

Being Present: Benjamin on Image, Temporality, and Trauma

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Abstract. This article examines Walter Benjamin's conception of the image through the temporal relation in which what-has-been and the present become historically recognizable together. A restricted comparison with Freud's *Nachträglichkeit* brings into focus the non-coincidence of occurrence and later significance, while preserving the difference between psychic experience and the historical and aesthetic mediations of such recognizability. The dialectical image, I argue, does more than register temporal rupture: it configures a relation in which heterogeneous temporal moments become historically intelligible together. Aesthetic mediation and Benjamin's engagement with Proust bring this problem into the sensible and embodied temporalization of the subject, where remembrance exceeds voluntary recollection. The argument then reaches a threshold at which remembrance concerns pasts never experienced by those to whom they later become significant. Historical remembrance here depends upon materially transmitted traces without their assimilation to the memory of a collective subject. Trauma returns at this threshold as a political problem, since its belated efficacy remains bound to singular experience even where the violence from which it arises is historically organized. Being present finally designates the temporal-political relation emerging from these differentiated mediations: a present answerable to histories it has not itself experienced, whose encounter with what has passed can alter its historical situation and leave its possibilities otherwise than settled in advance.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin; dialectical image; trauma; historical temporality; afterwardsness (*Nachträglichkeit*); involuntary memory; historical remembrance; aesthetic mediation.

1. Introduction

To be present would seem, at first, to mean inhabiting the time in which one lives. Benjamin makes this seemingly ordinary condition historically difficult. In the *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, the present emerges against the homogeneous and empty time of historicism as a moment at which the historical continuum can be arrested and an otherwise obscured past suddenly becomes recognizable. What has been can flash up in the Now, forming a constellation whose moment of recognizability gives the historical image its peculiar temporal intensity. History does not simply accumulate behind the present. Its apparently settled past remains traversed by unrealized possibilities, interrupted transmissions, and the claims of those whose histories have been written from the standpoint of the victors. Such moments acquire another force when a present becomes capable of reading them as historically its own concern. The dialectical image condenses this relation between what-has-been and the Now, bringing into visibility tensions that the appearance of historical continuity had kept apart. The present consequently occupies a more precarious position than chronological succession suggests. It is the time from which the past becomes readable, while this readability exposes the present to histories it cannot simply possess as its inheritance. *Being present*, as the problem pursued here, begins from this unsettled relation between historical distance and present recognizability. It asks how what has passed can become effective under altered historical conditions, and how the present itself comes to be differently situated through that encounter (Benjamin 1940 [2003], Theses V–VII, XIV, XVI–XVII; Benjamin 1999, N2a,3; N3,1).

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Across Benjamin's different engagements with history, image, remembrance, and aesthetic experience, history becomes legible through its encounter with a particular present, often under the signs of interruption, danger, awakening, and sudden recognition. Yet these dispersed configurations do not readily settle into a single temporal model. The question is therefore how their affinity can be articulated in a form sufficiently capacious to preserve the complexity of Benjamin's thought without prematurely closing it.¹

The same caution applies to Benjamin's relation to Freud and, more broadly, to the place of psychoanalytic problems within his thought², particularly where his temporal configurations are brought into relation with psychoanalytic ones. Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit*³ emerges from the observation that an occurrence need not possess from the outset the significance it will later assume within psychic life. An earlier scene can persist as a trace whose affective and traumatic determination arises only through a subsequent experience, so that the later moment does more than disclose what had remained hidden in the first.⁴ It retroactively reorganizes the significance of what occurred (Freud 1895 [1950], SE 1, pp. 295–297; Freud 1896, SE 3, pp. 189–221). Memory accordingly takes shape through processes of reinscription in which temporal priority and psychic significance cease to coincide. The past available to memory is therefore already subject to displacement and reconstruction, as Freud's account of screen memories makes especially apparent, while the Wolf Man case radicalizes the difficulty by making the temporal relation between an earlier scene and its later psychic efficacy itself an object of interpretation (Freud 1899, SE 3, pp. 299–322; Freud 1918 [1914], SE 17, pp. 7–122). Freud's later accounts of repetition and traumatic recurrence render the consequences of this displacement more acute. What returns has already happened, although its efficacy belongs to another time and can seize a present that does not command the conditions of its return (Freud 1914, SE 12, pp. 145–156; Freud 1920 [1955], SE 18, pp. 12–15, 30–31).

A corresponding complication of temporal sequence is at stake in Benjamin, though on different terms. Afterwardsness complicates the apparently straightforward sequence in which experience occurs, passes into memory, and subsequently becomes available for recollection. The past persists through traces, substitutions, repetitions, and altered investments, while later experience can confer upon an earlier occurrence a determination unavailable within its first registration. For the present argument, the differentiation between the spatiotemporal occurrence of an event, its aesthetic-experiential registration, and its subsequent determination within practical modes of consciousness and will may provide a provisional point of orientation. Its relevance to Benjamin remains necessarily open, however, since his thinking brings media, materially transmitted histories, forms of experience, and their theoretical-political articulation into relations that repeatedly condition one another without thereby becoming interchangeable. The question is therefore less whether Freudian afterwardsness supplies a temporal model for Benjamin than how far the problem it articulates can remain operative as it passes through these differently constituted forms of mediation.

