antithesis," objects Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*, "than that which reactionary thinkers like Klages try to set up between the symbol-space of nature and that of technology" (AP K1a, 3). Benjamin, in contrast, envisions the positive possibility of a second, alternative *Geist* of technology and with arrhythmic *Takt* of industrial production. As Wohlfarth argues, it is the

⁵⁹ Benjamin is also referencing Simmel's discussion of the slave revolt of technology (rather than of the masses) in *The Philosophy of Money*: "if we consider the totality of life" the cost of the technological control of nature is a "dispensing of spirituality as the central point of life," whose paradoxical implications are that "the machine, which was supposed to relieve man from his slave labour in relation to nature, has itself forced him to become a slave to it ... we serve it in so far as we dominate it." For Simmel, this implies that the "significance and intellectual potential of modern life" has not been transferred from the individual to the masses, as erroneously thought, but rather from the subject to the object: the "revolt of the slaves" that threatens to dethrone the autocracy and the normative independence of strong individuals is not the revolt of the masses, but the revolt of objects." (Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, 488). Benjamin emphasized the connections between Simmel and the intellectual group around the poet Stefan George, a group loosely affiliated with Klages's Cosmic Circle: "You look askance at Simmel-. Is it not high time to give him his due as one of the forefathers of cultural Bolshevism? ... I recently looked at his *Philosophy of Money* ...there is good reason that it stems from the time in which Simmel was permitted to "approach" the circle around George." (Benjamin, *The Correspondence*, 599). Simmel wrote two appreciative articles on Stefan George in 1898 and 1901, and dedicated the third edition of *The Problems of the Philosophy of History* to him in 1907. On Benjamin's relationship to Simmel, cf. Jennings, "On the Banks of a New Lethe"; Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity*, Heinz-Jürgen Dahme, "On the Current Rediscovery of Georg Simmel's Sociology," Habermas, "Georg Simmel on Philosophy and Culture," and Micko, *Walter Benjamin und Georg Simmel*.

“Marxian dialectic between the forces and relations of production” that for Benjamin opens a “one-way street out of Klages’s *système sans issue*.”⁶⁰ His “version of the ‘doctrine of the ancients’ differs point by point from Klages, *but it is from Klages’s that it differs*” and in turning “Klages on his head”, Benjamin ends up producing “a kind of left-wing Klages.”⁶¹

Where Klages associates his theory of images with a formative power of humanity, he assumes the bodily form of humanity is eternal and therefore biologically complete. The decorporatization of humanity can therefore only appear as an *acosmic* intrusion, which Klages identifies with *Geist*. Benjamin, in contrast, rejects Klages’s antithesis between natural *Seele* and rational *Geist*, retaining a commitment to a dialectics of *Geist*, and instead introduce a distinction between two kinds of *body*, first differentiated in the Klagesean-infused ‘Outline of the Psychophysical Problem’ (1922) as the solitariness pertaining to the corporeal body [*Körper*] versus the collectivity of the lived body [*Leib*]:

In addition to the totality of all its living members, humanity is able partly to draw nature, the nonliving, plant, and animals into this life of the body [*Leib*] of humankind, and thereby into this annihilation and fulfilment. It can do this by virtue of the technology in which the unity of its life is formed. Ultimately everything that subserves humanity’s happiness may be counted part of its life, its limbs. (SWI 395)

Klages’s formative power is extended to include all the social and technological transformations of bodily vitality and expression, which entail the destruction of its current form (the completion of the bodily form of human individuals) as it undergoes a new, collective reformation. The “anguish of nature which can no longer be contained in life and flows out in wild currents over the body” is both the manifestation of “the utter decay of corporeality” but simultaneously “the last instrument of its renewal” (SWI 396). This

⁶⁰ Wohlfarth, “Walter Benjamin and the Idea of a Technological Eros,” 74-5.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 79, 84.

becomes associated with the consummation of new historical forms of collective bodily experience (and, elsewhere, associated not with the more-than-human individualism of Nietzsche's *Übermensch* but the impoverished experience of the less-than-human *Unmensch*), as the precursor for an alternative configuration of the relationship between humanity, technology and nature.⁶²

This narrative is taken up in 'To the Planetarium,' where Benjamin proclaims that, "Humans [*Menschen*] as a species completed their development thousands of years ago; but humanity [*Menschheit*] as a species is just beginning its development" (SWI 487). The transformation of humanity's collective bodily nature or *physis* entails a new and different contact with the cosmos, in which "the frame of mankind" – its "new body [*neuen Leib*]" – is "shaken by a feeling that resembled the bliss of the epileptic" during the "frenzy of destruction" which occurred during First World War's "nights of annihilation" (SWI 487). This implies a more dialectical and historical relationship between what Klages distinguishes as *Seele* and *Geist*, in line with Eisenstein's own critical response to Klages.

