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Walter Benjamin and the Virtual: Politics, Art, and Mediation in the Age of Global Culture

Benjamin, Trauma and the Virtual
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One of the greatest challenges facing cultural theory is to conceptualise the relation of space and time in contemporary global culture. Discourses about "virtual culture" propose that digital media create a new spatial dimension consisting of mobile, transitory flows of information in "real time". Cyberdiscourse is thus characterised by an imaginary of unlimited spatial expansion and by narratives of technological progress and social transformation (Shohat). Conversely, "trauma theory"(Caruth, Felman, LaCapra, Kaplan) approaches today's culture in terms of the unresolved legacies of historical violence and injustice. From the perspective of those who concern themselves with trauma and history, technological media transmit virtual image worlds increasingly dislocated from any material trace or physical embodiment of the past. According to one common criticism, the "presentism" and immediacy of this simulated experience renders the human subject often unable to integrate visceral shock and conscious sense-making. This cultural condition can be understood as a generalised form of what psychoanalysis calls dissociation.

The instantaneous transmission of information appears to absorb temporal location into the immediacy of its re-presentation and to displace spatial location into a free-floating world of simulation. For this reason any image has the potential to serve as both an historical icon and a geopolitical map. For example, the "events of September 11" have become one the most dramatic and dramatised occasions around which different discourses about space and time have been mobilised. 9/11

almost immediately became the logo for a new spatial aggression (the War on Terror) as well as enshrined as a national trauma of the gravest kind. Meanwhile a hegemonic silence was imposed regarding any *other* historical traumas these events may have recalled. Yet such a conjunction of the virtual and the traumatic remains to be conceptualised differently: as a potentially radical interruption of habitual experience in which our sense of both the past and the present can be reconfigured. This essay proposes that Benjamin's final writings, in which concepts from both Bergson and Freud form a new critical constellation, enable us to understand trauma and virtuality in such a transformative relation.

In the 1930s Benjamin had already noted the inability of human perception to withstand the impact of visual experience in its industrial, metropolitan and technologically mediated forms. Benjamin argued that mass media functioned as both shock-absorber and narcotic: numbing emotional response and transforming catastrophe into visual spectacle. In our own era trauma theory continues to articulate the failure of the postmodern subject to assimilate the new speeds and intensities of contemporary life. Trauma has become central to debates about history and memory in an era in which digital information has apparently freed itself of any past located in place or material objects. Thus Andreas Huyssen proposes that our preoccupation with trauma is a response to a "crisis of temporality" due to "technological change, mass media, and new patterns of consumption, work, and global mobility" (21). Traumatic memories are experienced with a sense of great vividness and immediacy: they seem to retain an indelible imprint of the past and thereby an incontestable link with history in an era of pure simulation. Yet since 9/11 we have again been reminded of the ways that "traumatic" events participate in a construction of past and future that imposes a homogeneous narrative on an explosive terrain of political conflict.

This essay approaches Benjamin in the context of these issues and through the lens of Deleuze's reading of the virtual in Bergson. For Bergson the past constitutes a virtual dimension of the present which may be actualised at any moment. This virtual dimension is what makes possible both the consciousness of time passing and the occurrence of unpredictable events and free acts. This dynamic notion of virtuality is central to Deleuze's reading of Bergson. Bergson also attempted to distinguish authentic experience from habitual forms of perception which he described as "cinematographic" (*The Creative Mind* 18). Despite Deleuze's attempts to claim him for a more positive theory of cinema, what Bergson understood by the cinematographic remains at the heart of

what today is called "virtual culture." Benjamin, by way of an historical critique of Bergson, argued for an understanding of the image that participated in both the temporal and the technological senses of the virtual. Drawing on Freud's theory of trauma and memory, Benjamin attempted to move beyond the false polarity of authentic experience and technological mediation.

