



## 2007 Issue No. 15 — Walter Benjamin and the Virtual

### **Dialectical Film Criticism: Walter Benjamin's Historiography, Cultural Critique and the Archive**

By Catherine Russell

Walter Benjamin's seminal essay on the "Work of Art in the Age of its Reproducibility" has long been regarded as a key text in the theorization of cinema. [1] Numerous phrases and concepts from Benjamin's larger corpus of work – the flaneur, the dialectical image, the collector, allegory, etc. – have also entered the film studies lexicon, and yet there is little consensus on the meaning or significance of these terms. They have provided theoretical insights into the study of early cinema, film noir, new media, experimental film and video, and many other sub-categories of film studies. As this discipline becomes increasingly "undisciplined" and unfocused, Benjamin, whose work is equally decentered, seems to be becoming more and more relevant. "Technologies of reproducibility" will be in continual flux for the foreseeable future, and Benjamin remains a key figure in the thinking-through of the historical, cultural, aesthetic and political implications of on-going transformations in the production, distribution and reception of visual culture. While there are many ways this case could be argued, for our purposes, I would like to focus on the relation between cultural critique and historiography in Benjamin's thought.

Several key Benjaminian concepts, including the collector and the quotation, have direct bearing on the actual practice of film criticism and the new technologies that enable critics to own films (in superlative DVD formats) and quote from them in the form of frame-grabs and digital clips (copyright issues notwithstanding). Giorgio Agamben has discussed Benjamin's embrace of the distinctly modern practices of quotation and collection in terms of a "destruction of authority" and a "freedom from usefulness" respectively (*The Man without Content* 104-105). For Agamben, Benjamin's project constitutes an aesthetics based on the intransmissibility of culture and the alienation from history. Art, he suggests, provides an important means by which this alienation can be fully recognized, precisely through its ability to explore this state of intransmissibility and consequent negation of the past, and he proposes an aesthetics in which the "ghost of beauty" (evoked in kitsch) points to the "destruction of the transmissibility of culture" (111).

The film critic, I want to suggest, can potentially understand his or her practice as a kind of historical intervention in which they might act as a kind of messenger who is "perennially late." Their message, in Agamben's words, "is nothing other than the task of transmission [that] can give back to man [sic] who has lost his ability to appropriate his historical space, the concrete space of his action and knowledge" (114). The film critic, who is uniquely equipped to engage creatively with the images of the past, should understand their practice as a potentially specialised mode of historiography. In this paper I will indicate how Benjamin's methodology provides a model for such a practice, and how dialectical film criticism might be intrinsically linked to on-going and ever-evolving modes of archive-based film practices.

In the methodological overview of the *Arcades Project* (Konvolute N), Benjamin lays out his own orientation to nineteenth century Paris:

For the historical index of the images not only says that they belong to a particular time; it says above all, that they attain to legibility only at a particular time. And indeed, this acceding “to legibility” constitutes a specific critical point in the movement at their interior. (462)

He further describes this “now of recognizability” as a dialectical form of awakening. For Benjamin, this is where truth resides – in the flash of recognition that links past and present – and he frames it here very specifically as a method of reading images. The repeated phrase “image is dialectics at a standstill” is a typically cryptic statement in which Benjamin rhetorically invokes his own monadological methodology. And yet, I am tempted to take him literally, to pursue this idea of reading moving images dialectically through to its logical – and “theological” and “messianic” conclusions.

The notion of “rescuing critique” in Benjamin’s writing was teased out by Jürgen Habermas in 1972. Habermas distinguishes Benjamin’s methodology from the dominant trend at that time of “ideology critique” associated with Frankfurt School theorists and embraced by the Left (“Consciousness Raising,” 98). [2] While he is critical of the ways that in his view, “the theologian” in Benjamin “could not bring himself to make the messianic theory of experience serviceable for historical materialism,” (114) he recognizes that Benjamin’s theory of experience could nevertheless be made useful for cultural criticism, particularly on “the verge of *posthistoire*, where symbolic structures are exhausted, worn thin, and stripped of their imperative functions” (121). While his relevance “does not lie in a theory of revolution,” Habermas concedes that Benjamin’s approach “which deciphers the history of culture with a view to rescuing for the upheaval,” may be an important means of reconfiguring “a new subjectivity” for a dialectical theory of progress. He argues that Benjamin’s criticism “was concerned with doing justice to the collective fantasy images deposited in the expressive qualities of daily life as well as in literature and art” (117).

