# The "Design Event": The Anti-Design-Historian and a Poetics of the Object.

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## Abstract

What happens when a sudden encounter with a design-object calls into question traditional approaches to the history of design? Or, alternatively, when such moments make manifest how the symbolic roles we occupy as design historians can serve to obstruct our singular relationship to the object? Beginning with what is cautiously termed the "design event", this article seeks to explore how an examination of how our own unconscious fascinations and obsessions that encircle the material object, can offer the potential for a self-reflective approach to design history, one that locates the reasons for our passionate preoccupations at the very heart of our analysis. Furthermore, it is argued that a focus on what is singular to the self, on the intersubjective relationships that have shaped our attachments to certain objects, can serve to form part of a broader challenge to the carefully constructed symbolic identities we are interpellated by in our professional roles as historians.

It seems to me then as if all the moments of our life occupy the same space, as if future events already existed and were only waiting for us to find our way to them at last, just as when we have accepted an invitation we duly arrive in a certain house at a given time.

W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, (2001: 359-360)

In the summer of 2005, I was driving along the sea-front of a small town in Kent, South East England. I had just dropped my eldest daughter off at her mother's house and was making the long journey home. Still smarting from an acrimonious and protracted divorce, it was always a tough drive back and I was emotionally quite raw. As I drove down the coastal road, I saw a small café that I had passed many times before and even been inside on a few occasions. However, this time, there was something uncanny about it. I pulled the car over and got out. I realized that what had caught my attention was the sign for the café, then known as "The Russet". The typeface it was set in was familiar, but I wasn't sure why. I remembered this incident, when, a few days later, I was walking in London, on my way to a meeting, and I saw it again, used on the street signs throughout the city (fig.1). It suddenly struck me: a modified version of this typeface – which I discovered was called Albertus, and had been designed in the 1930s by the German typographer and calligrapher Berthold Wolpe – was used in the 1960s TV program *The Prisoner* (fig. 2).

As a small child, this program held a special fascination for me. *The Prisoner's* main protagonist is played by actor Patrick McGoohan, an ex-secret service agent who has been kidnapped and relocated to "the Village". The village is presented as an isolated site from which no one can escape. It is entirely populated by ex-secret service employees, who, because of their sensitive knowledge, are kept as prisoners by their own government. They are known by numbers instead of names: the main protagonist (McGoohan) is No.6. Each episode sees him in quest to determine why he has been brought there, who is No.1 (a case of the ultimate unknowability of the Big Other), and how he can escape. However, even though they are prisoners, the façade of "normal" village life is seemingly sustained by the other

inmates through village fetes, sports events and even local elections (which all use the Albertus typeface as a kind of corporate identity). The village is a disturbing paranoiac environment, with obvious references to Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon and George Orwell's *1984*. Watching this as a 7-year-old child, I felt a deep connection to McGoohan's plight (fig.3). Clearly, at the time, I was too young to understand its relevance to my life, but on seeing this typeface on the café sign in Kent and throughout London, it became clear. As the child of an immigrant mother, who was incredibly private and frequently distant, in a home where there were numerous taboos about which we could not speak, *The Prisoner* struck a chord. Home was an environment which you could not leave, where you had to act out a seemingly normal life, with normal activities, with an unknowable "leader". Moreover, it was not a coincidence that, as many of the voiceless issues in my childhood home were consequences of fractured families and divorce, when I was taking my own daughter – who also, at the time, happened to be 7 years old – back to her mother's house, this typeface and all its rich associations suddenly captured my attention.

Clearly, this example is something singular to myself. Yet, this article will explore, with reference to the work of Jacques Lacan (by way of interpretation by Slavoj Žižek) and Walter Benjamin, how often the designed objects that interest each of us actually function as unspoken registers of a lack in the symbolic space that constitutes our very being. How many unspoken traumas or absences that guide our readings of the designed object are masked by what Lacan referred to as a "university discourse" (Lacan, 2006)? Does the use of such a language blind the historian to the fact that they are studying nothing more than the particular constellations whose causality is formed by their subjective attachments (albeit attachments that are themselves formed in a matrix of socio-historical discourses)? Moving onto the