¹ The complexity of Benjamin's philosophy warrants particular care. His writings resist disciplinary compartmentalization and are better approached as a multilayered philosophical configuration traversing aesthetics, history, politics, and the theory of experience. As Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne emphasize in their introduction to *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy*, Benjamin's philosophical project requires precisely such attention to the relations among apparently disparate domains; significantly, they invoke Benjamin's proposition that "'construction' presupposes 'destruction'" (A. Benjamin & Osborne 1994, p. x).

² The relation between Benjamin and psychoanalysis has been approached in markedly different ways, which itself cautions against treating Freud as providing a directly transferable model for Benjamin's thought. See Roff 2004; Weigel 1996; Nägele 1991.

³ *Nachträglichkeit* is rendered here as "afterwardsness" (Fr. *après-coup*), following Laplanche's account of retroactive constitution rather than mere temporal delay (Laplanche 1999, pp. 34–45).

⁴ Freud's account of repression further complicates this persistence insofar as what is excluded from consciousness is not thereby deprived of efficacy, but continues through derivative formations and the conditions governing its return (Freud 1915, SE 14, pp. 141–158).

Especially consequential here is Benjamin's engagement with Proust, where image, remembrance, and experience converge upon the temporalization and visualization of the subject.⁵ This experiential configuration may also illuminate the place of trauma in Benjamin, insofar as singular experience in its sensible articulation opens onto *Eingedenken*, through which remembrance acquires a specifically historical reach. What remains uncertain in such a passage is the distance it must preserve: how might histories never lived by the present subject enter its experience without being assimilated to the memory of a collective subject?

Moving from the dialectical image and aesthetic mediation through Proustian involuntary memory to historical transmission, the argument follows the changing temporal forms of remembrance, only there returning to trauma as a political problem of singular experience and historically transmitted violence.

2. Dialectical Images and the Temporality of Historical Recognizability

For Benjamin, the image is irreducible to a static object of representation because its mode of appearance is itself temporal. Past and present do not merely succeed one another but enter into a constellation in which their relation becomes newly legible, so that the image condenses heterogeneous temporalities: fragments of what has been, the present of their recognizability, and, crucially, the possibility of a future opened by what the historical continuum has left unrealized. Temporal rupture consequently matters less as interruption in itself than through the receptivity it demands toward relations that chronological succession obscures. Non-coincidence between an occurrence and the moment of its recognizability must remain open to renewed constellation; otherwise rupture itself risks hardening into repetition or becoming blind to the heterogeneous temporalities it discloses. Benjamin occasionally brings this danger close to states of shock or intoxication, yet these mark limits rather than the principle of the dialectical image. Compulsive recurrence, in this sense, constitutes an extreme rather than paradigmatic form of temporal non-coincidence. What returns belatedly in traumatic experience does not return as an intact past available to sovereign recollection; its fragmented emergence registers instead an occurrence holding out against integration into the experience to which it nevertheless belongs. The dialectical image poses a different but structurally related problem at the level of historical experience: what has been becomes legible only through its discontinuous constellation with a present in which possibilities suppressed or left unrealized by historical continuity become recognizable. How can temporal rupture become historically legible through the specific mediation of the image without that mediation domesticating the discontinuity it makes recognizable?⁶

The difficulty of recognizability is already internal to Benjamin's conception of the dialectical image. What becomes legible in the Now must interrupt the continuous relation between past and present, yet this emergence is inseparable from the historical construction through which dispersed and suppressed materials are brought into constellation.⁷

This methodological complication also modifies the relation between temporal rupture and temporal immediacy in Benjamin. The dialectical image names a historical rupture in which what-has-been crystallizes with the Now in a sudden flash—an interruption of homogeneous time through

⁵ For a fuller examination of Benjamin's engagement with Proust, see Schlossman 1986.

⁶ On the temporality of the dialectical image and the constellation of past and present, see Buck-Morss (1989, pp. 241–252) and Osborne (1995, pp. 136–140).

⁷ Pensky locates precisely this unresolved tension between the dialectical image as an “event of a new time” and as the “production of a materialist critic,” observing that the Messianic Now that “springs forth” into profane time remains difficult to reconcile with the “painstaking application of historical method” (Pensky 2000, p. 193).

which the past insists within the present. As Benjamin writes in Convolute N of *The Arcades Project*, “the dialectical image is the caesura in the movement of thought,” the moment in which “what-has-been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation” (Benjamin 1999, p. 463). Yet the image is not simply an event subsequently given aesthetic form: its historical legibility is inseparable from the concrete mediations of its appearance—montage, allegory, ruin, photographic arrest—through which heterogeneous temporal materials enter into constellation. The distinction between temporal structure and mode of appearance must therefore remain analytically available, without hardening into a division between content and form. In the broadly Kantian configuration of Benjamin’s thought traced by Caygill, such distinctions persist through their reciprocal implication rather than through the separation of independently constituted terms (Caygill 1998).

Aesthetic forms neither merely illustrate an independently constituted rupture nor produce its temporality; they shape the conditions under which its interruption becomes perceptible and historically intelligible. In this sense, Benjamin’s images function as “flashes of knowledge,” in which temporal shock becomes a mode of historical cognition (Weigel 2015, p. 362).

