

# (Non-)Moving Images: Nikolaus Geyrhalter's *Homo Sapiens* as a Cinema of Natural History

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## ABSTRACT

This article outlines the ontology of ruins presented in *Homo Sapiens*, a 2016 film by the Austrian director Nikolaus Geyrhalter, through the lens of “natural history,” an aesthetic and philosophico-historical category developed by Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno. In glossing natural history’s concomitant concepts such as “mood,” “aura” and “creaturely life,” the significance of the cinematic medium for the question regarding the *nature* of the relation between “first” and “second” nature and between the human and the non-human – unfolds. In the second move of the article, the film’s auditory dimension of perception through which “creaturely life” is sensed will be put into constellation with Kafka’s “The Burrow.” The claim is that *Homo Sapiens*’s particular form of expression, in line with the spatio-temporal dimension of the reality it seeks to capture, demarcates a threshold whereby the realm of the aesthetic and the realms of ethics and politics are mutually imbricated. This point takes its lead from Giorgio Agamben’s meditations – following Benjamin’s “angel of history” – on what he termed the “angel of photography.”

## KEYWORDS

cinema; mood; natural history; ruins

'In relation to the history of organic life on Earth', writes a modern biologist, 'the paltry fifty-millennia history of *homo sapiens* equates to something like two seconds at the close of a twenty-four-hour day. On this scale, the history of civilized mankind would take up one-fifth of the last second of the last hour'. Now-time, which, as a model of messianic time, comprises the entire history of mankind in a tremendous abbreviation, coincides exactly with the figure which the history of mankind describes in the universe.

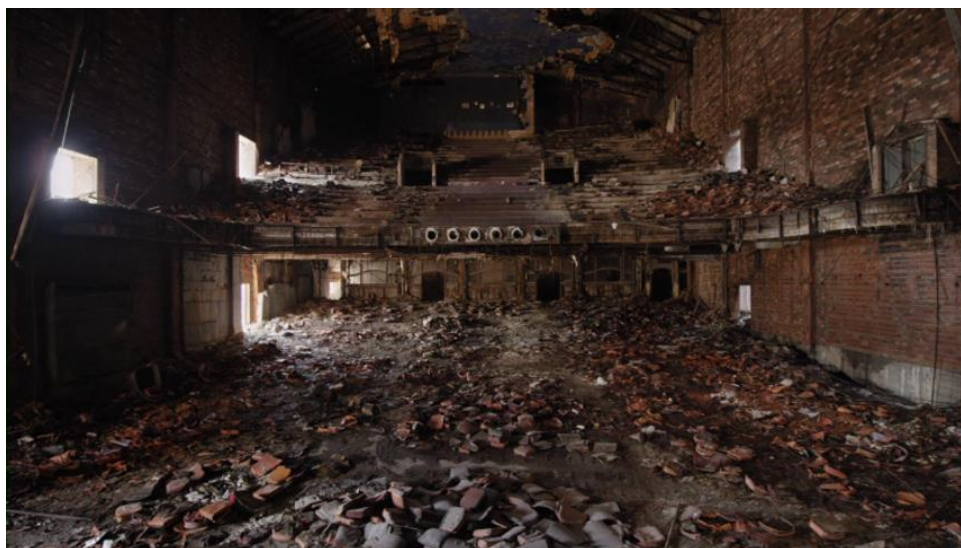
-Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 396

I have completed the construction of my burrow and it seems to be successful.

