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WALTER BENJAMIN'S WORLD OF THINGS

In the comprehensive biography *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life*, Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings describe Benjamin's childhood in an elite bourgeois household as a fertile ground for the child's evolving intellectual curiosity: "Around him was a multifarious *Dingwelt*, a world of things appealing to his well nurtured imagination and his omnivorous imitative abilities."[1] The biographers contend that the richness of the material culture surrounding the child explicates Benjamin's reflections on the development of self-consciousness. According to these reflections, the child's self-perception develops concurrently with his spatial orientation in his household, which consisted of a multifaceted and vivacious world of objects that affected his senses.

Benjamin's auto-fictional reflections, titled *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (*Berliner Kindheit um neunzehnhundert*), portray an emerging persona that develops in tandem with echoes of an intrusive surrounding. Disruptions that are embedded in modern reality resound in the descriptions of the household, as well as in those of Berlin's sites. The spatial orientation in the urban sphere, like in the case of the flâneur in Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*, famously conveys a documentation of the changing circumstances of bourgeois life. In the case of *Berlin Childhood*, temporal and cultural transformations are recorded in the circumstances that lead to the emergence of an individual persona. The development of a reflective persona thus foregrounds the exploration of a historiographical perspective that deprioritizes chronological linearity.

I contend that spirituality is present in the text in two main ways.[2] The first is the identification of the child as a non-human, a persona that disrupts

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[1] Eiland, Howard and Michael William Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 13.

[2] Charles Tart has referred to spirituality as "that vast realm of human potential dealing with ultimate purposes, with higher entities, with God, with life, with compassion, with purpose." (1975) "Introduction," in C. T. Tart (Ed.), *Transpersonal Psychologies* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 4. The term is often used interchangeably with "religiousness"; notwithstanding the conflation of the two terms, spirituality has been associated with human experiences that are differentiated from religious orthodoxy and religious institutions, including mystical experiences. See Brian J. Zinnbauer, Kenneth I. Pargament, Brenda Cole, Mark S. Rye, Eric M. Butter, Timothy G. Belavich, Kathleen M. Hipp, Allie B. Scott and Jill L. Kadar, "Religion and Spirituality: Unfuzzying the Fuzzy." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 36, no. 4 (1997): 549–564. Charles Taylor's investigation of religious experience in the modern age destines spirituality an eminent role; according to Taylor, the term hones the emphasis on subjectivism that is featured in our "Age of Authenticity," an age that preceded a broad rejection of old religious institutions. *A Secular Age* (Cambridge/Boston: Harvard University Press, 2007), 507–508. The following inquiry of Benjamin's disassociation of materiality and stillness (and of humanness and agency) employs tropes that transgress institutional religion. The essay's second part will explore this transgression by looking at Benjamin's employment of messianic tropes to dismantle historiographical linearity.

normative views on human sentience. The text disrupts the presumption that humans are superior to inanimate objects due to their vitality. Second, the child's retrospective gaze employs a non-linear perception of history—a perception that is explored in several of Benjamin's seminal texts through the opposition of the messianic (or redemptive) perspective on history to the realm of profane historiography. In *Berlin Childhood*, the child's impressions unfold from the retroactive perspective of a visitor. The child is both unborn and a voice that resembles the perspective of an undead that revisits the city of Berlin upon the ostensible extinguishing of the individuals that populated the city in the story that he tells.

This article investigates the narrator's sentience in *Berlin Childhood* as grounded in his overall presentation as non-human. I argue that the narrator transgresses the view of sentience as a unique human feature by challenging the cultural hierarchy of subjects and objects—a hierarchy that is governed in human societies by spiritual norms that celebrate living bodies and reject the dead. I seek to relate the text's transgression of the animate-inanimate hierarchy to the narrator's position as a narrator of history. In invoking religious tropes constitutive to Benjamin's writings on history, the narrator wears a layer of associations that disconnect his figure from the earthly realm. Developing a counterintuitive spiritual experiment, i.e. a form of transcendence that is intertwined with inferior inanimate objects, *Berlin Childhood* dispels the view of human beings as history's central concern and of the human perspective as the leading prism to history.