material object itself, as we will see, Benjamin's concept of the "monad" is useful in this regard, in that it offers the recognition that in such condensed moments "all the forces and interests of history enter on a reduced scale" (Benjamin 1999: 475). The recognition of such monads is, for Benjamin, a political act of the utmost importance. It enables the historian to blast "a specific life out of the era or specific work out of the lifework" (Benjamin 1992: 254). In my argument, the design-object as monad is not only connected to a historical totality but also serves as a route to a condensed moment of psycho-social revelation through which our relationship to the past can be reordered. In the example above, the typeface Albertus served to mark a lack in my childhood. It marked the unknown site of the desires of my mother – desires that had been shaped by a coalescence of mass migration of the Irish to Britain in the mid-twentieth century, alongside more personal experiences – that manifested itself in the seemingly (to a 7-year-old child) random institution of certain taboos. Through my realization that Albertus functioned as a monad of earlier experiences – which, following the work of French philosopher Alain Badiou, I am going to tentatively call a "design event"[1] – I have been able to wrestle this design-object away from more traditional realm of design history, a critical language that frequently negates the idiosyncratic (and quite often irrational, aggressive, erotic, and hysteric) desires that encircle the material object.

**Mind the Gap**

What is clear from the above is that there is an unnamable dialectic. On the one hand, the object is clearly representative of a specific localized historical narrative, encapsulating the ambitions of its original author(s), and moreover, had (and continues to have) a social existence in its utilization. Yet, as we have seen, the object

also contains, in reference to the work of Benjamin, a messianic redemption as a monad of certain psycho-social relations, a monad that is ripe for retrospective change. In *The Parallax View* (2006), Slavoj Žižek offers a productive way to map out the tension present when we have two such related perspectives but from which there is no common ground to view them both. In Žižek's words, this parallax gap is detectable within "the apparent displacement of an object (the shift of its position against a background), caused by a change in observational position that provides a new line of sight" (Žižek 2006: 17). A common example of this is the Rubin's Vase, where there is a fluctuation in the figure-ground relationship; you are either looking at one or the other but not both at the same time. Applying Žižek's approach to other areas, such as design history, we have the analysis of the social, economic, cultural and biographical determinants that shape and frame the designed object, but often at the expense of the more singular and idiosyncratic characteristics that form our relationship to the thing in itself, while a discourse characterized by personal and individual revelations and/or associations with a design is customarily (but not exclusively) enacted independent of those historical forces. In both scenarios, the analysis is about the same thing, but they cannot be reduced to a single vantage point, there is a gap.

The gap that arises in the shift in position is not reducible or open to being synthesized away in a traditional Hegelian Thesis, Antithesis, Synthesis – that would be to occupy some position external to our perspective on the object, of which, as has been argued, we are a part (this would be the "view from nowhere" as the philosopher Thomas Nagel famously phrased it; or akin to picking yourself up by your own hair, or jumping on your own shadow). As Žižek notes "there is an irreducible a-symmetry between the two perspectives, we have a perspective and what eludes it, and the other

perspective fills in the void of what we could not see from the first perspective"
(Žižek 2006: 29). This shift reveals what Žižek calls the "minimal difference", which
divides the object from itself. By attempting to reveal the subversive heart of
dialectical materialism, Žižek directs our attention to the productive gap between
opposites, rather than a traditional focus on the polarity of opposites or a desire to
synthesize.

To further enable us to understand this minimal difference or gap in the object,
Žižek speaks of "the frame" or "framing" as central to the analysis. For Žižek, the
"subject and object are inherently 'mediated,' so that an 'epistemological' shift in the
subject's point of view always reflects an 'ontological' shift in the object itself"
(Žižek 2006: 17). This redoubling of the frame – a shift in the subject engenders a
shift in the object – is evident in Freud's well-known case of his little daughter
fantasizing about eating a strawberry cake. As Žižek himself highlights,

> … what we have here is by no means a simple case of the direct
> hallucinatory satisfaction of a desire (she wanted a cake, she
> didn't get it, so she fantasized about it…). That is to say: what
> one should introduce here is precisely the dimension of
> intersubjectivity: the crucial feature is that while she was
> voraciously eating a strawberry cake, the little girl noticed how
> her parents were deeply satisfied by this spectacle, by seeing her
> fully enjoying it – so what the fantasy of eating a strawberry cake
> is really about is her attempt to form an identity (of the one who
> fully enjoys eating a cake given by the parents) that would satisfy

her parents, would make her the object of their desire… (Žižek

1997: 9)