In contrast to the conception of *Geist* as an ahistorical intrusion, fundamentally alien to the body, and the overidentification of collective psychosomatic images with the natural *Seele*, Benjamin's critical revisions suggest both the problematic aspects of any *Seele* tied to the organic limitations of the individual *Körper* and also how the emergence of a new, collective *Leib* might be correspond to a technological *Geist* accompanied by its own vital images. As Wohlfarth has argued, just as 'On the Mimetic Faculty' postulated the persistence of an archaic physiological faculty to seize resemblances that is not simply annihilated but archived within the language, so 'To the Planetarium' gambles on the belief that "Collective,

⁶² For a discussion of Benjamin's concept of the *Unmensch* as the inversion of Nietzsche's (and Klages's) political philosophy, see Charles, "Pedagogy as 'Cryptic Politics'".

ecstatic union with the cosmos has not forfeited its claims upon humanity but ...will find its modern consummation in an unleashed *technology*.”⁶³

The introduction of a collective-bodily *Geist* permits Benjamin to differentiate between a *first* (annihilatory, negative, acosmic) and *second* (formative, positive, cosmic) technology. The “first attempt of humankind ...to conquer the uncontrolled destructive spasms of this new technological body with the disciplining power of living substance [*Lebendiges*]” is described as “a *Rausch* of generation” [*Rausche der Zeugung*]’ (SW 1:487). Indeed, as the earlier discussion of Bekhterev, Eisenstein, Tretyakov and Lacin sought to demonstrate, this potential resides in the mimetic infectious of the movement – the expressive language – of cinema itself: montage. If, as Benjamin suggests, Epic Theatre’s “discovery and construction of the gestic is nothing but a retranslation of the methods of montage – so crucial in radio and film – from a technological process to a human one” (SW2 584), we might equally add that the construction of montage in cinema was itself conceived as the translation of expressive gestures of bodily language from the media of the human body to that of technology.

The section ‘Prayerwheel,’ for example, begins to develop an alternative concept of the utopian will, connecting the motive innervations of the will to the vitality of images:

Only the presented image [*vorgestellte Bild*] vitally nourishes the will. Conversely, the mere word can at most ignite it, but then, shrivelled up, it smoulders. No undamaged will without exact imagistic presentation [*genaue bildliche Vorstellung*]. No presentation without innervation [*Keine Vorstellung ohne Innervation*]. (SW 1:466, trans. altered)

Benjamin’s Schopenhauerian reference to the relation between *Wille* and *Vorstellung*, which extends to the invocation of the Buddhist practice of breathing in accordance with the holy

⁶³ Wohlfarth, “Walter Benjamin and the Idea of a Technological Eros,” 78-9.

symbol as a model for such regulation of bodily innervations and therefore the activation of images, reflects the fact that Klages took Schopenhauer's "immediate relationship" between *Wille* and *Leib* "and developed it into his [own] 'theory of expressions'."⁶⁴ Although Benjamin's discussion of breathing practices recalls the *pranayama* (the *ayama*, extension or expansion, of the *prana*, the vital life-energy/breathe, one of the five principles of Yoga) and in particular of the chanting of the sacred syllable "om", the title 'Prayer Wheel' refers to writing of the Sanskrit symbols of the mantra, *Om mani padme hum*, upon and inside a spinning wheel powered by hand, wind, heat, water or sometimes electricity, and therefore used as a technological aid for bodily visualization.

