



PROJECT MUSE®

Outtakes of a Life: On a Cinematographic Moment in
Benjamin's "The Storyteller"

Michael G. Levine

MLN, Volume 134, Number 5, December 2019, pp. 1008-1036 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mln.2019.0110>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/748164>

Outtakes of a Life: On a Cinematographic Moment in Benjamin's "The Storyteller"



Michael G. Levine

For Richard Macksey and the incontestable sunshine of digression.

"And suddenly my whole life passed before my eyes." Once an unheard-of occurrence, the life review experience (LRE), as it is now termed in neuroscientific literature, has been increasingly reported, investigated, and embroidered upon since the beginning of the twentieth century. The experience is defined today as the vivid perception of images of one's life, encompassing either the person's entire lifespan or several significant events (Katz et al. 367–421). Usually following a chronological order, it proceeds from early to late age, although there are reports of it being viewed the other way around. The number of distinct events perceived may range from several images to the impression of a rapid flow or simultaneous presentation of numerous images depicting one's entire life, and may even extend to the future (Katz et al. 76–77). Most life review experiences are reported among people undergoing a near-death experience (NDE).

While moments of life-threatening danger and what transpires in the individual going through them may have been a source of fascination from time immemorial, as a team of Israeli neurologists contends, a spike in scientific interest in the particular experience of the life review may have much to do with the invention of motion pictures at the end of the 19th century (Katz et al. 76). As Friedrich Kittler observes,

Around 1900, immediately after the development of film, it appears that there was an increase in the number of cases of mountain climbers, alpinists, and possibly chimney-sweeps who, against the odds, survived almost fatal falls from mountains or rooftops. It may be more likely, though, that the number of cases did not increase but rather that the number of scientists interested in them did. In any case, a theory immediately began to circulate among physicians like Dr. Moriz Benedict and mystical anthroposophists like Dr. Rudolf Steiner . . . The theory stated that the so-called experience—a key philosophical concept at the time—of falling (or, according to other observations, also drowning) was allegedly not terrible or frightening at all. Instead, at the moment of imminent death a rapid time-lapse film of an entire former life is projected once again in the mind's eye, although it is unclear to me whether it is supposed to run forwards or backwards. In any case, it is evident: in 1900, the soul suddenly stopped being a memory in the form of wax slates or books, as Plato describes it; rather it was technically advanced and transformed into a motion picture.

. . . the only thing that can be known about the soul or the human are the technical gadgets with which they have been historically measured at any given time. (35)

The scholarly literature concerned with LRE not only privileges the visual but speaks repeatedly of the high-speed projection of images or, as in Kittler, the screening of a time-lapse film at moments of life-threatening danger.¹ Implicit in these accounts is the assumption that the life reviewed is one's own, that under the pressure of impending death, all of one's experiences—or at least the most significant—are viewed in a flash. What never seems to occur to those studying the phenomenon is that the life flashing by may not entirely—or even in part—be one's own. If and when such possibilities are entertained, they are presented only in the form of comedic spoofs, such as Woody Allen's stand-up routine, "Down South," or seemingly extraneous remarks made in the context of focused meditations on the relationship between narration and dying, as in Walter Benjamin's 1936 essay, "The Storyteller."

Allen's account of an LRE opens with him traveling in a formerly Confederate state in the US. Invited to what he thinks is a costume party, he decides to go as a ghost. The gathering turns out, of course, to be a meeting of the Ku Klux Klan, and Allen gives himself away at

¹The present article focuses only on the scholarly literature and above all those passages in Benjamin's oeuvre devoted to the LRE. Cinematic and literary treatments of the experience are too numerous to mention and would require an examination in their own right. Perhaps the best-known of these works is Ambrose Bierce's 1890 short story, "An Occurrence at Owl-Creek Bridge."

the moment when donations are being solicited. Instead of putting in cash as the plate is passed, he “pledges” fifty dollars (as Jews forbidden to carry money on the High Holidays traditionally do). “They knew immediately,” he says, “took my hood off, . . . threw a rope around my neck, and decided to hang me.”

And suddenly my whole life passed before my eyes. I saw myself as a kid again, in Kansas, going to school, swimming at the swimming hole, and fishing, frying up a mess-o-catfish, going down to the general store, getting a piece of gingham for Emmy-Lou. And I realize it’s not my life. They’re gonna hang me in two minutes, the wrong life is passing before my eyes. And I spoke to them, and I was really eloquent, I said “Fellas, this country can’t survive, unless we love one another regardless of race, creed or color.” And they were so moved by my words, not only did they cut me down and let me go, but that night, I sold them two thousand dollars-worth of Israel Bonds. (“Down South”)

If there is a fate worse than death, it is perhaps the realization that life itself, the life one thought one had lived, will not have been one’s own. This is certainly a near-death experience of another nature, one that has the curious effect in Allen not only of concentrating his presence of mind but also of sharpening his Jewish wit and enhancing his rhetorical powers.

Benjamin describes a related scene of mistaken identity at the very center of “The Storyteller.” For him, the experiences flitting by at the moment of death are neither one’s own nor, as in Allen’s case, those of another, but instead what he describes as images of self-encounter without self-awareness. Such projections have their own force of persuasion, an eloquence conveyed not in words but in the silence of a certain mimetic effect. Thus, Benjamin writes:

Just as a sequence of images is set in motion inside a man as his life comes to an end—unfolding the views of himself under which he has encountered himself without being aware of it—suddenly in his expressions and looks the unforgettable emerges and imparts to everything that concerns him that authority which even the poorest wretch in dying possesses for the living around him. This authority is at the very source of the story. (SW 3: 151)

So wie im Innern des Menschen mit dem Ablauf des Lebens eine Folge von Bildern sich in Bewegung setzt—bestehend aus den Ansichten der eigenen Person, unter denen er ohne es inne zu werden, sich selber begegnet ist—so geht mit einem Mal in seinen Mienen und Blicken das Unvergeßliche auf und teilt allem, was ihn betraf, die Autorität mit, die auch der ärmste Schächer im Sterben für die Lebenden um ihn her besitzt. Am Ursprung des Erzählens steht diese Autorität. (GS II:2:449–450)

I am interested in this passage for a number of reasons: first, because it sheds a very different light on the life review experience as it is commonly understood, placing the accent on moments so “unforgettable” that, paradoxically, they never belonged to one’s lived experience or conscious memory of it; second, because it and related passages in Benjamin’s oeuvre employ pointedly (proto-)cinematic language to describe unconscious processes of registration, archivization, projection, and transmission, thereby underscoring a link between the language of “technical gadgets,” as Kittler calls it, and modern thinking about the soul, the psyche and the human; and third, because it touches on questions of storytelling, narrative authority, and what it means for life “to assume transmissible form,” which are not otherwise developed in the course of the essay.

While appearing at the very crux of “The Storyteller,” in part X of an essay divided into nineteen sections, the passage nevertheless remains relatively disconnected from all that surrounds it, as though the insight flashing up here were itself not susceptible of narrative or discursive development. Relatively isolated, it is best read as a fragment connected to other similarly disconnected, suspended, and undeveloped flashes of insight. Here the connections made are to be sought less in the argumentative flow of the text (though this will in no way be discounted) than in the uncanny insistence of certain signifiers. A case in point is the repetition in the very last sentence of the text of the verb “to encounter” initially used to describe the views under which the dying man “encountered himself without being aware of it [*unter denen er ohne es inne zu werden, sich selber begegnet ist*].” “It is in the figure of the storyteller,” the essay concludes, “that the righteous man encounters himself [*sich begegnet*]” (SW 3:162; GS II:2:465).

Relatively isolated from its surrounding context and barely comprehensible on its own terms, the passage must also be read in connection with other liminal moments in Benjamin’s writings of the 1930s. None is more relevant than his account of a little hunchback in possession of a certain flipbook. Composed in 1934 for inclusion in *Berlin Childhood*, the passage never made it into the final 1938 edition. Before turning to such moments, I begin with the immediate context of the deathbed scene in which Benjamin’s alternative account of an LRE is told. The scene is itself preceded by his brief summary of changes in the history of dying, including how the thought of death had declined in omnipresence and vividness; how its very face had been altered; how hygienic and social developments in the private and public institutions of nineteenth-century bourgeois society had

made it possible for people to avoid the sight of the dying; how the dying were stowed away in sanatoria and hospitals by their heirs; and how in modern life in general dying had been pushed further and further out of the perceptual world of the living. After noting these changes, Benjamin moves to the deathbed scene and the moment in which, as he says, “not only a man’s knowledge or wisdom but above all his real life [*gelebtes Leben*] . . . assume transmissible [*tradierbare*] form” (SW 3:151; GS II:2:449). This moment, he adds, is the very stuff of which stories are made.