If we return to the vision of my 7-year-old self watching *The Prisoner*, I was not only enjoying/desiring the program but also adopting an identity of enjoyment to meet with the (unknowable) desire of my mother. As already discussed, how many times in our childhood have our relationships to design-objects been mediated by the desire of the other? To the point which, to quote Lacan, the object is "in the subject more than the subject itself" (Lacan, cited in Žižek 1997: 9-10).

**The Singularity of Being (An Historian)**

Yet, when moving from personal recollection to historical record and back again, there is always a danger of being marooned on one side of the crossing point. Élisabeth Roudinesco has outlined in relation to her own archival research on Lacan: "If everything is filed, monitored, noted or judged, history as creation is no longer possible: it is replaced by the archive transformed into absolute knowledge. But if nothing is filed, if everything is erased or destroyed, then there is nothing to stop narrative being swept off into fantasy, or the hallucinatory sovereignty of the ego, in favor of a kind of archive that functions as a dogma" (Roudinesco 2014: 51). Drift too far one way, and we come to occupy the imaginary position of the One, the symbolic authority, the singular gatekeeper of the historical record; too far in the opposite direction, and our individual investments give rise to historical narratives that are nothing more than a concoction of reverie and desire. Still, being attentive to why certain design-objects necessitate our attention in the present can serve to reveal fissures in the field, gaps that require us to ask how a particular design has been (and

continues to be) utilized, a challenge to the object as reified and frozen. "For every image of the past", as Benjamin famously highlighted, "that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably" (Benjamin, 1992: 247). Although directed at the ruling class's proclivity to bypass those events that undermine its view of history as continual progress, this approach also lends itself to analysis of how the personal revelation, the design event, reveals the exclusion of intersubjective meanings that continue to inform our interpretation of design. To return to the beginning of this work, it recalls the scenario of a child who realizes (if only unconsciously) that their questions will never be answered, and therefore stops asking them (or learns to only ask certain kinds of questions). When we rely on names that are fixed, unchanging, as Roudinesco highlighted, history as process becomes dogmatic, permanent and unmoving; historical truth fails to shift, is neutered of its ability to transcend the boundaries of a dominant way of being or established set of conventions.

When speaking about the often ephemeral objects of design history, Benjamin continues to have a special relevance here. Throughout his work we can detect a "theory of redemption [where] there is an effort to 'rescue' phenomena from their 'degraded, immediate state' by recombining them in a dialectical image, for the purpose of extracting a 'prehistory' and, perhaps, a suppressed dream of utopia which the dead and reified artifacts are still capable of emitting" (Harootunian 1996: 79). Articulating the singular relationship we may have with a piece of design offers a way in which to bypass the dominant symbolic forms of historical record, a way of "rescuing" objects from a historical language that nullifies this alternative way of speaking. Being attentive to how our desires were formed towards a piece of design can aid us towards liberating the "suppressed dream", can reveal how our obsessions

are mediated by intersubjective and socio-historic discourses that shaped our original encounter with the object, discourses that continue to determine how we view the object because of the hegemonic persistence of a form of political economy that shaped the initial confrontation. "In the dialectical image," Benjamin said, "what has been within a particular epoch is always, simultaneously, 'what has been from time immemorial.' It is at this moment that the historian takes up, with regard to that image, the task of dream interpretation." (1999: 943).

However, too often in design history, the way we encounter the designed object is not dissimilar to alienation from the object experienced by the worker under capitalism. In *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx noted that "the externalization [*Entäusserung*] of the worker in his product means that not only that his labor becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists *outside him*, independently of him and alien to him, and begins to confront him as an autonomous power; that the life which he has bestowed on the object confronts him as hostile and alien" (Marx [1844] 2002: 119). Could it not be argued that the design-object of our fascination, an object we have imbued with some psychic labor, is often experienced as something separate, experienced as unutterably Other, fetishized to the point in which we are alienated from why we are drawn to it and see it as distinctive? Is this itself simply a symptom, à la Benjamin, of how certain socio-political discourses that framed our original encounter with the object still underpin the historical moment in which we re-encounter it? Or, to turn to my example of Albertus, does the sudden revelation of why a piece of typography holds special significance in 2005 mirror a corresponding crisis in the underling socio-political discourse of 1978, an echo or association that in itself has precipitated this historical remembrance? It is beyond the limits of this essay to engage in such a study, but the argument being made here –

following Benjamin – is that the particularity of the subjective encounter could serve to mask a crisis in the totality.