In my study of the Japanese director Naruse Mikio, the notion of “rescuing critique” has proven to be eminently useful. [3] Despite being nominated the “number four” director of the Japanese cinema, Naruse has been, until very recently, greatly neglected by film scholars and cinephiles in and beyond Japan. Working from 1930 to 1967, Naruse made 89 films, most of which can be described as “women’s films” in that they feature female protagonists and are often based in women’s literature. My feminist analysis of a director and a body of work that engaged with neither the politics nor the vocabulary of feminism is explicitly made from outside the cultural framework of the films’ production and reception. In returning to Naruse’s films, I am also “quoting” their affective appeal within a new historical moment. Actresses whose stars have long since been eclipsed in the constellations of celebrity shine anew in the forms of expressive gesture, in a language of the body.



**Figure 1:** Kurishima Sumiko in *Every Night Dreams*, a.k.a. *Nightly Dreams* (*Yogoto no yume*), dir. Naruse Mikio, 1933, 64 mins., Shochiku.

Naruse's cinema conforms in many important ways to the various types of melodrama that film scholars have identified and evaluated, and my analysis draws on the work of Christine Gledhill, Linda Williams, Thomas Elsaesser, and others. In my reading of these films, a Utopian modernism is articulated within the interstices of Naruse's women's films, predicated on the memory of past forms of collectivity embedded in Tokyo's old downtown neighbourhoods (*shitamachi*) and in Japanese domestic architecture. Romantic longing and repressed sexuality become allegories for the category of the subject who, in Naruse's cinema, is almost always a woman.



**Figure 2:** Sugimura Haruko in *Late Chrysanthemums* (*Bangiku*), dir. Naruse Mikio, 1954, 101 mins., Toho.

The quotidian detail with which Naruse's *shoshimin-eiga* films are preoccupied constitutes a panorama of Japanese cultural history, which calls for a methodology closer to "dream analysis" than formalism. If the auteurist searching for origins and for vision can be described as "mythic" (Polan 6), my approach to Naruse is historical in Benjamin's sense of the term. He suggests that "Historical 'understanding' is to be grasped, in principle, as an afterlife of that which is understood" (*Arcades* 460). It is an approach that is furthermore bolstered by the dialectical relation between the present and the past, if my present refers to my historical and cultural positioning: "In order for a part of the past to be touched by the present instant <Actualität>, there must be no continuity between them" (*Arcades*, 470).

## Archiveology

Benjamin's *Arcades Project* provides still further clues to a historical method of film criticism in its own montage-like structure of borrowed quotation and juxtaposed sources. As an unfinished work, Benjamin was forced to leave it as an archive of notes, scrupulously collected, catalogued and annotated. In the age of digital film, the film critic has also become a collector, and indeed the availability of Naruse's body of work in digital form enabled me to complete my own study, and has subsequently led to the increasingly wide dissemination of the films. And of course, this is also true of the large volume of world cinema dating back to the earliest years of the medium. For film critics, this has made possible ever new opportunities of return, reassessment and revision.

Over the last twenty years, film criticism has expanded well beyond the practice of scholarly writing, to the technologies of extraction and compilation that inform so much documentary and experimental film practice. Filmmakers such as Errol Morris and Ken Burns who deal with the public memory, and a host of independent filmmakers dealing with family memory and identity politics, follow in a long history of film practice that draws on – and quotes and collects – the image banks of cultural memory. Through techniques of montage and "secondary revision," filmmakers have been able to return, revise, rethink, review, and re-invest in the past. The dialectics of this process, inaugurated most powerfully perhaps by Alain Resnais in *Night and Fog* (1955), have become a mainstay of experimental documentary film practice, particularly as it evolved into the essayistic mode of Godard, Morris, Friedrich and many many others.

Film criticism since the 1960s has more or less followed the lead of filmmakers insofar as theorists, from Bazin to Deleuze, tend to perform a kind of film criticism alongside their "theory." But to make the leap from archival film practices to film criticism, we need to return to Benjamin's insights on the historiographic potential of such a practice. Through Benjamin's conception of redemptive historiography, the utopian and the activist dimension of archival return can be better understood. As Habermas points out, the notion of rescuing critique cannot be easily reconciled with ideological film criticism, and indeed Benjamin's preoccupation with the "dreamworld" and "phantasmagoria" of consumer capitalism did not sit well with his Frankfurt School colleagues in the 1930s.