The distinction between the temporal rupture of historical continuity and the formal-material mediation of its recognizability also determines the specific sense in which Benjaminian temporality can be brought into relation with Freud’s concept of afterwardsness. The difficulty of reading Benjamin through Freud lies, however, in determining how far this segmented or fragmented temporality—whereby what has occurred remains constitutive of the subject even as later experience gives its determination another form—can illuminate historical experience without abstracting this retrospective determination from its psychic conditions and transferring it as a model to the political history of remembrance.

The psychic mediation of an earlier experience and the formal-material and historical mediation of a past are not equivalent. Yet this difference remains under tension insofar as the constitution of significance may involve another position—an interpreter, observer, or third party—across increasingly extended forms of mediation. What comes into view is thus the widest span across which temporal determination might operate, rather than two neatly separated registers. Trauma occupies an extreme or threshold position within this span. Where experience is overcharged, blocked, or exceeds a threshold of integration, the relation between occurrence and later determination acquires a particularly forceful form. Traumatic belatedness does not thereby become the dialectical force of historical recognizability. In Benjamin, when *das Gewesene* becomes recognizable through its discontinuous constellation with a determinate Now, no psychic force equivalent to traumatic non-coincidence need be posited. Instead, the caesura itself changes its mode according to the form of mediation. Its relation can therefore be thought across differently constituted forms of experience without historical recognizability being reduced to psychic temporality or psychic experience being detached from the social and historical conditions of its mediation.

This specifically historical form of non-coincidence explains why Benjamin’s account of the dialectical image does not merely reject linear chronology but reconfigures the relation between past and present. He writes: “It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation” (Benjamin 1999, p. 463). Benjamin describes this moment as “the caesura in the movement of thought,” emphasizing that the dialectical image “is not a synthesis but a constellation, pregnant with tensions” (p. 463). This interruptive structure is inseparable from the moment of recognizability in which historical truth briefly appears. As he further notes, “Every present day is determined by the images that are synchronic with it: each ‘now’ is the now of a particular recognizability. In it, truth is charged to the bursting point with time” (pp. 463–464). The present, then, is not merely a later moment produced by temporal succession but the site in which

fragments of the past become legible. The dialectical image thus holds past and present in a constellation whose temporal tension resists their subsumption into a continuous historical narrative.⁸

Within this specifically historical constellation, what is at stake is more than the intensification of a discontinuity already lodged within historical time. Its occurrence produces the relation through which heterogeneous moments become historically intelligible together: what-has-been acquires a determination that it did not possess independently of the Now in which it becomes recognizable, while that Now is itself altered by the past with which it enters into constellation. Historical experience might therefore be understood neither as the recovery of an already constituted meaning nor simply as the interruption of an established continuum, but as the formation of a temporal relation through which a new configuration of historical connectedness first becomes thinkable. Material traces such as ruins, citations, fragments, and montage participate in this production rather than merely giving sensible form to a meaning constituted elsewhere. The historical relation configured in the dialectical image is therefore inseparable from the punctuality of its recognizability. “The true image of the past,” Benjamin writes, “flits by; it can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again” (Benjamin 1940 [2003], Thesis VI).

The formulation concerns more than the transience of memory: it makes the historical intelligibility of the past dependent upon a present encounter in which what-has-been becomes newly determinate. The flash does not simply disclose material whose meaning had remained intact beneath its historical suppression; rather, the moment of recognition configures a relation through which past and present become legible together. Precisely because this relation is punctual rather than continuously available, it breaks with the historicist procedure of arranging events within a succession whose apparent coherence converts catastrophe into another moment of development. Materialist historiography turns instead toward those breaks in transmission at which the past can enter into a relation with a present that neither merely inherits nor retrospectively masters it. Benjamin’s “weak messianic power” brings the political stakes of this temporal structure into view: the claims of the oppressed past become effective not through their incorporation into an enlarged historical continuum, but through a present capable of entering into a still-unsettled relation with them (Benjamin 1940 [2003], Theses II, VI).⁹

The punctuality of historical recognizability places a corresponding demand upon the practice of the historian. The “Angel of History” renders visible what such a practice must resist: propelled forward by the storm of progress, the angel perceives where historical continuity sees development an accumulating catastrophe, “one single catastrophe” piling wreckage upon wreckage (Benjamin 1940 [2003], Thesis IX). Materialist historiography consequently cannot consist in completing the

⁸ Weigel reconstructs a development from the predominantly spatial and topographical organization of memory in the early *Passagen* materials toward a scripto-topographical model in which historical perception assumes the form of reading. Individual and collective memory are brought into structural relation, while the earlier constellation of dream and waking is progressively reformulated through traces, writing, distortion, and their conditions of readability. Of particular importance is Weigel’s account of Freud’s distinction between permanent memory traces and perception-consciousness: the trace is never simply available as such but becomes readable through a discontinuous and momentary *Aufleuchten* of consciousness. She argues that Benjamin takes up precisely this structure in relation to the images of what-has-been, whose “historical index” consists in their becoming readable only at a specific moment, the “Now of cognizability.” The Freudian configuration is consequently neither reproduced unchanged nor abandoned: it is displaced into a theory of collective memory and historical perception and further elaborated through Benjamin’s concepts of image, constellation, writing, and non-sensuous similitude (Weigel 1996, pp. 99–116, esp. pp. 101–105, 107–109, 113–116).