-Franz Kafka, "The Burrow," 325

*Homo Sapiens*, a 2016 film by the Austrian director Nikolaus Geyrhalter, is an accumulative succession of long, static shots showing demolished and abandoned constructed forms of human collectivity, recorded in different locations around the globe. The film continues the exploration of the cinematic expression that characterises Geyrhalter's work. It is modelled on an accentuated sense of spatialisation and temporalisation, and maintains the thematic exploration of the relation between the spheres of the human and the technological (Bachmann 26–33). Recording failed utopias that have been materialised in architectural forms, *Homo Sapiens* opens with a close-up of drops of water, probably rain, puddling on the surface of a disintegrated mosaic. Although this information is not disclosed, the mosaic is placed in an interior space of a deserted Communist monument (built in 1981 in Bulgaria). Significantly, these are the only human figures that are included in the film's accumulation of what we observe as remnants of missed life. In cutting to the successive medium and long shots, the camera's static gaze reveals a porous interior space. The last shot presents the whole monument from a distance. And in between the framing sequences, the film's other static shots capture forsaken spaces of industrial-capitalist modernity: shopping malls, cinema theatres, offices and factories and other exterior collective spaces that we encounter as remnants of perished forms of human life, a desolate "second" nature embedded within "first" and timeless nature.

*Homo Sapiens*'s wide, often symmetrical shots are scarcely cinematic. The (non-)moving images, or moving images which depict stillness as such, pertain to a threshold between photography and cinema. The film's unmoving images amount more to the still photographic procedure of long exposure (fig. 1). And yet the latter's spectral effect of effaced objects or bodies in movement eludes them in a – paradoxically – uncanny way. We might say that nothing is unveiled in these shots. To borrow one of the key concepts underlying Walter Benjamin's writing on the topics of aesthetics and philosophy of language, these shots express "expressionlessness." Yet still, these enduring scenes of destruction are governed by the intensified acousticality of a heightened natural, mostly weather-like, soundscape.



**Fig. 1** (Non-)moving Image between the Photographic and the Cinematic. Film still from *Homo Sapiens* by Nikolaus Geyrhalter, 2016

In an interview, Geyrhalter maintains that *Homo Sapiens* is more a fictional vision than a documentary film, because the shots, on the post-production phase, were subject to extensive intervention. As Geyrhalter notes, “the trees, the buildings and even the wind were almost like actors for me.” And this fictional aspect is more actively at work on the level of the soundscape the film produces. In order to comply with the effacement of human existence, any original sound could not be recorded at all. Carefully created for each image from archive material and recordings taken specially for that purpose, the sounds that we hear might be called para-diegetic – attached to the profilmic world but from outside. The paradoxical revelation of presence by way of its withdrawal, conspicuous only in the trace of its absence, is effected through the natural life that acoustically animates these petrified spaces. To the extent that what is exposed in them is nothing more than the temporality of earthly life, these shots affectively strike us as scenographies of “mere” or “naked” life. Or better, as what several critics, such as Sigrid Weigel and Eric L. Santner, have described – following Benjamin – as “creaturely life.”

The concept of “natural history” is drawn from Theodor W. Adorno’s lecture entitled “The Idea of Natural History” (1932). There, against the background of Benjamin’s account of the pre-cinematic fabricated ruin of the baroque tragic dramas or mourning plays (“Trauerspiele”), Adorno claimed that “the deepest point where history and nature converge lies precisely in [the] element of transience” (119). Highlighting the gaze of *Homo Sapiens* upon the entanglement of life, acoustical sensibility and the (non-)moving image space, this article asks: what are the human-nature-apparatus relations emerging out of this capturing of an empty world? And, how does the film prompt us to think about the manner in which the cinematic medium is an expression of “natural history?” Or, to put this slightly differently, how does this accumulation of shots, lingering between the photographic and the cinematic, reach legibility as “natural history” and “creaturely life?” In what follows, I will examine *Homo Sapiens*’s entanglement of nature and history by addressing the film’s spatio-perceptual complexity from the perspective of Benjamin’s theory of the moving image and his discussion of sound and the auratic. In the final section of the article, the dialectical relation between the space of meaning of

natural history and the creaturely will be put into constellation with a literary text: Kafka's short story "Der Bau" ("The Burrow," written in 1923/4). The point of convergence here is the auditory enigma of Kafka's fragment of a story: the creaturely soundscape of hissing and rustling that pervades the monstrous construction of the burrow. It is by the auditory dimension of perception, and the embodiments of sound and listening, that *Homo Sapiens* could be interpreted as an expression(lessness) that enacts the aesthetic experience of "natural history."

