

Telescoping the Microscopic Object: Benjamin the Collector

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Who amongst you has not, in the long hours of leisure, taken a delicious pleasure in constructing a model-apartment, an ideal home, a revision?

— Charles Baudelaire, 1852

Introduction to Edgar Allen Poe's *Philosophy of Furniture*

Irregular (Re)collections

In the late 1930s, having fled the Third Reich, Walter Benjamin collated a series of autobiographical snapshots, and gave them the title *Berlin Childhood around 1900*. The forty-odd vignettes are a collection of memories from his childhood, and at the same time, communicate recollections from the infancy of a new century. Some of these memories uncoil in the open spaces of the park, the market and the streets, but many describe remembered interiors and their objects. The interiors figured are those of schools, department stores, and, in particular, Benjamin's homes and the apartments of his aunts and grandmothers. In recalling them, Benjamin exhibits a quite delicious pleasure in constructing a model-apartment, an ideal home, a *revision* of the past.

telescope

A letter from 1935 introducing the "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" to a friend conjured up an optical device – a telescope – to figure this revisoning with its emphasis on seeing more closely and seeing anew. The revisoning entails a curious temporality. Benjamin's telescope has a line of sight that cuts through time itself, spying a fantastic image of the nineteenth century as a mirage seen through a bloody fog, in a future, liberated condition. The telescope was a well-chosen tool, for it, along with the microscope, found new uses in the nineteenth century, transferring from the realm of amusement to the realm of scientific and practical value.¹ In the letter to his friend, Benjamin notes that he will have to build the telescope himself, and his efforts so far have led him, as pioneer, to discover fundamental elements of materialist art theory. It is such a special, well-equipped telescope of memory – utopian, re-visioning, meddling – that Benjamin focuses on the minutiae of his past, cutting through time to detect as yet unredeemed utopian inklings.

In *Berlin Childhood around 1900* Benjamin returns to a social infancy that is impersonally concerned with spaces, places and objects. Evading sentimentalism or individualism, Benjamin attempts to transcribe a chronicle of social history rather than an autobiography. He dissolves himself into social spaces and speculations on things. He stumbles through the ruins and rubble of over-cluttered interiors in Berlin's West End, writing less of people and more of the objects there, and the spaces they inhabit. Benjamin scents out the 'thing-world' of his childhood. This thing-world is an assortment of spaces congested with the splinters of urban bric-a-brac: telephones, chocolate machines, trains and railway stations, postcards, cluttered plush interiors, optical toys, rebus puzzles, sewing machines, velvet-lined caskets, stamps, majestic stone and metal monuments that crown tree-lined avenues or nestle alluringly in Berlin's cultivated Tiergarten.

Of course, there are also dispatches from the world of amusements. The second scene in *Berlin Childhood around 1900* describes the *Kaiserpanorama*, the imperial panorama, a nineteenth-century

contraption with viewing windows and stools, set in a circle. This construction allowed an automated, fixed-time viewing of hand-coloured, postcard-sized stereoscopic images of interiors stuffed with bric-a-brac, museum sculpture galleries and remote lands. By Benjamin's time, these optical devices, "aquariums of distance and of the past," were going out of fashion, and so he was always guaranteed a seat. Staring at these vivid and miniaturised three-dimensional selections of landscape, with their curious tangibility, his desire for distant travel was kindled. He watched the images of mountains and railway stations rest awhile in the gaslight awaiting the bell that signalled their departure. Yet the desire awakened was not a hankering to thrust out into the unknown, but seemed rather to be a longing to return home.

Berlin Childhood around 1900 re-images the past from what Benjamin casts as a child's perspective – curious, utopian, non-conformist. Youth's experience is seen to be dreamlike, invested with possibilities and hope. Elsewhere Benjamin had written that, through children, each epoch maintains some stake in fantastic dreaming. Benjamin's own writing in the memoirs is wide-eyed, taken from the viewpoint of a novice. To be child-like is to be engulfed by the city, amalgamating with its glass and asphalt. The infant's unfamiliarity with objects makes all things novel. Emergent technologies are associated with the newly born. In one scene from *Berlin Childhood around 1900* Benjamin depicts his father as he executes business transactions on the telephone. Inside that telephone is incubated a newborn voice. Images of birth, technological birth, perceptual rebirth in the autobiographical fragments are matched by the attempted exclusion of dying from the scenes of childhood. At no. 12 Blumeshof, the good bourgeois home of Benjamin's maternal grandmother, Benjamin remembers that the cozy, seemingly built-to-last furniture radiated a trust in an eternity that has banished death. That denial of mortality was a precarious posture, for it was held by a generation soon to be involved in mass death. War was rumbling in the distance at the time of Benjamin's childhood, and again at the time of his

writing the memoirs. For the first time, these twentieth-century wars were threatening the fabric of the safe European home.

Benjamin accumulates his remembered shards of the turn of the century for an antagonistic scuffle with history as it has been. The act of remembering, he says, involves the associative "capacity for endless interpolations into what has been." His plushly remembered past is shown to contain in all its dusty, over-cluttered effects the first spooks of the historical decline of the bourgeoisie. Illustrations of upholstered chunks of luxuriance and depictions of moments of class-isolation fabricate a metropolitan topography that is lavishly kitted-out with decay. In representations of the years preceding the destruction of the city by war, the adult-child's mock-prophetic suspicions enable him to show how the city's foundations betray the fissures and the fractures of an accelerating decomposition. Using the construct of the child or the 'as-if' child is a way of returning to the past, in order to suggest a technique for envisioning and then breaking with that past. In writing and remembering, he envisages a possibility whereby the initial glimpse of a fresh, utopian, "mythic" relationship between child and new technological cosmos provides an impetus for change, a "hope in the past."

