the art of getting lost:
reeling through Benjamin

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Abstract

This project asks why Walter Benjamin regarded film as a revolutionary technology. Through *Picture House* and *Hansel & Gretel*, two 'digital objects' I have composed, and my text, *the art of getting lost*, I trace the obscure connections among memory, mimesis, embodied experience, communication, translation, forgotten futures, allegory, and the (neo)baroque, which Benjamin weaves together in his theory of film. In film's mimetic nature Benjamin saw a means to (re)educate our abilities to make connections, to stray from our usual ways of perceiving and to enter into an astonishment that can lead to new awareness. I argue that in his concept of innervation—an exchange between screen and skin—Benjamin sees film as producing a semblance of an oral society, one which privileges memory and embodied communication. Film, I posit, is a site which Benjamin understood as permitting a recuperation of the sensual; for him it is a time and place which sutured experience and representation, body and memory. Further, I argue that the aura Benjamin claimed was stripped away in technological reproduction is in film actually reproduced as an 'afterlife' which is able to touch us in ways that are more than metaphorical. My own practice picks up on Benjamin's notion that within film there lies buried what paradoxically he called forgotten futures. My pieces play along one of these possible tangents, engaging in a baroque cinema of attractions which celebrates artifice and openendedness. Benjamin, I am arguing, saw the technology of film as performing a remembrance service, reminding us of the cost of uncritically accepting representations and misusing technologies. His theories prove as relevant to today, if not more so, as to the time he wrote them.

for those
who know
by heart

Acknowledgments

Thanks to all those who have given me support, friendship, encouragement, and have put up with me throughout this project. Without your help and generosity this project would have remained a forgotten future.

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purloined valuables

> Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't *say* anything. Merely show.
> I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the
> rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way
> possible, to come into their own: by making use of them.
> —Walter Benjamin[1]

This project began with my desire to articulate my artistic practice. My work in 'new' media, has always, in one way or another, expressed my preoccupation with objects and techniques from the past. Manifest in my works is my aspiration to understand and reproduce something of the magic found in the patina of such things as early film, shadow plays, puppets, photo albums, scrap books, curio cabinets, and fairy tales. In light of my proclivity towards the dated and outmoded, it seems logical, in retrospect, that over the years my work has moved from linear one-channel video works, for which I would shoot all the footage, to works that began more and more to incorporate found materials. This tendency towards using appropriated sources has culminated in the works I have produced during the course of my PhD being (almost) entirely composed of purloined images and sounds.

My fascination with the 'useless' nature of these found materials partly may have to do with the fact that they have been deemed unworthy or irrelevant and discarded in favour of new models. As castoffs they evoke a sense of melancholy—what has outlived its purpose is disposed of, relegated to the rubbish pile. However, in our rush to embrace the 'new' and 'improved' we so easily and quickly forget or dismiss the secrets of past lives harboured by these antiquated articles. The battered beauty of these tattered artifacts stirs up a visceral reaction, a palpable longing. What is it that triggers and mobilizes this poignant attraction? For what these aged fragments evoke is something more than mere sentimental nostalgia. There is a tangible lamentation at play in these worn items; they

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[1] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, [N1a, 8], 460. Emphasis in original. Hereafter referred to as *Arcades*.

whisper of what has been lost, what has passed us by, what cannot be retrieved, or at least not in its entirety.

In trying to make sense of my attraction to objects and methods that have dropped in estimation and use, I discovered something of an affinity between my own approach to my practical work and critic and theorist Walter Benjamin's passionate defense of the popular and the outmoded. In researching Benjamin's varied and extensive writings I became intrigued by his thoughts on the medium of film. I was curious to understand why Benjamin assigns a 'revolutionary' power to this technology. I wanted to know what, in Benjamin's eyes, makes this medium so capable of affecting radical change. Part of the difficulty in understanding Benjamin's theories on film stems from the fact that despite holding the medium in such high regard he didn't actually write all that much specifically on film. Further, the fragmentary nature and compact economy of much of his writing left him little room to draw out a coherent and direct argument. Even Benjamin's much referenced "Work of Art in the Age of Reproducibility"—arguably his most sustained and detailed work dealing with film—tends to raise more questions about his terminology and tropes than give definitive answers regarding his conception of the medium.[2]

I think the ambiguity surrounding Benjamin and film is responsible, at least partially, for the relative lack of research conducted in this area. A few scholars, Eva Geulen and Miriam Hansen most notably, have written cogent and creative papers investigating various aspects of Benjamin's relationship to filmic technology.[3] However, despite the innovative work of Geulen, Hansen, and others, which has been indispensable in helping me to form my argument, there seems to be a relative paucity of critical works that deal with Benjamin and film. My dissertation sets out to address this gap in the area of

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[2] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," (Second Version), *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 100-133, "Work of Art in the Age of Reproducibility" (Third Version), *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 251-283. The essay, one of the few works from Benjamin's extensive oeuvre that were published during his lifetime, remained for Benjamin a work in progress. The first version was completed and published in French 1935; Benjamin finished a second, German version with footnotes in early 1936. For the next three years Benjamin worked on a third version, which has become the widely read version of the text. See editors Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, "Chronology, 1935-1938," *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 425. Hereafter referred to as WOA2 and WOA3; *Selected Writings* hereafter referred to as *SW*.
[3] Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street," *Benjamin's Ghosts: Interventions in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*, 41-73; Hansen, "Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: "The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology,"" *New German Critique*, Winter 1987, vol. 40, 179-224; Hansen, "Room-For-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema." 23 March 2006 <http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa4092/is_200404/ai_n9348684>; Hansen, "Of Mice and Ducks: Benjamin and Adorno on Disney," *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, Winter 1993, volume 92, Number 1, 27-61. Eva Geulen, "Under Construction: Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Benjamin's Ghosts: Interventions in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*, 121-141.

Benjamin studies. Undertaking a sustained investigation through a number of Benjamin's texts, selected films, and related writings, in conjunction with my own practice, this project seeks to understand why Benjamin believed film—a reproductive technology—was so special, so unique. And, further, I wish to discover whether there is any currency today in Benjamin's theories on film.

The resultant text, *the art of getting lost: reeling through Benjamin*, looks at the way in which the idea of estrangement is crucial to Benjamin's understanding of film. Benjamin advocates a straying or getting lost, a veering from the expected. In doing so, he hoped we would (re)cognize the world in new ways, be moved from our prescribed and habitual perception into astonishment and wonder at both the marvelous and the horrific in our world. For Benjamin, the technology of film, with its ability to (re)present the world to us in new ways, had the potential to lift us from the ordinary and make us (re)consider the usual and the mundane.

The notion that we largely live our lives unconscious of much of what goes on around us compels Benjamin to urge us to cultivate and exercise a new perception. In doing so, he would have us stray from the status quo and linger at what Benjamin's friend, critic Theodor Adorno, skeptically called "the crossroads of magic and positivism."[4] Modernity itself was, for Benjamin, a beguiling creature, one that sits like a crust or a layer of ash atop an earlier now obscured world which still circulates beneath, its molten body glimpsed through fissures and breathing through cracks. The modern world, in ways that are often violent, brings together past and present, the near-at-hand and the darkly distant, the local and the exotic. Benjamin both celebrated the wonders that modernity ushered in and lamented what this radical spatial and temporal restructuring squeezed out.

This "strange weave of space and time" effectively renders the modern world an uncanny place.[5] The modern world, for Benjamin, is haunted. Ghosts and doubles vie for space, not wanting to be forgotten. Benjamin would urge us to be receptive to these lost voices. And although we all may possess the ability to communicate with the 'dead,' lassitude has dulled this faculty. The straying Benjamin presses us towards cannot rely on the already-known and therefore (re)positions us to better tune in to the latent world beneath the asphalt. But of course, if we get lost, we still do have recourse to what we know, even

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[4] Theodor Adorno, letter to Benjamin 10 November, 1938, *Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin: The Complete Correspondence 1928-1940*, 283.
[5] Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," *SW*, vol. 2, 518.

if that knowledge doesn't include a familiarity with the immediate surroundings. Benjamin's getting lost, while necessitating an abandoning of routine (moving out of habit), paradoxically results in a different sort of convention. What he apparently is suggesting is that in losing our bearings and dissolving our boundaries, we tap into a different kind of memory, one which is situated in the *lived body*. This embodied wisdom, he would seem to imply, is a way of knowing that derives from a primal instinct, something which we are not conscious of, cannot account for in our rational day-to-day lives. After all, getting lost is a matter of survival. Although Benjamin does not explicitly correlate the two states, I believe that this 'base' memory that he identifies, which helps us navigate, is actually the mimetic faculty which he prizes so highly.

Although film, in Benjamin's estimation, contributed to an erosion of traditions, he also believed it helped to (re)activate the mimetic faculty. The vacillation between cause and cure is crucial to understanding Benjamin's thinking not only about film, but modernity in general.[6] While there is no doubting Benjamin lamented the passing of some traditions, he did not make a claim for the possibility (or desirability) of returning to an earlier point at which humans were 'free' from technology. Modernity, for Benjamin, is both a world that can surprise and amaze in ways that regenerate our curiosity and sharpen our acuity, at the same time that it erodes collective memory. Something of this dialectical approach is found in theorist Tom Gunning's identification of the state of astonishment as a threshold experience.[7] As we grow accustomed to the new, astonishment gives way to familiarity. But Gunning stresses that the move from amazement to habit is not a linear dead end. Rather, the process is a dialectical one: each state can provoke the other, resulting in an inherently "unstable and temporary experience."[8] In Gunning's thinking, the pervasiveness of the uncanny in modernity provides the basis for this give and take of surprise and routine. Rendering the familiar strange and the strange oddly familiar, the uncanny repeatedly moves us between the known and the unknown, the marvelous and the malevolent.

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[6] The question of how to define 'modernity' is both problematic and ongoing. As Paul Wood states in his introduction to *The Challenge of the Avant-Garde*, there are many modernisms which have been determined by time and place. The issue is further complicated by the fact that the term 'modernism' is used to speak of both artworks and ways of thinking about them (Wood, 12). However, the modernism with which Benjamin is concerned is primarily the period between the nineteenth century and World War II in Europe. In particular, he is interested in avant-garde practices and approaches that developed with dada and surrealism as a response to the First World War.

[7] Tom Gunning, "Re-Newing Old Technologies: Astonishment, Second Nature, and the Uncanny in Technology from the Previous Turn-of-the-Century," *Rethinking Media Change*, eds. David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins, 41.

[8] Gunning, "Re-Newing Old Technologies" 41, 46.

Prefiguring Gunning, Benjamin sees this dialectics of astonishment powerfully duplicated in the technology of film. The uncanny verisimilitude with which film captured and (re)animated the world, for Benjamin, (re)engaged our mimetic capabilities; film was a "training ground" which provided a way for viewers to come to terms with the shocks of the modern world.[9] The importance of exercising the mimetic faculty, for Benjamin, stems from his belief that modernity had dulled our ability to make associations between the seemingly disparate. A failure to draw connections in the world and make contact in meaningful ways led Benjamin to fear foreclosure on alternate stories and versions of events. Further, he was concerned that the communication of those common histories was being eroded, that the mundane and quotidian were being silenced in favour of moments marked by high tragedy and drama—those events which are usually deemed more 'important' and worthy of commemoration. In an attempt to rescue the overlooked and unheeded, and all the unfulfilled possibilities that disappear as a result, Benjamin seeks out hidden routes and detours, trails and traces that require a trained eye and receptive ear to detect.

The force of primitive, traces of a dimmed past, obscured and forgotten connections, memory—these have powerfully driven Benjamin's concern with the latent which has obvious connections with psychoanalysis. Freud posited that the conscious screens out traumas that the individual has experienced. The cost of this forgetting is manifest as neurosis. The psychoanalyst's task is to help the patient to remember, to draw out what lurks in the unconscious. As a result of Freud's "talking cure,"[10] the patient is able to come to terms with the past by mending broken narratives.[11] The uncanny, too, not only ties Benjamin to Freud, but also links both figures to the Surrealists. In his short essay on the uncanny, Freud proposes that what makes something uncanny is not that it is novel or unknown; rather, the sense of unease or anxiety we experience occurs when the familiar suddenly breaks through the thin veil of the foreign.[12] Pardoxically the uncanny comes from seeing the known, and *not* from seeing the strange; or, rather, from seeing what we already know within an unexpected context or frame. The Surrealists exploited Freud's theories of the uncanny and the unconscious to bring to light the irrational in the

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[9] Benjamin, WOA3, *SW*, vol. 4, 269.

[10] Sigmund Freud, *Two Short Accounts of Psycho-Analysis, Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis, The Question of Lay Analysis*, 45, 52, 56.

[11] See *Freud: A Very Short Introduction* by Anthony Storr for a succinct overview of Freud's life and theories of psychoanalysis.

[12] Freud, "The Uncanny" (1919), reproduced in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan.

everyday.[13] Similar to the way in which Freud maintained that psychoanalysis was a science,[14] the Surrealists conceived of art as a "form of research into the workings of thought, which would make a contribution to knowledge."[15]

Benjamin, too, I would argue, conceives of his own work in such a way. His laborious *The Arcades Project* brought together a collection of quotations, astounding in both their diversity and number, in order to construct a profile of the shopping arcades in nineteenth-century Paris. Part of his purpose was to identify the social conditions that formed these spaces and resulted from them as they blurred the boundaries between interior and exterior. Benjamin makes his appreciation for this rigorous research approach even more explicit in his declaration that the medium of film embodies the fusion of art and science,[16] an assertion which I discuss more fully in chapter four. Defending the Surrealists' desire to "win the energies of intoxication for the revolution,"[17] Benjamin claims that one can easily form an inaccurate conception of the Surrealists' endeavours, which often tended confusingly towards the arcane and obscure. "Any serious exploration of occult, surrealistic, phantasmagoric gifts and phenomena," Benjamin explains, "presupposes a dialectical intertwinement to which a romantic turn of mind is impervious. For histrionic or fanatical stress on the mysterious side of the mysterious takes us no further."[18] In his championing of the Surrealists' appreciation of the supernatural and mystical, Benjamin is also defending his own interests in the arcane. Sarah Ley Roff eloquently discusses Benjamin's desire (one which Freud shared) to align occult practices with science.[19] Benjamin's attempt to wrestle mimesis from its role as simple reflection of reality[20] by tying it to earlier practices of astrology and graphology, attests to his inclination to fuse the irrational and the methodological.[21]

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[13] In his "Second Manifesto of Surrealism," André Breton outlines Surrealism's intent to critically investigate and exploit the gaps in between "reality and unreality, reason and irrationality, reflection and impulse, knowledge and "fatal" ignorance, usefulness and uselessness." André Breton, "Second Manifesto of Surrealism," *Manifestos of Surrealism*, 140.

[14] Storr, *Freud: A Very Short Introduction*, 24.

[15] Steven Harris, *Surrealist Art and Thought in the 1930s: Art, Politics, and the Psyche*, 3.

[16] Benjamin, WOA3, *SW*, vol. 4, 265.

[17] Benjamin, "Surrealism," *SW*, vol. 2, 215.

[18] Benjamin, "Surrealism," 216.

[19] Sarah Ley Roff, "Benjamin and psychoanalysis," *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. David S. Ferris, 124.

[20] See M.H. Abrams' *The Mirror and the Lamp* for an historical overview of the ways in which the notion of the mimetic has changed over time.

[21] See Benjamin's works: "A Doctrine of the Similar," *SW*, vol. 2, 694-698, "On the Mimetic Faculty," *SW* vol. 2, 720-722, "On Astrology," *SW* vol. 2, 684-685, and "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," *SW*, vol. 1, 62-74.

Freud, Benjamin, and the Surrealists—albeit in different ways—all were concerned with recuperating the instinctual, the unconscious, the latent to bring about a fuller understanding of the conditions that create our identities. The desire to recognize and account for the materiality of life, which is to say an embodied experience of the world, ties these figures, directly and indirectly, to Marxism as well.[22] In "The metaphysics of Modernism," Michael Bell observes that modernism itself was concerned with questions of interpretation and knowing. Bell argues that both Marx and Freud "turned human life into a fundamentally hermeneutic activity."[23] Marx's theories developed out of a rejection of much of George Hegel's philosophical idealism. Broadly speaking, Marx took issue with Hegel's assertion that ideas—the abstract—were what constituted reality and determined history. Marx argued that this idealist approach failed to assign any agency to humans and ignored their immediate physical realities.[24] The acknowledgement and even privileging of a sensual experience of the world as a way of knowing also informs Freud's thinking, which postulates that our instincts are largely responsible for the formation of identity. Importantly, the Surrealists, too, were engaged with a critique of Hegel's thinking. Although attracted to Hegel's historical perspective and placement of the individual as part of a collective,[25] the Surrealists, like Marx, ultimately couldn't reconcile their project with Hegel's absolute idealism. The Surrealists were eager to distance themselves from a romanticism that strove to embody Hegel's 'Absolute Spirit' and its necessary liquidation of material form.[26] Rather, the Surrealists, and Benjamin in like fashion, wanted to bring the abstract into the tangible, to make art part of ongoing everyday life. Benjamin and the Surrealists' (as well as Freud's and Marx's) concern with a way of knowing predicated upon sensual contact necessarily stood at odds with a rational, cognitive concept of epistemology. Importantly, in those revisionist interventions this haptic knowledge accounted for what often had been overlooked and undervalued. Further, and in fitting extension of the actions, both Benjamin and the Surrealists championed popular culture, and brought it into their own work, as a way of questioning the elite position that 'fine art' held in 'high' modernist thinking.

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[22] See Susan Buck Morss' *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin And The Arcades Project*, chapter one "Temporal Origins," and Graeme Gilloch's *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations*, chapter five "Culture and Critique in Crisis," which deal with Benjamin's complicated ties to Marxism. See also Jack J. Spector's introduction to *Surrealist Art & Writing 1919/39: The Gold of the Time*, where he outlines the complex and changing relationship the Surrealists had with Marxism as well as Freud's theories.

[23] Michael Bell, "The metaphysics of Modernism," *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, 9.

[24] See Ken Morrison's *Marx, Durkheim, Weber: Formation of Modern Social Thought*, 28-32 for a concise explanation of Marx's rejection of Hegel's philosophy.

[25] André Breton, "Second Manifesto of Surrealism," 140.

[26] See Steven Harris' *Surrealist Art and Thought in the 1930s: Art, Politics, and the Psyche*, 16-17.

In ways that challenged established realist conventions, both Benjamin and the Surrealists pushed the idea of resurrecting what has been lost to a capitalist world that was so seized with belief in progress. Freud and Marx also employed the language of archaeology, both as a model on which to base their theories and as a means to articulate those ideas. Like Freud who posits a forgotten experience as fundamental to the construction of identity, Marx, too, speaks of a world that lies beneath, one held in check by the dominant capitalist forces. For both thinkers, there exists a realm that could be accessed if only the governing conditions were to alter and permit an emergence of what had been repressed (the forgotten experience in Freud's thinking, and the proletariat in Marx's).[27] The belief that a world hidden to us exists and can be accessed under the proper conditions is informed by the emergence of archaeology as a formalized discipline in the early nineteenth century.[28] Marx's (base and superstructure)[29] and Freud's (conscious and unconscious)[30] terms both draw on layered models in which, through excavation and examination of the subsequent findings, one can discern glimpses of an alternate reality, whether residual or emerging.

Benjamin and the Surrealists, too, engage in a form of archaeology. As I draw out in my dissertation, much of Benjamin's thought employs the language of this discipline. Both Benjamin and the Surrealists sought to excavate the marvelous in the everyday; they desired to dig up and to bring the overlooked to attention. In sifting through the debris of modernity they hoped to piece together a picture of what had been and what might yet be. In different ways Benjamin and the Surrealists were after a reconstruction of the past; they desired to piece together an alternate history from the broken bits of modernity, one which would speak of the strange and marvelous as it pervades the everyday world we so readily take for granted.

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[27] See chapter two in Anthony Storr's *Freud: A Very Short Introduction* for a comprehensive summary of Freud's conception of repression. Marx's and Engels' *The German Ideology*, sets out their theory that the material and historical conditions of the world shape the individual.

[28] See Michael Shanks' essay "Culture / Archaeology—the dispersion of a discipline and its objects," where he discusses the ways in which archeology has changed since it emerged as a discipline in the early nineteenth century. Shanks traces connections between archaeology, anthropology, and landscape in interesting ways to query our contemporary understanding and usage of these framing devices. Michael Shanks, "Culture / Archaeology—the dispersion of a discipline and its objects." 18 May 2007 <http://traumwerk.stanford.edu/~mshanks/writing/Culture.pdf>.

[29] See the preface of Marx's *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. 18 May 2007 <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm>.

[30] See Sigmund Freud, *Two Short Accounts of Psycho-Analysis, Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis, The Question of Lay Analysis.*

Having outlined some of the numerous connections between Benjamin and psychoanalysis, Surrealism, and Marxism, I would like to state that my intention here is not explicitly to investigate these links. In fact, to trace these connections in any orderly way would be highly problematic. Benjamin rarely makes direct reference to Freud, the Surrealists, or Marx, making any empirical study of the influence of their theories on Benjamin's thinking difficult.[31] However, even more hampering to any coherent examination of the degree to which Benjamin may be employing psychoanalytic or Marxist theory, or adopting Surrealist techniques, is the fact that Benjamin is not fully committed to any of these groups.[32] Although obviously interested in these ways of framing experience, Benjamin was reluctant wholeheartedly to embrace any of them.[33] Rather, I believe Benjamin approached these models as a collection of epistemological methods and chose from each the elements that appealed to him.[34] Sarah Ley Roff makes a similar argument, asking us to recognize Benjamin's tactics as intertextual.[35] I would argue that Benjamin is far less interested in 'getting it right,' in adhering strictly to the rules of any one of these systems, than in exploring interconnections. And so I find myself in agreement with Roff who names Benjamin's texts as "staging-grounds for struggles between discourses," a strategy related to his use of citation, most obviously in *The Arcades Project*. There Benjamin's massive collection of quotes jumble together,

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[31] In fact, Benjamin rarely makes direct reference to or credits sources in his writings. This practice certainly raises questions about appropriate academic protocol. But the omission of sources is even more perplexing in light of Benjamin's desire to bring multiple discourses into dialogue and to question the autonomy of the artist. Although it may not account for the extent of Benjamin's failure to sufficiently credit others' ideas, the fact that much of his writing had not been published during his life, and therefore the works we received often are not finished or polished, needs to be considered.

[32] In his book *Compulsive Beauty*, Hal Foster describes the Surrealists' and Benjamin's rejection of Marx's superstructure as an expression of an economic base as "a truly fundamental point of conflict with official Marxism." "Rather," Hal continues, the Surrealists and Benjamin "played upon the tension between cultural objects and socioeconomic forces," exploiting the incongruities between the old and the new (Foster, 159).

[33] In fact in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" (one of the few explicit references Benjamin makes to Freud) Benjamin refers to Freud's essay "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" to elucidate his theory that Baudelaire's writing embodies the shocks of modernity. However, Benjamin makes known his ambivalence towards Freud's theory as a whole. He explicitly states: "The following remarks based on [Freud's theory] are not intended to confirm it; we shall have to content ourselves with investigating the fruitfulness of this hypothesis in *situations far removed from those which Freud had in mind when he wrote*" (Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," *Illuminations*, 160, emphasis added). Similarly, although appreciative of much of Surrealism's attempts to challenge convention, Benjamin decides that they too ultimately fall short of the mark. The very intoxications Benjamin praises the Surrealists for engaging, for him, also become dangerous: "This profane illumination did not always find the Surrealists equal to it, or to themselves; and the very writings that proclaim it most powerfully [...] show very disturbing symptoms of deficiency" (Benjamin, "Surrealism," *SW*, vol. 2, 209). Further, Benjamin declares in his typically poetic fashion that although Surrealism may have entered "the humid backroom of spiritualism," he is "not pleased to hear it cautiously tapping on the windowpanes to inquire about its future" (Benjamin, "Surrealism," 209).

[34] Benjamin describes the Surrealists as being "concerned literally with experiences, not with theories and still less with phantasms" (Benjamin, "Surrealism," 208). I believe Benjamin himself is in sympathy with the Surrealists' aims of bringing art into play as a legitimate and significant means of acquiring knowledge. Along with the Surrealists, Benjamin believed that through the irrational (art), we could more fully understand ourselves and our relations to our worlds.

[35] Sarah Ley Roff, "Benjamin and psychoanalysis," 116.

overwhelming the possibility that any coherent linear narrative might emerge in an alternate history of the arcades in nineteenth-century Paris.[36]

Similarly, my own approach to Benjamin echoes something of his desire to explore ideas through various methods and formulations. Although Benjamin's thinking on photography / film and memory, and the connections he makes to psychoanalysis, may at times seem naïve or perhaps even misguided, such complaints, as I have argued above, miss the important point that primarily Benjamin is more interested in exploring connections than in firming up irrefutable truths or air-tight systems. Benjamin flexibly utilized various theories to construct a model for thinking in innovative and interesting ways about the conditions of modernity and its radical changes. Whether these theories were tenable as empirical or historical truths was not of paramount interest for Benjamin. In this project I, too, am not concerned with whether Benjamin's theories are ultimately 'correct' or 'pure.' Rather, I have undertaken a careful and creative exploration of the complexities of Benjamin's theories on film. The result is a comprehensive investigation, which, in intent ways, plays with the many interconnections that Benjamin forges in thinking about film and situating it as a means of social change.

Perhaps Benjamin's desire to inscribe the medium with so much revolutionary potential might have been overly optimistic. Many of his contemporaries certainly thought so, Theodore Adorno being one of the most vocal in his opposition to large parts of Benjamin's theories. However, rather than engaging in a debate as to the correctness of Benjamin's theories, what I have done here is to draw out the ways in which his thinking of film is neither simple nor unfounded. Like Carol Jacobs' eloquent and insightful account of Benjamin's use and thinking of language in her book *In the Language of Walter Benjamin*, my study too might be said to take a more literary tack. I've approached Benjamin's texts as texts, analyzing not only *what* Benjamin is saying, but *how* he is saying it; and further, provoked in emulation of his remarkable style to write in a more creative mode. As I draw out in the following chapters, Benjamin was concerned with the ways in which 'facts' and 'information' were replacing communication and knowing. Keeping with his desire to value a hermeneutical understanding (as well as accounting for the restraints of time and space) my exploration has concentrated on the intricacies of Benjamin's theories themselves, rather than on the historical conditions that

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[36] Roff, "Benjamin and psychoanalysis," 125.

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surround them, or on the adequacy of his comments on history. There are, in any case, innumerable scholarly texts which already diagnose these connections in detail.[37]

It seems reasonable to say that Benjamin was not a systematic thinker. He had no interest, really, in identifying a site from which he might proceed to explain everything in a consistent, self-sufficient, and seemingly unassailable way. Such positioning clearly has its advantages, but Benjamin was prepared to bypass that option in preference for a more tentative, constantly adjusting way of proceeding. He never sought a fixed or immutable scheme that presumably would explain everything and itself existing supposedly beyond refutation, its terms transcendental, which is to say everywhere applicable and internally consistent. If the results might appear to some as loose and vague, Benjamin, I think, would not have been unduly troubled, for he was prepared to take up from among the many curiosities he happened upon whatever he found attractive or productive. He was in no way slovenly in his thinking, however; he was in fact highly intelligent, but in what he came across he preferred the productive to the hermetic, the undecided to the concluded, the ruminative to the analytical, the partial to the schematic. His disposition—curious, open, responsive, adaptable—meant that he valued hunches and intuitions perhaps as much as he relied on unrelenting analysis. His was a poet's sensibility in many ways, and a good part of the pleasure in reading Benjamin is the freshness of his images, the newness and power of his metaphors. It can be found too in the many pages of his unpretentious and highly personal accounts—the stirring power of his often simple, concrete, and homely citings. The mind that produces those gnomic, speculative, discontinuous, intently citational, and remarkably poetic texts, brings him close to what in our times many find to be a highly appealing—perhaps a postmodern—negotiation with the world. Provisional, personal, wayward, modest in his own way, Benjamin proceeded as an independent figure: not as genius who pretended to have originated an argument, not as authority who would seem to have given the last word, nor as metaphysician who in grand theory would have provided some mechanism of ultimate explanation. Those are guarantees which in our most ambitious or anxious (more egotistical perhaps?) moments we (perhaps Benjamin too) might dream of possessing. But he never took that route, and it is his own meanderings as flâneur that I myself, as a flâneuse of Benjamin's texts, would celebrate here in what I find and in how I work.

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[37] See, for example, Bern Witte's *Walter Benjamin: An Intellectual Biography*; Eric Jacobson's *Metaphysics and the Profane: The Political Theology of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem*; *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* by Margaret Cohen; *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism* edited by Beatrice Hanssen and Andrew Benjamin; John McCole's *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*; and *Walter Benjamin's Passages* by Pierre Missac.

Benjamin was not interested in producing conventional criticism, nor am I. In fact his willingness to deviate and play with texts is a large part of what drew me to him in the first place. To force Benjamin into an expected form violates the spirit of Benjamin's work and my inquiry. Rather, my adherence to a Benjaminian drift has resulted, I would like to claim, in a "profane Illumination,"[38] a text that, in its deviations from questions of historical accuracies or sources of influence found in Benjamin's writings, has sought to produce a more engaging and useful, more open and exploratory, understanding of Benjamin's thinking about film.

As I said, a felt sympathy drew me to Benjamin. His composite approach became a productive model for me to think through my own use of found materials and fractured narratives. Importantly, then, I would wish to read Benjamin with a generosity that welcomes surprise more than to process with a zeal that hopes to find fault. If one were asked to choose between sympathy and judgment—not that the choice is or has to be exclusive—I would say that a reader can do as well in surrendering to a text as in seeking to dominate it, can as usefully take away what leads s/he finds in it, as linger unhappily over its real or supposed deficiencies. All acts of reading involve some kind of contention, I suppose, but it is not my wish here to develop a sustained critique of Benjamin, who in any case is not the subject of my work, not exactly or fully that is, so much as a stimulating helper who shows me intriguing ways to look at cinema and articulate my own practice.

I believe that the attempt to find new ways of thinking about the relationship between experience and representation, ways that didn't foreclose on or deny multiple possibilities, nor eradicate the magical and malevolent, was what attracted Benjamin to parts of psychoanalysis, Marxism, and Surrealism. Weaving strands of each into an archaeological approach, Benjamin hoped to unearth connections that would create an art that people could connect with. In film Benjamin saw something of this possibility. In his thinking the medium had the ability to function in powerful ways as a collective unconscious. In its mirroring of reality, film circulated the familiar, yet, as a composite of sequences of images, film required new ways of understanding. In film the known and the recognizable is brought into a tension with the unfamiliar; film, for Benjamin, is uncanny. Benjamin, then, conceives of film as model, both figuratively and literally, through which to understand the effects of modernity. In identifying the filmic medium as one that can

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[38] Benjamin, "Surrealism," *SW*, vol. 2, 216.

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cause an unease, Benjamin saw it as capable of prompting the viewer into a critical relationship with the screened images and sounds; film forced viewers to 'look again,' to do a double-take and scrutinize what it was that was there in front of them in all its seeming veracity. Benjamin hoped that viewers, in engaging with these meaningful representations, these reconfigured realities, would be moved to action, to question their surroundings and to begin the kind of hard work that might alter them.

Benjamin's near compulsion to draw correspondences between the seemingly disparate, and to stray into strangeness, is what the practical component of my thesis, too, is concerned with. In conjunction with the text *the art of getting lost*, I have produced two works, *Picture House* and *Hansel & Gretel*, which continue my exploration of Benjamin's theories. My practice works in tandem with my written text; the two complement each other. This is very much a hybrid project: the text and practice both tackle issues revolving around memory and representation and explore these areas through form as well as content. In Benjaminian spirit, *the art of getting lost* as well as *Picture House* and *Hansel & Gretel* attempt to put theory into practice, to make the medium perform the very ideas it is addressing; to foreground the mediation of all representation.

In chapter one I discuss the way in which the art of getting lost is fundamental to Benjamin's thinking. Crucial to Benjamin's understanding of the modern world is the notion that the self is an unstable and ultimately unknowable entity. In this chapter I argue that Benjamin conceived of identity as a construct, a representation, a memory—a mediated experience. The importance of (re)cognizing the layers of social conventions that settle into hardened definitions of our selves and our worlds prompts Benjamin to urge us to stray from our usual selves and be receptive to a world which we generally don't notice. Here I discuss the way in which the child and the flâneur are two figures that, for Benjamin, are able to perceive the world hidden by the habitual. The child, not yet stunted by preconception, is still able to look at the world as if 'at first sight.' Through play the child engages in a mimetic reciprocity, losing him- or herself in an imitation of the Other. The importance of this youthful figure, for Benjamin, lies in the fact that he or she *performs* the notion that identity is malleable. In the child's use of his or her body to mimetically interact with the world, he or she engages in an act of immediacy; the child *becomes* (however partially or temporarily) what s/he is imitating.

In this first chapter I go on to examine the flâneur who, for Benjamin, is both a metaphorical and literal figure that he desires to inscribe with a certain agency. Benjamin's flâneur, I argue, is a detective, a chronicler—a roaming I / eye of the city— who collected the scraps that usually were overlooked and unheard and then (re)presented them in an effort to contribute to the preservation of a collective memory. The flâneur is an ambiguous character: part of the crowd, yet a distanced observer, (s)he recorded the seemingly unimportant. In the technology of photography Benjamin sees something of the flâneur's methods of registration duplicated. Photography, too, for Benjamin was a record that didn't screen out the actualities before its lens; photography elides the subjectivity inherent in traditional art forms. For Benjamin, photography (and by extension film), in its democratic recording, serves as an apt aid—metaphorically and literally—for the flâneur. In Benjamin's eyes, the technology's immediacy meant that the photograph produced a 'true' picture of modernity, reflecting the fragmented and fleeting nature of the modern world. Further, I argue that, importantly for Benjamin, both the child and the flâneur engaged with the world in sentient ways, cultivating an embodied knowledge of a world largely forgotten, which they then share with others.

In the second chapter I examine Benjamin's dialectical relationship to film. Although cautious of film's ability to nibble away at our memories, Benjamin was also excited by the possible role film could play in helping people to cope with the stresses of the modern world which had upset traditional patterns of community and communication. I trace the ways in which the mimetic medium of film—both a cause and cure for the ills of modernity—(re)presents the world, exposing the mundane as uncanny, fabulous, and frightening. Able to speak to our "optical unconscious," film allows a different version of the world to register through devices such as slow motion, the close-up, and reversal of action which, in Benjamin's view, can explode the "prison-world" of the ordinary.[39]

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[39] Like his understanding of mimesis as a once powerful means of perceiving and understanding, Benjamin seems to conceive of the optical unconscious as an atrophied human faculty that photography is able to spark back to life: "For it is an other nature which speaks to the camera rather than to the eye: "other" above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the . unconscious" (Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," *SW*, vol. 2, 510). Although he doesn't explicitly equate his unconscious with Freud's, he does draw parallels between the camera and psychoanalysis as means of creating the conditions which expose an unconscious (Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," 512). Able to arrest time, the photograph "reveals the secret" world in ways which our usual perceptions screen out (Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," 512). Benjamin appreciates much Surrealist work as being able to access the optical unconscious, shares with them a desire to discern something of the mysteries that are (just) beyond our (usual) perceptions. Benjamin speaks of the marvel at seeing the otherwise imperceptible minutia of human action when slowed down on film, for example. (Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," 510). In Benjamin's thinking, it is the technology of photography and film that (re)awaken the optical unconscious permitting a new (and urgently needed) understanding of the world.

Further, the technique of montage which juxtaposes time and space in radical ways, permitted cinema viewers the opportunity to embark on an adventurous journey from the safety of their seats, a phenomenon which I will discuss in relation to Buster Keaton's film *Sherlock Jr.* (1924). Importantly for Benjamin, film was a collectively viewed medium. Along with many of his contemporaries, such as Theodor Adorno and Siegfried Kracauer, Benjamin believed that the radical restructuring of society brought about by the Industrial Revolution and First World War had resulted in an impoverished experience, and worse, an inability to communicate the wisdom gleaned through trial and error. I will argue that in film Benjamin saw a chance to recuperate some vestige of an oral society, with an emphasis on collective communication and embodied knowing, qualities of existence which were crucial, in Benjamin's mind, to the maintenance of a humane and responsible society.

In chapter three I look at the strong links Benjamin made between translation, photography / film and memory. Eager to lead us astray, Benjamin promoted translation as a form of estrangement. In foregrounding language's concrete aspects, Benjamin hoped to produce a copy that in its 'awkward' refusal of an easy reading would move the reader into a more critical reception of the world. I go on to discuss how the new reproductive recording devices of photography and film, importantly for Benjamin, were also able to expose to us a world we largely take for granted. In their ability to touch a part of ourselves which would usually remain shut off from our everyday lives, the photograph and film, with their uncanny mimetic capabilities and ambiguous vacillation between presence and absence, necessitated and exercised a new form of perception. In this chapter I examine the ways in which representation itself was, for Benjamin, something intriguing and troubling. I speak of how Benjamin aligned the photograph / film and memory: both are recordings of (fleeting) moments of the past, both are immediate in their forms, and both are subject to a later, imposed mediation. The photograph / film, the memory—the 'image' of an event—has no inherent meaning; 'facts' surrounding these moments in time are attached to them at a later point. What Benjamin is at pains to point out is the way in which the later imposition and interpretation of meaning is so readily taken as 'true,' a concern I elucidate through a discussion of Christopher Nolan's film *Memento* (2000). What Benjamin desired, I argue,

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See also Benjamin's "Work Of Art in the Age of Reproducibility," 3rd version, *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 255-266, where he briefly discusses the optical unconscious and film's explosive capabilities.

is a new form of literacy—a detection of what was never written—what is there in between the lines of all representation.

In chapter four I explore the ways in which Benjamin tied the mimetic faculty to a 'primitive' state, one that is capable of forging associations that become obscured through everyday routine. I examine the way in which modernity, for Benjamin, resulted in a failure of the rational and gave rise to a modern 'barbarian.' However, this stripped state, in Benjamin's view, provided an opportunity to begin anew. The mimetic capabilities of film, I argue, for Benjamin, were able to engage the viewer in ways that were more than metaphorical. For him, film was able to affect the spectator in a visceral and palpable manner, in ways that *moved*, *touched*, and *mattered*. In this chapter I will use Elias Merhige's film *Shadow of the Vampire* (2000) to bring to light the importance Benjamin placed on the mimetic capabilities of film. I will also argue that the aura of an object, which Benjamin, in his widely-know "Work of Art" essay claimed was destroyed by reproductive technologies, is actually reproduced by photography and film, resulting in a reincarnated, reconfigured afterlife of the object before the lens, which in its near tangible presence, can take on a haunting power.

In the fifth and final chapter of my dissertation I explore Benjamin's idea that film harbours within itself a number of 'forgotten futures.' One of film's disregarded possibilities, I argue, can be traced back to a baroque heritage that celebrates a sentient experience and engages the spectator in an analogic reading, one which necessitates a 'getting lost' in its labyrinthine structure. In this chapter I discuss the way in which the (neo)baroque eschews any easy or singular reading found in traditional linear narratives in favour of an open-ended database structure which permits a multitude of possible outcomes. Filmmaker Guy Maddin's work serves as an apt instance of what Tom Gunning, undertaking an archeological approach to the history of cinema, has identified as a "cinema of attractions." In keeping with Gunning's definition of a cinema of attractions as an approach that involves a celebration of artifice, a flagrant flaunting of self-awareness, and a rejection of traditional narrative progression, Maddin's films I argue, belong to not only a cinema of attractions, but their darkly ironic humour also places them within the baroque tradition of the Trauerspiel (literally 'sorrow play'). Through a critical analysis of Maddin's *Archangel* (1990), I trace the important links Benjamin made between modernity, mourning, haunting, allegory, memory, and film. Also, in order to contextualize my own digital work in relation to Benjamin's theories on

film, I bring into play notions of remediation and theories of media convergence in this chapter, which argue that 'new' technologies largely mimic and pilfer from earlier ones.

Reflection on my practice is woven into each of the chapters and discussed in relation to the issues that Benjamin's theories raise. Fundamental to Benjamin's thoughts on film is the relation he draws between photography / film, memory, mimesis, mourning, reproduction, embodied experience, and the communication of that experience. My practice explores this constellation of concerns. However, I would again stress the hybrid nature of my project: neither *Picture House*, nor *Hansel & Gretel* are mere illustrations of Benjamin's theories. Rather, I think of them as *demonstrations* of some of the ideas that my text deals with. These two works point out their own constructedness, they *show*, give evidence; they are assemblages of clues. The practice is a chance to push and play with Benjamin's theories in ways that the text, for reasons of clarity and cogency, cannot engage with in the same manner, or to the same degree. *Picture House* and *Hansel & Gretel*, in ways that are both reflective and self-reflexive, extend and expand my textual inquiry of Benjamin's theories of film. Simultaneously, my text becomes a way to work through, conceptualize, and articulate my practice. The two engage in a Benjaminian "innervation:" this is a dialectical relationship, a give and take in which each constantly informs and alters the other.

Picture House is a computer-based collage of text, still and moving images, and sound that continues the exploration of pre- and early cinematic techniques which I discuss at length in the text of the dissertation. The viewer / reader, clicking from page to page in *Picture House*, is encouraged to draw connections between the disparate elements on each screen. *Hansel & Gretel* is comprised mainly of anonymous travel footage from the early twentieth century, and ruminates on the cinematic nature of the urban experience. Although it is a linear video, *Hansel and Gretel* has no clear narrative and so, it, too, presses the viewer into linking the seemingly unrelated to make sense of the sequence of images. Both works are comprised almost entirely of found elements and both play with the genre of the fairy tale.[40] These purloined materials are largely items that have been discarded or have fallen out of fashion. The datedness of these images and sounds helps

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[40] Over the course of several years, I scavenged the majority of the material for both works from the vast and varied collections of *The Internet Archive* <http://www.archive.org/index.php>. Other sources include Fritz Genschow's 1955 film *Dornroschen* (*Sleeping Beauty*), Roberto Rodriguez's 1963 film *La Caperucita Roja* (*Little Red Riding Hood*), and Eadweard Muybridge's photographs. The text for *Picture House* I composed myself.

to establish a certain distance; they take on a degree of unfamiliarity, even as they remind us of things we've seen, places we've been, and stories we've heard. The viewer must put aside preconceived and habitual ways of reading in viewing these works; s/he must get lost in the experience and critically engage with what s/he is perceiving.

Both works use an allegorical approach to extend the text's inquiry into notions of memory (public and private) and the pervasiveness of cultural narratives such as fairy tales. They ask us to ponder both the slippery nature of our recollections, and the mutability of the meanings we assign to representations. Keeping with Benjamin's desire to recuperate and revalue the marginal, in reusing these 'expired' materials, I hope to reanimate them, and bring their forgotten stories back into circulation, albeit, reconfigured in a new context.

Through a sustained and detailed examination of the complex range of ideas Benjamin weaves together surrounding his theories on film, my thesis addresses the gap in this area of Benjamin studies. Not only does my text offer a comprehensive and innovative reading of Benjamin's theories on film, but my practice too, permits another way of thinking about Benjamin's arguments regarding film, memory, and communication. Further, the hybrid nature of my project—a unique combination of text and practice—itself brings to light new possibilities for interpreting and understanding the nature of representation and reproducibility which concerned Benjamin. As I mentioned previously, I see the writing and the practice very much working in tandem; each informs the other, teasing readings out that may not have been readily available if each component had been constructed independently. In engaging with *Picture House* and *Hansel & Gretel*, as well as the text *the art of getting lost*, I would hope the reader strays a little from the habitual, sees things with a first sight, reads in between the lines, makes delightful and disconcerting connections, and contemplates forgotten futures.