Domestic Life and the Undead Narrator

The first volume of Karl Ove Knausgård's multivolume work *My Struggle* explores the spiritual conundrum behind the association of inanimate objects with death. When individuals die, they are taken to enter the realm of inanimate objects. This realm encompasses human beings' surroundings including domestic spaces and nature. But whereas this realm is associated with familiar phenomena and domains of human life, we are repulsed by the transformation of humans into inanimate objects:

> The moment life departs the body, the body belongs to the dead. Lamps, suitcases, carpets, door handles, windows. Fields, marshes, streams, mountains, clouds, the sky. None of these is alien to us. We are constantly surrounded by objects and phenomena from the realm of the nonliving. Nonetheless, there are few things that arouse in us greater distaste than to see a human being caught up in it, at least if we are to judge by the efforts we make to keep corpses out of sight.[3]

The uncanny nature of entering the sphere of the nonliving is marked (and perpetuated) in keeping corpses hidden. Dead bodies invoke the volatility of the human condition; they reveal the liminality of the distinction between human life and the realm of the inanimate. Death is the alarming threshold that separates the dead from the living, the inanimate from the animate. The dead do not merely depart. Rather, they become inanimate and penetrate thereby the environments in which we live, including the most private ones: our homes, our shelters.

[3] *A Death in the Family*, translated by Don Bartlett (London: Vintage Books, 2013), 3–4.

Berlin Childhood dispels the culturally seminal distinction between the dead and the living. The text does so by developing an unconventional depiction of the inanimate. Establishing his persona vis-à-vis his relation to inanimate domestic objects, the narrator demonstrates an exploration of a unique agency that is affiliated with the inanimate or the dead. The auto-fictional narrative at the center of the text thus offers a non-hierarchical account of animate and inanimate objects, the living and the nonliving. The narrator's depictions of the world reveal his status as an "undead"— a figure that hovers between life and death. This figure transgresses the normative allocation of agency, vitality, and reflection to the living.

Reflections on the cultural positioning of humans as superior to objects reveal the stakes of narration in *Berlin Childhood*. In response to the dominance of Kant's Copernican revolution in philosophy—which centered on positioning humans at the center of phenomenology—adherents to "new materialisms" have suggested privileging the object over the subject. Mel Chen's *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (2012) is an original answer to this trend. *Animacies* portrays the relationship of humans to objects as existing not in a binary opposition, but rather on a scale of vitality that sorts world phenomena in accordance with livelihood. Chen wishes to show "how animacy is defined, tested, and configured via its ostensible opposite: the inanimate, deadness, lowness, nonhuman animals (rendered as insensate), the abject, the object."[4] Chen contends that the differentiation between superior and inferior animacies is ingrained in linguistic utterances. Linguistic differentiations between humans, animals, and objects always presume, Chen argues, the hierarchy between them. Chen opts to depict the interobjective relation of phenomena and world objects that goes beyond intersubjective.

In so doing, Chen draws widely on experiments done in early cognitive linguistics, which coined the term "animacy" in order to discern the preconditions of linguistic references to inanimate and animate objects. Animacy is the category that encompasses agency, activity, liveliness, and the ability of cognitive performance. Chen seeks to trace "the grammatical effects of the sentience or liveness of nouns" as inherent to language.[5] Emphasizing the hierarchy between entities based on their vitality, *Animacies* explores modes of existence that transgress this common understanding of reality. One venture point of such a mode is sickness. Chen describes how sickness may carry unsociality. The narrator of *Animacies* is recovering from a chronic sickness when their girlfriend walks in. She sits next to Chen's auto-fictional figure in an attempt to offer this figure comfort. But healing from an illness, the narrator does not feel the girlfriend's embrace; rather, that narrator is carried away by the embrace of the couch on which they are seated—a surprising source of comfort and stability. The promise of intersubjectivity gives way to interobjectivity when, confessing a lack of vitality in face of a recovery from illness, the narrator is associated with the world of things. Chen writes:

> *Animacies* not only takes into account the broadening field of nonhuman life as a proper object, but even more sensitively, the

[4] *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2012), 30.

[5] *Animacies*, 2.

> animateness or inanimateness of entities that are considered either "live" or "dead."[6]

Chen's inquiry destabilizes the view of humans as model agents; the investigation of nonhuman life encompasses multiple and concurrent trajectories in which inanimate objects shape human sentience.

