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## Memory

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## 8. Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin

### Memory from Weimar to Hitler

*Esther Leslie*

#### Siegfried Kracauer and Memory Loss

In mid-December 1932 Siegfried Kracauer wrote a short newspaper article entitled “Street without Memory.” Here he describes Berlin’s fashionable shopping street, the Kurfürstendamm, as a place voided of memory: “the embodiment of empty flowing time, where nothing persists.”<sup>1</sup> He relates how on visiting a café where he often ate, and where he was sure he had peeked in the night before, he found it closed, its interior emptied. A year later he found that the café’s replacement, a patisserie, had suffered the same fate. Having disappeared, these spaces do not become part of memory, for “constant change purges memory.”<sup>2</sup> Reflecting on the lost café, he finds it difficult to recall its décor or its clientele. The patisserie that replaced it obliterated the earlier memories. “That which once was is never to be seen again, and that which is current occupies the present one hundred percent.”<sup>3</sup> Kracauer’s city sketch is a lament for vanished memory, not just a specific memory, but also the possibility of having any memories at all.

Where Kracauer diagnosed memory-loss, Walter Benjamin observed a sudden flooding of memory. Memory is flooded by memoirs—Benjamin points to a rash of biographical accounts of war appearing some ten years after the end of the 1914–18 conflict. Resentful soldiers on the losing side made efforts to reshape the meaning of what had occurred.<sup>4</sup> The flood of memoirs as much as Kracauer’s fixation on the forgotten and overridden are both elements of a wider fascination with memory and its processes in Weimar Germany, at a moment of crisis. Both Kracauer and Benjamin assess memory darkly, perceiving it as under threat or fugitive, an arena of social, technological, economic, and political conflict, while “genuine” memory is a possession of only

those who are or may one day be fully, unalienated post-capitalist humans. In Kracauer's diagnosis, something has happened to memory historically. Rapid change and the overwhelming presence of the current mean that memory is actively expunged in the name of "now." Kracauer, a trained architect, perceives a complement to this in building design. In earlier days ornamentation appeared as a bridge to yesterday and so indicated a sort of memory preserved by buildings, an index of the persistence of the past. The new structures on the Kurfürstendamm have no ornamental twiddles on their facades. Their front-ages are sleek and glassy, repelling associations. Ornament is out of fashion, just as are the cluttered and decorative interiors of the late nineteenth century, no longer favored in the super-modern and slick times of the 1920s and 1930s. Modern times are seemingly without sentiment, without ties that bind to days gone. Modern days are rational, objective, progressive, and forward-looking. That is the ideology of the modern, its self-justification and its advertising copy. But Kracauer discerns another motivation, an underlying drive, that concretely undermines the physical traces of the past, forcing them out of the present. At the end of 1932 Germany is in the grip of a worldwide depression unleashed by the Wall Street crash of 1929. In the new Berlin of crisis, businesses can but be improvised, temporary. Structures are fleeting, everyone bivouacs for a moment. That the buildings change their function, their décor, their clientele so rapidly, Kracauer notes, is a sign of economic failure. Kracauer links memory and economy. Modernity's rapid flux is a product of financial instability experienced by individuals as contingency. The flux keeps people running on the spot, overwriting old memories with constantly new situations. Modernity is experienced as a form of amnesia induced by economic conditions.

Kracauer's diagnosis of the modern condition is bleak. The memoryless are without a home because they lack a past. They have lost essentially human capacities, which are related to duration and continuity. Kracauer mentions some dancers he spies in a private club. They move like marionettes amid leather sofas and carpets that substitute for their "vanished inner architecture."<sup>5</sup> "Inner architecture" is Kracauer's name for all that would constitute their human existence: the internal axis of past, present, and future, as expressed in memories, dreams, emotions, desires, wishes. One word for memory in German is *Erinnerung*, which includes within itself the idea of the "inner," or internalization. Without innerness, people have become pure surface. It is not only people who lack depth. The world and all its effects appear to him to be only superficial.<sup>6</sup> Objects, such as sofas or carpets, persist for a while, only then to be discarded, along with the traces of use that mark them. Ernst Bloch gave a name to the environments that Kracauer charted. In his review of Kracauer's 1930 study *Die Angestellten* (*The Salaried Masses*) Bloch called them the "artificial middle" (*künstliche Mitte*).<sup>7</sup> As Bloch puts it, Kracauer penetrates this center of modernity, which others only observe. It is the zone of ghostly white-collar workers scuttling around in the empty everyday, haunting their locales and rooms. Bloch calls this the "hollow space" (*Hohlraum*), a cavernous space chock-full with distractions and fads. The hollow space makes its inhabitants dizzy and susceptible to hedonistic