Just as the 'Prayer Wheel' balances the power of the imagistic presentation against the vitality of bodily movement, so the 'Program' describes the playful gestures of the learning child in terms of an exactly proportioned equilibrium between the "receptive innervation" associated with the perceptual stimulus of the child's vision and the "creative innervation" associated with the motor movements of the child's hand (SW2 203). "The developing of these gestures into various forms of expression," Benjamin adds, is achieved through the "improvised synthesis" of the theatrical performance in which, in an echo of Marx's famous proclamation in the third of his theses *On Feuerbach*, "children stand on stage and teach and educate their attentive educators." In both instances, a concordant turn away from the consciousness of the present opens up new practical possibilities, a meditative expansion of the playing space [*Spielraum*] that is still invoked in the theses 'On the Concept of History' that Benjamin compares with the "themes which monastic discipline assigned to friars for meditation" (SW4 393): both are intended to turn us away from our conscious concern with worldly affairs, that encourage a linear conception of historical progress and centrist concern

⁶⁴ Schopenhauer, *Ein Lebensbild in Briefen*, 89; Yotam Hotam quoted in Abelson, „Schopenhauer and Buddhism,” 255.

with popular politics, neither of which he deemed capable of confronting the powers invoked by fascism.

Misreading Freud: the Remembrance of the Dead

When Benjamin speaks of a 'Different Utopian Will' in the notes associated with his earlier formulations of the 'Work of Art' essay (and repeated in the discussion of innervation in the *Arcades Project*), it is once again the signals of the learning child that provide the model for such revolutionary innervations and, specifically, the rhythmic gesture of grasping: "Just as a child who has learned to grasp stretches out its hand for the moon as it would for a ball, so humanity, in its efforts at innervation, sets its sights as much on currently utopian goals as on goals within reach" (*SW3* 135; cf. also *SW3* 124, n10 & *AP* W7, 4). As with the 'Program', receptive innervation is exemplified in the attractive stimulus of the developing child (associated with the impression of the moon) and creative innervation in the motor movements of the child's hand (associated with the reflex of grasping). The action of grasping, one of the primary reflexes of human infants, serves as the example of an expressive movement in Eisenstein's biomechanics and Benjamin's figure of the child reaching for the moon constitutes a cosmic model of expressive movement: the rhythmic completion of a reflex, rather than the conscious and intentional relaxation of muscular innervations that occurs when the adult calculates that the moon is not within reach.

The mediating element of this figure, it should be emphasized, is not the consciousness of the moon itself but the actualized (that is, attractive or affective) image of the ball. Consequently, the ball-moon montage functions as a primal image, innervated in relation to the formative drive of the child. Despite its romantic connotations, the natural imagery of the distant moon is brought nearer by Benjamin through the cultural-technological artefact of the toy ball, whilst conversely the toy ball is made an object of yearning in

conjunction with the natural-mythological force of the moon. In the earlier versions of the ‘Work of Art’ essay, therefore, the dialectical account of the innervating body-space of technological *Geist* is brought back into conjunction with the image-space Klages had reserved solely for the natural creativity of the *Seele*. Here, affective image-space is rendered dialectical in a similar way to body-space, with the positive function of technologically innervating rhythms of *Takt* being connected to the dissipation of the negative and individualized dimension of what Benjamin understands as ‘auratic’ perception.⁶⁵

Both Miriam Hansen and Mark Hansen claim that this theory of images disappears in Benjamin’s last essays (the final version of the ‘Work of Art’ essay and ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’), representing an eschewal of the “cognitive” dimension of his politics of innervation. For Mark Hansen, Benjamin’s account of innervation in ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’ is a “purely physiological, sensuous, and (in the broad sense) *aesthetic* response

⁶⁵ When the penultimate section of ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’ equates the crisis of the aura with the detachment of *sexus* (nearness) from an *eros* (distance) (two poles that were still intimately connected in Goethe’s poetry), Benjamin is repeating an explicit discussion of Klages from his 1922 ‘Outline of the Psychophysical Problem’ (cf. *SW4* 339 & *SW1* 397-400). As McCole has pointed out, Benjamin’s definition of the aura “recasts Klages’ pathic passivity of dreams as an inability to maintain perceptual distance” (McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, 246). Benjamin claims that “to experience the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look back at us” (*SW4* 338), adding in a footnote: “Whenever a human being, an animal, or an inanimate object thus endowed by the poet lifts up its eyes, it draws him into the distance. The gaze of nature, when thus awakened dreams, and pulls the poet after its dream” (*SW4* 354n77). Similarly, *One-Way Street*’s discussion of a theory that “feeling [*Empfindung*] is not located in the head, that we sentiently experience a window, a cloud, a tree not in our brains but rather in the place where we see it, then we are, in looking at our beloved, too, outside ourselves” (*SW1* 449), is, Miriam Hansen suggests, a reference to Klages’s understanding of perception (*CE* 328, n66).