When on the verge of death, a series of images is set in motion. They are, Benjamin emphasizes, views of the dying man under which he encounters himself “*without being aware of it [ohne es inne zu werden].*” They are views of his life, but strangely enough, only to the extent that they do not belong to him—only to the extent that the moments in question are not only recorded without his knowledge, but also unconsciously retained and obliviously archived. It is in this sense that one must understand Benjamin’s use of the term “unforgettable.” “Suddenly in his expressions and looks the unforgettable emerges [*so geht mit einem Mal in seinen Mienen und Blicken das Unvergeßliche auf*]” (SW 3:151; GS II.2:449). As noted above, such views remain unforgettable precisely to the extent that they were never consciously registered or available to conscious recall. Only that which was never remembered, only that which will have been unknowingly retained elsewhere in a space *of* the self but not *belonging to* it, is impossible to forget. What is unforgettable are not privileged moments of self-observation and self-recognition but rather scenes of self-encounter without self-consciousness, scenes that are less the stuff of one’s own life story or autobiography than of a sort of auto-hetero-biography. Only the latter, Benjamin suggests, is the stuff of which stories are made. Such “unforgettable” stories are imparted not in words but in looks. And what is seen is not a static image—even though the deathbed scenes initially discussed by him are those depicted in medieval paintings—but rather “a *series of images set in motion*” inside a man as his life comes to an end.

While Benjamin never makes explicit the connection between this series of images and the medium of motion pictures, his account of the little hunchback mentioned above suggests a mediating link. Initially composed for inclusion in *Berlin Childhood*, this account does not appear in the recently published English edition of Benjamin’s *Selected Writings*, and is to be found only at the very end of the 1934

draft published in volume 4, part 1 of the *Gesammelten Schriften*. I cite it here in my own translation:

I imagine that the life that is said to pass before one's eyes at the moment of death is composed of those images that only the little man has of us all. They flit by quickly like pages in those tightly bound flipbooks that were the precursors of our cinematographs. With a slight pressure, the thumb moves across the edges of the page and the images, barely distinguishable from one another, become visible for just a second. In their fleeting succession one comes to recognize the boxer at work and the swimmer in his struggle against the waves. The little man has these images of me.²

The "little man" referred to here is *das bucklichte Männlein*, a figure that surfaces frequently in Benjamin's writings of the thirties ranging from *Berlin Childhood* to his Kafka essay to the theses on the philosophy of history. As has often been noted, this little man is associated with moments of rupture and strange forms of address.³ Thus, for example, in the last section of the final version of *Berlin Childhood* Benjamin recalls how his mother would say "Greetings from Mr. Clumsy [*Unge-schickt läßt grüßen*]" when he had broken or dropped something. "And now I understood what she was talking about," he adds. "She was referring to the little hunchback who had been looking at me. Whoever is looked at by this little man pays no attention. Either to himself or to the little man. He stands dazed before a heap of fragments." Benjamin's explanation of the unsettling mode of address associated with the look of the little man is accompanied by a citation of the following lines from *The Youth's Magic Horn* [*Des Knaben Wunderhorn*]:

When I go up to my kitchen stove
To make a little soup,
I find a little hunchback there
Has cracked my little stoup (SW 3:385)

Will ich in mein Küchel gehn,
Will mein Süpplein kochen;
Steht ein bucklicht Männlein da,
Hat mein Töpflein brochen (GS IV.1:303)

²The German original reads as follows: "Ich denke mir, daß jenes „ganze Leben“, von dem man sich erzählt, daß es vorm Blick der Sterbenden vorbeizieht, aus solchen Bildern sich zusammensetzt, wie sie das Männlein von uns allen hat. Sie flitzen rasch vorbei wie jene Blätter der straff gebundenen Büchlein, die einmal Vorläufer unserer Kinomatographen waren. Mit leisem Druck bewegte sich der Daumen an ihrer Schnittfläche entlang; dann wurden sekundenweise Bilder sichtbar, die sich voneinander fast nicht unterschieden. In ihrem flüchtigen Ablauf ließen sie den Boxer bei der Arbeit und den Schwimmer, wie er mit seinen Wellen kämpft, erkennen. Das Männlein hat die Bilder auch von mir" (GS IV.1:304).

³See, for example, Cadava and Hamacher.

Again, Benjamin emphasizes that he never saw the little man: "It was he who always saw me." As an unseen seer, and as one whose look has a shattering effect upon those at whom it is directed, the hunchback is associated not only with accidents that happen but, moreover, with a certain "accidenting" of the self. His visual address comes from elsewhere, but it is a kind of outside on the inside, a blind spot in one's field of vision, a spot one has a vested interest in not knowing or seeing. It is a spot seen only by accident, one whose blinding impact is experienced only in the form of a mishap. Accidenting the self, the hunchback's address opens it to an otherness within.

To be addressed by "Ungeschickt" is thus to be greeted not only by that which makes one clumsy and accident prone, but also by that which comes in the form of an accident. Reading his name *Ungeschickt* with an eye to the ambiguities lurking within it, one might also say that his greeting is never exactly sent, never *geschickt* from anywhere specific, and never from a place located in any simple sense outside the self. If anything, his greeting opens the addressee to a locus of alterity that can only be stumbled upon, a place already shattered and in ruins.

An unseen seer and unsent sender, the little man appears in the 1934 draft of *Berlin Childhood* as a strange kind of receiver, or, to be more specific, as a proto-cinematic recording device. "I imagine that the life that is said to pass before one's eyes at the moment of death is composed of those images that only the little man has of us all." As in "The Storyteller," it is a question here of a culminating moment, the very instant when one's life is said to pass before one's eyes. At such a time life passes as though each of its moments were a separate image bound together in a little flipbook. The slight pressure of the thumb across the edges of the page sets these images in motion, giving them the cinematic appearance of visual fluidity and biographical continuity. That it is the "little man" who, according to Benjamin, "has these images of me," "images that only [he] has of us all," suggests, however, that what passes fleetingly before the dying man's eyes is not so much the film of his life as *outtakes* from it (just as the passage we are reading is itself a kind of outtake from *Berlin Childhood*). Even though the little man is now associated more with receiving than sending, more with mechanical modes of recording than disruptive forms of greeting, in both cases he marks a disruption of the self and an opening of one's life story.

The images passing before the dying man's eyes do not in this sense belong to him or to the experience he has had of himself. Like the

optical unconscious discussed in “A Short History of Photography,” it is a question here of “another nature that speaks to the camera rather than to the eye.” It is “other,” Benjamin explains, “above all in the sense that the space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious” (SW2:510; GS II.1:371). What “speaks to the camera rather than to the eye,” what addresses it and is recorded mechanically by it, are precisely those moments of encounter discussed in “The Storyteller.”⁴

Though not explicitly mentioned in the text’s deathbed scene, the figure of the little hunchback seems to hover at its edge, peeking through the cinematic terms it seems to borrow from the 1934 draft of *Berlin Childhood*.⁵ Not only are the terms cinematic—to recall, Benjamin writes of “a sequence of images set in motion”—but the entire scene plays out as a silent film screening, since the dying man communicates to his audience not with words but only with “expressions and looks.” As a silent cinematic projection, the scene acts out precisely what cannot be put into words or included in a narrative of the self, just as the little man of *Berlin Childhood* is described not

⁴Cf. Benjamin’s remarks about Proust: “Proust has brought off the monstrous feat of letting the whole world age by a lifetime in an instant. But this very concentration, in which things that normally just fade and slumber are consumed in a flash, is called rejuvenation . . . Proust’s method is actualization, not reflection. He is filled with the insight that none of us has time to live the true dramas of the life that we are destined for. This is what ages us—the great and nothing else. The wrinkles and creases on our faces are the registration of the great passions, vices, insights that called on us; but we, the masters, were not home. [*Proust hat das Ungeheure fertiggebracht, im Nu die ganze Welt um ein ganzes Menschenleben altern zu lassen. Aber eben diese Konzentration, in der, was sonst nur welkt und dämmt, blitzhaft sich verzehrt, heißt Verjüngung. . . . Nicht Reflexion—Vergegenwärtigung ist Prousts Verfahren. Er ist ja von der Wahrheit durchdrungen, daß wir alle keine Zeit haben, die wahren Dramen des Daseins zu leben, das uns bestimmt ist. Das macht uns altern. Nichts anderes. Die Runzeln und Falten im Gesicht, sie sind die Eintragungen der großen Leidenschaften, der Laster, der Erkenntnisse, die bei uns vorsprachen—doch wir, die Herrschaft, waren nicht zu Hause*]” (SW 2:244–245; GS II:1:320–321).