Although Benjamin does not adopt Bergson's use of the term "virtual," we can nevertheless discern Bergson's substantial influence in Benjamin's own propositions about history and memory. In Benjamin, Bergson's virtual domain becomes a transformative potential that can include, but is never completely assimilated into, mediated experience. For Benjamin, like Bergson, while the past exists outside representation, it is nevertheless actualised in images. In his 1939 essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" Benjamin developed an original synthesis of Bergson's philosophy of memory with Freud's theory of trauma. Freud had argued in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that traumatic experiences broke through the protective shield of individual consciousness and then returned as intrusive memories and disabling symptoms. Freud's theory became for Benjamin an explanation of how cultural forms could also be approached as carrying the equivalent of unconscious memory traces. In his final theses "On the Concept of History" (completed only a year after the Baudelaire essay) Benjamin proposed that critical practice, by seizing upon these disturbing images, had the potential to shatter the dominant interpretation of the past. The relation between these different theories can be tabulated in the following way:

	representation	**memory**
Bergson:	cinematography	virtual
Freud:	consciousness	trauma
Benjamin:	information	oppressed history

For Bergson, the camera produced a distorted and inadequate representation of human perception. But for Benjamin technologically mediated images, while dislocated in time and space, can nevertheless become the site of a critical intervention in history. It is Benjamin's attention to the traumatic nature of this dislocation that makes him our

contemporary. For Benjamin, traumatic experience disengages the subject from historical agency at the same time as it registers historical change. The task of the critical historian then becomes one of seizing upon images of this traumatic experience and re-mobilising them in the context of narratives of potential liberation. Thus while Huyssen has proposed that contemporary trauma discourses constitute an inadequate attempt to ground identity in a past that remains outside technological mediation, Benjamin's thought allows us to envision historical transformation in conjunction with the traumatic displacements of mediated experience. Benjamin inscribes a trauma in our attempts to imagine the virtual and to actualise new spaces where history can be narrated, witnessed and made.

We can pursue this point by returning to the example of 9/11. The recent documentary feature *9/11: The Falling Man* (dir. Henry Singer 2006) uncovers the story of the production, transmission and reception of the images of those who jumped from the twin towers, as well as the experiences of their friends and families. Ultimately, the film concludes, the actual identity of the "falling man," the widely disseminated image of the anonymous individual plummeting to the ground, is less important than its iconic significance for collective memory: the national trauma of 9/11. But the film is constrained by its literal interpretation of traumatic memory. An analysis of the sequence from which the "falling man" image is removed reveals the arbitrary quality of this isolated image. On this point Bergson's critique of cinematographic representation remains valid: no image, or sequence of images, can ever adequately capture a human experience. Rather, the image can only be understood as "traumatic" by way of its association with *other* images and narratives, by which it can then be seen to participate in the virtual dimension of memory. When images appear on the screens of televisions, computers and video/DVD monitors they have been removed from their original spatial and temporal location. This was already true of the photograph. The technological image has given the event what Benjamin called a "posthumous shock" (*Selected Writings* 328). Only attention to the convergence of mediated images with other forms of memory can reveal their true significance. In this case the narrative of national trauma is fixed to the shock of an image of death. But the shock of this image, which registers history as a process of ruination and catastrophe, retains the potential to activate a different reading of history.

The Virtual

Underlying the various contemporary articulations of the virtual – promotional, utopian, culturalist and philosophical – is the question of the degree to which technology saturates the imaginary of social transformation. Cyberutopians seek liberty from the nation state, virtual realitarians pursue the transcendence of the physical world, while cultural critics have attended to implications of media-induced derealisation. The rhetoric of "new media," supported by an entire mode of production, marketing and distribution of commodities, texts and images, sometimes subsumes cultural theory into a non-critical description of technological change. However, while Benjamin has been employed in some versions of cyberdiscourse (Friedberg, Manovich), important features of his thinking have remained largely unassimilated in this context. The ongoing interpenetration of the technical and the visual requires us to continually reinvent a theoretical and critical language pioneered by Benjamin and to wrest him once again from the conformity which threatens to overwhelm his thinking.