Chapter One

private eye public space
or
at first sight

In this first chapter I will speak of the importance Benjamin attributes to the act of straying. This waywardness involves both a veering from the established, what is mapped, and a disengagement from our selves, from our automatic daily routines and our conscious processes. In seeking out the hidden and forgotten Benjamin hoped to recuperate something of the past that he felt had been discarded and devalued too easily and quickly. For Benjamin, the child and the flâneur are two figures whose 'rudimentary' memory has not been clouded by the repetition of routine, positioning them as 'fine tuners,' engaging with the world in an embodied, sentient way. I will also discuss the way in which ideas of play and repetition figure prominently in Benjamin's thinking about perception and investigate his concerns that modernity, particularly the modern reproductive technologies of the photograph and film, had reconfigured how we experience and what we communicate.

the art of getting lost

> Not to find one's way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal. It requires ignorance—nothing more. But to lose oneself in a city—as one loses oneself in a forest—this calls for quite a different schooling. The signboards and street names, passers-by, roofs, kiosks, and bars must speak to the wanderer like a twig snapping under his feet in the forest, like the startling call of a bittern in the distance, like the sudden stillness of a clearing with a lily standing erect at its center. Paris taught me this art of straying; it fulfilled a dream that had shown its first traces in the labyrinths on the blotting pages of my school exercise books.
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> —Walter Benjamin[41]

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[41] Benjamin, "A Berlin Chronicle," *SW*, vol. 2, 599. Hereafter referred to as BC.

to establish a certain distance; they take on a degree of unfamiliarity, even as they remind us of things we've seen, places we've been, and stories we've heard. The viewer must put aside preconceived and habitual ways of reading in viewing these works; s/he must get lost in the experience and critically engage with what s/he is perceiving.

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This idea of reconfigured significance, is in fact, one of the concerns I am engaged with in my practice. Both *Picture House* and *Hansel & Gretel* are constructed from found materials, ones which would largely fall into the category of the 'outmoded.' Taken from a range of sources (1950s educational films, early photographs, World War Two propaganda films, early television commercials, amateur strip films, and anonymous home movies, for example), both works seek to bring these records of earlier times into currency. Severed from their original purposes and intents, no longer tied to expectations attached to them at the time of their production, these images and sounds begin to give up secrets they have carried with them. Although much of this found material was produced relatively recently, ironically it seems to come to us from a time and place long ago and far away. Appearing to us as naïve or even quaint, the items have the feel of existing in another world, one which perhaps knew an innocence that has been lost to us. However, my assemblages, which recombine and juxtapose these images and sounds, begin to imply a world—past and present—that is not so innocent. In *Hansel & Gretel*, for example, the streets of this montaged metropolis are largely deserted. There is an odd emptiness, a stillness, an eerie silence in this footage, which is reinforced by my decision to not use audio in the work. This is a world largely devoid of humans. The images of empty city spaces, forlorn figures, as well as the titular tale of abandoned children which is alluded to, conjure up issues of social responsibility: what happens to the poor and homeless, those that have no family to care for them, or whose family is not able to provide? What happens to the vast majority of Hansels and Gretels that do not find a happy ending to their plights? And who is the strange solitary figure who seems to be slowly and painfully expiring, alone, on the pavement—the wicked witch justly dispatched from this world; the evil step-mother who in her selfishness seals her own fate; the distraught father mourning the loss of his children? In its ambiguity, the work lets us read these, as well as other interpretations, into this small, flickering world (see figure 1).

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of these accidental encounters embodied the marvelous that lurked in the everyday; they contained a little of the uncanny that the Surrealists (and Benjamin) saw squeezing through the cracks of a modernity that thought of itself as rational, civilized, and progressive (see *Surrealist Art & Writing 1919/39: The Gold of Time* by Jack J. Spector, 141-147). Also see André Breton's "Surrealist Situation of the Object" where Breton stresses that the object, as the Surrealists conceive of it, is "the oneiric object, the symbolic object, the real and virtual object, the found object, etc." (André Breton, *Manifestos of Surrealism*, 257). Breton explains that the usage and incorporation of these surreal objects in various ways will create "a novel sensation" in the "reader-spectator," "one that is exceptionally disturbing and complex, as a result of the play of" different media which engage the senses (Breton, 263). Like Benjamin, the Surrealists are interested in a poetic investigation that will work towards "*dialectically* reconciling these two terms— perception and representation—that are so violently contradictory" (Breton, 278). Claude Cahun, too, speaks eloquently of the magical qualities of such ordinary things as "bread crumb pellets mechanically (?) [sic] rolled between the fingers," and "a tapered sugar needle in one's mouth" (Claude Cahun, "Beware Domestic Objects!" *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology*, edited and with introductions by Penelope Rosemont, 59).

Figure 1. Still from *Hansel & Gretel*.

Just as I desire in *Hansel & Gretel* (as well as *Picture House*) to open up a dialogue with the past by juxtaposing these 'outdated' materials, it is imperative for Benjamin, too, to apprehend alternate versions of events in order to refute the totalizing claims made in the name of a universal official history.[46] If we are to see other worlds and hear other words, the stories of the other, we need to look not at the grand monuments, but to search these obscure narratives out in the mundane nooks and crannies of the familiar. Benjamin would have us deviate from the maps and guidebooks that circumscribe us as tourists who do nothing more than gape and gawk at sights that have been deemed "important," and set in place, immutably. We need rather to go *site* seeing, to stray, to wander; like Hansel and Gretel who lose their way in the forest, we, too, need to go missing. What is important here is the *experience* of place. In his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau makes the distinction between the 'map' and the 'tour.' The difference, he explains, involves 'seeing' versus 'going.' The act of mapping, as de Certeau is thinking of it, results in the projection of "totalizing observations," whereas in touring *through* space, one engages in a spatialisation of one's surroundings.[47] It is the very act of moving through space, for de Certeau, that puts us 'in touch' with our surrounding, permits us to connect with and comprehend our worlds. Traversing space equates to an act of enunciation for de Certeau,[48] one which in its phatic implications, involves a sentient,

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[46] Benjamin, "Paralipomena to "On the Concept of History,"" *SW*, vol. 4, 405.

[47] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 119.

[48] de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 97-108.

or—as Rebecca Solnit eloquently conceives of these perambulatory wanderings—a "voluptuous surrender."[49] Benjamin, too, is not after the superficial encounter of the sightseer visiting the 'must see' places, but in a prefiguring of de Certeau's 'touristic' approach, rather, advocates a seeking out of the unexpected. This excursion is about *leaving oneself* open to wonder and curiosity, to an experience that is not documented in the guidebooks or made available through official histories.[50] In straying and traipsing, our bodies become instruments of inscription: stubs of pencils, nibs fluid with ink; we scrawl and smudge our way into narratives as we amble through space. For, as de Certeau tells us, "Every story is a travel story—a spatial practice."[51]

To leave oneself and to lose oneself: this self-abandonment is crucial to Benjamin's project. Not only does one need to surrender oneself to one's surroundings in order to be receptive to alternate histories, but also, key to Benjamin's thinking, is the notion that the self is already lost, because it is in no way cohesive or fixed, though we may not know it. We are lost because we consist of composite shards of a fragmentary modern experience. As Susan Buck-Morss suggests, Benjamin himself "perceived his own life emblematically, as an allegory for social reality, and sensed keenly that no individual could live a resolved or affirmative existence in a social world that was neither."[52] The self, splintered and separated, becomes for Benjamin a ghostly double. A distanced observer, a sort of haunting (and haunted) chronicler, looks on and reads its severed twin's existence. It sees in its (other) self a symbolic narrative, a spectral snapshot which reflects the true, ruptured picture of modernity.[53]

In "A Berlin Chronicle" Benjamin puts this allegorical reading into practice. In this text Benjamin's remembrances of his own childhood become a vehicle to explore memory, the city, and the uncanny nature of modernity. However, despite the fact these are *his*

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[49] Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, 6.
[50] Ironically, in an attempt to attract more customers, today's tourist industry caters for the tourist who wants to journey off the beaten path. With options such as extreme vacations, trekking, over-landing, safaris, and ecotourism, one can now be a tourist by not being a tourist.
[51] de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 115.
[52] Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, 31-32.
[53] Many of the Surrealists too, of course, were experimenting with photography and the ways in which the medium lent itself to a self-investigation. Claude Cahun, for example exploited the genre of the photographic self-portrait to question and challenge notions of a fixed, stable, and cohesive self. See Mary Ann Caws book *The Surrealist Look: An Erotics of Encounter*, chapter eight, "Doubling: Claude Chun's Split Self," page 95-119. Roland Barthes also muses on the unsettling nature of the "portrait-photograph" (Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 13). Attempting to reconcile the experience of being in front of the camera Barthes realizes he is "neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object" (Barthes, 14). This in betweenness, this vacillation between subject and object is, in some ways, similar to Benjamin's notion of 'innervation' which I explore more fully in chapter five.

memories Benjamin shares with us, he insists, "Reminiscences, even extensive ones, do not always amount to an autobiography. And these quite certainly do not, even for the Berlin years that I am exclusively concerned with here." Benjamin is thinking of his "Chronicle" as something quite different from a standard autobiography with its coherent narrative sequence and singular focus. "For autobiography," he explains, "has to do with time, with sequence and what makes up the continuous flow of life." In contrast, he himself is concerned with "a space, of moments and discontinuities."[54] Refusing personal history as a linear progression, Benjamin essentially spatialises our lives; he charts what punctures and punctuates our existence. In an extension of that view, Benjamin speaks of his long-felt desire to graphically represent his life in the form of a map.[55] Depicting the houses of friends, lovers, meeting places, routes to schools, parks, and graves, this "bio-map" would not commemorate the continuous life of chronology, but rather mark the bits and pieces, the dotted experiences that make up our lives. And yet, in a sense, Benjamin's bio-map is a map of the dead.[56] Like a chloroformed collection of butterflies pinned in place, Benjamin fixes a cartography of reminiscence. The points on this map are memories—images that stick in our minds, which remind us, often with sharpness, of past selves and selves we pass in these once-frequented places.[57] Benjamin desires to tack down his recollections and their embalmed emotions, to embroider memory and trace the threads of stories that have us in stitches, as well as those that prick us; our hearts like pin cushions. And although mapping implies a certain rigidity, a demarcation of boundaries, Benjamin's bio-map, in its pointed subjectivity, refuses any one clear reading. Exploiting the distortions of memory that occur over time, Benjamin's map misdirects us; it is ironically, a map for getting lost.

My work *Picture House*, too, in a sense, functions as a bio-map; it charts moments both public and private. In bringing fragments of the past back into significance, the work asks the viewer / reader to navigate through a haze of memory and requires him or her to bring

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[54] Benjamin, BC, *SW*, vol. 2, 613.
[55] Benjamin, BC, *SW*, vol. 2, 596-597. Obviously, Benjamin's bio-map would be more closely related to documenting the experiences of de Certeau's "tour," which in its openendedness, would refuse the rigid fixing that both Benjamin and de Certeau are eager to veer from in order to open up other possible narratives.
[56] See Shoshan Felman's provocative essay "Benjamin's Silence," in which she convincingly argues that Benjamin's oeuvre can be read as a work of mourning for the dead. Shoshana Felman, "Benjamin's Silence," 1999, Critical Inquiry 25, Number 2 (Winter 1999).
[57] In her book *You are here: Personal Geographies and Other Maps of the Imagination*, Katharine Harmon suggests that our urge to map is an instinct, part of what makes us human (10). She goes on to say that maps, particularly unconventional ones, become vehicles for the imagination rather than solely utilitarian tools. "We look at these maps, and our minds know just what to do: take the information and extrapolate from it a place where they can leap, play, gambol" (10-11).

his or her own memories into play to interpret the (multiple possible) narrative threads. For example, the fifth screen of *Picture House* (see figure 2) asks us audibly "Will he find you watching and waiting for his return? Are you ready for his return?"
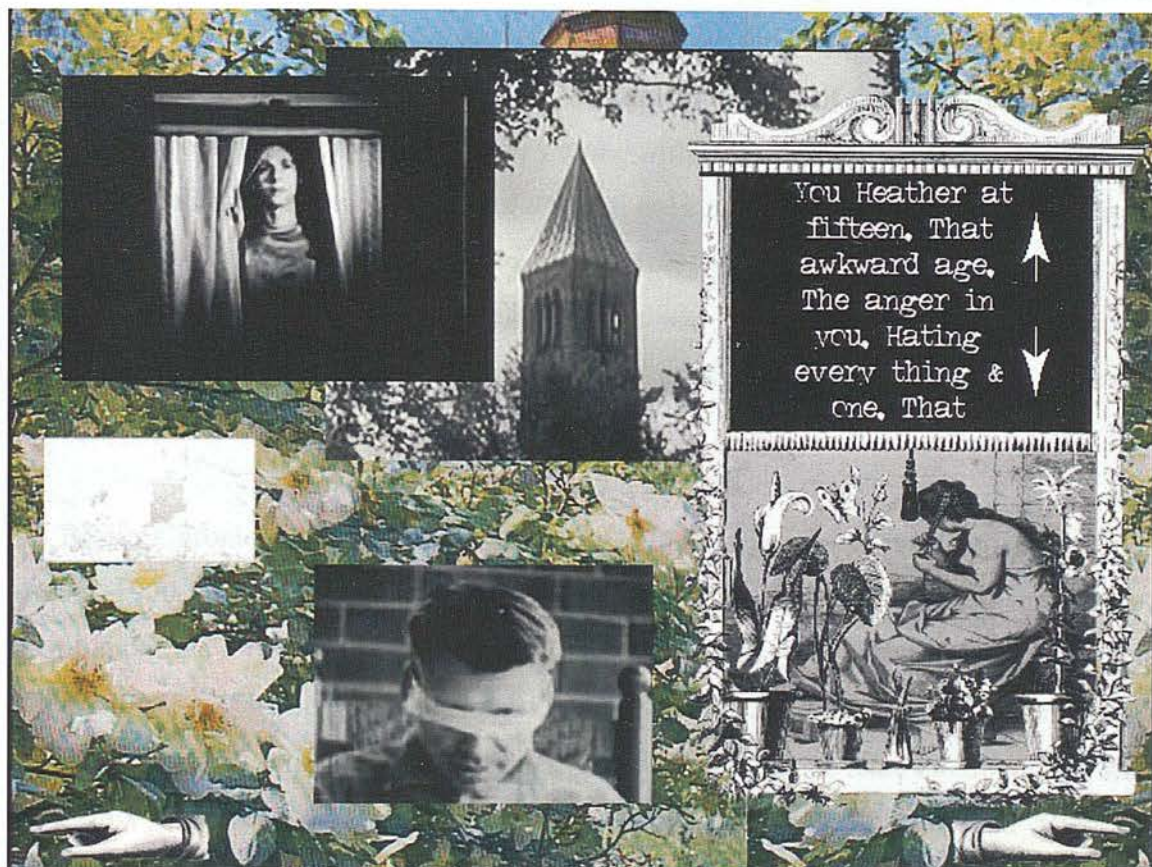
Figure 2. Still from *Picture House*.

Who is watching and waiting—you the viewer, me the bricoleur, one of the figures on-screen or in the text? And who is returning? The on-screen figure anxiously looking out of a darkened window most readily seems to be submitting to the decidedly evangelical tones of the anonymous querying voice. But there is an echo of this attendant youth on the right of the screen: a woman braiding her hair framed by a window. However, this figure has her back to us, she does not seem to be concerned with someone's return; certainly she does not appear to be watching for an apparition. And what of the blindfolded man who slyly peeks out at us / the camera? Is he blind? Injured? Playing a game? And the text that tells us of a figure at Heather's window—is this the youthful on-screen figure anxiously peering out into the night? The text gives a clue for the interpretation of these disparate elements. In it Heather is compared to Rapunzel, the fairy tale character who lets down her long hair so her lover, the prince, can climb up to the

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tower where she is imprisoned. When her captor the witch discovers these shenanigans she quickly puts a stop to the lovers trysts. The witch hacks off Rapunzel's lengthy tresses and nails them to the window sill, only to cut them loose when next the prince climbs up, leaving him blinded by his fall. The page / screen circulates around this fairy tale. However, it (obviously) is not a straight forward recounting of the story of *Rapunzel*. Things get in the way here; there are interruptions, not the least of which is memory. My own recollection of the story, somewhat hazy and comprised of different versions sutured together, is complicated by associations I make with other narratives. The viewer / reader, too, will recall her / his own version of the tale, or in fact, may not recognize the elements of the *Rapunzel* story here at all and invent a completely different explanation for their association, a possibility I find intriguing. Either way, this segment, as with the whole of *Picture House*, keeps us off balance; like Benjamin's biomap, it invites us to wander through our unstable memories.

"A Berlin Chronicle" and its later, somewhat altered appearance as "Berlin Childhood around 1900," becomes the site on which Benjamin charts his childhood memories to speak about the city as a site of contradictions, a place that is at once both marvelous and frightening, and in its details both familiar and strange. Like the palimpsests of Benjamin's school blotters,[58] these collections of reminiscences trace the intangible status of memory and encapsulate the ephemeral nature of modernity. In their allegorical construction, Benjamin's childhood 'tableaus' provide multiple points of entry to the knot of memory. In related spirit, *Picture House* is not concerned with—and in fact refutes—any singular reading. It is not the centre of the maze that concerns me, nor is it what matters to Benjamin; rather, his interest, too, lies in the paths that lead there, in the partially perceived traces that guide us and misdirect us.

The labyrinth, by nature, obscures a direct course and thwarts our finding our way. With its twists and turns a labyrinth involves a kind of near-sightedness; we cannot perceive quite what is in front of us, nor can we see the way out. The state of myopia means the usual clues we rely on to orient ourselves are unavailable. The puzzle in which we are caught requires us to inch along, hands outstretched; we need to *feel* our way. Unable to fall back upon the known or the 'easy,' we are required to call upon a different set of tools to navigate. Omar Calabrese has provocatively described this 'myopic' state not as an inferior vision, but rather as a different kind of perception, one that involves an

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[58] Benjamin, BC, *SW*, vol. 2, 599.

awareness of one's blindness—a sort of second sight that paradoxically operates with a clarity not granted in 'normal' perception.[59] In Benjamin's estimation, it would seem that when we cannot rely on the instrument of everyday memory (or vision) to guide us, we gain access to another kind of awareness, one more sentient in its roots and operations. Stripped of recognition, we must situate ourselves through what he seems to imply is an older, more fundamental knowledge, something that would seem almost hard-wired in its 'naturalness.'

Unable to depend on our own memories of time and place, we recall stories we have heard; tales of escape and cunning, yarns spun that lead us out of the snarl. In "The Storyteller" Benjamin poignantly argues for the preservation of the tradition of storytelling. I believe in these archaic memories, which are founded on a shared knowledge, Benjamin identifies a potent form of mimesis—the mimetic being a faculty to which Benjamin assigns an extremely important role. Through imitation we learn the world and our place in it. In mimicry we embody the knowledge (and the folly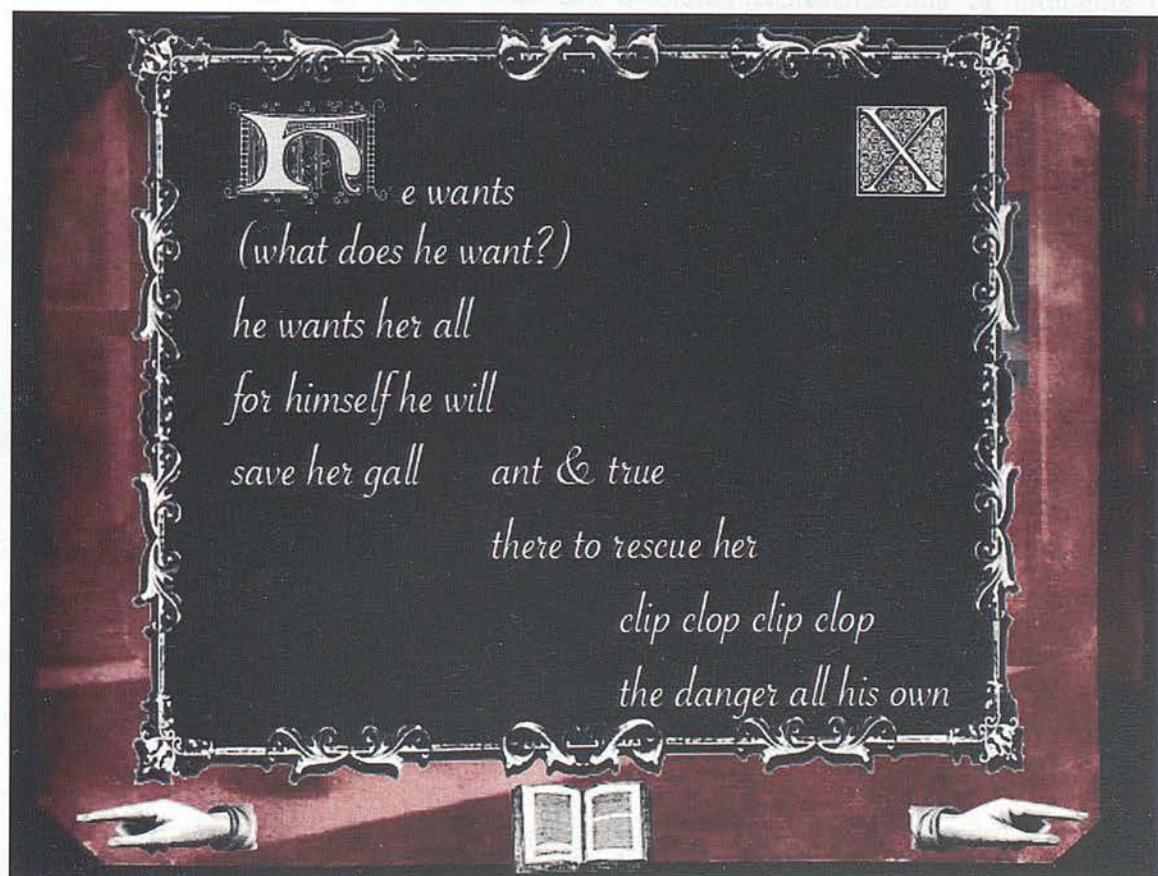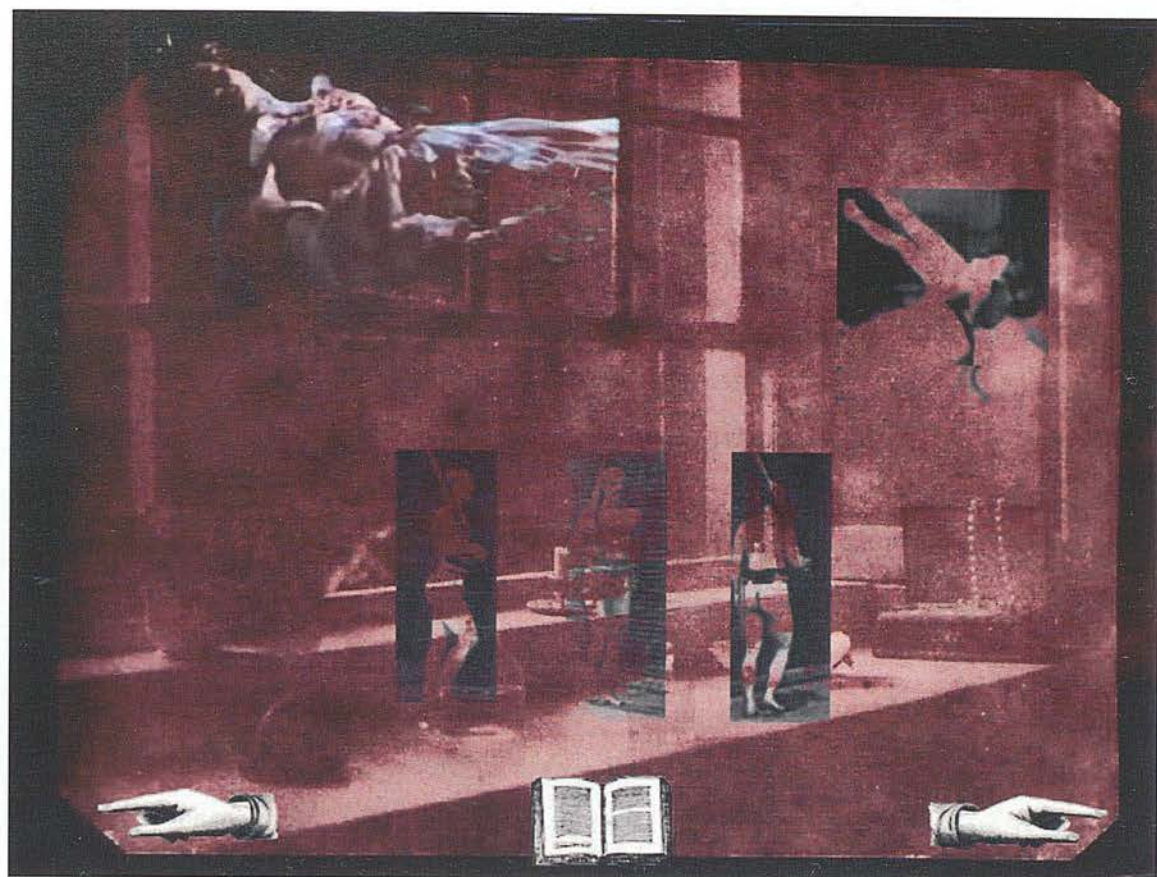) of previous generations. However, with the fracturing effects of modernity, this wisdom is no longer passed on or received in a coherent way. And Benjamin fears that without access to a larger cultural memory, we are a lost society, unable to hear our own stories and see our own blindnesses. *Picture House* and *Hansel & Gretel* engage with this concern. Playing with the genre of fairy tales, they ask us to (re)consider the ways in which we largely take for granted cultural narratives, not because we are unthoughtful or uncaring, but because we have become so accustomed to them in their ubiquity and their longevity, that they seem as natural as breathing. My practice cites well-known tales such as *Little Red Riding Hood, Sleeping Beauty*, and *Hansel and Gretel*, but fractures these familiar narratives, complicating our usual, or at least our most casual, reception of these stories; the works ask us to think again about these tales and why they hold such an apparently neutral position in our society (see figures 3-6).

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[59] Calabrese here is elaborating the point made by Pierre Rosenstiehl where he proposed that in order to solve the topography of the labyrinth, one must operate from a myopic vision which requires deciphering the immediate and the local and not—so honoured in a zeal for the "universal"—the distant and postponed. Omar Calabrese, *Neo-Baroque: A Sign of the Times*, 133.

A sight for sore
yes it hurt
of course it would
(wouldn't it, didn't it?)
wounds where once
he saw himself
reflected

the look X
in his eyes
when he saw
if only he saw
through her
eyes for one
instant
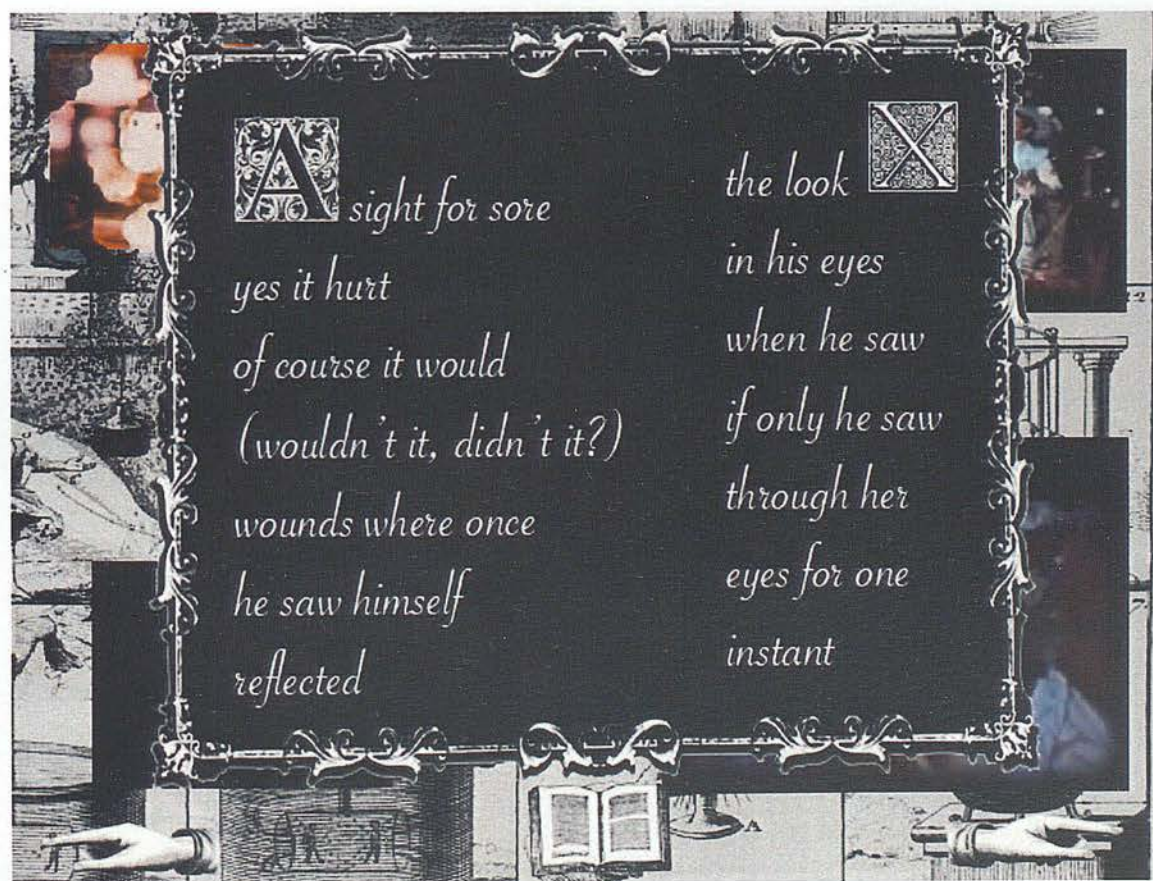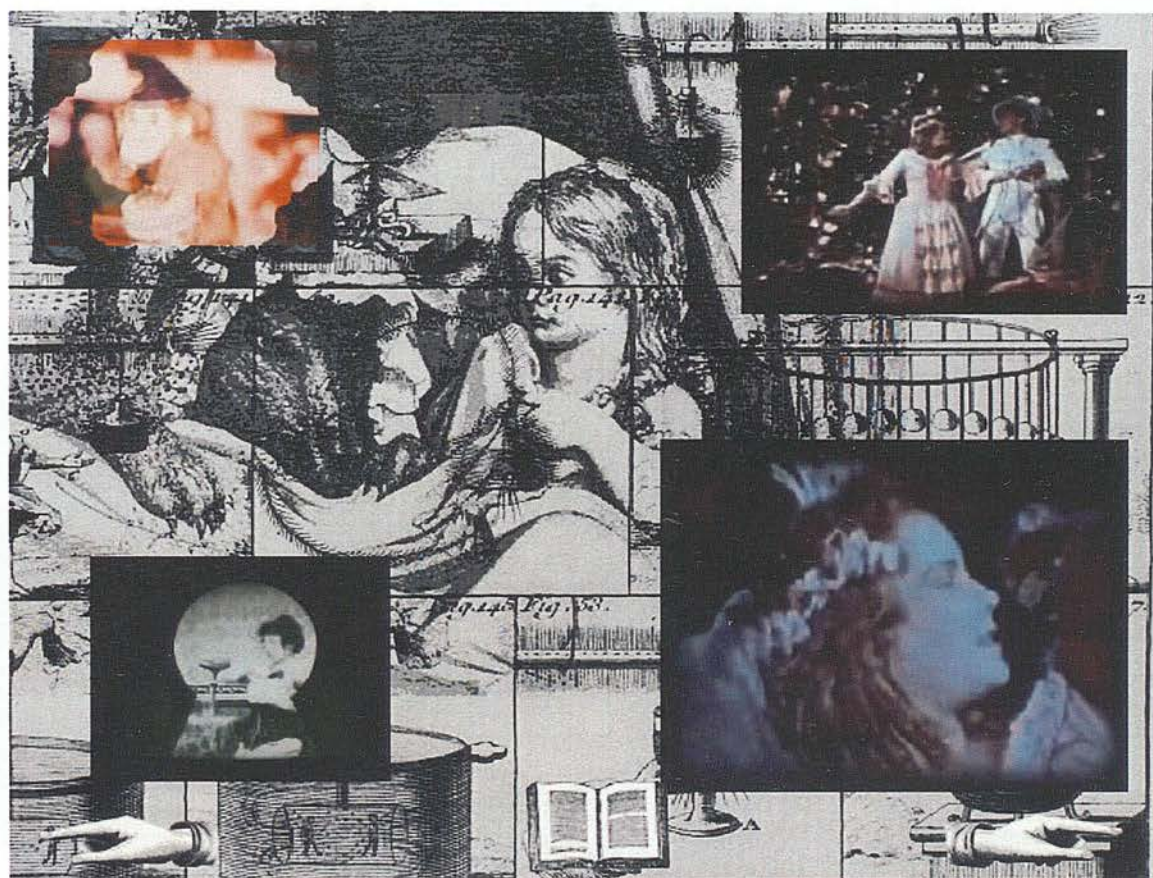
Figures 3 and 4. Stills from *Picture House*.

Figures 5 and 6. Stills from *Picture House*.

In presenting his childhood memories as allegories which are accessible to all, in both "A Berlin Chronicle" and "Berlin Childhood around 1900," I believe Benjamin attempts to contribute to the evaporating pool of shared recollection. The topos of these vignettes ("topos" literally means "common place") is a child's memory of locations. In keeping with his desire to retrieve lost and obscured narratives, Benjamin draws out the sense of the mundane and the weight of the communal in shared memories of public locations above and beyond the individual experience we could find in autobiographical memoirs.[60] These reminiscences are presented as a series of snapshots. In choosing that option, Benjamin stresses the special connections offered by this more casual, less rehearsed image. In its amateurishness, the snapshot emphasizes that what it offers is neither official, sanctioned history, nor a professionally composed portrait of an individual.[61]

In constructing his narrative as a series of fleeting images, Benjamin compresses the tropes of photography and memory. Using the logic of the photograph to speak of a constructed past, or at least one that is more fluid and mutable than is generally acknowledged, Benjamin draws out the similarity between the two media: image as memory and memory as image; both are mediated representations of moments of experience. Exploiting his memories to analyze the modern urban experience, Benjamin creates a critical distance between past and present, which allows him to speak of himself and one who is not himself. In effect he almost effaces the childhood self, even as he reaches for it. And yet, though displaced by an adult self, this earlier self continues in trace and dream. The self of childhood lingers, as images floating in the emulsion of memory.

errant figures

Childhood, for Benjamin, is a way of being that has not yet been hardened into habit. His child has not yet lost the ability to see things at 'first sight,' to see as strange what we as

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[60] Central to Benjamin's theory is the trope of the city as text. The notion that there is a coded meaning hidden from us, one that a cunning reader is able to apprehend through an embodied, haptic experience, informs much of Benjamin's thinking. This proclivity to read the world as allegory is something I will explore in chapter five.

[61] Also, in privileging the role of the amateur, Benjamin (even if unconsciously) stresses his fondness for these memories: in a lovely coincidence, it turns out that the etymology of the word amateur can be traced back to its connotations of an *amateur* as a "lover of," from the Latin, *amare* "to love." The *Online Etymology Dictionary*. <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?search=amateur&searchmode=none>.

adults might overlook as the unworthy familiar, as something beneath noticing. Indeed, this is the "Task of childhood: to bring the new world into symbolic space. The child, in fact, can do what the grownup absolutely cannot: recognize the new once again."[62] Marina Warner has identified in her lecture "Through a Child's Eyes," a tradition in literature and film in which the child is depicted as either an innocent or a special witness.[63] However, I would argue Benjamin's 'child' is a somewhat more ambiguous figure. Childhood for him may well entail an innocence, but this is a function of a not-yet-knowing rather than a state of innate purity. The child has not yet had time to accumulate experience that settles into habit and, since yet plastic, can still perceive with an unjaundiced eye. This clarity of vision does not position the child as a *tabula rasa*; rather, it arises from a condition closer to error. It involves a wandering or a straying, an arriving into mistake. Above all, it depends on a 'forgetting,' a dis-regard for established notions of 'the way things are.' The child mis-recognizes, mis-takes or substitutes something for something else. An already-knowing has not yet closed off his or her perceptions, and alternate paths of meaning remain open to him or her. Further, as witness, Benjamin's child, unlike the onlooker in the narrative tradition of which Warner speaks, is not posited as a helpless creature. To the contrary, his witness is actively engaged. In those capacities he or she is tied closely to the heroes and heroines in fairy tales who rely on cunning to outwit malevolent figures and evade evil forces. The child's craftiness, insight, and deception bring her / him to a veering from the usual or expected; tried, s/he is able quickly to find new strategies. Such cunning leads to departures; it requires one to err and to go astray.[64]

This childish wandering, for Benjamin, is most provocatively manifest in play through which we can move out of the expected and into the imaginary. In play Benjamin traces a vestige of a mimetic faculty which he believes was far more potent and prevalent before the onset of modernity. We often play at *being* something. In childhood games, Benjamin reminds us, we take on the semblance of an other in ways that, at least at the moment of

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[62] Benjamin, *Arcades*, [K1a, 3], 390.

[63] Marina Warner, "Through a Child's Eyes," *Cinema and the Realms of Enchantment: Lectures, Seminars and Essays by Marina Warner and Others*, 38-39.

[64] The childlike wonder Benjamin appreciates as an active participation, a process of construction, is echoed by E. H. Gombrich in his assertion that "The innocent eye is a myth" (Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, 251). Gombrich takes issue with John Ruskin's notion that it is possible to perceive with a purity, a vision untainted by external influences. In similar thinking to Benjamin, Gombrich speaks of the way in which perception is a process of transformation in which 'mistakes' can deliver us into new understandings. Further, in keeping with Benjamin's understanding of a 'childish' way of seeing the world as a productive one, Gombrich asserts "It is not the 'innocent eye' [...] but only the inquiring mind that knows how to probe the ambiguities of vision" (Gombrich, 331).

experience, are very real: "The child who stands behind the doorway curtain himself becomes something white that flutters, a ghost. The dining table under which he has crawled turns him into the wooden idol of the temple; its carved legs are four pillars. And behind a door, he is himself the door, is decked out in it like a weighty mask and, as sorcerer, will cast a spell on all who enter unawares."[65] Hans-Georg Gadamer speaks of one's own body as a vehicle for imitative expression; through our bodies we represent ourselves as something we are not, or not quite yet at least. Like Benjamin, Gadamer understands mimesis as an immediate representation: "Imitative representation is not the kind of play that deceives, but a play that communicates as play when it is taken in the way it wants to be taken: as pure representation."[66] In play, Gadamer explains, we do not intend to be 'believed' as we might expect to in an act of feigned sympathy, for example. In such a 'dishonest' act (what are you playing at? we say suspiciously), we quite fully pretend to be what we are not, whereas in play (at least in the kind of play that Gadamer speaks of) there is no pretence of deception. In play we put on a show, we *demonstrate* we are playing. In doing so, we direct others, point out to them the fabrication of our actions. Play for Gadamer, as for Benjamin, necessarily involves an embodied communication, a sensual, performative way of knowing. In foregrounding the representation we highlight its construction. In showing that we are showing we invite the other to engage with this display and imagine something outside the usually perceived. "For imitation enables us to see more than so-called reality," in that it opens up possibilities we may not have previously contemplated; play lets us get lost.[67]

This ludic mimicry at times has sources other than the material world, and purposes other than untroubled communication. Benjamin reminisces: "Early on, I learned to disguise myself in words."[68] Benjamin tells us that for him, the compulsion to become similar, to behave mimetically, took place in language, an "archive of nonsensuous similarities."[69] Language, although it may lack the immediacy of an image, nonetheless permits another way of drawing out likenesses. Oddly enough, these wordy associations in some ways offer a more effective construction of semblance. For example, I tell you that Benjamin's childhood reminiscences *are like* snapshots; the language points out, or demonstrates, a connection between two things that are absent. But language's mimetic ability is for Benjamin most powerfully at work in ways that we tend largely to overlook. In language,

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[65] Benjamin, "Berlin Childhood around 1900," *SW*, vol. 3, 375.
[66] Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Play of Art," *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, 127.
[67] Gadamer, "The Play of Art," 128.
[68] Benjamin, "Berlin Childhood around 1900," *SW*, vol. 3, 374.
[69] Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty," *SW*, vol. 2, 722.

with all its nuance and slippage, we can lose ourselves as our words wrestle and nudge us into unintended meanings. Benjamin confesses that the words used most often to describe him, those which he tended to 'resemble' as a child, were "Not those that made me similar to well-behaved children, but those that made me similar to dwelling places, furniture, clothes. I was distorted by similarity to all that surrounded me."[70] The effects are not so strange as we might suppose since we cannot avoid language; we use it to name, construct, and communicate the world. Through language we know the world, and we become similar to the world.[71] Also, since language always carries an excess within itself, it harbours the silent yet pervasive threat that it will make visible the writing between the lines. Language overruns our intended meanings and it gestures towards other possibilities. It plays with us and we with it. In that interplay, our words and our selves become distorted as they begin to morph into other meanings.

In an effort towards clarity we may rephrase our statements, or reiterate our utterances to emphasize the point. Children's games too, very often are based in performing the same action over and over. "Again! Again! Do it again!" This compulsion to repeat, so prevalent in play, has a two-fold purpose in Benjamin's view; repetition lets us come to terms with the horrific and traumatic and to vicariously relive the victories and pleasures we have experienced.[72] Like so many of Benjamin's concepts, his understanding of play is a paradox. In play, establishing obscure similarities, we veer from the expected. We move off onto alternate paths that criss-cross and fold back on themselves. However, ironically, play is also what cements habit. "Habit enters life as a game, and in habit, even in its most sclerotic forms, an element of play survives to the end. Habits are the forms of our first happiness and our first horror that have congealed and become deformed to the point of being unrecognizable."[73] We are unable to return to formative moments because they have been distorted through familiarity. In a passage where Benjamin reflects on this erasure of the originary experience, he speaks of the way in which the new becomes habit through repetition: "My hand can still dream of [the movement of pen on page for the first time], but it can no longer awaken so as actually to perform it. By the same token, I can dream of the way I once learned to walk. But that does not help. I now know how to walk; there is no more learning to walk."[74] In habit we become accustomed, we learn;

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[70] Benjamin, "Berlin Childhood around 1900," *SW*, vol. 3, 374.
[71] See Benjamin's "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," *SW*, vol. 1, 62-74. Here Benjamin develops a theological theory of language, tying humans to the natural world through naming.
[72] Benjamin, "Toys and Play," *SW*, vol. 2, 120.
[73] Benjamin, "Toys and Play," 120.
[74] Benjamin, "Berlin Childhood around 1900," *SW*, vol. 3, 396.

things that once were strange and beyond knowing become 'second nature' to us and we function largely unaware of what we have mastered. Although these proficiencies are necessary and even, for the most part, desirable, habit also shuts down our ability to perceive the world in ways the child is capable of, with wide-eyed 'first sight.' However, Benjamin sees in the repetition inherent in play, a means of coming to terms with our world. What is necessary in order to avoid becoming trapped in routine, he seems to imply, is, paradoxically, an awareness of our ingrained customs. In this self-awareness, Benjamin asks us to step outside ourselves, to take up the position of analytical and chronicling double.

Although the child is able to look upon the world with a wonder that has been stunted in the adult, for Benjamin there is an exception to the vast numbers of grown-ups who have become unaware of the marvelous in the everyday: the flâneur. For the nineteenth-century poet and critic Charles Baudelaire, the flâneur is "the painter of the passing moment," one positioned to appreciate the overlooked.[75] This roving eye / I "hurls himself headlong into the midst of the throng, in pursuit of an unknown, half-glimpsed countenance that has, on an instant, bewitched him."[76] Baudelaire speaks of the flâneur as one who is dazzled by first impressions and he likens that shock to the sense of novelty a child might experience.[77] This apprehension comes as a convulsion which, for Baudelaire, prompts the brain into ecstatic receptivity. The flâneur, a genius according to Baudelaire, is seemingly able to recover a sense of wonder and to channel it in analytical ways. The results, informed by a higher innocence, or a knowing naïveté, can produce feats of masterpiece.