New understandings of the interaction of objects and individuals sparked interest in religious studies and theology. As Clayton Crockett and Jeffrey W. Robbins have cogently written, "The New Materialism is a radical theological vision, even though it stretches what is usually understood by theology almost beyond recognition."[7] Crockett and Robbins' appeal to the New Materialism aims to develop a vision of radical theology. They postulate that decentralizing human perspective aligns with ecological attempts at restoring the earth in the face of climate change. Another recent volume on the topic, *Entangled Worlds: Religion, Science and New Materialism*, opts to depict three trajectories that amalgamate theology and new materialisms: investigation of the agency of matter; of "a range of theologies, each of which animates materiality as a site of divine unfolding"; and of "the ethical and political work that material theologies might do" contra "their materiaphobic counterparts."[8]

Karen Barad's contribution to the latter volume straddles these three objectives by examining Benjamin's perception of time. Barad is especially interested in Benjamin's notion of the now-time (*Jetztzeit*), a momentous perception of time that is detached from the continuum of history and is charged, consequently, with revolutionary potential. Benjamin's now-time signals the possibility of the "diffraction" of a certain instance from cohesive chronology. Barad focuses on Benjamin's description of this moment as an explosion that interrupts the homogeneity of normative historical accounts. Explosion signals, in her mind, the affinity between Benjamin's perception of revolutionary potential and accounts that disrupt normative science by alerting the scientific prism to the agency of matter (such as inquiries into quantum theory). In making this connection she discerns that "Objects are not mere metaphors for Benjamin. They are instances of sensuous materiality."[9] She stresses, along these lines, that Benjamin foregrounds now-time in the attention to the embedding of *all* material beings in eternal transience, in the infinite.[10]

The dismantling of hierarchies between animate and inanimate beings is evident in *Berlin Childhood* as the work unfolds the emergence of the narrator's sentience. The individual's bodily functions are active alongside the functions of objects. Several sections put a certain inanimate object in the center: the telephone, the carousel, the jewelry box. These objects *seem* alive and vital, and their appearance thus solicits a comparison to human

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[6] Ibid., 10.

[7] Clayton Crockett and Jeffrey W. Robbins, *Religion, Politics, and the Earth: The New Materialism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), xvi.

[8] "Introduction," in Catherine Keller and Mary-Jane Rubenstein (eds.) *Entangled Worlds: Religion, Science, and New Materialisms* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 7.

[9] Karen Barad, "What Flashes Up: Theological-Political-Scientific Fragments" in Catherine Keller and Mary-Jane Rubenstein (eds.) *Entangled Worlds: Religion, Science, and New Materialisms* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 30.

[10] Ibid., 63.

activity. In so doing, Benjamin's auto-fictional work transgresses what appears to be a normal order of personification (the description of inanimate objects in the form of people or animals). The attempt to view a vibrant object as human-like reveals a certain dearth: the human presence that it would be compared to has not yet been established in the world of the text. The "human" is a potential entity rather than a fixed category that could delegate its sentience to other objects.

Benjamin's reflections on a child's self-awareness present the entrance of new technologies to bourgeois life as the backdrop for the awakening of the individual's senses. The child's development—ostensibly an organic and natural process—registers an interruption that penetrates the household. New technologies disrupt the order of family life. They intervene with daily life and reverberate the metropolitan setting. New domestic objects reshape the individual's relationship to the environment and unravel familial communication. Composed throughout the late stage of Benjamin's writing, *Berlin Childhood* echoes his previous descriptions of the shock that is imminent to modern life.

In this way, instead of the personification of objects—the act of describing objects as imitating human form and actions—the child, who perceives the inanimate objects as lively, learns to emulate *their* activity. In this process, the narrator obtains vitality and becomes human. This dynamic pertains especially to new technological appliances whose disruptive impact on family life instills anxiety and aggression in the subject. Eiland and Jennings write: "on the telephone, which in those days had already attained a dominant position in the household, his father sometimes revealed a fierceness that contrasted dramatically with his usual affability."[11] The adjustment to the new sound technology disrupts the household routine and modulates new sensibilities for its members:

> Not many of those who use the apparatus know what devastation it once wreaked in family circles. The sounds with which it rang between two and four in the afternoon, when a school friend wished to speak to me, was an alarm signal that menaced not only my parents' midday nap but the historical era that underwrote and enveloped this siesta. […] At that time, the telephone still hung – an outcast settled between the dirty-linen hamper and the gasometer – in a corner of the back hallway, where its ringing served to multiply the terrors of the Berlin household. When, having mastered my senses with great effort, I arrived to quell the uproar after prolonged fumbling through the gloomy corridor, I tore off the two receivers, which were heavy as dumbbells, thrust my head between them, and was inexorably delivered over to the voice that now sounded. There was nothing to allay the violence with which it pierced me.[12]

The biographers allude to the role of the telephone in provoking the child's sentience, especially with regard to voice. The fierce ringing of the telephone urges the child to seek its source. The mechanical voice hands the child to a second voice: the one on the other side of the line. The phone delivers the child to the human voice, which, like the phone's ringing, penetrates him violently. These two voices condition a third voice that does

[11] *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life*, 350.

[12] *Berlin Childhood around 1900*. Translated by Howard Eiland (Cambridge, Mass./London: Harvard University Press, 2006), 49–50. *Walter Benjamins Gesammelte Schriften* VII (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989), 391.

not resound in the episode: the child's voice. It is presumed that the child's own voice would be provoked by the object's mechanical sound. However, this promise is accompanied by a presentation of human agency as feeble in comparison to that of the object. Benjamin's *Dingwelt* thus disrupts the hierarchy between the subject and the object.

As the telephone episode shows, the ostensible humanity of the objects draws on a comparison to a human agency, which is still in the process of becoming. In *Berlin Childhood*, the motions of inanimate objects cannot be fully compared to human actions, since the human is always only a promise and not yet a concrete materialization. Human sentience develops in the text in tandem with the functions of non-living objects. This dynamic exposes the individual persona as reliant on the organization of the domestic space and, particularly, the positioning of objects in it. The child's senses are modulated in tandem with the reorganization of the household around the intrusive presence of new technologies. Personification relies on the *promise* that the human will come into being. The human-like activity of objects thus evokes the development of the child, who learns to aim at this promise of humanness as reached with adulthood.

Urban Echoes at Home

The shuttering effect of technology pertains in the text not only to household items, but also to such catalysts of human mobility as trains. Importantly, the intrusive presence of the urban landscape in the domestic realm provokes the narrator's emerging sentience. This intrusive influence is what one sees in the excerpt "Loggias":

> The rhythm of the metropolitan railway and of carpet beating rocked me to sleep […] Many where the messages embedded in the skirmishing of the green roller blinds drawn up high, and many the ominous dispatched that I prudently left unopened in the rattling of the roll up shutters that came thundering down at dusk.[13]

This description concerns liminal spaces that disrupt the distinction between inside and outside as it is embodied in the common apposition of the domestic to the urban sphere. The loggias are contained in the domestic realm while also allowing outside impressions (such as dusk) to penetrate the home. The succeeding presentation of the loggias suggests that they are metonymic to the act of childhood reminiscences, precisely because of the spatial liminality that they convey:

> In the years since I was a child, the loggias have changed less than other places. This is not the only reason they stay with me. It is much more on account of the solace that lies in their un-inhabitability for one who himself no longer has a proper abode. They mark the outer limit of the Berliner's lodging. Berlin – the city god itself – begins in them. The god remains such a presence there that nothing transitory can hold its ground beside him. In his safekeeping, space and time come into their own and find each other. Both of them lies at his feet here.[14]

In this passage, the divine emerges as an essence that the domestic space shares with the metropolitan. The divine element appears to draw its

[13] *Berlin Childhood*, 39–40. *GS* VII, 386.

[14] *Berlin Childhood*, 42. *GS* VII, 387–388.

power, or transcendental nature, from the seminal Kantian categories pertaining to the human perception of reality: space and time. But in Benjamin's text, the collision of space and time is not the defining human feature that focalizes humans' perception of world phenomena. Quite the reverse, these categories are subjected to an inanimate sphere ruled by a "city god" (*Stadtgott*), a term that associates the city with governing patron gods. The loggias are the threshold of the domestic, a liminal space that marks the room as a miniaturization of the city. Someone who cannot find abode, perhaps like the flâneur, can reside in the sphere of the inanimate. Emulating a non-human object—the camera—the narrator's sentience opts to emulate the capacities of an object.[15] The camera's ability to document outside impressions by capturing images is at the core of this dynamic that is alluded to in the irresolute statement that the loggias "have changed less than other places."

