

Transformations

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Walter Benjamin on Photography: Towards Elemental Politics

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Introduction

Contemporary media studies often claim that Walter Benjamin has based his media aesthetics on a materialistic notion of media that has lost its currency. However, it becomes apparent on a closer study that it is only against the background of Benjamin's early writings that the currency of his reflections on technical media, such as photography and film, can be properly estimated today. In this article, I will study the intertwining of the "metaphysical" and "historical" aspects of Benjamin's media aesthetics by focusing on his reflections on photography. I will argue for the relevance of Benjamin's approach to theorising the photographic medium at the threshold of the "post-photographic era." The article consists of three parts. Firstly, I will give a brief account of the language-philosophical roots of Benjamin's media aesthetics. Secondly, I will discuss the notion of the optical unconscious in the light of Benjamin's philosophy of language and consider its interpretative power today. Lastly, I will outline the dialectics of nature and technology developed by Benjamin in the context of his reflections on film and photography, which, in my interpretation, constitutes a step towards elemental politics.

Language, media, and experience

The historical frame of experience is one of the most central themes in Benjamin's thinking. In his early writings Benjamin theorised experience with explicit reference to Kantian philosophy. In the essay "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy" he proclaimed that he would recast the Kantian account of experience by emancipating philosophy from a scientific concept of experience, which, in his view, was too limited and disconnected from the totality of life ("Coming Philosophy" 100-110). His coming philosophy would be Kantian in spirit, but would extend its scope to cover mystical and religious experience as well as fantasies, hallucinations and other marginalised forms of experience, thus transforming philosophy into a metaphysics of "higher experience" ("Coming Philosophy" 102). The coming philosophy would go beyond "empirical consciousness," which Benjamin interpreted as being formative to the Kantian account of experience, and create a concept of knowledge beyond science and subjectivity that would correspond to the concrete totality of experience.

Benjamin's philosophy of experience centres on the question of language. For early Benjamin, experience as the "uniform and continuous multiplicity of knowledge" is "linguistic" in nature ("Coming Philosophy" 108). The term "linguistic" should be understood here in a wide sense, since, in Benjamin's view, language represents the most elemental level of experience. In Kantian terms it comes close to a transcendental condition of possibility for experience. However, unlike the Kantian transcendental forms of experience (time and space), language, in Benjamin's sense, is a historical structure. For Benjamin, the totality of experience is not only conditioned naturally but

also historically, which means that it is structured by ever changing possibilities for articulation, which, in the last instance, are “linguistic.” According to Benjamin, “we cannot imagine a total absence of language in anything;” and every expression – even in the non-human realm of things – can be considered a kind of language (“On Language” 62). This language-philosophical conception of experience forms the basis of Benjamin’s reflections on media. The historical configuration of the “medium of perception,” which is one of the key themes of his media aesthetics, is to be understood against this background as an interplay between language, senses, and technical media.

It should be noted that Benjamin himself never used the term “media aesthetics.” Nevertheless, it has an established role in Benjamin studies as the designation of a heterogeneous set of writings addressing, in one way or another, the notion of medium (Schöttker 411-433). Despite various shifts and turns in Benjamin’s later thinking, the metaphysical aspects of experience emphasised in his early writings continued to play an important role in his later media-theoretical reflections, although often in unspoken ways. Consequently, the political impetus of Benjamin’s media aesthetics cannot be reduced to its topical political contexts, or historical matters. It is intimately connected with elemental – or metaphysical – aspects of the human condition. In the working notes to his seminal study on the German baroque mourning play, Benjamin described the intimate relation of the “metaphysical” and “historical” aspects of his approach in terms of the inseparable unity of a “reversed stocking” (*umgekehrter Strumpf*) (*Gesammelte Schriften* vol. I/3 918). When reflecting on technical media, Benjamin stages the relation between historical matters and metaphysical themes in a similar manner. However, because of the wide range of topics and contexts addressed by Benjamin in a rather fragmentary and seemingly unsystematic way, the interplay of metaphysical themes and historical matters is not always easy to grasp. In order to foreground this interplay, the implicit connections between the different lines of Benjamin’s thought need to be followed.