⁹ Andrew Benjamin develops this account from Walter Benjamin’s Thesis V of *On the Concept of History*, particularly the formulation that “the true image of the past flits by” and can be seized only as an image that “flashes up at the moment of its recognizability” (Benjamin 1940 [2003], Thesis V). On this basis, Andrew Benjamin distinguishes an image merely “given to be seen” from one that “has to come to be seen” and interprets *Erkennbarkeit* as a punctual moment in which recognizability involves both “seeing within destruction” and seeing “as a form of destruction.” He further contrasts this moment with myth and eternal recurrence and relates the truth of the image to its momentary rather than continuous presence (A. Benjamin 2013, pp. 174–177).

sequence from which these remains derive their meaning. Its task is rather to seize singular moments of recognizability in which what has been excluded from it can enter into another historical relation. Such seizure cannot be reduced to a sovereign act of reconstruction, since recognition is itself conditioned by the temporal constellation in which the image becomes legible. The possibility that such a moment may be missed gives this historiographical practice its ethical-political stakes: what fails to become legible risks being returned to the continuity of progress through which the claims of the defeated and oppressed are effaced. The relation to trauma can, at this point, be maintained in a more restricted sense. What historical and traumatic experience share is not an identical temporal structure but a disturbance of contemporaneity between occurrence, experience, and subsequent intelligibility.

3. Form and Shock: Aesthetic Mediation

Whereas Section 2 asked how what-has-been can become historically recognizable through its discontinuous constellation with the Now, establishing that the dialectical image configures rather than merely represents this historical relation, the question of form follows from the conditions of that configuration itself, including the interpretive position through which it becomes legible. The image does not first exist as a temporal rupture to which perceptible form is subsequently added; material and formal mediation participate in constituting the historical relation through which rupture becomes recognizable in the first place. This problem of mediation also prepares the subsequent return to the relation between image and trauma, since any such relation must take account of the forms through which discontinuity becomes perceptible rather than presupposing a structural equivalence between traumatic and historical temporality. The present section therefore considers more briefly how particular aesthetic forms organize historical recognizability and under what conditions formal interruption acquires critical force rather than merely reproducing fragmentation.

Modern aesthetic procedures such as montage, allegory, citation, and photographic arrest organize historical legibility by giving materially differentiated form to relations of interruption, temporal disjunction, and return. Their significance cannot therefore be reduced to the representation of a rupture constituted independently of them. Yet neither does formal discontinuity possess an intrinsically critical force. Fragmentation, shock, juxtaposition, or arrest can interrupt the appearance of temporal continuity without thereby rendering the historical relations traversing that continuity intelligible; indeed, the same formal operations may displace or aesthetically contain what they make perceptible. Rather than directly re-enacting traumatic temporality, aesthetic forms participate in configuring temporal relations whose critical significance depends upon whether heterogeneous historical materials become recognizable in a determinate constellation. The problem of aesthetic mediation consequently lies in this non-equivalence between formal interruption and historical legibility: the former may condition the latter, but cannot by itself guarantee it. At their most incisive, such forms allow an unassimilated past to become perceptible without either restoring it to continuous historical meaning or converting discontinuity itself into an aesthetic resolution.

Benjamin's entry into this perceptual dimension is the concept of shock (*Schock*). Modernity produces a sensorium exposed to recurrent impacts—crowds, commodities, signage, speed—whose discontinuity alters the conditions under which experience can be accumulated and transmitted. The distinction between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* becomes crucial here: the immediacy and fragmentation of modern perception place under pressure those more durable and collectively mediated forms through which experience acquires continuity. In "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," shock accordingly names not simply an external impact but a problem concerning the relation among perception,

consciousness, memory, and the formation of experience (Benjamin 1939 [2003], pp. 316–18).¹⁰ Aesthetic procedures organized through ellipsis, interruption, or juxtaposition can reproduce the discontinuous rhythm of shock at the level of form without thereby acquiring, by virtue of that discontinuity alone, a determinate critical force.

The significance of shock for aesthetic mediation lies, however, not in supplying a single formal model that could subsequently be identified across different media. Its interruption of perceptual continuity assumes different determinations according to the medium. Poetry, photography, and montage therefore need to be distinguished according to the temporal relations they configure: the fleeting encounter, the arrest of a trace, and the constructed juxtaposition of heterogeneous historical materials do not perform the same operation. Their comparison nevertheless makes it possible to ask how discontinuity passes from a condition of modern perception into formally organized modes of historical recognizability.

In “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” Benjamin finds one such configuration in the urban poet’s exposure to modern shock. The city, with its crowds, noises, and rapidly succeeding impressions, places perception under conditions in which the fleeting encounter can resist incorporation into continuous experience. Baudelaire’s “À une passante” (“To a Passerby”), for example, condenses desire, shock, and loss into an encounter whose disappearance belongs to its very mode of persistence: what is retained poetically is not the recovery of a continuous experience but the tension of an encounter that cannot be prolonged into one. This condensation can be compared with traumatic non-coincidence without being identified with it, insofar as the significance of the encounter persists through the discontinuity that prevents its experiential completion (Benjamin 1939 [2003], pp. 313–18, 328–29).