Rob Shields has noted that the virtual is most often contrasted with the real, especially in prominent discourses about digital media and cyberspace. In this sense of the virtual, the real is equated with the material and the concrete (*The Virtual* 19). Yet a closer look at this opposition reveals numerous problems. The virtuality of computer information technologies includes specific forms of materiality, even as they extend our understanding of spatiotemporal locatedness. For many, virtual simply means simulated. But this in turn complicates any simple virtual/real opposition, because simulations multiply experiences of the real (20-21). What we call "virtual" often refers to our experience of the screen, the terminal and the network. Shields attempts to clarify this situation in his discussion of Proust, Bergson and Deleuze, all of whom distinguish the virtual not from the real but from the actual. For these thinkers, the virtual is real, as in the case of a memory which may or may not become actualised in the present. Following such a logic, human consciousness and subjectivity is organised in a virtual mode, because it is only through memory that an entity can be posited to exist continuously over time (25-28). However, the question of history further complicates our contemporary notion of "virtual reality," as Shields writes:

> Virtual spaces have an elusive quality which comes from their status as being both nonplace and yet present via the technologies which enable them. However, just as these environments are not spatial per se, but only virtually so, they

> also have duration but, strictly speaking, neither a history nor a future. (*The Virtual* 51)

These qualities of digital media support the temporal construction of virtual space as always in the present. In this way, events are transmuted into self-referential and apparently self-contained simulations, and removed from the complex play of real historical forces.

When theorists have taken up Benjamin in the context of virtual culture, his analysis of modernity is seen as anticipating today's technoculture, while his emphasis on shock and catastrophe is put to one side. For example, Anne Friedberg stresses the ways that virtual experience is embedded in the modern capitalist construction of individuality. Friedberg develops her discussion of the virtual with reference to debates about postmodernity, in particular Frederic Jameson's arguments about the disappearance of history. Information media have produced "increasingly detemporalised subjectivities" and a "derealized sense of 'presence' and identity" (Friedberg 20). Friedberg's theory of a "mobilized 'virtual' gaze," the history of which she traces back to Benjamin's writings on the *flaneur* and the emergent consumer culture of the nineteenth century, describes forms of spatio-temporal mobility intensified by both motorised technologies and electronic media. Yet Friedberg's discussion pays little attention to the larger political struggles with which Benjamin's original analysis was engaged, or to his conception of history as catastrophe. The relation of the spectator/consumer to traumatic experience remains separate from the question of the virtual.

Susan Buck-Morss, on the other hand, has further elaborated Benjamin's theory of shock. Re-reading the Artwork essay, she argues that what is at stake in the politics of mass media is "the alienation of the corporeal sensorium" (5). Buck-Morss sees this problem embedded in a modern fantasy of an autonomous subject who is actually "sense-dead" (10). The philosophical tradition that pursues an ideal of sovereign consciousness, which Buck-Morss traces from Kant through to Nietzsche, can also be contrasted with both Bergson's emphasis on intuition and Freud's attention to the problem of trauma. Benjamin's reading of Bergson and Freud was incorporated into his own Marxian analysis of the brutalisation of the human sensorium under the conditions of industrial labour. The senses become numbed. In the same way, the modern subject surrounded by a barrage of stimuli from technological media has learned to shut down sensory response. This deadening of the senses, however, also shuts down access to deeper reserves of feeling and memory. Benjamin

transformed Bergson's analysis of individual memory to develop his own theory of collective historical memory. In the following section I propose that Benjamin's reading of Bergson and Freud in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" and its resonances in the theses "On the Concept of History" suggest another valuable line of inquiry for exploring the relation of trauma and the virtual.