Hansen acknowledges Marleen Stoessel’s and Christine Buci-Gluckmann’s suggestions that “aura has more to do with a different kind of fetishism: the psychosexual economy of knowledge and belief first theorized by Freud” (*CE* 111, cf. Stoessel, *Aura* and Buci-Gluckmann, *Baroque Reason*) and adds that the logic of fetishism is crucially inflected with the register of the Freudian uncanny (*CE* 314n19). But she also suggests that “rather than following the psychoanalytical route (which he was well aware of), Benjamin locates the unsettling force of the auratic return of the gaze in an anthropologically and mythopoetically conceived prehistory” (*CE*, 110). Benjamin’s definition and characterization of the aura, she notes (“While resting on a summer afternoon, to trace a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch that throws its shadow on the observer—this is what it means to breathe the aura of those mountains, that branch” (*SW* 3:104–5)), is taken from Klages: “Compared to someone noticing the bug on his hand, the beholder of blue-veiled mountain ranges more substantially resembles ...the ‘dreamer’,” and it “is not so much the actual distance of an object as the mode of contemplation that determines whether the object is characterized by nearness or farness; and no one will confuse the thingness of the quality of nearness with the image-ness of that of the far” (Klages, *Vom kosmogonischen Eros*, 118-119; trans. in Hansen, “Benjamin’s Aura,” 366). More generally, she argues, Benjamin “appropriated Klages’s elaboration of the polarity of nearness and distance to theorize the epochal reconfiguration and interpenetration of ‘body space and image space’ that he discerned in the mass-based media of advertising and cinema, the modern urban habitat, and the experiments of the surrealists,” i.e. to theorize the notion of innervation (*CE* 125). She even goes on to suggest, more positively, that Klages’s “implicitly anti-Freudian” treatise *Dream Consciousness*, “offers a rich archive of observations relevant to film” that “points to more recent efforts to make phenomenological thought productive for film” (*CE* 125). Benjamin maintains this theory of perception as late May 1940: when he writes to Adorno that, “if aura were indeed concerned with a ‘forgotten part of humanity’, it would not necessarily be the part which is present in labour ...there must be something human in things which is *not* put there by labour ...I think this question will inevitably crop up again in my work (possibly in the continuation of my “Baudelaire” project...)” (*SW4* 413)..

to mechanical stimuli” that “can no longer make common cause with his earlier dialectical and image-centred conception.”⁶⁶ With the jettisoning of this ‘cognitive’ element of the earlier theory, he argues, Benjamin simultaneously abandons the politically redemptive promise earlier associated with technology, and the “surrealist inspired program of dialectical awakening,” giving way to a more minimal concern: “how is humanity to establish and maintain (nondestructive) contact with the ever complexifying, technologically driven cosmos?” Miriam Hansen similarly argues that the anthropological-materialist elaboration of mimetic innervations elaborated in the second version of the ‘Work of Art’ essay (specifically in the longer sixth section of the second version and its associated footnote) is dropped from the final version. As a consequence, she objects, the concept of politicizing that ends the later version is too easily conflated with the “liquidationist tenor” and “politically progressive purchase” of a “romantic notion of proletarian culture” (CE 83 & 91), giving rise to what we might characterize as a liquidationist, left-Fordist or accelerationist politics.⁶⁷

Significantly, Mark Hansen identifies this essay’s focus on the experience of technological shock – for the poet in the crowd or the worker at the industrial machine, “innervations flow through him in rapid succession, like the energy from a battery” (SW4 328; trans. modified) – with Benjamin’s “strong misreading” of Freud.⁶⁸ This misreading hinges, however, on a series of conceptual manoeuvres that work to reintroduce significant motifs from Klages’s theory of the actuality of images, despite the explicit disavowal of Klages in the opening section for “making common cause with fascism” (SW4 314).