Elaine Scarry's classic study, *The Body in Pain,* reflects on the influence of architectonic structures on human sentience. Scarry investigates practices of torture that make use of domestic objects and spaces. Going through extreme pain, the individual experiences the collapse of the rudimentary function of rooms:

> In normal contexts, the room, the simplest form of shelter, expresses the most benign potential of human life. It is, on the one hand, an enlargement of the body: it keeps warm and safe the individual it houses in the same way the body encloses and protects the individual within; like the body, its walls put boundaries around the self preventing undifferentiated contact with the world, yet in its windows and doors, crude versions of the senses, it enables the self to move out into the world and allows that world to enter.[16]

Scarry highlights the constitutive role of an inanimate unit in creating human self-perception. We relate to rooms as emblems of bodily functions. Architectonic units shelter individuals, in the same way that the body shelters human consciousness. Simultaneously, these units enable individuals to sustain a controllable relationship to the outside world. These units have windows and doors that, like corporal openings, allow individuals to manage their relationship to their outside surroundings.

Their symbolic resemblance to the human body posits both the room and the domestic objects in it as the building blocks of civilization:

> [A]s the elemental room is multiplied into a house of rooms and the house into a city of houses, the body is carried forward into each successive intensification of civilization. In western culture, whole

[15] Michael Jennings reads the loggias passage as centering on the penetration of new technologies into the domestic realm. According to Jennings, this passage alerts the reader to the presence of a technological apparatus that mirrors the act of reminiscing: the camera. The shape of this new instrument of recollection parallels that of the loggia, a box-like structure whose shutters open and closes sporadically. Jennings argues that the shape of the loggias thus evokes two concurrent functions of the new photographic technology. The multidimensional infrastructure shows the narrator's gaze to function like that of the photographer. Simultaneously, the same domestic space resembles the function of the technological apparatus, the camera obscura, in its ability to capture images through its structure. Jennings, Michael W.: "The Mausoleum of Youth: Between Experience and Nihilism in Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood*." *Paragraph* 32, no. 3 (2009), 316–317.

[16] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 38–39.

> rooms within a house attend to single facts about the body, the kitchen and eating, the bathroom and excreting, the bedroom and sleeping; so, too, entire cities become attentive to single facts about the body, as movement is visible in the car industry in Detroit, or eyesight and memory in the film and copying of Rochester. It is, though, back in the inward and enclosing space of the single room and its domestic content that the outward unfolding […] of civilization originates. One can get accustomed to the function of the room as a part of the civilization. One can begin to acknowledge the manufactured objects inside the room, like the furniture, as well as the position of the room as a part of the building, and the building as part of the city.[17]

Scarry contends that moments wherein the room's architecture and its common objects are used for torture transgress the human control over inanimate objects.[18] Doors and windows can be slammed, opened, and closed harshly—that is, against the will of the prisoner. Such violent actions intensify the power of the prison guards as they mark their ultimate control over the human body by disrupting the symbolic quality of the room as a shelter that magnifies the body. In the same way that the windows and doors are opened and slammed violently, against the prisoner's will, the prisoner can no longer shut off his or her own body to the outside world by closing the eyes or mouth.

Benjamin's auto-fictional narrative reflects this potential hazard. The text proposes that architectural and self-contained structures like the room, the apartment, and the city modulate not merely the human body, but also the human historical reflection. *Berlin Childhood* offers a narrative of a history that transcends the temporal limitation of human life. In doing so, the text theorizes a perception of time that transgresses the linearity of common historiography. In employing the figure of the messianic that recurs in Benjamin's oeuvre, *Berlin Childhood* alludes to a perspective toward history that transcends human sentience.

To use Scarry's language, "while the room is a magnification of the body, it is simultaneously a miniaturization of the world, of civilization."[19] The location of the household in the metropolitan expresses a unique transition from the first conundrum in *Berlin Childhood*—the view that inanimate objects, which determine the subject's form, exist *before* the subject —to the second: the realization that inanimate objects are likely to exist *after* the subject whose sentience they provoked. In discussing Benjamin's 1928 *Origin of German Tragic Drama* (*Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*), Eric Santner has opted to demonstrate the transgression of the domain of human existence that is caused by an animal-like perception that he terms "creaturely life" and that is featured, in Santner's mind, in writings by Benjamin, Rilke, and Sebald.[20] Santner takes *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* to explicate the intertwining of creaturely life with an account of history that deprioritizes human life as the object at its center. This perspective toward history exposes the independence of the inanimate

[17] Ibid., 39.