In Baudelaire's estimation the "perfect *flâneur*" is one who takes pleasure in mixing with the milling masses but one for whom it is equally important to maintain a sense of reserve: though "away from home," the flâneur would feel everywhere at home; seeing the world, yet remaining hidden from it.[78] In his duplicitous role as one who is at once there and not there, Baudelaire's flâneur moves through the crowd, collecting its bright colours and shaking into vivid impressions bits of sight, sound, smell—the teeming flavours and memorable textures of the city. Later, in less hurried moments, he will

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[75] Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, 5. Hereafter abbreviated as *PML*.
[76] Baudelaire, *PML*, 7.
[77] Baudelaire, *PML*, 7-8.
[78] Baudelaire, *PML*, 9.

process those bits into sketches of modern urban life.[79]

The flâneur lingers at the crossroads of the 'natural' and the social, fascinated by the incongruity Baudelaire situates somewhere between biological instincts and the constructed definitions of society.[80] For Baudelaire, the human condition is one of depravity; we fell from grace and our state of sin needs to be restrained by a mask of civility. As Baudelaire sees it, the artifice of modernity—the ephemeral fashions, the affected relations between strangers—(un)covers our essentially base natures, with a result that can be intoxicating. The modern, for all its distractions, offers unhindered pleasure, catering to our corrupt human nature. Even art, in Baudelaire's thinking, is merely another entertainment, another pleasurable diversion to be consumed. In stripping art of any political significance, Baudelaire's "art for art's sake" positions it as yet one more commodity that circulates in the marketplace.[81]

Benjamin, however, points out that Baudelaire's flâneur himself had also become a commodity. Baudelaire's privileged dandy, an extravagant figure, who leisurely "goes botanizing on the asphalt" had, at the time of Baudelaire's writing, already moved from free-spirited observer to journalist, one who sells his observations.[82] Baudelaire's flâneur

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[79] Baudelaire, *PML*, 10. The flâneur for Baudelaire is unquestionably a male figure. He cannot begin to conceive of a female flâneur, or *flâneuse*, an issue I will come to later.

[80] Baudelaire, *PML*, 11.

[81] Part of what informs Benjamin's critique of Baudelaire's flâneur is his shared concern with the Surrealists' questioning of the autonomy of art. Both Benjamin and the Surrealists wanted to bring about a shift from a (high) modernist notion that privileged a purely formal art. Benjamin and the Surrealists sought to pull the abstract into the concrete, to lessen the gap between experience and representation, to make art a part of everyday life (see Steven Harris *Surrealist Art and Thought in the 1930s*, 17). The intent was "to make thought active to relate the hitherto separate spheres of thought and action, action and dream, a separation that had been understood to be the hallmark of a separate, modernist art and literature since the time of Baudelaire" (Harris, 2). However, Benjamin also appreciated Baudelaire's works as a reflection of the changing role of art (see Benjamin, "Surrealism," 211-212). The movement that came under the banner "art for art's sake" was often prey to "obligatory misunderstanding" Benjamin tells us (Benjamin, "Surrealism," 211). "L'art pout l'art," Benjamin argues, "was scarcely ever to be taken literally; it was almost always a flag under which sailed a cargo that could not be declared because it still lacked a name" (Benjamin, "Surrealism," 212). Like his flâneur, Baudelaire himself was caught between forces of change, a lyric poet in world that no longer appreciated lyric poetry (Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," *Illuminations*, 156). Importantly for Benjamin, Baudelaire's poetry registers the shocks of modernity, particularly those that are delivered by the masses, the "amorphous crowd of passers-by" (Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," 165). As Benjamin conceives it, Baudelaire's poetry embodies and performs Freud's notions of the conscious as screen which blocks the shocks one encounters from entering into memory; it permits the registration of the moment, but at the "integrity of its contents" (Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," 163). It seems that Benjamin's interest lies in the way that this instant is capture by the consciousness without admitting all that is attached to it. The correlations Benjamin draws in other works between the consciousness, the unconscious, the camera, photography, film, and memory are evident in his thinking here; the recording made by the camera detaches its subject from the conditions under which it was captured leaving only the trace of the event.

[82] Benjamin, "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire," *SW*, vol. 4, 19 and *Arcades*, [M16, 4], 446-447. Interestingly, if we look at the etymology of "commodity" we find that in addition to the more well known meaning of "profit" or "benefit," it carries connotations of "fitness" and "adaptation," as well as the

evidently was at home in the arcades of the city. There, in the ambiguous spaces that turned interior into street and street into interior, the flâneur could stroll through the wares of modernity, observe the latest fashions of passers-by and read bills of upcoming events. The labyrinth of arcades kept the flâneur abreast of the new, providing the fodder for his 'news' reports. As journalist, his time spent strolling and observing soon became legitimized as work. And in the same way that the commodities of capitalism were displayed in the shop windows where the new and (often very recently) outdated vied side by side for the passerby's attention, the flâneur exhibited his labour in the street, himself an incongruous mixture of the bygone and à la mode.[83] Baudelaire's flâneur, a consummate double, was able to disguise leisure as work and work as leisure. However, with the advent of the department store, the flâneur began to lose his footing, and to disappear from the street. Once he was removed from the milling crowd (as it began to migrate indoors, off the streets, and into the new stores), the ambiguities of interior / exterior and absence / presence that defined the flâneur's existence were reduced to the point of near eradication. At best, Benjamin ruminates, the diminished flâneur was now "a spy for the capitalists, on assignment in the realm of consumers."[84]

Interestingly, the department store which was in part responsible for the demise of the flâneur, is the very phenomenon, Anne Friedberg suggests, that allows for the existence of a female flâneur or *flâneuse*. The figure of the *flâneuse* is a difficult one to define, as are most marginal characters. Some scholars (Janet Wolff and Griselda Pollock, for example) even claim that it is an impossible position, arguing that there was not and cannot be a female equivalent of the male flâneur, due to the social, political, and economic realities of a capitalist society.[85] While it is not my intention to investigate the historical or contemporary possibility of the *flâneuse*, some brief comments here are necessary.

The department store, Friedberg argues, removed from the dangers of the street, allowed women to venture out unchaperoned for the first time. Imbued with a new independence, the actual or would-be *flâneuse* now had the opportunity to participate in a peripatetic

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notion of convenience, which derives from its usage to denote the "chair housing a chamber pot." Baudelaire's artistic flâneur has to adapt to changing demands in the market place and is forced to turn to journalism, seen by some as a practice which produces writing fit for the chamber pot. See *Online Etymology Dictionary.* < http://www.etymonline.com/>.

[83] Benjamin, *Arcades,* [M16, 4], 446-447.

[84] Benjamin, *Arcades,* [M5, 6], 427.

[85] See Janet Wolff's *Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women & Culture,* 41, and Griselda Pollock's essay "Modernity and the Spaces of the Feminine," in her book *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art,* 71.

experience of the city.[86] Friedberg does point out that this newfound freedom was restricted to the women of the bourgeois class, and is aware of the limitations in equating the experience of the *flâneuse* to that of the flâneur through her sole ability to purchase. Nevertheless, Anke Gleber takes issue with Friedberg. In *The Art of Taking a Walk*, Gleber points out the fact that Friedberg's *flâneuse*, as shopper, does little more than perpetuate the social system that positions a woman as marginal in the first place.[87]

While I agree with Gleber, that "Limited excursions of shopping in a prescribed ghetto of consumption amount to little more than second-hand distraction, never approximating the flaneur's wide-ranging mode of perception, a mode of seeing unimpeded by aims, purposes and schedules," it seems unproductive to completely discount the subversive potential that could be found in Friedberg's *flâneuse*.[88] I am thinking here of de Certeau's notion of "making do." Regarding consumer activities such as watching television or reading magazines, de Certeau asks the important question: what do consumers *make of* and *do with* the commodities of capitalism?[89] In identifying the act of *la perruque* (doing work for oneself under the guise of working for an employer) de Certeau inverts the idea of the consumer, turning her / him into a *producer*. De Certeau argues that the ways in which we use or, rather, misuse the products of capitalism (perhaps as in Benjamin's childhood misrecognitions), will often alter their intended purpose. The results will then complicate the system of production and consumption. Similar to Benjamin's stress on cunning, de Certeau posits that everyday actions such as reading, walking, eating, writing, shopping, and conversing—those that occur at the very sites most susceptible to commercialism—when conceived as activities of production, become places from which the disenfranchised can exert a resistance to the dominant versions of usage and consumption.[90]

Deborah Parsons elaborates one of the most productive approaches to the status of the *flâneuse*. In *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity*, she draws out the fact that although Baudelaire disallows women an equal footing, he grants them a certain, though reified, power. For Baudelaire, woman, already a mysterious figure, becomes more so through her fashions. As Baudelaire would see it, the beguiling female, always already in masquerade, becomes all the more fascinating as the ephemeral nature

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[86] See Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern*, 36.
[87] Anke Gleber, *The Art of Taking a Walk: Flanerie, Literature and Film in Weimar Culture*, 174.
[88] Gleber, *The Art of Taking a Walk*, 174.
[89] de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 31.
[90] de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 40.

of her ever-changing costumes emphasizes her enigmatic ways.[91] Mary Anne Doane too sees such masquerade as a tactic that allows women some power over their public self-presentation,[92] not unlike the ruse which de Certeau sees marginals using to subvert the dominant.[93] In a similar move Parsons makes the intriguing claim that the flâneur also consciously constructs his appearance and practices a masquerade, making him something of an androgynous figure.[94] In any case the flâneur certainly is an *extravagant* figure. In the fourteenth century, extravagant meant to 'wander outside or beyond,' only taking on the connotations of 'excessive' or 'wasteful' in the early eighteenth century. However, by the end of the eighteenth century, 'extravagant' had also come to refer to the idea of a 'fantastic performance.'[95] The flâneur, in roaming and combing the city for stories, takes on a performative function; more particularly he masquerades, blending in with the crowd in order to get access to material for his reports, yet always maintaining a distance from the 'common.' In opening this provocative line of thought, Parsons helps us to rethink the role of the *flâneuse* in an interesting way. If the flâneur already occupies a site of contested or ambiguous gender, that is, if such waywardness is marked to some degree as 'female,' then the possibility of women participating in the ambulatory investigations deemed to be exclusively male becomes more possible.

Benjamin, too, points out the constructedness of the flâneur. Having ceased to be a 'real' figure, in a historical sense, the flâneur soon came to exist as a character in literature, even by the time Baudelaire was writing his praises of one who seeks out "the fantastic reality of life."[96] The literary connections certainly can be found. For instance, as Rob Shields has noted, American novelist James Fenimore Cooper's stories of a solitary figure who is receptive to the signs of nature on the American prairies, helped in an unusual transposition (of rural to urban) to construct the idea of the flâneur, as one who 'reads' the city as landscape.[97] Benjamin clearly records his own debt to such sources, as we can hear in the passage quoted early on in this chapter: "The signboards and street names, passers-by, roofs, kiosks, and bars must speak to the wanderer like a twig snapping under his feet

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[91] Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis*, 25.
[92] Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator," *Screen*, vol. 23, number 3-4, Sept / Oct 1982, 81-82, 87.
[93] "La perruque" literally means "the wig." de Certeau's subversion, too, involves a masquerade: the employee appears as an efficient worker even though he or she is tending to his or her own interests on company time.
[94] See Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis*, chapter one.
[95] *Online Etymology Dictionary*. < http://www.etymonline.com/>.
[96] Baudelaire, *PML*, 15.
[97] See Rob Shields' "Fancy Footwork: Walter Benjamin's notes on *flânerie*." In *The Flâneur*, edited by keith tester.

in the forest, like the startling call of a bittern in the distance, like the sudden stillness of a clearing with a lily standing erect at its center."[98] In a more explicit moment Benjamin traces this linkage by citing a passage from social theorist Roger Caillois: "We must take as an established fact that this metamorphosis of the city is due to a transposition of the setting—namely, from the *savannah* and *forest* of Fenimore Cooper, where every broken branch signifies a worry or a hope, where every tree trunk hides an enemy rifle or the bow of an invisible and silent avenger."[99] The city as a foreign landscape, where (to the acutely attuned) at every turn a new wonder or horror emerges, is evident in much of Benjamin's writings. For example, in his notes on the arcades of Paris, Benjamin draws out the surreal aspect of these enclosed exteriors. He muses on how in the arcades one feels as if in an aquarium, floating past strange creatures and configurations that shimmer and twinkle from behind glass. The arcades, to him, also resemble a prehistoric world; these are caverns where amongst "immemorial flora, the commodity, luxuriates and enters, like cancerous tissue, into the most irregular combinations."[100]

Benjamin's flâneur is a character open to possibilities. Whereas, with his fall into journalism, Baudelaire's flâneur becomes nothing more than a spy for the capitalists, Benjamin's wanderer resembles something closer to a detective.[101] Although the distinction between the two roamers could seem negligible (both gather information to report), I believe it is important for Benjamin. Seeking clues that the average, untrained eye would overlook, Benjamin's flâneur assembles a picture of what *has* happened, whereas Baudelaire's extravagant figure searches out the immediate, or even that which has not yet occurred. Baudelaire describes his flâneur as one who would feel at home everywhere.[102] Home, of course, is *heimlich*—that which is familiar and comfortable; what is *unheimlich* is strange and foreign. Baudelaire's flâneur, at ease wherever he goes, does not perceive the uncanny, what lurks beneath the obvious and complicates interpretation. Baudelaire's flâneur is anxious to mark off the new as radically distanced and distinct from the old, whereas Benjamin's flâneur, like the child, recognizes the convergence of past and present, identifying the old reconfigured in the new and the new

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[98] Benjamin, BC, *SW*, vol. 2, 599.
[99] Benjamin, *Arcades*, [M11a, 5], 439. It is also worth noting that the state of 'savagery' of Cooper's characters is something, of course, that spoke to Baudelaire's sense of the human as little better than a collection of base drives, whether living in the wild American prairie or the "jungles" of urban Paris. See Benjamin, *Arcades*, [M14, 3], 443.
[100] Benjamin, *Arcades*, <a°, 3>, 874, see also [R2, 3], 540-541, and <A°5>, 827. Aquarium reference: <c°, 4>, 878-879.
[101] See Benjamin, "The Return of the Flâneur," *SW*, vol. 2, p. 264. See also, Benjamin, *Arcades*, [M13a, 2], 442.
[102] Baudelaire, *PML*, 9.

already partially formed in the old. Baudelaire's flâneur relays the nebulous shifts in fashion and fancies, whereas Benjamin's flâneur would seek out that which has been discarded, buried, and neglected, the valuable which sits below the noticed—a role that I would hope the viewers / readers / players of *Picture House* and *Hansel & Gretel* would find themselves taking up as they sift through the reclaimed materials I have employed. It would seem that Baudelaire's journalist might engage with what today we call tabloid journalism, whereas Benjamin's flâneur would practice some version of archaeology.

But it is also more than a perceived superficiality that makes Benjamin wary of Baudelaire's flâneur. What is at stake for Benjamin is a feared closure of routes, both real and metaphorical, which permit alternate readings. The fact that the news that reaches us every morning from around the globe is already so "shot through with explanation," means that there is no longer any room for the reader to make his or her own connections; there is no longer anything but the official report.[103] Modernity with its insatiable desire to capture, catalogue, and comprehend, strips the world of any mystery or magic. It is this ruthless rationalization which charts and plots all points that in part prompts Benjamin into advocating a straying off the beaten path.

By any account, Benjamin's flâneur is not concerned with the famous or the official. Scavenging the rubbish bins and alleyways, poking through the seemingly unimportant, his detective searches out what has been covered up. In collecting these implicating fragments, Benjamin's flâneur weaves together a narrative that has not yet been told, one that, in its disparate construction, not only permits, but insists on, an active participation by the reader / listener. This analogical "narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks."[104] And, as I have pointed out, a large part of what informs Benjamin's writing is a concern that experience and the communication of that experience is slipping away. Benjamin's flâneur is not a journalist who peddles superficial society gossip, nor are his stories a mere reportage of 'facts.' Rather, he is a chronicler; he collects strands of stories, winds together whispers waiting to be heard, and brings them into public reception.[105]

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[103] Benjamin, "The Storyteller," *SW*, vol. 3, 89.

[104] Benjamin, "The Storyteller," *SW*, vol. 3, 89.

[105] The storyteller is a chronicler, Benjamin tells us. He or she is a "history-teller," one who *narrates* past events, as opposed to the historian who task it is to *explain* what has happened. The chronicler, Benjamin emphasizes, is not interested in arriving at immutable conclusions; rather, this figure is one who would give us a feel for things. S/he is "concerned not with an accurate concatenation of definite events, but with the way these are embedded in the great inscrutable course of the world." Benjamin, "The Storyteller," *SW*, vol. 3, 152.

These might be tales of what Miriam Bratu Hansen calls "experience under erasure."[106]

Wanting to (re)activate the (forgotten) possible narratives harboured within the found material I use in *Picture House* and *Hansel & Gretel*, my practice mimics Benjamin's flâneur's actions. The collection(s) of scraps that I have sutured together could be understood as an archaeological excavation of sorts. And, as in all archaeological undertakings, the site is interpreted through a weave of supposition, extrapolation, and fantasy—how could it not be? The reader of *Picture House* and *Hansel & Gretel* is actively required to solve these puzzling (re)presentations; he or she, too, becomes a detective, piecing together clues to construct a narrative. Both my works attempt to remind us of the ways in which we are creatures governed by convention. In their odd combination of materials, times, places, and voices, *Picture House* and *Hansel & Gretel* render the ordinary strange and ask us to consider how we usually understand our worlds (see figure 7).
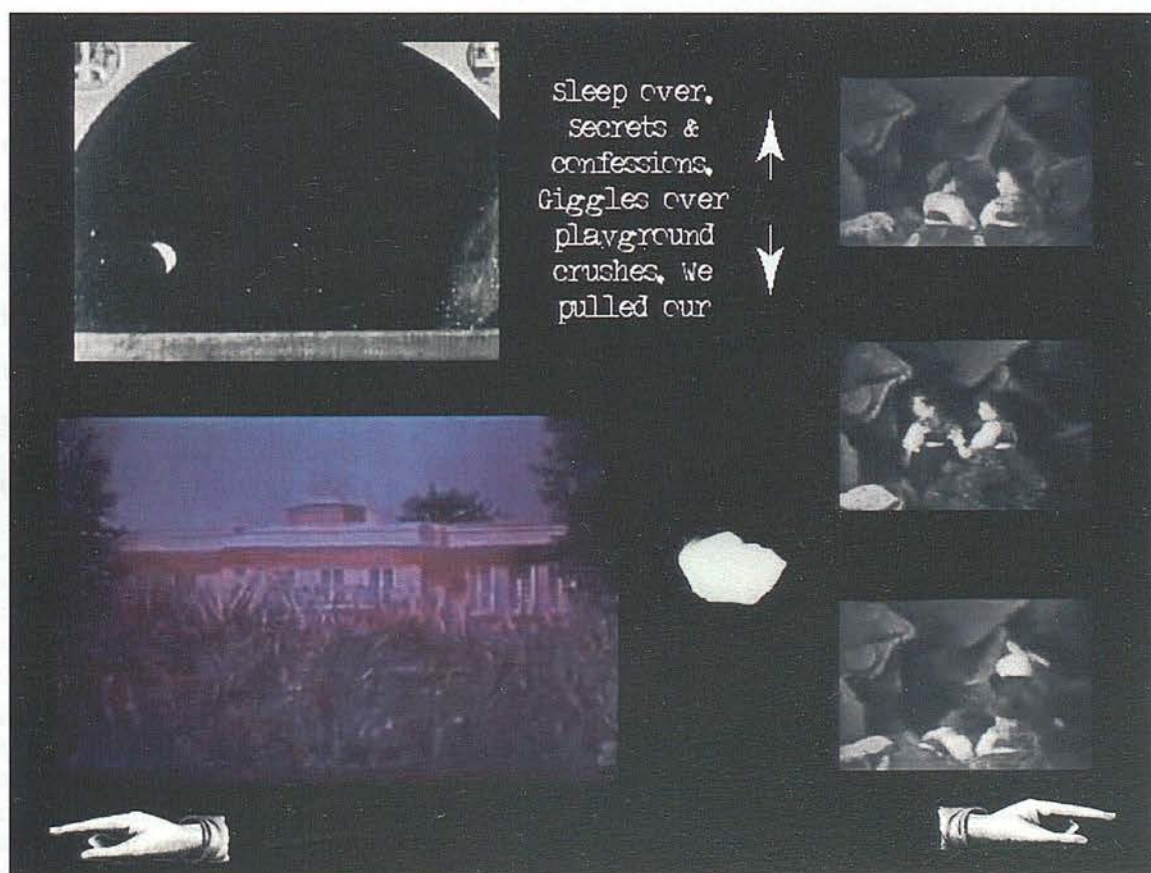

Figure 7. Still from *Picture House*.

[106] Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Room-For-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema." 23 March 2006
<http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa4092/is_200404/ai_n9348684>.

Although it was important for Benjamin to expose the world that modernity overlooks, he also understood the need to tap into modernity's force. Despite being critical of the way in which capitalism had reduced virtually everything to commodity, Benjamin also recognized the power of this system. For one thing, he identified advertising as ushering in a new form of inscription and sought to harness this 'script-image' for other means. Similar to the way in which the Dadaists and Surrealists exploited the graphic aspects of text, Benjamin wanted to appropriate the language of advertising that generates "Locust swarms of print, which already eclipse the sun."[107] The way in which we encounter text has changed with modernity, as Benjamin's vividly apocalyptic, if not prophetic, language stresses—the very cosmos, the shining world itself, nearly obliterated by a commercialism visited upon it in the form of a dark and pestilential language. Yet, the new media also usher us into previously unseen (and unheard) mediations of the world. Benjamin is keen to stress that the new public prevalence of text and the way in which advertising exploits its graphicity, changes the way we read words.[108]

Benjamin's "archive of nonsensuous similarities"[109] becomes sensuous through the nearly tangible material qualities of text. The font, colour, size, and texture of the letters become palpable; these are letters of invitation, striking solicitous notes, tempting us into an aspect of language that largely goes unnoticed and when recognized, is often derided.[110] But as Benjamin knew well, when making the written signifier exceed the signified, words take on a prominence and power. The new dynamic text makes possible what Miriam Hansen identifies as a *Wandelschrift*.[111] As Hansen explains, *Wandelschrift* implies both a moving and a mobile script. It is a "new mutability and plasticity of script

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[107] Benjamin, "Attested Auditor of Books," *One-Way Street*, 62.

[108] Benjamin, "Attested Auditor of Books," 62.

[109] Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty," *SW*, vol. 2, 722.

[110] For example, the Dadaists experiments which foregrounded the graphicity of language, as well as their use of sound poetry—textual representations of sounds which eradicated any discernable meaning—were written off by most as nonsense. Benjamin notes that these works were derisively referred to as "word salad." (Benjamin, "WOA2," *SW*, vol. 3, "XVII," 119.) The same attitude, sadly, still pervades as sound poetry, concrete poetry, and even texts which are more conservative in form but that do not take 'meaning' as their main purpose, are relegated to quaint endeavours at best, but more often derided as offensive rubbish. Texts that challenge traditional patterns of writing and reading through devices such as line breaks, multiple voicing, creative use of fonts, a foregrounding of the weight or sound of words, and the inclusion of items such as lists, clippings, handwritten letters, maps, etc., often produce a fear in their readers who feel they have no means to understand these texts. The resistance to take up the invitation to play which these ludic texts extend attests to the majorities' unwillingness to heed Benjamin's words to get lost in the unknown.

[111] Miriam Hansen, "Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street," *Benjamin's Ghosts: Interventions in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*, 63.

(*Wandel* in the sense of change), which heralds a resurgence of writing's imagistic, sensuous, mimetic qualities; and the connotation of the verb *wandeln* (to walk, amble, wander), which suggests writing's migration into three-dimensional, public space and which makes reading a more tactile, distracted experience."[112] In effect, the inked letters take on the properties of a migrant—flâneurs in their own right. They traipse across our lives, where they catch our attention with their conspicuous markings, dressed up for their own perambulations, the typographic exuberance removing any pretense of transparency in their use.

In turning the powers of capitalism against itself in this way, Benjamin hoped to rescue the works of the poet, the chronicler who plays with imagination. This, too, is what he would wish for Baudelaire's flâneur. By tying the flâneur's ambulatory ways to a mobile and mutable use of script (a linkage, as in de Certeau's *la perruque*, which permits a degree of duplicity or masquerade in that the language of capitalism is being used to critique the very system itself) Benjamin hoped to inscribe the flâneur with a modest agency. Along with an exploitation of the graphic qualities of script, Benjamin advocated co-opting such advertising forms as the leaflet, pamphlet, and brochure. These publications—informal, throw-away, rapidly produced, and easily disseminated—speak to the local, as opposed to the book, which Benjamin sees as a form mired in outdated, "pretentious," and "universal" gestures.[113] In tactically employing these common print formats, Benjamin hoped to speak directly to the ordinary person. By appropriating the language of advertising, Benjamin believed it possible to deliver a message with an immediacy, which the book, in its more cumbersome form and its ties to high culture, could not. In aligning his flâneur with these meager methods of dissemination, Benjamin assigned him a subversive role. Essentially Benjamin makes the flâneur into a sort of Robin Hood figure who identifies with the common and popular. I believe it was important for Benjamin to position the flâneur as folk hero, a hero of the people, who, in his championing of the ordinary, is able to inspire and move people to action. As a figure in folklore, this character then, is recorded in stories, even as he himself gathers and recounts, perpetuating the cycle of common recollection.[114] This would stand in stark

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[112] Miriam Hansen, "Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street," 62-64.

[113] Benjamin, "Filling Station," *One-Way Street*, 45.

[114] For Benjamin too, the flâneur is always male. Despite the fact that at the time Benjamin was living there, many women in Paris were actively engaged in shaping the image(s) of the city, Benjamin excludes them from his writings. Journalist Janet Flanner (a wonderful coincidence of name) is one such figure. Flanner, an American living in Paris, wrote a weekly "Letter from Paris" for the magazine the *New Yorker*. Her career, as well as the fact that she moved in artistic and literary circles, would almost certainly have meant

contrast to the foppish dandy-journalist who, in Baudelaire's wish, would remain a purely aesthetic figure.

And yet Benjamin is not far from Baudelaire, when Benjamin celebrates the flâneur's power to see, like the child, 'at first sight.' For Baudelaire, too, appreciates the flâneur as a site of registration for the new: his is a man who goes in search of the "ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent."[115] Baudelaire states "we might liken him to a mirror [. . .] or to a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness," responsive to the smallest movements.[116] Baudelaire's flâneur is able remarkably to reproduce the rich variety and "the flickering grace" of all life: "He is an 'I' with an insatiable appetite for the 'non-I', at every instant rendering and explaining it in pictures more living than life itself, which is always unstable and fugitive."[117] Knowing Baudelaire's 'intoxication' with the new, and the unmistakably cinematic nature of his terms, it is surprising to learn that he was resolutely set against the new technology of photography.[118] Even though Baudelaire positioned the flâneur as a sort of 'camera eye / I,' he resented the fact that, as a technology that 'eliminated' the artist, photography disallowed the subjective filtering that was so crucial for the flâneur / artist / journalist who he celebrated.

Benjamin, however, emphasized and celebrated the metaphorical and literal implications of photography associated with this pupil of the city. Benjamin's flâneur practices what Anne Friedberg identifies as a "mobilized virtual gaze."[119] The flâneur's ambulatory wanderings take on a cinematic quality as he (or she) moves from site to site, image to image (and sound to sound), somewhat like the process of linkage that the viewer / reader of Picture House is asked to engage in. The flâneur's gaze, Friedberg tells us, is not direct but received and mediated.[120] Benjamin's flâneur, himself a socially constructed figure, takes up images from the world around him that have already passed through social filters and then adds to their artifice. Photography, however, creates an image that is detailed and immediate. In its ability to elide the subjectivity which Baudelaire prized so highly in his flâneur's 'sketches' of modern life, photography, for Benjamin, becomes not only an apt metaphor for the flâneur, as one who records the world, it also acts as a medium and a

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that Benjamin was aware of her, but this *flâneuse* seemingly does not exist for Benjamin. See *Paris was a Woman* (1995), a film by Greta Schiller.

[115] Baudelaire, *PML*, 12.

[116] Baudelaire, *PML*, 10.

[117] Baudelaire, *PML*, 10.

[118] See Johanna Drucker, *Theorizing Modernism: Visual Art and the Critical Tradition*, 12.

[119] Friedberg, *Window Shopping*, 2.

[120] Friedberg, *Window Shopping*, 2.

material object that aids the flâneur to bring to light that which may be overlooked as unworthy of attention.

The importance Benjamin ascribed to the photograph's ability to elide subjectivity should not be underestimated. As Leo Charney has observed, much theory of the modern period was preoccupied with the rift between experience and representation.[121] Benjamin certainly shared this concern, stating that with modernism came a "poverty of experience," a torpor that settles, severing the connection between lived moments and the passing on of those experiences.[122] I argue that the photograph, for Benjamin, offered some possibility of diminishing the rent between embodied experience and the communication of those moments. Benjamin stressed the ways in which the mechanically reproduced image was more immediate than earlier forms of art. However, I believe that Benjamin might have been thinking of the photograph as what more accurately might be called an *inter*mediate phenomenon. By this I mean that the photograph, for Benjamin, not only marked an in betweenness of presence and absence, but it also occupied a liminal space. I think it likely that in the photograph, with its lack of human manipulation, Benjamin saw an opportunity to approximate the moment of (bodily) experience that dissipates and distorts in the instant we try to give it shape through cognition; the seemingly unmarked image, for Benjamin, uncannily duplicated the experience we forget we have experienced. The photograph's ability to elude the highly personal imprint of the artist would have also appealed to Benjamin in that these 'objective' images, like the informal publication formats of the pamphlet and the poster, would be available to a larger group of people than the products of 'high art' which shunned the vernacular and were sequestered in revered museums and galleries.

However subjective the 'sketches' Baudelaire's journalist produced, as 'news,' his flâneur's reports were presented as 'factual.' As such, they delivered an official version of events, one which would be anxious to close off alternate readings. The photograph too, presents a 'complete' image; all is there to be seen. However, this mechanical record of a moment in space and time is lacking the instructive narrative found in the news report. The photograph in its ambiguous silence introduces a distance between image and observer, thereby complicating any 'easy' reading of the image.[123] For this reason,

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[121] Leo Charney, *Empty Moments: Cinema, Modernity, and Drift*, 6.

[122] Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," *SW*, vol. 2, 734.

[123] Drucker, *Theorizing Modernism*, 13-14. Although Benjamin stresses photography's ability to offer an 'objective' view of the world, this is to be understood relative to his criticism of Baudelaire's defense of

photography for Benjamin was a doubly alienating medium. For one thing, it mimicked the fragmentary experience of modern life, arresting the fleeting in what could be a completely random framing. In addition, through its mechanistic (re)production of the image, photography also emphasized the way in which the world was already constructed as image (captured as easily with the click of the shutter as with the blink of an eye) and not the work of a supremely special and separate genius.[124] In a related argument, Linda Hutcheon emphasizes the important distinction between an 'event' and a 'fact.' An event, she reminds us, is what 'really' happened, this is the raw experience for which there is no 'meaning' as such. It is only later, 'after the fact' of the occurrence that we ascribe significance in an attempt to make some sense of the event.[125] Hutcheon astutely remarks: "Facts are not given but are constructed by the kinds of questions we ask of events."[126] The selections we make, the choices that eliminate and lead to others, construct the 'reality' of our world, or at least the (framed) reality to which we have access. Denied the ability to communicate in an unmediated way we must rely on representation to approximate some version of our experience.

The photograph, in all its immediacy, for Benjamin, addresses this gap between image and 'reality.' The image (of the world), for Benjamin, is collectively produced, not something that the artist invents, although he or she may alter it. And, in contrast to Baudelaire's flâneur, who is imbued with an aura of superiority, as one (of the few) who is gifted with the sensitivity to directly access a world hidden from most of us, Benjamin's flâneur finds that 'true' experience is only ever available through mediated

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artistic genius. Like the Surrealists, Benjamin understands photography as a tool which exercises the imagination at the same time that it empirically documents. Not only did Surrealists such as Claude Cahun use the genre of the photographic self-portrait to question identity, members affiliated with the group exploited the way the photograph could be used to reveal the magical within the everyday (to communicate with Benjamin's optical unconscious). See, for example the photographs of Man Ray, Eli Lotar, Claude Cahun, Gyula Halasz Brassaï, Lee Miller, Raoul Ubac, Hans Bellmer, and Jacques-Andre Boiffard. In her essay "Photography in the Service of Surrealism" Rosalind Krauss draws our attention to the inherent contradiction between Surrealism and photography: Surrealism was founded as a challenge to realist conventions; photography reproduced the world with acute veracity (Krauss, "Photography in the Service of Surrealism," L'amour Fou: Photography and Surrealism by Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston 15). Nonetheless, Krauss argues that rather than photography being something peripheral to or lesser than 'true' Surrealist works, photography itself is at the heart of Surrealism. It was, in fact, photography's connection to the real that made it so indispensable to the Surrealists. The photograph was simultaneously able to (re)create a marvelous world, while maintaining a connection to the known; the technology was able, quite literally, to bring to light the astonishing in the everyday. "In cutting into the body of the world, stopping it, framing it, photography reveals that world as written. Surrealist vision and photographic vision cohere around these principles" (Krauss, 40). The above-named artists photos, in addition to others, are reproduced in L'amour Fou.

[124] Drucker, Theorizing Modernism, 22.

[125] Linda Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction, 122.

[126] Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism, 123.

representation[127]—a fingerprint, a torn note, a drop of blood. All we have are leftovers of an existence which we cut and paste together in an awkward attempt to frame experience. The world, as image, as something understood and communicable, is only knowable in such sutured acts; we cannot have an unmediated experience that opens on to the 'true.' In focusing on photography, Benjamin inverts the subjective role of the flâneur, emphasizing that the creator is shaped as much by the image as he or she shapes it. In a similar argument Johanna Drucker has astutely observed that "The image is an instrument to create consciousness, rather than being its result."[128] In this logic, an understanding Benjamin would surely agree with in relation to his theories of film, the image becomes imbued with a certain agency. The image (particularly the photographic image) has the power to move and to make, to shape how we think and relate that knowledge. It asks us to enter its world for a moment, invites us into a kind of mimetic symbiosis. An animate force, the photograph engages the spectator / reader in an ambiguous play; we are moved by and move between what is both there and not there. In this figuring, too, the image becomes a point of departure as much as an end product. As much as the similitude draws us in, the image also gestures away from itself, asking us to draw hidden correspondences amongst disparate times and spaces, between past and present, experience and representation.

collective experiences

Just as Benjamin emphasizes that "A Berlin Chronicle" is not an autobiographical text, so, too, he is quite clear on the point that the flâneur participates in more than a personal, subjective experience. Benjamin speaks of how the streets lead the flâneur "through a vanished time" and "into a past that can be all the more profound because it is not his own, not private. Nevertheless, it always remains the past of a youth."[129] In an extensive metaphor, Benjamin tells us how "the flâneur advances over the street of stone, with its double ground, as though driven by a clockwork mechanism." Inside that machine a music box is "palpitating" like a child's toy. It plays a tune: "From days of youth, / from days of youth, / a song is with me still."[130] The flâneur recognizes that this melody, like a

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[127] Drucker, *Theorizing Modernism*, 19.
[128] Drucker, *Theorizing Modernism*, 23.
[129] Benjamin, *Arcades*, <e°, 1>, 879-881.
[130] Benjamin, *Arcades*, <e°, 1>, 879-881.

fairy tale or nursery rhyme repeated over and over, does not originate from his own youth, or even from a recent youth, but from a much earlier childhood. It speaks to him all the same, whether it derives from his own or an ancestor's childhood. In this haunting tune he detects the stories of the past. The flâneur collects and repeats these tales, and in passing them on, brings the past to bear on the present. But this past, Benjamin insists, "always remains the past of a youth."[131] A Benjaminian reading of this statement could conclude that modernity, in its lust for the new, has increasingly made things become quickly outmoded and unrecognizable. Not allowed to grow old through use, objects and ideas are relegated to a perpetual 'childhood.' The flâneur must be receptive to their stunted voices; the chronicler must tell of the life they were not permitted to live out.[132] The flâneur, then, in this reckoning, becomes an eulogizer, delivering mournful words for the dead. But in relating these stories of what has been, Benjamin's flâneur gives them a new life, he reincarnates them.[133] But a past could also remain youthful through its renewal, through a (re)valuing of the old and the passing on of wisdom necessary for the continuation of society, a process which Benjamin passionately supported.

The ground we traverse, like the photograph, resonates with a tension between past and present. In these layered spaces we perceive the traces of previous wanderers. Because space, for Benjamin, can record and retain something from the past, space 'knows' us. Space in a way reads and writes us, forming images of us for us.[134] Accessing these representations is a matter of excavation, for language lays like a crust over top of buried memories, ossified representations, down through which we must dig our way. Memory, for Benjamin, "is the medium of that which is experienced."[135] Like a prehistoric swamp, memory petrifies the moment of the event; it preserves it—yes, but there is also a transformation that takes place, a mediation that is necessary if we are to be able to extract these embalmed instances and examine and learn from them. However, to bring memory to the surface we must move into language, for we can never fully extricate ourselves from our linguistic base; held fast as fossils, we remain trapped in its signifying strata. What is necessary in order to approach memory, to unearth an understanding of

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[131] Benjamin, *Arcades*, <e°, 1>, 879-881.

[132] In speaking of the past as something that "always remains the past of a youth," we can also hear Benjamin's (undoubtedly intended) reference to the way in which the child, in his or her youthful wonder, shares the flâneur's capacity for detection.

[133] Similarly, Benjamin identifies an afterlife as the product of the translation of an original, a concept I discuss more fully in chapter three.

[134] Benjamin says of old buildings: "although they were not young with us and perhaps did not even know us when we were children, they have much knowledge of our childhood, and for this we love them." Benjamin, BC, *SW*, vol. 2, 611.

[135] Benjamin, "Excavation and Memory," *SW*, vol. 2, 576.

what we have undergone, Benjamin seems to say, is a clearing-away of the language that has settled into memory and sifted into habit. The sediment of language, packed down with repeated usage, needs to be tilled if it is to be fruitful.[136] In overturning language we rupture its transparency; it takes on a certain foreignness. In making strange, we are forced to engage in a sort of translation. When language itself, rather than the message it 'carries,' is emphasized, we begin to see in it other usages and unexpected meanings. These possibilities open up odd linkages and associations, ones perhaps closer to the logic found in dream or memory. 'Unbalanced,' we are (at least temporarily) transported into other worlds, other ways of conceiving of the conventional.

In bypassing our customary defenses, we can draw upon a different kind of memory. Benjamin makes the distinction between two types of experience: *Erfahrung*—experience gathered over time, resulting in wisdom—which he contrasts with the immediate experiences of *Erlebnis*—a series of shocks which do not register in consciousness and therefore do not get processed in a coherent and communicable way but will occasionally rupture through as *mémoire involuntaire*. These 'forgotten' memories take on an uncanny tenor. For not only do we not remember the experiences from which they are derived, but because they surface unbidden, triggered by a perceived semblance somewhere beyond our knowing, they take on a significance that is not granted to 'usual' memories. *Erlebnis*' lack of (knowable) registration is compensated for in *Erfahrung*—an accumulation of experience—through which we are able to rationalize the world around us. Despite *Erfahrung* being a form of memory which works off conscious cognition and rationalization, I believe in this concretion of experience Benjamin also sees a more fundamental form of memory. Although different from the 'sneaky' memories of *Erlebnis* which largely remain cached in the body, or at least for the most part are screened from consciousness, in *Erfahrung* too, Benjamin seems to identify a mimesis that departs from an ordered view of the world. For *Erfahrung* is, in part, tied up with the more primitive or automatic aspects of our selves and is able to connect the seemingly disparate in ways that normally would not be perceived or permitted by our usual cognitive processes. It would seem that *Erfahrung*, like *Erlebnis*, is, in part, an unconscious way of knowing the

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[136] In his text "Experience and Poverty," *SW*, vol. 2, 731, Benjamin opens with a reference to a fable which was popular during his childhood. An old man on his deathbed misleads his sons into believing that he has buried treasure in the vineyard. The sons dig and dig but unearth no treasure. However, the next autumn, the vines produced an abundant crop. We can hear the moral of this story echoed in Benjamin's usage of archaeological metaphors and his insistence that what might seem like futile work, or even misguided effort, may in fact yield rich results, as well as his repeated references to images of growth: seeds, kernels, fruit, flowers, which are scattered throughout his writings like weeds squeezing through cracks in the pavement.

world, even as it involves a cognitive processing of events. The apparent contradiction may make more sense if we recall that when experience settles into habit it becomes an unconscious or automatic process. The negative aspects of habit, for Benjamin, involve a certain degree of danger in what might have been lost or missed, what may pass by, perhaps completely unnoticed, as we fail to take note. We need to look again, askance, askew, go awry, wayward, and veer from the circumscribed and anticipated. Benjamin is eager to ensure that the give and take of the cycle of astonishment and routine which Tom Gunning identifies does not terminate in a dead end of already knowing.[137]

Ideas of rhythm and timing are significant for Benjamin; the ebb and flow of a dialectics of astonishment moves us back and forth between the known and the surprising, criss-crosses us through the liminal, and leads him to declare that the entries into the labyrinth, rather than what lies at its centre, hold significance. What has happened, Benjamin tells us, is that with modernity's erosion of tradition, we no longer experience rites of passage with the same frequency or intensity: "We have grown very poor in threshold experiences. Falling asleep is perhaps the only such experience that remains to us."[138] We need to pass over more thresholds, says Benjamin; till our dreams, to replace those that modernity has made fallow. We need to develop new traditions, traditions that, in their stasis, mark points of transition and move us into change. Tradition participates in a collective memory, maintaining social order, and yet, by its very occasion, prompts people into new phases of their lives, leads them into ways of being they have not yet experienced. In the traditions of society Benjamin identifies a movement between the fixed, the known, and the new and unfamiliar; a regenerative process which pulses between stasis and change. Similarly, it is the movement to and from memory—the process of finding (moving across thresholds), and the location of the memory (what has prompted the recollection)—rather than the memory itself that Benjamin values.

As I discussed earlier, Benjamin conceives of memory as map, a pseudo-biography one might unfold and refold, the self pressed into shape in the repeated pleating. A sort of archaeological report, this 'biomap,' I would argue, functions as a cartography of memory for Benjamin. But this document maps more than Benjamin's memories. Rather, in the way that the photograph, for Benjamin, permits a proximity to experience through its immediacy, I believe he is similarly conceiving of his bio-map as a trace of experience,

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[137] Tom Gunning, "Re-Newing Old Technologies: Astonishment, Second Nature, and the Uncanny in Technology from the Previous Turn-of-the-Century," *Rethinking Media Change*, 41.
[138] Benjamin, *Arcades*, [O2a, 1], 494.

some vestige of the 'real' event versus the later mediated representation, something above and beyond the 'facts' imposed on the recollection. This map, I believe, Benjamin is thinking of as a sensual record, a mark, a stain of memory left by the body; these manifestations represent what cannot be fully articulated, yet are powerfully felt. What has triggered memories, in their formation and in their 'discovery,' is what is significant; the experience that has formed both the memory and the occasion for its retrieval are what Benjamin is eager to bring into the light. In doing so he ties the formative moment of the past to the experience of the present which has prompted the memory to be recalled; in effect Benjamin short circuits linear time, and, in joining past and present, creates a dialectical spark which ignites something new.

Memory, like the earth which hides the ruins of earlier times, is the medium through which the past can be accessed; it is the "dark joy of the place of the finding."[139] It is, in its form as genuine memory which, according to Benjamin, is both "epic" and "rhapsodic."[140] But the past is only available to us in fragments of a life "severed from all earlier associations."[141] The most we can do is to keep sifting through the soiled memories, rearranging words and images, in hopes of brushing up against the "ancient treasures" of "authentic memories" which approximate some version of 'true' meaning.[142] Benjamin wishes to close the gap between the 'false' memories produced by capitalism and its flood of commodities, and the 'actual' experience of capitalism, a disparity, which he, like his contemporaries Theodor Adorno and Siegfried Kracauer, believed was responsible for the alienation felt by so many in the modern world. Benjamin writes emphatically of that decline as a hawking of what comes to us as great value from the past: "We have become impoverished. We have given up one portion of the human heritage after another, and have often left it at the pawnbroker's for a hundredth of its true

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[139] Benjamin, BC, *SW*, vol. 2, 611.