And yet, subsequent work on visual culture by cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall, literary theorists such as Fredric Jameson, and film studies theorists such as Jane Gaines and Miriam Hansen, have pointed to the ways in which the ideological and the utopian are deeply enmeshed in popular culture. Much of this work draws on Benjamin – and his contemporaries Kracauer and Bloch – to theorize what Gaines describes as the "Utopianizing effect" of cinema (109). In my own work on Naruse, I found that despite the darkness and melancholia for which he had become known, his films also illustrated the ideological entrapment of women within social structures that continue to restrict their roles as agents of history. And yet, Naruse's ambivalent and ambiguous endings in which his female characters are poised on the brink of history are also confirmations of the Utopian sense of the possible that is grounded in the real changes in gender roles that postwar democracy made possible.

In this sense, the Utopianism of Naruse's narratives needs to be recognized as being firmly embedded within the ideological. Only through the dialectics of interpretation can their potential be realized. In the context of the women's film, we can often identify this Utopian impulse as a form of desire, but it is equally enforced by the traditionalism, or Japaneseness, of the texts. It is precisely the "theologian" in Benjamin that makes his cultural theory particularly relevant to the contradictions of Japanese modernity, in which traces of the past continue to persist within the ever-changing present. As Harry Harootunian points out, the expansion of the Japanese empire at the height of the modern movement appealed to the priority of "a culture of depth that has left its traces in the present" (123). The search for a woman's happiness in Japanese modernity that persists throughout Naruse's cinema invites a critical methodology that can rescue and redeem these desires and impulses from within a tradition in which "progress" and "catastrophe" are deeply intertwined. As Habermas puts it,

Benjamin aims . . . at rescuing a past charged with *Jetztzeit*. It ascertains the moments in which the artistic sensibility puts a stop to fate draped as progress and enciphers the utopian experience in a dialectical image – the new within the always-the-same. ("Consciousness Raising" 101)

### Collecting Cultural History

The film critic as collector in Benjamin's sense of the term is in a privileged position to invert many of the priorities and hierarchies of conventional film history. For Benjamin, the collector is a kind of allegorist, for whom the commodity is detached from its original purpose or destiny, and reconfigured as the memory of the desire that informed its production. The politics of collecting are precisely the dialectics of awakening. He says of the collector: "we construct an alarm clock that rouses the kitsch of the previous century to 'assembly'" (*Arcades*, 205).

The premise of the *Arcades Project* is that the traces of the covered passages in Paris illustrate to Benjamin how the nineteenth century "was incapable of responding to the new technological possibilities with a new social order" (26). He sifts through the ruins to see in their decay the traces of failure alongside the traces of hope; and above all, how the two are dialectically related in the visual culture of commodity capitalism. In Japan, likewise, the gender equality promised but not delivered by revolutionary democracy can be read in the phantasmagorias of modernity, in the negotiation between old and new forms of the everyday, and in the revelations of "the dreaming collective."

Even if Benjamin himself was not concerned with the colonial practices of modernity or the transformations of non-European cultures, his work provides valuable insights into the role of visual culture in modernity. He noticed the artifacts imported from Asia that were displayed in the Paris Arcades, soon to become collected as the kitsch of bourgeois decor. In fact the opening convolute of the *Arcades Project*, on "*Arcades, Magasins de Nouveautés, Sales Clerks*," is littered with references to cashmere shawls and other exotic Asian goods imported from India and Egypt. Benjamin also recognizes the influence of the Oriental bazaar on the modern department store. Implicit in his mainly quoted description of the panorama of material objects in the arcades are the tropes of cultural exchange, cosmopolitanism, xenophobia and Orientalism produced through contact with non-European cultures (31-61). We are now more able to understand modernity as a product of cultural diversity and heterogeneity, and Benjamin's study of nineteenth century Paris lays the groundwork for the recognition of how modernity is in many ways an incomplete project.

If the incompleteness of modernity was Habermas's central observation regarding the postmodern turn in 1980 ("Modernity"), the exponential expansion of the range and scope of visual culture enables us to better acknowledge the incompleteness of modernity as a global phenomenon. Habermas was very pessimistic that modern culture could be renewed on the level of everyday praxis; but other theorists, particularly Giorgio Agamben, have been subsequently



more optimistic. Agamben's return to the Benjaminian image sphere embraces Benjamin's conception of the profane as the key to surviving the on-going catastrophe of modernity. Film criticism is especially well equipped to return to any number of moments in global modernity that remain incomplete.

While there are many dimensions of Benjamin's conception of the profane, the "illumination" of which is the historian's chief mandate, I would like to take up further the notion of kitsch. In the era of digital cinema, all the detritus, the forgotten, neglected B films, along with hours and hours of outtakes and indulgent commentary, are available to collectors and film critics for analysis. For Benjamin, kitsch referred to "the overproduction of commodities; the bad conscience of producers" (*Arcades* 865). In the dream world of commodity culture, kitsch is also the key to the awakening from the dream state of consumer capitalism in its baroque qualities of overabundance and excess.