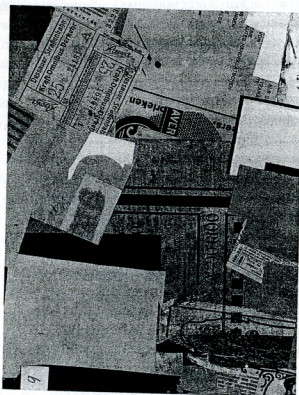
Writing from a position of knowledge of intervening events – and a shrewd grasp of those to come – Benjamin develops an odd gaze in which the role of memory signals a strategy for splicing historical continuity with political interpretation. In (re)constructing collective histories or collective memories, Benjamin proposes a "collective unconscious" and suggests a creative relationship between generations and their wish-investments in new technologies and new products. He accentuates the unredeemed promises of bliss that attended endless spectacular consumption and boundless technological production – and that outflows into war's military technology and propaganda. This childlike vision is broadcast not least to reanimate old and squandered social hopes that have fled, like Benjamin, into exile. His telescope of memory – built in exile – is a fantastic construct

assembled to match the fantastic potential of modern technologies. It finds its complement in the figure of the optical unconscious roused by the new visual technologies of photography and film. This camera, unconscious partner of the viewer's analytical researches into the composition of the modern, displays a new nature for humans, and this new nature is endowed with utopian potential. Benjamin introduces the term 'optical unconscious' to describe a mode of perception made visible on celluloid and initiated by cameras. The first mention of an optical-unconscious appears in an article on Soviet film, "Erweiterung an Oscar A. H. Schmitz" (1927), where Benjamin identifies film as a place where there "arises a new region of consciousness" through which people get to grips with the ugly hopeless world, comprehensively, meaningfully and passionately. Photography and film, because of their indexicality to the world, reflect it; but in reflecting it, they also construct it as a world of stretched-out temporality and fragmented space, a universe of "synthetic realities." The optical unconscious assembles an exploratory way of seeing, a microscopic incursion that slices up the intricate configurations of natural and social life.

Mechanically reproductive technology operates such that it ruptures life's continual flow of images. A fragment that now figures as a representation of the real is blasted out of the incessant movement of experience by its reproduction. As representation, it is held up, made still for an instant of conscious reflection on its significance. The cognitive potential of the newly discovered celluloid realm relies on technical trickery to reveal new structures of material.

Montage in film, the normal filmic process of editing and montage in photography, an artistic and commercial practice, reflect back to viewers the world as experienced, but also, simultaneously, bring to view a world that is malleable and as yet unknown. Photography and film bring objects closer, exported across time, across space, available to microanalysis. It lays the world out for intimate inspection. For example, Benjamin is impressed by Blossfeldt's plant photography in *Urformen in der Kunst* (1928). These extreme close-ups reveal the

forms of ancient columns in horse willow, a bishop's crosier in the ostrich fern, totem poles in tenfold enlargements of chestnut and maple shoots, and gothic tracery in the fuller's thistle. Nature is revealed as a wonderful zone of cultural activity. Film technologically stretches time and shrinks space, synthesising connections and disruptions. Film and photography, through the optical unconscious, tap transformative potentials embedded in actuality. Such a vision also turns out to be redemptory, for the uses to which the new technologies are put, in Nazi Germany at least, have little to do with social analysis and more to do with social power.



Kurt Schwitters, *Orlog*, 1930. Courtesy of Donald B. Marron.

The motif of reanimation of energies now slumbering in objects, the latent contents of the actual, is acted out again and again in the small vignettes that Benjamin sketches in *Berlin Childhood around 1900*. For example, a sketch called "Hiding Places" (also in the 1926 collection *One Way Street*) describes children's mimetic relationship to a material world that encloses them at play, and in which, for example, a dining table transforms into a temple with columns, and the child becomes its wooden idol. Making itself like the world that encloses it, the child under the *portière* turns into a flapping ghost. Hidden behind the door the child mutates into a threshold, a force that can hex all who unwittingly enter. The segment "Death Notice" explores the idea of re-awakened meanings in objects and words through reflection on the idea of the *déjà vu*. *Déjà vu* signals the renaissance of meaning in events that reach us – Benjamin grasps the acoustic, not the visual – like an echo awakened by a call, "a sound heard somewhere in the darkness of past life."³ Benjamin ponders how words, thuds and rustlings may be endowed with the magic power to transport us into the tomb of long ago, and he also notes the effect of its counterpart, the sudden re-encounter with a word left over like a muff left forgotten in our room, a deposit from a future yet to come.

A sketch called "Cabinets" (1933) – on the assorted cabinets in his bourgeois childhood home – parallels the reanimating act of recollecting with the procedures of collecting. As the years passed his mother would present him with keys to more and more cabinets. Each time he received gifts he had to choose which was worthy of placement in the most recently accessible cabinet. He reasoned that things locked away stayed new longer, and yet he also knew that it was not the newness that he wanted to preserve, but rather he hoped "to renovate the old," in that, he, as newcomer, made it his.⁴ Such renovation, he tells us, was also the feat of the collection that thronged in his drawer, where every little stone, every plucked flower, every pinned butterfly formed the basis of a specialist collection and the whole lot combined, everything he owned, was his collection. The same phrasing can be found

in *One Way Street*, in a section titled "Untidy Child", where Benjamin affiliates the child, the researcher, the antiquarian and the bibliomaniac. All are hunters after spirits whose trail they scent in things. This collecting is no accumulation of inert objects, but rather an imaginative transformation of objects into desired deposits. To have cleared out the drawer full of treasured objects, he says, would have involved destroying a construction comprised of thorny chestnuts that were morning stars, tin foil that was a silver stockpile, building bricks that were caskets, cacti that were totem poles and copper pfennigs that were shields. A treasure trove accessible to touch, his miniaturised childhood assets grew and disguised themselves. Held in his hands, squinted at through his myopic vision, the collection became the locus of an imaginative enterprise. Such re-invention mirrors the way that Benjamin's recollection of this material also enacts a transformation of that past, into possible pasts, and so suggests alternative futures. Benjamin's collections paralleled (and parodied) his parents' connoisseurial collections – his father was, after all, an antique dealer, and proud of his clutter of silver terrines, Delft vases, bronze urns, glass goblets and the like, secreted in niches and under domes and baldachins – all forbidden to his young son's touch.

Blueprinted in the "Cabinets" anecdote is Benjamin's theory of collecting. The child-collector flaunts a charged, imaginative, romantic affiliation to objects, that is also seen to be exhibited by the collectors that Benjamin cherished and about whom he wrote: art collectors Wallraf and Boiserée, Von Stosch the gem collector, Marolles the print collector, and the Goncourt brothers, whose concern, notes Benjamin, was, unusually, with the housing of objects rather than the objects themselves. Eduard Fuchs, amateur of caricatures and erotic art, was subject of an essay, entitled "Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian" (1937), an unsurprising title given Benjamin's theory that the collector's affinity with objects is a form of historical research. Another collector mentioned is Pachinger, about whom Benjamin relates an anecdote concerning the search for a misprinted tram ticket that had been in

circulation for only a few hours. Such dedication to transitory detritus is the quirk of amateur collectors, also dubbed by Benjamin the "true collectors." Benjamin affirms Fuchs's comment on how private collectors, committed to encyclopedism, systematicity and unswerving single-mindedness, do not indulge in procuring only those showpieces, such as turn the public collections into accumulations of things divested of their shabby, workaday clothes and dressed up in flashy Sunday best. Fuchs, a Marxist reformer, wishes to connect the collectible to its social provenance. Shrunken to mere merchandise it has been cut off from those who produced it and those who are best equipped to understand it. Benjamin agrees.