### Rubble of Second Nature

The attachment to ruins instigates an intensification of presence. Timelessly preserved in these shots, the spectacles of modern ruins presented in *Homo Sapiens* render a collective melancholic fixation upon a seemingly lost past, which is all the same present. [1] With its visual articulation of a catastrophic view of history – a view established by the accumulation of documented abrupt loss of meaning and functionality – the film grapples with the political, economic and social contexts in which these ruins have arisen. Freud, in his analysis in "Mourning and Melancholia," observed that melancholy is grounded on an attachment to the fantasy of loss; it cannot acknowledge that the mourned object is gone (245). According to Benjamin, whose conception of critique is unfolded by a chiasmic disposition of fetishism and melancholy, this chiasmus uncovers an insight into history's incompleteness (Comay 88–101). For the film itself, as Geyrhalter reflects, "[it] doesn't have any natural end, you could carry in filming forever."

[1] For the significance of the ruin as cultural philosophical figure, and on the need for "ontology of ruins," see Hell and Schönle's introduction to *Ruins of Modernity*.

In undermining cinematic conventions such as motion and progression by the adherence to a temporal perplexity of "eternal transience," the film as a whole congeals into a site of "natural history" ("Naturgeschichte"). "Natural history," better glossed as the "history of nature," aims to evoke, as Santner has noted, the "space between real and symbolic death." It is a space of exchangeability between the dimensions of nature and history precisely on account of the dual notion that

life can persist beyond the death of the symbolic forms that gave it meaning and that symbolic forms can persist beyond the death of the form of life that gave them human vitality. Natural history transpires against the background of this space between real and symbolic death, this space of the 'undead'. (Santner 16–17)

Architectural ruins give rise to this space. Architecture encloses an inner space, the symbolic act of mastering an outer, threatening nature. When these material shelters disintegrate and are no longer used in the form of possession nor of sheltering, symbolic "second nature" succumbs to real, natural death. And yet, the ruins' disintegration preserved in *Homo Sapiens* is never to be dissolved – the film's shots strike us as permanent nows of "natural history." For, it is these constructions' natural progression of decay – their "natural history" – that the camera aims to capture, and this by means of the nature of film as time-based medium.

In his seminal study *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama* (written 1924–25, published in 1928), Benjamin captures the manner in which a new form of modern, melancholic appreciation of the world was empathically shaped. Like the bodily gesture of the winged angel depicted in Albrecht Dürer's famous engraving *Melancholia I*, the setting of the German mourning plays, as analysed by Benjamin, directed the gaze downwards, to the earthly, and, therefore, to the creaturely. As Benjamin notes in several places, the space in question is suffused with creaturely melancholy. Ruins, he remarks, are “the home of the saturnine beasts” (179). Congruent with the emblematic ruin, an ageless object whose ruination is never accomplished, these plays were based on an immanent movement without a final goal. The realities presented in them were caught in a threshold in which neither resurrection nor death, neither redemption nor loss, could ever reach their decisive form (235).

Allegory, according to Benjamin, names this mode of signification in which objects of human creation were hollowed-out of meaning, disclosing the “*facies hippocratica* of history” (*Origin* 166). Similar to the ruins' intensification of presence only by means of its withdrawal, allegory inescapably collapses into “speaking otherwise” (*allegory* derives from the Greek terms *allos* for “other” and *agoreuein* for “to speak publicly”). Allegory, as defined by Benjamin, “means precisely the non-existence of what it presents” (*Origin* 233). As a form of knowledge, allegory amounts to a structure of desire since it is constituted through a relation to alterity: “[allegory] is the form in which man's most extreme fallenness to nature” “speaks” in the guise of “a puzzling question;” “not only the nature of human existence as such, but also the historicity of the individual” (166, trans. modified). If nature includes an instance of history, under the allegorical gaze, history prevails upon the natural instance that passes away with it. For the observer of allegory, history is revealed “there” yet only as “a petrified primordial landscape,” that is, as guilty creaturely life deprived of grace (166, trans. modified).