Photography introduces a different operation. In “Little History of Photography” (1931), the photographic image arrests a moment and preserves details whose historical significance need not coincide with the circumstances of their initial inscription (Benjamin 1931 [1999], pp. 518–20). Arrest is therefore not simply another version of poetic shock: the persistence of the photographic trace opens a temporal interval within which what has been recorded can become differently readable. Montage, in turn, makes the constructive dimension of such mediation explicit. By juxtaposing temporally and materially heterogeneous elements—advertisements, architectural fragments, journalistic anecdotes, commodity forms—it does not merely preserve discontinuity but actively constructs relations among materials whose historical connection is not given in advance (Benjamin 1999, N1a,5; N2a,3). Buck-Morss sharpens this point by distinguishing montage as such from its critical operation: while Benjamin’s construction leaves its ideational elements “unreconciled” rather than fusing them into a “harmonizing perspective,” montage can equally produce illusion when incompatibility and contradiction are concealed; what matters is whether the construction “makes visible the gap between sign and referent” rather than absorbing it into a deceptive totality (Buck-Morss 1989, pp. 67–68).

In this respect, the traditional conception of aesthetic form as possessing an atemporal integrity is unsettled. Form emerges instead through a temporal interaction between intention and material, activity and receptivity, in which what is given can be worked through without its heterogeneity simply being dissolved. If such working-through generates different determinations of meaning, subsequent mediation remains internally ambivalent: as Comay’s account of traumatic belatedness suggests, it may register the pressure of what initially failed to be assimilated while also “elid[ing]”

¹⁰ Benjamin’s discussion of shock here is itself one of the points at which his engagement with psychoanalysis becomes particularly explicit. Roff (2004, pp. 129–131) emphasizes, however, that Benjamin does not simply reproduce Freud’s account of the protective shield against stimuli: in the Baudelaire essay, the psychoanalytic problem is displaced through the bodily and historically specific experience of modern shock, so that Freud functions within a constellation of other aesthetic and materialist concerns rather than as an autonomous explanatory model.

it through its displacement (Comay 2011, p. 25). What matters aesthetically is therefore how formal mediation can hold out against mere fragmentation without converting discontinuity into closure, participating instead in the production of conditions through which a present relation may open onto futurity. Benjamin's "moment of danger" sharpens the stakes of this distinction: what becomes recognizable in the present is bound to a historical relation that may disappear if it is subsumed once more under the apparent continuity of history (Benjamin 1940 [2003], Thesis VI). The critical force of aesthetic discontinuity lies, accordingly, not in nonclosure as such, but in its capacity to hold open historically determinate relations whose heterogeneity would otherwise be effaced by their reintegration into continuity.

4. Memory, History, and Political Remembrance

The move to memory becomes necessary once the temporal relation between past and present is considered across individual experience and collective history. In contrast to Adorno's more general reserve toward such a passage, Benjamin remains considerably more open to relations between these levels. Yet, as already argued, their relation cannot be collapsed into the historicity of a common subject through which individual experience and collective history would acquire an underlying temporal unity. The relation between image and trauma is rooted in this problematic, since perceptual receptivity alone cannot account for how what has passed exceeds its occurrence and acquires renewed actuality. Such actuality proceeds through the individual temporalization of experience, even where what becomes actual belongs to a history that cannot itself be possessed as individual memory. Trauma makes this problem particularly acute insofar as its recurrence unsettles any simple coincidence between the objective pastness of an occurrence and its actuality in experience. Remembrance extends this problem beyond traumatic recurrence, naming a relation in which what has passed acquires another mode of presence through encounters with objects, images, and sensible experience without being exhausted by the present in which it becomes actual. What kind of relation to the past is established when such re-emergence can be reduced neither to retrieval nor to representation or assimilation? Its non-sovereignty becomes decisive here: what has passed is neither simply present nor reduced to what no longer exists, but becomes effective through material and aesthetic encounters in which its significance, as well as the subject's relation to it, is altered under present conditions.

Proust and Involuntary Memory

Benjamin's interpretation of Marcel Proust brings the relation between image and remembrance into the domain of lived and sensible experience, where the past becomes accessible neither through deliberate retrieval nor independently of the material encounters through which it re-emerges. Proust's achievement, in Benjamin's view, lies in making involuntary memory (*mémoire involontaire*) central to the experience of the past. Involuntary memory does not simply bring back a stored image; rather, recollection renders perceptible what was not fully available to experience in the same form before its return. One "sees for the first time" what remained latent until a material trigger awakens it (Benjamin 1929 [1968], p. 210). This is distinct from *déjà vu*, which superimposes an illusory familiarity upon the present, whereas involuntary memory emerges unpredictably through encounters with material objects and sensations. The famous madeleine soaked in tea functions as a material key, unlocking strata of the past "beyond the reach of the intellect" (Benjamin 1929 [1968], pp. 210–211). These images flash up without the guidance of conscious will, establishing a temporal disjunction between an earlier experience and its later emergence in memory.