Benjamin was a collector. He collected children's books and toys, for reasons that are bound up with his anthropological-materialist concerns. Benjamin was a collector who made it his business to know his collections inside out, and he wrote expansively about those collections and his passions. For example, in "Cultural History of the Toy" (1928), a feuilleton piece written for the literary supplement of the Frankfurter Zeitung, he tracks the history of toys. Before industrialisation they were produced by artisans, wood-carvers, pewterers, made on the side as miniature reproductions of objects of daily life. As such they contained indications of the adult world. Later, in the epoch of industrialisation in the nineteenth century, toys become ever more distant from the adult world. But Benjamin's observations are not tied to the factuality of the object under scrutiny. Benjamin imagines the toy in a universe of handling. In a blow against naturalism, he makes the point that it is the imaginative act of play, culturally and class-determined of course, that makes the toy, not the toy that determines the play.

The study of toys was just one of a number of pieces on children's effects written through the 1920s. In these short articles – on alphabet books, rebus books, Russian toys, colour and monochrome illustrations – published in newspaper supplements, literary journals and illustrated magazines, Benjamin worked out ideas about play and the enchantment

of objects. It is significant that his ideas about play, essentially ideas about the processes of cognition, are worked out for the pages of newspapers and journals, transitory forms of text, passing through on their way to becoming detritus. These articles catch spoors of what later blooms in the autobiographical memories: play as transformation, play as magical, play as mimetic and primitive. "Toys and Play" (1928), written for a literary journal, reveals how Benjamin, like the children he observed, was intrigued by fairy tales and toys' imprints of an animistic, primitive sense; the rattle, for example, he claims, is an instrument that wards off evil spirits.

Accompanying these socialising and supernatural facets is always a sense of the transformative aspect of play and childish perception.⁵ An essay called "Insight into Children's Books" (1926), published in the same literary journal, acknowledges the materiality of transformation in childish things, particularly in the trick-books that Benjamin prized, with their shifting page-orders, where words appear in costume, and where hidden flaps reveal concealed figures, and ribbons or tabs are tugged to trigger or resolve episodes. These trick-books demonstrate how much seeing and knowing is tied to touch. Rebus puzzles, Benjamin informs us, were once thought to take their name from rêver, to dream, not res, for thing; conjuring up all dream-work's action of transfiguration, condensation and antithesis.⁶ Such imaginative work of renewal of matter signals to Benjamin an originary impulse to revolution that exists in the child. It is in this sense that a child lodges inside each true collector. "The collector," writes Benjamin in 1935, "makes the transfiguration of things his concern": the collector, infantile, irresponsible, immune to the world of calculation and appliance, exists outside an economy of use, in a realm of desire.

To him fell the task of Sisyphus which consisted of stripping things of their commodity character by means of his possession of them. But he conferred upon them only a fancier's value, rather than use-value. The collector dreamed that he was in a world not only far-off in

distance and in time, but which was also a better one, in which to be sure people were just as poorly provided with what they needed as in the world of the everyday, but in which things are free from the bondage of being useful.⁷

The visionary collector creates value by zealous imaginative projection. The desirability of release from exchange-value may go without saying, for a leftist. The release from use-value signals a release from a dull utilitarianism, emancipation from the inert and homogenising factuality of objects. Benjamin wants to hold on to the specificity of objects, and the possibility of an object's sensuous participation in a genuine life not dominated by exchange and functionalism. An essay from 1930, "In Praise of the Doll", characterises the genuine collector:

The true, unrecognised passion of the collector is always anarchistic, destructive. For this is its dialectic: by loyalty to the thing, the individual thing, salvaged by him, he evokes an obstinate, subversive protest against the typical, the classifiable.⁸

The collector does not amass the hoard of objects as dead material. That is the debased attitude of the *souvenir-hunter*. Substituting for genuine experience, the *souvenir* attempts to generate intentional memory, voluntary memory, which is for Benjamin never true memory. True memory is involuntary memory, holds Benjamin, after Proust and his evocative crumb of madeleine. Involuntary memory summons up, in one flash, the narrator's past or a past ready for narration, out of the blue. For Proust, involuntary memory is impromptu, bouncing off objects encountered randomly. It is lucid, pre-verbal, and coupled with euphoria, which is why, in Proust as in Benjamin, such memories are often linked with childhood. Involuntary memory provides an unanticipated link between an experience in the present and one in the past. It confounds linearity, disrupts temporality – and it inclines towards discovering utopian potential. It is an agent of that action described

in the epistemological section of the *Arcades* project: "telescoping the past through the present."⁹ In the *Arcades* project, Benjamin draws on Proust to explain the peculiarities of voluntary and involuntary memory:

The canon of involuntary memory, like that of the collector, is a kind of productive disorder. "And my life was already long enough, so that for every entity it offered me, I'd find in the opposite regions of my memory another entity to complete it Like an art-lover who is shown the wing of a triptych, recalling in which church, in which museum, in which collection, the others are dispersed (likewise in following sales catalogues or in visiting antique shops, he finishes by finding the twin of the object he possesses and makes a pair, so that he can reconstitute the predella in his head, the whole altar-piece)" Voluntary memory, on the other hand, is a registry, which classifies the object with a number, behind which the object disappears. "We must have been there." ("That was an experience.")¹⁰

Benjamin invokes Proust to knock over-commodified experience. For the true collector, material provides access into materiality, memory, history and knowledge of all kinds. Imaginative projection into the object is not a free-form rhapsody, but a reverie that is as determined and symptomatic as dreams. Benjamin explains how, for the collector, the whole world is present in each of his objects. The object focuses knowledge. Employing the collected material telescopically, the collector sees through the object into its whole past, its origin and manufacture, its uses, its value across time. In delineating collecting in this way Benjamin invokes the characteristics of a scholarly methodology that had long been his own. "Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian" augments an earlier thought from *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*:

It is the dialectical construction which distinguishes that which is our original concern with historical engagement from the patchwork findings of actuality. "That which is original is never revealed in the naked and manifest existence of the factual; its rhythm is apparent only to a dual insight. It ... is related to its pre-history and subsequent development."¹¹

All this detail that can be invoked – by looking, by loving, by touching – comprises a magic encyclopedia that relates the fate of each object. The collector handling his objects, notes Benjamin, appears as a magician who peers through them into a distance called history. Collectors, he proclaims, are “physiognomists of the thing-world,” that is, they are skilled in foretelling character or destiny from the features and lines of the object’s “face.”¹² The object provides access into origin and past, but also into the future, into prospective worlds and future modes of dealing with objects. Typically for Benjamin, his musings occupy the interface of historical materialism and magical thinking.