[140] *Online Etymology Dictionary*. "Epic" in its general meaning is a "story" or "poem" and "rhapsody" means literally "to stitch." <http://www.etymonline.com/>

[141] Benjamin, "Excavation and Memory," *SW*, vol. 2, 576.

[142] Benjamin, "Excavation and Memory," *SW*, vol. 2, 576. It is important to note that Benjamin's position is clearly influenced by the rhetoric of Marxism and psychoanalysis, both of which work off the idea of a latent, prelapsarian state that is obscured and repressed by the forces of capitalism and consciousness, respectively. However, Benjamin does not argue for an originary moment of perfection. His arguments are based on the notion of a fundamentally flawed world; there is, for him, no earlier point when we were without technology and had access to an unmediated truth. Although some of his more 'theological' works might seem to indicate something to the contrary. For example, in his "On Language as Such and On the Language of Man," Benjamin takes the text of Genesis as his starting point to argue the significance of language and naming. Here, as elsewhere, Benjamin stretches the logic of meaning to breaking point. In this essay, Benjamin's linguistic play results in the image of a world in which human importance is radically diminished in favour of a more balanced relationship between humans and 'nature.' "On Language as Such and On the Language of Man," *SW*, vol. 1, 62-74.

value, in exchange for the small change of "the contemporary.""[143] The erosion of experience and the inability to communicate experience, for Benjamin, results in a kind of stupefying silence that settles on modernity. Stunned and stunted by the traumas of war, the relocation necessitated by the Industrial revolution, and the resultant dismantling of traditional patterns of communication, people have become mute.

conclusion

The art of getting lost is serious play for Benjamin. The child, able to look upon the world 'at first sight' and the flâneur, who seeks out alternative versions to dominant narratives in the discarded and forgotten, are two errant figures that, for Benjamin, participate in a much needed straying. In the child, Benjamin sees clearly manifest the mimetic faculty which has atrophied by the time of adulthood. Through play and repetition, we imitate and know the world; we master the unfamiliar and form habits. This knowledge, built up through embodied experience, forms Benjamin's *Erfahrung*—wisdom that must be passed on for the maintenance of society. For Benjamin, the modern person is unable to articulate experience in any meaningful way since experience—an embodied, sentient, comprehensive experience—is no longer available (it has been sold out). What is needed, Benjamin argues, is a way to reanimate and to reopen lines of communication. The reproductive technologies of photography and film could uncannily mimic the processes of (the lack of) memory: in the immediacy of the photograph I believe Benjamin saw the possibility of 'brushing up against' experience.

It is this beguiling relationship between memory and experience that my practice seeks to address. My intention with *Picture House* and *Hansel & Gretel* is to complicate our usual reception of representations. My practice opens up questions surrounding both private and public memory, and the ways in which these slippery remembrances can operate. In bringing representation to our attention, Benjamin hoped we would become critical interpreters, for the same 'objectivity' that positions film and photography as magical mimetic instructors, comes with a responsibility to use these powerfully 'real' images in

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[143] Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," *SW*, vol. 2, 735. Also, it is important to keep in mind that not everyone saw the Industrial Revolution and the rise of modernity as a total scourge on society. Theorist Raymond Williams for example, speaks of the way in which his family, who were poor farmers, welcomed the mechanization of the farm which greatly reduced the backbreaking labour of traditional methods. See Raymond Williams, "Culture is Ordinary," in *The Raymond Williams Reader*, ed. John Higgins, 11.

ways that contribute to enriching impoverished experience. And it is in film, paradoxically, a modern form of storytelling, that Benjamin sees a means of tapping into some vestige of old collective memory and embodied communication, which will be the focus of my next chapter.

Chapter Two

Benjamin and film: cause & cure

In this chapter I will explore the ways in which the technology of film, for Benjamin, in its ability to capture and construct the world, is able to connect with the viewer in ways that are not only immediate, but visceral. Through Buster Keaton's film *Sherlock Jr.* (1924) I will also illustrate something of the magic that Benjamin saw in film's ability to reel us along to the distant and the unknown through the processes of montage and editing. As well, I will examine how film's mimetic capacity, for Benjamin, allowed for a revolutionary potential which offered a means of preserving the disappearing world while also providing a way to cope with fragmented modern life. It is perhaps fanciful, though useful, to suppose that like the child and flâneur, film, with its ability to speak to the "optical unconscious," is able to access a 'primitive' knowledge.[144] An archaic knowledge could, of course, imply a collective knowledge; shared memories upon which society is constructed. Importantly for Benjamin, film was a technology that was received by a collective audience. In this chapter I will also argue that in film—a highly developed mimetic technology—Benjamin saw the possibility of recouping a semblance of an oral society, a society dependant upon a notion of common recollection gathered through sentient experience, which had been eroded by modernity.

play room

Film, for Benjamin, although part of the capitalist structure responsible for the impoverishment of experience, was also a medium poised to address the alienation of modernity. According to Benjamin, the *"representation of human beings by means of an apparatus has made possible a highly productive use of the human being's self-alienation."*[145] As both disease and remedy, moving pictures, like the photograph, work in ambivalent ways. Benjamin (as did Siegfried Kracauer) saw film as a medium that could 'truly' represent modernity. Motion pictures, like the technology of the still photograph,

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[144] See Benjamin's WOA3, *SW*, vol. 4, 266, regarding Benjamin's concept of the optical unconscious.
[145] Benjamin, WOA2, *SW*, vol. 3, 113. Emphasis in original.

mimic the fragmentary and ephemeral nature of modern life. 'Moving pictures,' however, can exploit time in a way the still photograph cannot. Vivian Sobchack articulates the difference between the still and moving photograph: "The cinema presents us with quite a different perceptual technology and mode of representation. Through its objectively visible spatialization of a frozen point of view into dynamic and intentional trajectories of *self-displacing* vision and through its subjectively experienced temporalization of an essential moment into *lived momentum*, the cinematic radically reconstitutes the photographic."[146]

In cinema the still image flickers to life, (re)presenting the world to us in startling verisimilitude. Film emphasizes the disjointed and discontinuous nature of the modern experience through its constructedness. Film's ability to artfully suture past, present, and future, both diegetically and at the level of construction, results in a representation that requires the viewer to travel through time and location, often in ways that are jarring and violent.[147] What makes film so well equipped to capture the image of modern life, according to Eva Guelen, is the fact that in cinema, "there is no object apart from its representation."[148] The technology of film, which allows for reproduction, jeopardizes the authority of the actual object being represented. In the process of reproduction, the authenticity or the *aura*, which represents the "historical testimony" of the object and is based on its physical presence, is corroded, leaving the object stripped of "the weight it derives from tradition."[149]

The withering of the aura, Benjamin tells us, is matched "by a huge gain in the scope for play [*Spiel-Raum*]." And it is in film where the "space for play is widest." For with this mimetic recording medium, "the element of semblance has been entirely displaced by the element of play."[150] Film does not just *resemble* the object it has captured, as film, it *is*, it has *become* that object. Film, in its ability to reproduce a haunting likeness of objects, and further, to animate these ghosts, bypasses any suspicion of approximation: the copy is utterly convincing in its mimicry. As such, film does not have to belabour its semblance; in Benjamin's world, it is free to play. As Benjamin explains, this displacement of semblance by play comes about because with technology humans begin to move from a

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[146] Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, 145. Emphasis in original.
[147] Eva Geulen, "Under Construction: Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,"" In *Benjamin's Ghosts: Interventions in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*, 130-131. Here Geulen examines the significance of simultaneity for Benjamin.
[148] Geulen, 133.
[149] Benjamin, WOA2, *SW*, vol. 3, 103.
[150] Benjamin, WOA2, *SW*, vol. 3, footnote #22, 127.

desire to master nature towards a goal of interpenetration between humans and technology.[151] The oldest forms of imitation—dance and language—happened *within* the body; there is no mediation, only the body mimicking. Later techniques of representation—painting, sculpture—involve a mediation between the real and the represented.[152] However, like the body which is able to perform with a directness, in the modern technology of film, as Geulen has argued, "there is no longer any mediation, neither one between method and object, nor one that might fall to representation, for representation is itself the object (and the method), and film is accordingly pure mediation."[153] Because film appears to us so convincing in its presence, so utterly 'real,' for Benjamin, it is able to touch us in ways that other technologies cannot. Film can play with our emotions and perceptions, reeling us along, casting us into wonder. In destroying the authenticity of the object, film takes on a ludic role.

This is certainly the case with both *Picture House* and *Hansel & Gretel*. Both works invite the reader / viewer to play. They ask the spectator to engage with a constellation of representations, not only to tease out possible interpretations, but to consider the mediation of representation itself. The reader of *Picture House* and *Hansel & Gretel* must sift through these remnants of the past, joining scraps, suturing hints and stubs of suggestions that crop up in the sounds, still and moving images, and texts. In doing so, he or she may be moved to ponder the meanings he or she attaches to the images, texts, and sounds. This interruption in our habitual reading could lead the viewer to a consideration of our usually untroubled reception of representations, to question the way in which we so readily take much of our world as 'given' or true, because 'that's just how it is.' It is my intention that *Picture House* and *Hansel & Gretel* make the viewer aware of what it is that they are viewing—these are representations, *copies* of people, sounds, locations, ideas (see figure 8). As reproductions, they are no longer unique. Divested of their 'originality,' no longer cloaked in the associations of the singular, these copies can now operate in a more general register; they are free to play with meaning. Notably, in the copy, as copy, film plays with the very notion of authenticity.

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[151] Benjamin, WOA2, *SW*, vol. 3, 107.
[152] Benjamin, WOA2, *SW*, vol. 3, footnote #22, 127.
[153] Geulen, "Under Construction," 133.

Figure 8. Still from *Picture House*.

In yet another paradox it becomes apparent that the notion of authenticity is only possible once we have a reproduction, a second version, to call the state of originality into being.[154] Only if there is at least one level of succession can there be a beginning which might be an origin. Authenticity is defined from the start by its opposite—reproducibility. But it is precisely because of its reproductive capabilities that Benjamin, far from lamenting any loss in dissemination, actually invests film with a radical potential.[155] He is astute in showing that one of film's abilities is to record and represent the world to us in ways we cannot usually see. The interpenetration of art and science—a merging of the irrational and the rational—in film, which brings the new to light, is in fact one of the "revolutionary functions of film" for Benjamin.[156] Like the child and the flâneur, film too, is able to draw our attention to a world that largely remains invisible to us. Through it we

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[154] Geulen clarifies Benjamin's point that the aura only becomes manifest in its decay. She says, "the loss of the aura requires no further explanation, for the aura itself is the explanation. [...] That a concept such as the aura has at all become conceivable is thus a sign that art is no longer auratic." "Under Construction," 136. It is only with the advent of mechanical reproduction that the idea of the aura or authenticity can come into question.

[155] Benjamin notes that as the aura is stripped away with reproductive technologies such as film, ironically a cult of the movie star simultaneously emerges, one which artificially constructs and sells the 'aura' of the screen actors. See Benjamin, WOA3, *SW*, vol. 4, 261.

[156] Benjamin, WOA3, *SW*, vol. 4, 265.

can explore the commonplace, the mundane, and expose in familiar objects their hidden details.[157] The techniques of film can dramatically alter our perceptions: the close-up expands space, slow motion extends movement, and enlargement exposes structures hitherto unseen: "Clearly, it is another nature which speaks to the camera as compared to the eye."[158]

The camera captures this other nature (really no 'nature' at all), and in exposing the secret, the odd, and the astonishing, it brings into focus the uncanny nature of modernity. The polished glass eye of the camera springs open the world that remains latent for most of us most of the time. With its ability to access these hidden worlds, the camera brings to light what Benjamin calls the "optical unconscious," a faculty that registers "a vast and unsuspected field of action" which our normal observations largely do not take note of and in their physiological limitations often cannot apprehend.[159] The camera, as external device, is able to circumvent our usual defences and limitations and enlarges both the marvellous and the malevolent in our world. Ironically, it is through the prosthetic eye of the camera, through its mediation, that we are able to see 'at first sight.'[160]

As for Kracauer, film for Benjamin has the power to renew our experience of physical reality. Photography, with its inherent capacity for realism, maintains an indexical and iconic relationship with the object; the object literally leaves a trace, a record of a certain time and place, and the photograph then functions as an icon for the missing referent.[161] Photographic film, like the flâneur, scarcely alters the actual objects upon which it turns its attention. For Kracauer, this means that the photographer must carefully read the subject like a "book of nature."[162] Obviously Kracauer, like Benjamin in the passage cited

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[157] Benjamin, 265.

[158] Benjamin, 266. Elsewhere, Benjamin expands on this idea: "For it is another nature which speaks to the camera rather than to the eye: "other" above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious." "Little History of Photography," *SW*, vol. 2, 510.

[159] Benjamin speaks of the "optical unconscious" in WOA3, *SW*, vol. 4, 266. The quote is found in WOA3, *SW*, vol. 4, 265.

[160] See Louis Aragon's text "On décor," in *The Shadow and Its Shadow*, edited by Paul Hammond, which celebrates film's ability to imbue a strangeness to the everyday.

[161] Of course, this argument obviously is complicated when we speak of digital photography and the way in which it no longer necessarily has any indexical, contingent ties to the physical world. However, Tom Gunning has provocatively argued that the Spirit photograph, popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as the trace of an apparition, a non-material spirit, calls the indexical nature of chemical-based photography itself into question. See Gunning, "Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations: Spirit Photography, Magic Theatre, Trick Films, and Photography's Uncanny," in *Fugitive Images: From Photography to Video*, ed. Patrice Pedro, 65-66. Miriam Bratu Hansen makes a similar claim for cartoons, pointing out that they too are not tied to the 'real' world. See Hansen, "Room-For-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema." 23 March 2006 <http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa4092/is_200404/ai_n9348684>.

[162] Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, L.

in chapter one (page 11), is thinking of the city as wilderness, a foreign (and potentially hostile) landscape. To take a good picture, Kracauer surmises, the photographer must be "an imaginative reader, or an explorer prompted by insatiable curiosity."[163] The photographer too, it seems, must lose him- or herself in a play between object and representation. In fact, in André Bazin's thinking, the chemical-mechanical nature of the photograph means that the photographer's role in the art-making process (as opposed to the painter or sculptor who manipulate their media to a greater degree) is significantly reduced. It is the relative absence of human intervention in producing the photograph that, for Bazin, sets this medium apart from previous ones. And for him, it is this very same distance between human and photograph that grants this emulsified ghost a kind of magic: "Photography affects us like a phenomenon in nature, like a flower or a snowflake whose vegetable or earthy origins are an inseparable part of their beauty."[164]

Although the photograph (still or moving) has the ability to capture an uncanny likeness of an object, this silvered double *does* alter the perceptions it brings to us. Through the lens, we can read between the lines of the everyday. Photography both *records* and *reveals*. It has the capacity to render the familiar in a disorienting way and to distort the reality before us. In Benjamin's metaphor of extreme, even violent, change, it can explode the expected: "Our bars and city streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories seemed to close relentlessly around us. Then came film and exploded this prison-world with the dynamite of the split second, so that now we can set off calmly on journeys of adventure among its far-flung debris."[165] Not only does *taking* the photograph require an adventure or exploration according to Kracauer, but here Benjamin, continuing the trope of journeying, stresses that the *reception* of film (with its photographic basis) prompts us into a form of travel as well.[166]

Buster Keaton's film *Sherlock Jr.* (1924) offers a good example of film's ability to let us go calmly adventuring. In the film, a slick, unsavoury character known to us as "the cad" steals Keaton's fiancée's father's watch and frames Keaton for the crime in order to

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[163] Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, L.

[164] André Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, 13.

[165] Benjamin, WOA3, *SW*, vol. 4, 265. See also Miriam Bratu Hansen's introduction to Siegfried Kracauer's *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, XXV.

[166] It is interesting to note that the language we use to speak of these events entails an ownership, a possessing: we *take* pictures, *take* (our) time, *take* trips—perhaps indicative of an insatiable desire to capture some small piece of mortality. However, we also take up, take in, we are taken over; we incorporate what is external. In this understanding, the language becomes less about ownership and more about an embodied mimetic engagement: the urge to lose oneself in the strange, in the other.

discredit the hero and win Keaton's fiancée for himself. Dejected and disheartened, Keaton goes off to work at the theatre where he is employed as a movie projectionist. After starting the first reel, Keaton falls asleep on his stool, his back to the screen. Shortly, Keaton's double wakes and separates from his sleeping body. The spectral twin then watches the screen where he sees the characters turn into his (ex)fiancée and the cad who has stolen her away. Outraged, he rushes from the projection booth and down the aisle of the theatre. After momentarily taking a seat, Keaton jumps over the piano and, startlingly, into the scene taking place on screen. The cad promptly seizes him and throws him from the sitting room and from the frame and Keaton tumbles back into the audience. Undaunted, Keaton tries another tactic and approaches the screen from the side. Standing by the theatre curtains, he gestures incredulously to the audience in the movie theatre, as if to say, "Can you believe this? How can he get away with this?" He then proceeds to charge into the frame once again.

At this point the scene in the movie changes to an exterior shot and Keaton comes face to face with a closed front door. Bemused, Keaton turns away and begins to walk down the steps, but another scene change sends him tumbling. The shot of the house has been replaced with a scene which depicts a bench in a garden. The shift starts a sequence of rapid and radical scene changes that keep Keaton reeling for balance, both physically and mentally, as he struggles to keep up with his instantaneous travels from one spot to another. From garden to busy street, to encounters with a lion and mountain, desert, sea and snow, Keaton's character tumbles through time and space (see figure 9).
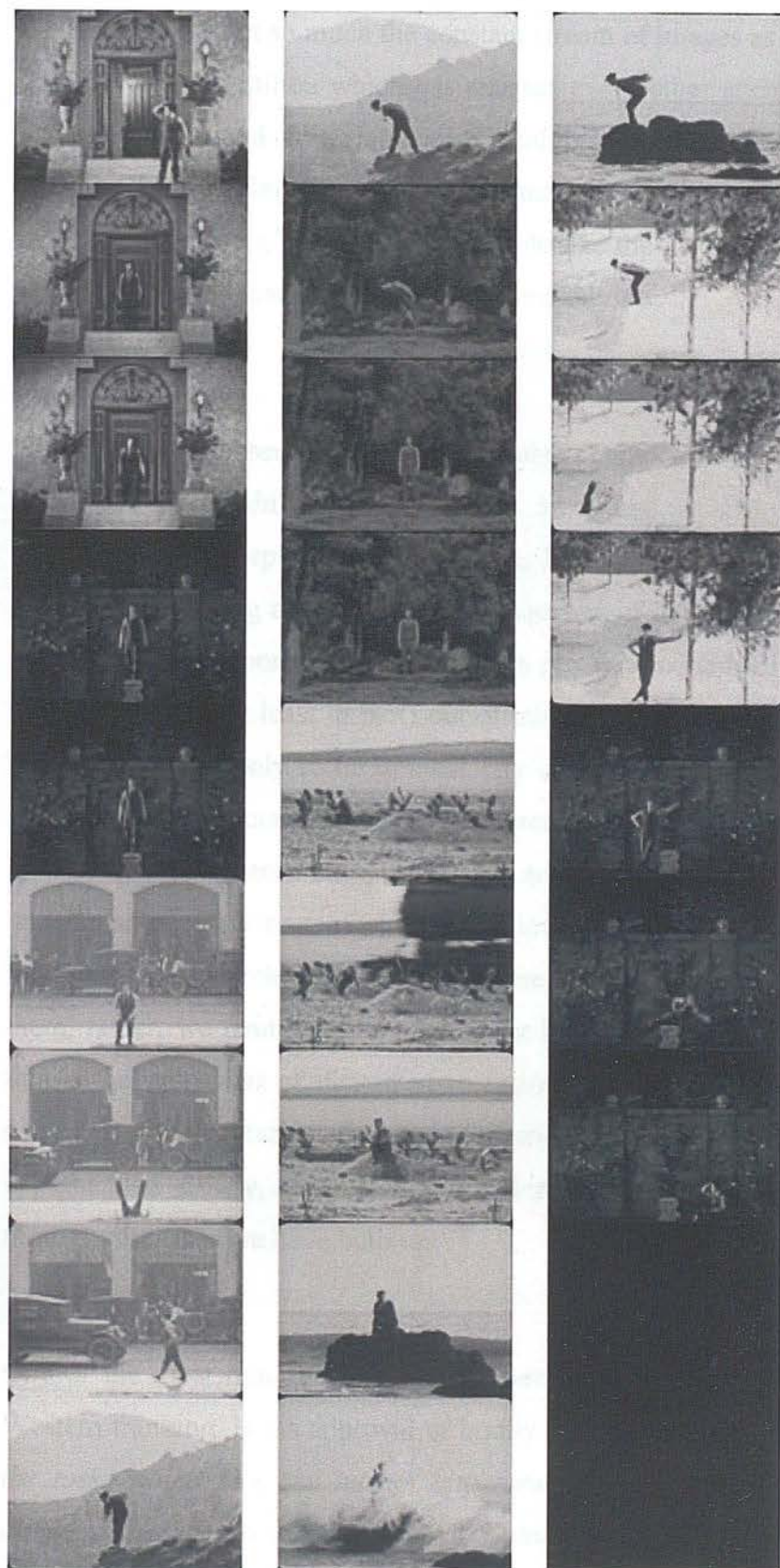
Figure 9. Stills from *Sherlock Jr.*

This sequence is interesting in that it in no way furthers the narrative. Its purpose is pure enjoyment; it allows us to take pleasure in the magic of film. In a passage which could be read as an inadvertent though apt gloss on *Sherlock Jr.*, Benjamin states that part of film's

enchantment "is not so much the constant stream of images as the sudden change of place that overcomes a milieu which has resisted every other attempt to unlock its secret."[167] Keaton's jarring and abbreviated misadventures allow us to "calmly and adventurously go traveling," witnessing his numerous potentially fatal situations from the comfort and security of our seats,[168] even as they emphasize the disquieting nature of film itself with its rapid shifts in locations, times, and points of view.

mobile hospital

Film not only represents in a new way, it also demands a new mode of reception. Viewing film, says Benjamin, the "audience is an examiner, but a distracted one."[169] The contemplative absorption one assumes in looking at a painting, say, is not possible to maintain in viewing a film. The rapid sequence of images which pass us by blocks any attempt to dwell upon and consider these pictures individually; the next pushes the last out of sight and (at least in part) out of mind. Each new frame, or photogram, clamours for our attention, only to be immediately displaced, usurped. The shock formed by the rapidly changing images creates a distracted state in the viewer, one that, ironically, allows for a heightened reception as we are asked to make constant adjustments in our understanding. This inattentive state for viewing, Benjamin tells us, finds its model in our relationship with architecture. The way we use buildings largely precludes our 'seeing' them; rather, we tend towards a tactile or haptic relationship with them. For Benjamin, this is the same sort of distracted reception into which film prompts us. Discouraging sustained contemplation during a viewing, film, Benjamin argues, needs to be apprehended slowly, through a visceral reception, a play of presence and absence; through resources we have built up.[170]

One of the most remarkable points in Benjamin's position, against a long tradition in Western thinking, is his approval of bodily engagement in experiencing the world: "*For the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at historical turning points cannot be performed solely by optical means – that is, by way of contemplation. They are mastered gradually—taking their cue from tactile reception—through habit.*"[171] Ironically, film, in its ability to (re)present the world to us in new ways, requires us to

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[167] Benjamin, "Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz," *SW*, vol. 2, 17.
[168] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, 236.
[169] Benjamin, WOA3, *SW*, vol. 4, 269.
[170] Benjamin, WOA3, *SW*, 267-268.
[171] Benjamin, WOA3, 268. Emphasis in original.

become accustomed to its form, and to form a new way of viewing, something which Benjamin names in this case as a valuable kind of routine. The requirement would seem to be self-contradictory—how to view, or to form patterns of perception when one is not fully attentive? Benjamin is well aware of the objection, for as he tells us, "Even the distracted person can form habits."[172]

Michael Taussig provocatively reminds us that it is in fact through habit that the most profound change occurs: once something has become routine, change has been fundamentally accepted and incorporated.[173] For Benjamin, these new ways of seeing, acquired by sitting in movie theatres, can equip us with strategies for understanding the contemporary world. Film provides an induction to the mode of reception necessary to cope with modern life. Distraction, as a productive state of reception, has developed because "new tasks of apperception" have been set for us.[174] As Benjamin sees it, largely, "individuals are tempted to evade such tasks" either because they no longer have the time, or perhaps, more distressingly, the ability to grasp what moves beyond the circumscribed patterns in our usual lives. In Benjamin's view, if most of us are unable to tune into this alternate world, it then falls to art, with its ability to bring the familiar into doubt, to foreground and foster new ways of seeing.[175] And film, as a mass medium, and as a site of diversion, is particularly well suited to this task. Those who in reluctance or weariness repudiate other ways of perceiving in their day-to-day existence, become amenable to it in the seeming innocence of the cinema.

As both method and object, film records and mimics the scattered nature of the modern city. Editing further draws out the disjunctive temporalities and rapid movement between spatial (dis)locations which are characteristic of modern life. Since film as a medium is well suited to capture and deliver the shocks associated with the modern urban experience, Benjamin sees film as something of a training ground.[176] The 'playroom' of film, for him, allows a time and place in which to become accustomed to the stimulations of the city; it offers a way of rehearsing the tactile shocks and rendering them manageable. Film becomes a vehicle which transports and transforms us through a

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[172] Benjamin, WOA3, 268.
[173] Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*, 25.
[174] Benjamin, WOA3, *SW*, vol. 4, 268.
[175] Benjamin, WOA3, *SW*, vol. 4, 268. Here Benjamin echoes Victor Shklovsky and the Russian Formalists who believed that the task of art is to complicate our reading and estrange us from the already known. In rendering things strangely familiar, art would prompt us to look again, to not take our everyday perception for granted.
[176] Benjamin, WOA3, *SW*, vol. 4, 269.

cathartic ride: "Only the cinema commands optical approaches to the essence of the city, such as conducting the motorist into the new center."[177] Film, for Benjamin, is a sort of ambulance, literally a 'mobile hospital,' which patches us up and staves the wounds of modernity. However, paradoxically, it also delivers a violence to the viewer, as the visceral quality Benjamin ascribes to cinema can hit the viewer like 'a shot.' Wounding the viewer, film simultaneously picks the injured up and carries them away to be repaired. Film, through its mimetic mastery, is able to do what the body can: communicate in an immediate, visceral way.

Cinema, as vehicle to the "essence of the city," both transports us to the wonders of the metropolis and brings them to us through advertising (upcoming films and commercials that are placed before the main feature, product placement, not to mention tertiary paraphernalia—movie posters, magazines, etc.). Cinema is of course itself a commodity. And yet, despite much of cinema, even then, tending towards crass commercialism, Benjamin insists on film's transformative power. He is careful to stress that it is not the content (plot) or even the form of film, but the *technology* of film itself that is radical.[178] To propose that it is technology and not content or form that lends film its efficacy may seem implausible, given that Benjamin passionately speaks not only of genres (slapstick and cartoons, for example), but of specific films, such as Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), as contributing to the medium's revolutionary status. What is necessary to remember is that the German word *Technik* has a fuller meaning than does the English word "technology." *Technik*, while denoting technology and techniques, also refers to the social, political, and economic realities that are tied to technology.[179] So in assigning the *Technik* of film a subversive role, Benjamin is thinking both of its ability to viscerally affect us through its beguiling play of presence and abscence (hoping this palpable impact will potentially incite change), and of the technology's ties to the 'real' world which shape technologies and vice versa. Benjamin does concede that plot certainly plays a part in film's importance, however. Prefiguring Peter Greenaway's criticism that cinema's potential has not been exploited,[180] Benjamin argues that it is largely the case that form and content have not kept pace with the transformations in technology; the (re)presented images are out of synch with the experiences of modernity. Benjamin takes issue with the fact that whereas the technology of film radically departs from traditional modes of

[177] Benjamin, BC, *SW*, vol. 2, 599.
[178] Benjamin, "Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz," *SW*, vol. 2, 16-18.
[179] See Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*, xii.
[180] See John Petrakis, "Blasphemy in Cinema: An Interview with Peter Greenaway," in *Peter Greenaway Interviews*, eds. Vernon Gras and Marguerite Gras, 173.

representation, the plots and forms most filmmakers employ derive largely from older media, such as the novel and the theatre, and therefore are not taking advantage of the full potential of the filmic medium. [181]

A number of media theorists including David Thorburn, Henry Jenkins, Jay David Bolter, and Richard Grusin, have argued that 'new' media, in fact, are never really new, that they never appear, pristine and shining, out of thin air; technologies are always shaped and coloured by those that precede them. Think, for example, of early phonographs, radios, or even television sets and the ways in which in their early incarnations they resembled pieces of furniture. Structurally, there is nothing that would inherently determine that a radio should resemble, say, a small china hutch, but for reasons of aesthetic continuity and marketing, the 'new' technologies were packaged in older, more familiar forms. Thorburn and Jenkins point out that rather than there being sudden, jarring introduction of a new technology which replaces an older one, there is always a more complex relationship between the established and the emerging.[182] Media, recent and 'outdated,' steal from, imitate, inform, and reinforce each other. Digital hyperlinked text, for example, despite dire predictions from many critics, has not eliminated the traditional book, even as the newer format draws from its predecessor.[183] What much recent theory on periods of media change emphasizes is that this meeting of old and new is much more of a *process* than a series of static events strung together culminating in an ultimate delivery system; there is always a give and take, a continuous, ongoing overlap between the 'outmoded' and the 'new.' In identifying intersections and influences amongst media, and placing periods of transition in an historical context—one that takes into account social, political, and economic forces—alternate possibilities are opened up for the interpretation of the histories and effects of technologies.[184]

Although Benjamin is certainly in agreement with this line of thinking which emphasizes the ways in which media inform and influence each other, that their emergence is far

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[181] Benjamin, "Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz," *SW*, vol. 2, 17.

[182] David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins, "Introduction: Toward an Aesthetics of Transition" in *Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetic of Transition*, 2.

[183] See *Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetic of Transition*, edited by David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins, for several essays that examine the relationship between electronic media and the book. Interestingly, Benjamin himself seemed to think that the book's demise was already underway in the early twentieth century. Speaking of the way in which advertising emphasized the graphicity of text and employed new cheaper forms of dissemination, such as the pamphlet, he surmises: "Now everything indicates that the book in this traditional form is nearing its end." Benjamin, "One-Way Street," *SW*, vol. 1, 456.

[184] Thorburn, Jenkins, "Toward an Aesthetics of Transition" in *Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetic of Transition*, 3.

more 'netted' and tangled with older ones—as his determination to give voice to the 'outmoded' attests—he also recognized the very real ways in which the technology of film departed from earlier modes of representation. Film's (re)presentation of the world strips the 'matter-of-factness' from the everyday and the mundane. Exposed in this way, the world can appear new and extraordinary. In its revelatory capacity, film demands a new mode of perception and reception, asking us to look critically at our mediated existence. For Benjamin it functions as both training ground and shunt for the pressures of the mechanized world, positioning the medium as one that could potentially set off social change.

Although film is born out of a capitalist system and participates in a dominion which has pushed and squeezed people into punching clocks and mindless repetitive tasks on the assembly line, film, for Benjamin, also provides an opportunity to undo some of this damage. Ordinary people can live their wishes vicariously through the movies they watch in silent semi-darkness. "For the majority of city dwellers, throughout the workday in offices and factories, have to relinquish their humanity in the face of the apparatus. In the evening these same masses fill the cinemas, to witness the film actor taking revenge on their behalf not only by asserting *his* humanity (or what appears to them as such) against the apparatus, but by placing that apparatus in the service of his triumph."[185]

Looking again to Keaton's work, we can see played out in it the human victory over the apparatus. Keaton's films, in many ways, are about film. The outrageously demanding (and dangerous) physical antics that tie his narratives together are often dependent on the medium of film for their effectiveness. Keaton's (often self-conscious) use of film's properties, such as its capacity to shoot retakes, control speed of action through playback, and the opportunity it offers to carefully choreograph stunts through editing, permits an adjustment in power. It allows for a mastery of humanity over machine, or at least a beneficial relationship between the two. In Keaton's *Go West* (1923), for instance, there is a scene where the cow that has befriended Keaton throws herself in front of a bull to save him from the bull's charge. There is an obvious edit here, which allows an unmistakably fake cow to be inserted at the crucial moment. Only the medium of film allows the scene to work so effectively; editing specifically makes it possible. [186] Here, and in many other

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[185] Benjamin, WOA2, *SW*, vol. 3, 111.
[186] Although other media, such as the comic strip with its sequential images, can convey shifts in time and space, film, in its verisimilitude, exercises a power over us which the still image cannot. The fact that we

instances in Keaton's work, the (filmic) apparatus is used to deliver a victory for the hero. For Benjamin and contemporaries such as Adorno and Kracauer, Charlie Chaplin's work, too, engaged film in a new and exciting way. Although, to a certain extent, like Keaton, Chaplin exploited the properties of film to facilitate his gags, it is the gestures of his character that fascinated Benjamin. He points out that Chaplin embodies and performs the mechanization of the cinematic apparatus and by extension, the conveyor belt of the factory, in his characteristic movements. "The innovation of Chaplin's gestures is that he dissects the expressive movements of human beings into a series of minute innervations. Each single movement he makes is composed of a succession of staccato bits of movement. Whether it is his walk, the way he handles his cane, or the way he raises his hat—always the same jerky sequence of tiny movements applies the law of the cinematic image sequence to human motorial functions."[187] The correlation between the Taylorization of the factory, the technological aspect of film, and Chaplin's performance style, are made clear in Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936). Literally and figuratively caught in the mechanics of the factory's workings, Chaplin moves through cogs and gears like a strip of film (see figure 10). His snared body becomes the site of inscription and transmission of the effects of industrialization on the individual. As labourer he is consumed by the factory; as actor, as filmic representation, the little tramp is consumed by us, the audience.

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can see in 'real' time the effects unfolding before us on the screen, film's ability to bring things to 'life,' and to show us the magic of the world is what, for Benjamin, marks this medium off as special.
[187] Benjamin, "The Formula in Which the Dialectical Structure of Film Finds Expression," *SW*, vol. 3, 94.
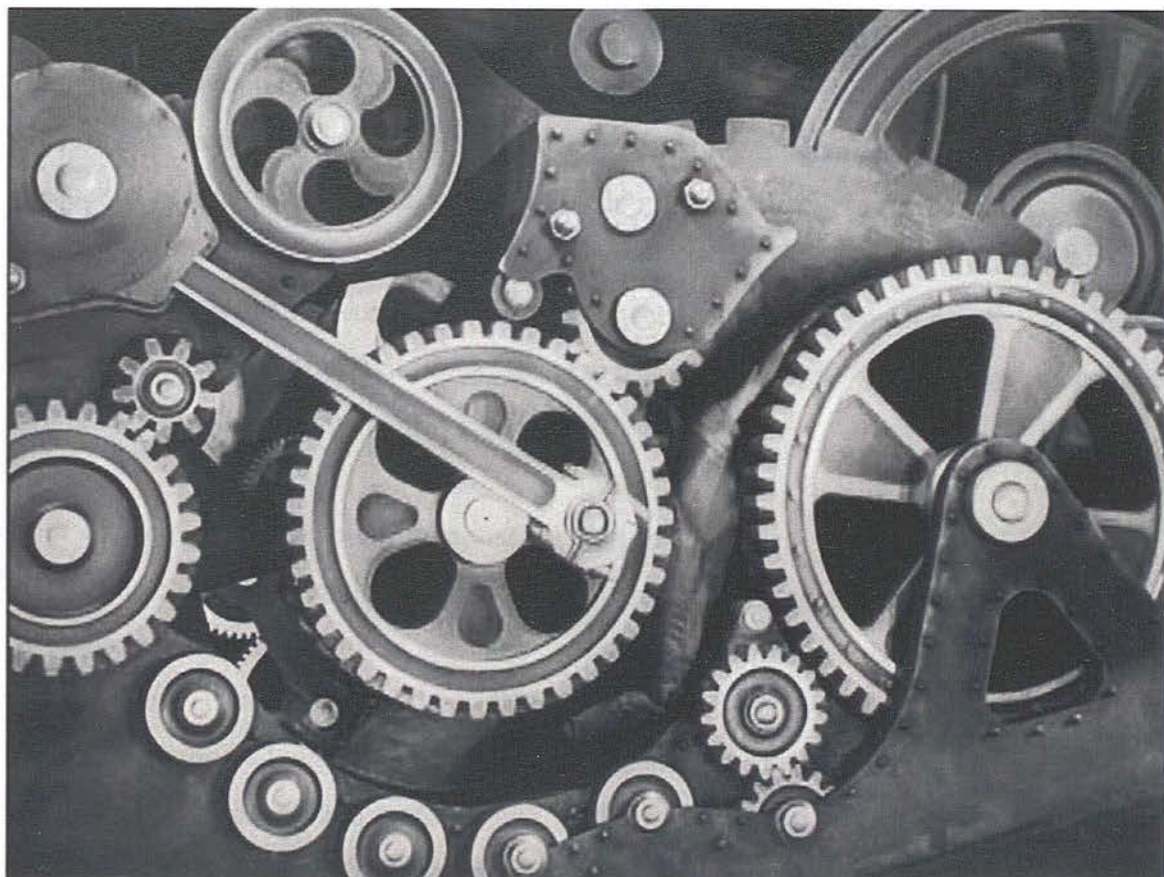
Figure 10. Still from *Modern Times*.

As well as in the slapstick films of Keaton and Chaplin, in cartoons Benjamin saw a mode of representation that offered another way to exploit film's properties. Through cartoons, the play of time and space could be toyed with to a new degree. Animation permitted an investigation of time as malleable as well as allowing for an exploration of space in a graphic (rather than geographical) way.[188] For Benjamin, cartoons, in their capacity to animate the inanimate and to imbue objects with 'life,' mimic what happens in the market place. Cartoons' ability to anthropomorphize objects parallels the fetishization of commodities. Despite facing criticism from Adorno (amongst others) for a tendency towards mysticism, Benjamin insisted that the status of the object had changed with modernity; it now held a power through the capitalist fantasies invested in it.[189] Able to defy the laws of the everyday through the anthropomorphization and animation of objects and animals, cartoons can call into question those very conventions. Mickey Mouse is able to "not only surpass the wonders of technology," he is able to mock them.[190] Like the film actor who becomes the proxy shunt for the audience, Mickey becomes a symbol of

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[188] Esther Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-Garde*, 19.
[189] Leslie, 8.
[190] Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," *SW*, vol. 2, 735.

hope and retribution through his triumphs over technology. In these animated worlds Benjamin sees a merging of "nature and technology, primitiveness and comfort."[191] This blending of technology and (human) nature was something crucial for Benjamin, who grasped the dangers of a one-way relationship between people and technology. Film, Benjamin's "training ground," offered the possibility of addressing this imbalance and allowing for a give and take between body and technology. Benjamin emphasized that on film and on-screen, body- and image-space merge in a form of "innervation," a concept I will discuss in chapter five.[192]

Both slapstick and cartoons demonstrate film's ability to engage the spectator on a visceral as well as optical level. Although slapstick elicits reactions other than mirth, and cartoons need not be funny at all, laughter is often something these two genres have in common. For Benjamin, laughter offered a way for the everyday person to cope.[193] Humour provided a language that all could understand and use. And film (most obviously in its guise as slapstick and cartoon) was the perfect medium to strike a humorous chord in an audience worn out from the daily bombardments of the modern city. Even when laughter takes on a "barbaric" quality, it is "well and good," according to Benjamin.[194] For example, Chaplin's titular character, Monsieur Verdoux (in his first sound movie (1947)), a suave charmer who marries rich widows and then murders them for their money, manages through humour to elicit sympathy from the audience. Caught at last, and about to be hanged, Monsieur Verdoux has a conversation with a reporter. In a thinly veiled statement condemning the Second World War, he tells the reporter "One murder makes a villain, millions a hero. Numbers sanctify, my good fellow." Chaplin's character, although a murderer, is able nonetheless through humour to give "a little humanity to the masses."[195] For Benjamin, the laughter provoked by cinema, although it often "hovers over an abyss of horror," is collective.[196] As a group in the theatre, the audience laughs together; often we laugh all the harder at the shared knowledge that the humour is derived from our own plights and our deepest humiliations.

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[191] Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," 735. It is important to note that Benjamin's enthusiasm for Disney's films applies to early Disney, not his later films that tended towards a safer, more commercially viable realism. As Benjamin observes: "What is revealed in recent Disney films was latent in some of the earlier ones: the cozy acceptance of bestiality and violence as inevitable concomitants of existence." Benjamin, WOA2, footnote #30, SW, vol. 3, 130.

[192] Benjamin, WOA2, SW, vol. 3, footnote #10, 124.

[193] Benjamin, WOA2, 118.

[194] Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," SW, vol. 2, 735.

[195] Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," 735.

[196] Benjamin, "Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz," SW, vol. 2, 17.

Importantly for Benjamin, film is a collective activity. In film, the collectively constructed image is recorded and represented for a collective (re)viewing. Although the form of my own practice more readily lends itself to a personal, intimate viewing, it nonetheless plays off the familiarities of popular culture and collective memory. Film, for Benjamin, was the medium that struck a balance between kitsch and art, making cinema appealing to the masses. Benjamin is quite clear that it is impossible to conceive of any kind of revolutionary tendencies on behalf of the masses if they are exposed to nothing but a bourgeois art which in no way articulates their world. Speaking of the political significance of film, Benjamin seems to suggest that although the medium itself was largely positioned as a commodity, it was this very condition which allowed it to reach the everyday person. As commodity, it can never entirely satiate, unlike the work of art, which for Benjamin, has the ability to present itself as complete. Benjamin tells us that film, therefore, "burns or sears without providing the "heart's ease" which qualifies art for consumption."[197]

So film offers a representation of the everyday world which at its best engages critically with issues surrounding the conditions of modernity; it enflames the viewer, potentially moving her or him to a revolutionary stance—a far cry from the cinema as safety valve or diverting amusement decried by so many radicals.[198] But in the end it also sears or cauterizes the wounds it inflicts. Film, as 'mobile hospital,' performs a double operation. It marks us, searing and sealing a memory in a shock. The scab that forms is constantly played with, irritated and ripped off by the next shock, each time exposing the raw wound

[197] Benjamin, *Arcades*, [K3a, 1], 396.

[198] Adorno, for example, did not share Benjamin's optimism regarding popular culture. For Adorno, Benjamin's arguments often drifted dangerously close to embracing the capitalist culture that, in Adorno's opinon, Benjamin, as a good Marxist, should have been denouncing. I believe it likely that the pressure from Adorno and others from the Frankfurt School, as well as Bertolt Brecht, whom Benjamin admired immensely, to 'toe the party line' accounts for much of the uncharacteristic tone of Benjamin's "Work of Art" essay, which takes on a conspicuous sobriety in comparison to much of his writing. See *Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin: The Complete Correspondence 1928-1940* for a record of the disagreements between Adorno and Benjamin with regard to popular culture. In particular see the letters from Adorno to Benjamin dated the 2-4 of August, 1935, 104-114, and 10 November, 1938, 280-287. As I outlined in my introduction, Benjamin, although seduced by some aspects of Marxism (in particular its defense of materiality and experience), is reluctant to fully subscribe to its ideology. Penelope Rosemont points out that "most of those who called themselves Marxists were either puritanical or cynical (and antifeminist)" (Penelope Rosemont, ed, *Surrealist Women: An Anthology*, 44). Many of those who identified themselves as Marxists felt that avant-garde thinkers such as Benjamin and the Surrealists, who had affiliations to the Marxist party, weren't engaging in serious political work, that their endeavours tended towards murky mysticism or popular (capitalist) kitsch, rather than rejecting and criticizing the harmful products of capitalism. In direct contradiction to these accusations, figures such as Claude Cahun spoke eloquently and passionately about the revolutionary power of poetry (Claude Cahun "Poetry Keeps its Secret," *Surrealist Women: An Anthology*, ed. Penelope Rosemont, 53-56). Further, Cahun, in collaboration with Marcel Moore, used these 'revolutionary poetic powers' to stage their opposition to the Nazis in inventive, humourous, and courageous ways. For an interesting account of Cahun's and Moore's anti-Nazi activities see Lizzie Thynne's film *Playing A Part: The Story of Claude Cahun*, 2004.

anew. But film, for Benjamin, is also poultice, soothing the tender tissue. The remedial dressing of film provides a dress rehearsal of sorts, fending off the infection of modernity.