Freud's concept of afterwardsness provides one model for understanding this temporal non-coincidence insofar as an earlier experience may, through a later experience that retroactively reconfigures it, acquire a significance it did not possess or could not register in the same way at the moment of its occurrence. Proust gives a distinct phenomenological form to a comparable temporal non-identity: what is no longer present enters remembrance through the astonishment of its re-emergence and, without becoming present again in its original form, nevertheless remains effective and acquires renewed actuality. This Proustian configuration of memory can in turn be brought into relation with Freud's "Mystic Writing Pad" (*Wunderblock*), where memory appears not as a transparent archive but as a stratified field of traces whose impressions persist through differentiated layers without remaining continuously available to consciousness (Freud 1925 [1961], pp. 227–32).

What the psychoanalytic models formulate in terms of retroactive significance and the persistence of traces, Proust allows Benjamin to encounter at the level of sensible and embodied experience of what never have been met.¹¹ Yet Benjamin's affinity with this Proustian configuration exceeds the interpretative position from which he ostensibly approaches it. Proust becomes less an object of commentary than a textual medium through which a temporal proposition already at work in Benjamin's thought acquires another articulation. Through this encounter, the disjunction between past and present becomes perceptible not as an abstract temporal relation but in the material occasions of involuntary memory. What Benjamin takes from Proust is therefore not trauma or loss as its content, but a non-sovereign structure of temporal emergence in which memory-images (*Bilder*) emerge through sensory encounters and render the past newly legible in the present. Involuntary recollection can acquire a traumatic structure when belated return becomes inseparable from the recognition of loss, without trauma thereby defining involuntary memory as such (Comay 2009, pp. 86–90). Such memory-images bring past and present into a dense constellation without collapsing their temporal difference. Time, for Proust, is therefore neither a continuum nor an indefinitely extended present, but what Benjamin calls "convoluted time." Distinguishing Proust's rapturous eternity from both Platonic and utopian eternity, Benjamin locates his "true interest" in the passage of time in its "most real—that is, space-bound—form," most openly disclosed in the interaction of "remembrance within and aging without." Proust's world is consequently a "universe of convolution," in which involuntary memory brings what has passed into a present relation without abolishing its temporal difference (Benjamin 1929 [1968], pp. 210–211). Benjamin then characterizes Proust's method as "actualization, not reflection" (p. 211).

This actualization is itself inseparable from the corporeal passage of time. Remembrance works inwardly while aging registers temporality outwardly, so that Proust can, in Benjamin's formulation, let "the whole world age by a lifetime in an instant" (p. 211). The body thus belongs internally to this convolution rather than merely registering its effects. Benjamin's discussion of Proust's psychogenic asthma makes the relation aesthetic as well as corporeal: the illness "became part of his art," while his syntax "rhythmically and step by step reproduces his fear of suffocating" (pp. 213–214). Sensation, corporeality, and literary form thereby become different sites at which a temporality unavailable to reflective recollection becomes perceptible. What returns need not have been preserved as continuously available content. Benjamin accordingly refuses to oppose remembrance simply to forgetting. Remembrance and forgetting form the woof and warp of the same experiential fabric, so that forgetting belongs to the constitution, rather than merely the loss, of what can later emerge in involuntary memory (p. 211). Habit becomes significant within this structure insofar as the habitual organization of experience can render what it contains imperceptible, whereas involuntary memory

¹¹ Benjamin formulates this peculiarity of *mémoire involontaire* in "A Short Speech on Proust": "not only do its images appear without being called up; rather, they are images we have never seen before we remember them" (Benjamin, GSII.3, p. 1064; trans. Hansen, 2008, p. 348).

breaks with such availability without simply restoring an intact past. Memory does not therefore simply overcome forgetting: what has withdrawn from conscious possession can become perceptible otherwise, through the sensory and material occasions of its return. Benjamin's subsequent description of the "free-floating forms" of *mémoire involontaire* as largely "isolated, though enigmatically present, visual images" gives this discontinuous return an explicitly imagistic determination (p. 214).

Material Traces and Historical Remembrance

Involuntary memory renders intelligible how that which is no longer continuously available to consciousness may nevertheless acquire renewed perceptibility through material and sensuous encounters. Yet this structure remains indexed, however non-sovereignly, to a remembering subject and a past that belongs to its experience. Where such a relation cannot be presupposed, a differently constituted problem of historical remembrance arises: how can a past never experienced by the present subject—belonging instead to other lives, earlier generations, or defeated histories—acquire actuality through encounters with its material traces in the present? At issue is therefore not the extension of subjective remembrance beyond the individual through the supposition of a collective identity as its remembering subject, but a change in the mode of the past's transmissibility: from experiential return to historically transmitted traces. Objects, photographs, texts, citations, ruins, artworks, and urban remains can mediate such persistence without requiring that what they transmit ever have been retained as memory by the subject who encounters them, allowing a past never possessed as memory to persist "in the world of things" (Conty 2017, pp. 48–49).

The historical image gives this materially mediated relation to the past a specifically historiographical determination. Historical transmission is never neutral with respect to what it preserves: the continuity through which the past becomes available is itself marked by the asymmetry between the victorious and the defeated, between what enters the inherited account of history and what it suppresses or renders illegible (Benjamin 1940 [2003], Theses II, IX). Historical intelligibility cannot therefore be identified with the continuous unfolding of what has been transmitted, since the conditions of transmission participate in determining what can appear as history at all.