One of the reasons that Naruse's cinema was so long overlooked by film scholars is that it seemed to be heavily influenced by American cinema. It was not "Japanese" enough, and thus not arty enough. [4] Naruse could not say no to any project, and he worked continuously through the Fifteen Years War and the American Occupation, respecting the radically opposed ideological directives that were imposed during these two administrations. In my reading of the uneven body of work, the contradictions of Japanese modernity are not only laid bare, but the films provide a privileged insight into the gender dynamics of the social formation during the middle decades of the twentieth century.



**Figure 3:** *Sincerity (Magokoro)*, dir. Naruse Mikio, 1939, 67 mins., Toho.

Harootunian has pointed out that everyday modern life in interwar Japan produced an anxiety over the loss of experience tied to memory and tradition, a phenomenon that was accentuated in Japan due to the uneven development of urban and rural life:

In response to the spectacle of modern everyday life in the cities . . . writers and thinkers often remained content with simply emphasizing what remained as the "mysterious side of the mysterious" taking them no further. Yet the appeal to

mystery exempted them from thinking about either history or the conditions of modern life, as such, without, as Benjamin has reminded us, the “profane illumination of reading about . . . phenomena.” (*Overcome By Modernity* 213)

We know from the artwork essay how the fine line between the right and the left with respect to the modernity of the cinema is emblematically noted by Walter Benjamin: “The violation of the masses, whom fascism, with its *Fuhrer* cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into serving the production of ritual values” (“Work of Art” 269). In the Japanese instance it is evident that a similar cult of nationalist spirit was harnessed to the cinema, and through the films of studio-based directors such as Naruse, integrated into the language of classical cinema. If we are able to recognize this cinema as a kind of kitsch, we may be better prepared to identify the utopian within the ideological. Benjamin describes kitsch as follows:

For developing, living forms, what matters is that they have within them something stirring, useful, ultimately heartening – that they take “kitsch” dialectically up into themselves, and hence bring themselves near to the masses while yet surmounting the kitsch . . . Only film can detonate the explosive stuff which the nineteenth century has accumulated in that strange and perhaps formerly unknown material which is kitsch. (*Arcades* 395-96)

The phrase “brushing history against the grain” evokes the symptomatic reading of melodrama as a modernist form (Brooks, Nowell-Smith, Elsaesser), but it is also a phrase used by Walter Benjamin in his essay “On the Concept of History.” In fact, it is fundamental to Benjamin’s notion of cultural history, which he elaborates in more methodological detail in his 1937 essay on Edward Fuchs. In Fuchs, Benjamin recognizes the appreciation of “anonymous artists,” and the mass arts that refute the cult of the leader embodied in the fetish of “the master’s name” (“Eduard Fuchs,” 283). Writing in 1937, Benjamin imputed a certain urgency to a critical methodology that would “blast apart” the historicist’s method of studying cultural history as an “inventory which humanity has preserved to the present day.” This leads him to his famous epitaph, “there is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (267).

## Catastrophe

Another key figure in Benjamin’s *Arcades* project is the gambler, who embodied what Miriam Hansen has described as “experience under erasure” – the man for whom the “innervation” of technology becomes a *raison d’être* (“Room-for-Play” 6-7). Benjamin himself arguably lived according to the laws of the gambler, finally losing his final wager by taking his own life on the verge of an escape from fascist-controlled Europe. For Hansen, Benjamin’s significance for media politics today lies in his “radical ambivalence, his effort to think both positions through in their most extreme implications.” His pessimism, she argues, points to “an experimental will to explore and shift between antithetical if not antinomic perspectives” (20). The film critic who gambles with film history is one who is willing to roll the dice on meaning and interpretation, to rethink visual culture from perspectives not envisioned previously.

The real challenge that Benjamin’s theory of visual culture presents to the film critic and scholar is to recognize the dimensions of our own catastrophe and to incorporate it into our view of the past. How can critical activism be aligned with historical analysis? As Benjamin puts it in “On the Concept of History:” “Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it ‘the way it really was.’ It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger” (391). His notion of dialectical history is grounded above all in the view that: “The concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are ‘status quo’ is the catastrophe” (473). For most film scholars, the catastrophe is elsewhere, even if it is always also “at home” on our TV. What role does the ongoing panoply of global crises play in film history? And what role does film

history play in the face of the interminable conflicts and regimes of scarcity, inequality and poverty that is the global status quo?