Benjamin and Bergson

Bergson understands memory as distinct from perception in so far as it constitutes a virtual domain in which the traces of all past experiences coexist. But memory is dependent on perception to become actualised. Only the coincidence of perception and memory gives structure to experience. Memory is unconscious in the same sense that space always exceeds the limits of our immediate field of action – thus the common metaphor of a journey into the past. However, we know that memories do not arise according to any simple linear progression but are prompted by and inform our experience of the present (*Matter and Memory* 145). There are "dominant memories," "shining points around which others form a vague nebulosity," and forgotten events which "await . . . the dominant image to which they may be fastened" (171). If this attachment to a dominant image never takes place, these events remain lost to memory. These radiant images from Bergson will become, in Benjamin, a theory of the historical constellation.

For Bergson, habit memory is at the center of the human experience of time. Memory was grounded in a pre-linguistic synaesthesia in which experience was not yet differentiated by units of signification or quantification (Jay 192-194). The spatialisation of time, manifest in the primacy of the clock, gave rise to the conception of time as a homogeneous medium (195-196). Bergson argued that, rather than identify with the images available to others in the social world, we should attempt to rediscover the internal experience of individually endured time (*Matter and Memory* 197). Bergson's metaphor for these external images of spatialised time was "snapshots" (*The Creative Mind* 15). However, as Martin Jay points out, the image was partially rehabilitated by Bergson in the case of poetry. The poetic association of images can point toward the absolute reality to be experienced directly only through intuition:

> "No image can replace the intuition of duration, but many
> diverse images borrowed from very diverse orders of things,

> may, by the convergence of their action, direct consciousness to the point where there is a certain intuition to be seized." (qtd. in Jay 203)

This poetic notion of the convergence of images would be transformed in Benjamin's theory of the constellation and the dialectical image, in which a memory must be seized as it "flashes up in a moment of danger" (*Selected Writings* 391).

Images may simulate but never reproduce human perception. But images may be combined in new ways that recover memories that were lost. Benjamin begins his essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" by relating Bergson's arguments to the changing conditions for the reception of lyric poetry in the nineteenth century. Benjamin proposes that the decline of lyric poetry was related to changes in the structure of modern experience. Benjamin understands Bergson's attempt to define true experience as belonging to a larger philosophical trend throughout this period, and he historicises Bergson's philosophy as a response to the "alienating, blinding experience of the age of large-scale industrialism" (*Selected Writings* 314). For Benjamin, Proust's long novel was the greatest attempt to give this Bergsonian conception of authentic experience a poetic form. Benjamin also historicises Proust's withdrawal into private experience as the converse of modern culture's turn to a new mode of information and mass media (315). Similarly, he claims that Bergson's conception of experience, while seeking to block out modernity, nevertheless registers it in the form of an "afterimage." As Eduardo Cadava has noted, the concept of the "afterimage" itself suggests a photographic analogy (Cadava 89). For Benjamin, both Bergson and Proust capture the essence of their historical era in the very act of turning their gaze *away* from its harsher realities. Thus the shock of the new is retained as a traumatic memory in both writers, reversing Bergson's negative evaluation of the "snapshot" and transforming it instead into a source of historical truth.

In the same essay Benjamin moves from Bergson to Freud, whose theory of traumatic memory is outlined in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Benjamin aligns Freud and Bergson through their shared understanding of consciousness as destructive of memory traces. Freud described consciousness as a protective shield which blocked out sensory stimuli and potentially disturbing experiences. In Freud the authentic memory pursued by Bergson becomes the unconscious shaped by trauma. Benjamin understood that for this reason Freud had gone beyond Bergson's attempts to reformulate memory for modernity. For Freud had

shown that "true memory" often includes the violent and catastrophic experiences that the individual has attempted to forget but which manifest themselves in compulsive physical symptoms, neurotic fixations and recurring nightmares. Benjamin comments later in the same essay that because Bergson eliminates death from his conception of experience, he also effectively isolates it from historical change (*Selected Writings* 336).