[18] Ibid., 40.

[19] Ibid., 38.

[20] Eric L. Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

objects and framework, which grants human history meaning, from a human viewpoint on history. Referring to Benjamin's notion of natural history (*Naturgeschichte*), Santner argues that this term pertains "not to the fact that nature also has a history but to the fact that the artifacts of human history tend to acquire an aspect of mute, natural being at the point where they begin to lose their place in a viable form of life (think of the process whereby architectural ruins are reclaimed by nature)."[21] *Berlin Childhood* exhibits the viable possibility that inanimate objects may outlive the subject that emerges through the interaction with them. Adding to the engagement with domestic objects and architectonic units as preceding the individual (and conditioning his sentience), it appears that urban sites are likely to outlive the humans who inhabit them, the humans to whose life they have given meaning. *Berlin Childhood* exhibits in this way Benjamin's conception of historiography: it experiments with a historical narration that deprioritizes the human perspective as the leading prism to the transformation of the world.

Historical Perception and Messianic Hope

The attempt to conceptualize a new form of historical narration builds on seminal tropes of Benjamin's thought. Benjamin's unpublished fragment number 174 describes childhood as a phase of sharp sentience. However, instead of yielding the expectation of the child's future exploration of the world, this phase leads to a blurring of past and present:

> Is the intensity with which we, as children, absorb the world, but also images, rhyme, etcetera, not mixed together with some kind of presentiment? So that many of the things of which we are reminded in later life do not just remind us of actual situations, but also of presentiments.[22]

At first glance, the fragment appears to make a counterintuitive argument. Culture perceives the child's consciousness as a tabula rasa. To use Chen's terminology, children are commonly ascribed enhanced animacy because they have a long life ahead of them. Benjamin's fragment overturns this expectation. The child's first impressions evoke a sense of presentiment (*Vorahnung*). Rather than pure, empty, or blank, the child's impressions are laden with future repetitions. This dynamic makes it hard to locate the one original memory (because memories are embedded per definition in a set of repetitions). In other words, presentiment is a sensation that transgresses the temporal distinctions "present" and "past." Sigrid Weigel has mapped Benjamin's conceptualization of images in referring to his understanding of temporality and cognition:

> The trace of many images […] inscribes comparable figurations in Benjamin's writings: first encounter—fascinated contemplation of the image and impression, or being touched; *latency*—the image in one's

[21] Ibid., 17.

[22] Sollte nicht der Intensität, mit der wir als Kinder die Welt, aber auch Bilder, Reime etc aufnehmen, sich etwas von Vorahnung beimischen? So daß vieles im spätern Leben, was uns erinnert, nicht sowohl an wirkliche Situationen als an Vorahnungen uns erinnert (*GS* VI, 204). Tom Vandeputte's translation of fragment 174 was prepared for a workshop on intensity in Walter Benjamin's philosophy, an event that took place at the Forschungsinstitut für Philosophie Hannover. I thank Tom Vandeputte for allowing me to use his translation and the entire group of participants for the fruitful discussions of the term.

> head, as an imaginary vis-à-vis the reflection; *thought-image*—the discussion of the image and the generation of a dialectical image within theory.[23]

Weigel's notion of "the generation of a dialectical image" in Benjamin's oeuvre resonates with the temporal split provoked by childhood memories. Children's presentiment is taken as ingrained in both their experiences and in the later recollection of these experiences. Presentiment cancels out, therefore, the status of images as "original" and the understanding of recollections as mere replicas of an original experience.