Giorgio Agamben has further expressed Benjamin's view of history in terms of a "state of exception" that has now become the norm. He introduces the term "form-of-life" as a politics of resistance to those powers that are legitimized through the state of emergency (*Means without End* 6); and further suggests how gesture in the cinema constitutes a kind of awakening to this "form of life." If for Benjamin, the dialectical image is one that has "movement at its interior," for Agamben, it is gesture – not image – which is at the "centre" of cinema (56). Gesture, he says, "breaks with the false alternative between ends and means," (57) and exhibits the "pure mediality" of human beings. "Politics," he says, "is the sphere of pure means. That is, of the absolute and complete gesturality of human beings" (60).

Agamben's remarks might be used as an interpretive frame for a film such as Chantal Akerman's *Toute une nuit* (1982), a film in which the gestures of romance and melodrama, along with the sensuous affect of desire, loneliness, boredom and passion, are depicted in narrative abstraction. But I would also like to propose that such gestures can be located within the archives of film history. Identification and analysis of the archive of gestures may help us recognize the many levels of failed progress, dashed dreams and defeated utopias that subsist within the "dreamworlds" of mass culture. As Jane Gaines suggests, "The pleasure of analysis is in finding the 'shred' of something, of anything utopian, in the most crudely escapist entertainment" (111-112). Indeed, in Naruse's cinema, which is very much a cinema of gesture, of unspoken emotions conveyed through glances, dropped eyes and brisk movements, the home becomes a cinematic space where the woman's subjectivity and desire are rendered visible in the dynamics of looking. The home is like a stage on which the women perform their roles; but the home often opens onto a garden, or a view of the city, offering a constant reminder of the world that lies outside the home. The image of Takamine Hideko looking out over a railing, poised on a kind of threshold of domestic space, is emblematic of the emergence of female subjectivity inscribed within Naruse's cinema.

Throughout Naruse's women's films, the chief goal of his beleaguered characters is the achievement of happiness. This is all they require from modernity. The excesses of consumer capitalism are barely glimpsed in this cinema; the happiness that is required from a social formation that is completely penetrated by technologies of reproduction is precisely a mode of experience. Naruse's world is a virtual world, but in keeping with Agamben's reading of Benjamin, it is a profane world in which the concept of "happy life" is sought. By returning to this forgotten cinema, across global and historical divides, we may be able to identify a politics of "pure means," of masks and gestures that indicate the endless mediality of human life as it points to its own being-in-language. This is the phantasmagoria which, for Benjamin, came to dominate the modernity of nineteenth century Paris (*Arcades* 26).





**Figure 4:** Takamine Hideko in *Yearning* (*Midareru*), dir. Naruse Mikio, 1964, 97 mins., Toho.

The techniques that Benjamin proposes for an “awakening” from the dreamworlds of commodity culture are never far from reach. An awareness of the dialectical – the Copernican turn of remembrance – is embedded in the fundamentally collective nature of the phantasmagoria. “The dreaming collective,” he argues, “communes with its own insides” through the arcades, as the sleeper (and the madman) commune with their inner organs. “We must follow in its wake so as to expound the nineteenth century – in fashion and advertising, in buildings and politics – as the outcome of its dream vision” (289). As critical theory, Benjamin’s program is predicated on the nightmare as well as the Utopian dreamscape, finding them always firmly enmeshed and embedded within each other’s imagery. As a means of illustrating how Benjamin’s theory can inform film criticism, I would like to turn finally to two examples of film practices that engage critically with the dreamworld of the visual culture of the twentieth century.

### Anti-Semitism and Cold War America

The first example is a documentary film called *Heir to an Execution: A Granddaughter’s Story* (2004) by Ivy Meeropol, granddaughter of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg who were executed by the American government in 1953 for passing nuclear weapons secrets to the Soviet Union. On one level, *Heir to an Execution* is an excellent example of a growing subgenre of documentary practice that is informed both by identity politics and by the image-bank of cultural history. Meeropol’s approach combines a personal quest for the truth about her family with an investigation into the public record, particularly the visual record, as the Rosenberg case was played out in the media at the height of the cold war. The inquiry includes extensive interviews with the filmmaker’s father Michael Meeropol and his brother Robert – the two sons orphaned by the execution – and many family members and compatriots of the Rosenbergs. The testimonies, which are at once articulate and compassionate, fill in the details of how the extended family, terrified of further persecution, failed to take in the two boys. They also provide detail on the case and the culture of Communist sympathisers from which the Rosenbergs emerged.