In the light of Benjamin’s early philosophy of language, theories of media that focus on technological apparatuses and their effects appear to have a very narrow basis, since they tend to neglect the metaphysical aspects of media. The effects of technical media never fully derive from their technical or “formal” qualities; media also convey a metaphysical “content.” On the other hand, semiotic analyses developed in the model of textuality are equally limited. Just as language “never gives *mere* signs” (Benjamin, “On Language” 69), the ways technical media produce sense, cannot be reduced to signs and sign functions. Benjamin urges us to keep these both sides in mind. The specific strength of Benjamin’s media aesthetics lies in the way it sets up dialectical tensions by combining metaphysical speculation with historical analysis.

In his early language-philosophical article, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” (1916), Benjamin argues against an instrumentalist or “bourgeois” understanding of language, and, in similar vein, takes distance from mystical linguistic theories that take the word to be the essence of the thing (“On Language” 69). According to him, language is to be thought of as the linguistic being of things, that is, as their “communicability,” or more precisely, “impartability” (*Mittelbarkeit*):

Language communicates the linguistic being of things. The clearest manifestation of this being, however, is language itself. The answer to the question “*What* does language communicate?” is therefore “All language communicates itself” . . . this *capacity* for communication is language itself. (“On Language” 63-64)

Language is not a means of communication, neither is the linguistic being of things equal to their essence. Language *is* communication in terms of impartability, as an immediate capacity to take part in the event of itself. Things take part in this imparting only insofar as they express in their being a “residue of the creative word of God” (“On Language” 74) and thus relate to the divine source of language. In other words, things are fully immersed in language only in the creative word of God, which, for Benjamin, stands for pure immediacy.

A theory of language in Benjamin's sense cannot disregard the question of the divine origins of language, since language in its very being is oriented towards an incommensurable other. Language is "not only communication of the communicable but also, at the same time, a symbol of the incommunicable" ("On Language" 74). The two extremes of mediation, immediacy and infinite reference, make up what Benjamin calls the "magic" of language ("On Language" 64). [1] In order to explicate Benjamin's densely articulated thought on this point, we can say that language is magical in its ability to "touch without touching." Language "touches" things by establishing relations between them. Moreover, this magical "touch" is *infinitely immediate*; it takes place without any mediating instance other than the language itself. The magic of language can take many forms. Benjamin writes in this context of "magic of matter," "naming," "abstraction," and "judgement" ("On Language" 67-72).

The magic of language is also manifested in the multiplicity of languages as a "peculiar convergence:" "[L]anguages are not strangers to one other, but are, a priori and apart from all historical relationships, interrelated in what they want to express" ("Task" 255). According to Benjamin, every language as a whole "intends" in its own way "one and the same thing" ("Task" 257). Benjamin calls this "one and the same thing" the "pure language." It is a higher language, which cannot be achieved by any single language, but "only by the totality of their intentions supplementing one another" ("Task" 257).

This suprahistorical relationship between languages appears in translation. This is why Benjamin gives the concept of translation a central role in his language philosophy:

Translation attains its full meaning in the realization that every evolved language (with the exception of the word of God) can be considered a translation of all the others. . . . Languages relate to one another as do media of varying densities. . . . Translation is removal from one language into another through a continuum of transformations. ("On Language" 69-70)

Languages supplement one another in their ways of intending, which is to say that they translate each other. It is to be noted that translation in this sense concerns the intent itself, rather than communicable contents. In "The Task of the Translator" Benjamin writes that translation "gives voice to the *intentio*" by making different languages recognisable "as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel" (260). In other words, translation points at a realm of reconciliation and fulfilment of languages. "Immediate impartability," "pure language," and "creative word of God" stand for this redeemed language, that is, a linguistic realm that cannot be achieved in any single language.

However, pure language is not a dimension of impossibility, which could be measured in terms of its (im)possible realisation. Rather, what is at stake here is a virtual realm of language. Although Benjamin himself does not write of "virtuality" here, the term is suggested in the suffix "-ability" (*-barkeit*). [2] As a virtual dimension of language, impart-ability produces reality effects without realising itself. Rather than being simply impossible, it is capable of showing actual effects while remaining virtual. These two levels of language need to be distinguished. What Benjamin calls "pure language" is not conditioned by any specific means, objects, or addressees such as word, thing, or human being ("On Language" 65). It "communicates" itself in itself, it is "in the purest sense the 'medium' of communication" ("On Language" 64). In other words, pure language is its own "content" and "form." It produces difference only in its own impure appearances. This implies that impartability is the condition of possibility for instrumental language *and* its interruption. Language as impartability is a "pure means" only lending itself to communication through self-division (Hamacher 116). The mediality of language is virtual as such, but as self-division and difference-production, language is always already actual and multiple. We could thus say that language imparts in that it divides itself. It takes part in itself, communicates itself (including its own historicity) in itself, and, at the same time, parts with its immediacy.