The key here is the attempt to excavate the contingent subjective, social and political issues that weave themselves around the design object, while remaining forever alert to the incommensurability of them both. I question how this object as symptom of an earlier intersubjective experience of the Other's desire – the idea of the design-object inhabiting some kind of painful lack in the other (i.e. the strawberry cake or a typeface), a wound or lack generated by socio-political discourses – equally problematizes a historical approach that negates the subjective element. Move too far to one side and there is a danger that design writing becomes increasingly reified, more "thing like". Too far the other way and we experience something akin to what Borges attributed to the novelist William Henry Hudson, who apparently said that "throughout my life whenever I have undertook [sic] the study of metaphysics, happiness always interrupts me" (Borges, cited in Bosteels 2008: 175). The intensity of the existential experience of the object overwhelms any possibility of an equitable historical study.

**The Object Objects**

Maybe one response to this is to think of our relationship to these objects, of our fascination with them, as having originated in D.W. Winnicott's idea of the "transitional object", as socially mediated material objects that have marked a particular period of our early lives as we moved from one stage of psychic development to another. For Winnicott, as the psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas noted, the experience of the transitional phase is often repeated in adult life, "usually on the occasion of the aesthetic moment… [where] an individual feels a deep

subjective rapport with an object… and experiences an uncanny fusion with it, an event that may re-evoke an ego state that prevailed during early psychic life" (Bollas 1987: 16). Adopting this psychoanalytical methodology, one way of recovering the forgotten object is to be sensitive to our own emotional (not intellectual) responses to an object we are drawn to. We need to ask ourselves "How we are feeling? Why are we feeling? And why now?" when faced with a piece of design and from this start to become aware how we have internalized, through an object, a particular psycho-social (and historically determined) relationship. Yet, we need to be cautious. In infancy, with the transitional object, there is often a sense of omnipotence, a sense of having total control over the article in question. In such a relationship, as noted above, lay the seeds of the fetishisation of the object that is characteristic of some design writing. The latter manifests itself in a form of design criticism that can be playful, yes, but a performative encounter with the artifact that it not dissimilar from that of a child's imagined mastery of a much-loved toy. Rather, the first step is to explore the object as a symptom of the historian's own intersubjective development. Here, we move from the traditional idea of the historian "working-on" the design-object to the idea of the design-object being the active agent over and against the subject's passivity: the object is that which, as Slavoj Žižek has noted, "disturbs the smooth running of things" (Žižek 2006: 17).

While the exploration of the role of desire in historical discourse challenges the establishment of the historian occupying the position of the One, there is a problem here. To return to Žižek's idea of the parallax gap, from what position are we engaging in this self-reflective process? From where are we speaking? If the symbolic attachments that form our relationship to the object are found in the blind spots, the shadows, the gaps, where is the Archimedean Point from which the design historian

can view their own involvement in this rendezvous with the object? As already indicated, there is not one. Redolent of the Heisenberg Principle, the self functions like the positive end of a magnet that distorts the critical space that encircles a design-object. However, there are hazards in such an approach. If we are unable to develop a study of an object via a language that reaches beyond that which is uniquely singular to the historian – a language that is itself formed by the unspoken desires of the other – all we are left with is an approach that, in its acute solipsism, has no audience beyond the self. Nonetheless, such a critique equally serves to negate the actuality, as outlined already, that our symbolic investments are themselves formed in networks of power. Our attachments are not innocent; they are formed through the symbolic order riven with socio-political proclivities. In my instance, Albertus masked the lack in the other, a desire that both fascinated and appalled me, a desire, as already noted, shaped by the unique experiences of wide-scale patterns of migration and divorce. In brief, our psychic investments in particular design-objects are socially and historically experienced, but when the socially agreed meanings around an object come to predominate, then the path back to our own singular relationship to an object is difficult to trace.