gratification among the bedazzlement of fleeting impressions on the streets and in the entertainment extravaganzas. The task of the critic is to find ways to delve beneath this smooth and fluxy surface of humans and objects to discover a “deeper meaning” that must surely still inhere (just as memory is not abolished but fugitive). This quest for meaning is what Kracauer undertook in his analyses of seemingly forgettable movies or sudden and contingent configurations of bodies on city streets.

Kracauer’s analyses appeared weekly in a Frankfurt newspaper. The regular columns for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* grapple with modernity’s dissolution of contemporary memory. In Kracauer’s rescue operation, the unpredictable and the unmemorable become the sites where memory is reinforced after all, by him. However, his regular writings are subject to the same process of forgetting. The newspaper that contains them is thrown away at the end of each day. The writings continue to exist only as memory traces, which means more likely they are forgotten.

### **Kracauer, Memory, and Technology**

In Kracauer’s writing memory is multiply under threat. It is not simply the pace of change and economic instability that menace memory. Memory is also challenged technologically by modern inventions that counter memory, even as they appear to aid it. Photography is the most notable example. Kracauer compares images that come to mind in memory and images produced by the camera. For him, the brief moment caught in the camera’s viewfinder when a person stands before the lens conveys only a very reduced part of the scene. The photograph is tied to one contingent moment, or rather the external, spacialized look of a single moment. When, in Kracauer’s example, a grandmother placed herself before the camera’s lens as a twenty-four-year-old, “she was present for one second in the spatial continuum that presented itself to the lens. But it was this aspect and not the grandmother that was eternalized.”<sup>8</sup> Photography shows only the surface of a person, the outer skin at one moment in time. In this respect, perhaps, it is coincident with the modern person type, who is, in Kracauer’s depiction, just a shell, without “innerness.” This is unlike the memory-image, which portrays a concentrated and enhanced image of a person. The image that flashes into memory is a whole image of the person. The memory-image conjures up a condensed version of the person that sums up and summons up his or her totality, even if it is selective. Unlike the indiscriminate camera lens, memory, deliberately or not, picks the images it draws into its purview. In time, the grandmother as a young girl becomes anyone, an exemplar of any figure of that age from that year. The old photograph of the grandmother cannot relate to memory because no living memory still retains an image of the grandmother as a girl. No living memory can determine how accurate or inaccurate the likeness is. Her arrested smile “no longer refers to the life from which it has been taken. Likeness has ceased to be of any help. The smiles of mannequins

in beauty parlors are just as rigid and perpetual.”<sup>9</sup> The memory image cheats time because it finds a niche in living memory and so is loosened from any single moment of remembering. Photography, by contrast, fixes one moment and makes it permanent. In doing this it apparently excerpts it from history and memory. Because memory has vacated it entirely, the image of the grandmother is appropriated by time, which makes an image of itself.<sup>10</sup>

All photographs are subsumed by time. Contemporary photographs are also swallowed up by time, but differently. Kracauer comments on the photograph of a current film actress. The photographic evocation of a star, who is a living human being, a “corporeal reality,”<sup>11</sup> functions as a reminder of the figure known originally—if only in mediated form—as the star of a successful film. This photograph has little to do with memory in its full intimate sense. The star is not known by her public. Her public possess only this one moment of her. The photograph fits into the continuum that constitutes our experience of the present. Her image smoothes into the now, presumably to be overwritten by the next image, the next star, tomorrow. Unlike photography, memory-images are not instants from a continuous linear narrative,<sup>12</sup> but are rather suddenly flashed up moments that are freighted with significance. Memory is “full of gaps,” consisting of impressions from other times, which make sense only because of their subjective resonance.<sup>13</sup> Memory is composite and personal.