In the end, the Rosenbergs’ “innocence” – or their actual role in the treasonous practices they were accused of – is unresolved; and yet the anti-Semitism of the McCarthy witch-hunt of the era is

proven without doubt. The question of Ethel's refusal to testify against her husband challenges our expectations of motherhood, and yet the film finds her not guilty but caught within a complex set of discourses and social pressures. Meeropol's chief accomplishment is to "humanise" her grandparents through the recourse to extensive photographic and filmic evidence. Alongside the bombast of their accusers, they emerge as truly the scapegoats of history. While the Rosenberg trial and execution has been written about extensively, by collecting and assembling the "visible evidence," Meeropol has created a substantially different document of the case, one which invites dialectical inquiry on several levels, including the personal and subjective level of the filmmaker's own identity alongside the public record.



**Figure 5:** Ethel and Julius Rosenberg in *Heir to an Execution*, dir. Ivy Meeropol, 2004. HBO

In "One Way Street" Benjamin compares the document to the artwork in a playful critique of artistic "snobbery." In the document, he argues, "subject matter is the outcome of dreams," and "the more one loses oneself in a document, the denser the subject matter grows" (459). If we think about these remarks in the context of a documentary project such as *Heir to an Execution*, Benjamin's insights into history and visual culture can be seen to converge. The phantasmagoria, or world of representations which is the American twentieth century, can be reconfigured as a text ready not only for exegeses, but for a recognition of the life-forms that were the Rosenbergs.

The playwright Tony Kushner, interviewed in the "special features" extras in the DVD release of *Heir to an Execution*, speaks most eloquently to this aspect of the film. He says that "looking at those two people kissing we know they were sexy people." Of Ethel, he notes that "her face is a projection screen. You can imagine all sorts of things." He himself developed Ethel Rosenberg into the figure of an angel in his play *Angels in America*, but he insists that we should not feel the need to judge her. Instead, we should recognize the value of the Rosenberg case as a text: "if it is our Talmud, and we perform intelligent *midrash*, we will come to understand what our next move ought to be." He believes that "studying this case for people who believe that study is part of their activism, who believe that political action is a combination of theory and practice, part of the theory you have to study is the Rosenberg theory of activism." Kushner says all this and more, gesticulating with his hands, filmed in one camera set-up in the standard "talking head" format of

the documentary interview.



**Figure 6:** Ethel Rosenberg in *Heir to an Execution*, dir. Ivy Meeropol, 2004. HBO

In invoking the Jewish techniques of Talmudic scholarship, Kushner points to the underlying ethnic links between the film's techniques, the Rosenberg case, and his own investment in it. For our purposes, Kushner's remarks suggest how film criticism that understands its dialectical potential as a form of critical exegesis might constitute a form of historical activism. Implicit in his remarks, and in the film itself, is the understanding of textuality as the sensuous and affective dimensions of visual culture that speak to us differently than the written documents of court transcripts and journalistic reports.

The example of *Heir to an Execution* highlights the stakes on which Benjamin's dialectical historiography was premised. In the face of the emergency of encroaching Fascism, he felt compelled to identify the dynamics of that trance-like state of the phantasmagoria that enabled the rise of national socialism in Germany; at the same time, he recognised the critical revolutionary potential of an awakening from that dream state. My second example points to the way that "the dialectical image aims at a redemption of phenomena from their degraded, immediate state" (Wolin, 213). As Richard Wolin succinctly puts it, "It was only by way of a rigorous analysis of the cultural sphere that the great utopian potential of capitalism could be released and made serviceable for society as a collectivity. This is precisely how Benjamin saw his task as a historical materialist researcher" (218).