Benjamin thinks of this self-division in terms of the fall from the paradisiacal state that only knew one language. In linguistic terms, the fall constitutes for Benjamin a transformation of language, which can be thought of as the birth of representation (“On Language” 70). After the fall, language is in a state of constant self-division and multiplication. There are innumerable languages, with the “language of technology” among others (“On Language” 62). However, in spite of the fall, all languages are still related to each other. They supplement each other in their ways of intending and thus express a residue of the magical community of languages.

Against this background, it is legitimate to think of photography as a language that articulates differences in its own way of intending and, at the same time, points at the pure language. Given this, it is illuminating when Benjamin in “Little History of Photography” establishes an implicit link to his language philosophy by considering photography in terms of the historical difference between technology and magic (512). In the following, I will present a way of articulating the historical dynamics of this difference and indicate its possible relevance to the media-theoretical debates of today.

Reading what was never written

In “Little History of Photography” Benjamin states (referring to Laszlo Moholy-Nagy) that the illiterates of the future are those who do not know how to read photographs (527). Is the future he was thinking of still our future? How does photography contribute to the challenges of visual literacy of our time?

During the late nineteenth century, photography established itself as a medium of great importance in collecting and securing visual information in various fields of research, such as anthropology, criminology, and medicine. Today, in the wake of the proliferation of digital media, photography is in a state of dispersion. Diverse applications of light-based picturing techniques are being enhanced digitally. Photographic archives are remodelled into databases. Hybrid forms of photographic imagery mixing analogue and digital technologies have become the norm. The “photographic” is undergoing a transformation. We can speak of the “expanding field of photography” (Osborne 63-70).

The recent boom of critical accounts of photographic “authentication strategies” is symptomatic of this process of transformation. The attention has especially been focused on the convergence of the rhetoric of realism and indexicality; notions like “New Neurotic Realism,” “reality effect,” “performative indexicality” and “constructed contingency” stand for this (Frohne 402-426; Green & Lowry 47-60; Wortmann 219-225). In this context, the old question, whether photographic imagery should be considered in terms of the technical qualities of the medium or in terms of cultural practices arises once again, and what is more, in a rather peculiarly polarised form. New digital technologies lend attention to material-technical questions, while, at the same time, visual literacy tends to be considered in equal terms with the ideal of literacy connected to writing. Consequently, in face of the digitalisation of photography, the inscription of light appears in the view of many scholars as something that, rather than being a trace, has to be culturally generated as a trace. The rhetoric of this cultural contextualisation, in turn, leans on knowledge of the material-technical qualities of the medium. In other words, nature and culture tend to be played against each other once again by opposing “semiotic” models of interpretation with “aesthetic” ones.

Here, Benjamin’s media aesthetics opens highly relevant perspectives by raising the question to what extent visual literacy might be explicated in the model of textuality. In the light of the language-philosophical roots of Benjamin’s media aesthetics, photography appears as a language that “never gives *mere* signs.” It is a historical configuration of technology and metaphysics expressing in its articulations a residue of the magical community of languages marked by various modes of sense-production. In short, the ways in which photography “makes sense” are

not to be reduced to *semiosis*. Photography also produces sense by reconfiguring *aesthesis*, that is, the processes constituting the frame of sense experience. What is at stake here is a “linguistic” dimension beyond signs. Benjamin’s notion of “optical unconscious” can help us illuminate this.