The culture of Weimar Germany was distinctly photographic. Illustrated magazines chock-full of photos snapped up anything and everything in the world.<sup>14</sup> Exhibitions devoted to photographs were fashionable and fully at one with the rhetoric of modernity. Photography and film were the media for mediating the modernity of which they also formed a definitive part. For Kracauer, this accumulated photographic data, reveling in its newness and its ability to communicate the new, is effective at repressing the fact of death: “What the photographs by their sheer accumulation attempt to banish is the recollection of death, which is part and parcel of every memory image.”<sup>15</sup> Memory is intimate with death, and the passing of all things and states, until the time when death engulfs it too. In contrast, the flood of photographs wards off death. But, of course, one day all this most modern photography, this tracing of Weimar’s surface, would become just so many images of outdatedness, of passé fashions, the forgotten and the despised elements from a world that has adopted a “photographic face.”<sup>16</sup> In time photographs lose meaning, reduced to a heap of details. At the point of their collapse, Kracauer sees the possibility that they might gain another type of meaning, existing as an emblem of our grim existential condition. The recorded passage of time shows how fragile and conditional our objects and our lives are: “photography gathers fragments around a nothing.”<sup>17</sup> Despite its repulsion of death, in Kracauer’s eye, photography reveals the deadly emptiness that nestles the heart of life. Photography’s expulsion of the essence of a person, a person’s subjective resonance, becomes an advantage when it is used as a document of

history. Once a photograph's personal significance is quite shriveled, the stockpiled elements that it blatantly displays yield information, details, data that had been overlooked or unnoticed until now. Kracauer observes: "For the first time in history, photography brings to light the entire natural cocoon; for the first time, the inert world presents itself in its independence from human beings."<sup>18</sup> The estrangement that the photograph delivers as it slips from memory and falls out of kilter with present time—an alienation from human and historical thinking in a personal context—becomes its advantage later when social histories are to be examined. Photography, in its independence, its distance from personal memory, becomes significant for detailing social histories. Kracauer redeems photography and makes it serve the memory of the collective.

Kracauer compares memory to photography precisely because the technology of photography appears to replicate some of the tasks of memory. But his conclusion warns against any true affinity. Walter Benjamin, his contemporary, also made a link between photography and memory, but his analysis of the extent to which humans have been remolded by their technologies encourages him to surmise more of a resemblance than Kracauer might allow.

### Walter Benjamin, Memory, and Image Technologies

On several occasions Walter Benjamin considers memory in relation to the new technologies of vision. It is as if in modernity memory cannot be thought without recourse to the technologies that usurp its role as archivist. But Benjamin's is not a dismal view of how celluloid partners memory. For him the new technologies of image-making have entered into modern lives—meeting viewers halfway, in a situation determined not by tradition but by the viewer—and have made themselves indispensable. Photographs and film have seized our imaginations, which is to say they have made themselves part of our internal worlds. One of the starkest examples of this is offered by Benjamin's memoirs, which appear under two titles, *A Berlin Chronicle* (1932) and *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (1938). Photography and memory mesh at various points in these writings, in which, as in that work that he partly translated, Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, the material form of memories is of equal significance to the act of reminiscence.