⁶⁶ Hansen, *Embodying Technesis*, 256-7.

⁶⁷ The appellations *liquidationist*, *Left Fordist* and *accelerationist* are used to characterize aspects of Benjamin’s work in, respectively, McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, in Hal Foster, *Prosthetic Gods*, 109 and ‘Archives of Modern Art’ in *Design and Crime: And Other Diatribes*, 75 & 151n19, and (critically) in Benjamin Noys, *Malign Velocities*, 90. Noys regards Benjamin’s later idea of revolution as the emergency handbrake of history as an auto-critique of his own “productivist” moment, associated with a Brechtian “productivism” of the early 1930s and see the latter (and its contemporary retrieval in Fredric Jameson’s *Brecht and Method* and Alain Badiou’s *The Century*) as a precursor to contemporary accelerationism (cf. Benjamin Noys, “‘Grey in Grey’: Crisis, Critique, Change,” 48-51 and *Malign Velocities*, 83-92).

⁶⁸ Hansen, *Embodying Technesis*. 234-5.

First, the Bergsonian appeal to a *vita contemplativa* and a *vita activa* is undermined by Benjamin's subsequent construction of "genuine historical experience" that, in contrast to Bergson's *durée* and action, "gleans what earlier generations admired" and so includes an appeal to the dead (and, as such, the death of contemplation and action) (SW4 352, n63); the Proustian distinction between *voluntary* and *involuntary memory* associated with the *vita contemplativa* is similarly blurred through a concept of remembrance [*Eingedenken*] ultimately associated with the cultic quality of the image ("probably nowhere recalled in Proust's work" (SW4 316), Benjamin unhelpfully adds); finally, this cultic fusion of individual and collective history and prehistory involves a distinction between recollection [*Erinnerung*] and memory [*Gedächtnis*] absent from Freud's work. Benjamin's remarks "are not intended to confirm" Freud's essay; he admits that "there is no substantial difference between the concepts *Erinnerung* and *Gedächtnis* as used in Freud's essay" in order to explain Freud's problematic claim that "consciousness takes the place of a trace of recollection [*Erinnerungsspur*]" (SW4 345, n16; translation altered).

While he makes reference to Theodor Reik's *Surprise and the Psycho-Analyst* (1935) to justify the mnemonic distinction between *Erinnerung* and *Gedächtnis* absent from Freud's essay, this distinction would have been more familiar to Benjamin from Klages's argument that "we could never reach a clear understanding of said memory [*Gedächtnis*] unless we begin by making a distinction, foreign to current speech, between memory [*Gedächtnis*] and capacity for recollection [*Erinnerung*]" (SC 94). For Klages, the former is a "vital fact," which does not require contemplation, sensation or consciousness but exists as a "hereditary memory" in which "the impression of grains [for chicks], or of the breast [for human babies], is accompanied by an experience of a certain significance" (SC 97). This "must by no means be confused with the capacity for recollection," which merely represents one of the consequences of this function "under certain and new conditions" (SC 94). The images of

memory pertain to the “vanished immemorial past” such that “primordial images are appearing souls of the past [*erscheinende Vergangenheitsseelen*]” (SC 94). Without referencing Klages, Benjamin invokes these “images of an earlier world” [*Bild der Vorwelt*] in his invocation of Baudelaire’s correspondences as “the data of *Eingedenken* – not historical data, but data of prehistory ...an encounter with earlier life” (SW 4:334).

In Benjamin’s ‘Baudelaire’ essay, the theory of innervations becomes coded more directly as the *Chockerlebnis* of present technological and urban experience, which increasingly intrude upon and threaten this collective mnemonic dimension; a historically elongated conception of historical time implicitly elaborated, as Michael Jennings has pointed out, via Klages’s and Jung’s interpretation of the phantasmagoria as collective psychology.⁶⁹ Here, then, the innervating shocks of industrial modernity, earlier identified with *Takt*, are discharged into the prehistorical mnemonic depths of the image-making medium itself, corresponding to a form of motoric-ideo mimesis that specifically contradicts the description of anticathexis proffered by Freud, who has no corresponding account of *Gedächtnis* and maintains that such shocks divulge upon the outer layer of perceptual consciousness.