In an industrial urban society, consciousness must work harder to protect itself from shock:

> Perhaps the special achievement of shock defence is the way it assigns an incident a precise point in time in consciousness, at the cost of the integrity of the incident's contents. This would be the peak achievement of the intellect; it would turn the incident into an isolated experience. (*Selected Writings* 319)

Later in the same essay Benjamin notes the importance of the camera as the technology that attempts to master shock through the instantaneous "snapping' of the photograph (328). He also comments that camera techniques thereby *extend* the range of involuntary memory and constitute "important achievements in a society in which long practice is in decline" (337). Benjamin moves beyond the opposition of authentic and "cinematographic" experience that persisted in Bergson and allows that images produced by the camera, in their tendency to fix time in a momentary "flash," may become instead images of history registered as a catastrophic shock.

In "On the Concept of History," Benjamin accepts the terms of a "weakened" claim to access past experience (no form of memory is ideal, or "pure" as in Bergson). Yet, although this essay employs a Messianic terminology of apocalypse and redemption, many of the underlying motifs remain Bergsonian. Now the "true image of the past . . . flashes up" (*Selected Writings* 390). Following Bergson, Benjamin rejects the construction of time as homogeneous or progressive. Instead the past is charged with "now time" [*Jetztzeit*] which may be "cited" in a manner which again recalls both the photographic flash and Bergson's intuitive grasp of experience. Benjamin calls it a "tiger's leap" (395). The past must be appropriated as it "flashes up in a moment of danger" (391). What is this danger? The first danger that Benjamin describes is that the "true image of the past" (390) threatens to disappear forever if its value *for* the present is not recognised *in* the present moment. The second danger that Benjamin mentions is that the image of the past will be used in the

interests of the dominant classes. In Benjamin's formulation of the moment of danger, Bergson's intuitive leap forms a constellation with Freud's theory of traumatic memory, as there is no document of history that is not marked by violence and catastrophe. Thus there is no historiography that can avoid the legacies of traumatic experience. History is registered in terms of a catastrophic loss that remains unassimilated by dominant narratives about the past. But Freud's traumatic memory returns *against the will* of the subject. Can this insight be aligned with Benjamin's formulation? Only if the "danger" of the moment in which the image can be grasped also describes the traumatic force of its return: it threatens to re-traumatise the subject and thereby leave him/her subject to the same "numbing" repetition of history in its dominant form. In Benjamin, Bergson's and Freud's different theories of memory confront each other in a dialectical "standstill" in which both are potentially transformed. For this transformation to take place, the virtuality of memory in Bergson must bring traumatic experience to the point of historical insight.

Benjamin or Deleuze?

One of the most widely discussed uses of the virtual as a philosophical term has been Deleuze's interpretation of Bergson. In this section I will argue that Deleuze's reading of the virtual provides a useful perspective on Benjamin's use of Bergson, but also that Deleuze and Benjamin develop significantly different positions on the virtual and technology. In *Cinema 1* Deleuze explains that what Bergson calls the "cinematographical illusion" is the division of movement into spatial units or "snapshots" and therefore a falsification of actual movement. Yet for Deleuze this does not amount to distinguishing cinema from natural perception, as in phenomenology, because the false division into homogeneous space is endemic to Western thinking. Deleuze then turns Bergson's argument against him by claiming that this understanding of cinema is bound to an early, or "primitive" version of cinema that is overcome in later developments in the medium. With the development of montage and the mobile camera, Deleuze argues, cinema was able to actualise the "movement-image" first described by Bergson in *Matter and Memory* (*Cinema 1* 1-3). Thus Deleuze reverses Bergson's opposition to cinema by claiming that Bergson imagines reality itself as a "metacinema" (59). Deleuze argues that, as in Bergson's intuitive experience, the film image is able to by-pass verbal language and directly represent experience in a new way.