An early version of one of the thirty-odd vignettes in *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, "The Little Hunchback," mentions the cliché of the rapid film of a "whole life" streaming past the mind's eye at the moment of death.<sup>19</sup> It is like a thumb-cinema, Benjamin notes. So too should his book of memoirs seem: a rapid succession of images, comprising short scenes that have impressed themselves into memory. Likewise he employs photographic metaphors in *A Berlin Chronicle*. In this collection of autobiographical fragments he reflects on the irruption of the forgotten past into the present. The first reflection describes those peculiar moments when something akin to a magnesium flare indelibly sears onto

memory an image or circumstance—in Benjamin’s example, a room—as if memory were a photographic plate. Some time later that same image flashes once again into consciousness’s view in order to be decoded.<sup>20</sup> Benjamin’s reflection on “temporal removal,” which is arguably the mechanism of photography, involves *déjà vu*. A wayward segue of past and present produces a “shock” and so, for example, a “forgotten glove or reticule” is stumbled upon, and it causes a word or gesture to suddenly return. Benjamin illustrates his point through an anecdote involving the return of repressed knowledge in the present. He reveals how, one night, when he was five or six, his father entered his bedroom to wish him goodnight, but lingered to report a relative’s death. The little boy was indifferent to the news concerning his older relation. Unable to assimilate the facts his father relayed about heart attacks, instead, as his father spoke, he imprinted onto his memory all the details of his room—because he felt “dimly” that he would one day have to return to search for something “forgotten” there. This he does, some years later, when he finds out the repressed (because scandalous) truth: the real cause of his relative’s death was, in fact, syphilis.<sup>21</sup>

Memory, for Benjamin, is not just recall of events that are buried in the past. It involves a quest for knowledge or truth about a situation. To this extent, memory is envisaged in much the same way as Benjamin imagines photography and film. Like memory, cameras operate with an unconscious.<sup>22</sup> The camera’s indiscriminating eye absorbs more than is consciously perceived and records it all for later examination. In similar fashion, memory develops belatedly into understanding, just as a photograph snatches an image from time and presents it to the world again only after a process of development. Memory deposits are shocked belatedly into knowledge, blasted, as Benjamin says elsewhere, into “the now of recognizability”—“in which things adopt their true—surrealistic—face.”<sup>23</sup> Echoes of the future are deposited in the past like time bombs, and in his memoirs, Benjamin is hunting out the detonated and detonatable mines of the *fin de siècle*.

Benjamin has occasion to return to the death room again when he writes his memoirs of childhood. For this he conjures up in his mind’s eye memories of spaces, textures, patterns, atmospheres, and relationships. Memory is annexed, in a Proustian way, to sensuous experience. If not the visual, then perhaps the smelled, the tasted, or the heard: Benjamin speaks at one point not of “*déjà vu*” but of the “already heard,” noting how some events seem to reach us like an echo awakened by a call from the past.

It is a word, a tapping, or a rustling that is endowed with the magic power to transport us into the cool tomb of long ago, from the vault of which the present seems to return only as an echo.<sup>24</sup>

Scuttling back to “the cool tomb of long ago,” Benjamin records the accoutrements of life in Berlin in 1900: the patterns on family dinnerware, the organic forms of garden

chairs on balconies, the intricacies of Aunt Lehmann's miniaturized quarry ornament, the swirls of falling snow as tracked through the window of a warm parlor by a bookish bourgeois boy who is prone to illness. Recalling objects and places allows for the adumbration of past experience, of what it was like to be and to feel in the earliest days of the twentieth century. But the memoirs are not an occasion for nostalgic recall of a completed past. This past is incomplete, which is to say that it has repercussions in the present, and from the perspective of redemption, the perspective Benjamin favors, could be otherwise cashed out. If studied closely that which will come into being or could have come into being may already be spotted lurking in it. Memory is not just of the past, but juts into the future too, though this can only be discerned retrospectively. In the frames of the scenes recounted, snared details register the inventory of a future that will yet come into being, and that might have already been anticipated under an attentive enough glare.