The figure of the ruin embodies what Weigel has observed as the “double reference to both profane and religious ideas” in Benjamin's thought (29). This signification of the ruin finds resonance in the evocation of architecture in the “The Work of Art in its Technological Reproducibility” (written in three versions between 1935 and 1939). There Benjamin notes that “buildings have accompanied mankind since primeval times” (33). The physical vulnerability of life is articulated through the art of building. Architecture is a cover and a shelter: “the human need for shelter is permanent” (33). It is from this perspective that we can consider the manner in which *Homo Sapiens* brings architecture, photography and cinema into uncanny proximity: the film, at once, captures the decay and rottenness of past forms of human dwelling, and thus it preserves a past moment *in* time, yet it does so by a medium grounded on the passing of time as such. Through its ruin-scape, *Homo Sapiens* confronts us with the natural historical essence of the image. The film transposes, by its cinematic gaze, sites of decayed architectural constructions into spatio-temporal deformations. By the very filmic activity of capturing or, indeed, documenting failed historical realities, the shots constitute an image space in which a different – and so allegorical – sense of space, that of placelessness, comes forth.

Benjamin develops such exposure in his notion of the “optical unconscious,” conceptualised in his writings from the 1930s on photography and film. As several scholars have observed, Benjamin’s analysis of film relies more on the early cinema that preceded the cinema dominated by narrative (Gunning 125). Benjamin’s critique of the cinematic apparatus calls for an attentiveness to film’s annihilating capacity to bring “second natural” formations into forms of imaginary ruins. According to this analysis, film discloses an image space that is inexorably transient. It is from the standpoint of a historical, collective subjectivity that Benjamin writes: “our bars and city streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories seemed to close relentlessly around us” (“The Work of Art” 30). And film precisely attains the inversion of this claustrophobic characterisation of social space into a “play-form of second nature.” [2] Film’s medial transformations – those of “close-up” and “slow motion” – are effected through the destruction of these architectural confinements. “Then came film and exploded this prison-world with the dynamite of the split second, so that now we can set off calmly on journeys of adventure among its far-flung debris” (30). In film, material objects – and the prominent image for Benjamin here is “second nature” shaped as the human built environment – recede from the physical world, only to be found again within an image space in the form of an intensified physicality, shattered amidst “a vast and unsuspected field of play.” “First nature,” glossed here as mythical, as that which lies beyond or before the human, uncannily glimpses through the ruin-scape of second nature.

[2] For an analysis of this concept and its significance to Benjamin’s account of cinema, see Miriam Bratu Hansen (183–204).

As Benjamin also states, “the historical task” of film is “to make the enormous technological apparatus of our time an object of human innervation” (“The Work of Art” 19). According to Benjamin’s scattered remarks on first/second nature, and also on first/second technology, “first nature” is primarily connected with organic nature, “the bodily organism of the individual human being.” And yet, “the revolutionary demands of first, organic nature” are still far from being fulfilled in the collective’s appropriation of “second nature as its first in technology [Technik]” (“A Different Utopian Will” 135). “Technology,” for Benjamin, means the “mastery not of nature but of the relation between nature and man” (“One-Way Street” 487). In the “The Work of Art,” he contends that “humans of course invented, but no longer by any means master this second nature which they now confront” (18). Second nature is, in effect, first. [3] While second technology rests upon the attempts to gain distance from “first nature,” the cinematic technique inaugurates the “play-form of second nature” (or second technology). This “field of play” is capable of displacing the primal relation to mythical nature to such an extent that mastery and control might be done away with. *Homo Sapiens*, we might say, presents us with a double exposure of the failure of this mastery in which the failure of the mastery of buildings over nature is overlaid with the failed forms of our second natures.

[3] See also Adorno’s conclusion in “The Idea of Natural History” (124).