The term "intensity" that characterizes this volatile temporality of images in fragment 174 relates in Benjamin's oeuvre to a perception of time that is laden by theology. In his 1921 "Theological-Political Fragment," a text that develops the terms that will become eminent to his theories of history, Benjamin wrote about "the messianic intensity of the heart," an affect driven by a mystic concept of history:

> If one directional arrow marks the goal in which the dynamic of the profane takes effect and another, the direction of messianic intensity, then clearly the pursuit of happiness of free humanity strives away from every messianic direction. But just as a force is capable, through its direction, of promoting another in the opposite direction, so too is the profane order of the profane in the coming of the messianic kingdom. The profane, therefore, is not a category of the kingdom but a category – that is, one of the most appropriate – of its most quiet nearing. For in happiness everything earthly strives for its decline and only in happiness is the decline determined to find it. While clearly the unmediated messianic intensity of the heart, of the inner, individual person, passes through tragedy, in the sense of suffering.[24]

Like the more famous figure, the "angel of history," the image of the heart pronounces the anticipation of an apocalyptic future. The vision of apocalypse dispels the connotation of a future with development. "Intensity" is the driving force behind this transgression. Intensity heralds a form of individuality of a believer who detaches him or herself from collective convictions. Messianic intensity is a reflection on history that dispels the view of the future as the culmination of linear progress. Happiness that is grounded in messianic aspirations, as opposed to forms of happiness that are centered on this world, bounds the individual to a negation of the earthly (as resembled in "tragedy").[25] Happiness driven by messianic aspirations thus contradicts the common association of happiness with prosperity. Quite the reverse, "messianic happiness" entails not

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[23] "The Flash of Knowledge and the Temporality of Images: Walter Benjamin's Image-Based Epistemology and Its Preconditions in Visual Arts and Media History," *Critical Inquiry* 41 (Winter 2015), 352.

[24] The fragment and its translation are available in Eric Jacobson's "Understanding Walter Benjamin's Theological-Political Fragment," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (2001): 207.

[25] As Jacobson writes "In Benjamin, it is clear that the world must pass away but its passing can only be achieved through happiness. This happiness is at once constituted to be worldly and, at the same time, messianic, in the sense of being directed toward messianic activity. In this respect, the focus of this development, based on happiness, turns to the motor of redemption" (Ibid., 229).

merely the decline of the profane world, but also the decline of its notion of linear progress.

The Meaning of Time: Inanimate Perspectives

The vision of historical consciousness that negates the world of the living guides the notion of temporality in *Berlin Childhood* as manifested in the narrator's spatial and temporal orientation in the world. As Anja Lemke cogently shows, *Berlin Childhood* portrays a counterintuitive picture of the child: the newly born is closer to death than to life. She writes that, "The topography of the city is not only the access to the structure of one's life, but is a link to the realm of the dead. In the houses, streets and squares, the urban space preserves the traces of the past as a stone testimony to the dead."[26] The child's presence is that of a ghostly observer who reflects on the urban sites out of a direct connection to death. The childhood recollections are the attempt to return to the experience of the world (Lemke uses the word "Erlebnis") through this prism of the proximity to death. This freedom of signification parallels the child's peculiar animacy.

Peter Szondi has claimed that Benjamin reads Proust as trying to escape the future by clinging to the past, and that *Berlin Childhood* is exactly contrasted with this attempt: "the future is precisely what Benjamin seeks in the past."[27] Benjamin's reflections on childhood prove to be a venture point for the unfolding of a unique perception of history in his entire oeuvre. The figure of the child is synonymous with vitality. It holds the promise of pure and sharp sentience and further cognitive development. Benjamin transgresses these cultural conventions. His displacement of animate bodies with inanimate objects results in a broader reflection on the linear perception of time.

Benjamin's depiction of the child as cohabiting in the so-called realm of the dead—in the symbolic forms of the city which have outlived the people whose lives they formed—resonates with the child's cohabitation with the inanimate. The child's ghostly regard in the city reveals a paradoxical mode of agency. The narrator's activity in telling a historical account adheres to latency that is culturally associated with the inanimate. The narrator's recollections transgress the distinction of vitality from death. Benjamin's amalgamation of childhood reminiscences with urban history equips his narrator with sentience that exceeds normative historiography; these auto-fictional recollections establish a narrator that embraces the inanimate, ergo the culturally inferior, while undertaking a historiographical gaze that appeals to the order that exceeds human life.

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[26] *Gedächtnisräume des Selbst: Walter Benjamins "Berliner Kindheit um neunzehnhundert"* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2005), 32–33 (my translation).

[27] "Hope in the Past: On Walter Benjamin." *Critical Inquiry* 4, no. 3 (1978): 499.