In the present the act of remembering comes into its own, for true meaning like photographs, develops later, and then it is memory's work to reveal a truth at first obscured. This future that lurks in Benjamin's memories is a grim and violent one, disastrous for the many, but also reflected individually in Benjamin's various "failures"—his adult illnesses, his lack of success at earning money, his general out-of-placeness.<sup>25</sup> Portents of the fiascoes to come can already be read in the culture of Wilhelmine Germany, even in the most intimate locations, such as the balcony of a bourgeois apartment. For example, disaster is apparent in the vignette "Loggias," in *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, which speaks of cradles that become mausoleums. Such a balcony-tomb houses Benjamin, for its uninhabitability seems to him an appropriate domicile for one whose destiny is to be stateless and uprooted. He nestles among the abandoned clutter that has been exiled from the home. These loggias are the crib of the first recollections of the city. As these memories and their nourishing fantasies fade or are disabused, the loggias become the tomb of an entire bourgeois class, condemned, "in panicked horror," according to Adorno's afterword, to witness its "disintegrating aura," and to come to "awareness of itself: as illusion."<sup>26</sup> Memory registers catastrophe. In the autobiographical snapshots of *A Berlin Chronicle*, Benjamin finds in his memory of school

rigidly fixed words, expressions, verses that, like a malleable mass, which has later cooled and hardened, preserve in me the imprint of the collision between a larger collective and myself. Just as, when you awake, a certain kind of significant dream survives in the form of words though all the rest of the dream content has vanished, here isolated words have remained in place as marks of catastrophic encounters.<sup>27</sup>

School, which Benjamin hated, has converted itself into a few remembered words, slogans and clichés that exemplify the inflexibility of his educational experience. In remembering this time Benjamin is able to make it historically significant in a wider sense. This stiffness and inertness is an indicator of the wider decadent Wilhelmine culture that will outpour

into war. It is also the prequel to the further catastrophic encounters, such as those that make Benjamin take leave of his home city.

When Theodor and Gretel Adorno collated a selection of Benjamin's writings for Suhrkamp in 1955 they lodged *Berlin Childhood around 1900* in a section called "Picture-Puzzles and Miniatures" (*Vexierbilder und Miniaturen*). Benjamin cherished these two things—rebuses, because they demanded to be solved and the clues were contained in the image, and miniatures because they condensed the world into handleable, studyable form. Photography—an art of coincidence, when the photographer and camera coincides with the fraction of a moment, an instant of objective arrangement—makes portable picture-puzzles, sometime miniaturizing, occasionally magnifying. Benjamin hoped to parallel this trickery verbally in his memoirs. Unlike in Kracauer's pessimistic critique of photography, memory finds an analogue in photography. Adorno recognizes this aspect of Benjamin's memoirs in his afterword to the first German edition of *Berlin Childhood around 1900* in 1950:

These fairy-photographs of a Berlin childhood are not only the ruins of a long-departed life seen from an aerial perspective, but also shots of the airy state, snapped by an astronaut who persuaded his models to kindly hold still for a moment.<sup>28</sup>

### **Benjamin: Memory and Mementos**

Benjamin began writing his memoirs in 1932. In that same year he wrote to his friend Gershom Scholem that he wanted to spend his birthday in Nice with "a quite droll fellow" whom he had often met in his life. It seems that he was referring to death and that he planned to kill himself in his hotel room.<sup>29</sup> Instead he chose to write about memory and imagining the past in a lecture on Marcel Proust. Benjamin's lecture touches on mortality. He writes of dying and again evokes the cliché of the proto-photographic strip of images of a life whirring through a dying person's head. The operation of this proto-cinematic device is once more aligned to the process of memory. Memories burst up at a moment of crisis. They are involuntarily summoned strips of montage, flashing past in rapid succession. The notion of the "involuntary memory" is taken from Proust. Involuntary memory does not indicate consciously dredged up recollections, but rather overcomes an individual unexpectedly, stimulated by sensuous experience.<sup>30</sup>