These thoughts on collecting, voiced in “In Praise of the Doll”, are also to be found in Benjamin’s unwieldy assortment of quotations, aphorisms and commentaries, all ordered into note bundles and known as the *Arcades* project. The *Arcades* project is a practical example of collecting. One of the entries in a bundle of notes on “The Collector” (in German: *der Sammler*) claims that “collecting is an ur-phenomenon of study: the student collects knowledge.”¹³ The *Arcades* project is Benjamin’s treasure trove of archive findings. These notes on the theory of collecting record the decisive thing in collecting: that the object is dissolved from its original function, released from the “bondage of being useful,” and is brought into the closest possible relationship with its equals. He states how for the true collector each single thing in this system becomes an encyclopedia of all knowledge from the epoch, the landscape, the industry, and the owners from which it derives. The collector magics the object into a charmed circle, where it petrifies, as a final shudder (the shudder of acquisition) brushes it. Everything remembered, thought and known about the object forms its podium, its frame, its seal, its context. “Collecting,” writes Benjamin “is a form of practical remembering.” Objects shelter a profusion of memories and histories – he is not keen to untwist the two things. This sheltering is especially resonant when it is acknowl-

edged that, for the private citizen, the interior is required to support him in his illusions, in contrast to that separate zone called work, the site of reality, as Benjamin notes in the 1935 outline for the *Arcades* project. The reactivation of the “phantasmagorias of the interior,” those of Benjamin’s past, of his collections, and of the pasts he found detailed in the archives, awakens a political memory, such that Benjamin insists:

Every smallest act of political reflection marks a new epoch in the antique trade. We are constructing here an alarm clock that calls the kitsch of the previous century to ‘collect en masse’.¹⁴

Kitsch and Fossils: Matter in the Last Century

Benjamin had evoked the image of the alarm clock once before – at the close of his essay “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia” (1929) where he writes that the surrealists “exchange, to a man, their human expressions for the face of an alarm clock that in each minute rings for sixty seconds.”¹⁵ Surrealism was the century’s wake-up call. According to Benjamin, only the surrealists had understood correctly the ways in which mass industrial society had technicised human existence, producing a collectivity, a technicised *physis*. And only the surrealists could circumscribe how that new technical reality was charged up on dreams and mythologies that needed to be interpreted. Surrealist methods bestow admittance to an underbelly of experience, discovered through a ransacking of the unconscious and the dreamworld. The surrealist take on objects coincided with Benjamin’s concurrently unfolding methodology in studies of the Parisian arcades and elsewhere. The surrealists propose an anti-commodity poetical strategy of data collection from everyday life, from dreams and streetlife, and from the banalest environments. As such, they provide the artwork version of Benjamin’s child-time collecting. In his first study of the surrealists, a newspaper article called “Dreamkitsch” (1926), Benjamin writes:

The dream no longer opens onto a blue distance. It has turned grey. The grey layer of dust on things is its best part. Dreams lead straight to the banal.¹⁶


Turning their gaze from the genteel and the pretty, the surrealists fix their attention on the everyday, insists Benjamin, with an eye to the street, sexual relationships, fashion and commercial products. They focus on the everyday not in order to smother everything with a blanket of boredom, but to rediscover the eccentricity of the humdrum. Benjamin asks what side does the thing display in the dream? And answers that in the dream, the hand grasps the object at its most well-worn part, the side covered with cheap slogans. The thing that appeals to the dream is kitsch, and kitsch is,

... the last mask of the banal with which we cover ourselves in dreams and in conversation, in order to take the power of the extinguished thing-world into us.¹⁷

Kitsch, for Benjamin, means all that is sloppily put together: all the rubbish and mass culture and cheap commodity output of the nineteenth-century, all that should have been thrown away. From the late 1920s onwards, Benjamin devoted his energy to demonstrating how mythic drives continue to dally in modernity, even in those precincts where instrumental rationality is alleged to reign. Kitsch and clutter is where

these dreams and unconscious impulses of a “dreaming collective” are to be found. The kitsch and clutter of the nineteenth century has soaked up myriad utopian fantasies and pledges of progress, abundance and the manifestation of a technical arcadia; it acts as a safe deposit of desire. Kitsch, especially antiquated, unmodish kitsch, confesses a collective psychoanalysis that can be tweezed out of things. Kitsch, because of its industrialised, formulaic mass-production, or its bogus pretensions, or its candid gushes of sentimentalism, enables an inquest into social desire, a social desire for fulfilment that Benjamin tags revolutionary. Once winkled out of the fashion circuit of commerce – that is, once it becomes passé – it can be viewed through telescope eyes.

This vision of objects marked by fossilised hints of collective wishes and fantasies is lashed in a special way to the particular mode of being of the bourgeoisie in the late nineteenth century. In “Experience and Poverty” (1933) he recounts how this century began with children still transported to their schools by horse-drawn carriage, but by the 1930s it housed adults who stood cut off from their ancestors and their own past by the technical experience of massive immolation in war, the speed-ups of ceaseless industrial innovation, and the social experience of a revolution that was obstructed. Benjamin is sure that these shifts – technical, political, social – affect the relation between memory and the past. Experience – *Erfahrung* – has vanished. In its place have flooded quackish ideas that seek to re-invent this missing wisdom. In an unpublished version of “Experience and Poverty”, Benjamin remarks ruefully that it is most unlikely that “humanity will be able to get beyond the bottleneck before it is laden down with the baggage of a collector or antique dealer.”¹⁸ In the epistemological core of his *Arcades* project he notes an effect of the “accelerated tempo of technology” – the past quickly appears as if prehistoric, and as such its objects, its practices, its motivations, seem as mythic as ritual fetishes and acts. Registering both the rift with the past, and the speed-up effect in the present, Benjamin writes:



Eugène Atget, *Rag and bone men located on the seventeenth district of Paris*, 1913. Courtesy of Atget/Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris.