⁵That this edge is a bedside reminds us of related appearances of the little man in *Berlin Childhood* and the Kafka essay where he addresses a kneeling child about to say his prayers: “My dear child, I beg of you, / Pray for the little hunchback too. (SW 2:812) [*Liebes Kindlein, ach, ich bit, / Bet fürs bucklicht Männlein mit!*]” (GS IV:1:304). In the final version of *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert* this quote appears in the very last lines making an implicit connection between the signifiers *Bett*, *bit*, and *mitbeten*. Cf. Levine, “Of Big Ears and Bondage,” 196–215. Perhaps more importantly in this context is the association of the little hunchback, connected in the 1934 draft with the threshold of death, with that of the century, *der Jahrhundertchwelle*. Thus, the final draft concludes, “He has long since abdicated. Yet his voice, which is like the hum of the gas burner, whispers to me over the threshold of the century: ‘Dear little child, I beg of you, / Pray for the little hunchback too’ [*Jetzt hat [das Männlein] seine Arbeit hinter sich. Doch seine Stimme, welche an das Summen des Gasstrumpfs anklingt, wispert über die Jahrhundertchwelle mir die Worte nach: ‘Liebes Kindlein, ach, ich bit, / Bet fürs bucklicht Männlein mit!’*]” (SW 3:385; GS IV:1:304).

only as a keeper of recorded images but also as a kind of unconscious projectionist. The images he keeps bound in his little flipbook are, according to Benjamin, set in motion with the brush of his thumb.

If “The Storyteller” may be said to take a step beyond *Berlin Childhood*, it is in the way the brush of this thumb is replaced by an inner mechanism or unconscious automatism that causes the pictures to move by themselves.⁶ Moreover, it is the dying man’s face that now becomes a kind of projection surface as certain views of himself are silently screened. Whereas film usually provides the illusion of continuous motion through the projection of twenty-four frames per second, here the continuity is illusory for other reasons as well. Under the guise of reviewing his life story as an intact and seamless narrative, what is actually projected in the dying man’s looks and expressions is the very life he will never have consciously lived. These are views that come from elsewhere, images of self-encounter without self-awareness, images that have been unconsciously archived and unwittingly projected. That Benjamin refers to what suddenly surfaces in a dying man’s looks and expressions as “the unforgettable” recalls the following observation made by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, later cited verbatim by Benjamin in his 1939 Baudelaire essay: memory fragments “are often most enduring when the incident which left them behind was one that never entered consciousness” (Freud 160).

Like Freud, Benjamin struggles to say where and in what form the “unforgettable” persists. His recourse to gestural language and to folkloric figures such as the little hunchback is telling in this regard. It suggests, first, that there was perhaps no more proper, non-gestural way for him to describe unconscious processes of registration, projection and transmission; and second, that his way of silently staging what cannot be said more directly is to weave together folkloric figures, moving pictures, and medieval paintings. There is no doubt a privileged relationship between scenes of weaving and the act of storytelling in Benjamin’s essay. Yet, the reason for this is not just that, according to Benjamin, storytelling reached its historical highpoint in the age of artisanal production, or that weaving permitted those gathered together to listen with a kind of distracted attention to the stories being told, but also because weaving stands first and foremost

⁶Thus, when Benjamin speaks at this point of “a sequence of images . . . set in motion inside a man [*im Innern des Menschen*],” this “inside” should be viewed less as an organic interior or consciously accessible archive than as a kind of mnemonic prosthesis, inner *mechanism* or “technical gadget.”

in “The Storyteller” for the inextricable relationship of various, seemingly discrete activities.⁷

Nowhere is this point made more forcefully than in Benjamin’s concluding remarks about the coordination of soul, eye, and hand in the act of storytelling. Having just cited a passage from Valéry, he comments:

With these words, soul, eye, and hand are brought into connection. Interacting with one another [*Ineinanderwirkend*], they determine a practice. We are no longer familiar with this practice. The role of the hand in production has become much more modest, and the place it filled in storytelling lies in waste. (After all, storytelling in its sensory aspect was never for the voice alone [*keineswegs ein Werk für die Stimme allein*]. Rather, in genuine storytelling the hand plays a part [*wirkt vielmehr die Hand hinein*] which supports what is expressed in a hundred ways with its gestures trained by work.) That old coordination of the soul, the eye, and the hand, which emerges in Valéry’s words is that of the artisan [*die handwerkliche*] which we encounter whenever the art of storytelling is at home. (*SW* 3:161–162; *GS* II:2:464)

In addition to the interactions of which Benjamin speaks, this passage is notable for its own signifying network. In the German, the terms *Werk*, *wirken*, *handwerkliche*, and *ineinanderwirken* are themselves woven into and through one another—perhaps in silent acknowledgement of the derivation of the terms *Werk* and *wirken* from *Flechtwerk*—that is, from basket- or wickerwork. Benjamin’s point is that the handiwork of weaving must be understood in its complex relation to the work of the hands in storytelling, to a gestural language that not only supports vocal expression but also—with and against it—may tell other stories of its own.

If we continue to read “The Storyteller” through the 1934 draft of *Berlin Childhood*, we also note the way the phrase *mit einem Mal* [suddenly] in the former seems to replace the adverb *sekundenweise* in

⁷This interweaving of seemingly or previously discrete activities is taken up by Benjamin in his “Work of Art” essay with specific reference to film. While the activities of film production, reproduction, and mass dissemination are generally thought of as being separate and successive, he stresses how in the age of technical reproducibility their interrelationship must be otherwise conceived and it is precisely the suffix “-ibility” that points to their mutual implication. Thus, he writes, “In film, the technological reproducibility of the product is not an externally imposed condition of its mass dissemination, as it is, say, in literature or painting. *The technological reproducibility of films is based directly on the technology of their production. This not only makes possible the mass dissemination of films in the most direct way, but actually enforces it.* It does so because the process of producing a film is so costly that an individual who could afford to buy a painting, for example, could not afford to buy a [master print of a] film. It was calculated in 1927 that, in order to make a profit, a major film needed to reach an audience of nine million” (*SW* 4:273; emphasis in original).

the latter in which it is a question of “images, barely distinguishable from one another, becom[ing] visible for just a second [*dann wurden sekundenweise Bilder sichtbar, die sich voneinander fast nicht unterschieden*].” Whereas the former emphasizes the startling eruption of moving images that, coming from “inside the man,” in fact seem to come out of nowhere, the latter seems to accentuate the speed at which they flit by, moving so quickly that they are barely distinguishable from one another, and, as such, give the appearance of cinematic movement.

While terms like *mit einem Mal* and *sekundenweise* emphasize the suddenness with which images erupt as well as the rapid speed at which they are projected, they may also point to a certain lapse, gaping or letting open of time. Such a time is touched on at the very end of Benjamin’s 1940 theses on the philosophy of history, yet another text in which the figure of the little hunchback appears. Here the second [*die Sekunde*] is described as a strait gate [*enge Pforte*] through which the messiah might enter.

A Slight Adjustment

As Benjamin’s troping of the second as a strait gate or narrow doorway suggests, it is a question here more of a slight opening than a positive temporal unit. This opening has its counterpart in “The Storyteller” in the sudden gaping of that culminating moment in the dying man’s life when he is supposed to see his entire existence pass in review before his eyes. What opens in place of this highspeed review is the projection of another story, a screening of autobiographical outtakes. This sudden emergence of moving pictures has something of the messianic—not as the irruption of an extra-temporal or transcendental dimension or even as a “second coming” but as the sudden return of that which heretofore had no place in the man’s life, the return of what had been missed repeatedly and remained irreducibly other and imperceptible in moments of self-encounter.