I would argue that film, for Benjamin, also makes possible a sort of getting lost. Film opens possibilities, explodes the ordinary, wrenching it from habit, "so that now we can take extended journeys of adventure between [. . .] widely scattered ruins."[199] Film permits us to, to wander, to journey; at least temporarily it enables us to lose our hardened selves.[200] It allows us to perceive that the mundane and the ordinary, such as the "vicinity of a house, of a room, can include dozens of the most unexpected stations, and the most astonishing station names."[201] In the technology of film, the world that everybody 'knows' can be turned into the startling and the surprising. Through its ability to render new, film offers a glimpse into alternate realities, and therefore into forgotten futures, which is to say versions of what might yet be.[202]

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In another recycling, Benjamin names not only memory, but cinema too, as the "dark joy of the place of the finding"[203] where is found magic and permission. As I have shown, the child and Benjamin's flâneur are both figures that sit uneasily on the boundaries between inexperience and habit, wonder and cynicism, embodied experience and textual knowledge. This ambiguous state of being—an in betweenness—is a space occupied by the figure that Linda Hutcheon calls the 'ex-centric,' which I will return to in chapter five.[204] As part of a sentient way of knowing, an oral experience of the world becomes significant for these figures. Benjamin tells us that the state of "anamnestic intoxication in which the flâneur goes about the city not only feeds on the sensory data taking shape before his eyes but often possesses itself of abstract knowledge—indeed, of dead facts— as something experienced and lived through. This felt knowledge travels from one person to another especially by *word of mouth*."[205]

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[199] Benjamin, "Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz," *SW*, vol. 2, 17.
[200] See Giuliana Bruno's *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* for a provocative look at film, architecture and travel. Also see her book *Streetwalking On A Ruined Map: Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari*, which addresses cinema, the city, women, and industrialized society.
[201] Benjamin, "Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz," *SW*, vol. 2, 17.
[202] See chapter five for a discussion of Benjamin and forgotten futures.
[203] Benjamin, BC, *SW*, vol. 2, 611.
[204] Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 35, 67-69.
[205] Benjamin, *Arcades*, [M1, 5,], 417. Emphasis added.

Communication in everyday life was radically affected by the technologies of modernity. Although writing had for some time allowed for communication at a distance, the invention of the telegraph, and later the telephone, radically decreased the necessity for face-to-face communication and reduced the interval between production and reception. The nature of the city, too, refigured the way in which people interacted. With the growth of industry, people from scattered rural towns and villages came together as strangers in a foreign, and what for many would be a hostile, urban setting. Benjamin quotes George Simmel in *The Arcades Project*, citing his argument that modernity caused a situation in which one largely would see, but not hear the world—representations abound in modernity, but the interpretation and communication of these narratives had been significantly silenced—resulting in a sense of pervasive anxiety for those displaced from oral communities. Simmel speaks of the discomfort at being forced to reconcile oneself with the fact that new forms of transportation, such as the omnibus and the train, forced strangers to sit together without speaking.[206] Further, the relentless bombardment of visual advertisements and the noisy rush of modern life which offered little opportunity (or perhaps, desire) to speak to those one passed on the busy, crowded street, left no occasion for the aural or the oral to register, little chance for people to connect one to one.

Hansel & Gretel with its deserted streets and eerie silence plays out something of the isolation that resulted with modernity. None of the figures in this small world have any contact with each other. However, despite the lack of face-to-face communication in *Hansel & Gretel*, we do see an anonymous finger which clacks away, recording words on a typewriter (see figure 11).

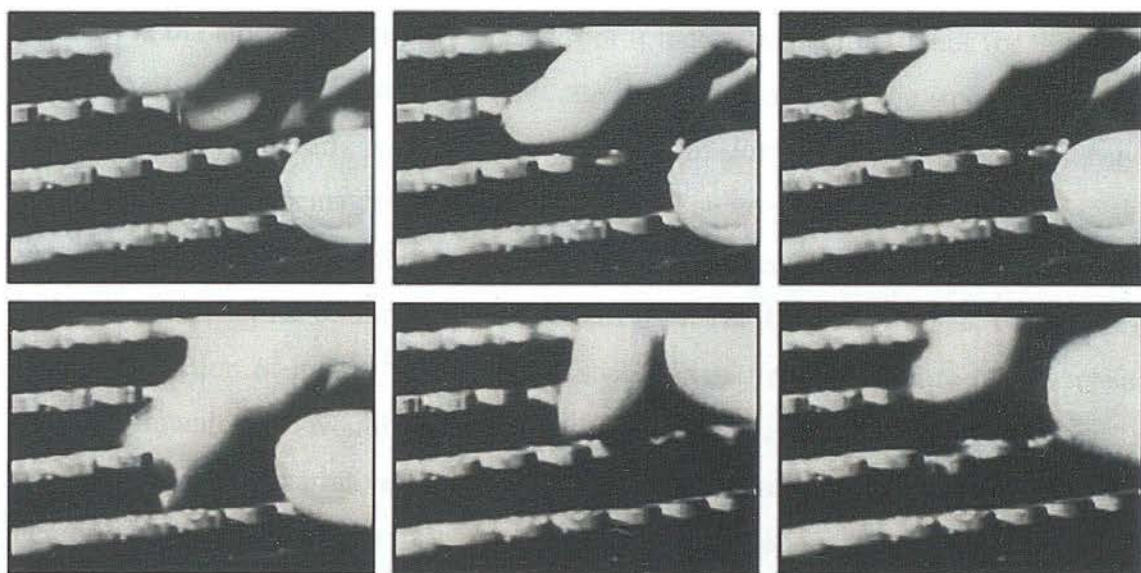[206] Benjamin, *Arcades*, [M8a, 1], 433.

Figure 11. Stills from *Hansel & Gretel*.

Is the typist telling the story *Hansel & Gretel* which we are viewing? Is it her striking of the keys that unravels the narrative? One possible reading of this work could be that, despite the mechanical mediation of typewriter, a story nonetheless is being written. Perhaps this anonymous scribe is producing a document which will be passed on and added to the archive of collective memory. One definition of "inscribe" is "to draw within a figure so as to touch in as many places as possible."[207] *Hansel and Gretel* inscribes a narrative that attempts to touch on a range of interrelated ideas including storytelling, (lack of) communication, and the importance of narrative in helping us understand our worlds. The fact that the work ends with the typist's finger striking a key in a decisive fashion, after her earlier hesitations, in some ways, is an arbitrary cut off point. Is the story over? Or is what we have witnessed just a beginning? For all we know, the storyteller now hidden from our view, continues to click away at the keys; the narrative continues with or without us.

Benjamin himself understood history as narrative that is continually unfolding rather than a succession of static moments: "Actually," he tells us, "there is no story for which the question "How does it continue?" would not be legitimate."[208] The narrative of our lives continues to unravel through wisdom shared, but it "is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is in the process of unfolding."[209] Similarly, the narrator of Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy* shrewdly states, "The

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[207] *Merriam-Webster Online.* <http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary?va=inscribe>.

[208] Benjamin, "The Storyteller," *SW*, vol. 3, 155.

[209] Benjamin, 145-146.

question is the story itself and whether or not it means something is not for the story to tell."[210] As I have said, *Hansel & Gretel* plays with the idea that the story is never quite over and always unfurls one more twist or turn; *Picture House* too, obviously is concerned with an openended narrative structure. The very process of constructing these two works itself engaged in this openendedness. As I indicated in my introduction, a good deal of the material for both works I have taken from *The Internet Archive*, a fabulous and diverse collection of media.[211] Because of the relatively random nature of my selection process—downloads would range from wildly exciting to disappointing and innapropriate—the 'narrative' I had in mind (itself already a very general premise: memory, fairy tales, gender roles) would inevitably change and alter with each new unexpected addition. Drawing from a potentially inexhaustible database of images and sounds, *Picture House* and *Hansel & Gretel* could have ended up very different works. Their final forms are the result of what materials I happened to come across and chose to keep. However, in a sense, neither work is really ever completed as each reader will have a considerably different interpretation of the works as they draw from personal memory to make some sense of what they are experiencing. These stories have no endings, happy or otherwise. What they communicate is the complexity of communication itself (see figure 12).

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[210] Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy*, 3.
[211] *The Internet Archive*. <http://www.archive.org/index.php>.

Figure 12. Still from *Picture House*.

In his book, *Communication as Culture*, James Carey notes that communication is now largely seen as a form of transmission. The notion that meaning is something preformed and delivered from one party to the next, Carey traces to its sources in Western ideology. For him the transmission model stems directly from the geographical and informational expansion fuelled by the Industrial Revolution, and before that in the previous centuries' lust for new lands with their riches to be plundered and heathen inhabitants to be converted from a state of 'savagery,' through the imposition of imported and immutable 'truths.' As an alternative to the transmission model, Carey offers a much older, but largely ignored paradigm of communication as ritual.[212] In drawing our attention to the etymology of the word "communication," Carey reminds us that it is tied to "common," "community," and "communion." To communicate is literally to make common, to share. "A ritual view of communication," Carey tells us, "is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs."[213] Such communication seeks to affirm and to consolidate members within their communities. Within Carey's phatic

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[212] James Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*, 18.
[213] Carey, *Communication as Culture*, 18.

model the lines of connection would be more netted and reciprocal—more multiple and more open. My practice, too, engages in this mesh of possibilities, requiring the viewer to draw upon his or her own experiences and memories, as well as a knowledge shared in society (such as fairy tales), in order to make some sense of these small, flickering worlds.

In Carey's definition of the ritual model of communication, its religious roots are made obvious. This is a system of communication that is based on the notion that societies construct a version of the world for themselves that reflects their communal beliefs.[214] The purpose of ritual communication is not empirical but social. The importance, for Benjamin, of a communication based on a shared experience echoes his lapsarian sentiments. His rhetoric surrounding not only the child and the flâneur, but also film, continuously refers to a desirable world that is latent and hidden, one obscured by lassitude within a constructed world that screens the 'real' from us. Carey effectively summarizes the qualities of this existence now dimmed by modernity: the "projection of community ideals and their embodiment in material form—dance, plays, architecture, news stories, strings of speech—creates an artificial though nonetheless real symbolic order that operates to provide not information but confirmation, not to alter attitudes or change minds but to represent an underlying order of things, not to perform functions but to manifest an ongoing and fragile social process."[215]

In Carey's defense of ritual communication, he emphasizes that communication is much more complex than moving information from point A to B. A ritual form of communication involves an interaction; this necessitates an embodied experience. This shared, bodily knowing also depends upon and contributes to a collective memory. A communication grounded in ritual would seem to be what Benjamin's flâneur engages in. Contrary to Baudelaire's dandy-journalist, whose delivery of the 'news' merely transmits information or facts, Benjamin's wandering chronicler performs an act of communication that leaves room for play. A ritual, it is worth noting, is marked off as special, as distinct from the ordinary. And yet ritual is also, paradoxically, something established in patterns of habit. Ritual communication, I would argue, in privileging memory and the communication of embodied experience, can pull the ordinary into the marvelous, emphasizing the contribution that the mundane makes to shaping identity. Such a

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[214] Carey, *Communication as Culture*, 19. Here Carey is quoting the philosopher Emile Durkheim.
[215] Carey, *Communication as Culture*, 19.

celebration Benjamin would surely support, given his desire to see the establishment of new traditions that move us across thresholds of experience and communication.

And what of the "projection of the ideals created by the community" Carey speaks of? Is this not the socially, collectively constructed image Benjamin emphasizes, reminding us that the image of the world is just that—a *representation* which we all contribute to shaping and colouring (and it, in turn, us)? And what of the "projection" of this image? Oddly enough, Carey omits from his list of cultural manifestations the most obvious, the most literal example of a shared constructed and projected image—the cinematic experience. Here, in the cinema, there is some vestige of the religious experience informing the notion of ritual as communication. We sit, an attentive congregation, eyes fixed on the altar / screen, at times in rapture, wrapped in the dark of the theatre, the reverent taking of popcorn and hush of whispers settling around us (in unwitting parody, perhaps, of holy communion). Like the medieval cathedrals that allowed the layperson the opportunity to read their religion in the images that adorned the building, the cinema offers a space in which to read the images that we construct and in return construct us.[216]

In film, in the collective experience of attending and receiving film, I believe Benjamin sees "manifest an ongoing and fragile social process."[217] This is the continuous and precarious process of humans' adaptation to the technologized world of modernity. In thinking of cinema as a training ground, as a place and time to adjust to the shocks of everyday modern life, Benjamin is situating cinema as an environment that recoups something of an eroded oral society.[218] Film commands a presence. We know the actors are not there with us in the room. Nonetheless, we are caught up in their gestures (and speech, once sound arrived) as well as the objects that surround them, which take on a life of their own (particularly in cartoons). The interaction between the audience and what dances on the screen makes this world present to the viewer in a particularly powerful way. The face-to-face communication, the presence of another that makes communication

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[216] Interestingly, many of the early purpose built cinemas were decorated in lavish ornaments, gilding, plush, friezes and paintings. The physical space of the cinema was to be read as much as the images projected onto the screen. See for example David Naylor's *Great American Movie Theaters* and *America Picture Palaces: The Architecture of Fantasy*, Dennis Sharp's *The Picture Palace and other buildings for the movies*, and Ave Pildas' *Movie Palaces: Survivors of an Elegant Era*. Siegfried Kracauer hypothesizes that the lavish decor of these "palaces of distraction" (323) served to keep the spectator from being overwhelmed and subsumed by the screened film: "The interior design of movie theaters serves only one purpose: to rivet the viewers' attention to the peripheral, so that they will not sink into the abyss." (325-326) Siegfried Kracauer, "Cult of Distraction: On Berlin's Picture Palaces," *The Mass Ornament*.
[217] Carey, *Communication as Culture*, 19.
[218] Benjamin, WAO2, *SW*, vol. 3, 118.

possible (as within the structure of an oral society), is represented within the on-screen action and in our interaction with the images that flicker before us. It seems to me that Benjamin sees in film a way of communicating that participates in, that rescues and revives, a ritual form of communication in a world which scarcely allows room or time for direct (physical) exchange.

Here Benjamin anticipates Walter Ong's notion that modern electronic technologies of communication, such as radio and television, bring us into a "secondary orality."[219] While this second occurrence of orality also contributes to a sense of community, the fact that it grows out of a print culture means it does so in "a more deliberate and self-conscious" way.[220] Benjamin certainly would have agreed that a degree of self-awareness defines this more recent orality. For despite Adorno's accusations of utopian sentimentality, Benjamin was always at pains to emphasize that his argument, although lamenting the passing of some aspects of a pre-modern world, in no way made an appeal to the idea that there was once an Edenic existence to which it might be possible to return; there was, for Benjamin, no human existence prior to or outside of technology, for it is in the nature of the species to be users of tools. For him, human existence, inextricably intertwined with technology, involves a kind of ebb and flow—an "innervation"—which always involves a give and take.[221] Film, as I have pointed out, for Benjamin, functioned in this way; it contributed to the erosion of traditions and yet it simultaneously provided a way to repair the damage of modernity.

If we return to Keaton's *Sherlock Jr.*, we can see an example of the presence and power that film can possess. At the end of the film Keaton's character wakes from his triumphant dream. In his reverie he had entered the world of the film he is screening and through brilliant powers of deduction (and clever filmic tricks) was able to clear his name and win back his fiancée. He now watches the movie, realizing that it has all been a dream. Dejected, Keaton is about to admit defeat, when his love comes through the door of the projection booth and tells him she knows of his innocence. Standing before her, now awake and no longer the sophisticated suave detective of his dreams, Keaton is at a loss. Not sure quite what to do, he finds himself gazing out onto the film which he has just vacated (see figure 13). He sees the two lovers standing together. The hero takes the heroine in his arms and kisses her. Keaton somewhat anxiously mimics these movements

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[219] Walter J. Ong, *Orality & Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, 136.

[220] Ong, *Orality & Literacy*, 136.

[221] Benjamin, WOA2, *SW*, vol. 3, footnote #10, 124.

and continues to take his cues from the screen, eventually placing a ring on his love's finger. The shy projectionist, however, is unable to muster the courage to duplicate the passionate on-screen kiss he watches and instead substitutes a little peck on the cheek. The mime completed, Keaton glances back to the screen, hoping for more instruction. However, the next shot of the couple shows her sewing and him holding two babies. Keaton, a little shocked and bemused, scratches his head as both screens fade to black. In keeping with Benjamin's belief in the revolutionary potential of film, one possible reading for this ending is, that, although film can instruct and offer solutions (acting as Benjamin's *Erfahrung*, the memories of experience), it is only if the lessons are passed on and listened to—if they are in*corp*orated—that we are enabled to act in informed ways to bring about change.[222]
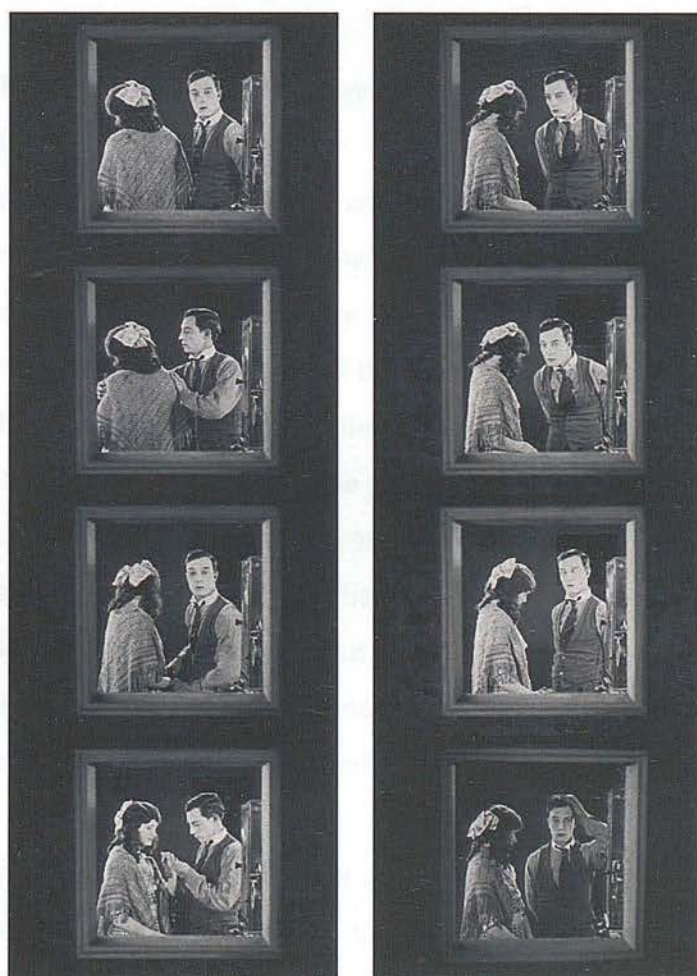
Figure 13. Stills from *Sherlock Jr.*

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[222] In this scene we can read an equation between representation and reproduction: film duplicates the individual. Film, for Benjamin, involves a visceral, sensual aspect; it also involves an intimacy, a sharing, that is amplified in a collective audience (I discuss these ideas more fully in chapter four). Played out here is the fact that in film (the gaps in between the frames), and often in life, it is what we don't see that perpetuates life. Another reading, of course, is that there is no deviating for Keaton, or anyone, from the conventions of a heterosexual relationship which culminates in producing offspring.

As it is the child's "task" to "recognize the new once again," to perceive the strangely familiar, for Benjamin, it was crucial that people awake from their commodity-induced stupor and recognize the world around them for what it was. This was both a world filled with poverty and injustice, a world on the brink of war, and a world of wonder.[223] With film's ability to mimic the fragmentary nature of modernity and bring the unseen into being through the optical unconscious, Benjamin saw it as a technology uniquely positioned to illuminate and expose a world veiled by custom. Operating through mimetic play, film could reach us in a more visceral and powerful way than previous technologies: "Just as technology is always revealing nature from a new perspective, so also, as it impinges on human beings, it constantly makes for variations in their most primordial passions, fears, and images of longing."[224]

I believe in the technology of film, a technology that is "the representation of shared beliefs," Benjamin saw an example of what Carey later defined as ritual communication.[225] Able largely to circumvent the subjectivity of traditional forms of representation, such as painting and drawing, film, a medium designed for public reception, had the ability to speak to a diverse modern audience. The collective experience of viewing and the memory we carry with us out of the movie theatre, can in Benjamin's view, contribute to the "maintenance of society in time."[226] Film potentially can let us tell ourselves the stories that are important for social survival. As a secondary orality, film, at its most productive, takes up the position of communal storyteller which modernity had largely eradicated. Film, too, allows for a getting lost. It gives us a chance to lose ourselves, to step out of the patterns of the everyday and travel to new and strange worlds. Film can let us wander and stray, can lead us astray. And although we are able to err on the side of caution, safe in our seats, film is able to let us see things at 'first sight.'

Benjamin perceives in film a chance for humans to (re)gain a bit of humanity which the modern world has leached from them. Film screens our forgotten world to us: "To put it in a nutshell, film is the prism in which the spaces of the immediate environment—the spaces in which people live, pursue their avocations, and enjoy their leisure—are laid

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[223] Benjamin, *Arcades*, [K1a, 3], 390. Also see convolute "K" in *Arcades* for Benjamin's notes on awakening.
[224] Benjamin, *Arcades*, [K2a, 1], 393.
[225] Carey, *Communication as Culture*, 18.
[226] Carey, *Communication as Culture*, 18.

open before their eyes in a comprehensible, meaningful, and passionate way."[227] In their (re)use of popular materials such as commercials, educational films, and amateur movies *Picture House* and *Hansel & Gretel*, too, address our immediate environments. They foreground the ways in which conventions shape our reading and understanding of representations, they emphasize the important—and often ignored—ways memory constructs our worlds and our selves. *Picture House* and *Hansel & Gretel* seek to draw attention to the everyday, to have us recognize the meaningful and valuable that lies within the mundane.

In its ability to disclose the secrets of the world, film lets us read between the lines of the ordinary. In the same way in which he sees a ghost of the (often not so distant) past in the new commodities of capitalism, Benjamin views the altered receptivity film permits not so much as new, but as a recuperation and reactivation of an earlier way of making sense of the world. It is film, for Benjamin, that allows the once powerful mimetic faculty to flicker back to life. In the following chapter I will examine the close-knit constellation of photography / film, inscription, memory, and mimesis, which Benjamin weaves through his words.

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[227] Benjamin, "Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz," *SW*, vol. 2, 17.

Chapter Three

to read what was never written

Questions of copies and originals haunt this chapter: I will be looking at the ways in which the translation, for Benjamin, becomes the site of the 'afterlife' of the original, a reincarnation of an earlier existence. Issues of legibility and literacy that surround the translation also come to the foreground in relation to the photograph. I will investigate the way in which the technology of the photograph necessitated a new way of perceiving and understanding these mimetic objects. The photograph, with its strange ontology of doubleness (what is both there and not there), becomes for Benjamin an uncanny mirroring of human memory, mimicking the way we remember, while simultaneously eroding our capacity to do so. I employ Christopher Nolan's film *Memento* (2000) to elucidate Benjamin's theories of dialectics at a standstill, profane illumination, and what he identifies as the 'perilous moment' crucial to all reading—the ability to critically read representations, to recognize the mutable and mobile nature of meanings which we ascribe to them.

Benjamin is concerned with deciphering the traces of a forgotten world, one largely experienced through a tactile encounter, one that has not been memorialized in an official or 'important' way. To uncover these obscured histories paradoxically is "to read what was never written."[228] The child, through repetition and play, reinvests objects with a significance that adults overlook.[229] The flâneur, too, as tracker of traces, brings together disparate materials to expose the attractions and atrocities of modernity. Another figure Benjamin credits with the ability to make us do a double take is the translator.

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[228] Benjamin, *Arcades*, 416. The phrase, "to read what was never written," which Benjamin cites several times in his writings, is German writer Hugo Hofmannsthal's.
[229] Benjamin, "Construction Site," *One-Way Street*, 52-53.

> The power of a country road is different when one is walking along it from when one is flying over it by airplane. In the same way, the power of a text is different when it is read from when it is copied out. The airplane passenger sees only how the road pushes through the landscape, how it unfolds according to the same laws as the terrain surrounding it. Only he who walks the road on foot learns of the power it commands, and of how, from the very scenery that for the flier is only the unfurled plain, it calls for the distances, belvederes, clearings, prospects at each of its turns like a commander deploying soldiers at a front. Only the copied text thus commands the soul of him who is occupied with it, whereas the mere reader never discovers the new aspects of his inner self that are opened by the text, that road cut through the interior jungle forever closing behind it: because the reader follows the movement of his mind in the free flight of daydreaming, whereas the copier submits it to command.
>
> —Walter Benjamin[230]

Typical of the tone of much of Benjamin's writings, this excerpt from his work "Chinese Curios" employs the language of warfare to stress its point.[231] Benjamin's comparison of the human body moving of its own accord through the landscape to a body carried over the topography in a plane also draws our attention to the relationship between humans and technology. Oddly enough, however, it is the body on the ground which seems to have the tactical advantage. Like the flâneur, this figure who walks *through* space is positioned to read the powers of the landscape. The translator is immersed in the experience of the textual landscape, attuned to the forces which are deployed at every bend and turn of the road. Engaging in the act of copying, Benjamin tells us, opens up a part of oneself that has remained hidden. After all, through the nonsensuous similarities of language we become like the words; in them we read shadowy selves and duplicitous doppelgangers. In ways that echo film's ability to correspond with the optical unconscious, translation, it seems, cuts a swathe through the bracken of habit, permitting a sentient self-discovery; it *undermines* our usual expectations.

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[230] Benjamin, "Chinese Curios," *One-Way Street*, 50.

[231] Benjamin repeatedly speaks throughout his texts of explosions, digging, states of emergency and rescue missions. See the following for examples of Benjamin's use of the language of warfare to describe the modern condition: WOA3, *SW*, vol. 4, "Excavation and Memory," *SW*, vol. 2, Benjamin, *Arcades*, [N9, 7], 474. "On the Concept of History," VIII, *SW*, vol. 4, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," VIII, *Illuminations*, and *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 74.

Translation, Benjamin tells us, is a form,[232] one that involves both a "transformation and a renewal of something living."[233] In identifying translation as a structure, something that gives shape to the representation, he draws attention to the fact that although in both original and copy what is meant is the same, their way of meaning is not.[234] The separation of form and content that becomes so pervasive with digital technologies and the database approach that they encourage (a topic I deal with more fully in chapter five), is already at play, for Benjamin, in all representation; the tenor of a work will, to some degree, always be determined by the form of the medium it is expressed within. Benjamin is eager to stress that representations by definition are mediated through the technologies that shape them and the social conventions that interpret them, with the result that what they mean is always shifting and reforming.

The translation alters the original. But the source always lingers and lurks in the copy. The process involves both a renovation and a preservation. Translation is an interlinear version of an original; a reading between the lines, an act of reading (and writing) "what was never written."[235] But what is the purpose of a translation, asks Benjamin? "Is a translation meant for readers who do not understand the original?" Why say the "same thing" over and over? And what actually does a work 'say,' what does it communicate?[236] Benjamin states that the purpose of a translation, strangely enough, is not "communication or the imparting of information."[237] In the same way that, for Benjamin, Baudelaire's complacent flâneur contributed to and reinforced dominant narratives, in Benjamin's thinking, it is similarly a poor translation that merely transmits the information contained in the original.[238] In maintaining a strict fidelity to the content of the original text, the translator corrupts the translation and fails to pass on an objective (and therefore, in Benjamin's account, accurate or true) version of the original. Because meaning is tied to the usage of the specific language of the original, in all its nuance and subtlety of time and place, it can never be fully translated.

Just as ritual communication emphasizes dimensions other than the transmission of information, Benjamin suggests that translation, too, participates in something more than a reinscription of the facts that make up the original. The most effective translation,

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[232] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," *SW*, vol. 1, 254.
[233] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 256.
[234] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 257.
[235] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 262-263.
[236] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 253.
[237] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 253.
[238] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 260.

according to Benjamin, is one that sacrifices eloquence or an 'uncomplicated' reading for a language that more accurately represents the intention of the original. Part of what informs Benjamin's move towards a concrete use of language is his desire to depart from the traditional ('bourgeois') usage of metaphorical language in literature.[239] The emphasis Benjamin places on language as a form is what Rainer Rumold identifies as Benjamin's desire to free language so that it can "engage in the praxis of a 'poetic life,' of a life that is delivered from the demands of sublimation and rationalist functioning to the utmost possible limits."[240] In order to avoid reproducing a typical bourgeois "bad poem on springtime, filled to bursting with metaphors,"[241] Benjamin asks that the translator look upon the words of the work to be copied as if reading them for the first time.[242] Further, translators, in Benjamin's thinking, must treat their own language, too, as if it were foreign. A failure to do so results in a copy that reproduces "mere images," rather than capturing the "energies of intoxication" through a "poetic politics."[243]

The heady translation Benjamin urges us towards is not an idiomatic version of the original; this is not a text that attempts to deliver the 'meaning' of the earlier text in an untroubled way, rather, the translation should be a scrupulous literal translation of the original text which, in its 'awkwardness,' prompts the reader into dizzying instability. As I pointed out earlier, Benjamin claimed that it is not the plot that imbues film with its radical potential, but rather the medium itself, the *Technik* of film—what this marvelous recording machine makes possible—is what made it revolutionary.[244] Similarly,

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[239] Benjamin's claim certainly seems strange, particularly in light of passages such as the one quoted at the opening of this chapter which is rife with metaphors of warfare. Benjamin's usage of metaphors can be traced throughout his writings. For example, in discrediting the idea of a "timeless truth" Benjamin compares the eternal to a mere "ruffle on a dress." (Benjamin, *Arcades*, [N3, 2], 463.) Or take another example from Benjamin's "Berlin Childhood around 1900": "Each day and every hour, the telephone was my twin brother." (*SW*, vol. 3, 349.) It may be however, that Benjamin is thinking of *his* usage of metaphor as something which complicates usual expectations. One the one hand, it is often hard not to interpret Benjamin's dense writing style as deliberately obscure. On the other hand, given that he did advocate techniques of estrangement, his often bizarre metaphors become effective as they frustrate the reader in their refusal of any easy reading. Certainly, in making us wonder how eternal truth could be like a ruffle on a dress—a seemingly incongruent equation—Benjamin does force his reader to pause and ponder longer than a more obvious comparison would have required.

[240] Rainer Rumold, *The Janus Face of the Avant-Garde*, 120.

[241] Benjamin, "Surrealism," *SW*, vol. 2, 216.

[242] For example, Benjamin speaks of reading a French translation of a German text known to him. What was remarkable about it, he tells us, was that the passages that had been familiar to him were no longer the same, they had undergone a transformation: "the horizon and the world around the translated text had itself been substituted, had become French." Benjamin, "Translation—For and Against," *SW*, vol. 3, 249.

[243] Benjamin, "Surrealism," *SW*, vol. 2, 216.

[244] It is important to remember that *Technik* encompasses the technical, social, economic, and political aspects of the medium. And in Benjamin's defense of the *Technik* of film, he is not excluding the avant-garde filmic experiments undertaken by the Surrealists. The Surrealists' excitement at film's ability to "instrumentalize the commonplace object by making it photogenic, to confer a dignity and poetic value on the things of everyday life," (Paul Hammond, "Available Light," *The Shadow & Its Shadow: Surrealist*

Benjamin is eager to stress that in the translation it is the medium of language that needs to be attended to, not the meaning of the original. The translator, in Benjamin's understanding, is a mechanic whose task is to tinker with the semantic cogs that drive our world, to polish these parts, their shine attracting our attention. "For just like any good car, whose every part, even the bodywork, obeys the needs above all of the engine," so too, the translation must heed the gears and belts of language that mobilize it.[245]

In drawing attention to language in the translation, Benjamin hoped to complicate the reader's engagement with the text. The disruption of the everyday use of language renders the most ready meaning superfluous or at least defers it enough to jar us into second thought. This estrangement from the transparent usage of language promotes a kind of getting lost in language, during which the copier (and, by extension, the reader) is surprised at every word; every turn of phrase in the path of the text is an encounter with the unexpected. By translating the individual words, rather than the general idea conveyed in the original, the translation plays with etymology; the resultant text, somewhat awkward to the ear, magnifies the concreteness of language and in doing so, in Benjamin's estimation, comes closer to the intent of the original. Foregrounding language is not a mere "technical renovation of language, but its mobilization in the service of struggle or work—at any rate, of changing reality instead of describing it."[246]

Discerning the language of the translation is a matter of listening Benjamin tells us: the translation stands outside and calls into the "language forest" of the original. In this tangle of leaves, folios rustle and echo. The repetition of the original reverberates in the language of the translation.[247] The translator's task is to harmonize these reverberations, to integrate "many tongues into one true language."[248] The translation, Benjamin

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Writings on the Cinema, 7) is, as I have already stressed, in sympathy with Benjamin's notion of cinema's ability to access an 'optical unconscious.' The Surrealists' desire to disrupt and complicate the conventions of production and reception in commercial cinema, too, is a stance Benjamin supported. (See for example, the Surrealists films: *Entr'acte* by René Clair (1924), *La Coquille et le clergyman* by Germaine Dulac (1927), *Un chien andalou* by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí (1928), *L'Étoile de mer* by Man Ray (1928), *Hans Richter's Vormittagsspak (Ghosts Before Breakfast) (1928)*. Although it could be argued that Benjamin's (and the Surrealists') conception of film as a revolutionary medium is ultimately misguided, as his version of film's potential fails to win out, this would seem to be missing the point. Benjamin realizes, all too well, that not only commercial cinema is a formidable force to bring to its knees, but also that film could very easily be used in ways that privileged content to capitalize on an emotional response. In the last lines of his "Work of Art" essay, for example, Benjamin speaks warily of the ease with which the fascists have used cinema as a tool for propaganda (see Benjamin, WOA2, *SW*, vol. 3, 120-122 and footnote #37, page 132, and Benjamin, WOA3, *SW*, vol. 4, 269-270, and footnote #47, page 282).
[245] Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," *SW*, vol. 2, 733.
[246] Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," 733.
[247] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," *SW*, vol. 1, 258.
[248] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 259.

theorizes, is where languages converge; here the "innermost kinship of languages" is sparked.[249] In language there is a tension between "what is meant" and "the way of meaning it."[250] The words 'cat' and 'chat' both refer to a four-legged furry creature, but the signifiers differ. Translation, for Benjamin provides a way to overcome this rift between languages. In translation, one language supplements the meaning of another, fleshing out the reference. Because language is always provisionary and partial, it mediates our meanings; we never have direct access to what Benjamin calls "pure language." In his thinking, pure language (ultimately unknowable but occasionally glimpsed as it flares up) encompasses all languages and "no longer means or expresses anything but is, as expressionless and creative Word, that which is meant in all languages."[251] Benjamin's "pure language," no longer impaired by mediation, actually begins to resemble a language of images, something more akin to a prelinguistic shorthand that would circumvent the limitations of (linguistic) translation. Images strung together in a sequence...interestingly, Benjamin's pure language starts to sound like film.

Although in translation it is the form of language that must be reckoned with, for Benjamin a foregrounding of language's concreteness is also necessary to produce a powerful original. Benjamin looks to the Surrealists' literary works that cunningly demonstrated an understanding that "language seemed itself only where sound and image, image and sound, interpenetrated with automatic precision and such felicity that no chink was left for the penny-in-the-slot called 'meaning.'" Here in the strange and uncanny works of the Surrealists, "image and language take precedence" over any rational meaning.[252] In disrupting language's usual invisibility, the Surrealists were able to distill language to an immediacy that functions as something closer to an image, a pre-verbal, less mediated representation. Without the usual clues to help us read these words, they take on a presence, a flagrant self-awareness. In their obtrusive occupation of the page these strange markings become unmoored from convention and meaning, forcing the reader to search out the rules of their ludic creations. These texts, Benjamin proposes, are not the products of mere "artistic dabbling," rather, they are "magical experiments with words," ones which participate in "passionate phonetic and graphic transformational games."[253]

[249] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 255.
[250] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 257.
[251] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 261.
[252] Benjamin, "Surrealism," *SW*, vol. 2, 208.
[253] Benjamin, "Surrealism," 212.

The text of *Picture House*, too, plays with language. In emphasizing the concrete nature of the words and their multiple possible meanings, these texts foreground an aspect of language that we habitually take for granted. For example, my use of fonts serves to emphasize the graphic qualities of language; line breaks help to create double meanings; and the devices of assonance and alliteration also contribute to a foregrounding of the words and the weight they carry. Take the text from the tenth screen of *Picture House* (see figure 14):
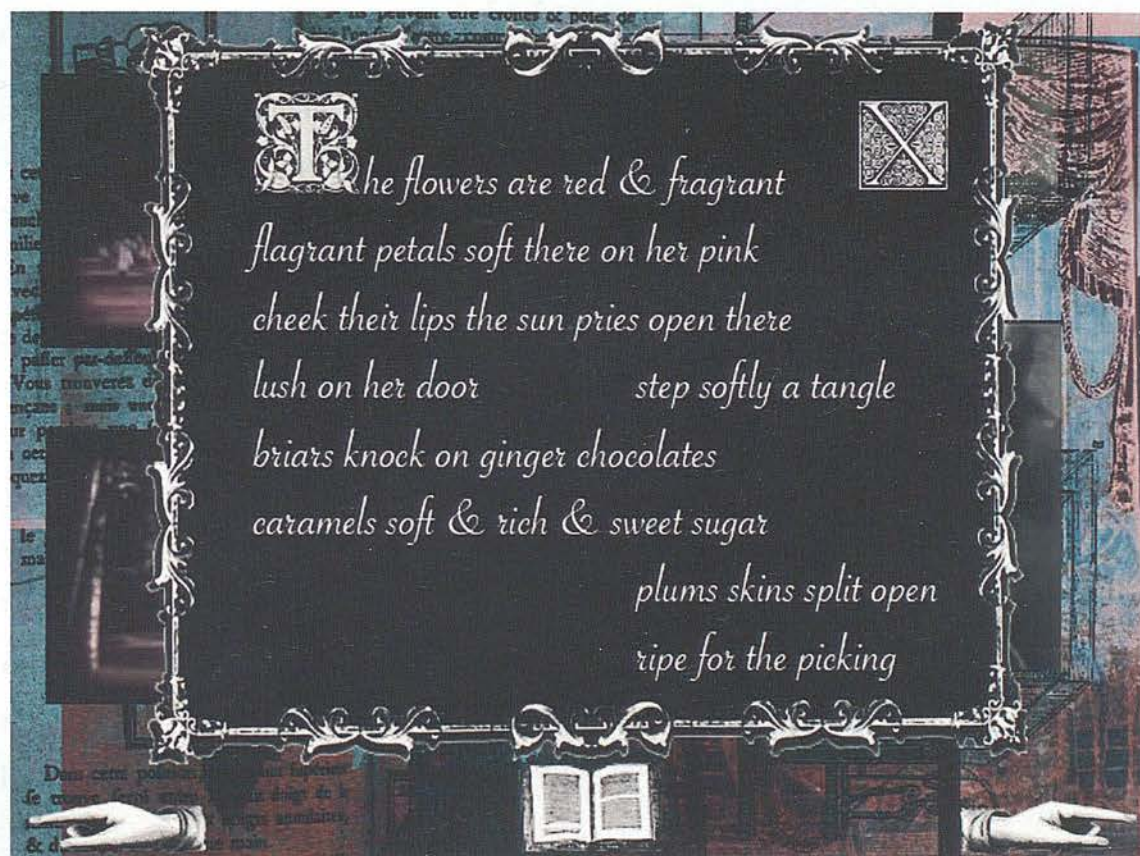

Figure 14. Still from *Picture House*.

the flowers are red & fragrant

flagrant petals soft there on her pink

cheek their lips the sun pries open there

lush on her door

step softly a tangle

briars knock on ginger chocolates car

amels soft & rich & sweet sugar

plums skins split open

ripe for the picking

The sounds catch on our lips as we form them. Our eye trips over the sudden ending of lines. Reconnecting with the next, meaning alters and expands. In their refusal to sit unobtrusively in the background, we are forced to consider the words for their own sake and not just the singular or one-dimensional 'meaning' they convey in our usual usage of language.

Despite 'saying the same thing,' the translation, although a copy of the original, in many ways does not resemble the original. This 'dissimilar' copy—a textual reincarnation—Benjamin identifies as the "afterlife" of the original. Like the image that echoes on your eyelids as a ghostly negative after looking at something bright, in the translation, "the original undergoes a change."[254] As the afterlife of the original, the translation allows the originary text to take on new meaning as it is brought into dialogue with a different circle of texts. In the language of the translation the original unfolds, its literalness pleated into representation.[255] A good translation in Benjamin's opinion weaves together the intangible; it attempts to extract the 'essence' of the original. The "essential substance" of the copied text is what Benjamin describes as "the unfathomable, the mysterious, the "poetic.""[256] This kernel buried in the text holds within itself "that which lies beyond communication in a literary work."[257] This 'uncommunicable' Benjamin identifies as a remainder, something other than what can be translated; it is an instance of pure language.[258]

Translation's role then, according to Benjamin, is "to turn the symbolizing into the symbolized itself."[259] In other words, the task of translation is to *transform* language; it is not merely the transparent transmission of information, but a foregrounding of the *way* in which language means, to create in the target language the feel of the source text, something of its tone and weight. The deliberate "effort of assembling and expressing what is to be conveyed" through a careful selection of words, is of course a practice

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[254] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," *SW*, vol. 1, 256.
[255] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 255.
[256] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 253.
[257] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 253.
[258] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 261.
[259] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 261.

Benjamin undertakes in his own writing.[260] Translation, for Benjamin is a *representation* of the way language always works, because any act of representation inevitably involves a translation itself. What Benjamin is at pains to repeatedly point out is that as human beings we operate *in* language. It cannot be otherwise: "There is no world of thought which is not a world of language, and one sees of the world only what is provided for by language."[261] That awareness of mediation is certainly evident in Benjamin's texts—strangely elliptical—which keep meaning off-balance, endlessly circulating in possibilities. In his aphoristic fragments, meaning is not permitted to settle. Benjamin's dense texts play with the possibilities of language; they force us to read between the lines, see (and hear) what is not spelled out, what is not written there.

remainders and reminders: the photograph and memory

The photograph, too, with its strange play of presence and absence, requires a kind of interlinear reading. The photograph, as reproduction, is a translation which gives an afterlife, an afterglow perhaps, to the original captured uncannily through the lens. This paper coffin, threshold between times and spaces, carries within it the ghostly double of its subject. Writing on the history of the photograph, Benjamin cites the reaction of a witness to an early daguerreotype: "We didn't trust ourselves at first," the speaker confesses, "to look long at the first pictures [that we saw] developed. We were abashed by the distinctness of these human images, and believed that the little tiny faces in the picture could see us, so powerfully was everyone affected by the unaccustomed clarity and the unaccustomed fidelity to nature of the first daguerreotypes."[262] In this startling statement we can get some idea of how the reproductive capabilities of the photograph took people aback. What to make of this object that seemed to capture and trap something beyond mere image, something more than semblance, virtually to see the very thing itself and hold it there in suspension? It seems, initially, people were *unaccustomed* to such a convincing copy. Deciphering the photograph required a drastically new mode of reception; it required a canny translator.

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[260] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 260.
[261] Benjamin, "Translation—For and Against," *SW*, vol. 3, 249.
[262] Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," *SW*, vol. 2, 512.