In Proust, the material object occasions the return of a past belonging to the subject's own experience. In historical remembrance, however, the material trace enters a history of transmission that exceeds the subject's experiential relation to the past. A photograph, ruin, text, or artwork not only mediates access to a past the present subject never experienced; its availability in the present is itself conditioned by processes of preservation, selection, displacement, inheritance, and neglect. The significance of transmission therefore concerns whose past can acquire presence in the present and under what conditions. What survives cannot be separated from the historical conditions of its survival. For Benjamin, the continuity through which the past is handed down is politically compromised by the relations of victory sedimented within it. If the image of the past becomes apprehensible only in the fugitive *Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit* at which it flashes up, its recognizability cannot be dissociated from the danger attending both tradition and those who receive it: that what has been transmitted be appropriated anew as an instrument of the ruling classes (Benjamin 1940 [2003], Theses V–VI).¹²

¹² Andrew Benjamin gives *Erkennbarkeit* a more exacting determination than the recognition of an already constituted historical object. His distinction between what is "given to be seen" and what "has to come to be seen" locates recognizability in the event through which an image acquires its historical visibility, rather than in the subsequent identification of something whose historical significance would already be available. Hence his twofold characterization of recognizability as "seeing within destruction" and as seeing that is itself "a form of destruction" (Benjamin 2013, pp. 174–177).

Historical materialism consequently intervenes not simply by retrieving what historical continuity has left unarticulated, but by contesting the mode of transmission through which that continuity constitutes itself as inheritance. Historicist empathy, ostensibly granting access to the past on its own terms, proves inseparable from the position from which such access is undertaken: insofar as empathy attaches itself to the victor, it enters the succession through which past victory is inherited by those who rule in the present. Cultural inheritance thereby becomes internally non-identical with the civilizational continuity it appears to attest, since what the triumphal procession carries forward as its spoils remains inseparable both from the anonymous labour to which those cultural treasures owe their existence and from the process in which, as Benjamin writes, “barbarism taints the manner in which it was transmitted from one hand to another” (Thesis VII).

What presents itself within the historicist continuum as a sequence of events, and under the rubric of progress as historical advancement, confronts the angel as a single accumulating catastrophe whose wreckage is not left behind by the movement that produces it (Thesis IX). Yet to interrupt this continuity is not thereby to occupy a position outside the history it has transmitted. The difficulty becomes especially acute where revolutionary standstill remains implicated in the temporality it negates: as Comay strikingly puts it, the revolutionaries who shot the clocks “had, in the first place, to synchronize their watches” (Comay 2005, p. 100).

This non-exteriority bears equally upon historical transmission: what has occurred enters later constellations under conditions in which its significance cannot remain simply identical across its passage. Trauma renders this temporal non-identity especially acute, since the delay between occurrence or inscription and later articulation belongs to the constitution of its significance rather than merely succeeding it. Comay locates this difficulty in the broader structure of *translatio*—“transfer, transference, transmission, transport”—through which passage across historical boundaries cannot be separated from the material and semantic displacements such passage entails (Comay 2011, pp. 13–14). Her subsequent description of trauma renders the temporal implication of this structure more precise: between “originary inscription” and its later “transcription, translation, or re-edition” there persists a delay in which chronological sequence is thrown out of joint (pp. 24–25). What reaches the present through a historical trace is therefore neither the unchanged persistence of an earlier significance nor something detached from the past it transmits; transmission exposes that past to a later determination whose belatedness belongs to the historical relation itself.

Trauma and the Politics of Remembrance

If historical remembrance cannot be derived from an enlargement of individual memory into a collective mnemonic subject, no more can the political significance of trauma be secured by transferring the psychic structure of traumatic experience directly to history. Irreducibly singular though trauma remains in the psychic and corporeal experience of the subject who undergoes it, exhausted by such singularity are neither that which inflicts the wound nor the modalities under which its effects subsequently return, sedimented within both being the determinations of historically organized relations of violence whose unequal apportionment of exposure, vulnerability, and power conditions, in turn, what may become rememberable, representable, or susceptible to disavowal. Caruth locates the peculiar historicity of trauma in precisely this temporal difficulty: an event may acquire its traumatic force through a latency in which occurrence and conscious experience fail to coincide, while its historical significance emerges through forms of implication that exceed the subject to whom the event occurred (Caruth 1991). Yet once this implication is extended beyond the experiential history of the subject, altered too is the register of the problem carried forward from Benjamin. At issue is how what has been singularly undergone can enter into a political relation with the historical conditions of its occurrence without being either immured within private experience or subsumed under an antecedently constituted collective memory.