This shift from a culminating moment in which everything was supposed to have come together all of a sudden with tremendous concision to a narrow opening of time at the very threshold of life and death reminds one of the passage in the Kafka essay in which Benjamin observes that when the Messiah comes he will transform the world not so much through great acts of violence but merely through a minimal modification. Not only is the little hunchback once again very much on the scene—the section bears his name as its title—but the speculation regarding the messiah’s world-altering intervention

deals directly with his connection to “distorted life” and indirectly with his stooped posture and generally distorted form. “This little man is at home in distorted life,” Benjamin writes. “He will disappear with the coming of the Messiah, who (a great rabbi once said) will not wish to change the world by force but will merely make a slight adjustment in it” (SW 2:811).⁸

The slight adjustment or *Zurechtstellung* Benjamin mentions, setting the term in pointed apposition to the distorted life or *entstelltes Leben* in which the little man is said to abide, seems to suggest a process of setting things aright and of allowing the permanently bent-over hunchback finally to stand erect.⁹ Yet, as the great rabbi observes, this *Zurechtstellung* will occur less as a chiropractic correction, less as a wrenchingly orthopedic process of putting something back in its rightful place, than as a “slight adjustment,” an ever so insignificant and barely perceptible shift.¹⁰ It is an alteration as minimal as a paranomastic exchange of letters in a word (as in Joyce’s “The letter! The litter!”) or a diacritical change of spacing between them (as in Hamacher’s title “*Die Sekunde der Inversion*” (The Second of Inversion) which must also be read as “*Diese Kunde der Inversion*” (This Impartment of Inversion). As noted earlier, in Benjamin’s “The Storyteller” this shift occurs as an ever-so-fleeting opening of that mythically culminating instant when one’s life is supposed to pass before one’s eyes at the moment of death. As in the last scene of *Berlin Childhood around 1900* where the little hunchback may be heard to whisper across the threshold of the new century [*die Jahrhundertschwelle*], here the doorway of life-death gapes slightly and a heretofore untold and untellable life story—the story of one’s other life and missed self-encounters—suddenly emerges, projected with incredible rapidity as a silent film or as what Benjamin will later refer to in the fifteenth of his theses as “history in time-lapse mode [*ein historischer Zeitraffer*]” on the face of the dying man (SW 4:395; GS I:2:701).

It is curious then that in the context of the temporal breaches and unconscious screenings depicted at the end of section X of “The Storyteller” Benjamin should speak of narrative authority. “The unforgettable,” he says, “imparts to everything that concerned [the man on his deathbed] the authority which even the poorest wretch in

⁸“Dies Männlein ist der Insasse des entstellten Lebens; es wird verschwinden, wenn der Messias kommt, von dem ein großer Rabbi gesagt hat, daß er nicht mit Gewalt die Welt verändern wolle, sondern nur um ein Geringes sie zurechtstellen werde” (GS II.2:432).

⁹For an extended discussion of the place of the back and the pivotal role it plays in Benjamin’s Kafka essay, see the concluding chapter of Levine, *Writing through Repression*.

¹⁰On the “slight adjustment” see Hamacher 32–35.

dying possesses for the living around him. This authority is at the very source of storytelling [*Am Ursprung des Erzählens steht diese Autorität*]” (SW3:151; GS II.1:450). If there is authority here, it is authorless. It is a source, ironically, that is without origin. If even the poorest wretch is said to possess it for those around him, this is not because it is an inalienable property but rather because it concerns what was never in his possession in the first place.¹¹

The shift is crucial, enabling us in turn to understand the distinction Benjamin makes between the noun *Tradition* and the adjective *tradierbar*; between what he describes in the thirteenth section as a chain of *tradition* created by memory that passes on a happening from one generation to the next and the “*transmissible form*” real life, *gelebtes Leben*, first assumes at the moment of death. The latter remark introduces the deathbed scene we have been analyzing. As this analysis has sought to suggest, there is a crucial difference between the chain of tradition created by memory and the concatenation of images associated with the “unforgettable” that is suddenly and unwittingly projected in the expressions and looks of the dying man. As we have already had occasion to note, these are not conscious images to which the man has direct access but unconscious projections which those gathered around him are given to see.

Yet, what they themselves actually observe is unclear. Indeed, when life takes on “transmissible form,” it appears to do so blindly, mechanically, and unconsciously. The views of himself which the dying man had never before seen, the self-encounters of which he had been oblivious, thus suddenly find themselves screened on his face. Just as something within him, something we have referred to for lack of a better term as “the little man,” has blindly recorded these encounters, and just as these unforgettable images have been mechanically set in motion and unwittingly projected in his looks and expressions, so too can we assume that those in a position to view them do so without knowing what they are seeing and in turn pass them along without realizing what they are doing, without ever having consciously possessed them in the first place. This, I would suggest, is what Benjamin means when he speaks of life assuming transmissible form at the moment of death. Such transmissions have more the form of an unconscious *chain reaction* than a traditional chain created by memory. Rather than being consciously passed on as possessions from one generation to

¹¹This includes those moments of self-encounter of which one is not consciously aware and the “unforgettable” that persists precisely insofar as it never entered consciousness or conscious memory in the first place.

the next, they are perpetually *disowned*.¹² And it is in this way that we can understand how the authority of which Benjamin speaks, the authority that is said to be at the source of storytelling, is authorless.

The deathbed scene, as I have heretofore described it, would seem then to stand completely under the sign of an automatism, of cinematic projections involuntarily screened and unconsciously transmitted.¹³ However, the sentence with which the essay as a whole concludes appears to gesture in a more active direction. As noted earlier, Benjamin here repeats the verb *sich begegnen* that plays such a pivotal role in his description of those images in which the dying man had “encountered himself.” Thus, the last sentence reads, “It is in the figure of the storyteller that the righteous man encounters himself [*sich begegnet*]” (*SW* 3:162; *GS* II:2:465).

The Righteous Man

What then is the nature of this encounter? Is it between self and other, the righteous man and the figure of the storyteller, or, as in section X, is it an encounter with the otherness of the self, an encounter that will necessarily have been missed and, through this missing, have returned involuntarily as a series of projected outtakes?¹⁴ The

¹²Cf. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge: In Seven Plays of Shakespeare*.

¹³Echoes of this structure of unconscious transmission may be found in Caruth's essay “The Body's Testimony: Dramatic Witness in the Eichmann Trial” which concludes: “If [the trial witness] K-Zetnik's commitment to testify for the condemned can be passed on, it is because the ‘promise of [his] oath’ comes not from him alone, but from ‘their eyes.’ When K-Zetnik falls to the ground in a coma and draws us into his drama, he also passes on this oath that he can no longer see reflected back to him but that he hands over, at this moment, to the audiences who watch him. If K-Zetnik breaks his promise as he falls, he also passes it on, in this collapse, to another audience and to the possibility, at least, of a future addressee” (259–278).

¹⁴In his 1962 article “Die 36 verborgenen Gerechten in der jüdischen Tradition [The 36 Hidden Righteous Persons in Jewish Tradition]” Gershom Scholem notes how 18th-century Chassidic writers in Poland often distinguished between two types of righteous persons or *Zadikim*. The former were called the *Nistar* meaning the hidden, the latter, the *Mephursam* or the famous. The *Nistar* were said to belong to a higher order because they were less susceptible to the temptations of worldly vanity. Moreover, as the hidden, *they were not even aware of their own status*, their holiness and righteousness emanating from the hidden deeds they performed. Their unself-consciousness was such that they did not even know they belonged to the select group of the *Lamedvavneks* or 36 righteous persons (Gershom Scholem 223). Scholem himself draws inspiration from Ernst Bloch's collection *Traces [Die Spuren]* first published in 1930. Themes of namelessness, incognitos, and hidden identities are particularly prevalent in the stories “Potemkin's Signature” [*Potemkins Unterschrift*] (cited by Benjamin at the beginning of his famous 1934 Kafka essay), “Incognito to Oneself” [*Ein Incognito vor sich selber*] and especially “Motifs of Concealment” [*Motive der Verborgenheit*] toward the end of which Bloch writes of an encounter between the pious Rabbi Raphael of Belz and his seemingly unworthy

righteous man makes two appearances toward the conclusion of the text: the first at the end of section XVII and the second toward the middle of XVIII. In the former he appears as a liminal, hybrid, and mediating figure who combines in his person aspects of the various realms between which he stands. In the latter he serves as a kind of proxy, holding open a place—and a role—in the *theatrum mundi* no one actor can fill. Benjamin says of the former:

The righteous man is the advocate for created things and at the same time he is their highest embodiment. In Leskov he has a maternal touch . . . This figure, [the protagonist of his story “Kotin the Provider and Platonida”], a peasant named Pisonski, is a hermaphrodite [*zweigeschlechtlich*]. For twelve years his mother raised him as a girl. His male and female organs mature simultaneously, and his androgyny [*Zweigeschlechtlichkeit*] becomes the symbol of the god-man [*des Gottesmenschen*].