For Benjamin, the technology of the photograph is powerfully able to do what a translation does—lend a degree of foreignness to the copy. The mechanically reproduced image also allows the photograph to elide the subjectivity inherent in earlier forms of art. Like the translation that shuns metaphorical language, the photograph produces an image which evidently is stripped bare of subjective emphasis. The photograph is not a metaphorical representation of something; in all its verisimilitude, it *is* that thing. The photograph is an image that is at once fully complete and yet strangely empty. Reproduction of all that appeared before the lens of the camera, the photograph is a document in which everything within its frame is engrained with equal importance. Here, in an arrested moment singled out for our reference, a silvered double mimics a sliver of life. But what to make of it? The photograph remains mute on the role of direction. The viewer must read the photo as an index of its instant, write a story of what has been.

Photography offered a new mode of inscription—chemicals reacting to sunlight to form an image. However, in the photograph, there is also a delayed inscription. In all its repleteness the photograph offers no direct meaning; the significance we affix to the representation after the event provides a way "to read what was never written" in the original moment. But with this wondrous new technology, that exposes things in a "profane illumination," comes a nagging responsibility.[263] In his essay "Little History of Photography" Benjamin asks: "Isn't it the task of the photographer—descendent of the augurs and haruspices—to reveal guilt and to point out the guilty in his pictures?"[264] What might he mean by this? He goes on to quote an unnamed source as saying that in the future illiteracy will not be associated with a failure in reading or writing but with an ignorance of photography. And, further, he asks: if a photographer is unable to decipher his or her own photographs, does not that make this person just as illiterate?[265] What is important here for Benjamin is a felt necessity to learn to read the photograph as well as the world it records and reproduces. That requirement would hold evidently for both the photographer and the viewer. In other words Benjamin is pointing out the importance of (re)educating our mimetic faculties. Photography forces the viewer to adopt a different approach to the image, to exercise an emerging set of rules in viewing, associative means that had been employed in earlier times when the mimetic faculty was more valued but which have since fallen from usage.[266] And the photograph, for Benjamin, is a medium

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[263] Benjamin, "Surrealism," *SW*, vol. 2, 216.
[264] Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," *SW*, vol. 2, 527.
[265] Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," 527.
[266] In several texts Benjamin cites arcane ways of knowing the world as examples of the once powerful mimetic faculty. See for example, "On Astrology," *SW*, vol. 2, 684-685, "Doctrine of the Similar," *SW*, vol. 2, 694-698, and "On the Mimetic Faculty," *SW*, vol. 2, 720-722.

that returns us to another way of perceiving.[267] Speaking of the importance of coming to terms with the way these reproducible ghosts become receptacles for our desires, he says, "Won't inscription become the most important part of the photograph?"[268] Similar to the way in which Benjamin sees the formation and retrieval of memory rather than the memory itself as what is really important, so, too, the ability to recognize the 'facts,' the meanings that we apply to the photograph—what we inscribe it with— are for him significant. Benjamin stresses the necessity of (re)learning to decipher these representations; we need to become literate at reading both what was burned into emulsion as well as what was never written by the camera.

Like the flâneur, readers of the photograph must take on the role of detective. The viewer must treat the photo as an image of a 'crime scene,' comb it for clues of what has been.[269] Photograph and photographer must bear witness and bring to light the guilty, for it harbours evidence of how an (often unsettling), world is known and reveals itself. Benjamin stresses that the need to understand the workings of the photograph become all the more important as "photographic records begin to be evidence in the historical trial [*Prozess*]. This constitutes their hidden political significance."[270] The technological inscription—the photograph itself—must be deciphered, extracted and differentiated from the narratives later imposed upon it. In the silvered silence, the viewer must read clues, track the traces that linger as the "appearance of a nearness."[271] The photograph, an immediate translation of reality, one 'free' of subjectivity, becomes a powerful tool for Benjamin in its ability to engage in a "literarization of the conditions of life."[272] The technology of the photograph did what other media could not: it was able to bind form

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[267] In his essay "Garage Cinema and the Future of Media" Marc Davis proposes an image-based system of communication in which a "semasiographic" (based on a resemblance) will replace the current "glottographic" (writing as record of speech) system. He envisions that in the future we will draw upon vast data banks of images to construct our 'sentences.' Davis even makes the claim that technology will evolve to permit for images the possessing of something akin to what for written language the word processor provides in checking spelling and grammar. Marc Davis, "Garage Cinema and the Future of Media." 19 January 2003 <http://fusion.sims.berkeley.edu/GarageCinema/pubs/pdf/pdf_599AB179-D346-4374-8F0AE11D9D76EBEF.pdf>.

[268] Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," *SW*, vol. 2, 527. This too, is what concerns Barbara Maria Stafford. In *Artful Science: Enlightenment Entertainment and the Eclipse of Visual Education*, she argues that the hegemony enjoyed by the written word has crippled our ability to read images. Stafford points out that despite the fact that digital technology has meant that we are surrounded by images more and more, we tend to regard these with suspicion. We are reluctant to think of the image in terms other than aesthetic (non-functional) or as illustration, as a second-rate supplement to the written word. What Stafford wants is, like Benjamin, a responsible reader of images, and a reinstalled practice of and respect for alternate ways of acquiring knowledge, ones that involve a critical reading of images, alongside a tactile embodied way of knowing that involves a literacy of sources in addition to written texts.

[269] Benjamin, WOA3, *SW*, vol. 4, 258.

[270] Benjamin, WOA3, 258.

[271] Benjamin, *Arcades*, [M16a, 4], 447.

[272] Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," *SW*, vol. 2, 527.

and content in a way that opened new methods of perceiving, ones that were tied directly to "living social contexts."[273]

What was crucial for Benjamin was that the technology of photography (as well as film) be used in ways that were radical and challenging, ones that pushed the "barrier between writing and image. What we require of the photographer is the ability to give his picture a caption that wrenches it from modish commerce and give it a revolutionary use value."[274] But it is not enough for the photographer to add words to instill a radical meaning in his or her photograph. The writer, too, Benjamin tells us, must employ the techniques of photography in order to maximize the effects of estrangement that will jar the reader from the blindness of already knowing.[275]

The "lessons inherent in the authenticity of the photograph," for Benjamin, are crucial to apprehend.[276] For their arrested moments reveal the guilt and the duplicitous nature of modernity; photography lays bare the atrocities and marvels of the modern world which has fragmented and reconfigured tradition. As Benjamin sees it, the radical spatial and temporal upheaval ushered in by modernity has resulted in the erosion of experience. And this "poverty of experience is not merely poverty on the personal level, but poverty of human experience in general."[277] As I previously mentioned, Benjamin makes the distinction between two types of experience, *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*. *Erlebnis* involves the shock impressions of the everyday; it is an embodied, tactile experience. The conscious mind has to parry these blows in order not to suffer from overload. As a result, most of what we experience fails to register; it does not filter over into *Erfahrung*, or conscious experience. In other words, most of what we live through does not make it into memory; our lives are largely lost to us. And as I pointed out earlier, Benjamin describes memory as "the medium of that which is experienced."[278] So, modernity with all its shocks and jolts has decreased the likelihood that experience will ever actually move into memory, and therefore much of what we live through cannot be processed and communicated. What is left as remainder—the "uncommunicable"—is the essence of our lives which we can no longer even recognize.

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273 Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," *SW*, vol. 2, 796.
274 Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," 775.
275 Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," 775.
276 Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," *SW*, vol. 2, 527.
277 Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," *SW*, vol. 2, 732.
278 Benjamin, "Excavation and Memory," *SW*, vol. 2, 576.

In Benjamin's view, technology significantly contributes to the deterioration of *Erfarhung*, or communicable experience. Both the machines of destruction used in World War One to obliterate the human body, and those technologies of reproduction that displace a first-hand experience, contribute to what Benjamin identifies as a decay of experience.[279] Prefiguring Jean Baudrillard's concerns that simulacra have erased the real, Benjamin asks, in regard to the impact of technology on our world, "Where it all leads when [...] experience is simulated or obtained by underhanded means?"[280] He further wonders, "what is the value of all our culture if it is divorced from experience?"[281] As I discussed in chapter two, Benjamin, at least in part, is concerned with reproducing some vestige of an oral society, with its experience of an immediacy that has been lost in modernity. The oral—speech as sound—necessarily fades quickly. Unlike the written, speech exists only in the moment of the utterance; it is already gone in ghostly evanescence by the time we shape our tongue and lips and body to compose the next sound.

In order to maintain itself, an oral society relies on repetition, for it is through repetition that an understanding can be committed to memory. An oral society functions through ceremony and precedent. Lessons are learned through experience: knowledge is accumulated through trial and error. Repeating experiences and ideas, knowledge is passed on in memorable form. But what happens when we are not able to commit to memory due to physical damage (neuro-biological) or out of a sense of disbelief or distrust of memory, of a diminished ability to 'know by heart'? What happens when we cannot or will not remember?

It is that concern that Christopher Nolan picks up in his film *Memento* (2000). A blow to the head while attempting to thwart an attack on his wife has left Leonard, the main character in the film, without the ability to form new memories. Bewildered, yet determined to avenge his memory of the wrong done to his wife, Leonard sets out on the trail of the man responsible. What unfolds on-screen is the convoluted tale of Leonard's desire for retribution. Yet the film in no way consists of only a simple tale of revenge, nor is it a tale simply about revenge. *Memento*, in fact, is an allegory of memory, both in theme and presentation. The film is presented in back-to-front narrative: we start in the

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[279] Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," *SW*, vol. 2, 732.
[280] Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," 732.
[281] Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," 732.

present and move back through time, retracing Leonard's efforts to track down his wife's attacker. We move back through memory.

Leonard, like the figure of the child I examined in the first chapter, sees things with a "first sight." But the world in which he moves is not full of wonder and curiosity. Unable to rely on personal memory to guide his thoughts and actions, Leonard finds his world a frightening and dangerous one, where suspicion and hostility are the norm. Incapable of retaining information, unable to form a memory, Leonard relies on various mnemonic devices to cope with that lack: a Polaroid camera, pens, paper, tattoos.[282] In a sense, through these recording devices, he is forced to operate with a 'second sight.' However, Leonard's second sight is not that which allows the clairvoyance traditionally ascribed to this power. He cannot see into the future "to read what was never written." His second sight is a mediated one, inscribed through recording devices extraneous to the body. In other words, Leonard's surrogate recordings lack the immediacy and (dubious) accuracy we attribute to memory. Unable to make new memories, Leonard does, however, retain those he formed before the "incident," as the attack on his wife comes to be referred to in the film. In his pursuit of justice, it is the *memory* of his wife—a memory that increasingly becomes suspect—that haunts him.

Leonard tries desperately to piece together the clues that he has amassed. He has created an extensive map of facts, photos, and descriptions of the case that he pins to a motel room wall (figure 15).

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[282] Susan Sontag points out that the Polaroid works off the same principle as the daguerreotype camera, a process which results in each print being a unique object (Sontag, *On Photography*, 125). Of course, in *Memento*, Leonard's use of the Polaroid camera is prescribed by his need for an immediate semblance. But the Polaroid, in its uniqueness, is also, perhaps, closer to Benjamin's model of memory. As I will discuss further on, Benjamin equates an image of the past to a trace which in a flash becomes fixed on the photographic plate of memory.

Figure 15. Still from *Memento*.

Like Benjamin's bio-map, which I spoke of in chapter one, this is a cartography primarily of place and incident, not people. Benjamin speaks of the way in which, in memory, although we may recall a time that is tied to a particular person, it would seem that it is space, more so than the presence of the person we were with, that largely remains in memory.[283] The details of a conversation in a pub may fade, we may even cease to recall all those present (drunkenness aside). However, a sense of the space in which that event took place often lingers with us: the way the sun refracted through the glass in your hand, the smell of winter that comes in with each new patron, the placement of a staircase, the music playing—why is it that these fragments (memories which themselves alter over time) have pushed out our recollections of the people we were with, especially when the memory involves our loved ones?

Perhaps it is the case that what memory seemingly most strongly registers comes to it through senses other than sight. We tend to remember the 'feel' of the event; the smell of cigarette smoke in someone's hair as you embrace them, the rough weave of the cloth of their jacket against your cheek, the frost fogging your glasses as you bid them farewell on the corner, train rumbling past. This strange imbalance in our memories between people and place makes more sense if we recall Benjamin's understanding of our relationship with architecture as a proprioceptive and haptic experience, one where the sensate body

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[283] Benjamin, BC, *SW*, vol. 2, 614.

becomes a primary site of reception.[284] Disconnected from our environment because of the hectic pace of modern life, our routines of self-preservation screen out the details and nuances in our everyday comings and goings. It is a more unconscious relationship with our surroundings which Benjamin sees taking shape in the modern urban world. It would seem that this distracted state is what allows for the overlooked to lodge in our memories, like insects trapped on sticky fly paper. Forgetful of our surroundings, we nevertheless find that they sneak into memory to surface later in an altered, more significant state. So paradoxically, even the distracted person, mired in the busy world of not noticing, is able to experience a hidden world. Only this experience comes later, after the fact; it is dependent on a forgetting. Although there may be an awareness of an occasion at the time of the actual event, it is often only when this recorded moment is played back, unsolicited, to the self as (involuntary) memory that the ordinary becomes tinged with a magical quality. Like the translation that functions to reincarnate the original, these *mémoire involuntaire* are the afterlife of the experience, an inscription of what was not read (nor written, if we recall Hutcheon's point that the event has no meaning in and of itself; interpretation is only applied later as fact),[285] at the time of first experience.

Although people, as well as locations, do figure in Leonard's mapping (he religiously takes a Polaroid of the people he meets and writes 'pertinent' information below their image), the figures in Leonard's world are in fact largely inconsequential. Although oddly familiar in their semblance to their photographs, Leonard cannot recall these people upon next meeting them; they only exist as reproduction for Leonard, a similarity suspended in emulsion. Unrecognized, these figures essentially function as interchangeable and replaceable props in Leonard's quest.[286] For the important thing here is the quest, the journey. It is the task of excavation, the "dark joy" of finding, that spurs Leonard on. What else can he do? Without memory he is without himself, quite literally. Without recourse to the knowledge that accumulates in memory, Leonard is reliant on his mnemonic devices to cope as best he can. But, ultimately these surrogates are insufficient. Without the ability to draw upon past events, Leonard is unable to communicate in any effective and meaningful way; his relationships fall apart as he cannot remember to trust others (and increasingly doubts himself). All Leonard can do is play a game of retribution with himself. In fact, in Benjamin's words, Leonard "conduct[s] himself like a man

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[284] Benjamin, WOA3, *SW*, vol. 4, 267-268.

[285] Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 122.

[286] See Kendall Walton's *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundation of the Representational Arts*, 37-38, where he discusses props as generators of 'fictional truths.'

digging," endlessly returning to repeat his excavations.[287] And yet, Benjamin tells us, this "fruitless searching" is in its own way a success.[288] It becomes apparent that Leonard's excavations, though they may result in his uncovering of the culprit, ultimately remain unfulfilling because he cannot recall any successes he may have had. It is only the actual act of searching—(re)tracing the paths—that gives any meaning to what he gathers, and thus gives him a sense of purpose.

Despite the mediation of his recording devices, Leonard repeatedly tells people that the "facts" he has gathered through them are more reliable than memory. As the story unravels, however, we begin to see the tenuous nature of Leonard's truths. We learn that people are playing him, twisting information, and exploiting his lack of memory, or "condition" as Leonard refers to it, to throw him off. For example, Leonard has a photograph of Natalie (who has given him a place to stay), under which he has written: "She will help you. She too lost someone close to her" (figure 16). We eventually come to see how ambiguous this 'truth' is when it is revealed to us that Natalie is the girlfriend of Jimmy, the fellow Leonard has shot, believing Jimmy to be the one who attacked his wife.
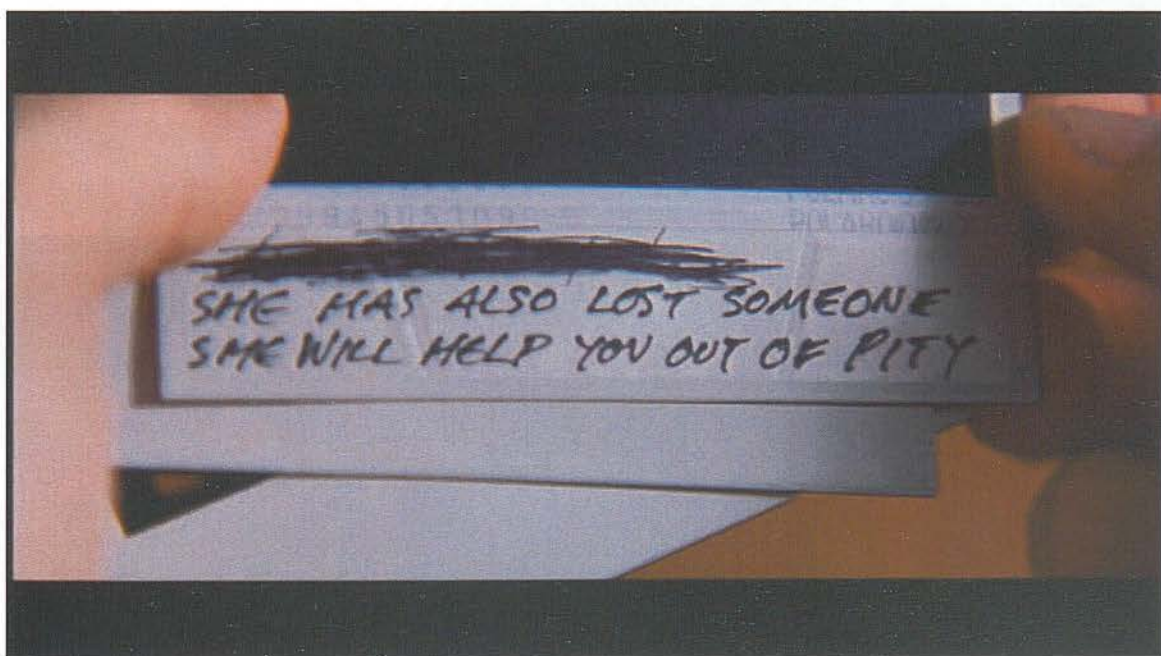

Figure 16. Still from *Memento*.

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[287] Benjamin, BC, *SW*, vol. 2, 611.
[288] Benjamin, BC, 611.

As an audience, we find ourselves sharing some of Leonard's confusion. Only given the 'facts' ourselves in bits and pieces, as the 'backward progression' of the film gradually reveals the story, we, too, are unsure about what to trust. For example, we are not certain that Natalie knows Leonard killed her partner Jimmy, at least not at the point in the story when she offers to help him and he ends up sleeping in her bed. There the two of them *lie*, each filling the gap of the loved one no longer there, perhaps each knowing or believing that the other is responsible in some way for that loss. Our helplessness as audience echoes this ambiguity. We have only partial information about the situation; we, too, cannot completely believe anything or trust anyone. Throughout *Memento* our sympathies, like the nature of our mutable memories, shift and reform. Like Leonard and Natalie, who may be lying to each other and themselves in order to alleviate their loneliness, we all construct stories which contradict and alter our reminiscences.

The slippery nature of memory is what *Picture House* and *Hansel & Gretel* are playing with too, asking us to (re)consider both our own personal reminiscences as well as narratives that have become embedded as memories in our culture. Perhaps we have seen streets like those in *Hansel & Gretel*, have walked down similar deserted roads ourselves. However, even if we personally have not physically been present in a large urban centre at night, with its skyscrapers twinkling in the darkness, we are familiar with these spaces. We know this landscape through countless films that are set in modern cities (see figure 17).

Figure 17. Still from *Hansel & Gretel*.

The cinema develops out of and alongside modernity, "but it is also a producer of urban culture and civilization."[289] Some theorists, such as Helmut Weihsmann and Kevin Lynch, amongst others, have postulated that the urban experience itself is somewhat cinematic.[290] It seems to me no coincidence that Benjamin finds a relationship between architecture and film.[291] As we move through urban space, random moments catch our attention; these registered fragments unfold much as sequences in a film. Not only do we experience the city in ways that are cinematic then, but, too, our idea of 'the city' is shaped to some degree by the filmic depictions of metropolises we encounter. The cinematic representations of urban centres, which have figured in film since the medium's earliest times, have created a collective celluloid memory of 'the city.'[292]

Without any reminiscences of his own to fall back on, collective or personal, Leonard literally relies on celluloid memories to cope. His helplessness emphasizes the ways in which through memories, through representations, we piece together a narrative of ourselves, one which is always partial and provisional. The way in which *Memento* is built also draws our attention to the construction of memory. In playing back the story from the present to the past, we, the viewer, like Leonard, must rely on what has passed, what of it we remember, and try to make sense of it in light of new information. In trying to piece the story together, we, along with Leonard, must play detective. The film is screened to us beginning in the present and moves back through what has happened previously, each subsequent scene revealing a little more of what has led to the opening sequence of the film. Constructing a map of similarities and correspondences in which we use the most recent image to decipher the next, we, in a sense, must read what has not yet been written, what has not yet been made legible. As I discussed in chapter one, Benjamin draws a strong correlation between the photograph and memory; in both, past and present are caught in a spark of illumination. The residual image, caught as fleeting impression,

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[289] Helmust Weihsmann, "The City in Twilight: Charting the Genre of the 'City Film' 1900-1930," in *Cinema and Architecture: Méliès, Mallet-Stevens, Multimedia*, edited by François Penz and Maureen Thomas, 10. See also, in *Cinema and Architecture*, Ian Wiblin's essay "The Space Between: Photography, Architecture and the Presence of Absence," 106, and "Life Into Art, Art Into Life: Fusions in Film, Video and Architecture," by Odile Fillion., 118-121.

[290] See Helmust Weihsmann, "The City in Twilight: Charting the Genre of the 'City Film' 1900-1930," in *Cinema and Architecture: Méliès, Mallet-Stevens, Multimedia*, edited by François Penz and Maureen Thomas and chapter seven in Kevin Lynch's *What Time Is This Place?*

[291] Benjamin, WOA3, *SW*, vol. 4, 267-268.

[292] Although the 'artificial' nature of these composite, romanticised cities need not be inherently or altogether a negative thing, as Colin McArthur argues in his essay "Chinese Boxes and Russian Dolls: tracking the elusive cinematic city," we need to be wary of whose version of locations and events comes to represent the ideal or utopian city. McArthur astutely points out the reality that the American dominance in cinema can lead to an hegemony of American values and aesthetics which override the local and lesser known. Colin McArthur, "Chinese Boxes and Russian Dolls: tracking the elusive cinematic city," in *The Cinematic City*, edited by David B. Clarke, 33.

Benjamin names as "dialectics at a standstill."[293] Benjamin explains that this arrested image is not the result of a temporal relation of past and present; it is not simply a chronological association. Rather, this is the relation of "what-has-been" to what is now.[294] Past and present meet at a fault line; they grind against each other and as they give way they release an energy, a new configuration, that flares up in a "profane illumination."[295] The rupture permits the emergence of something new through the convergence of past and present. And the ability to decipher the meaning of these newly forged associations comes down to a "perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded."[296] If not seized, this precious instant will disappear, extinguishing the light which could have revealed what now must remain locked away.[297]

The concerns Benjamin has for the perception and interpretation of dialectical images are based in his understanding of the dialectical image as historical document. In describing experience we mediate it; it is only available to us as texts, as "documents, eye-witness accounts, archives."[298] The past, Hutcheon astutely claims, is "archaeologized."[299] The interpretation of these excavated documents requires an ability to read between the lines of the official narratives that have later been attached to the moments of formation. Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*, essentially a sprawling collection of quotations referring to the nineteenth-century shopping arcades in Paris, attempts to practice this perilous reading. Influenced by the Surrealists' work, *The Arcades Project* brings together the old and the new in strange juxtapositions. In this unfinished (and perhaps unfinishable) collection, Benjamin attempts to construct an unorthodox assemblage of texts which would make available new possibilities for understanding both what has been and what is now. Benjamin conceived of *The Arcades Project* as a literary montage designed to "educate the image-making medium within us," to ask us to (re)consider how and what we remember and return to as a source of understanding.[300] In offering a collection of disparate scraps and snippets of quotations, Benjamin sought to bring the

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[293] Benjamin, *Arcades*, [N3, 1], 462; [N2a, 3], 462; [N3, 1], 463; [N5, 2], 466.

[294] Benjamin, *Arcades*, [N3, 1], 463.

[295] Benjamin, "Surrealism," *SW*, vol. 2, 216.

[296] Benjamin, *Arcades*, [N3, 1], 463.

[297] Although Benjamin stressed the constructed nature of the world and the importance of recognizing the ways in which imposed meanings shape conventions, he also believed that there was a 'truth' that is something more than "a merely contingent function of knowing." Although ultimately unknowable due to the mediated nature of human existence, 'truth' "is bound to a nucleus of time lying hidden within the knower and the known alike." In the brief moments of profane illumination that occur when dialectics come to a standstill, Benjamin saw an opportunity to glimpse this hidden 'truth.' Benjamin, *Arcades*, [N3, 2], 463.

[298] Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 93.

[299] Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 93.

[300] Benjamin, *Arcades*, [N1, 8], 458.

reader into a moment of (re)cognition, to reawaken our ability to recognize similarities and make connections. Benjamin hoped that, forced to make some sense of the descriptions of the past he had gathered together, the reader would produce a series of dialectical images. Removed from any obvious understanding, this 'montage reading' would train our mimetic faculty, "raising it to a stereoscopic and dimensional seeing into the depths of historical shadows."[301]

As with the act of translation which foregrounds the contructedness of language, his use of montage, Benjamin hoped, would cause the flat one-dimensional images of history to spring to life in a fuller way, and in doing so, press the reader into a more critical perception; this too, I would hope, is the effect of *Picture House* and *Hansel & Gretel* for the viewer. What already appears peculiar due to its agedness and / or subject matter, is made all the more so when brought into conjunction with other materials. For example, in *Picture House*, the footage of a deer on a bed is bizarre enough in and of itself. But when juxtaposed with a sequence of a stripper, and an animated electrocardiogram filmstrip, the already elusive narrative is extended and amplified (see figure 18). The repetition in *Hansel and Gretel* results in much the same disorientating effect, returning us again and again to the same images but with slight alterations and additions. In playing with the odd incongruities and similarities that emerge amongst images, text, and sounds, in these two works, the viewer is asked to think about how these constellations function, perhaps even asking themselves why they chose to make certain associations, what it is they have been reminded of.

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[301] Benjamin, [N1, 8], 458. Benjamin notes that the words are those of Rudolf Borchardt's in *Epilegomena zu Dante*, vol. 1 (Berlin, 1923), 56-57.
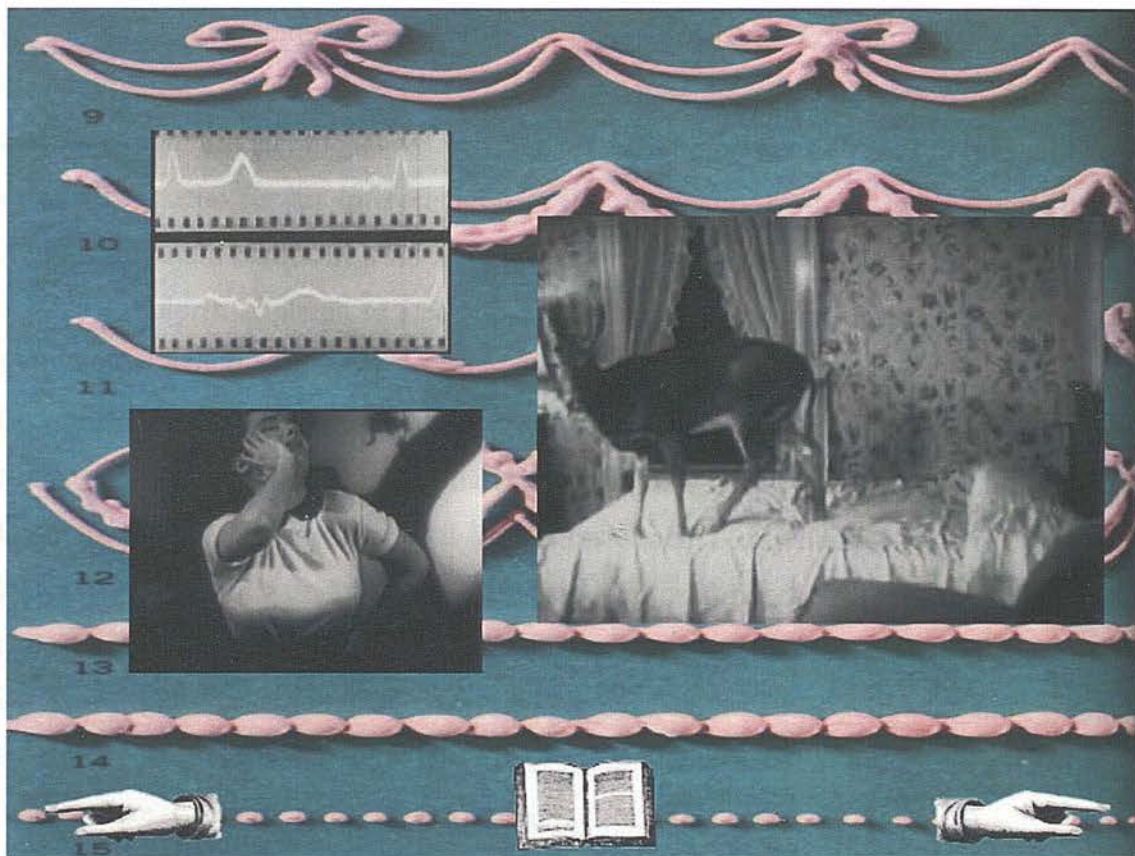
Figure 18. Still from *Picture House*.

The ability to grasp the interlinear is imperative for Benjamin. He writes that only the Surrealists, who juxtaposed the outmoded and unexpected to jar the reader's / viewer's expectations, had attempted to address the "state of emergency" that was modernity.[302] In their work, Benjamin tells us, the Surrealists "exchange, to a man, the play of human features for the face of an alarm clock that in each minute rings for sixty seconds."[303] Reading becomes a question of perilous timing. Benjamin warns that even a profane interpretation must be subject to the tempo of the image, which the reader must follow closely if the critical moment—the flash of illumination—is to be apprehended. Reader and text must synch at the right instant to allow the image a brief moment of availability, something "which the reader must not forget at any cost lest he go away empty-handed."[304]

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[302] Benjamin, "Surrealism," *SW*, vol. 2, 218. See also Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," VIII, *SW*, vol. 4, 392, and Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 74.
[303] Benjamin, "Surrealism," 217-218.
[304] Walter Benjamin, "Doctrine of the Similar," *SW*, vol. 2, 698.

Desperate to elicit some meaning from his reading of clues, Leonard is in his own "state of emergency."[305] Not able to rely on memories to navigate the world, Leonard's understanding literally depends on a moment-to-moment reading of things. Timing is especially crucial for his interpretation of the image. For example, after Leonard shoots Jimmy, Teddy, a character who has been telling Leonard he is a cop helping him track down the culprit, explains to Leonard that this is not the first time Leonard has killed someone to avenge his wife. In fact, through what Teddy says, we start to wonder if Leonard is entirely the innocent character he believes himself to be. After Teddy lets it slip that his (Teddy's) real name matches the initials of the attacker Leonard is chasing, Leonard, distraught and enraged at the doubts which Teddy has put in his head, decides that Teddy will now be "the one." Leonard purposefully copies down Teddy's license plate number, knowing full well in doing so he is deliberately shaping his memory. Leonard's perilous reading of things makes sure he will not go away empty handed, though he may go away confused; in grasping the seeming significance of Teddy's license plate, Leonard ignites a new version of the same search.

Memento plays out the irony of memory: on the one hand, if we cannot remember we repeat (for example, in the scene where Leonard is burning some of his wife's belongings, he admits to himself that he has probably done this many times before, only he cannot remember to forget her), but on the other hand, as in an oral society, we must repeat to remember. Leonard must remember the past (that small part of the past which he can still remember) to remind himself of why he is doing what he is doing. But he must also remember that which he cannot—that which has never been written.

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[305] Benjamin, "Surrealism," *SW*, vol. 2, 218.

Just as Leonard needs his Polaroids, notes, and tattoos to make memory manifest, Benjamin is similarly concerned with the representation of memory in both "A Berlin Chronicle" and "Berlin Childhood around 1900." In bringing experience into representation, memory takes on a shared significance and becomes readable.[306] The process of making memory legible, as well as developing the capacity to read these images, for Benjamin, is tied to his desire to reanimate *Erfarhrung*, the kind of experience that needs to be passed on from generation to generation in order for society to function. Asking us to veer from the expected, Benjamin would wish to have us learn to be critical consumers of the images that inundate us. In querying the texts that would presume to speak for all, ones that would offer an "underhanded" or "simulated" version of what has happened, Benjamin would hope that we would be urged into a (re)consideration of local, everyday experience which we all know, and, further, a sharing of that knowledge.[307]

As I pointed out in chapter one, both "A Berlin Chronicle" and "Berlin Childhood around 1900," work off photographic terms. The photograph (and by extension film) functions for Benjamin as a powerful mnemonic device. And, while cautious of the fact that technologies of reproduction contribute to the erosion of memory, Benjamin sees within photography a means of reengaging our ability to read mimetically. This memory-making technology, Benjamin would hope, can, if used responsibly, bring us into new ways of knowing and communicating, ones which would affirm a collective sense of society.

In tying both "A Berlin Chronicle" and "Berlin Childhood around 1900," to photography, Benjamin tries to bring his own remembered images to a brief standstill. In "A Berlin Chronicle," Benjamin reminds us that the "length of time during which we are exposed to impressions has no bearing on their fate in memory"; a brief occurrence is as likely to be recalled as an extended one. Making explicit equations between memory and the photograph, he continues: "It is not, therefore, due to insufficient exposure time if no image appears on the plate of remembrance."[308] What happens, Benjamin argues, is that a high degree of familiarity inures us to what is before our very eyes. It obscures the plate, blocking the light needed to expose an image and to bring it to our awareness. Not until the plate is illuminated in a flash, "as if from burning magnesium powder" that breaks

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[306] Sigrid Weigel, *Body - and Image -Space: Re-reading Walter Benjamin*, 128.

[307] Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," *SW*, vol. 2, 732.

[308] Benjamin, BC, *SW*, vol. 2, 632.

through the attire of the everyday, will the snapshot of memory be available to us in what might seem naked immediacy.[309]

In the way that a latent world exists for Benjamin, so, too, there is a self which largely remains obscured by our settled selves. Esther Leslie provocatively remarks that for Benjamin, "A celluloid self is buried in the unconscious or 'darkroom'" of the mind.[310] And in the critical moment that allows involuntary memory to register, this celluloid self, plastic and receptive, separates from our known selves. For Benjamin, it is this "deeper self," a "little heap of magnesium powder" that, when touched by a match, becomes seared with the "most indelible images."[311] In Benjamin's thinking it is a more profound, fundamental self that is startled by the flash. As I tried to draw out in chapter one, this 'primitive' self has, in Benjamin's view, a more direct recourse to the mimetic faculty. Memory—an inscription of semblance—is a mimetic process. And in the brief instances when the routine self is no longer eclipsing this hidden self, memory slips in and touches the secret self with a copy of the event. These touching memories that take hold are all the more powerful because, in a sense, we do not remember receiving them.

The recycled material in *Picture House* and *Hansel & Gretel* functions in this way. The works are allegorical constructions of my own (extremely dubious) memories. *Picture House* began, in fact, with someone reminding me of a memory I had no recollection of, a memory I did not (and still don't) have. Given that the unsettling nature of the experience of someone reminding you of what you cannot remember was a starting point for these works, the fact that the material used to represent my memories in these two works is not my own, not of my making, is rather suiting. These are not my memories, nor will they be those of most viewers; they come to us from an earlier time. And yet, there is something strangely familiar about them, something comforting as well as disquieting in their agedness. In their familiar foreignness they take on a certain power, they are able to speak to the present in ways which the new, of our time, blinds us to. *Hansel & Gretel*, in its repetition, asks us to ponder these pieces of the past. Like a recurring dream, or a fairy tale told again and again, *Hansel & Gretel* brings us back to the same series of images over and over: a cityscape by night, a cup of coffee, a set of formidable doors, an empty courtyard, a (nearly) empty street. In doing so it imbues these representations with a significance they ordinarily would not possess. The fact that these images were captured

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[309] Benjamin, BC, 632.
[310] Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin*, 81.
[311] Benjamin, BC, 633.

by an unknown recorder on holiday is itself important. Although marked as worthy of notice by this anonymous traveler, the material does not make for the arresting viewing which we seem to demand more and more as technical developments make possible ever wilder and more realistic special effects.[312] These modest images hold significance for the person who recorded them; presumably their mundane subject matter is not intended to hold fascination for others. However, it is just this, the humbleness, the gentle yet eerie quietness, of these highly personal filmic remnants that interests me. I find myself irresistibly attracted to these cups, doors, courtyards, and strange streets (figure 19). The fact that they once held an importance for someone, spoke to someone in a way that they wanted to be reminded of, makes them all the more compelling for me. Who took these pictures and why? In my (re)use of this colloquial material I hope to underline the importance of (re)investing in what has been tossed aside as unworthy or insignificant.
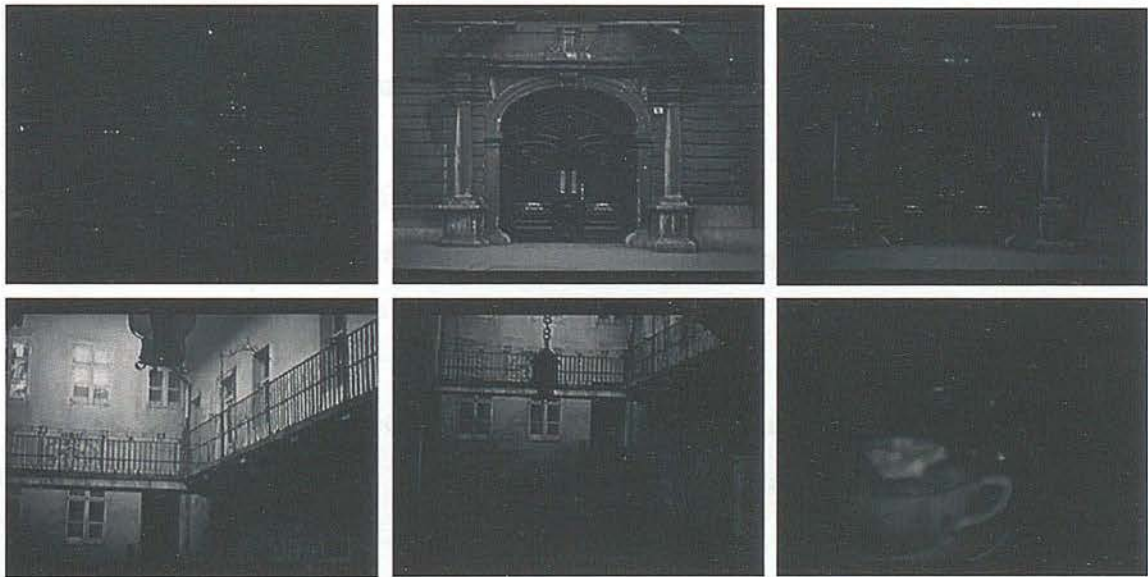

Figure 19. Stills from *Hansel & Gretel*.

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[312] Lev Manovich points out that the reality that digital special effects mimic is in fact photographic reality, "reality as seen by the camera lens." It is a film image that digital has learned to imitate. Manovich, "Cinema and Digital Media," in *Technology and Culture: The Film Reader*, ed. Andrew Utterson, 30.

Translation for Benjamin is both a transformation and a renewal of the original. The translation becomes the "afterlife" of the older text, bringing it into new dialogues. In urging the translator to draw attention to language, to emphasize its concreteness, Benjamin hopes to complicate the text, forcing the reader to make linkages and associations that are not readily apparent. The photograph too, brought the viewer into an odd point of contact between the known, the recognizable, and the unaccustomed. The uncanny verisimilitude with which photography and film captured their subjects meant new ways of understanding these images needed to be developed. Their 'lack of subjectivity' gives no clues as to how to decipher these ghostly doubles. As a result, in Benjamin's view, these convincing copies exercise our atrophied mimetic faculty. However, the understanding of these images must also involve an awareness of the narratives that are imposed upon them. What Benjamin is concerned with is the gap between experience and the representation and communication of that experience. All representation involves a translation, a mediation. This is what makes the *mémoire involuntaire* so special for Benjamin. These memories which sneak up on us screen back moments we do not remember experiencing. As such, they jar us in their forceful interruptions and bring into question the stability and permanence of memory and the integrity of our very identities.

These unsolicited remembrances, which, like the dialectical image, are created in a flash through a collision of past and present, operate with a startling immediacy which 'everyday' memories do not. Involuntary memories: the term itself is strange—I am remembering against my will. And in doing so, I (anxiously) become aware that, in fact, I am lost from my self; at least part of my self has experienced and registered a moment which my conscious has denied. In this process of forced remembrance I believe Benjamin saw a brief instant, similar to that permitted by the photograph and film, which snapped shut the fissure between experience and representation.[313] Further, I think it

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[313] Of course Benjamin himself realized that any attempt to reconcile experience and representation could only ever be partial and provisional. "Language takes precedence" Benjamin tells us. "Not only before meaning. Also before the self" (Benjamin, "Surrealism," 209). As I have argued throughout these chapters, Benjamin believes that we are creatures of language and cannot operate outside of it. Language shapes the way we communicate and understand ourselves. We are mediated; the self is a composite, splintered. Through his writings Benjamin sought to bring the fragments of modernity into some usefulness, some understanding. By duplicating the fractured nature of the modern world, Benjamin (as did the Surrealists) sought to engage the latent energies held within these scraps. The resulting patchworks function as a cracked mirror or funhouse distortion might; these shards can only ever approximate a coherent image. *The*

likely that Benjamin saw a need to transfer the force found in *mémoire involuntaire* to our *Erfahrung* (usual) memories, to apply its transformative and astonishing powers to our everyday lives. He would urge us to become aware of what has become habit, what we remember to do without even noticing we are doing it. Benjamin would advise us to tempt our celluloid double out of the darkroom, let it reel about and record the secrets of the world which it may later expose to astonish us.

Arcades Project, of course, puts this fractured recovery into practice; its obsessive hoard of quotations building a picture of the Paris arcades that can never be comprehensive or complete.