### Crystal Gazing

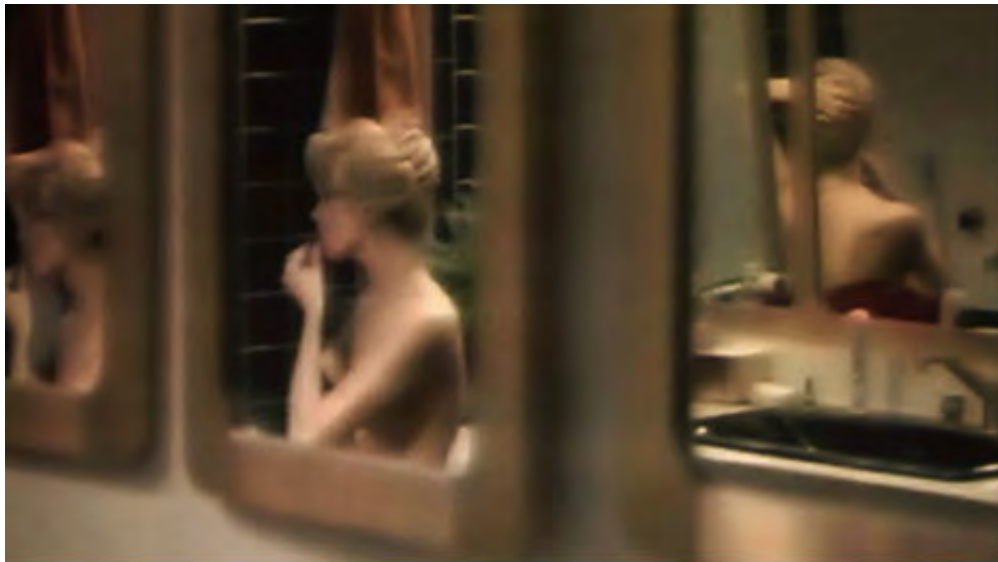
The fifteen-minute film by Christoph Girardet and Matthias Müller called *Kristall* (2006) is exemplary of how found-footage filmmaking constitutes in itself a form of research. These filmmakers have excelled (in this and many other works) in working through the Hollywood archive to collect and compile series of gestures, expressions, poses, compositions and spaces that enable a return to the clichés of melodrama with new eyes and ears. In *Kristall*, the filmmakers have selected moments in mirrored bedrooms where men and women see themselves, and see

each other. These wordless encounters are loaded with anxieties and tensions, suspicion, fear, and vague forms of pensive apprehension. The pleasures of narcissism are infused with the paraphernalia of the bourgeois boudoir: jewels, make-up, luxurious hair and baroque furnishings. The filmmakers have pulled out the empty moments, times of waiting, expectation, solitude and boredom; the moments just before and just after the “big moments,” which are themselves limited to shots of mirrors being smashed.



**Figure 7:** *Kristall*, Christoph Girardet and Matthias Müller, 15 mins. 2006.

The figures in *Kristall* are in some cases familiar friends, including both American and European stars, from Ingrid Bergman and Liz Taylor to Jeanne Moreau, Sophia Loren, Kirk Douglas, Anthony Perkins, and many others whose names are elusive, triggering memories that are just out of reach, of films we may or may not have actually seen. These people live in the language of cinema, within the frames of reduplicated mirror images; within the spaces of windows and doors, the sounds of tinkling, crashing and ominous soundtrack music. Girardet and Müller have not only compiled these fragments with virtuoso editing techniques, they have slightly distorted the rephotographed montage so that the images are slightly destabilized. Their small distortions accentuate the melancholic dreamy atmosphere in which these men and women subsist.



**Figure 8:** *Kristall*, Christoph Girardet and Matthias Müller, 15 mins. 2006.



**Figure 9:** *Kristall*, Christoph Girardet and Matthias Müller, 15 mins. 2006.

The short film climaxes with a series of 43 quick shots of women turning away from their mirrors, turning with anticipation, as if something has caught their eye, or their ear. These brief movements are followed by a series of shots of pensive men, and then the men start appearing behind the women, reflected in their mirrors as they enter the space of the bedroom. A final sequence of shattered mirrors, punched in anger by both men and women, further fragments the image into shards of violence. The film ends with a three-sided full length mirror miraculously reconstructed in reverse motion from its shattered pieces, reflecting an empty, shadowed bedroom.

This remarkable film has the effect of abstracting a set of gestures from the image-bank of “industrial cinema,” and returning them to a collective subjectivity. It speaks to many conventions of gendered behaviour, commodity capitalism, ideals of beauty and literary tropes of loss and desire, not to mention the melodramatic dynamics of hysteria, repression and home. The filmmakers first saw Hollywood films on German television as kids, and Müller suggests that as a gay artist he was first drawn to this material because of its depiction of the American home as a



claustrophobic “women’s prison” (Müller 291). Speaking of an earlier film called *Home Stories* (1990), he says, “I also envy these female characters their privilege of being able to live out their emotions uninhibitedly on the domestic stage, through their large, expansive gestures” (292).

Indeed, Girardet and Müller’s film practice is in keeping with a larger development in experimental and independent cinema that Roger Hallas describes as “gay cinephilia.” He identifies a number of works that “approach the visual archive of popular culture as a rich source of affect, rather than merely as site for ideological analysis” (87). He claims that the AIDS crisis has provoked the tendency towards loss and melancholia alongside a tendency to “queer” the archive through creative misreadings. *Kristall* may have come out of this constellation of cultural politics and aesthetics, but I also think it points beyond identity politics to a broader conception of the “dreaming collective.” The repetition of surprisingly similar gestures underlines the commodity character of genre cinema, but when they are reconfigured as ritual, they produce something close to that messianic, theological or spiritual sense of recognition that Benjamin associates with revolutionary energies.