In Leskov’s view, the pinnacle of creation has been attained with this, and at the same time he presumably sees it as a bridge established between this world and the other [*zwischen irdischer und überirdischer Welt*]. For these earthily powerful, motherly male figures . . . have been removed from obedience to the sexual drive in the bloom of their strength. They do not, however, really embody an ascetic ideal; rather, the continence of these righteous men has so little privative character that it becomes the elemental counterpoise to uncontrolled lust. (SW3:158–59; GSII.2:459–60; trans. modified)

Located at the pinnacle of creation, the righteous man brings all that stands beneath him to a head, gathering all its energies toward his mouth, toward the mouthpiece and advocate [*Fürsprecher*] he is. The mounting energies seem to carry the speaker himself beyond the summit, making him a bridge between the highest and the still higher, between the earthly and the otherworldly. As Benjamin suggests, the energies building toward him are not only creaturely but sexual, combining masculine and feminine in such a way that makes “continence” [*Enthaltsamkeit*] in this context have less to do with asceticism and a neutralization of sexual drives than with the positive and enduring tension obtaining between equal and opposing forces held in elemental counterpoise. One might say that it is the tense standoff

“mirror image” Jizchak Leib: “But in the incognito of Yitzhak Leib, absolutely nothing is yet habitable, as it were [*nichts schlüsselfertig, gleichsam*]; there is perhaps a key [*da ist vielleicht ein wirklicher Schlüssel*], and the house is ready, but the key will not turn, will not open the ‘angel’s door’ in the least, not even halfway [öffnet die “Engelstür” nicht im geringsten, auch nicht halb]; perhaps just because it really is ready [*vielleicht eben sie es wirklich ist*]. This is Chassidic: that the *zaddikim* on whom life depends are hidden, *perhaps even from themselves* [*verborgen sind, vielleicht sogar vor sich*].” Bloch, *Traces* 96; *Spuren* 127–8. I am grateful to Peter Fenves for bringing Scholem’s article to my attention.

of these forces that holds the righteous man himself in place, holding him *gespannt*, strained like a bow, stretching him like the bridge he embodies across the gulf of two radically different worlds.

If in the first passage the righteous man appears as a tension-filled mediating link, in the second he holds a place that is emphatically open and ultimately unoccupiable. “For Hebel,” Benjamin writes, the righteous man “has the main role in the *theatrum mundi*.” He continues:

But because no one is actually up to this role, it keeps changing hands [*Weil ihr aber keiner gewachsen ist, so wandert sie vom einem zum anderen*]. Now it is the tramp, now the haggling Jewish peddler, now the man of limited intelligence who steps in to play the part [*der einspringt, um diesen Part durchzuführen*]. In every single case it is a guest performance, a moral improvisation. Hebel is a casuist. He will not for anything take a stand with any principle, but he does not reject it either, for any principle can at some time become the instrument of the righteous man. (SW 3:160; GS II:2:461–462)

Significantly, Benjamin switches registers here, shifting from a sense of all that comes together in one individual—the earthly and the otherworldly, masculine and feminine, continence and unbridled lust—to a pointedly theatrical vision of the righteous man in which he is less a syncretic figure than a role no one actor “is actually up to [*keiner gewachsen ist*].” Standing merely as a placeholder, as one whose place is open to and only provisionally held by a series of others, the righteous man can never be encountered, can never encounter himself, as such.

What could it mean, then, for Benjamin to conclude his essay with the contention that the storyteller is the figure in which the righteous man encounters himself? Is the storyteller yet another stand-in in a series that includes the tramp, the haggling Jewish peddler, and the man of limited intelligence? No one is up to the role, Benjamin claims, and it therefore repeatedly changes hands. That the righteous man encounters himself only as another suggests at the very least a shift from a sense of enduring identity to a movement of perpetual substitution, a shift from a specific place (be it a pinnacle or a bridge) to the displacements of a wandering role no one actor can perform. One cannot in this sense *be* a righteous man. Relationally defined, he is never free standing nor is his posture ever quite upright. Instead, he leans perpetually on others and is in this sense as stooped as the little hunchback.

Not only are the righteous man’s place and identity held open to a series of provisional stand-ins, but the roles these stand-ins are induced to play consist only in makeshift practices and “moral improvisations.” It would seem then that the righteous man’s role wanders because

he himself is cut off from past precedents, behavioral models and prescribed *modi operandi*. Indeed, as his role changes hands, the very notion of a role comes to be redefined. For the actor is now not only free but compelled to improvise—that is, to respond to momentary conjunctures and to intervene in ways that cannot be known in advance. “Hebel,” Benjamin stresses, “is a casuist. He will not for anything take a stand with any principle, but he does not reject it either, for any principle can at some time become the instrument of the righteous man” (SW 3:160; GS II:2:463).

The question of improvisation leads Benjamin to cite Valéry in the final section:

Artistic observation can attain an almost mystical depth. The objects on which it falls lose their names. Shadows and light form very particular systems, pose their own, highly idiosyncratic questions which depend upon no knowledge and are derived from no practice, but get their existence and value exclusively from a certain accord of the soul, the eye and the hand of someone who was born to perceive them and evoke them in his own inner self. (SW 3:161; GS II.2:464; trans. modified)

Absolved from prevailing knowledge and practice, the systems formed through interactions of shadow and light improvise their own questions and praxes. Indeed, “artistic observation,” as it is outlined by Valéry, bears a curious resemblance to the look of the little hunchback described by Benjamin. When the latter falls on humans it makes them clumsy, when the former is trained on objects it makes them lose their names. It is in their newfound anonymity, it seems, that they first become free to enter into provisional, mutually determining interrelationships. In Saussurean terms, each becomes a value whose place in the “very particular systems” of which Valéry speaks can only be negatively and contextually defined. Like the series of actors standing in temporarily for the righteous man, each nameless object is viewed now only as a placeholder in a chain of self-differences. Such interrelationships, Benjamin suggests, generate their own makeshift praxes and questions and in this sense—the sense given the term by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy—improvise a kind of “literary absolute.”¹⁵

¹⁵Speaking in particular about the form required for the ideal of the fragment-hedgehog, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy write, “The Work must be nothing other than the absolutely necessary auto-production in which all individualities and all works are annihilated. Not altogether in artistic geniality, but rather, more rigorously, in its ideal (in the romantic sense of the word), in the necessary auto-production and auto-production of necessity, does one henceforth find the structure of the System-Subject, the *Bild* beyond all *Bild* of the fragment, or in other words of the absolute, because it is

The Proverb as Placeholder

Benjamin pursues this logic of the placeholder associated with moral improvisation and new praxes generated through the intense interaction, the *Ineinanderwirken* of hand, eye, and soul, in his concluding discussion of proverbs [*Sprichwörter*]. “A proverb, one might say, is a ruin which stands on the site of an old story and in which a moral twines about a gesture like ivy around a wall [*Sprichwörter, so könnte man sagen, sind Trümmer, die am Platz von alten Geschichten stehen und in denen, wie Efeu um ein Gemauer, eine Moral sich um einen Gestus rankt*]” (SW 3:162; GS II:2:464). Less the moral of a story or the counsel one might extract from it, the proverb stands only as debris marking the site of something vanished, the place where old stories once stood.

The passage and the subsequent mention of a gentle flame in which the wick of the storyteller’s life may be completely consumed are perhaps allusions to the famous Hasidic tale recounted by S. Y. Agnon and cited by Gershom Scholem in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. The tale is itself an account of makeshift performances, chains of substitution, intergenerational transmissions, and progressive losses.¹⁶

When the Baal Schem, the founder of Hasidism, had a difficult task before him, he would go to a certain place in the woods, light a fire and meditate in prayer; and what he had set out to perform was done. When a generation later, the Maggid of Meseritz was faced with the same task, he would go to the same place in the woods, and say: “We can no longer light a fire but we can pray.” And everything happened according to his will. When another generation had passed, Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov was faced with the same task, [and] he would go to the same place in the woods, and say: “We can no longer light a fire, nor do we know the secret meditations belonging to the prayers, but we know the place in the woods, and that can be sufficient.” And sufficient it was. But when another generation had passed and Rabbi Israel of Rishin was called upon to perform the task, he sat down in his golden chair, in his castle, and said: “We cannot light the fire, we cannot speak the prayers, we do not know the place, but we can tell the story of all of this. And, once again, this was sufficient.” (Scholem 349–350)

At the end of the tale “the story of all of this” stands as a placeholder, as the ruin of all the lost practices, prayers, fires, and privileged loca-

indeed this *ab-solutum*, detached from everything, that the hedgehog represents [*c’est-à-dire de l’absolu, puisque ce n’est pas autre chose—ab-solutum, détaché de tout—que figure le hérisson*]” (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute* 56; *L’absolu littéraire* 78–9). As has often been noted, not least of all by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy themselves, their influential study is deeply indebted to Benjamin’s doctoral thesis, *The Concept of Art Criticism in Early German Romanticism*.