It is hard to access the past. Much is irretrievable. Memory is not a resource that can be dredged up at will. It emerges not when it is called for but as an involuntary reflex, unleashed by an act as banal as biting into a cake or as critical as dying. Involuntary memory emerges from a loss of control over the conscious application of subjective meanings upon the range of experiences presented to consciousness. For Proust, declares Benjamin, involuntary memory is spontaneous, not goal-bound, glancing off material objects

encountered by chance. It is vivid, because preverbal, and connected to blissfulness, which is why, in Proust, such memories are lashed to childhood. Involuntary memory provides an unexpected shocking link between an experience in the present and one in the past. It disrupts linearity, confounds temporality—and it tends toward uncovering a utopian potential. In his study of the Parisian arcades, Benjamin notes one such involuntary memory. Once, riding on a train through Berlin, he saw the perfect advertisement, a fusion of poetry and painting, which impressed itself upon his mind with such shocking force that it crashed through the floor of his unconsciousness, laying dormant for years. He could remember only the product but not the image, but longed to find it again. For ages he avoided the urge to seek out the manufacturer of the advertised product. But one day, in typical contingent city fashion, passing some backstreet bar in a working-class district of Berlin, encrusted in enamel signs, he stumbled by chance upon a simplified advertisement for the same brand of salt. This stimulated with the force of a flood the memory of the first image: salt dripping from a sack in the desert, loaded on a truck, heading for a sign which reads *is the best*, and spelling out *Bullrich-Salt*. Benjamin remarks how this image encapsulates capital's engendering of the fantasy of a predestined harmony between product, nature, and desire. This is the image of utopia, and it comes unbidden.<sup>31</sup>

Benjamin composes autobiographical memories, but these do not attempt to outline the contours of a single, individual life. Rather he seeks collective histories and collective memories, images available to any child of the Wilhelmine epoch. However, Benjamin acknowledges that experience is dependent on class, and while his memoirs might relate a collective experience of Berlin around 1900, they also indicate that the city is a place of meeting points and uncrossable thresholds between rich and poor. Elsewhere, in his writings on Baudelaire and his study of the nineteenth century, Benjamin asserts a social aspect to memory. He writes of the interior of the bourgeois home, where knick-knacks, mementoes, photographs are memory traps, totemic objects that ward off the future and drag inhabitants back into a past that shelters them, just as the various casings, coverings, etuis, and albums shelter objects. In these cluttered dusty parlors every object embeds a trace in a velveteen case or accepts a trace, as the antimacassars accept the head's contours and hair oil.<sup>32</sup> His childhood days suffocated under traces, clutter, stuff that clogged up the atmosphere. The twentieth century, by contrast, is airy, sleek, emptied, but it does not provide "dwelling." The living exist in hotel rooms. The dead inhabit crematoria. Memory, for good or ill, cannot survive in such temporary or interim or lifeless spaces. Instead, memory is substituted by the memento or souvenir. Mementos mark the place where life used to be. They are the accoutrements of an alienated populace that has lost touch with genuine experience.

Memory is key for Benjamin. It occupies him in assorted forms: memory as re-evoked moment (*Erinnerung*), memory as physical organ (*Gedächtnis*), souvenirs (*Andenken*), recollection (*Eingedenken*), voluntary and involuntary memory (*mémoire volontaire/involontaire*). Benjamin's tabulation of this array of memories indicates his concern to

construct a science, history, and politics of memory. This responds to a perceived assault on memory, concomitant with the emergence of the mass-produced commodity-form, and made tangible in the memento or souvenir. The souvenir is the object that substitutes for memory and concretizes “died-off experience.” In “Central Park,” he states that “the ‘souvenir’ is the schema of the commodity’s transformation into an object for the collector.”<sup>33</sup> Such souvenirs always come in heaps, declares Benjamin, like endless commodities. The souvenir is a “secularized relic”<sup>34</sup> and it cannot but evoke melancholy. In place of experience, the souvenir hopes to force that intentional—voluntary—memory, which is for Benjamin not true memory.

A sort of productive disorder is the canon of the *memoire involontaire*, as it is the canon of the collector. . . . The *memoire volontaire*, on the other hand, is a registry providing the object with a classificatory number behind which it disappears. “So now we’ve been there.” (“I’ve had an experience.”)<sup>35</sup>

Souvenirs are particles of splintered memory in the modern era. The souvenir is the packaging up of experience—which means the experience contained is inaccessible. What Benjamin holds out against is the conversion of the thing into the saleable item, and the experience into the disconnected event. Other objectifications of vacated memory in modernity appear in Benjamin’s work: the waxwork figure, the phantasmagoria, the daguerreotype, all ghostly hieroglyphs of the industrial “liquidation of memories.”