Benjamin coined the notion of “optical unconscious” with reference to psychoanalysis. He made it designate the new realm of experience made accessible by photography in a similar way as psychoanalysis constituted an access to the psychic unconscious. “It is another nature which speaks to the camera rather than to the eye” (Benjamin, “Little History” 510). This “second nature” speaking to the camera detaches the visible from the capacities of the eye. It brings forth the virtuality of vision. In other words, equipped with the camera, the eye sees more virtually than it can read actually. Consequently, the eye faces the task of learning how to read the second nature, how to actualise the virtualities of the visible. In language philosophical terms this can be thought of as translation. Photography displaces vision by introducing new spatio-temporal configurations (temporal short cuts, arrested movements, inhuman scales, superimpositions, etc.). It thus undermines any notion of natural visibility, that is, the natural legibility of visual appearances. At the same time, this discrepancy brings forth its reverse. It shows the “peculiar convergence” of different modes of experience, which, following Benjamin, are to be seen as different languages. In short, it calls for translation. We may here recall Benjamin’s allegory of the cameraman as a surgeon penetrating the surface of the phenomenal with his instruments and thus raising the question of the constitution of reality (“Work of Art” 116).

In the “expanding field of photography,” the eye is likely to encounter images that exceed its capacities of reading. It has to learn how to read. Here, recourse to signifying conventions is an obvious option. Benjamin, when pleading for captions in “Little History of Photography” seems, at first sight, to go for that option:

The camera is getting smaller and smaller, ever readier to capture fleeting and secret images whose shock effect paralyzes the associative mechanisms in the beholder. This is where inscription must come into play, which includes the photography in the literarization of the conditions of life, and without which all photographic construction must remain arrested in the approximate. (Benjamin, “Little History” 527, the translation has been modified)

This line of thought does not lead Benjamin to treat photographic images as mere representations, however. The “literarisation” invoked here is not only about contextualisation and the semiotic anchoring of images. It is also, and more fundamentally, about bringing forth the magical community of languages, as well as explicating the law of their historical transformation, that is, translation. This is why Benjamin stresses the presentational aspects of photography. In the very same article he writes that photography opens new “image-worlds” that need to be interpreted in the same way as psychoanalysts interpret dreams:

Yet at the same time, photography reveals in this material physiognomic aspects, image worlds, which dwell in the smallest things – meaningful yet covert enough to find a hiding place in waking dreams, but which, enlarged and capable of formulation, make the difference between technology and magic visible as a thoroughly historical variable. (Benjamin, “Little History” 512)

In terms of the legibility of photography, the virtual dimension of vision evoked by Benjamin’s notion of the “optical unconscious” implies that viewing a photograph amounts to the task of “reading what was never written.” However, deciphering the representative aspects of an image and relating it to a textual context are not yet a reading in a strict sense. In the light of Benjamin’s recourse to psychoanalysis, the real challenge is to read an image as a presentation that is capable of creating new contexts, or – to distance ourselves from the textual metaphor – new configurations. We can say that the “optical unconscious” (insofar as its model is the Freudian unconscious) is not manifested in the form of symbols. Rather, its mode of self-presentation is

allegorical. Unlike some popularised versions of the “Freudian” interpretation of dreams suggest, Freud himself underlined the idiosyncratic character of the dreams. According to him, there are no universal keys to interpreting dream images (Freud 109). In the psychic text of the dream, the difference between signifier and signified is never clear-cut (Derrida 209). In other words, the manifest dream images do not symbolise pre-established meanings. Instead, the unconscious experience directing the dream work produces its own signifiers; it produces their status-as-meaningful. This is to say that dream images are allegorical presentations rather than symbolical representations.

Against this background, Benjamin’s recourse to psychoanalysis can be interpreted as a way of underlining the presentational qualities of photography. Photography, as an access to the “optical unconscious,” produces sense in all senses of the word “sense.” It has effects on the level of perception and spatiotemporal orientation as well as on the level of signification, or, the production of sense connected to signs. As a language, photography never gives mere signs. The photographic image calls for translation that would give voice to the specific configuration of technology and magic expressed in it. It calls for articulating its own historicity.

In the light of Benjamin’s media aesthetics, the photographic image is marked by indexicality, but not only in terms of a trace and a pointer, as the Peircean alternatives prevalent in the contemporary photography theory suggest. A photograph can show traces of the past and point at something that is absent, but it can also indicate the state of the relation between technology and magic, that is, its own mediacy. Not unlike what Benjamin calls a “dialectical image,” photography is marked by a “historical index.” [3] In language philosophical terms, photography brings forth the historical relation between technology and magic and puts the “hallowed growth of languages to the test” by lending itself to measuring the distance from the pure language (“Task” 257).