¹⁶Cf. Agamben’s discussion of this narrative at the beginning of *The Fire and the Tale*.

tions it recounts, and this recounting, we are told, is still sufficient. If Benjamin's text alludes to the Hasidic tale, it goes one step further. For in Benjamin it is the story of loss that itself seems to be lost. Only the proverb stands in the place of "the old stories" amidst the ruins and this, it appears, is no longer sufficient.

Like the righteous man whose role in the *theatrum mundi* cannot be fully assumed by any one actor, the proverb holds open a place that is at once that of the old stories and of those in a position to tell them. Earlier in the essay Benjamin speaks about how counsel was never neatly packaged as a discrete message but woven inextricably into the fabric of the story. In the absence of the old stories and their tellers there is still a kind of weaving going on in the end, but it is now that of a moral that entwines itself [*sich rankt*] like ivy around a gesture [*Gestus*]. As noted earlier, gestures in Benjamin's essay are associated not merely with *Handwerk*—be it artisanal production or the movements and gestures of the hands themselves—but, more generally, with the *Ineinanderwirken*—the working into one another—of eye, hand, and soul in which no one element is ever subordinated to the operation of the others. The moral, one might imagine, is itself intertwined in this cooperation of eye, hand, and soul, all working together in such a way as to gather mournfully around the place where not only old stories but also now obsolete ways of understanding the very act of storytelling once stood. If the placeholder marks the site of loss and, moreover, the loss of the very story of loss, then we are left only with a palpable silence entwining among their ruins. Such silence is evoked at the very beginning of "The Storyteller," and everything that follows stands under its sign. It is a silence associated with the loss of communicable experience and the end of the art of storytelling. Thus, Benjamin observes at the end of section I:

With the First World War, a process became apparent which continues to this day. Wasn't it noticeable at the end of the war that men who returned from the battlefield had grown silent—not richer but poorer in communicable experience? What poured out in the flood of war books ten years later was anything but experience that can be shared orally. (SW3:143–144; GS II:2:439)

While perhaps alluding to this silence in his description of a proverb that stands as a ruin on the site of old stories, Benjamin does not dwell on it in the end. Like so many of the moments we have been analyzing, it seems strangely isolated and resistant to discursive development. If anything, the culminating paragraph appears to gather around and against it, emphasizing instead the surprisingly long reach of the sto-

ryteller's life. Not only is he said to be endowed with the ability "to reach back to a whole lifetime [*ein ganzes Leben zurückzugreifen*]" but, moreover, "to encompass the experiences of others [*nicht wenig von fremder in sich schließt*]" even if the latter only come down to him in the form of "hearsay [*Hörensagen*]" (SW3:162; GSII.2:464; trans. modified).

Given what is said in section X about the fate of experiences that, having never been integrated into the totality of one's lived experience or narrative of the self, surface belatedly at the moment of death as strangely cinematic projections, it is odd that the essay itself should end with an emphasis on inclusivity and the expansiveness of the narrator's life and stories. The only trace of what was referred to above as "auto-hetero-biography" is the concluding phrase in which the issue of an encounter with oneself as another is raised once again. It would seem then that the missed encounters touched on in section X, those outtakes that remain beyond the purview of conscious recall and autobiographical narration, hover unassimilated and spectrally insistent not only at the limits of the dying man's life but also at the final threshold of Benjamin's essay.

Between Storytelling and Historiography

What moves us beyond "The Storyteller," what carries the text beyond its own end, is the way these unresolved issues continue to haunt Benjamin's corpus, returning toward the end of his own life in another liminal convergence of life and text. Only this time it is Benjamin himself who is cast in the role of the dying man, and the text in question is "On the Concept of History." Written shortly before his death, these theses are often read as the last in a series of "last wills and testaments" he composed.¹⁷ As important as it is to follow the way issues left in suspense at the conclusion of "The Storyteller" reemerge in this text, the larger question posed by their recurrence is how the scene of unconscious projection appearing in section X—itsself made legible through intertextually related scenes in *Berlin Childhood*—may be said to mark a locus of suspense or an internal threshold in Benjamin's oeuvre, one that constitutes the very seam along which the oral activity of storytelling is articulated with the silent writing of history.

¹⁷Here one is reminded of the famous letter Kafka penned to Max Brod in June 1921 in which he describes himself mired in the "impossibilities of writing" only to add in the suspense of a parenthetical aside: "(since the despair could not be assuaged by writing, is an enemy both of life *and* of writing, writing is here only a moratorium, as for someone who is writing his will shortly before he hangs himself—moratorium that may well last a whole life)" (Kafka 289).

As was already apparent in the deathbed scene of section X, the question of silence is ambiguous. Associated with the absence of verbal narration, it is a scene in which visual images set in motion inside the dying man appear suddenly in his looks and expressions. Not only does the scene play out in silence, but this muteness is itself associated with the passive and mechanical way in which the spectators gathered around the bed may in their turn be said to blindly take in the projected images and unwittingly pass them on. Their mute performance can in this sense be seen as a kind of mimetism, a way of carrying out unconscious processes already set in motion inside the dying man, processes involving the seemingly mechanical registration of “unforgettable” images in moments of unwitting self-encounter and their equally unwitting screening at the moment of death.

While the theses retain much of this unconscious dimension as well as the cinemato-photographic language that seems necessarily to accompany it, they nevertheless describe the writing of history—or at least the task of the materialist historian—in more active terms. In order to trace this shift from passive to active—which does not necessarily mean from unconscious to conscious, I begin with the persistence of the cinematographic language that is explicitly used in the 1934 draft of *Berlin Childhood*, implicitly taken over in “The Storyteller,” and then redeployed in the theses.

As will be recalled, in the first text Benjamin speaks of images that “flit by quickly like pages in those tightly bound flipbooks that were the precursors of our cinematographs.” Barely distinguishable from one another, they “become visible for just a second.” In the theses it is again a question of images moving by so rapidly that it is almost impossible to get a fix on them. Thus, the fifth thesis begins, “The true image of the past *flits* by. Only as an image that flashes up, never again to be seen, can the past be seized in an instant of recognizability [*Das wahre Bild der Vergangenheit huscht vorbei. Nur als Bild, das auf Nimmerwiedersehen im Augenblick seiner Erkennbarkeit eben aufblitzt, ist die Vergangenheit festzuhalten*].” Whereas the earlier text speaks of images of an entire life compressed into—and visible only for—a second, and whereas “The Storyteller” describes a scene in which the outtakes of a dying man’s life undergo similar processes of concentration and instantaneous projection, the theses refer only to a single image—“the true image of the past”—that flits by as though spliced into a series of images projected at breakneck speed. Only in a lightning quick moment, only in a flash of recognizability, can it be seized.

How are we to understand this shift from visibility to recognizability as well as that from passivity to activity this instant seems to imply? Moreover, what is the difference between a series of images concentrated into and visible only for a second, on the one hand, and a single image that, flitting by, seems to flash up only for an instant before disappearing forever, on the other? Given Benjamin's recourse to figures like the little man and his flipbook in *Berlin Childhood* and allusions to mechanisms of unconscious registration and projection in "The Storyteller," how can we know whether the subject of recognizability, the one who must in a flash seize the true image of a past never again to be seen, is the eye of a human or that of a camera?

A Matter of Seconds

The beginning of a response may be found in a passage from "A Little History of Photography" published in 1931 that is concerned with the difference between the naked eye and the photographic lens and aperture. Of particular note is the way this difference is framed in terms of a structure of address.