In such situations, as the cultural theorist Mari Ruti has said, when "the symbolic gains too much power at the expense of the real, our existence loses its passion and forward-moving cadence". But, correspondingly, as Ruti continues, "when the symbolic fails to adequately mediate the disorderly energies of the Real – when the quilting points that connect us to social sites of meaning are too fragile – we feel terrorized by the over proximity of jouissance [Hudson's happiness]; we fail to gain a steady foothold in cultural narratives and other collective landmarks that would be able to anchor us in the symbolic world." (Ruti 2012: 160). The design-object can

come to mark the site of this struggle, a conflict that is not containable within empty universal historical time, but, as Benjamin recognized, that "supplies a *unique experience with the past*" (Benjamin 1992: 255, my italics).[2] In Lacanian terms, our entry into the symbolic sees a subjecthood that is split. That pre-symbolic unnamable part of us is lost forever, and the lifelong search for this lost "Thing" manifests itself in creative acts of sublimation, relationships with material objects that are both singular and socially codified (Ruti 2012: 127). In terms of design history, such an approach becomes productive when we start to grasp why our sublimative desires encircle specific objects, why the historical (and politically motivated) languages and relationships that played their original role in cutting us from our pre-symbolic selves have resurfaced in another historical moment. Although not explicitly psychoanalytical, Benjamin captured this when he said "Materialistic historiography… involves not only flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. *Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock,* by which it crystallizes into a monad" (Benjamin 1992: 254, my italics). In the first instance, the uncanny encounter, the "configuration pregnant with tensions", is an apposite way of describing the autobiographical "design event" outlined at the beginning of this essay. Secondly, and as is well known, Benjamin is here advancing a form of historical thought that fractures the abstract and homogenous temporality that permeates much historical writing.

To return to the earlier point, what emerges from this is a vision of the historical encounter as a "monad", a radically consistent but heterogeneous event, that sets itself against a form of singular abstraction known as History (but equally so other abstractions such as Capital, Nation, etc.). It has been the contention throughout this work that a cognizance of certain intersubjective encounters can serve to act as

such a monad, a way in which the design-objects we become wedded to mark the nexus point of specific social and political discourses. The radical awareness of such moments is that a new potentiality can be inserted into the historical record. Clearly, this does not mean that we can change past events, as Henri Bergson recognized, "I never pretended that one can insert reality into the past and thus work backwards in time." However, as Bergson continues:

> one can without any doubt insert there the possible, or, rather, at every moment, the possible inserts itself there. Insofar as unpredictable and new reality creates itself, its image reflects itself behind itself in indefinite past: this new reality finds itself all the time having been possible; but it is only at the precise moment of its actual emergence that it *begins to always have been*, and this is why I say that its possibility which does not precede its reality, will have preceded it once this reality emerges (Bergson, cited in Žižek 2006: 2002).

Benjamin himself was aware of this, when, paraphrasing a comment by the historian Andre Monglond, he recognized that "the past has left images of itself in literary texts, images comparable to those which are imprinted by light on a photosensitive plate. The future alone possesses developers active enough to scan such surfaces perfectly" (Benjamin 1999: 482). The work that remains is to ask why some images, in this instance, objects of design history, and not others, reveal themselves to the historian at a specific moment in time.

The logical culmination of this last question is an ethical one. The ground from which we view the design-object may be connected across time by the enduring

socio-political values from which we first encountered it (or when it was created), but the object (and/or ourselves) is not totally determined by these discourses. There is a significant degree of freedom in how we view these objects and what we choose to accept as causal factors in the construction of meanings around them and our relationship to them as historians. Following this, maybe it becomes more useful to speak about these elements in terms of their role within competing narratives. As with the analysand in the therapeutic setting, who seeks to explore how their identity has been shaped within stories that are not fully their own, it is the ability to choose which ingredients of the story to emphasize and which to ignore, which offers the real freedom. The "truly new emerges through narrative", Žižek has said, "the apparently purely reproductive retelling of what happened – it is this retelling that opens up the space (the possibility) of acting in a new way" (Žižek 2014: 150-151). If freedom is "inherently retroactive" (Žižek 2014: 204), a decision regarding which past chains of necessity or acts will shape the design-object and more significantly, an individual's relationship to it is to move away from a tyranny of the other. We see the objects in the past that shaped us, we see why certain historical objects connect with contemporary conditions, and through this very act, the significance of those objects in history changes.