In “Little History of Photography,” looking back at the early days of photography, Benjamin discovered for himself the radical power of photography in reconfiguring human experience. Today, his writings challenge us to think of the “optical unconscious” as a virtual and non-human dimension. This makes the digitalisation of photography appear as less radical a shift than it is often claimed to be. In the light of Benjamin’s thinking, the post-human and the virtual already have their roots deep in the history of photography. In order to bring out these roots, we have to train the eye. It is in regard to this training that the political impetus of Benjamin’s media aesthetics can be brought to the fore.

Politics of sense

In “Little History of Photography” Benjamin writes of August Sanders *Antlitz der Zeit* (1929) in terms of a “training manual” (*Übungsatlas*) (520). He also writes of Karl Blossfeldt’s *Urformen der Kunst* (1928) and Eugène Atget’s *Lichtbilder* (1930) in a similar vein (518-526). Benjamin obviously suggests that in these “training manuals” a new readability of photography can be discerned, and that these photography books could thus be used to train visual literacy. The mode and the goal, or programme, of this training, however, is anything but obvious. In order to interpret Benjamin on this point, recourse to his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility” (especially to the second version of it) is needed. In this essay Benjamin develops a dialectics of nature and technology with specific reference to photography and film.

In Benjamin’s analysis, the photographic media constitute a decisive scene of demarcation, or “world-historical conflict” (*weltgeschichtliche Auseinandersetzung*), between nature and technology (“Work of Art” 106-108; 124-125). What is at stake in this *Auseinandersetzung*, is the reconfiguration of the “medium of perception” and its intimate relation to what Benjamin calls “politicisation of art.” For Benjamin, the “politicisation of art” involves a shift from “beautiful shine” (*schöne Schein*) to “play” (*Spiel*) (“Work of Art” 127). The photographic media, photography

and film, play a central role in this shift; they force us to rethink the nature of art. Photography transforms art in a profound way; it makes art “photographic” (“Little History” 523). And, it is the historical task of film, in turn, to relate the newly conquered image-worlds to bodily experience (“Work of Art” 120).

The dialectics of nature and technology, in the form of which Benjamin articulates the politicisation of art, involves four terms. On the first level there are “nature” and its counterpart, “first technology,” which Benjamin equates with the harnessing of natural forces, magic and ritualistic art (“Work of Art” 107). On the second level there are “second nature,” which is the first technology become nature, and “second technology” (“Work of Art” 107). Whereas the first technology is about shaping and mastering the first nature, the second technology is about mastering the interplay between the second nature and the human condition (“Work of Art” 107). Benjamin sees the origin of the second technology there where, “by an unconscious ruse, human beings first began to distance themselves from nature” and adopted a playful stance towards it (“Work of Art” 107).

In a crucial passage compressed into a footnote (“Work of Art” 127), Benjamin touches upon the relation between semblance (*Schein*) and play (*Spiel*). He states that semblance (the appearance of spirit, beauty, or the intelligible in a sensible form) has traditionally set up the most stable frame of art. Play, in turn, provides the “inexhaustable reservoir” of all the experimenting actions of the second technology. In his sketchy analysis, Benjamin relates the historical task of cinema to play. He argues that with the decay of aura (which is another name for beautiful semblance, *schöner Schein*) the work of art integrates into itself an element of play.

Further, in the same footnote, Benjamin notes that semblance and play have a common denominator in *mimesis*: “In *mimesis*, tightly interfolded like cotyledons, slumber the two aspects of art: semblance and play” (127). Their historical significance becomes evident in the *Auseinandersetzung* of first and second technology. In this demarcation the conceptual frame of *mimesis* is negotiated. This negotiation, or more literally “mutual deposing,” is comparable to an act of translation that makes different languages recognisable as “fragments of a greater language”, as Benjamin puts it in “The Task of the Translator” (260). What is at stake here is the question, in what circumstances first technology is naturalised, that is to say, turned into second nature.

To develop the point of this insightful but dense passage a step further we could conclude that the coexistence of semblance and play in *mimesis* raises the question of *methexis*, participation. The very existence of two modes of *mimesis* presses upon the thought to ponder the mode of participation in the idea or thing imitated. Thus, in form of the two aspects of art as *mimesis*, two modes of *methexis* are juxtaposed: semblance as the outward appearance or apparent form of something and resemblance as the state of resembling or performing likeness.