The old prehistoric dread already envelopes the universe of our parents, for we are no longer bound to it by tradition. The remembered world breaks up more rapidly, the mythic in it surfaces more rapidly and more crudely.¹⁹

It is as if memory is always under threat, as technical change superimposes new layer upon layer of actuality. But, at the same time, what is “mythic” in those pasts juts forward more and more obviously. Thrilled by Marx’s phrase – “the world has long possessed the dream of a thing that, made conscious, it would possess in reality,” Benjamin’s plot is to wake up the twentieth century from and to its dreams about the century just passed.²⁰ He hopes to track the myths that animated the dream worlds of the end of the last century, in order then to propel a “dissolution of ‘mythology’ into the space of history.”²¹ Benjamin asks what can be learnt about social worlds past, present and potential, if historically unfulfilled desires and fantasies – the stuff of mythology – are made manifest? The autobiographical writings contribute to this psycho-social analysis. Benjamin is true to his vision of the nineteenth century as the prehistory of a liberated humanity, as he fixes an image of a period of social paralysis and unconsciousness. He writes:

When as children we received those great collected editions, *Cosmos and Humanity, New Universe or The Earth*, would our gaze not fall first of all on the tinted “petrified landscapes” or the “lakes and glaciers of the first Ice Age”? Such an idealised panorama of a scarcely past ur-epoch opens up when we gaze into the widespread city arcades. Here is housed the last dinosaur of Europe, the consumer.²²

The idea of the consumer as dinosaur, as already seen from the perspective of its extinction, appears elsewhere in the *Arcades* project:

Like places in the stones of the Miocene or Eocene Age that bear the impression of monsters from that geological period, so the arcades lie today in the great cities like caves with the fossils of ur-animals declared extinct: the consumers of the pre-imperial epoch of capitalism, the last dinosaurs of Europe.²³

The consumer, as was, is en route to extinction. Benjamin pictures those consumers caught as in amber in the late nineteenth century, just before they bring about their own extirpation in war and in the class struggles of revolutions across Europe. After these events – that is, in Benjamin’s moment of writing – consumers can no longer sleep easy in their beds, buffeted by dreams, illusions and the hope of a better order to come through the cosmic perfusion of capitalism.

The consumer-dinosaur inhabits a dark cave, where he hoards his objects, his possessions.²⁴ The cave is not bare, but crammed with fossilised vestiges. Benjamin notes that the bourgeois interiors of the 1880s, around the time of his birth, appear as casings for humans, padded cells of cushions and velvet and plush, themselves stuffed full of encased objects, of coverlets and linings, made of materials in which the imprint of things is easily left behind. This mark is called the trace, and it is left on stools, sofas and mantelpieces, and relatives leave theirs in photographs. In “Short Shadows”, a sequence of ‘thought-images’ published in a Cologne newspaper in 1933, Benjamin observes that in the parlour:

... there is not one patch where the inhabitant has not left his mark: on the mantel piece with all its knick-knacks, on the upholstered seats with their tiny covers, embroidered with monograms, screens in front of the window panes, on the fire-guard in front of the stove.²⁵

Indeed the casings, the coverlets, the linings that cover the objects in the interior are safeguards to catch traces and keep them. And, notes Benjamin, they make the bourgeois parlour the perfect setting for a detective story, and for the manoeuvres of the new science, forensics – a science related in a way to Benjamin’s historical materialist research. The traces betray an ideology: for even the twee slogan – “just forty winks” – embroidered on the cushion cover reveals, says Benjamin, that the bourgeoisie did not dare to think about the future development of the order of production that they had set in motion.

Its textual counterpart is found in Nietzsche's idea of eternal return as spoken by Zarathustra. Eternal return, in turn, is however itself a dream – of the huge discoveries to come in the field of mass reproductive technology. In "Central Park" (1939) this mass of matter that absorbs traces is envisaged more sinisterly as part of an attempt to humanise the commodity, in a sentimental way; to give the commodity, just like the person, a house. Marx describes such humanising of material as commodity fetishism. Benjamin goes so far as to remark on the sex appeal of the inorganic. The traces indicate that something is trapped, calcified – but that it can be resuscitated, that is to say made conscious. Such resurrection is, of course, easier once the object has passed away, once the object has been discarded, thrust out of the home to turn up in junk shops or archives or dreams.

In the essay on surrealism, Benjamin pursues further the revolutionary energies that are stuck in the "antiquated" or "outmoded". The ruin hatches a revolutionary potential. His notes for this essay relate the following:

In the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings, the earliest photos, objects that are starting to become extinct, pianos, umbrellas, clothes from five years ago, chic meeting places once fashion begins to withdraw from them. In short, just like the solar power machines man has built to draw massive energies from the atmospheric warmth. Just as man has turned the differing levels of water courses into sources of energy, so the enormous state of tension of the collective, which fashion expresses, should be made serviceable for the revolution.²⁶

The surrealists persuade Benjamin to be interested in the world of obsolete things, remaindered not least by technological change. Technology participates in history by casting things into obsolescence. Or at least the external image of things transforms, even if things remain in essence the same, as fashion forces new superficialities of difference. "Dreamkitsch", once more raising the spectre of ephemeral tokens whose use-value and exchange-value is to be discontinued before banked, suggests that:

Technology cashes in the external images of things, which, just like banknotes about to lose their currency, are never to be seen again.²⁷

Fashion's permanent churning out and its adjustments of styles and types endlessly remainders products, dispensing novel modes of presentation, new images, new needs and wants. The surrealists instruct Benjamin that there are few things more socially poignant than these two: a once much-desired beauty from another epoch who now appears embarrassingly unfashionable; and a kaput gramophone, catapulted into uselessness. Like the surrealists, Benjamin's interest in the technological is directed not just at the new possibilities of hi-tech – the promises of utopias to come – but also at the revealing psychic reverberations and historically resonant energies of the passé – the uncashed utopian tokens of the past. Benjamin conceives of his remembered objects as the surrealists conceived of the bric-a-brac they found in Parisian flea markets.

Benjamin proposes the liberation of such dreams or energies from the past, stored up in objects – or remembered objects – like power in a battery. This liberation occurs through the removal of objects, labelled by Benjamin "enslaved and enslaving," from the circuit of fashion, releasing them, in order, in turn, to release the energies of the past in them.²⁸ Again he hopes "to renovate the old," proposing a withdrawal of objects from the cycle of exchange-value replacing exchange-value, a being in hock to fashion. He presents a redemptive religio-democratic vision – all objects come into their own – all have a place again – like the resurrected dead. Benjamin sets the revival of the unfashionable against the myth of progress, a myth that constructs a permanent present oriented to the promise of an ameliorated future. For progress-mongers the past is mobilised only to show that it is a place that we have, thankfully, left behind to move on to somewhere better. For Benjamin, the past is mobilised to show how the dividends it promised have not yet been doled out.