Where Kracauer mourns the loss of innerness, Benjamin embraces it in the realistic spirit of Brecht’s “bad new.” If this is today’s “personality type,” then its possibilities need to be explored. To that end, in 1931 Benjamin delineates a type without memory, the “destructive character.” He is a type opposed to repression in its political and psychic senses, who—causing havoc by cutting ways through—removes the traces which sentimentally bind us to the status quo; in order to make possible the formulation of experience according to revised tenets of existence in modernity:

Some people hand things down to posterity by making them untouchable and thus conserving them; others pass on situations, by making them practicable and thus liquidating them. The latter are called the destructive.<sup>36</sup>

The first type commits to the “aura” of things, preserving past traces as precious and impervious objects. The second has abolished “aura” and with it things, including the self. The destructive character would doubtless live, if he could, in the new glass and steel environments designed by Adolf Loos, the Bauhaus, and Bruno Taut with their “rooms in which it is hard to leave traces.”<sup>37</sup> “Erase the traces,” as Brecht insisted in a poem in his 1926 lyric cycle “Handbook for City-Dwellers.” For those traces—the monograms, screens, knickknacks on mantelpieces—are also tied up with possession and so signal class

society. Brecht details: “Erase the traces,” rather than have someone else efface them.<sup>38</sup> This exhortation was to take on a horrendous significance in 1930s Germany, when the Hitler regime made efforts to erase the traces of Jews, Communists, Gypsies, and others. The full assault on sections of the population was never known by Benjamin, who took his life in 1940. But he had sensed something of the burgeoning violence, and he left Berlin, site of his memories, in 1933, never to return.

For Kracauer thoughts on memory were spurred by the contemporary situation. Weimar Germany’s economic crisis and its technologically impelled rapid change threatened to wipe out memory. For Benjamin too, reflections on memory were occasioned directly by the contemporary situation, as expressed specifically in his personal circumstances. His recollection of the past and his reflections on the act of remembering were initiated at the start of permanent exile from a country in which everyday life struck him with terror.<sup>39</sup> Political events in Germany—the accession of the Nazis to power—occasioned more reflection on questions of memory, especially in relation to history writing.

### History and Memory in Benjamin

History is a form of official memory or, rather, in what Benjamin perceives to be its distorted forms, a form of officially sanctioned forgetting. Benjamin’s series of theses “On the Concept of History” are critical of past and present modes of historiography, from the nineteenth century historicists, with their “monumental, long-winded, and basically lackadaisical works,”<sup>40</sup> through the progress-oriented Social Democrats, to the power-mongers of his epoch. Historicism insists on “empathy with the victor,” an imagination of the past through the great deeds of great men, who constitute the ruling classes. In a preparatory note for the theses, Benjamin makes clear how historicism depends on recounting the antics of glorious heroes of history in monumental and epic form and is in no position to say anything about the “nameless,” those who are the toilers in history and those who suffer the effects of historical agency:

It is more difficult to honor the memory of the anonymous than it is to honor the memory of the famous, the celebrated, not excluding poets and thinkers.<sup>41</sup>

Historical construction is Benjamin’s term for a history-writing that can account for the experience of the nameless. It is able to remember the repressed of history who were its victims and its unacknowledged makers. Benjamin constructs a re-visioning of the past, wherein the historian bears witness to an endless brutality committed against the “oppressed.” This he understands to have been Marx’s task in *Capital*. *Capital* is a memorial, an anti-epic memorial, insisting on redress. Marx’s sketch of the lot of labor is presented

as a counterbalance to the obfuscation of genuine historical experience. Marx memorializes the labor of the nameless, whose suffering and energy produced “wealth” in the vast accumulations of commodities. But Marx’s direct descendants, the German Social Democrats, did not recognize this aspect of Marx’s thought. Instead, they continued to believe in the endless and automatic progress of humanity—via technology—toward a liberated society. Their complacency allowed—or at least did not oppose—fascism, and fascism instituted a corrupt version of history not worthy of the name.