Significantly, according to Benjamin, the cinematic and the architectural serve as paradigmatic media for dealing with the new tasks of apperception that face the human sensorium in the age of technical reproducibility. Architecture and film are mutually entangled by way of a dialectical interplay between “optical” and “tactile” receptions. The “tactile” reception, dwells within the domain of the architecture (“The Work of Art” 34). According to this argument,

[4] For an attempt to uncover the somehow overlooked sensorial faculty of tactility in Benjamin's thought, see my "im Taktischen'."

however, the tactile side of the human sensorium exceeds its signification as the faculty of touch. [4] Tactile reception, counterposed to contemplation that traditionally defined the spectatorial scenographies of the artwork (that is, painting and sculpture), precisely adheres to a new sense of optics in which a destructive and violent proximity of the beholder to her objects at hand is set forth. For it is in its interventions – compared by Benjamin to the manual work of the surgeon – that the camera penetrates “deeply into the tissue of reality” (29). Seen from this perspective, Geyrhalter's static frames are closer to the pensive position film was meant to abolish. And yet, *Homo Sapiens* expounds the tactile by casting a contemplative gaze upon contingent and decayed materiality based on durational time.

Geyrhalter's camera refrains from deeply penetrating into the reality it captures. It follows less the cinematic inscriptions characterised by Benjamin as the “ingenious guidance of the camera” (“The Work of Art” 30) and its temporal operations (stretching or condensing) than the technique of historical montage in the sense theorised by Benjamin in the *Arcades Project* and in his “On the Concept of History.” *Homo Sapiens* discloses a spatio-temporal constellation in which things, objects, creations – in short, everything material – pertains to its historical existence by virtue of its transitoriness and decay, simultaneously taking place on a global scale. It is Benjamin's montage thinking, which he repeatedly applied to his reflections on the concept of history, that is exemplified in Geyrhalter's film. With these shots, what “has been” becomes actual, and past and present are incessantly indistinguishable. This temporal constellation unfolds through the overlaying of two temporal registers that are at work in each of the continuous sequences comprising *Homo Sapiens*. While the one photographically captures the arrested temporality of former human dwelling spaces, the other is characterised by what Benjamin calls “Jetztzeit” or “now time,” figured in the advancement of dual natural phenomena taking place in these shots. The scarcely detectable progression of natural dissolution that transpires on the level of what has been formed as “second nature,” the dissolution of everything earthly, has its corollary in the acoustical, ever present nonhuman nature. Both coincide in melancholic eternal transience. This double-sidedness, nevertheless, is also at work on the level of the perceptual images implemented by the spatialisation of time as such. These spatial deformations are “optically” apprehended, on the one hand, due to their contemplative dimension – a dimension that is achieved by a maintainable distance between the spectator and her or his objects of perception. On the other hand, it is by virtue of the *temporal* distance – the distance retained between the stages of material disintegration – that these moving images arrest time to a point of an explosive standstill. For it is in the form of rubble, not of ruins, that, according to Benjamin, the cinematic image is capable of transcending the melancholic gaze, turning it into new forms of “awakening” or resistance, an idea central to his *Arcades Project*. [5]

[5] “What follows here is an experiment in the technique of awakening. An attempt to become aware of the dialectical – the Copernican – turn of remembrance” (*Arcades* 388).

### Auratic Immersion and Mood

According to Benjamin's meditations on film, "optical unconsciousness" is bound up with the idea that "nature speaks." Benjamin delineates film as a site at which a difference becomes conspicuous: "It can be grasped that it is another nature which speaks to the camera as compared to the eye. Other above all in the sense that in the place of a space that is permeated by human consciousness there is an unconsciously permeated space" ("The Work of Art" 30, trans. modified). Yet nature, according to Benjamin's early essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" (written in 1916), to which this remark seems to refer, speaks in non-articulable fashion. Nature's muteness discloses what Benjamin conceives of as the rigorous exigency of language and communicability, that of the expressionless. It is natural auditory expressions, however, that immerse the subject (always in relation to the object) in a perceptual web characterised as melancholic or mournful, a mood entailed by nature's "great sorrow." As Benjamin portrays this subjective mood in this early theologically-laden essay, "lament is the least differentiated, powerless expression of language." Lament is sensuous and so perceptible by way of almost only containing a "breath," to the extent that "even where there is only a rustling of plants, lament also resounds with it" (73). According to Benjamin, the language of nature, receptive as it is in the form of lamentation, attests to the primal scene of the Fall of language – its degradation into a "bourgeois language," one that functions as a means to an end – in the wake of which nature was left in a state of expressionlessness and sorrow (72).