In the arcades, preferred hunting ground of the nineteenth-century collector, objects of industrial capitalism's commodity pile-up had entered into the most surreal and aberrant amalgamations in 'rebus' shop displays. On the walls of the cave-like arcades, the commodity grows like unforeseen flora, and, says Benjamin, like the tissue of an ulcer, they grow into the most irregular connections. A universe of cryptic connections emerges where palms jostle feather dusters, hair-driers and the Venus de Milo. Prostheses are flung next to letter-writing manuals. Players in a de-familiarised modernist mythology, odalisques skulk by inkpots while vestal virgins raise aloft bowls for burnt offerings in the form of cigarette tips.²⁹ Relations between objects compelled by commerce in the nineteenth-century find a form in modernism: inaugurated by Lautréamont's chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table, an image that galvanised surrealism. Like the transformed objects in Benjamin's childhood chest of drawers, the commodity is renovated in metropolitan modernism. Its renovation breaks the normal parameters of use-value and exchange to produce this imagination-value: a refusal of exchange and utilitarianism.

Come Closer

In his study of the Viennese satirist Karl Kraus, written in 1930, Benjamin quotes from the architect Adolf Loos's *Ornament and Crime* (1908):

On reading the words with which Goethe censures the way the Philistine, and thus many an art connoisseur, runs his fingers over engravings and reliefs, the revelation came to him that what may be touched cannot be a work of art, and that a work of art must be out of reach.³⁰

Loos divides the work of art from the article of use according to whether the object under consideration may be touched. Benjamin quotes this passage once more a year later in a jotting on those ships, mineworks and crucifixions that miraculously appear inside bottles. And he asks, perhaps ironically, whether things in bottles are artworks

precisely because they are inaccessible to touch. Loos's remark on art and touch strikes Benjamin profoundly, and, on its basis, he draws consequences for a new, emergent spatiality that takes its cue from the image of the collector with his collectible in his hand. In "Dreamkitsch" Benjamin emphasises that technology also participates in a modern bridging of distances, noting that what counted as art in former days began at two metres distance from the body, but through mass-production the thing-world seems to edge towards the person. If, as Henri Bergson suggests in *Matière et Mémoire*, perception is a historical phenomenon, then the modern experience of the "new person," is one of objects thrusting themselves forwards, jostling for attention in cluttered environments. Objects' kitschiness, their cheap availability, their being at hand, compels a re-evaluation of ideas of closeness and distance between objects and people. It is a renovation of the relation between objects and people that the collector had seemingly already established, for things approach him, and each new thing that is acquired changes the meaning of all the other pieces. The true method of making things present to us, advises Benjamin, is to imagine them in our space, as does the collector. Indeed, Benjamin goes so far as to claim that the collector is the figure of the future:

Possession and property are related to the tactile, and stand in a certain opposition to the optical. Collectors are people with a tactical instinct. By the way, recently, with the turn away from naturalism, the primacy of the optical, that dominated the previous century, has ceased.³¹

He concludes this note with the observation: "*Flâneur* optical, collector tactical." The age of the collector has begun, but it must be a democratic one. Tactility, *taktisch* were notions purloined from the art historian Alois Riegl. Riegl delineated a new organisation of perception in the ornamental forms of late Roman art and decoration, forms not included in the classical canon. His writings concentrate on a history of perception that moves between the tactical and optical,

recognising how touch supplements the eye in the pursuit of material knowledge of objects. Benjamin translates this tactility of space and objects into the childhood experience of an empathetic touching, an intensified perception, bound up with shock, impact and curiosity. Tangibility is the thing, a visual tangibility, perhaps akin to that provided by the stereoscopic panoramas where objects seemed so three-dimensional the viewer felt able to reach out and touch them. Riegl is encountered in Benjamin's Berlin memories. In an antique dealer's in Berlin, at the beginning of the 1914-1918 war, Benjamin, "under the impression of Alois Riegl's *Late Roman Art Industry*, examines objects from antiquity, some breastplates, some bracelets.¹² He visits the shop because his friend wishes to buy friendship rings. Benjamin's recollection of these rings is an object lesson in tactile knowledge. He describes "the most fascinating ring" he has ever seen. It is a ring from the Roman imperial period:

Worn on the finger, the ring seemed merely the most perfect of signet rings. You only entered its secret by taking it off and contemplating the head against the light. As the different strata of the garnet were unequally translucent, and the thinnest so transparent that it glowed with rose hues, the sombre bodies of the snakes seemed to rise above the two deep, glowing eyes, which looked out from a face that, in the purple-black portions of the cheeks, receded once more into the night.

The ring is picked up, examined against the light. It cannot be seen without being touched, and it is designed for wearing on fingers that feel. The ring is known through its being touched.

Benjamin registers the aesthetic advantages of mass production, imaged in the collectors who lovingly handle their pickings – without thereby approving of the fashion system that threatens to render it all obsolete. The sensory outfitting of the collector-type prototypes the perceptual apparatus of the new masses. And they will get the culture they deserve – a culture that juts into their space and demands

manipulation. Here the idea of seeing meets the idea of touching in the notion of the close-up. The close-up enlarges the miniature, focusing attention on the particular, but at the same time it closes the gap, bringing nearer the desired object for intense scrutiny. The close-up takes up its place in the world of film and photography. So, of course, it is in the mass-reproduced that culture meets its viewer halfway. Contemplative and distanced observation is vetoed. Tactility and closeness mark out a new potential culture for and by the masses. Tactility and shock – forces that act on the body – form part of the new perception. This perception dislocates from a bodiless idealist aesthetic based on illusion, the imaginary and fictitiousness. Bourgeois idealist conceptions of art are seen to be wound into a narcissistic ideology that argues art is born from itself. Benjamin's approach retraces the ground of aesthetics sensuously. But closeness, tactility and sensuousness need not be interpreted as presence. In some ways, corporeal disappearance is precisely what is at stake in technological art. The copy is what is at hand. For Benjamin, the mass appropriation of culture signals literally a manhandling of cultural products. The mass-reproduced copy can be manipulated. It is "tactile." Exhibition, the ability to see and be seen, and tactility, the ability to touch, are sensuous concepts that relate new art to the physical presence of the collective receiving body. The most conspicuous example of tactile culture was architecture. Benjamin shifts his gaze from the velvet-lined casings in which nineteenth-century objects nestled to casings for humans, their places of habitation.

Benjamin argues for art as an embodiment of corporeal, material nature, and is not seduced by the ideal of artistic autonomy. It was Eduard Fuchs's insistence on the same principles that Benjamin recognised in him as collector and as art historian. Fuchs, he notes, attends to technologies of reproduction and the creation of mass art. Such attention in turn raises the question of reception and shifts analysis away from focus on the creator and his genius. Fuchs's concerns, non-connoisseurial ones, are appropriate for a new age of the masses.