To return to Giorgio Agamben’s remarks on gesture and the being-in-language which is for him the form-of-life on which political potential is hinged, he says of the face that it is the sole location of truth because “what human beings truly are is nothing other than this dissimulation and this disquietude within the appearance” (*Means without End* 94). He claims that “the task of politics is to return appearance itself to appearance, to cause appearance itself to appear” (95). This, I would argue, is the achievement of *Kristall*. Benjamin’s phantasmagoria is expertly re-assembled as an invitation to the viewer to discover another form of experience within the public sphere of the “culture industry.” We enter into a trance-like state, induced by the iconic aura of movie stars and the glitter of their decadent world, but we are invited to find something else there, in the interstices of hysteria and narcissism. Whether we name this something else as “affect,” as gesture with neither means nor ends – pure mediality, in Agamben’s words – or as *Erlebnis* (experience) in Benjamin’s [5], the film has the effect of an awakening. Returning at the end to the empty, waiting, mirrored image, deeply shadowed and multiply fragmented, Girardet and Müller defer the revolutionary moment. And yet the strategies and aesthetics of this powerful film might serve as a kind of impetus to a film criticism that could likewise return to the archive of film history in the spirit of critical reflection.

Much more could be said about both *Heir to an Execution* and *Kristall*. My point here is to indicate first of all how Benjamin’s theory of dialectical historiography can provide critical tools with which we can better understand the historiographic projects of these films. And secondly, taken as an interpretive methodology, if Benjamin’s style of criticism is especially appropriate to archival film practices, this mode of filmmaking, in all its varieties, including documentary, experimental and narrative modes, can in turn provide a model for film criticism. Returning to the archive of the collective unconscious can be a critical means of historiographic activism, a means of excavating the dreamworld of commodity capitalism for a renewed humanism. The thoroughly mediated experiences that can be found there provide templates for the utopian promises of modernity that subsist within the catastrophe and perpetual emergency of the early twentieth century.

In the diverse film examples that I have examined here, I hope to suggest how dialectical film history might lead to a more profound understanding of the present as a moment between past and present, such that, in Agamben’s words, “The past finds its truth again only on condition of negating it, and knowledge of the new is possible only in the nontruth of the old” (“Melancholy Angel” 110). In Naruse’s industrial, studio-based cinema, we have a body of work that remains terminally incomplete – in formal narrative terms in many instances, but also in terms of the dissatisfactions, desires, and quests for happiness that have yet to be realized in the gendered fabric of Japanese society. In *Heir to an Execution*, the moment of death, and the act of execution, gives rise to a body of images that beg to be read as a language of humanism. In *Kristall*, the filmmakers have broken into the image bank of mass culture, only to steal the moments of



suspension and empty time that give “new beauty” to the kitsch of the last century. These are all instances, in my view, of how Benjamin’s dialectics of history can be realized in critical archival film practice.

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## Endnotes

1. Benjamin’s essay has long been known in English as “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” which is how it appeared in Harry Zohn’s translation in *Illuminations*. In the four-volume *Selected Works* published by Harvard University Press (1996-2003), the essay appears under the title, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Reproducibility,” in two different versions, in volumes 3 and 4, both of which are longer than the version that was originally translated.
2. While Habermas draws mainly on Benjamin’s later works, including the Arcades Project and the essays on Baudelaire and cinema, he also crucially relates these works to Benjamin’s earlier writing on language.
3. Catherine Russell. *The Cinema of Naruse Mikio: Women and Japanese Modernity*. Durham NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming (2008). See also Catherine Russell. “Naruse Mikio’s Silent Films: Gender and The Discourse of Everyday Life in Interwar Japan” *Camera Obscura* 60 (2005): 57-89 and “Too Close to Home: Naruse Mikio and Japanese Cinema of the 1950s.” *Global Cities: Cinema, Architecture, and Urbanism in a Digital Age*. Eds. Linda Krause and Patrice Petro. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003. 87-114.
4. Noel Burch dismissed all of Naruse’s films after 1935 as being too close to the Hollywood norm (192). Phillip Lopate first pointed out that Naruse’s cinema did not conform to the art-cinema conventions that enabled his compatriots to be recognized as auteurs in the West.
5. Benjamin distinguishes two types of experience – *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* – in “Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (318). The former corresponds to the *mémoire involontaire*, while the latter corresponds to the shocks of modern experience that limits the possibility of memory.

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