For it is another nature that speaks to the camera rather than to the eye [*Es ist eine andere Natur, welche zur Kamera als welche zum Auge spricht*]; it is "other" above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness [*mit Bewußtsein durchwirkten Raums*] gives way to a space informed by the unconscious [*ein unbewußt durchwirkter*]. Whereas it is a commonplace that, for example, we have some idea what is involved in the act of walking (if only in general terms), we have no idea at all what happens during the fraction of a second [*im Sekundenbruchteil*] when a person actually takes a step. Photography, with its devices of slow motion and enlargement, reveals the secret. It is through photography that we first discover the existence of this optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis. (SWII:2:510; GSII:1:371; trans. modified)

Before taking up the difference between eye and camera and the structure of address that defines it, it is necessary to begin with the recurrence of the term "second"—here reduced to a "fraction of a second." As elsewhere, and notably at the very end of the theses where it is figured as a strait gate, the second is a unit of time that, despite its brevity, can be dilated and distended from within—in this case by the photographic devices of slow motion and enlargement. On the one hand, the second marks a moment of extreme compression in which, as in *Berlin Childhood*, an entire lifetime can be concentrated, or, as in the eighteenth and last of the theses, the complete history

of civilized mankind can be contained (filling only “one fifth of the last second of the last hour [of] the history of organic life on earth”). On the other hand, the second marks a threshold that can open to messianic coming and to the recurrence of scenes of self-encounter without self-awareness.¹⁸

The same equivocality that inheres in Benjamin’s notion of the second may be found in the term *Augenblick* used in the fifth thesis to mark the instant in which a true image of the past is said to flash up. Like the second, this *Augenblick* is as much a positive moment as a lapse in time. While its usual translation as “instant” captures the former sense, a more colloquial rendering of it as “blink of an eye” suggests something of the latter. Hovering between these two senses, the *Augenblick* stands uncertainly as a moment distended from within, as a positive instant riven by visual and temporal lapses. Held open in this way, it also marks a momentary loss or “spacing out” of consciousness.

That such openings are themselves indicated only through linguistic equivocation, through the sounding out in different languages of the signifying potential of certain words, returns us to the question of speech broached in “A Short History.” “It is another nature that speaks to the camera rather than to the eye,” Benjamin asserts.¹⁹ Here it is a question first and foremost of the silent speech of visual interpolation, of speech addressed to the camera rather than to the naked eye. It is speech of “another nature,” Benjamin notes, and “other,” he explains, precisely to the extent that it opens a space informed by the unconscious within that informed by human consciousness.

This opening cannot be conceived of merely as a change of location or as the replacement of one space by another, even if Benjamin himself has recourse to spatial terms when speaking of how the one “gives way to” or “comes to stand in the place of” the other [*an die Stelle eines vom Menschen mit Bewußtsein durchwirkten Raums ein unbewußt durchwirkter tritt*] (ital. added). As the foregoing discussion of the term *Augenblick* suggests, such an opening is affected only through slight slippages and lapses. Like the unconscious that, according to Freud, speaks only to the extent that it *misspeaks* itself, speaking only in and through lapses in meaningful communication, the opening of another space will have taken place here ultimately

¹⁸In “The Work of Art” essay Benjamin also describes how the coming of film bursts asunder the prison-world of urban life with “the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling” (SW 3:117; GS I:2:461; trans. mod.).

¹⁹Cf. Hansen 337–339.

as an equivocal *movement in place*, as a movement in which a place is made for—and indeed held open by—verbal slips and visual accidents. When another nature *speaks* to the camera, it does so, Benjamin suggests, only by accident, only when something “other” inadvertently slips through the meshes of consciously invested space [*eines . . . mit Bewußtsein durchwirkten Raums*] (SW 2:510; GS II.1:371).

Benjamin takes up the question of visual address and its speech of another nature in the passage directly preceding the one under discussion. I turn to it now with an eye toward the theses and what is described there as “the true image of the past.”

No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge [*fühlt unwiderstehlich den Zwang*] to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency [*das winzige Fünkchen Zufall*], of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject [*den Bildcharakter gleichsam durchgesengt hat*], to find the inconspicuous spot [*die unscheinbare Stelle*] where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently [*im Sosein jener längstvergangenen Minute das Künftige . . . so beredt nistet*] that we, looking back, may rediscover it. (SW II:510; GS II.1:371)

Like the true image of the past flashing up in an *Augenblick* of recognizability, something in the picture addresses the beholder, summoning him to search the image for a “tiny spark of contingency [*das winzige Fünkchen Zufall*].” There is something imperious about this address. Thus, Benjamin speaks of an irresistible urge or compulsion [*der Beschauer fühlt unwiderstehlich den Zwang*] that is more unconsciously powerful than any freely given or willfully yielding sense of absorption, immersion, or self-abandonment. No longer the contemplative viewer, described in “The Work of Art” essay as one able to position himself before a painting, fully in control of his gaze and the pace at which he peruses the image, the beholder of the photograph in question is drawn irresistibly to the site of an accident, driven to search the image for a “tiny spark of contingency [*das winzige Fünkchen Zufall*].”

Like the true image of the past that, flitting by, momentarily flashes up [*aufblitzt*], this tiny spark burns ever so briefly. It does so, however, less as a small point of illumination than as the still smoldering trace of a traumatic accident [*Zufall*], marking the blind spot where “reality has (so to speak) seared the subject [*den Bildcharakter gleichsam durchgesengt hat*].” Itself seared into the texture of the image [*Bildcharakter*], the spark enflames the beholder who does not see it or know exactly what he sees. Instead, under the spell of a certain blindness he is drawn irresistibly to seek out another blind spot, “to find the inconspicuous

location [*die unscheinbare Stelle*] where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it [*im Sosein jener längstvergangenen Minute das Künftige . . . so beredt nistet*].” Here we are closest to the *Augenblick* of recognizability in the fifth thesis; for, if that *Augenblick* is equivocally open, hovering between, on the one hand, a lightning quick instant and, on the other, a momentary lapse in time, vision and consciousness, so too does a moment of apparent immediacy and self-presence appear to be held open by a future said to nest eloquently within it.

It should be noted that Benjamin is not speaking here of photography in general but of a particular image of the French photographer Dauthendey and his wife taken after their engagement but before their actual marriage. Viewing the photo while knowing of the woman’s subsequent suicide, Benjamin remarks that her husband-to-be would one day, shortly after the birth of their sixth child, find her lying in the bedroom of their Moscow house with her veins slashed. Given the insistence of cinematographic language in the moments of death Benjamin discusses elsewhere, and given the way they are associated with a simultaneous compaction and dilation of those moments, it is telling in the present context that the moment of death is once again distended from within. Yet, as we shall see, it opens less as a narrow passageway, less as a suspension of time, than as a disarticulation of it. Out of joint, it will have been rearticulated in the manner of the future perfect tense as an intersection of past and future without the mediation of the present.

Before discussing this temporal torsion in greater detail in relation to the fifth thesis, it is necessary to dwell a moment longer on Benjamin’s description of the photograph of Dauthendey and his wife. “He seems to be holding her, but her gaze passes him by, absorbed in an ominous distance” (*SW II:510*). With characteristic economy, Benjamin invites us to see three things at once, each of which has to be viewed in terms of the others: the woman’s failure to reciprocate her fiancé’s embrace; the photographer’s inability to hold her distant gaze within the framework of an artistic composition; and the woman’s own visual embrace of an ominous future, the one she looks to only in looking past Dauthendey. Clearly, Benjamin views the picture in light of the woman’s subsequent suicide. Indeed, the description of a future said to “nest” in a long-forgotten past seems to invite not only a retrospective reading of the photo but, moreover, a way of seeing the temporal torsion mentioned above associated with the future perfect (and more generally with the traumatic temporality of *Nachträglichkeit*)

as a way of viewing the past in light of the future.²⁰ That the temporal relationship touched on here goes beyond retrospective illumination and is concerned instead with the persistence of blind spots and the manner of address associated with them is suggested by the seemingly gratuitous mention in this passage of eloquence, of a future said to nest “eloquently” [*beredt*] in the apparent immediacy of a past moment. What does this eloquence have to do with the ensuing remarks on speech of “another nature?”

That a time to come [*das Künftige*] and a point in time long ago passed [*jener längstvergangenen Minute*] come together here without the mediation of the present suggests that the earlier moment will have been out of sync with itself and never have belonged to the past as a past present. The theses are, if nothing else, an attempt to think history from the perspective of a present that is no longer a mediating link between past and future. Thus, Benjamin writes in the sixteenth thesis, “A historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition [*der nicht Übergang ist*], but in which time stands still and has come to a stop [*sondern in der die Zeit einsteht und zum Stillstand gekommen ist*]” (SWIV:396; GS I:2:702).