Chapter Four

sensual similarity

The wearing away of experience through the changes modernity has brought about leads Benjamin to lament the disappearance of an inter-personal exchange based in collective memory. However, with the eradication of traditional patterns of communication, Benjamin sees the potential for a new beginning. The 'new barbarian' of modernity, it is Benjamin's hope, would develop a more responsible relationship with technology, an interpenetration of body and *Technik* which hitherto had not existed, as became so evident in the devastation of World War One.[314] In this chapter I will explore the ways in which Benjamin saw in the technology of film an example of the possibility of a reciprocal relationship between humans and technology. Engaging our mimetic faculties, film accesses a 'primitive' part of ourselves, one able to trace faint associations and connect with the world in ways that our everyday routines obscure. I will draw out the importance of film's mimetic capabilities, which for Benjamin had the power to affect the viewer in palpable and sensual ways which could potentially help to alleviate the alienating effects of modernity. Further, through an analysis of Elias Merhige's film *Shadow of the Vampire* (2000), I will argue that the aura of an object which Benjamin claimed was destroyed by reproductive technologies, is actually reproduced by the technology itself, resulting in a reincarnation or afterlife of the object.

the powers of similarity

As I have pointed out, in Benjamin's thinking and writing there is often a conflation of image, memory, and photography, not only through their phenomenological similarities, but also the ease with which they share metaphors and substitute for each other as records of experiences. For Benjamin, a fourth element is bound to this tight coalescence. Like image, memory, and the photograph, which all come into being in a momentary spark—

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[314] The First World War used the technologies of mass production to produce weapons quickly, cheaply, and in great quantities. In addition, newly designed weapons such as the automatic machine gun contributed to the huge number of casualties suffered by both sides during the war.

what Benjamin names as a profane illumination—the "perception of similarity," as well, "is in every case bound to a flashing up."[315] Benjamin tells us that similarity, like the ephemeral image of the past, is difficult to recognize.[316] The image of what has been is unique, dependent on a particular conjunction of space and time, which leaves the trace of memory. Similarity, however, turns upon reproduction—something is like something else. We are reminded of a certain thing because we recognize its duplicated attributes elsewhere. As a result, Benjamin explains, similarity cannot be grasped as other perceptions might be.[317] Because semblance sets off a chain of associations—one thing reminds us of another and so on and so on—similarity cannot be arrested or pinned down; rather, it is a continuous process of linking. Similarity, in its slippery reconfiguring of the original, "offers itself to the eye as fleetingly and transitorily as a constellation of stars."[318]

Benjamin believes that the mimetic faculty we have in our time is but a vestige of a once-powerful force that was able to "read what was never written."[319] It has altered to the point that we are incapable of recognizing resemblances that were evident to earlier people. Benjamin speaks, for example, of the focused reading stars and entrails, occult practices which put to use a finely honed mimetic faculty.[320] Like Benjamin's optical unconscious which manages to register only a small portion of what we 'see' in our daily lives, our mimetic faculties are now capable of discerning only the tip of the iceberg, as it were.[321]

Yet Benjamin wonders whether or not the change in this gift for producing and recognizing similarities is a decay in the ability or merely a transformation of it.[322] Of one thing he is certain: the ability to make and identify similarities, so strong in the child, has largely been eroded by the time we reach adulthood. Both "A Berlin Chronicle" and "Berlin Childhood around 1900" are filled with examples of how children, largely through play, imitate the world around them. The practice is more than a facile copying; the children submerge themselves in getting lost in the object they are imitating. Theirs is a blurring of subject and object, an immersion and a reciprocity, that takes place in all

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[315] Benjamin, "Doctrine of the Similar," *SW*, vol. 2, 695.
[316] Benjamin, "Doctrine of the Similar," 695.
[317] Benjamin, "Doctrine of the Similar," 695.
[318] Benjamin, "Doctrine of the Similar," 696.
[319] Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty," *SW*, vol. 2, 722.
[320] See "A Doctrine of the Similar," *SW*, vol. 2, 694-698, "On the Mimetic Faculty," *SW* vol. 2, 720-722, and "On Astrology," *SW* vol. 2, 684-685.
[321] Benjamin, "A Doctrine of the Similar," *SW*, vol. 2, 694-695.
[322] Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty," *SW* vol. 2, 720.

acts of mimesis.[323] Benjamin says of his attempts to catch butterflies as a child: "Between us, now, the old law of the hunt took hold: the more I strove to conform, in all the fibers of my being, to the animal—the more butterfly-like I became in my heart and soul—the more this butterfly itself, in everything it did, took on the color of human volition; and in the end, it was as if its capture was the price I had to pay to regain my human existence."[324] Who then is the capturer? Who the captured?

In mimetic behavior we call upon powers of perception that have not been blunted by merely living. These capabilities, Benjamin seems to suggest, are tied to an ancient way of knowing, one that would be closer to a hard-wired biological response to the world. As I pointed out earlier Benjamin is thinking of *Erlebnis*—a sentient, 'irrational' form of experience, that is ultimately unknowable—as a 'primitive' form of memory which is tied to mimesis. *Erfahrung*, too, as I understand it, is partially composed of a mimetic 'not knowing.' *Erfahrung* involves a process that operates on two levels: it is both the conscious registration of the event and the subsequent habitualization of those instances due to a need to know something 'by heart' in order to survive. This rudimentary remembering involves what Tom Gunning has identified as a 'dialectics of astonishment.' Gunning stresses that the uncanny nature of modernity means we constantly move between states of surprise and assimilation; it is never a simple matter of wonder ending in obscured routine. Rather, it is an ongoing cycle in which "Inattention can be transformed into wonder; wonder can be worn down into habit; habit can suddenly, even catastrophically, transform back into a shock of recognition."[325] We can recognize this cycle, too, in *Erlebnis* (the experiences that the conscious deflects). As this unconscious memory flares up as *mémoire involuntaire* it powerfully demonstrates its ability to shake us from the certainty of our lives and activate our hidden capacity to forge (unconscious) associations. I believe that the fact that mimesis functions at both a cognitive (memory) and unconscious level (habit), as well as a 'preconscious' level (what is registered by the sentient body but does not get translated to consciousness), is what leads Benjamin to value the mimetic faculty so highly. In Benjamin's figuring, memory, habit, and shock are tangled in the processes of making semblances. Mimesis enables us to survive as it

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[323] As Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf say with regards to mimesis: "Human being and nature, far from being strictly opposed as subject and object, are bound to each other. The sense of the world is revealed to the individual by way of the individual's adaptation to the world." Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf, *Mimesis: Culture, Art, Society*, 270.

[324] Benjamin, BC, *SW*, vol. 2, 351.

[325] Tom Gunning, "Re-Newing Old Technologies: Astonishment, Second Nature, and the Uncanny in Technology from the Previous Turn-of-the-Century," 46.

settles into knowledge, but it also has the power to surprise and jar us from our usual perceptions of the world.

This repeated return to a state of awe means that, at least briefly, we are freed from our conventions and experience events as Benjamin's child, with a wide-eyed 'first sight,' might. Michael Taussig has observed that the notion of the 'primitive' is an enduring theme in Benjamin's work. Taussig claims that the fragmentary and shock-like nature of the modern world, coupled with "mimetic machinery like the camera and the movies," which open up Benjamin's optical unconscious, foster a resurfacing of the 'primitive.'[326] Concerned with, yet excited by the inundation of technologies that modernity ushered in and the ways in which they radically altered traditional patterns of perception and communication, Benjamin concluded that "With this tremendous development of technology, a completely new poverty has descended on mankind."[327] Stripped of certain identity and unmoored from established ways of knowing and meaning, people, he argues, had been reduced to a 'primitive' state. But, for Benjamin, the supposed poverty of experience also allows for new beginnings. For Benjamin, modernity is characterized by "A total absence of illusion about the age and at the same time an unlimited commitment to it."[328] And it is primarily film—that wondrous illusionistic technology— that Benjamin looks to as a means of addressing that ambiguous state. This copying machine may reduce our existence, but it also promises to renew it through engaging a new, and very old, mode of perception. The 'new barbarian' of the modern, Benjamin writes in his typically vivid prose, is "the naked man of the contemporary world who lies screaming like a newborn babe in the dirty diapers of the present."[329] Modernity, in Benjamin's view, is a starting from scratch, a disposition and an approach that explodes the cemented layers of civilization and results in altered ways of seeing the world.[330]

Taussig stresses that Benjamin's mimesis hinges not just on similarity, but upon a *copy* and *contact*. The claim would hold certainly for the tactility Benjamin ascribes to the movies, a site I believe he thinks of as involving both a visceral connection and embodied communication. Taussig asserts that in Benjamin's mimesis there is "a copying or

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[326] Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, 19.
[327] Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," *SW*, vol. 2, 732.
[328] Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," 733.
[329] Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," 733.
[330] Benjamin, 732-733. Here Benjamin speaks in architectural terms of the likes of Descartes, Einstein, Bertolt Brecht, the Cubists, and Paul Klee as "constructors" and "engineers" who build from razed ground to produce constructions that challenge tradition. See also Convolute 'N' in *The Arcades Project*, where Benjamin speaks of using "the whetted axe of reason" to clear the ground of the "undergrowth of delusion and myth." *Arcades*, [N1, 4], 457.

imitation, and a palpable, sensuous, connection between the very body of the perceiver and the perceived."[331] Taussig makes clear, however, that producing the semblance of a thing (copy) involves more than striking the eye (contact) in passive reception. Rather, the perceiver is actively tangled in the process of sameness, engages in a complex procedure that we tend to take for granted. Our frequent usage of terms such as "identification, representation, expression, and so forth" demonstrate how readily we have abandoned that which is "powerful and obscure in the network of associations conjured by the notion of the mimetic."[332]

The visceral power of mimesis, the ability to resemble the Other—to take on a foreignness through imitation, disguise, and masquerade—is important for Benjamin because this active engagement, at least partially or temporarily, moves us outside of ourselves, outside of what is usual. In becoming *like* something, we need to take on the attributes of that thing; mimesis involves a degree of transformation which calls the notion of an integral and fixed identity into question. The vampire provides an interesting illustration of that principle. In order to survive the vampire must carry out the contact and copy Benjamin advocates. Assigned a bewildering range of identities over time— from cipher of pure evil to sensual seducer—the vampire embodies the Other. This dark prince can often function as an index of society's fears and desires. The vampire, beguiling and fascinating, offers what we both want and dread: an intimacy that transforms us into the Other. Through soft punctured flesh semblance swims in.

Although it is not my intent to discuss this character at length, I would like to linger awhile in the dark with the figure in Elias Merhige's film, *Shadow of the Vampire* (2000), which brings to light Benjamin's theory of film and its mimetic qualities. A fictional account of the making of F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), *Shadow of the Vampire*, it could be said, is the text of Murnau's film that was never written. On the surface a movie about the production of *Nosferatu*, *Shadow of the Vampire*, I would argue, can be read as a musing on the ontological nature of film. *Shadow of the Vampire* is a film about film, about surface, appearance, and semblance, for in its world, things are not always as they appear.

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[331] Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, 21.
[332] Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, 21.

Film, as well as capturing the similarity of an object, has the ability to excavate the strange beauty that object holds within itself and also offer a 'true' image of the subject for study. The ability to demonstrate the interpenetration of art and science—to (re)present the world as marvelous, as well as fix an 'accurate' image of reality for close scrutiny—is one of the "revolutionary functions of film" for Benjamin.[333] Film, as a faithful and meticulous recording device, readily permits, even invites, an analysis of the physiognomy of the object before the lens. Comparable to a patient under the surgeon's knife, film can isolate and arrest, "like a flexed muscle in a body" Benjamin tells us.[334] If we recall that Benjamin thinks of film as a site of exposure, a training ground for the senses, we might better appreciate his metaphor of the film as a "flexed muscle."[335] Film flays the image, (re)presenting to us the tissue of our lives in ways we do not usually have contact with. Exposed and twitching, film's images contain a power, a taught beauty and a taut energy, in an explosive potential that operates as both artistic and scientific attraction.[336] Film teaches us to perceive differently, it gives us an "unprecedented perceptual acuity," which Benjamin sees as promoting a more critical form of mimesis, one which can be used to come to terms with the rapid changes in a modern world.[337]

Benjamin locates the keenness of perception fostered by film in the body as well as the mind. In naming the body as a site of reception for film's 'shocking' delivery, Benjamin emphasizes film's sensory impact. He compares the cameraman to a surgeon who penetrates the body and manipulates the organs, as distinguished from the painter whom he equates with a magician or one who merely lays hands upon the surface of the body.[338] Film, for Benjamin, though an artistic medium, has none of the contrived artifice of traditional artistic forms. Its incisive registration of the image is mirrored in the way it so inconspicuously presses upon and alters the viewer's body.

When we view cinema, the body becomes a site of corporeal response. A film can, we sometimes say, hit us hard; it can knock the breath out of us. Writing on the importance of an embodied experience, and on its lack of recognition in much film theory, Vivian Sobchack discusses the body as a site of reception. Arguing that movies touch us in ways that are more than metaphorical, Sobchack proposes an understanding of the movie

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[333] Benjamin, WOA3, *SW*, vol. 4, 265.
[334] Benjamin, WOA3, 265.
[335] See Benjamin, WOA3, 269, for Benjamin's discussion of film as a training ground.
[336] Benjamin, WOA3, 265.
[337] Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 267.
[338] Benjamin, WOA3, 263.

viewer as a *"cinesthetic subject."* In a positioning that draws upon immediate, sensual experience, "the cinesthetic subject both touches and is touched by the screen—able to communicate seeing to touching and back again *without a thought* and, through sensual and cross-modal activity, able to experience the movie as both here and there rather than clearly locating the site of cinematic experience as onscreen or offscreen."[339] Sobchack develops a Benjaminian appreciation for the film experience, one in which we are corporeally engaged as "matter that means,"as well as cognisant of the "meaning that matters."[340] Taussig similarly describes Benjamin's thinking of film as something that involves "the unstoppable merging of the object of perception with the body of the perceiver and not just with the mind's eye."[341] In effect, film (re)educates the mimetic faculty (an embodied and sentient way of knowing the world) through a physical and often kinetic impact, producing a contact that is otherwise lacking in modernity.[342] In so connecting, Benjamin writes in one of his most memorable (and hopeful) passages "people whom nothing *moves* or *touches* any longer are *taught* to cry again by films."[343]

In *Shadow of the Vampire*, filmmaker F. W. Murnau is portrayed as a proponent of the fusion of art and science in film. He delivers a monologue—stirring manifesto, really—on the subject, one worth quoting here in full:

> Our battle, our struggle, is to create art. Our weapon is the moving picture. Because we have the moving picture, our paintings will grow and recede, our poetry will be shadows that lengthen and conceal, our light will play across living faces that laugh and agonize, and our music will linger and finally overwhelm because it will have a context as certain as the grave. We are scientists engaged in the creation of memory. But our memory will neither blur, nor fade.

The correlation between permanent memory and eternal life is drawn out when Murnau admits that Max Shreck, the actor playing Count Orlok, the vampire, is not the method actor Murnau introduced him as. Shreck, it turns out, is actually a series of semblances. He is someone Murnau found and hired to play the part of an actor playing the part of a vampire. In return Murnau, god-like, has promised him eternal life in a film. The irony, of

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[339] Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 71. Empasis in original.

[340] Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 73.

[341] Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, 25.

[342] In a retort to a critical review of Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, Benjamin writes, regarding the cathartic properties of the violence of the images emphasized by montage: "Only if you touch it with kid gloves do you hear and move nothing." Benjamin, "Reply to Oscar A.G. Schmitz," *SW*, vol. 2, 19.

[343] Benjamin, "This Space For Rent," *One-Way Street*, 89, emphasis added. Also found in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 476.

course, is that the permanence which Murnau associates with film, as a medium that can capture the soul, analyze and preserve it, might carry more weight and offer more duration than a vampire's fabled endless life.

Ideas of memory, imitation, and permanence run through the film, often provoking further ironies. For example, when Shreck (whom we are led to believe may really be a vampire, not just an amateur actor pretending to be one) is asked how long he has been a vampire, he announces that he does not remember. In one reckoning we might suppose he has lived so long he is now unable to recall any earlier days—experience is lost to him; in which case the glory of eternal life turns into a curse. Shreck also tells us that he is too old to make vampires, and seems only vaguely to remember that he never really could. Shreck, it would seem, is sterile and, left to his own resources, would be unable to reproduce himself. What he does need is a film in which to duplicate, inside of which he can propagate himself, and so, in Murnau's reworking of an old convention, apprehend immortality in art. We might recall the words of Shakespeare, speaking of his own work: "so long lives this, and this gives life to thee."[344] Just as Leonard, the protagonist of *Memento*, needed photos, Shreck needs film to allow him to remember. For film, unlike Shreck's life that becomes ever fainter in its undying endlessness, produces memory as a hard copy, one that, at least in Murnau's reckoning, "will neither blur, nor fade."

Film, we might ruminate, preys on our memories, inasmuch as we sometimes relinquish our recollections to the (seeming) permanence of celluloid.[345] The parallel between film and vampirism is drawn out in a scene where Greta, playing the part of Hutter's wife, complains to Murnau that the camera, as opposed to a stage audience that feeds her, drains the life out of her. In his well-known "Work of Art" essay, Benjamin comments in remarkably similar words on how the actor in front of the camera differs from the actor before an audience. The film actor, Benjamin explains, is stripped of his or her aura before the camera.[346]

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[344] William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 18," *The Norton Anthology of English Literature. Major Authors Edition.* 3rd ed. Eds. M.H. Abrams et al..
[345] Siegfried Kracauer argues that film, while able to record and preserve, is also responsible in significant ways for the erosion of memory. Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography," *The Mass Ornament*, 50.
[346] Benjamin, WOA3, *SW*, vol. 4, 260.

Benjamin is somewhat vague about what that aura is, but his imprecision may stem from the difficulty in defining such a nebulous idea, rather than any desire to be evasive or obscure. Still, the aura, like many of the terms that are key for Benjamin, is one he returns to again and again. He turns it over and over, coming at it from different angles, translating in effect, in an attempt to extract the words to best define what it is he is trying to get at. At one point, Benjamin describes the aura as a "strange weave of space and time." The aura, he argues, is "the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be."[347] The aura of a stage actor is what, despite proximity to an audience, allows for the opening of a critical space. The aura, the uniqueness, the essence of the actor, creates the distanced vantage point necessary for viewers to take in the drama or, better still, to be taken in by it. In another attempt to understand the aura, to get at the aura of the aura, as it were, Benjamin makes a comparison between "trace" and "aura." He tells us that the "trace is appearance of a nearness, however far removed the thing that left it behind may be." The aura, however, depends on a sense of distance, regardless of the proximity of the object: "In the trace, we gain possession of the thing; in the aura, it takes possession of us."[348] The aura can be recognized in its effects, it seems. Protected from the familiarity of nearness ("familiarity breeds contempt" we tell ourselves), the aura would stir us to enchantment.

It seems to me that Benjamin's aura could in part be read as the result of those *fictions* attached to a person or object. By this I mean that the aura is what surrounds and gives shape to our reading. In a sense, in the aura—the constellation of an entity—we read what was never written about the person or object.[349] The aura, in its wedge of distance, makes things appear as if they come to us from far away or long ago, no matter how close or recent they in fact may be.

The aura that the stage actor uses to communicate with the audience is stripped away in film. Like the vampire who casts no reflection in the mirror, the film actor knows, or

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[347] Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," *SW*, vol. 2, 518.

[348] Benjamin, *Arcades*, [M16a, 4], 447.

[349] Kendall Walton says of "real" things, of material objects, that they "*prompt* imaginings, they are *objects* of imaginings, and they *generate fictional truths*." Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-believe*, 21. I believe that the aura, despite its lack of materiality, functions in much the same way Walton describes here, generating a narrative of the person (or object). Or, in other words, in the aura we can read what was never written.

should know, that for him or her on the screen there "is no facsimile of the aura."[350] By definition, the aura—that which is unique and authentic to an entity—is not reproducible. It can exist only in the stylized presence of an actual actor who bodily is enacting a role in front of an audience—the actual player there, and not there, at the same time. The aura, at least what Benjamin is calling the aura, does not translate to film, for it cannot be captured by the camera. Film can only screen the semblance of the person caught in the emulsion. Film and other reproduction technologies, in contributing to the reemergence of the mimetic faculty in modernity, result in "the destruction of the aura [which] is the signature of a perception whose *sense for the sameness of things* has grown to the point where even the singular, the unique, is divested of its uniqueness—by means of its *reproduction*."[351] The camera, in its voracious democracy, treats all subjects the same and makes them readily accessible. Before the equal eye of the camera, all become ghostly reproductions of themselves.

Contributing to a way of perceiving that would elide habit, the mimetic faculty in modernity responds to a sudden and powerful juxtaposition of the very old and the very new.[352] The 'temporal index' that results forces us to draw connections between the seemingly unrelated.[353] The tension between tradition and that which has recently come into being shows itself in a number of ways in *Shadow of the Vampire*. Modern modes of transportation—the steam engine and the automobile—are set against the older horse and cart. It is no coincidence that Murnau's monologue on film, a celebration of the fusion of art and science, is delivered over a shot of a steam train churning down the track.[354] This scene also evokes a parallel between the train on its track and the filmstrip on its—both technologies moving us rapidly and inexorably into a perceived future of progress.[355] There are further tensions between the old ways and beliefs of the villagers and the

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[350] Benjamin, WOA3, *SW*, vol. 4, 260.

[351] Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," *SW*, vol. 2, 519, emphasis added. See also Benjamin, WOA3, *SW*, vol. 4, 255.

[352] Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, 20.

[353] Miriam Hansen, "Benjamin and Cinema," in *Benjamin's Ghosts*, 61.

[354] This conjunction of film and train also echoes Benjamin's description of film's ability to allow us to perceive that mundane and ordinary locations, such as the "vicinity of a house, of a room, can include dozens of the most unexpected stations, and the most astonishing station names."[354] Benjamin, "Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz," *SW*, vol. 2, 17.

[355] Interestingly the first public screening of a film was the Lumière Brothers' *Train Pulling into a Station* (1895). Allegedly, the audience, startled by the train rushing towards them, leapt from their seats and ran screaming from the theatre. Tom Gunning, however, questions film history's readiness to believe that early cinema viewers were the naïve, unsophisticated spectators they have been made out to be. Rather, Gunning argues that early cinema goers would have been well acquainted with numerous modes of viewing learned from such sources as vaudeville, the music hall, theatre, panoramas, and magic lantern shows, positioning them more as sophisticated urban pleasure seekers. See Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator," in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, ed. Linda Williams, 114-133.

dismissal of these traditions by the cast and crew from the modern city. In one scene, Albin, the producer, explains to a concerned villager that they had to remove from the walls the crosses, so dear to the villagers, because "they overwhelm our composition." It would be hard to find a clearer instance of the old being disposed of by the new, or, for that matter, one value (religion) being supplanted by another (aesthetics).

This opposition of past and present is perhaps most poignantly played out in the scene in which Shreck encounters a film projector (see figures 20-22). Alone with this strange device, Shreck investigates it as a child might. Gingerly he turns the handle, and we see his astonishment and pleasure as images jolt to life. The apparatus holds a reel of footage that shows the sky, cast over Shreck, with the result that he seems to stand under a flickering sun. Mesmerized, as much by the technology as the presence of the sun, Shreck plays with the light, throwing shadows with his hands. As both vampire and film actor, Shreck can only exist in shadow, we appreciate, can only be a shadow; as vampire he must live in darkness, as film actor his reproduced self can live only as ghostly projection. Speaking of the experience of the film actor before the camera Luigi Pirandello says, in words that uncannily mirror the scene between vampire and projector, the "little apparatus will play with his shadow before the audience, and he himself must be content to play before the apparatus."[356] That situation gains special focus when Shreck turns to face the projector. Stealers of souls, they look into each other, he and the camera gaze through each other, pitted in an eternal confrontation. In the end, it is the new mimetic technology of film that gives Shreck his place in the sun.

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[356] Benjamin quoting Italian playwright and novelist Luigi Pirandello, in WOA3, *SW*, vol. 4, 260.
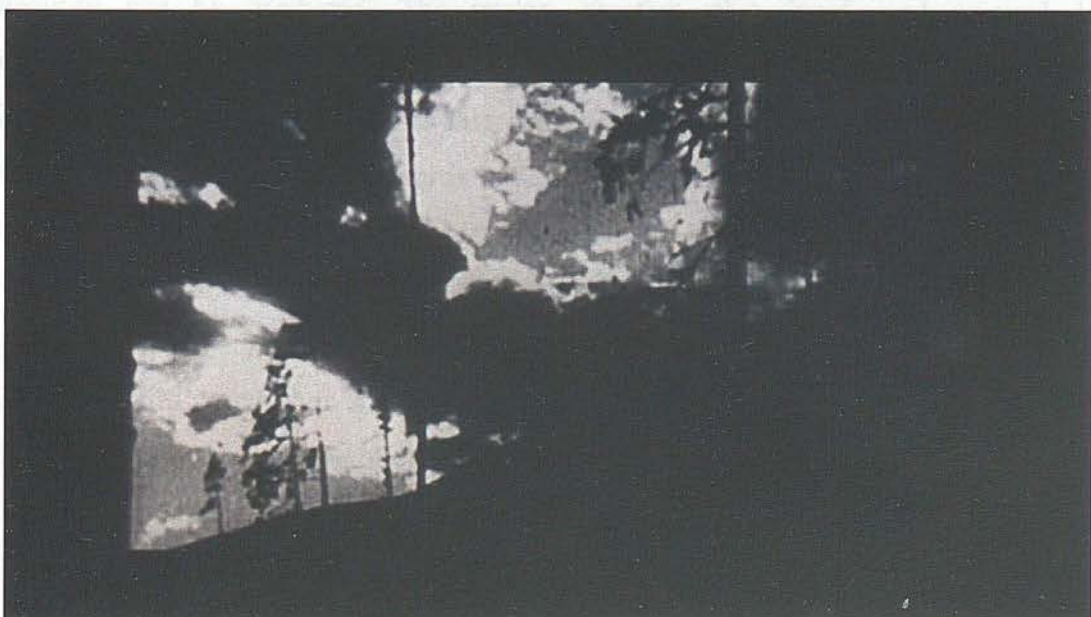
Figures 20, 21, 22. Stills from *Shadow of the Vampire*.

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The vampire is at once both full and void of life; he will live forever but he is relegated to the shadows. The photograph, too, partakes in this play of presence and absence—everything there in the frame, so convincing in its similitude, and yet a strange and pervading emptiness. Bereft of any obvious instruction for deciphering the ghosts of objects fixed before us, we find that the photograph impinges upon us to take up, to be taken up into, a new register. With the photograph, "For the first time, captions become obligatory."[357]

The importance of such instructions, Benjamin tells us, becomes even more pronounced in film. The reading of film, he explains, is still more complex because "the way each single image is understood appears prescribed by the sequence of all the preceding images."[358] It is now images that shape and sustain each other. In the temporal reversal of *Memento*, we are made especially aware of our dependence upon the unraveling sequence of images. Culprit and clue, the images must give themselves up to us, surrender their meaning, when they come to be read as the culmination of preceding images and foreshadowings of those that are yet to come. In film, sequential images and sound take over the task of printed words. The moving image, able to elide the mediation of the word, must now convey the information that a caption would have provided.

Although verbal and written communication depends on the specific order of words for its meaning—different arrangements result in different messages—its mediatedness means that there are a relatively small number of combinations through which intelligible meaning can be produced. The image, on the other hand, and particularly the photographic image, is much more immediate. The word 'cat' we know to represent a four-legged furry creature. But is this cat black? ginger? old? too fat to get up? Verbal language needs to insert more words to narrow the notion of 'cat'; it needs to supplement itself. A photograph of a cat, however, makes these attributes immediately apparent. We have only to look and we 'know' that this is a black, well-fed cat, the same one that wakes us up every morning. And unlike verbal language, images, because of the directness with which they speak to us, can be grouped and infinitely rearranged and still make meaning. Because the photographic image is a moment in time, selected and stilled, removed from context, the meaning of any single image can veer off in infinite directions. So, although the order of words is key to defining meaning, in film, sequence takes on an

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[357] Benjamin, WAO3, *SW*, vol. 4, 257-258.
[358] Benjamin, WAO3, 257-258.

added importance. Like verbal language, the sequenced image attempts to stave a nexus of possible meanings through supplementing itself. Each new image, a qualifier, a descriptor, is an effort to focus meaning, reel it in, fix it in a stable frame of reference. Disparate segments of signification tenuously hinged—are not the sequenced images of film a "strange weave of space and time"?[359]

The aura, a peculiar spatial and temporal pleating, is determined by where and when we come into contact with it. Film, as a reproductive technology, strips away the aura, the authenticity of the object it captures as it brings it into a much wider circulation as copy. However, it seems to me, that while what is before the camera may well be divested of its aura in its reproduction, the aura does not just simply wither and die. Rather, I would posit that the aura appears again, reconfigured. It could even be argued that there is in fact a reinvention, a reproduction, of the aura that occurs *within* the cinematic apparatus.[360] The narratives generated through the process of montage—sequentially ordering images (and sounds) of disparate times and places—is one of the most powerful effects of film. Through a combination of discrete images and sounds tied together through time, film constructs a new language, one that requires an analogical or mimetic reading in order to elicit meaning. Film destroys the aura of its subject *matter*, certainly; materiality is traded for multiplicity. But through a reconfiguration of time and space, film subsequently creates a new aura within itself, by itself, for itself. This new filmic aura, however, proves to be as elusive as the one it did away with. I would like to propose three possible readings of this reconfigured filmic aura.

On the one hand, as Benjamin points out, with modernity and its incumbent mimetic technologies, comes the desire to get hold of things, to bring the unique closer in the form of a copy.[361] It would seem possible to argue then that film's aura is tied to the semblance, the reproduction. However, it is not so much that the copy has an aura, as that the copy *is* the aura. The imitation, so convincing in its mimicry, absorbs and obliterates the original: it no longer needs authenticity.[362] Paradoxically, the reproduction itself

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[359] Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," *SW*, vol. 2, 518.

[360] This, of course, is a different aura than the 'artificial' one which develops the cult of the movie star, promoting the aura of "personality," which Benjamin describes in WOA3, *SW*, vol. 4, 261.

[361] Benjamin, WOA3, *SW*, vol. 4, 255.

[362] Benjamin stresses that, in film, what is unique is the mimetic reproductive technology itself and its penetrative capabilities, rather than a question of new content or forms. Benjamin, "Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz," *SW*, vol. 2, 17.

becomes unique.[363] The copy makes the unique accessible, it satiates the growing desire Benjamin identifies in people "to get hold of an object at close range in an image [*Bild*], or, better, in a facsimile [*Abbild*], a reproduction."[364] The reproduction, Benjamin seems to suggest, takes on agency; this is "where nearness looks with its own eyes."[365] As the copy paradoxically takes on an aura, it exudes a certain power over the viewer. Jean Baudrillard has argued that we live in a hyperreal world where the copy has usurped reality and presents itself as more real than the original. In his apocalyptic words, Baudrillard echoes Benjamin's concerns that experience has been lost to us.[366] However, for Benjamin, it is the very capacity to copy which positions film as a revolutionary technology; film is a skilled surgeon which will cut out our cataracts. For Baudrillard, this same reproductive ability has turned monstrous, overrunning the world, obliterating all reality and along with it even our ability to perceive the absence of a world beneath surface and simulacra. The fact that the copy has the ability to powerfully sway us, as Baudrillard so passionately argues, might point to it being the (reproduced) reincarnation of the aura. The copy, in Benjamin's definition, is a trace—something that we have power over.[367] However, it would seem that the copy also exerts an influence over us, an enchantment which Benjamin ascribes to the aura.

On the other hand, the new aura created by film could also be understood as existing in the interaction between screen and viewer, in the "strange weave of space and time" that takes place in viewing a film. In reproducing the object, film brings it closer, to the point where the apprehension of it can become a bodily sensation. Sobchack describes the interplay of screen and body as a 'rebounding' that is "reflexively doubled," in which the viewer is not only touched but touches.[368] Sobchack explains that although this visceral viewing can only ever be partial, as any sense of fulfillment in screen or body is constantly interrupted and deferred by the other, it is this very postponement of satiety,

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[363] Ironically the aura, the uniqueness of a subject, is something photographers have wanted to expose from the early days of photography. Benjamin tells us that "improvements" in photographic technology were responsible for the erasure of the aura that had still been present in early photographs. "After 1880" says Benjamin, "photographers made it their business to simulate the aura which had been banished from the picture with the suppression of darkness through faster lenses." He continues: "They saw it as their task to simulate this aura using all the arts of retouching, and specially the so-called gum print." (Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," *SW*, vol. 2, 517). However, the way I am thinking of the aura does not involve an intervention after the fact on the part of the photographer. Rather, this aura *originates* within the camera and because of the camera.

[364] Benjamin, WOA2, *SW*, vol. 3, 105.

[365] Benjamin, "Surrealism," *SW*, vol. 2, 217.

[366] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*.

[367] Benjamin, *Arcades*, [M16a, 4], 447.

[368] Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 77.

this thwarted desire, that intensifies the embodied experience of viewing film.[369] I would argue that in this process of give and take between screen and body a new aura is created, one that feeds on the palpable transfer between the metaphorical and the literal. In the sensual darkness of the theatre, body and image meet through technology in a process Benjamin terms "innervation," a concept that I will look at more closely in chapter five. The reconfigured aura in this figuring, is the in between, a membrane where embodied experience and screened image briefly, almost imperceptibly touch.

But Benjamin also says of the aura that it takes possession of us. If, as I'm arguing here, there is actually a reconfigured filmic aura, then it seems possible to argue that in viewing film, to some degree, we become 'possessed.' What is so powerfully both there and not there on the screen—a (re)presentation so beguiling in its resemblance to the 'real'— assumes an uncanny presence. Take, for example, home movies, particularly ones that are records of people now dead, and how moving these images can be. Often, in the informality of amateur recordings, the reproduced characters will directly address us through the camera lens; they are talking to us, with us, communicating something from 'the other side.' Disturbingly, film can briefly bring these characters back to life—there they are before us, moving, talking, laughing, just they way they used to do: it is them there, we think, if only for an instant, and the power of that brief opportunity to contact these departed spirits can be overwhelming and unsettling.

Or think, too, of the always somewhat strange sensation of seeing ourselves onscreen. It is me there, yes, but how can it be when I am sitting here watching me looking out at me? I always wished my family had a movie camera and have always been envious of those who had shoeboxes stuffed with film reels of family events. The chance to see people as I could not or would not at an earlier time, to see the self I've forgotten I was, has always intrigued me. It may be that the lack of my own family's home movies has, in part, shaped my fascination with the anonymous footage I have used in my 'digital objects.' Although the found materials of *Picture House* and *Hansel & Gretel* are not my own family's memories, in a sense it does not matter. They become mine because they have taken possession of me. Something of them, something in them, haunts me and touches me in a way that I cannot ignore. There is an elusive quality in these images and sounds that catches me in what is at times a physical response. Connecting with these fragments something snags and tightens in my throat—a sadness, a longing, a hunger almost. For

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[369] Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 77-78.

what, I'm not quite sure—something intangible, but at the same time palpable in its effects. It is, perhaps, the aura of these aged images and sounds that has entangled me in its mysterious and enchanting pleating of past and presence (see figures 23-25).
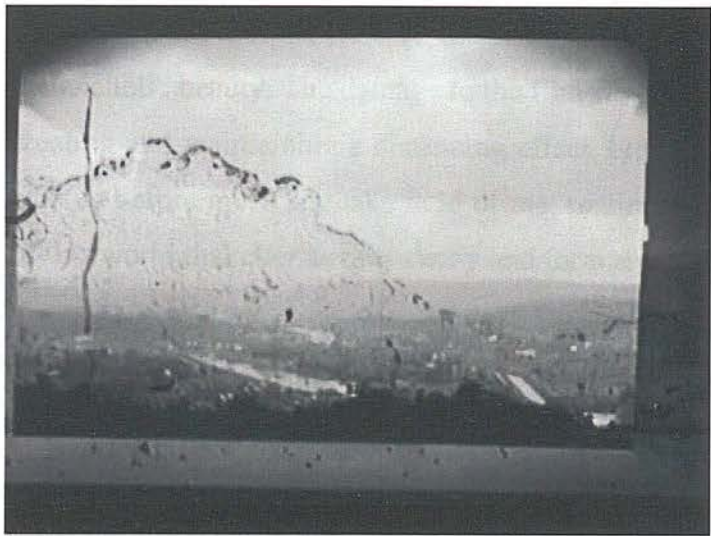
Figures 23, 24, 25. Stills from *Hansel & Gretel*.

The spaces and figures in the recycled material I have collected, distanced through time, along with the 'primitive' manner in which these worlds have been recorded, exert a fascination over me. The subsequent traces of age and wear with which these records of the past have been marked further adds to their beguiling quality. Scratches, lurches, pops and hisses: the obviousness of the recording media, is, for me, a marker of a sort of melancholic beauty. The damage to the film frames and audio tape not only contributes to creating and maintaining a distancing effect, but it also reminds me of the materiality of what is before me. They take hold of me, remind me that they are there, ghostly doubles of this world that alter as they decay and form a patina of wonder.

So, the reconfigured aura could be the copy, the reproduction itself. Alternatively, it could be the transaction of give and take, of sensual embodied contact that occurs between film and perceiver. But the aura also can be identified as that which is irreducible, a certain palpable presence in film that possesses us. And, in a sense, why could not this filmic aura be all three incarnations, or, more accurately, why should there not be more than one aura produced by a technology of reproduction?

Film is a *medium*, a conduit between the ghosts on-screen and us in the audience. It reaches out to touch us as we pour our desires and fears into it: back and forth, the (reconfigured) aura pulses in a palpable way, producing an energy and intoxication in the give and take. In the darkened space between viewer and screen, a translation takes place. The translation, Benjamin tells us, is an "afterlife" of the original.[370] In a very real sense, in viewing film, the spectator engages with this afterlife. Film, the ghostly record of what has been, allows the original it has captured to live on through a convincing double. The filmic representation, almost tangible in its mimetic animation, makes present what is not there. This powerful duplicitous reincarnation is an act of translation, a process Benjamin identifies as inevitably involving something uncommunicable, something of the essence of the original that cannot be translated.[371] In translation something is remaindered. The aura, it would seem, though initially stripped away in reproduction, finally cannot be destroyed: it lives on as remainder. Keeping in mind the importance Benjamin ascribes to the outmoded as fruitful sources for alternate histories, the original aura, castoff in reproduction, becomes reinvested with new force in its reconfigured guise. I would claim that this is certainly the case with *Picture House* and *Hansel & Gretel*. The found material

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[370] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," *SW*, vol. 1, 254.
[371] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 253, 261.

I have used in these works largely occupies the terrain of the forgotten and discarded. However, in reanimating these fragments of the past, their aura, the 'fictions' that make them unique, are given voice once more, albeit in an altered way.

conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to draw out the ways in which mimesis informs Benjamin's theory of film as a visceral and kinetic experience which reconfigures the idea of reception from one-way transmission, to one of *inter*penetration. Film conveys with convincing force the reality of what it 'sees,' and it acts upon us with compelling force as we respond to its appeal.

As I discussed in chapter two, the idea of communication as transmission names the provision of information as the primary purpose for communication, whereas a ritual model of communication emphasizes the importance of the act of communication itself—the gestures, the glances, the inflections, and textures that in human contact come together in a "strange weave of space and time" to create meaning. Ritual communication involves a visceral as well as a cognitive apprehension. This embodied experience is what Benjamin names "innervation," a term by which I believe he is referring to ritual communication. Also, as I have argued, Benjamin's notion of innervation could provide the site for a mechanically reproduced aura. If innervation involves both ritual communication and aura, it seems possible to argue that the reconfigured filmic aura I have proposed gives rise, through correspondence, to ritual communication.

In film, the 'original' aura is stripped from the subject, only to be reproduced within film. The new aura (or at least one version of it) comes into being in the visceral viewing experience which, as a public and collective activity, reproduces a semblance of an oral society, one which is reliant on memory and embodied communication. Film, along with other reproductive technologies, including digital imaging and e-mail, has fostered what Barbara Maria Stafford terms a return to an "oral-visual" culture.[372] She astutely argues that these new technologies recreate an environment that moves away from a textual

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[372] Stafford, *Artful Science: Enlightenment Entertainment and the Eclipse of Visual Education*, xxv.

hegemony which privileges literate understanding over oral, visual, or tactile knowledge, and in doing so, open up other more sensual, and hybrid ways of knowing.

Such interlinear and embodied provocation is for Benjamin what film does best: it wakens us to new ways of reading similarities in the world around us. In their interlinear constructions, I would hope that both *Picture House* and *Hansel & Gretel* provoke this mimetic reading, and in doing so, move the viewer towards a questioning of the transparent and habitual. Although the potent change Benjamin feels film can usher in may not have yet appeared, he was convinced of film's revolutionary potential and believed that although these subversive tendencies may not be readily apparent, they lie there buried, as a forgotten future of cinema.

Chapter Five

forgotten futures

[T]he most precise technology can give its products a magical value, such as a painted picture can never again have for us. No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spots where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it. For it is another nature which speaks to the camera rather than to the eye: "other" above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious.

—Walter Benjamin[373]

In this chapter I look at the forgotten potential that Benjamin saw in film. The power to engage the viewer in ways that were more than metaphorical, the ability to viscerally elicit a response, I argue, was evident in early film. Much early cinema exploited the medium to create spectacles that astonished and engaged their audiences. These tactics of spectator involvement can be traced to a baroque heritage. The baroque, as I will discuss in more detail further on, is defined by its labyrinthine nature. It offers an approach to representation that eschews the rational and embraces the carnal. In its wayward exuberance, the baroque flaunts its architecture of artifice. As contemporary examples of film's neglected possibilities I look at the films of Guy Maddin, focusing in particular on *Archangel* (1990), as well as my own practice which employs a baroque or database approach. Further, in order to appreciate the importance Benjamin ascribes to film, I examine the way in which his theories on the Trauerspiel, a baroque dramatic form, intersect with questions of allegory, haunting, and mourning.

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[373] Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," *SW*, vol. 2, 510. See also Benjamin's "Berlin Childhood around 1900," *SW*, vol. 3, 344-413, particularly the sections "The Otter," 365, "News of a Death," 389-390, "The Reading Box," 395-396; and "A Berlin Chronicle," *SW*, vol. 2, 634-635, for examples of passages where Benjamin refers to a future that has been passed over and with it, alternate outcomes swept aside.

I have argued that Benjamin is concerned with the paradox of reading what "was never written," which we might think of as the ghostly interlinear narrative of all texts.[374] The future, itself a narrative, is not yet written; it is a time and place still open to possibilities. As an excavator of the past, Benjamin attempts to read that future through remnants of what has been. But this clairvoyance, much like that of Leonard, the main character in Christopher Nolan's *Memento*, is in every sense a 'second sight,' and always partial and provisional; always in supposition. Benjamin as fortune-teller cannot predict the future, nor does he want to, for, as he argues, the notion of a Future based inexorably on a continuum of progress, or even as simple projection of the present, is narrow and untenable, and uninviting. He picks through the litter of tealeaves in the bottom of the cup, and points there to the catalogue of catastrophes that the storm of History has piled up at the feet of the Angelus Novus.[375] There can be no certain predicting of the future for Benjamin, then. He wishes rather to be the medium, the figure that will channel the dead and past, give voice to potential futures that he says have been forgotten—the futures that might have been, or that yet might be.

Made mute by official versions of events, and by an inability to see beyond and listen beneath, these neglected possibilities haunt the present. Spirits from 'the other side' linger in the present as disregarded prospects, even as they may not be directly apprehensible. In the same way that the photograph arrests death, suspending subjects and preserving them in the present, these frustrated outcomes announce themselves as strangely familiar and virtually forgotten, but not quite gone. Garrett Stewart has wryly observed that though death may still mean the end of biological life, with the invention of the camera, it is never any longer quite over.[376]

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[374] Nicholas Royle examines the way in which the literary is tied to the uncanny. Literature, he argues, provides a possible access to the uncanny and a means by which we might understand it. But he also stresses the idea that literature itself is uncanny in its ability to blur the boundaries between reality and imagination. Royle further emphasizes that the experience of writing and reading, always accompanied by ghosts of former texts, is an inherently uncanny undertaking. Royle, *The Uncanny*, 16.

[375] Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," IX, *SW*, vol. 4, 392. Benjamin uses a Klee painting of an angel as a point of departure to give voice to his concerns that the practice of History is flawed and lacking in its (often deliberate and necessary) omission of alternate versions of events. On to Klee's fragile angel Benjamin superimposes a narrative of loss, destruction, and ruin that this angel helplessly witnesses. Trapped by the gale of destruction, the angel cannot close its wings to fly back to paradise. Pinned by a force greater than it, the angel itself seems to become one more scrap on the heap of rubbish—an adornment for the ruins.

[376] Garrett Stewart, *Between Film and Screen: Modernism's Photo Synthesis*, x.

The photograph, a mesh between past (event) and present (record) is a strangely beguiling object. Able to oscillate between presence and absence, the photograph in its ambiguity preys upon memory even as it plays with memory. It fosters both a preservation and a renovation of remembrance. It keeps things and it alters things—their coinage staining with the banking and the handling. Film as 'medium' 'brings to life' dead, static images; it amplifies the disquieting nature of the photograph as it animates it. Marvelously, in its ability to record events in slow motion or close up, for example, film presents us with a view into a secret world whose latency it sets free. I believe the capacity to (re)activate our mimetic faculties—enabling us to make marvelous connections—is what Benjamin considers to be film's revolutionary potential. Rather than reading Benjamin's championing of film as a naive utopian endeavour, however, it is more productive to understand his position in the light of what he provocatively calls a forgotten future.