Conclusion

Benjamin’s account of technological innervations draws attention to the psychosomatic economy of energetics developed from vitalism but given a left-wing orientation in the works of Eisenstein. The interpenetration of image and body space involves, on this account, not merely the bodily dimension of affectively charged images (within the organic human body)

⁶⁹ Jennings, “On the Banks of a New Lethe”; Lebovic, *The Philosophy of Life and Death*, 45. Jennings also refers to aspects of *Lebensphilosophie* in the work of Georg Simmel. On Benjamin’s intellectual relationship with Simmel, see also Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity*, Heinz-Jürgen Dahme, “On the Current Rediscovery of Georg Simmel’s Sociology,” Habermas, “Georg Simmel on Philosophy and Culture,” and Micko, *Walter Benjamin und Georg Simmel*. Benjamin himself emphasized the connections between Simmel and the intellectual group around the poet Stefan George, a group loosely affiliated with Klages’s Cosmic Circle: “You look askance at Simmel-. Is it not high time to give him his due as one of the forefathers of cultural Bolshevism? ... I recently looked at his *Philosophy of Money* ...there is good reason that it stems from the time in which Simmel was permitted to “approach” the circle around George.” (Benjamin, *The Correspondence*, 599). Simmel wrote two appreciative articles on Stefan George in 1898 and 1901, and dedicated the third edition of *The Problems of the Philosophy of History* to him in 1907. Cf. Frisby, *Georg Simmel*, 23 and *Sociological Impressionism*, 158

but also the imagistic dimension of technological innervations (in connection with the extended body of humanity): the prehistorical as well as historical aspect of the energy dissipated in and through technology. We might think here not merely of the history of human labour incorporated into technology through both material and affective production but also a prehistory of such labour that flows back to the fossilized organic remains that still provide the dominant (non-renewable) source of energy for our technology today.

The historically redemptive escape from Klages's mythological annihilation is modelled not on theology or art itself but a capacity to discipline the innervating power of technology through affective images which simultaneously give expression to the new forms of collective body life. The dialectically redemptive alternative to the destructive *Geist* of *Technik* involves the mediation of an *eros*-infused interplay between man and nature, in contrast to the sexual violence deplored in Klages's *Mensch und Erde*. In the second version of 'The Work of Art' essay from the mid-1930s, currently existing first technology is said to aim at a mastery over nature, through the maximal possible utilization of humans, whereas a utopian second technology experimentally and playfully aims not at domination but a nonviolent and experimental *interplay* between nature and humanity. Against the antithesis between the *Urbilder* of nature and the *Geist* of technology, Benjamin insists that "to each truly new configuration of nature – and, at bottom, technology is just such a configuration – there corresponds new 'images'" (AP, Ka1, 3).

Miriam Hansen suggests that the archaic dimensions of Klages's theory of primal images permitted Benjamin to recover the possibility of a transgenerational memory, as a mode of perception which "imbricates the momentary 'flashing-up' of the image with the past of cosmic nature... generations of dead; and one's own forgotten youth" (CE 124-5). But the dialectical images opened by the innervations of technological media imply, it should also be emphasized, the *preconscious* of a new *Geist* of technology: a *collective* unconscious that

is located not in the organic body but the externalization of memory achieved with mechanically and digitally reproducible media. To the extent that the function of memorization has become increasingly externalized in technological media, which therefore harbours the potential of accumulating the energies of our collectively non-conscious desires, the minimal role that recollection still retains in contemporary mnemonics serves as a conscious substitute to such remembrance: today, individualized representations of feeling – the consciousness of memory rather than the affect of remembrance – still largely stand in the place of such collective bodily action.

It remains the task of childhood to discover the new “images” that correspond to each new configuration of nature (“and, at bottom, technology is just such a configuration,” Benjamin writes, insisting against Klages that there are primal images of the locomotive and the automobile as much as the forest and the mountains) and bring these into “symbolic space” in order to “incorporate them into the image stock of humanity.” This is, Benjamin makes clear, a pedagogical task, recalling the educative function of the children’s performances: “To educate the image-making medium within us” (AP N1, 7). What the utopian will of the learning child is able to do through the assimilation of such images via its utopian gestures, Benjamin seems to be suggesting, is to remember and express the future.

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