Benjamin heralded Fuchs as one of the first to derive implications from the constellation of *Masse* and *Technik*. And just as Fuchs detects a new epoch marked by mass-reproduced art, so Benjamin registers an epochal shift in interiors. The new architects with glass and steel make rooms in which it is difficult to leave a trace in the old way. The padded cells of the nineteenth century give way to a twentieth-century translucent but shrunken space. It is a space for a new type of seeing. In "Experience and Poverty", while discussing Le Corbusier and Loos, Benjamin mentions their co-inspirator of modern beings, the science-fiction author and theorist on glass architecture, Paul Scheerbarth. Scheerbarth imagines suitable inhabitants of these new spaces, people who have been altered, for the better, by our aeroplane, skyrockets and telescopes. The traces deposited by lives in their shiftable, hypervisible glass homes have not disappeared, indeed in our world we can see that they have multiplied. But they may adhere not so much to the furniture and baubles, as crystalline administratively in the archives of the expanded bureaucratic apparatus. Or these traces may nestle in the fragments of photography and the label and ticket debris of commercial intercourse. The collector, a figure who scoops up objects in the hope of discovering history and augury, must not be averse to taking in hand all this most degraded trash of city life.

Benjamin's collector assumes various guises. There is the collector as enthusiast, childlike in his relationship to the material world that he observes as an excuse for his burrowing, his tactile cognition, his imaginative revisioning. Such a figure may be a collector of objects; or a collector of memories – a recollector, such as Benjamin is in his autobiographical sketches, where he is set loose in a 'thing-world' that demands to be read politically. Such a collector of memories and recollector of the histories encoded in objects renovates the material that comes his way. This mode of seeing, piloted by the collector, is a mode of seeing that has much in common with the technologically enhanced vision of mechanical reproduction – reconstructive, synthetic,

mimetic, teleopic. An unpublished version of "A Short History of Photography" (1929) discusses the way that photography's miniaturisation of objects is a productive act because thereby old works are newly valorised, that is renovated. Renovation and reconstruction form part of the mode of seeing another type, a composite of artist and street-person who in collecting this commercial debris, picking it out of the rush of everyday life, renovates it. He reworks the refuse of everyday life as a refusal of designated value. This is the particular business of one collector who features in Benjamin's studies of Paris and commodity culture: the *Lumpensammler*, the rag picker.

Object Art: Metro-Modernism

The rag picker makes his living from picking through metropolitan refuse. He is a man of the street (or the arcades), out in the public zone, away from the interior. The rag picker plays a role in Baudelaire's *oeuvre*, and it was there, in the poem *Le vin des chiffonniers*, that he sparked Benjamin's imagination. Baudelaire spliced the rag picker and the poet, and thought of both as types who collected the day's refuse in the big city. Everything that the city threw away, everything it lost, everything it despised, everything it crushed underfoot, all that they catalogued and collected, collating the annals of intemperance, the capharnaüm (stockpile) of waste, sorting things out and making wise choices, producing value out of trash, an alchemical act. The surrealist André Breton also styled himself as rubbish sifter, in search of the *trouvaille*, the lucky find, the trash picked up at the flea market or junk shop. The *trouvaille* finds its avant-garde form in the ready-made, the found objects attributed from 1912 to Picasso, Braque or Gris – these things are unmade by the artist, though the same cannot be said of the anonymous designer who first conceived them. Ready-mades refuse illusion, refuse representation, or at least confound it. The artistic experience is cut back to the object alone – and seen from the perspective of criticism, this very mimeticism forms a critique of object-merchandise.

Lumpensammler

With these motifs, the avant-garde game had kicked off, its movements succeeding one another according to the law of industrial production, and continuous technical revolution. From *l'art pour l'art* to assemblage, dada and surrealism, under the microscope is the status of the object in industrial commodity capitalism. To find out about objects in commodity-culture demands a lack of preciousness. For Benjamin, hand-dirtying is intrinsic to modernism with its lyricism of the everyday. Just as his theory of modernity had taken its energies from the interpretation of kitsch, so too modernist culture erupts from the kitsch and trash gathered off the streets, defiantly unresponsive to the eternal values of art or the high-minded quest for a purity of form and materials, and the assertion of an abstracted truth. Benjamin singles out Dada as proponent of the tactile culture of the future. The theses on the work of art in the age of its technical reproducibility note that it hits the spectator like a bullet: "It happened to him, and so acquired a tactile character." However full of high spirits, dada was also deadly serious because it learnt from the First World War that spawned it – get into your victims, hit them where it hurts, get up their noses.

While the ready-made or found object had challenged representation, asserting the engaging nature of objects in and of themselves, another way to confound representation and to hold on to the objectivity of culture was developed through montage's disruption and tearing. Sometimes this happened quite literally, as, for example, in the case of Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau*. This was Schwitters's name for his series of collages and it derives from a word fragment torn off an advertisement for the Kommerz- und Privatbank. The name acknowledges and assaults the commodity-relation of art and anti-art, and it is also the art of the rag picker. Schwitters had a habit of foraging in garbage cans for scraps to use in his collages. One memorable ripe cheese paper spoilt a night at a first-class hotel in Switzerland. *Oorlog* (War), from 1930, is one of his many scrap collages. Its title comes from a torn scrap just off the image's centre, a news report on war –

while invoking the recent past, it hints at a dark future. Layered around this core are labels, wrappers, and tram tickets, from Dessau, home of the Bauhaus, and a Naples tram ride. The name Tzara peeps out by the word applause. The cubists, too, curated the arcana of labels, brand-marks, posters, and newspapers. Café life and cabaret provide the stimuli and the cubist collages deploy tear-outs and strips of newspaper, bottle labels, cigarette papers, handbills from department stores, bargain wallpaper – all carefully juxtaposed to allow puns, interplay between components and the emergence of symbolic meanings. The collector's eye for trash, for tokens that slip almost unconsciously through our hands, is the eye of the metro-modernist. The rag picker arranges himself and his junk in his modernist anti-home. He lives publicly, like his neighbour the *flâneur*, as Benjamin had learnt from Franz Hessel's Berlin study, *Spazieren in Berlin*. The *flâneur* was back, as the title of Benjamin's 1929 review insisted – "The Return of the *Flâneur*". And this *flâneur* was not just one man in the crowd, but was part of the crowd.