Intensified under modernity by technological acceleration, metropolitan shock, warfare, and the circulation of images is precisely this non-coincidence between singular experience and the historical conditions of its occurrence, altered thereby being not only the modalities under which violence is encountered but also the temporal and medial conditions under which its effects can recur. Testimony renders this difficulty particularly perspicuous. That traumatic memory exceeds the experiential enclosure of the individual does not of itself confer historical or political significance upon it, such significance depending instead upon a testimonial relation in which the address of singular experience to another makes it communicable without effacing the difference between undergoing an event and subsequently bearing witness to it (Felman & Laub 1992; Rosenberg Schipper 2024). Witnessing names, in this sense, a further determination of remembrance rather than a consequence immanent to traumatic recurrence itself. To witness need entail neither empirical co-presence with the event nor the subsequent contemplation of its representation, but may consist instead in becoming implicated in the mediated survival of a past whose claims remain incommensurable with their exhaustive recognition from the standpoint of the present. Responsibility takes shape within this temporal asymmetry. Irretrievable though the past remains, the present is not thereby absolved of answerability for the forms under which what has been excluded, suppressed, or left unresolved is permitted to appear. Politically determinate, then, is remembrance neither by virtue of the past it preserves nor through the retrospective knowledge it makes available, but insofar as its intervention into pastness alters the temporal disposition of the present itself. Andrew Benjamin gives this structure a particularly forceful formulation when he writes that remembering “takes the place of knowing” and that remembrance “breaks the links” holding what was past “as the past.” As a “form of destruction,” remembrance breaks open the interarticulation of remembering, pastness, and temporal continuity, thereby undoing the hold of historicist time. It is in this interruption that remembrance acquires its political determination. Each generation is endowed with a “weak messianic power” whose actualization belongs to the present, opposed by the project that would “maintain the present as it is”; the co-presence of these possibilities constitutes what Andrew Benjamin calls “the politics of time” (Benjamin 2013, pp. 169–170). Political, then, is historical recognizability not because cognition of what has been would of itself acquire practical efficacy, but because, in the very present in which a past becomes recognizable, at stake is also the disposition of that present toward possibilities foreclosed within the history it inherits.¹³

Such a politics of time is not exhausted by the praxis toward which historical recognizability may be directed, since political action itself presupposes a mode of inhabiting the present through which relations to what has passed become possible. It is at this juncture that the temporal structure of mediation reconstructed through Benjamin opens onto a post-Benjaminian thought. Rather than being returned to the closed circuit of an exclusively Benjaminian terminology, the problem can be carried forward through Agamben’s account of the contemporaneous, in which belonging to one’s time is constituted through disjunction from it, paradigmatically figured in the capacity to perceive the darkness of one’s epoch rather than coincide with what that epoch renders immediately visible (Agamben 2009).

What matters here, beyond the metaphors of darkness, is the experiential implication of the subject in a temporality whose moments no longer stand in relations of simple succession. Refracted through the problem of historical remembrance developed here, Agamben’s disjunction thereby acquires a determination not exhausted by his formulation. The subject inhabits a present whose

¹³ Tagliacozzo (2022, pp. 176–178) brings this implication into explicit relation with praxis. In the fleeting emergence of the dialectical image, a forgotten moment of the oppressed past enters into constellation with immediate political conditions and can thereby provide a direction for praxis, so that historical cognition bears upon political action rather than merely augmenting knowledge of what has been.

relation to what has preceded it is bidirectionally determining while remaining temporally asymmetric. The past cannot be altered in its having-occurred, yet the significance through which it bears upon the present remains susceptible to renewed determination, while the present is itself reconfigured through that encounter. Futurity emerges from this reciprocal asymmetry, rather than appearing as a temporal horizon simply awaiting what comes next. Being present would accordingly designate a temporal-political praxis in which neither the past is incorporated into present actuality nor the present secured as the sovereign position from which what has passed receives its final meaning. Political remembrance carries traumatic belatedness beyond recurrence in this sense. It concerns the possibility that what remains unresolved may participate in the formation of a future precisely because neither its historical significance nor the present's relation to it has been brought to completion.

5. Conclusions

Reconsidered through the temporal relations among interruption, belatedness, and actualization, Benjamin's image emerges neither as the representation of an antecedently constituted historical meaning nor as the aesthetic transcription of rupture alone. What the foregoing analyses have sought to establish is, rather, that the historical force of the image inheres in the relations it renders possible among temporally non-coincident determinations whose belonging together cannot be presupposed. Proustian involuntary memory disclosed this structure within the experiential history of the subject, where what has ceased to be continuously available can acquire renewed actuality through material and sensible encounter. Historical remembrance displaced the same problem without merely enlarging its scale, since the traces through which other lives, defeated histories, and unexperienced pasts become transmissible cannot be assimilated to the mnemonic contents of a collective subject. Traumatic belatedness introduces a further complication. It cannot simply furnish historical materialism with a ready-made temporal grammar, even where the delay between occurrence and later significance bears a certain affinity to historical transmission. What these different relations might nonetheless disclose is a more circumscribed temporal structure. What has passed remains irreversible; its significance, however, is not thereby fixed once and for all. Exposed to later determination, the past can enter into a new relation with a present that, in encountering it, is itself no longer left unchanged.

On the reading ventured here, neither interruption nor incompleteness could readily be accorded an intrinsically critical or ethical valence. Montage, allegory, fragmentation, and the dialectical image become consequential only insofar as the relations they articulate prevent historical difference from being absorbed into the sovereignty of a present for which the past would be either fully knowable or definitively complete. Hence neither aesthetic reconciliation nor the mere preservation of rupture provides the terminus of the argument. At issue instead is a non-sovereign form of actuality in which what has passed can bear upon the present without being restituted as presence, and in which the present, far from constituting the immutable standpoint from which history is retrospectively adjudicated, becomes susceptible to determination by what it cannot make contemporaneous with itself. Being present, understood in these terms, names neither possession of the historical moment nor coincidence with one's time, but the more exacting capacity to sustain relations with what remains temporally other to it.

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