In a letter written in March 1937, Max Horkheimer criticized Benjamin’s view of the “uncompletedness” of history. The crimes that have been committed against the oppressed, and the pain that has been suffered, are irreparable. If history’s uncompletedness is taken seriously, then the theological figure of the Last Judgement is relevant, and this is not a materialist concept.<sup>42</sup> Benjamin affirms this from a scientific perspective, but rejects it as a one-dimensional conception of historiography. Constructing history is not only to be seen as a task contained by a scientific discipline but also, suggests Benjamin, as a form of “remembrance” (*Eingedenken*):

What science has “determined,” remembrance can modify. Such mindfulness can make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and the completed (suffering) into something incomplete.<sup>43</sup>

Remembrance, a form of memory, modifies the dead actualities of history. It opens up the completed woundings to some form of reinterpretation, thereby providing the possibility of retrospective justice. Transforming the interpretation of the past opens the field for the transformation of the future. The representation of history is an impetus for political action. Memory—or rather remembrance—modifies history. It is its necessary corrective. This historiography, based on memory, is not capable of changing the world but of changing the image of change, and in so doing, it clears the way for the forces of change or, as Benjamin modestly puts it, makes it possible to improve our position in the fight against fascism:<sup>44</sup>

Formerly it was thought that a fixed point had been found in “what has been,” and one saw the present engaged in tentatively concentrating the forces of knowledge on this ground. Now this relation is to be overturned, and what has been is to become the dialectical reversal—the flash of awakened consciousness. Politics attains primacy over history. The facts become something that just now first happened to us, first struck us; to establish them is the affair of memory. Indeed, awakening is the great exemplar of memory: the occasion on which it is given us to remember what is closest, tritest, most obvious. What Proust intends with the experimental rearrangement of furniture in matinal half-slumber; what Bloch recognizes as the darkness of the lived moment, is nothing other than what here is to be secured on the level of

the historical, and collectively. There is a not-yet-conscious knowledge of what has been: its advancement has the structure of awakening.<sup>45</sup>

The past is not fixed but is a point of contest. The past has meaning only for us now in the present. We awaken into it as our now. In its appropriation for us in the present, it becomes a matter of memory, of subjective management, of recall from the perspective of the present. That this is an awakening speaks to Benjamin's quest for enlightenment, along the lines of Stephen Dedalus's phrase "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake." But for Benjamin the awakening to truth, and liberation, must be carried through collectively.

Questions of memory, of forgetting, of consciousness and repression, become class questions for Benjamin. Not least because the proletariat is denied memory, a claim on tradition, a rightful place in the triumphal march of history. It is cast by Social Democracy as a redeemer of future generations, not a backward-looking, avenging, remembering fighter.<sup>46</sup> That is to say, the proletariat has no *Er-innerung*, no systematized internalization of the span of decades. The continuum of history, like the poetry of the past, belongs only to the oppressor, he declares. For the oppressed and dispossessed, states Benjamin, there is only discontinuity, starting from zero and nothing. Flashed up in the present are memories of oppression that were never recorded but that have structured present social inequalities and catastrophic politics.

Benjamin's arrow of memory shooting back and forth between past, present, and future gains in political significance, as through the 1930s Germany slips into a nightmare-sleep that threatens, under the guise of reanimating the past, to allot a present and a future to only the few, as the Third Reich launches Himmler's "page of history" that, it was claimed, can "never be written."<sup>47</sup> In hoping to wipe out a people, the Nazis forced memory out as political issue. In a letter to Gretel Karplus-Adorno in Spring 1940, announcing the themes of the theses on the philosophy of history, Benjamin noted that he suspected that the problem of remembering (and of forgetting) would continue to occupy him for a long time.<sup>48</sup> For Benjamin, as for Kracauer, memory is a theme to be pursued at the very moment when it is confronted by technology and threatened with extinction, be that by the pace of change or by a sequence of power-wielders whose rule culminates in disastrous political events. In such circumstances, the injunction against all odds is "never forget."