Benjamin, on the other hand, accepts Bergson's alignment of the camera image with conscious memory, while also historicising Bergson's critique as an insightful but ultimately inadequate response to industrial capitalism. For Benjamin, the historical transformation of experience to which Bergson's philosophy testifies demands that we pursue potentialities of the technological image as part of a political struggle to redeem the value of experience. For Benjamin, Bergson's essentialist philosophy is to be read against the grain, as an historical articulation of experience under the conditions of modernity. Benjamin's discussion of Bergson seeks to establish the historical relation between philosophy and technology. Deleuze, however, through this re-alignment of Bergson's thought with cinematic representation, must abandon any analysis of this larger historical relation. Following the logic of Benjamin's critique, Deleuze risks reinstating Bergson's conception of authentic experience by way of a new theory of cinema. For Benjamin, all experience is historical.

But should we consign Bergson to the anti-technological position from which Deleuze attempts to rescue him? Paul Douglas has argued that despite Deleuze's claims to the contrary, Bergson's philosophy was fundamentally hostile to the photographic and filmic image. Bergson saw the cinema manifesting the intellectual tendency of the mind that attempted to fix an image in time and space contrary to the flow and flux of immediate experience (*Matter and Memory* 209-210). As Douglas notes, Bergson's resistance to the "snapshot" approach to understanding the complexity of lived experience would support a contemporary critique of the digital simulation of movement in computer-generated imaging (211).

Yet perhaps it is Deleuze's emphasis on the virtual in Bergson, rather than his redemption of cinematography, that can help us to move beyond this unproductive opposition of natural perception and media technology. In *Cinema 2* Deleuze returns to Bergson to further develop his theory of the virtual and the actual: "The present is the actual image, and *its* contemporaneous past is the virtual image" (79). What Bergson calls "pure recollection" refers to memory that has not been actualised in the form of conscious recollections or dream-images. But from where do these memories arise? From the virtual dimension of the past:

> Just as we perceive things in the place where they are, and have
> to place ourselves among things in order to perceive them, we
> go to look for recollection in the place where it is, we have to
> place ourselves with a leap into the past in general, into these

purely virtual images which have been constantly preserved through time. (*Cinema 2* 80)

Like Benjamin, Deleuze takes from Bergson the notion of an intuitive "leap into the past." Through memory, the past is continually prolonged in each moment of the present. Only memory, then, allows the possibility of new experiences to emerge, as it is the interpenetration of memory with each moment that produces the new. Slavoj Zizek comments:

> the proper Deleuzian paradox is that something truly New can *only* emerge through repetition. What repetition repeats is not the way the past "effectively was" but the *virtuality* inherent to the past and betrayed by its past actualisation. In this precise sense, the emergence of the New changes the past itself, that is, it retroactively changes not the actual past . . . but the balance between actuality and virtuality in the past. (12)

On this point we are struck by the similarity of Deleuze's reading of Bergson to Benjamin's theory of history:

> History is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by now-time. Thus, to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with now-time, a past which he blasted out of the continuum of history. The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome incarnate. It cited ancient Rome exactly the way fashion cites a bygone mode of dress. Fashion has a nose for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago; it is the tiger's leap into the past. (*Selected Writings* 395)

Benjamin argues that for Robespierre, as for Bergson, the past was fully real. Only by bringing together history as virtuality with the actuality of the present can the world be changed. The difference between the past recalled and present perception always creates a productive potential, a new experience which remains unpredictable. The interpenetration of the past in the present transforms the virtuality of the past into actuality in the present.

While acknowledging the traumatic impact of modern urbanism, industrialism and warfare, Benjamin nevertheless pursued a vision of history as open to transformation from below. His notion of a "tradition of the oppressed" (392) evoked an historical virtuality which, while exiled

from dominant, hegemonic narratives, might nevertheless emerge at any moment in the present. Benjamin's vision of history continues to have a potent hold on our contemporary critical imagination, while it has also been subject to serious questioning. One context for this discussion is the ongoing debates concerning the significance of the Holocaust, with its concern for the passing of the survivors and the question of how trauma may be transmitted across generations, as well as for understanding the differences between first-hand experience of genocide and its representation in photographs, film and television. Geoffrey Hartman writes:

> It is impossible to think of Benjamin's incursions into the "dark backward and abysm" of time as post-genocidal. Today the interior landscape is marked by ruined or vanished sites or else by a fantastic and facile "virtual reality." The relationship between representation and reality, between mimesis and the object of mimesis seems to have undergone a quasi-geological rift. (Hartman 12)

Hartman reads Benjamin as bound to an image of the past as a source of hope. This nostalgia becomes impossible when faced, on the one hand, by the black hole of memory left by the Holocaust and, on the other, by the new role of media in shaping memory. Yet Benjamin's comments on the dangers of representing history were unequivocal: "*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious. And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious" (*Selected Writings* 391). The virtuality of the past in Bergson, Deleuze and Benjamin looks to an encounter of past and present through which a new future takes shape. The Nazi extermination of the Jews supports Benjamin's darkest vision of history, but it does not preclude the possibility of new encounters with the reality of the Holocaust. Most disturbingly, the Holocaust continues to be a reality in the most catastrophic sense: traumatising survivors and witnesses, and repeated in new genocidal actions and racist aggressions. This is precisely the importance of Benjamin's insight: that the catastrophic negativity of memory is potentially of the greatest value for a political understanding of history. In this sense the contemporary preoccupation with trauma can be understood as one important contemporary articulation of the virtuality of the past. For trauma theory insists that even limit-events such as the Holocaust which pose crises for testimony, witnessing and representation continue to reverberate in the present and to shape the future.

Media Theory

How, then, might Benjamin's understanding of the past as both virtual and traumatic be taken up in the context of today's "virtual culture"? In this final section I propose a re-reading of some examples where Benjamin's analysis can be seen to anticipate virtual culture and I consider the possible historical trauma that forms their subtext.

The transformations of global telecommunications in our own era have turned our attention with renewed fascination to the archetypal figures of modernity which Benjamin's writings illuminated so brilliantly. In his book *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich compares the nineteenth century *flaneur*, who negotiates the historical transition from traditional social structures to modern metropolitan environments, with the heroes in James Fenimore Cooper's novels of the American frontier (270). For Manovich the comparison of *flaneur* and wilderness scout explains the metaphors underlying today's digital interfaces such as Netscape Navigator and Internet Explorer (273). But Manovich does not mention that Cooper is already a significant source of reference in Benjamin's discussion of the *flaneur*. While Manovich distinguishes the *flaneur*'s negotiation of the metropolitan crowd from the solitary exploration of the natural wilderness, Benjamin shows how these two imaginaries are bound to each other at a more fundamental level.

In the section on the *flaneur* from his essay "Paris in the Second Empire in Baudelaire," Benjamin describes the *physiologies*: brief pocket-sized portraits of the different social "types" to be encountered in the city. In this popular genre we can see an emergent form of the "shock-absorber" function of information media as a psychic protection against the congestion and anonymity of urban life. Novels also helped to transform the strange and threatening into new forms of entertainment – particularly detective novels. Benjamin discusses how the description of the metropolis was influenced by, and often directly cited, the narratives of Cooper (*Selected Writings* 22). For example, in Alexandre Dumas's *Mohicans de Paris* the gangs of the criminal underworld are imagined as American Indians and the cityscape as a primeval forest. Unlike Manovich's image of rugged individuals freed from the constraints of urban society, Benjamin reads the image of the Mohican as a figure of the lawlessness and violence that underlies modern capitalism. In Benjamin's essay, the violence of the colonial frontier can be read as an historical

trauma that haunts the European metropolis. [1]