*Homo Sapiens* entails a form of immersion within an atmospheric web or tissue – what Benjamin names "aura" or auratic experience – stretching between the human and its non-animated natural or created surroundings. Yet still, how are we to interpret the trope of "nature's speech," which also characterises the affective and "tactile" dimension fostering the aesthetic space of *Homo Sapiens*? If we take the meaning of the "aesthetic" as the casting of the term back to its original Greek gloss, derived from the word *Aisthēta* – "perceptible things" – it is by means of the remote and alien soundscape that the film's image space induces a spectatorial state of heightened concentration. It is the acoustic sphere that transforms *Homo Sapiens*'s scenes of destructibility into what Benjamin terms "reception in distraction" ("The Work of Art" 34). This mode of reception, which, significantly enough, is most instructively delivered by architecture also "finds its central place in cinemas" (34).

The Austrian art historian, Alois Riegl (1858–1905), whose conceptualisation of the opposition between the optical and the tactile is probably the source for Benjamin's use of these terms, designated "mood" ("Stimmung") as the "content of modern art." In Riegl's analysis of landscape paintings, the subjective-objective state of "mood" is underlined by the orders of distancing and spatiality in the act of viewing. "Mood" is achieved under the perceptual conditions of tranquility and far-sightedness or far-seeing. However, according to Riegl, it is the dialectical relations between the aesthetic experience based on distance and the sensed movements of organic or non-organic life ("Lebensregung"), out of which "mood" emerges. Describing a personal experience of contemplating a landscape, Riegl notes how a movement of natural life, acoustically perceived in the more "tactile" "near view,"



interrupted his contemplative mode, throwing him into a mood of anxiety, into “a struggle for existence” (48). *Homo Sapiens* corresponds with the imbrication of the optical, tactile and acoustical dimensions as staged by Riegl, but in a reversed manner. Here the relations between the elements of physical or bodily existence, subjective distanciation and the expression of the natural world in sounds are displaced. Instead of a remote view of a landscape, the static cinematic gaze is concentrated on ruined – and so *temporally* distanced – interiorities of human surrounding. And yet, except for the establishing shot of the mosaic, the camera’s rigorous motionlessness eschews any “tactile” view of fragmentation or decayed objects in detail.

The ruin, according to *Homo Sapiens*, is a whole and a total figure, framed in the more contemplative and objective apprehension delineated by Riegl. Although the film adheres to the co-existence of historical constructions and natural sounds, the latter’s overwhelming effect reaches the spectator’s ear from a source that can neither be located nor related to what is visible within the image space. Significantly, the relentless vision of ruination in *Homo Sapiens* ends with a “tactile” gesture, understood in terms of a surface that is (un)touchable, or indeed “haptic.” Its final image-ruin is a disclosure of non-visibility within the field of vision: the image ambiguously dissolves into a blinding white or into the clouds.

According to Benjamin, photography and film, in discovering the “optical unconscious,” has the capability to enhance the shattering of the aura. The aura, whose acoustical dimension lies in Benjamin’s characterisation of its experience in terms of breathing, makes itself felt within the field of vision of a natural setting. As Benjamin famously writes: “To track while resting on a summer afternoon a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow on the beholder is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch” (“The Work of Art” 15–16). We recall the barely sensuous “breath” of the rustling of leaves when nature laments. The idea of the aura – from the Greek for “breath” – is imagined to be an attribute of the mute, in the sense of an inarticulate natural world. One of the significant features in Benjamin’s celebrated scenography of aura is the dissolution of the beholder’s bodily contours by way of the shadow that is cast. Just as ruins befall architecture, the body, losing its delimited form as it is immersed in the landscape, reverts to its corporeal existence.