In a review of Karl Blossfeldt’s photography book *Ordinary Forms of Art (Urformen der Kunst)*, Benjamin makes a seemingly harmless observation: the photographed plants look like works of art imitating nature; we can recognise formal elements of ornamental and decorative arts in them (“News about Flowers” 156). Against the background of the dialectics of nature and technology outlined above, the clue of this remark is not to point out that art imitates nature. Rather, Benjamin is stating how photography, being a form of second technology, prepares or formats the visible and turns it into a second nature. These photographs do not imitate nature; they show (perhaps we could even say *perform*) nature as art. This is the reason, why Blossfeldt’s “training manual” contributes to the insight that photography can offer a means of articulating in what respect “the difference between technology and magic” is “a profoundly historical variable” (“Little History” 512).

This negotiation between the first and second technologies amounts to the political task of art as pursued by Benjamin in his “Work of Art” essay. In Benjamin’s sense the “politicisation of art” is

not, and cannot be, programmatic, because it presupposes that the very ground of art is transformed (Fenves 165). For Benjamin, mastering the interplay between the second nature and the human condition is something to be learned; and the politically crucial task of technological art is to train this ("Work of Art" 107-108). In the age of technological art, the human being has the task of transforming the immense technical machinery of his time into an integral part of human "innervation." The training and preparation for this is, in Benjamin's view, the historical task of film ("Work of Art" 108).

Benjamin includes in the notion of "innervation" elements from Freudian psychoanalysis and from neurological theories. However, unlike Freud, Benjamin sees innervation as a two-way process (Hansen 317). His notion of innervation articulates the dialectics of nature and technology in terms of bodily experience. It designates a technique and a state of psycho-physical organisation. Through various techniques of innervation, internal and external stimuli and physical actions and reactions are interwoven up to the degree, where the difference between "internal" and "external" is blurred. To put it differently, the criteria for demarcating "natural" from "technical" organisation of the medium of perception are undermined in the processes of innervation. Thus, for example, the filmic montage can contribute to reconfiguring the sense for spatiotemporal relations.

In Benjamin's view, innervation opens up possibilities for transforming the interplay between technology and the human being. It activates yet unknown resources of bodily experience and thus contributes to finding new forms of subjectivity. Against this background, the politicisation of art pursued in the "Work of Art" essay is to be understood as a "collective innervation of technics" (Hansen 325). The politicisation of art is not about the political contents in art. Instead, it takes place as a reconfiguration of the medium of perception. It is about elemental politics. These lines of thought are at work when Benjamin in "Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz" dismisses the locating of political tendencies in art on the level of content and urges us to dig deeper:

Just as deeper rock strata emerge only where the rock is fissured, the deep formation of "political tendency" likewise reveals itself only in the fracture points of artistic development; it is there that the different political tendencies may be said to come to the surface. In every technical revolution the political tendency is transformed, as if by its own volition, from a concealed element of art into a manifest one. ("Reply" 17)

Conclusion

If we study Benjamin's media aesthetics in the light of his early philosophy of language, visual literacy and its further training and practicing turn out to be intimately related to the dialectics of nature and technology as well as to the historical transformations of language. It thus seems highly relevant to consider technical transformations of media, such as the digitalisation of photography, in terms of translation and "mutual deposing" of nature and technology. According to Benjamin, "[i]t is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is exiled among alien tongues, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work" ("Task" 261). I tend to consider the task of the media theoretician in similar terms. A media theoretician's task is to denaturalise languages of media and study the world-historical conflicts expressed in them. A media theory that takes on this task consists of steps towards elemental politics. That is why it can touch upon meaning, just as translation, only fleetingly.

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Endnotes

1. Benjamin's term "magic" derives from the early romantic philosophy. His reflections on the magic of language also take up various elements from kabbalistic tradition (Menninghaus 22-33).
2. I am here indebted to Samuel Weber, who has interpreted Benjamin's notion of impartability in terms of virtuality (Weber 35-49).
3. The notion "historical index" derives from Benjamin's historiography, but even if Benjamin does not use it when discussing photography, there are substantial ties between his historiography and photography that have been well documented. For example Eduardo Cadava notes that, for Benjamin, there is "an irreducible link between thought as memory and the technical dimension of memorization, the techniques of material inscription" (Cadava xviii). Photography as one of these techniques of material inscription of memory has a central role in Benjamin's thinking, which suggests that dialectical images can be considered in photographic terms.

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