No longer mediated by the present and themselves no longer viewed as modalities of presence, past and future in “A Short History” stand open to the difference of the other. To stand open is to stand still in such a way that time itself is held in abeyance. The future said to nest eloquently in the immediacy of a long-forgotten past thus not only marks an opening of that past moment, its self-difference, but also its hospitality to another time within it. Differentially articulated, these times speak with and through one another. Something unpossessed speaks out of the past, speaking unwittingly beyond itself in slips and accidents. Like that speech of “another nature” addressed to the camera, it has nothing to impart but a little prick, a tiny spark

²⁰Eric Downing links this moment to a related passage in the section “News of a Death” from *Berlin Childhood around 1900* where once again it is a question of the future anterior and the structure of a call or address. Here Benjamin writes, “The shock with which a moment enters our consciousness as if already lived tends to strike us in the form of a sound. It is a word, a rustling or knocking, that is endowed with the power to call us unexpectedly into the cool sepulcher of the past, from whose vault the present seems to resound only as an echo. Strange that no-one has yet inquired into the counterpart of this transport—namely, the shock with which a word makes us pull up short, like a muff that someone has forgotten in our room. Just as the latter points us to a stranger who was on the premises, so there are words or pauses pointing us to that invisible stranger—the future—which forgot them at our place [*die Zukunft, welche sie bei uns vergaß*].” See Downing’s excellent reading of this passage in *The Chain of Things* 227–8.

of contingency.²¹ Itself a contingent slip, it summons by accident.²² Only the endangered historian with an acute sense of history's fragility, only the one who is himself fragile, vulnerable, and photosensitive enough to allow himself to be addressed as if by accident, will feel the summons of this speech of "another nature." He who feels addressed in this way may be gripped by an irresistible urge to search the image for other blind spots and tiny sparks of contingency.

I would submit that the *Augenblick* of recognizability is such a moment of address, a moment when the historian feels himself inadvertently singled by a tiny spark. For him, "the true image of the past" is anything but a faithful rendering of a past moment but instead an opportunity to encounter what will never have been available as a past present. In this sense the *Augenblick* of recognizability is in no way a knowing again or re-cognition of history "as it once was" but instead a chance encounter with historical accidents.²³ Such encounters, it will be recalled from "The Storyteller," were precisely those "unforgettable" moments which, having found no place in the dying man's memory or narrative of the self, were mechanically archived and silently projected in his looks and expressions at the moment of death. If there is indeed a move from the passivity of the dying man in "The Storyteller" to the activity of the materialist historian in the theses, it consists in a more active and vulnerable exposure to the casualties of history, to those

²¹The phrase "a little prick" refers to Barthes' notion of the *punctum*. Appearing in *Camera Lucida*, the much-cited notion has many affinities with Benjamin's "tiny spark of contingency" and is perhaps indebted to it. For a lengthier discussion of these affinities, see Levine, *A Weak Messianic Power*.

²²At the risk of opening an interminable parenthesis, I would suggest that this summons be heard in connection with Derrida's numerous statements about responsibility—most immediately in the improvised remarks made in the context of the Heidelberg Conference organized by Hans-Georg Gadamer in response to the publication in France of Victor Farias' book, *Heidegger and Fascism*. There Derrida observes, "Heidegger spoke all the time about responsibility, responding to the call of being: there would be no responsibility if there were not, already, the call of being that is not the call of someone, of a god . . . I am accountable, responsible for a call that comes to me, I know not from where. It is not God; it is not another consciousness or conscience" (Derrida et al. 67).

²³Benjamin's most pointed critique of the "as it once was" of classical historiography is to be found in Convoluted N of *The Arcades Project* where he writes, "It was in the context of a conversation [with Ernst Bloch] in which I was describing how this work—comparable, in method, to the process of splitting the atom [*Atomzertrümmerung*]—liberates the enormous energies of history that are bound up in the 'once upon a time' [*Es war einmal*] of classical historiography. The history that showed things 'as they really were' [*wie sie eigentlich gewesen ist*] was the strongest narcotic of the century" (Benjamin *The Arcades Project* 463; *GSV*:1:578). While the phrase "*Es war einmal*" is translated above as "once upon a time," I would opt for a less fairytale-like rendering of it as "as it once was." For an extended discussion of this passage and its historiographical implications, see Levine, *Atomzertrümmerung* 19–21.

moments that will never have found a place in historical accounts told by the ceaselessly triumphant victors. What remains voiceless, Benjamin suggests, still summons us, still silently addresses us if only by accident. It is the materialist historian's task to leave himself open like the eye of a camera to such contingencies.

Rutgers University

WORKS CITED

- Agamben, Giorgio. *The Fire and the Tale*. Translated by Lorenzo Chiesa, Stanford UP, 2017.
- Allen, Woody. "Down South." *Stand-up Comic: 1964–68*, <http://www.ibras.dk/comedy/allen.htm>.
- Benjamin, Walter. "A Short History of Photography." *Selected Writings* 2, 1931–1934, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings, Harvard UP, 2002.
- . "Berlin Childhood around 1900." *Selected Writings* 2, 1931–1934, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings, Harvard UP, 2002.
- . "The Image of Proust." *Selected Writings* 2, 1931–1934, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings, Harvard UP, 2002.
- . *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999) 463; *GS V*:1:578.
- . "The Storyteller." *Selected Writings* 3, 1935–1938, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings, Harvard UP, 2002.
- . "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility." *Selected Writings* 4, 1938–40, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings, Harvard UP, 2002.
- . "Berliner Kindheit um 1900." *Gesammelte Schriften* IV:1, edited by Rolf Tiedemann, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1991.
- . "Das Passagenwerk." *Gesammelte Schriften* V:1, edited by Rolf Tiedemann, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1991.
- . "Der Erzähler." *Gesammelte Schriften* II:2, edited by Rolf Tiedemann, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1991.
- . "Eine kleine Geschichte der Photographie." *Gesammelte Schriften* II:1, edited by Rolf Tiedemann, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1991.
- . "Zum Bilde Proust." *Gesammelte Schriften* II:2, edited by Rolf Tiedemann, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1991.
- Blackmore, Susan. *Dying to Live: Near-death Experiences*. Prometheus P, 1993.
- Bloch, Ernst. *Spuren*. Suhrkamp, 1969.
- . *Traces*. Translated by Anthony A. Nassar, Stanford UP, 2006.
- Cadava, Eduardo. *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History*. Princeton UP, 1997.
- Caruth, Cathy. "The Body's Testimony: Dramatic Witness in the Eichmann Trial." *Paragraph* vol. 40, no. 3, 2017, pp. 259–278.
- Cavell, Stanley. *Disowning Knowledge: In Seven Plays of Shakespeare*. Cambridge UP, 2003.
- Derrida, Jacques, et al. *Heidegger, Philosophy and Politics: The Heidelberg Conference*. Fordham UP, 2016.
- Downing, Eric. *The Chain of Things: Divinatory Magic and the Practice of Reading in German Literature and Thought, 1850–1940*. Cornell UP, 2018.

- Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XVIII (1920–1922). The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1955.
- Hamacher, Werner. “Bogengebete.” *Aufmerksamkeit. Liechtensteiner Exkurse* III, edited by Norbert Haas, Rainer Nägele, and Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, Edition Klaus Isele, 1999.
- Hansen, Miriam. “Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street.” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1999, pp. 306–343.
- Kafka, Franz. *Letters to Friends, Family and Editors*. Translated by Richard and Clara Winston, Schocken Books, 1978.
- Katz, Judith, et al. “The Life Review Experience: Qualitative and Quantitative Characteristics.” *Consciousness and Cognition*, vol. 48, 2017.
- Kelly, Edward F. and Emily W. Kelly. “Unusual Experiences near Death and Related Phenomena.” *Irreducible Mind: Toward a Psychology for the 21st Century*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2007.
- Kittler, Friedrich. *Optical Media: Berlin Lectures 1999*. Translated by Anthony Enns, Polity P, 2010.
- Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe and Jean-Luc Nancy. *L'absolu littéraire*. Editions du Seuil, 1978.
- . *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*. Translated by Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester, State U of New York P, 1988.
- Levine, Michael. *Atomzertrümmerung: Zu einem Gedicht von Paul Celan*. Turia + Kant, 2018.
- . *A Weak Messianic Power: Figures of a Time to Come in Benjamin, Derrida and Celan*. Fordham UP, 2013.
- . “Of Big Ears and Bondage: Benjamin, Kafka and the Static of the Sirens.” *German Quarterly* Special Issue: True to Walter Benjamin, vol. 87, no. 2, Spring 2014.
- . *Writing through Repression: Literature, Censorship, Psychoanalysis*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.
- Scholem, Gershom. “Die 36 verborgenen Gerechten in der jüdischen Tradition.” *Judaica I*, Suhrkamp Frankfurt a.M., 1963.
- . *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. Schocken, 1961.