### “Spark of Contingency”

*Homo Sapiens* presents a form of embodiment in an atmospheric web or tissue, *Stimmung* or aura. [6] The living body, however, is radically absent in *Homo Sapiens*; the film advances by a heightened attentiveness to this absence. I have also noted the photographic character of *Homo Sapiens*. In “Little History of Photography” (1931), Benjamin draws attention to the social and ethical dimensions emerging out of the documentary nature of photography. Benjamin defines the task of viewing these early productions of a reproduced reality:

[6] The untranslatability of “*Stimmung*,” a term that could be glossed in English as “mood,” “attunement,” “attention,” “atmosphere” or “ambience,” was accounted by Leo Spitzer. *Stimmung* means “the unity of the feelings experienced by man face to face with his environment (a landscape, nature, one’s fellow man), and would comprehend and weld together the objective (factual) and the subjective (psychological) into one harmonious unity” (Spitzer cited in Agamben, “Vocation” 89). Showing the etymological connection of *Stimmung* to *Stimme* (voice), Agamben restores the term to its originary acoustic – and so, theological dimension, that of divine revelation (94). For the philosophical and aesthetic complexity of meanings of this term, see also Wellbery.

No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it. (510)

*Homo Sapiens* fully realises what Benjamin terms the “spark of contingency,” defined as a detail that has escaped the organising structure, or, indeed, the intentional production, of the photographic or cinematic image. This is strikingly the case when natural life is not just heard but actually seen within the frame.

In one of the shots an empty space is ambiguously rendered as the dwelling place of a living creature we can barely identify. According to Geyrhalter (as he mentioned in a Q&A session after screening), a frog playfully chases leaves and nylon shreds as they whirl in eddies of wind (fig. 2). We might reflect, following Benjamin’s remarks on early photography – mediated by one of Giorgio Agamben’s aphoristic texts entitled “Judgment Day” – on this contingent entry of the animal into the space of the image. This moment of singularity corresponds to the first entry of the human into the photographic space, famously captured in Louis Daguerre’s *Boulevard du Temple* (1838). Agamben, reflecting on this daguerreotype plate, writes that “I could never have invented a more adequate image of the Last Judgment. The crowd of humans – indeed, all of humanity – is present, but it cannot be seen, because the judgment concerns a single person, a single life: precisely this one and no other.” At stake, for Agamben, is “life immortalized by the angel of the Last Judgment,” or indeed – in following Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History” – “the angel of photography” (24). And this preserved imprint of the human originated in a gesture of stillness and motionless of a man who has stopped to have his shoes shined. This actualisation transcends the realm of “beautiful semblance” – a term Benjamin associated with auratic art – and could only be materialised into an image by the apparatus. “The photographic exigency that interpellates us has nothing aesthetic about it. It is, rather, a demand for redemption” (26), Agamben writes.

A fleeting movement of organic life cuts through the interposed image space of *Homo Sapiens*. The image caught between the photographic and the cinematic undermines the film’s logic of ruination: a gaze founded on its prolongation upon decayed forms of second nature. Carried by the emergence of the animal into the inanimate surrounding, the whistling noises we hear, a blend of organic (mostly hissing insects) and non-organic sounds (wind, water), thus impinge on the film’s spatial order, intruding into the inside from the outside. And just as collective humanity in the scene captured in Daguerre’s *Boulevard du Temple*, effaced from the image space by the photographic procedure of long exposure, is all the more present, so too “first” and so timeless nature is intensively sensed in *Homo Sapiens*. Natural history is at work in *Homo Sapiens* precisely for the fact that nature is subject to a twofold conception: nature in its transitoriness and decline, on the one hand, and, timelessly existing nature, on the other. This double reference to nature

[7] The wind in *Homo Sapiens* is ever present.