In Benjamin's writings on Paris the histories of colonial violence become manifest in the cityscape as it is experienced by the *flaneur*. On this point Kevin McLaughlin has excavated Benjamin's use of the term "virtual" (*virtuelle*), as it appears in both his early writings on translation and in the later notes for *The Arcades Project*. McLaughlin insists on the importance of the virtual as a "philosophical dimension" (205) in Benjamin (although he does not discuss Bergson in this context). McLaughlin also seeks to distinguish Benjamin's image of the *flaneur* from the virtuality of the "information superhighway." Benjamin "describes an experience of Paris itself as a virtual medium" (*Selected Writings* 218), such as in its place and street names which carry with them a multiplicity of histories, a linguistic dimension which "haunts" the metropolitan site. As the *flaneur* slackens his pace or pauses to consider the origins of place names, a kind of slow-motion reading allows the street itself to become a virtual space. Such an understanding of the virtual unsettles any simple binary opposition between a material, sensual reality and the virtual, as the virtual is an inherent potentiality discovered by way of a sensual immersion in the material world. In this, Benjamin's critical project can be contrasted with a computerised virtual reality program which would allow, for example, the user to explore a simulation of nineteenth century Paris (*Selected Writings* 214-217). An example which McLaughlin gives of such a virtual site in *The Arcades Project* is Benjamin's description of the Place du Maroc which, as he "happened on it one Sunday afternoon," became for him "a monument to colonial imperialism" (*The Arcades Project* 518).

While the city proudly displays the spoils of colonialism in its expositions, World Fairs, department stores and arcades, it also carries in its signs and images traces of another temporality. This temporality is what Benjamin will call the "tradition of the oppressed". Against the homogeneous time of metropolitan display and globalised media, the virtuality of the past returns, like a traumatic memory, disrupting the hegemonic vision of history. In "On the Concept of History" Benjamin recalls that in the 1830 revolution in France the insurrectionists fired on the clocktowers (*Selected Writings* 395). In his reading of Benjamin's essay, Michael Lowy mentions a comparable example from recent history:

> During popular protest demonstrations – mounted by workers' and peasants' trade union organisations and by black and indigenous movements – against the official (governmental)

celebrations of the 500th anniversary of the "discovery" of Brazil by the Portuguese navigators in 1500, a group of natives shot arrows at the clock (sponsored by the *Globo* television network) counting down the days and hours to the centenary. (Lowy 92)

Benjamin's recovery of oppressed histories in the text that the modern metropolis leaves challenges us to pursue similar insights in the context of today's spaces of information. No doubt the temporality of today's global media culture places still greater demands on the human subject to reconcile individual experience and technological mediation. Today the historical traumas of the Holocaust or specific acts of terrorism are often seen as providing a collective link with an incontestable historical reality. Yet other traumatic experiences, such as those of colonisation or economic exploitation, are less often publicly acknowledged or commemorated.

I will conclude by returning once again to the example of 9/11. In the compilation of short films *11.09.01* (dir. Ken Loach et al), Ken Loach, rather than participate in an unquestioning memorialisation of the World Trade Center attacks, tells the story of the CIA-supported coup in Chile launched on September 11, 1973. Loach's short film presents a useful example of one interpretation of Benjamin's "tradition of the oppressed." The image of the World Trade Centre attacks "flashes up in a moment of danger": not only in its "traumatic" impact on the American population, but as a disturbing memory of an historical violence that has been excluded from the hegemonic version of the past. The "danger" of media images of 9/11 does not pertain only to the catastrophic situation for those directly involved but also to the ways that these images register, or fail to register, as an historical reality for those who encounter them. Do images like those of the "falling man" recall the traumatic experience of the American nation "under attack," or the innocent victims of terror wherever it operates as part of contemporary geopolitical struggles. "Even the dead will not be safe" wrote Benjamin. Countless individuals disappeared in the political repression in Pinochet's Chile. In Loach's film, 9/11 is transformed from a traumatic repetition into a moment in which a "forgotten" experience – the everyday slaughter of civilian populations – reemerges into the present and makes history as trauma once again available to be witnessed.

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Endnotes

1. Rob Shields reads the figure of the Mohican as a literary conceit by which the victims of imperial conquest are appropriated into an image of the metropolitan self. While I do not disagree with this analysis, I would also want to stress the ways that Benjamin reappropriates this image in the interests of recovering an oppressed history ("Fancy Footwork").

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