As I hope has been clear throughout this article, to engage in such an approach requires a radical break with symbolic identities of the expert, the self-proclaimed custodian of design history. It is a case of avoiding what Sartre called "Bad Faith", in this instance, that is adopting the language of a design historian, the tone and style of a design historian, becoming maybe not dead, but undead in your relationship to the object: a zombie historian that peddles the hegemonic language of "university discourse" to such an extent that the singularity of the self is absent. In reference to

the work of Eric Santner (see Santner 2001), Mari Ruti recognised that too often "disciplinary requirements can…divest us of intellectual capaciousness, open-mindedness, and generosity to the extent that we find it difficult to appreciate anything that falls outside of our own tightly defended way of doing things." (Ruti 2012: 31). Maybe, as Alain Badiou speaks of the anti-philosopher, so one could call for the figure of the anti-design-historian. As Badiou notes: "Instead of pretending that the voice of being or some other objective order directly speaks through him…the antiphilosopher speaks only in name of his own tormented subjectivity, as torn between salvation and sin, or between saintliness and suicide...." (Badiou 2011: 53). Although tinged with a certain strain of nihilistic masculinity, Žižek's much promoted form of subjective destitution is productive here in its call for a need to kill our attachments to hegemonic discourses, we must *"sacrifice that innermost part of yourself, your mode of enjoyment by means of which you were attached to power"*(Žižek 1999). In this instance, the design historian needs to sever their "excessive allegiance to symbolic investitures that seek (sometimes quite brutally) to bind [their] energies" (Ruti 2012: 32. It is not about a retreat to the subjective as a way of filling the absence of some overarching objective approach to design history (Benjamin's critique of history as a positivist "empty time"). Rather it is about refusing to invest ourselves in a form of historical writing that can be enervating, that can drain us of our capacity for, to use Winnicott's phrase, "creative living". As Ruti notes, the withdrawal from the edits of the symbolic order is to reject what is expected of us, to reject what it is legitimate to engage with (and how we can engage with an object), it is to encourage transcendent experiences that "summon us to what is immortal within our being" (Ruti 2012: 29).

Nevertheless, the problem always remains, in translating these "transcendent

experiences" into the discourse of design history, naming them, are we not in danger of collapsing into a rarefied form of language that negates the very radicalism of this experience? Maybe, as seen above, a way out of this impasse is to call for a form of design history that mirrors at the material level of the text, the tide of meanings that twist, swirl and encircle the object. That is, a form of historical writing that is close to the way Wittgenstein spoke about poetry and, as Alain Badiou recognized, its ability to say materially what can't be said linguistically, the "unsaid of the saying" or the act "summoned at the edges of linguistic evocation" (Badiou 2011: 177–78). Such an approach would realize that behind the object is a void, a nameless quality. It is about seeking out what the writer Andy Merrifield called a "space of slippage", a place where "we might reinvent ourselves subjectively while creating a new world objectively, a new material world, a new physical and social structure. And so in this gap, in the nothingness that Sartre tells us exists in our world, that we bring into the world, we can begin to locate the realm of freedom, the realm of magic." (Merrifield 2011: 141)

**Image Captions**

Fig. 1. City of London street sign set in Albertus, 11th July, 2014. Photo by author.

Fig. 2. Plaque mounted above the door of *The Prisoner* souvenir shop in Portmeirion, Wales—"the Village" in the TV series—featuring the Prisoner logotype. Photo: Grace Lees-Maffei, 6th May 2007.

Fig. 3. Image of author as Child, 1978. Author's collection.

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**Endnotes**

[1] The event is, as Badiou notes, "something that doesn't enter into the immediate order of things" (Badiou 2012: 28)

[2] "Historicism gives the 'eternal' image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past. The historical materialist leaves it to others to be drained by the whore called 'Once upon a time' in historicism's bordello. He remains in control of his powers, many enough to blast open the continuum of history". (Benjamin 1992: 255)