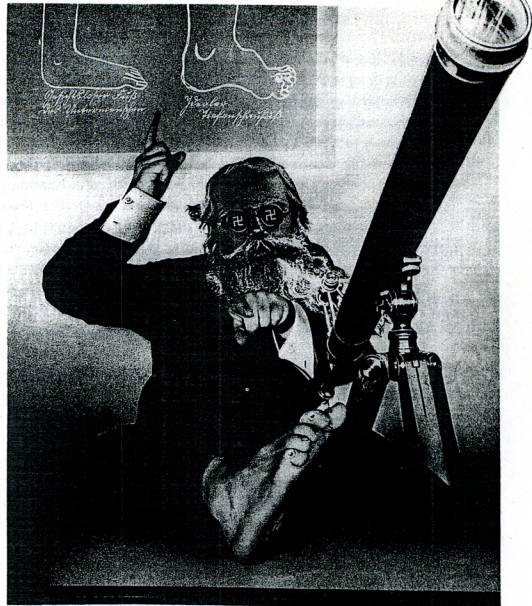
For the mass – with which the *flâneur* lives – gleaming enamel sign-plates are as good or better a wall decoration as the oil paintings in the bourgeois salon. Firewalls are its writing desk, newspaper stands its libraries, postboxes its bronzes, benches its boudoir and the café terrace its oriel from where it observes going-on.¹⁴

If the *flâneur* can be bothered to translate his viewing into reviewing, or his thought into theory, then this street furniture provides a bureau and drawing desk on which he can assemble the pieces of litter, the fragments of city lives, into images and narratives. The trash of the everyday metropolis is re-valued in the artwork. It is re-valued socially – that is to say, it gains an aesthetic value, and it is redeemed. ✕

Benjamin wanted to collect art by Paul Klee, and, if he had been wealthy in later years, he would have acquired several items. In April 1921, Benjamin went to a Klee exhibition in Berlin, and at the end of

Declares
the aesthetic value
juxtapose
the eye of the
metro-modernist

NEUER LEHRSTUHL AN DEN DEUTSCHEN UNIVERSITÄTEN
VÖLKISCHE TIEFENSCHAU



Ein Professor Vitlawopsky von der Universität Heidelberg hat festgestellt, daß das menschliche Hühnerauge, allerdings nur das germanische, befähigt ist, in die Zukunft zu schauen. Hitler hat sogleich nach Bekanntwerden der Entdeckung des genialen Forschers die Überführung von 1300 Hühneraugenoperateurinnen ins Konzentrationslager angeordnet.

Original-Aufnahme aus dem technischen Buch von John Heartfield.

May he went to Munich and bought a watercolour by Klee, called *Angelus Novus*. The New Angel, affixed above his desk wherever he lived, fluttered through his life, until the exigencies of exile meant he had to abandon it. The angel provided the name for a critical journal he wished to found. He wrote about the angel as example of the child-like aesthetic at the core of the modernism he prized. It was the subject of the famous vignette in his final piece of work, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1939–1940).³⁵ The angel stares at the skyward-growing junkpile of debris, dreadful historical events, wasted lives, futile objects. The angel, like Benjamin, wants to gather up the rubbish and the rubble on the ever-growing junkpile. But the angel's optic — his eyes are staring, his mouth is open — is one of impotence. Touch, intervention into the catastrophic unfurling is what he cannot achieve. Collecting the rubbish together, repairing it all would be the act that could renew the hopes for progress through technology, raised in the nineteenth century and so horribly betrayed by two world wars. It marks that "hope in the past," hope encapsulated in the arc between past and present, caught by the telescope eye, or the "weak messianic power" with which each generation has been endowed. Benjamin insists on that possibility in his practice as historian and as collector. He insists on that possibility in the cruelest hours of the century, when Nazi rule is in place in Germany. His utopian telescope that pierces through time to witness the hope deposited in the past was invented for a humane optical science. It finds a demonic counterpart in a photomontage from the 31 August 1933, *A.I.Z.* by John Heartfield, published in Prague. Heartfield was the master of the art of revaluing scraps of everyday life and re-accenting words in common currency to produce destruction of dominant values. A professor with swastika spectacles obscuring his vision places a corn (in German *Hühnerauge*, literally 'hen's eye') at the eyepiece of a telescope. Heartfield's text reads: "New Chair in German Universities; Racial Depth Seeing: Professor Vitlawopsky of the University of Heidelberg has discovered that the human corn, that is to say, the Germanic corn, is capable of

seeing into the future. Straight after the announcement of the discovery by the brilliant researcher, Hitler ordered the transportation of 1300 corn surgeons to the concentration camps.” Heartfield was responding to the official acknowledgement on 29 August 1933 of the existence of concentration camps in Germany. The camps were built to house leftists and Jews. Many of the first inhabitants were the third of all university teachers who had recently been purged from the profession. Heartfield satirises Nazi pseudo-science, not least the pseudo-science of race, perpetrated by the Nazi-friendly professors in their new posts. Their telescopes are useless. Their vision is corrupted. The Nazi ‘science’ of seeing into the future by using German defects will lead them nowhere, and is just another example of the bankruptcy of their ideas. All intelligence, it would seem, had been sent into the camps or into exile. Like Eisenstein and Rodchenko, Heartfield’s photomontages self-consciously evoked the theme of looking, of perspective and view-point. The corn looking through the telescope and the view through the swastika spectacle lenses will not achieve a true vision of the present or the future.

Heartfield was one of Benjamin’s author-producers who perfected dada’s meddling with the deployment of “authentic fragments of daily life.” His montage-criticism, converting signs as found into portents of what was to come, proposed a new optics, an interventionist, hands-on optics of modernist engagement. This was precisely the optics that Benjamin proposed. It was an optics oriented to action, and it did not shy away from cutting up the fragments ripped off the world. The modern artist, here a photo-monteur, has become the (re)collector and preserver of sanity now banished. Benjamin comments on Heartfield in his lecture “The Author as Producer” (1934). Heartfield is one of those who confirms that:

... the tiniest authentic fragment of daily life says more than painting. Just as the bloody fingerprint of a murderer on the page of a book says more than the text.³⁶

The “authentic fragment” is the clue to social actuality won from the busyness of the everyday and, “wrenched from modish commerce,” it is preserved in a new setting, releasing new spins on its meaning. Heartfield’s practice is playful, transformative, “re-functioning,” surreal and critical, and he redeploys the cast-off materials of daily life – newspaper reports and photographs, current phrases and the tics of today’s political rhetoric – in just the ways demanded by Benjamin’s profiles of the collector who has a special eye for things – in its various guises as child, memoir-writer, researcher, antiquarian, flâneur and modernist. These collectors with their scavenger sensibilities promote a profoundly democratic attitude to the world of material that can function only as a critique of what is.

flâneur