pervades *Homo Sapiens*'s image space in a non-visual fashion through acoustic expression. To recall Benjamin's contention, "even where there is only a rustling of plants" lament also resounds, immersing its listener in a melancholic mood. [7]



**Fig. 2** Animality as "Spark of Contingency." Film still from *Homo Sapiens* by Nikolaus Geyrhalter, 2016

With the shot of an animal, the incessantly, remotely whirling movement of non-animated nature that we hear, takes the form of a mere biological existence inside the interior space of the ruin. This deformation of sound into an intrusion of biological life disturbs the very historical nature of the image and transforms distraction into attentiveness. The film's strict discrepancy between inside and outside, staged as the disjunction between the visual and the acoustical, withers away as it brings about a radical internalisation. What was acoustically felt at a distance is now present, at hand, in close vision, searing the visual field with a "spark of contingency." Creaturely life, repressed in the course of humankind's actions of walling up historically and technologically formed structures of instrumental second natures, directed as they are against "first" nature – what Adorno calls elsewhere the "remembrance of nature in the subject"– is thereby recollected (*Dialectic* 32).

To conclude, let me turn to Kafka. *Homo Sapiens*, in radically interlacing the organic and the non-organic by way of the non-locatable site out of which the natural sounds emanate, recalls Franz Kafka's animal stories, a world in which the spatial and the creatural are intimately tied together. This is particularly exemplified in the striking late fragment "The Burrow" ("Der Bau"). Within an underground space constructed by a creature, probably a mole, the story gives voice to the latter's ceaseless thoughts and meditations on possible scenarios of the burrow's destruction or invasion by an invisible threat, unfolded as he wanders through its endless passageways and plazas. These meditations are interrupted and fed by a creaturely soundscape of hissing and rustling that pervades this monstrous construction. Hunted and distracted by these sounds, the narrator-mole is unable to determine whether they are real or imagined, threatening from within the structure or outside of it, whether they belong to some invisible animals, are just the rushing sounds of the soil, or perhaps, the sound he is making himself.

Any evocation of the burrow's visibility from the outside is concerned with scenarios of its destruction and loss. The creature states in the story's first sentence "I have constructed my burrow and it seems to be successful" (325), but we soon realise that the mole dwells in a ruin, or better, a construction site, and that his desired shelter in which he could "hear the sound of silence" is never to be accomplished. Whereas the burrow is set against an unbuilt outside "nature," it is by its auditory enigma that the story advances the collapse of extreme interiority into extreme exteriority, and vice versa. The creature concludes that there must be another creature whose existence is also determined by its uncertainty as to the existence of another creature, and so on, ad infinitum. As Mladen Dolar has observed, "the burrow is spatialized paranoia, entirely shaped by the scenario of the Other" (114). Kafka's constructed soundscape touches upon the structure of fantasy. The creature's total way of existence, marked by the perplexity of what we have called "natural history," of being already and not yet a ruin, is thus determined by an inside-out other. In his essay on Kafka from 1934, Benjamin writes that Kafka was "never tired of hearing about the forgotten from animals. They are not the goal, to be sure, but one cannot do without them." As Benjamin also notes: "This much is certain: of all of Kafka's creatures, the animals have the greatest opportunity for reflection. What corruption is in the law, anxiety is in their thinking" ("Franz Kafka" 810). In exposing the threshold between the mythical sway of life by law and "mood," Kafka's animals incite an attunement to "natural history."

The ontology of ruins in *Homo Sapiens* discloses the imbrication of creatural, natural and historical dimensions. By the very nature of representation in the film, understood as a double exposure – that of the cinematic and the photographic, the transitory and the timeless, or, in short, of natural history – the film advances an attentiveness to the inexorability of any discrepancy between these domains. This attentiveness involves a melancholic posture into which the film's audience is ineluctably drawn, adhering at once to the fixed gaze of the angel of history upon piles of wreckage, but also to the actualisation of Agamben's redeeming angel of photography.

### Author's Note

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