During the early twentieth century about which Benjamin is writing, a system of commercialized film production was already well under way. Early film, both in the realist 'actualities' of the Lumière brothers (and how wondrous are they in their very name—brothers of light, makers of light, players with light), and the more fantastical films of Méliès, had demonstrated a fascination with the medium itself and the possibilities it offered. This nascent cinema, what Tom Gunning terms a "cinema of attractions," was rapidly replaced by narrative-driven movies and their usage of established storylines, plots, and structures.[377] Addressing the commercialization of film, Benjamin surmises that as long as cinema is determined by its attendance figures and its profit margins, its "revolutionary merit" will reside only in its ability to call into question traditional concepts of art.[378] As I earlier noted, Benjamin laments the fact that film was not being used in ways that took advantage of its new revolutionary *Technik*. Rather, film's radical ability to explode the ordinary was being hampered by the use of plots and forms recycled from established (and therefore non-threatening) mediums such as the theatre and the novel. In his passionate investment in film's revolutionary potential, Benjamin is not naively clinging to a notion of the technology's capacity that has already disappeared. Rather, he asks us to see in film what he sees: buried within the medium of film are many unrealized outcomes. Benjamin wants to excavate these forces, with all

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[377] Tom Gunning "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser, 56-62. Although Benjamin is critical of the commercialization of cinema, he and many of his contemporaries, such as Adorno and Kracauer, also saw within mainstream cinema something hopeful. As I mentioned in chapter one, for instance, for them, Chaplin (a commercially successful figure), embodies and performs the plight of the masses who are pressed into service by capitalism.
[378] Benjamin, WOA3, *SW*, vol. 4, 261.

their unnoted or overlooked promises, held in abeyance by indifference. He wants to unleash the power inherent in them. For Benjamin, I argue that this means above all a recovery and revaluing of the sensual experience of film. And so he sets out on a rescue mission that he believes will reactivate our deadened senses and resuscitate our soporific lives.

baroque allegorical fragments

> Allegory [. . .] is not a playful illustrative technique, but a form of expression, just as speech is expression, and, indeed, just as writing is.
> —Walter Benjamin[379]

In her book *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment*, Angela Ndalianis outlines the parallels between the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century baroque and twentieth- and twenty first-century neobaroque, showing how both periods experienced crises of faith due to radical social and economic restructuring.[380] As Benjamin would say, both periods found themselves in a "state of emergency"—in crisis to be sure, but also in the process of emerging.[381] Benjamin writes cogently of the drastic and fundamental way that the First World War had changed the world: "A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body."[382] A world already drastically rearranged due to the Industrial Revolution now lay in unrecognizable ruins. The fragments of this exploded world, for Benjamin, become a defining aesthetic of modernity. They are for him allegorical runes. The human body, blown up by technology, is now small and insignificant. It is trapped in a space defined by a violent modern physics—"a field of force"—which seems itself possessed of an extraordinary power to smash and wrench these small bodies from the lives they have known and not known. For the modern person, bereft of certainty about self and world, these allegories must be understood as secular divination, a profane illumination. Immersed in them, Benjamin-the-bereaved is engaged in mourning work. He grieves the

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[379] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 162.
[380] Angela Ndalianis, *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment*.
[381] Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," VIII, *SW*, vol. 4, 392. See also "Theses on the Philosophy of History," VIII, *Illuminations*, 257, and *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 74.
[382] Benjamin, "The Storyteller," I, *SW*, vol. 3, 144.

forgotten futures, the possibilities of what might have been. Scavenging the ruins of neobaroque modernity for evidence of abandoned or unexplored routes, Benjamin is actively engaged in getting lost. That straying, he hopes, will lift the blinders from our eyes and allow us to unearth an escape tunnel, a way out of the tyrannical 'progress,' the one-way, dead-end street of capitalism.

The fact that Western rational thought had culminated in the catastrophe of World War I was for Benjamin, and his contemporaries Theodor Adorno and Siegfried Kracauer, amongst others, proof that the calculated 'reason' of the Enlightenment had colossally failed. Adorno, and later critics such as Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard, argue that in the aftermath of that collapse, capitalism has spawned a "culture industry," a "society of the spectacle," which through its dazzling commodities seduces the spectator into a world of surface and simulacra.[383] The commodity, divorced from the human labour which produced it, and made into coveted objects by linking it to manufactured desire, is essentially empty of meaning. The value ascribed to the commodity is that which we attach to it, and, often, as in the culture of entertainment, is insubstantial and / or misleading.

However, as Michael Taussig astutely points out, it is precisely this fetish commodity that Benjamin identifies as containing the potential for its own undoing.[384] For Benjamin, the commodity, an arbitrary sign, a phantasmagorical apparition in a "primordial landscape of consumption," takes on an allegorical significance that is subject to unsettling interpretation.[385] It is the unnerving nature of the commodity (a reproduction that is at once both original in its novelty and yet is a facsimile) that Benjamin believes will wake people from their capitalist reverie. The commodity, itself estranged from the human labour which has gone into it, embodies this shadow of human contact, that nearly eradicated strangeness: the commodity makes strange. And, as I have pointed out, it is this uncanny distancing which Benjamin, along with Victor Shklovsky and the Russian Formalists, identifies in the technique of estrangement, as a way to shake loose the habitual and see through the veil of capitalism.[386] To make strange, to emphasize the unusual in the everyday, to lift the veil of familiarity from the world, to wash off the dirt

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[383] See Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, particularly the chapter "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception;" Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*; and Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*.

[384] Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, 29.

[385] Benjamin, *Arcades*, <A°,5>, 827.

[386] See Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique" (1917). In *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, Second Edition. Eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan.

and grime that obscure the world's shining—this is what might reconnect us with our neglected lives. In advocating such action, Benjamin desires that the shock of experience would profoundly touch us to emotion and move us to knowing. Allegory, for Benjamin, is crucial because it gives us a way of reading the world that has its roots in what Bryan S. Turner identifies as "the forgotten and obscured past of modernity—the baroque."[387] Significantly, it provides an opening for something 'other.'

What Benjamin emphasizes time and time again in his unfinished *The Arcades Project* is the strange aura taken on by the old when it is juxtaposed against the new. Observing the incongruity of objects on display in the arcades of nineteenth-century Paris, he comments, not without pleasure at the presentation of condensed time and space, that this is "A world of secret affinities: palm tree and feather duster, hair dryer and Venus de Milo, prosthesis and letter-writing manual come together here as after a long separation. The odalisque lies in wait next to the inkwell, priestesses raise aloft ashtrays like patens."[388] Where others may have seen bad taste, or contamination of illustrious, even sacred models (Venus, the odalisque, the priestess), thrown among the ephemeral and tawdry products of the new age, Benjamin puts his eye to what he sees as a magical constellation, a telescope which brings into focus the far and discarded stories of obsolete items; faint pulses of light that travel and twinkle from a not-so-distant past. The picture is a strange one: the new, the only recently known, cocooned in its technological advances, effectively transforms the old and the familiar into the unrecognizable and the amazing with startling rapidity. Benjamin desires to disclose what is concealed within this obscure merging of past and present, and to reassign an importance to what is now neglected, eclipsed by the modish and newfangled.

Sharing Benjamin's concern at our readiness to ignore or even to deny the predecessors of new technologies, theorists such as Tom Gunning, Erkki Huhtamo, and Barbara Maria Stafford argue that we need to look to the past if we are going to understand the ways in which we currently think about (visual) culture. This archaeological approach aims to reconnect recent developments in media to their historical and cultural contexts. Huhtamo and Stafford, for example, see earlier epistemological devices as anticipating much of today's (digital) media. After all, as Benjamin tells us, the creations of one period open up

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[387] Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Baroque Reason: The Aesthetics of Modernity*, 7. The quotation is taken from Bryan S. Turner's introduction to Buci-Glucksmann's book.
[388] Benjamin, *Arcades*, <a°, 3>, 874. See also *Arcades*, <R2, 3>, 540-541 and *Arcades*, < A°, 5>, 827.

desires that can be addressed only by the technology of later periods.[389] In like spirit Stafford draws our attention to the philosophical toys, so popular in the baroque periods of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which occupied a position somewhere between education and entertainment, and that hovered between art and science.[390] The *Wunderkammer*, for example—a marvelous collection of colonial plunderings—brought together disparate objects in curious ways for both scientific study and pleasure. These fantastical groupings appealed to the Enlightenment desire for a tidy taxonomy of the world but also, paradoxically, to a darker, more irrational side of things. The same objects occasioned both analysis and astonishment. As conglomerations of wonder they solicited audiences through a sense of the magical and the exotic, and as a result encouraged a subjective analogical reading of the relationships among items. Refusing any linear or 'correct' narrative, these disparate objects, like the odd collections Benjamin notices in the arcade windows, engage the viewer in marveling at the possible relationships between the seemingly unrelated, in drawing associations (and dissociations) that may not be immediately apparent.

Gunning, too, engages in this archeology, rummaging through early film and its precursors in order to piece together an alternate history of cinema.[391] Rejecting the idea that cinema has *progressed* from a primitive state to its 'natural' culmination in the dominant realist narrative mode of contemporary cinema, Gunning cites precinematic devices, such as the popular magic lantern shows and the zoetrope, as setting the stage for a mode of cinema that has since largely been eradicated.[392] The music hall, vaudeville, magic shows—all of them coexisted with and therefore, to some degree, shaped early cinema. In fact, for a time, cinema screenings actually appeared, modestly, on playbills as only one act out of many features.[393] Surrounded by a variety of competing entertainments and distractions in venues like the musical hall, cinema became what Gunning, after Sergei Eisenstein, names a "cinema of attractions."[394]

While both *Picture House* and *Hansel & Gretel* are informed by this archaeological approach, it is most obviously *Picture House* which employs the tactics of a cinema of

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[389] Benjamin, WOA3, *SW*, vol. 4, 266.

[390] Stafford, *Artful Science*.

[391] Benjamin himself traces the precursors of cinema, citing flip books, "coin-operated peepboxes [...] with image sequences kept in motion by the turning of a handle," stereoscopes, and panoramas as devices that all influenced the movies. Benjamin, WOA2, *SW*, vol. 3, footnote #31, 131.

[392] Tom Gunning, "Non-Continuity, Continuity, Discontinuity: A Theory of Genres in Early Films," in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser, 97.

[393] Gunning, "An Aesthetics of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator," 127.

[394] Tom Gunning "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," 56-62.

attractions. The opening sequence, for example, flagrantly steals from the tradition of early play bills (see figure 26).[395] In keeping with the aesthetic of these entertainment advertisements, my use of fonts which foreground the graphicity of the words, as well as the hyperbolic nature of the scrolling text, celebrates language, inviting the spectator / reader to enter into the spirit of 'serious play.' Further, the viewer / player of *Picture House* is confronted with a dizzying array of sights and sounds (what to take in first?). Entering this quirky world is perhaps reminiscent of a fairground experience, which dazzles and astonishes, but can also take on a frightening air.
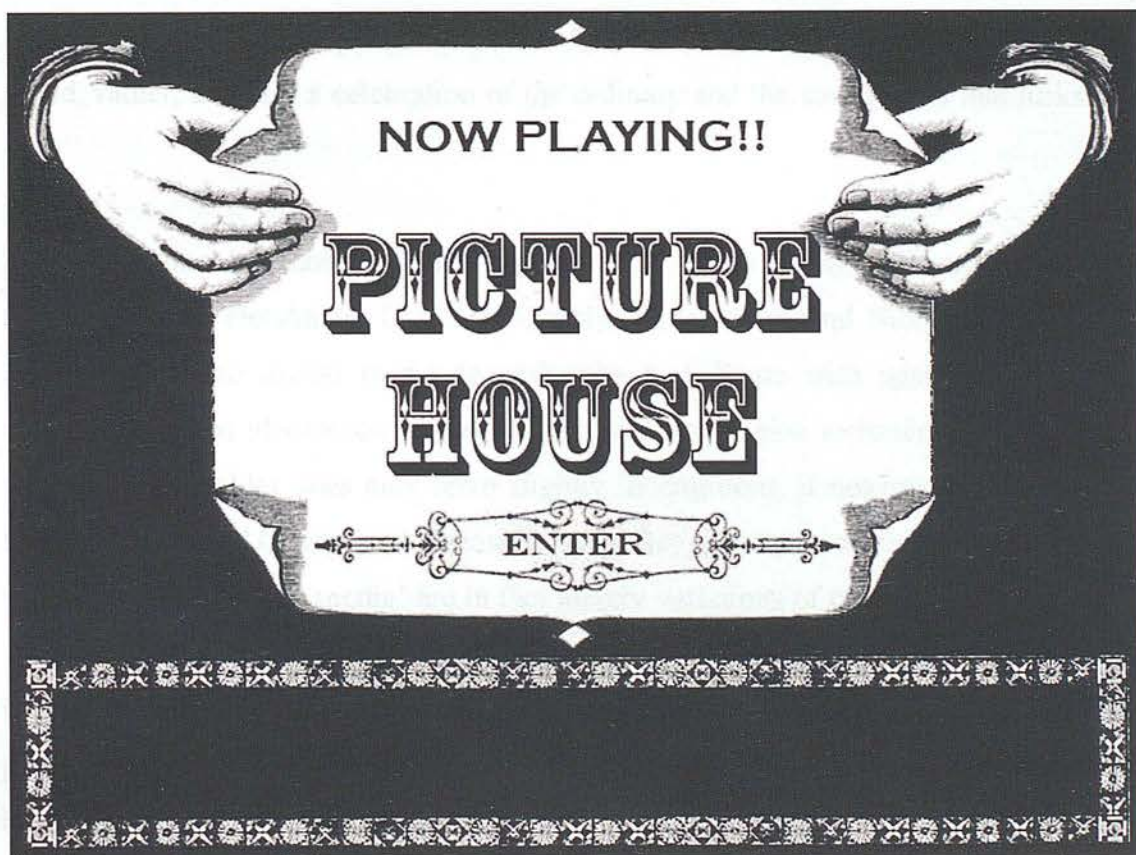
Figure 26. Still from *Picture House*.

Hansel & Gretel, too, in its disquieting repetitions, confronts the viewer in its refusal to divulge a singular or untroubled reading. Also, its small size and 'throw away' material mark *Hansel & Gretel* as 'unimportant.' Speaking of the nature of QuickTime movies,

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[395] The wording for the opening text of *Picture House* in fact is lifted directly from an early twentieth century poster designed by L. Johnson & Co., reproduced in Clarence P. Hornung, *Handbook of Early Advertising Art: Mainly from American Sources*, Third Edition, 134.

Vivian Sobchack has likened them to "memory boxes."[396] The reduced scale and way in which the technology foregrounds the 'materiality' of what is before us (playback is often jerky due to slow processors, images become degraded in an effort to keep file sizes manageable) can make these digital objects take on an outdated feel, especially when compared to commercial cinema with its 'flawless' production. Sobchack eloquently summarizes the enchanting effect these small moving worlds can exert: "Unlike big-screen, live-action movies, they draw us down and into their own discrete, enclosed and nested poetic worlds: worlds re-collected and re-membered; worlds more miniature, intensive, layered, and vertically deep than those constructed through the extensive, horizontal scope and horizontal vision of cinema."[397] *Hansel & Gretel*, and *Picture House*, too, which is comprised of discrete QuickTime movies, make no pretense at being grand; rather, they are a celebration of the ordinary and the strangeness that lurks within it.

Erkki Huhtamo has observed that many of the artists engaged in an archaeological approach (Lynn Hershman, Christine Tamblyn, Zoe Irvine, and Nicolas Clauss, to give examples), utilize digital media to undertake a dialogue with past technologies and engage in related ideological issues.[398] Although using new technologies to investigate the histories of older ones may seem slightly incongruous, if not impossible, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, as I discussed previously, have provocatively argued that what we so readily call 'new media' are in fact merely variations of older ones.[399] Undertaking an archaeological approach, I think it is possible to see in the digital what Benjamin saw in film: the computer interface becomes a 'play room' which opens up narrative possibilities that film's technology just does not permit or that commercial cinema, with its dependency on profit, is reluctant to experiment with.

Picture House, for example, takes advantage of the computer's ability to spatialize narrative. Falling somewhere between fairy tale book and hyperlinked interactive computer game, *Picture House* plays with possibilities, elicits associations. A combination of old (materials) and new (technologies), the work pulls past and present together to question such cultural constructs as gender roles and technologies, and the

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[396] Vivian Sobchack, "Nostalgia for a Digital Object: Regrets on the Quickening of QuickTime." *The Digital Cultures Project*. 25 Aug. 2003 <http://dc-mrg.english.ucsb.edu/conference/2000/PANELS/AFriedberg/nostalgia.html>.
[397] Vivian Sobchack, "Nostalgia for a Digital Object."
[398] Erkki Huhtamo, "Resurrecting the Technological Past: An Introduction to the Archeology of Media Art." 7 Dec. 2002 <http://www.ntticc.or.jp/pub/ic_mag/ic014/huhtamo/huhtamo_e.html>.
[399] Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media.*

ways in which these (re)shape our personal and collective memories. *Hansel & Gretel*, too, in its very title, shows concern with cultural narratives that we take as given or natural. Both works employ the principle of montage, stringing together the apparently disparate. In doing so, they put the viewer / reader in a position in which s/he must play an active role in weaving together a (somewhat) coherent narrative. Benjamin is troubled by the demystification of life that occurs with modernity; the factual has squeezed out any sense of magic and wonder. Similarly concerned with this state of affairs myself, in my practical work I hope to have permitted something of the strange and marvelous to flicker through these representations of the past. Perhaps this is partially a nostalgic bent on my behalf—a desire to recapture some sense of magic we experience as children. But, as Kimberly Smith has provocatively argued, nostalgia can also be understood as a criticism of the present, a position which, to me, seems productive in the possibilities it opens up.[400] Nostalgia, then, rather than being seen as an empty sentimental gesture, becomes a way to speak about what has been lost, left behind, discarded, effaced, or forgotten in the present due to 'maturation' or 'progress.'

I am interested in what we might think of as the aura of the found material I have collected for these two works. I am fascinated by the way in which the worn textures of image and sound, as well as the dated narratives they depict, become magnified when brought into the (digital) present. Through looping video and audio segments the strangeness of these representations is further drawn out. As one segment ends in *Picture House*, it falls out of synch with those that have a longer duration. The shorter segment begins again, and slowly, over repeated loopings, the narrative(s) are altered as the viewer / reader draws associations amongst the elements of the work. Also, due to the processor speed of the computer, certain sequences play differently at different times, resulting in a slightly different reading of the works being available at any given time.

Picture House and *Hansel & Gretel* make no pretense towards realism. In their jittery loopings and juxtaposition of the disturbing and delightful, they revel in a self-conscious construction, fusing current technologies with more 'primitive' or less 'sophisticated' early filmic approaches in an attempt to create magical, humourous, and troubling worlds which revel in heightened artifice. Such delight in illusion, in promoting an "aesthetic of astonishment,"[401] reveals the baroque qualities present from "the very beginning of the

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[400] Kimberly K. Smith, "Mere Nostalgia: Notes on a Progressive Paratheory." 7 Dec. 2002
<http://muse.jhu.edu/demo/rap/3.4smith.html>.
[401] Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator," 114-133.

cinema," which I will discuss further on.[402]

innervation

Benjamin lived through the First World War. He committed suicide trying to reach safety on the eve of the Second.[403] As a result, much of Benjamin's writing reflects his concern at what he saw as the misuse of technology for the purposes of destruction and killing. Part of his thinking about how we might understand technology and relate to it is expressed in his notion of "innervation." Although Benjamin is not altogether clear in his use of the term, he seems to be identifying the urgent need for humans to adapt to technology and to use it in responsible ways. As I understand it, he is arguing that technologies have always been with us and that there is no way of avoiding them—no moment that preceded a fall into technology. It is simply there, always, as part of human activity. However, I believe he is saying that premodern peoples had a more direct, holistic relationship with nature. The body, seemingly for Benjamin, *was* the technology that through ritual (dance, adornment, gesture), mimetically tapped into correspondences between the human and the natural. Speaking of the way modern technologies have estranged us from nature, Benjamin indicates that, rather than this being the result of an attempt to master nature, it has more to do with a lack of communication between humans and technology—a failure to act adequately on human desires and to activate those technologies in accordance with our finest aspirations.[404]

The trouble lies not with technology per se, but with the failure of humans to develop and make use of technologies that are needed and that help the needy. The "destruction caused by war furnishes proof that society was not mature enough to make technology its organ, that technology was not sufficiently developed to master the elemental forces of society."[405] The problem then is not a matter of technology by its very nature damaging the world, but a failure to conceive of how we might use technology in a fully humane way, one that would potentially make us more 'fully' human by closing the cleavage

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[402] Ndalianis, *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment*, 28-29.

[403] On September 26, 1940, unable to cross the Franco-Spanish border, Benjamin committed suicide. For one version of his attempt to escape the Nazis and emigrate to America see Hannah Arendt's introduction in *Illuminations*, 1-51. See also editors Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings' "Chronology, 1938-1940," *SW*, vol. 4, 427-447.

[404] Benjamin, WOA2, VI, *SW*, vol. 3, 107-108.

[405] Benjamin, WOA2, XIX, 121.

between sentient experience and the subsequent understanding and communication of that experience. What Benjamin is calling for in his talk of innervation is a more advanced mimesis, a conscious, manipulative play that involves a give and take between body and technology, for in the twentieth century humanity still "has its organs in the new technology."[406] The innervation that prompts us into such reciprocal action is based broadly on "a neurophysiological process that mediates between internal and external, psychic and motoric, human and mechanical registers."[407] Innervation—a tempering of and a tampering with body and technology—preserves and renovates human nature.[408]

The way in which modernity altered established patterns of behaviour for many people by fracturing and dislocating time and space, along with the alienating effects of modern technologies, and the catastrophic wars that they fed, leads Benjamin to stress the need for the coexistence of humans and technology. He favours a symbiotic relationship, which requires the use of technologies in intelligent and accountable ways. Benjamin would desire that we realize the damage we inflict both on the earth and each other through our irresponsible use of technology. Against those realities the process of innervation—an ebb and flow—provides a sensorial training, a cathartic process through which we might come to terms with the upheavals of technology.

For Benjamin, art generally, and film particularly, provides the site of this rehearsal. "The function of film," he writes, "is to train human beings in the apperceptions and reactions needed to deal with a vast apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily."[409] In a typical dialectical move, Benjamin, while firm in his belief that film's radical capacity lay in its ability to astonish with new (re)presentations of the world in visceral ways which (re)opened channels of communication, also seems to be arguing for a habit of technology, for a state that would accustom humanity to technology, making it second nature without losing its transformational power. The claim may not seem so contradictory if we recall that in *Erfahrung* a similar move from consciousness to the

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[406] Benjamin, WOA2, footnote #10, 124.

[407] Hansen, "Benjamin and Cinema,"in *Benjamin's Ghosts*, 47.

[408] It is important to remember here that Benjamin is not wishing to dispose of the body, or to seek out a body like the man / machine which we find in the *Terminator* films (*The Terminator* (1984), *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), directed by James Cameron; and *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (2003), directed by Johnathan Mostow.). Contrary to such desire, so prevalent in much rhetoric about the cyber world, and found also in the satisfaction with which critics such as Paul Virilio announce the end of the body in nihilistic tones, Benjamin sees a different relationship between human and technology. Its forgotten future involves a critical yet flexible approach, one that is nimble and creative. See, for example, Jérôme Sans' interview with Paul Virilio, "The Game of Love and Chance." 7 Dec. 2002 <http://www.grandstreet.com/gs/gs52/virilio.html>.

[409] Benjamin, "WOA2," VI, *SW*, vol. 3, 107-108.

invisibility of routine takes place. For in familiarity, we 'know something by heart,' we take it up into ourselves, fold it over into our bodies.

Film speaks to what Benjamin calls our optical unconscious, showing us ourselves as we cannot ordinarily see ourselves. Film, along with other modern recording technologies, allows the unnoticed to gain force and to come into focus.[410] In the most extreme example of this, we can see through the marvels of ground-glass images of our interiors—both oneiric worlds and the insides of our bodies. The interpenetration becomes literal, with technology physically penetrating the body, but it also expresses the revolutionary nature of innervation. We see technology seeing us: a feedback loop that pulses from screen to skin. Film can become a rehearsal of our attempts to understand the rapid changes, both frightening and heady, taking place around us. Film provides us with possibilities of alternate receptions of technology; it screens our world to us, touches us in ways that *matter*.

Again, Benjamin is not naive about technology; he certainly is not advocating a return to a nostalgic time and place before the Industrial Revolution. Rather, he is saying that technology is here now with us and there is no going back—no going back, that is, to any existence without it, if such a move were ever available to a sapient species such as ours.[411] What we must do, however, is to use it in ways that do not culminate in a society so enamoured with some of its formations that it is prone to "experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure."[412] Innervation, I am arguing, Benjamin is using as a shorthand for ritual communication and its embodied way of knowing the world. I am also supposing an equation between innervation and a reconfigured filmic aura—the give and take between image and audience—resulting in the possible reading of aura, too, as marker of a ritual communication. Benjamin sees in the filmic process of innervation a mimesis that, in its promotion of similarity through what I would call an

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[410] Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," *SW*, vol. 2, 510-512. See also WOA3, *SW*, vol. 4, 266, regarding Benjamin's "optical unconscious."

[411] Benjamin, "A Different Utopian Will," *SW*, vol. 3, 134. Here Benjamin argues that as humanity develops and branches out, the body becomes increasingly subject to the influences of technology and the changing nature of society; the utopian idea of an integral body, based on what Benjamin terms "first nature," must give way to the hope of a "second nature," one which tries to come to terms with the technologically shaped world in which we live.

[412] Benjamin, WOA2, XIX, *SW*, vol. 3, 122. In his desire for the preservation of the bodily, Benjamin stands in stark contrast to such figures as new media artist and theorist Stellarc, whose position comes across as an alarmingly ecstatic abandonment of the body. In near delight Stellarc instructs us "[t]he strategy should be to hollow, harden and dehydrate the body to make it more durable and less vulnerable. The present organization of the body is unnecessary." Stellarc, "From Psycho-Body to Cyber-System," in *Icons: localizer 1.3*. Ed. Richard, Birgit, Robert Klanten and Stephan Heidenreich, 70.

auratic experience, contributes to the "maintenance of society in time."[413] Innervation, Benjamin explains, is like a breathing, an inhalation and an exhalation that sustains life.[414] Although Vivian Sobchack does not use the term innervation, she certainly thinks of the experience of viewing film in ways which closely resemble Benjamin's. Echoing Benjamin's notion that film engages the viewer in sensual as well as cognitive experience, Sobchack states that while watching film there is a "commingling [of] flesh and consciousness, reversing the human and technological sensorium, so that meaning, and where it is made, does not have a discrete origin in either spectators' bodies or cinematic representation but emerges in their conjunction."[415]

database narrative

Both Benjamin and Gunning (in Benjaminian fashion) are arguing for an excavation of cinema's forgotten futures.[416] Filmmaker Peter Greenaway also firmly believes that the full potential of film has not yet been realized. Echoing Benjamin's disappointment with film's use of well-worn plots, Greenaway, too, is distressed with the fact that, after being around for more than a century, cinema today is basically nothing more than "a history of illustrated text."[417] Greenaway is critical of cinema's role as one that for the most part has functioned as a vehicle to represent literary works, in a realist manner, at the expense of its potential as a creative medium in its own right. Keen to open up the promise of the medium and use cinema in new ways, he confidently prophesizes that the cinema of the future will take on an encyclopedic form.[418] Given the postmodern tendency to view the world as a (random) collection of texts, Greenaway's proposed encyclopedic aesthetic is hardly surprising. Benjamin, in like manner, reminds us that "The Renaissance explores the universe; the baroque explores libraries."[419] Whereas traditional narrative cinema is grounded in the unfolding of time, the (neo)baroque involves a dynamic spatialization of

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[413] James Carey, *Communication as* Culture, 18.

[414] Benjamin, "Antiques," (Prayer Wheel), *One-Way Street*, 75.

[415] Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 67.

[416] New media theorist Lev Manovich also shares this concern. Speaking of the purpose of writing his book *The Language of New Media*, he comments: "But even if the language of computer media develops in a different direction than the one suggested by the present analysis, this book will become a record of possibilities heretofore unrealized, of a horizon visible to us today but later unimaginable." Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 8.

[417] John Petrakis, "Blasphemy in Cinema: An Interview with Peter Greenaway," 173.

[418] Lawrence Chua, "Peter Greenaway: An Interview," in *Peter Greenaway Interviews*. Eds Vernon Gras and Marguerite Gras, 182.

[419] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 140.

information which operates in an architectural or geographical way to urge the formation of associations.[420]

This "database narrative" makes explicit the paradigmatic structure which usually remains transparent in commercial movies. Lev Manovich explains that the syntagmatic consists in what is present, whereas the paradigmatic speaks of that which is absent—that which as potential substitution—is therefore oppositional. For example, the words that comprise this sentence exist here on the page, or on the screen, but the sets of possibilities from which I chose them—one by one, one after another, *this* one and then *this* one—are virtual. These moments of choice closely resemble Roman Ingarden's "indetermination spots." Speaking about the literary work of art, Ingarden argues that it is comprised of an endless number of "*Unbestimmtheitstellen,*" or indetermination spots. Because language (itself a database) is always partial, always dependent on context and supplement, whatever words are chosen by an author or speaker can only approximate meaning, can only reduce by a matter of degree the ambiguity of what is meant. The infinite nature of the database exhausts any totality of meaning; meaning can only be provisional and must remain dependent on a subjective construction.[421] Both *Picture House* and *Hansel & Gretel* are database narratives. And while both are constructed from a potentially inexhaustible pool of existing material, *Picture House* obviously employs a database as its structure as well. In their spatialized simultaneity, the collaged pages of *Picture House* refuse any singular or easy reading. I would claim that, in their own modest way, both of my works are examples of Benjamin's theory that film should exercise the mimetic faculty. The viewer / player of *Picture House* and *Hansel & Gretel* must make connections between images, texts, and sounds in order to make any sense of what is on-screen, and do so in ways that at times might very well be strenuous or frustrating, as 'meaning' is not forthcoming in either work.

Greenaway's recent project *The Tulse Luper Suitcases: A Personal History of Uranium* certainly defers any immediate or comprehensive meaning. Taking full advantage of a database structure, Greenaway has announced that the project will consist of nothing short of: three feature films; a TV series; 92 DVDs; innumerable CD-ROMs; an

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[420] Sean Cubitt, *The Cinema Effect*, 224. Echoing Benjamin's concerns that collective memory is being eroded, Lev Manovich has commented on the fact that the "information age" ushered in by digital technologies (most notably the computer) has resulted in an inversion between what he identifies as narrative (what moves the plot along) and description (the information that provides a backdrop for the story). What we have now with digital delivery systems, Manovich argues, is a glut of information at the expense of cultural narratives. Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 217.
[421] Claude Gandelman, *Reading Pictures Viewing Texts*, 147.

unspecified number of books; seemingly endless online stories (for which it is claimed a new one will be posted every day, just as in *A Thousand and One Nights* Scheherazade each day would weave another tale for the King); an online game in 92 puzzles; proliferating theatre events and exhibitions, and also a cascading series of websites and web-based projects created by others at the invitation of "The Tulse Luper Network."[422] The whole wild enterprise expands the already sprawling *Tulse Luper* stories. Not only is the *Suitcases* project (neo)baroque in terms of its encyclopedic structure, but also in the way it brings together disparate forms (film, DVD, web, print, etc.).[423] The assemblage is characteristic of the baroque, whose goal was to combine painting, sculpture, and architecture to exceed the limits of any one medium.[424] Manovich explains that traditionally the artist would execute an idea in one medium resulting in a singular work in which content and form would be inextricably linked. In other words, there could be no interface, no discrepancy between the medium and the meaning: "the interface and the work were the same."[425] Digital technologies, however, permit the same material to be transferred to multiple interfaces.[426] With the advent of digital media the information and the representation readily become detached.[427] As we can see in Greenaway's *Suitcases*, the same information can be (re)presented and its impact altered when it is mediated through different interfaces.

Although digital technologies facilitate a database approach, Manovich also posits that cinema itself "exists right at the intersection between database and narrative."[428] The repeated film and audio takes, from which are chosen the images and sounds that

[422] *The Tulse Luper Suitcases Production Site*, 7 Feb. 2005
<http://www.kasanderfilm.nl/tulseluperproduction/index.htm>; A.G. Basoli, "Greenaway Unpacks Tulse Luper Suticases," *Film Stew*, 16 Feb. 2005
<http://www.filmstew.com/Content/Article.asp?ContentID=5936>.
[423] Apparently Greenaway has completed and released the three feature-length Tulse Luper films (*The Tulse Luper Suitcases, Part 2: Vaux to the Sea* (2004), *The Tulse Luper Suitcases, Part 3: From Sark to the Finish* (2003) and *The Tulse Luper Suitcases, Part 1: The Moab Story* (2003)) and a series of websites that invite players to engage in the role of detective to search out clues to Luper's life. The success of the rest of Greenaway's endeavour is somewhat more vague. Often websites describe the existence of the various incarnations of the project in rather noncommittal wording: "a series of DVD's, travelling exhibitions, books, publications." *The Tulse Luper Journey*. 16 August 2006
<http://www.tulseluperjourney.com/about.jsp>. However, attempts to locate webistes which actually contain versions of the project, rather than information which merely describes the project prove frustrating. See for example *The Tulse Luper Suitcases*. 16 August 2006 <http://petergreenaway.co.uk/tulse.htm>.
[424] Ndalianis, *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment*, 214, 216.
[425] Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 227.
[426] Although it could be argued that the shifting of material amongst forms was present long before 'new media' (think, for example, of how the same myth, can be represented as a play, a painting, an opera, an oral telling, a film, a sculpture, etc.), Manovich does make the disclaimer that in order to qualify as database art, there must be more than one interface created, more than one incarnation of the work. If not, the work will fall into the category of traditional art. Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 227.
[427] Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 227.
[428] Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 237.

comprise the screened film, itself forms a database according to Manovich. The final film is only one version out of an infinite number of combinations that could have been sutured together from the material gathered for the project; the cutting room floor becomes scattered with a litany of forgotten futures. Manovich has argued that Dziga Vertov and Peter Greenaway are two filmmakers who fully exploit a database cinema. Vertov's editing in *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), which transforms a collection of images of modern life into a critique of modernity, and Greenaway's use of lists and numbering systems, according to Manovich, position these two filmmakers as exemplary in understanding the language of database cinema.[429] Greenaway's films which spatialize narratives and combine media, certainly fall into the category of a database. However, Manovich's claim that *Man With a Movie Camera* stands as one of the few database films seems to me to be somewhat more problematic. Consider Manovich's definition of what makes *Man with a Movie Camera* so special:

> in contrast to standard film editing that consists of selection and ordering of previously shot material according to a preexistent script, here the process of relating shots to each other, ordering, and reordering them to discover the hidden order of the world constitutes the film's method. *Man with a Movie Camera* traverses its database in a particular order to construct an argument. Records drawn from a database and arranged in a particular order become a picture of modern life—but simultaneously an argument about this life, an interpretation of what these images, which we encounter everyday, every second, actually mean.[430]

The process of relating shots to each other is not unique to Vertov—this is an operation that, on a basic level, every filmmaker engages in. To make deliberate associations amongst images and sounds is fundamental to the genre of the documentary, for example. The documentary filmmaker cannot always rely on capturing the planned footage, nor does he or she always believe it even possible to fully script for such projects. The final story, therefore is always sutured from what has (and has not) been recorded, effecting the way it will be read. And surely, an awareness of the ways in the ordering of shots will result in different narratives, along with a desire to uncover a latent world beneath the everyday, can be found in most 'experimental' cinema. The films of the Surrealists and Dadaists (contemporaries of Vertov), for example, would fit Manovich's criteria of assemblages that bring to light the marvelous, troubling, and uncanny nature of the world. Take, for instance, Hans Richter's *Vormittagsspak* (*Ghosts Before Breakfast*) (1928). The

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[429] Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 237-243
[430] Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 240.

film uses a variety of techniques, including stop motion, reversal of motion, negative exposure, and odd camera angles to stress the way in which, harboured in the everyday, is a magic which we tend to take for granted (figure 27).

Figure 27. Still from *Vormittagsspak*.

Marsha Kinder expands the definition of database even further, arguing that the use of databases in fact runs through the history of cinema.[431] She believes that what we call database narratives simply expose the process of selection and ordering that structure all narratives and language, magnifying the arbitrary nature of choices and emphasizing the constructedness of all communication. Even if this were so, 'true' database films emphatically challenge the traditional realist narrative, which is usually uncritically received as natural or inevitable. Films such as Greenaway's also confront the limiting idea that communication is nothing but the transmission of information. Database cinema, operating in a similar way to the baroque *Wunderkammers*, tends to spatialize narrative and move beyond an illusory presentation of the immediate, in order to trace a fine filigree of connections. The baroque encyclopedic tendency feels its way out of the frame and tentacles towards a "world of secret affinities."[432]

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[431] Marsha Kinder, "Designing a Database Cinema," in *Future Cinema: The cinematic Imaginary after Film*. Eds. Jefferey Shaw and Peter Weibel, 349.
[432] Benjamin, *Arcades*, <a°,3>, 874.

Despite historically determined differences between baroque (popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) and neobaroque (renewed interest in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries), there remain nonetheless many fundamental similarities between them. Both can be characterized by an exuberance for extravagance, a celebration of construction, an awareness of artifice, and a desire to excite and engage the senses in ways that entangle the viewer in a visceral manner. The (neo)baroque,[433] like an elegant insect, wears its skeleton on the outside; it self-consciously flaunts its structure, showing us that it is showing. The (neo)baroque's delicate and complex carapace, however, according to Sean Cubitt, tends toward the murky and the confusing. He feels that in showcasing its structure, the (neo)baroque regrettably obscures the innards, the content of a work. These self-reflexive structures, Cubitt laments, often take the form of a labyrinth and fold endlessly back in on themselves, refusing the privileging of any 'correct' reading. The open-endedness of the (neo)baroque catches the viewer in the web of artifice and the summons of the unanswered. Cubitt feels that this "appreciation of the indeterminate" has come at the cost of clarity and certainty in the image, and that referential reality is lost, particularly in the rise of the neobaroque.[434] Its ambiguous open endings, he surmises, lend themselves effortlessly, perhaps cynically, to an endless number of sequels, often made for seemingly little more reason than the pursuit of profit. Angela Ndalianis, on the other hand, though she is herself critical of the capitalist entertainment industry that spawns endless sequels and spin-offs, sees the irresolution as giving rise to a higher degree of spectator interactivity. The neobaroque tendency to exceed the narrative frame and to point beyond itself through intertextuality, combinations of media, and special effects that emphasize the visceral aspects of the experience, make for Ndalianis a more encompassing happening. The (neo)baroque event, although designed to overwhelm and excite the senses, importantly demands active engagement on the part of the viewer. Whether controlling the play in a video game, recognizing the intertextual references to other art forms or incarnations of the work, or generally trying to unravel the structural puzzle which is intrinsic to the baroque, the spectator is challenged and shaken out of the passivity with which s/he might sit through

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[433] I am employing Angela Ndalianis' usage of parenthesis in the term (neo)baroque, which she uses to speak of what is common to both the baroque and the neobaroque.
[434] Cubitt, *The Cinema Effect*, 230.

a less demanding viewing.[435]

The labyrinthine nature of the (neo)baroque which foregrounds structure rather than content, negatively results, in Cubitt's critical view, in "a transparently artificial script of algorithmic elegance."[436] Cubitt sees in the (neo)baroque aesthetic only empty artificial allegory, a structure merely for the sake of structure, and a site where meaning freefalls into insignificance. His hostility to the (neo)baroque, which echoes the mistrust of the postmodern harboured by such critics as Fredric Jameson and Jeff Nuttall, seems to overlook the fact that it is this very artificiality which the (neo)baroque celebrates so flagrantly and mobilizes so knowingly. [437] In drawing attention to the constructedness of itself, the baroque work is able—implicitly and at times explicitly—to question the given, the transparent, and the 'natural' which prevail so readily in the world at large, held in place by the screen of already knowing. Cubitt's suspicion of the (neo)baroque, however, seems to stem from a narrow reading of mainstream cinema. While his survey of neobaroque film in his book *The Cinema Effect* includes a range of films, and raises some interesting questions about the future of cinema, it mysteriously refuses any acknowledgement of a neobaroque cinema that functions as critique—as, I will argue, do the films of Guy Maddin, for example. I would also hope that my own work would be understood as acting in similar critical fashion.

The enmity towards the postmodern, a movement of which the neobaroque is a significant expression, could be said to stem in part from an unease over the uncanny. The (neo)baroque after all, like the uncanny, brings to light secrets that are usually hidden from the spectator.[438] The blanket dismissal of the postmodern in some ways results from what Linda Hutcheon identifies as a failure of imagination, a refusal to wonder, to be moved to curiosity, a fear of being taken in, and a reluctance to play.[439] Critics like Cubitt and Nuttall fear a world in which high modernist claims of truth and certainty have become unmoored. Their anxiety is understandable; we all need something to believe in.

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[435] Ndalianis, *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment*, 2-3. Ndalianis also argues for a rethinking of the term 'spectator.' Whereas the (neo)baroque audience has been traditionally relegated to the visual realm, Ndalianis wants to adjust the naming to encompass other senses in ways that take the visceral aspect of the baroque into account (Ndalianis, 28), an undertaking much like Vivian Sobchack's desire to understand cinema as an embodied experience (Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*).

[436] Cubitt, *The Cinema Effect*, 222.

[437] See for example, Fredrick Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* and Jeff Nuttall, *Art and the Degradation of Awareness*.

[438] Sigmund Freud, paraphrasing the German philosopher Friedrich Schelling, says of the uncanny: "everything is unheimlich that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light," Freud, "The Uncanny," *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, Second Edition. Eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, 420.

[439] Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*.

However, to suspect that postmodernism eradicates all certainty or stability in the world is to deliberately miss the point of postmodernism's critique. Hutcheon rightly states that a questioning of the ideological origins of cultural formations is not at all the same as eradicating systems of belief, nor does it automatically imply a desire for such results.[440] It certainly does not remove issues of truth and ethics, though in querying the constructedness of the systems in place that are taken as 'natural' and 'self-evident,' it does remove them from appeals to higher authorities or unassailable positions.

A more productive approach to these questions seems available through what Hutcheon terms the "ex-centric."[441] A figure that is able to interrogate the system s/he lives within, the ex-centric exercises a give and take, a Benjaminian innervation, much like Todd F. Tietchen's notion of 'pimping the system,' when you "play the game" and "work the game" simultaneously.[442] The ex-centric, occupying a space that is both within and without the dominant, in some ways is an uncanny figure: present, but not quite there. This liminal character takes up an ambiguous position and often relies on the playful ((neo)baroque) tactics of irony, pastiche, and self-reflexivity to address discrepancies in dominant discourse. Or, to put it in other words, the ex-centric, a postmodern detective, goes off-kilter in search of the uncanny, the discarded and thrown-out, what those like Cubitt, Jameson, and Nuttall perhaps would say would be better undetected, or at least unhonoured. Like Benjamin's flâneur, the ex-centric, in his/her distance from the dominant, is positioned as a specially enabled medium. Given his/her sensitivity to ghostly sightings and whisperings, s/he becomes a channel for the clandestine futures that haunt the present. The ex-centric wishes to make audible the histories of the Other, the marginalized, the colonized, that have seldom been heard and almost never written.

Theorists such as Cubitt, Jameson, and Nuttall are, despite their sympathies for the underdog, still wary of a perceived sullying of 'serious' art. Little wonder, for the contamination of the proper by the common throws established and time-honoured boundaries into question. The (neo)baroque's ostentatious display of its structure is celebrated at the expense of contained, comprehensive, and solemn meaning. However, the very artifice that displaces the certainty and clarity of meaning attributed to traditional

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[440] Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 13-16
[441] Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 35, 67-69.
[442] Todd F. Tietchen, "Dissing Baudrillard: Public Enemy and Foucault's Masked Other." 7 Dec. 2002 <http://www.middleenglish.org/spc/22.3/tietchen.html>.

narrative (with its introduction, crisis, and resolution), also enables the (neo)baroque to interrogate the mundane. Shunning the dominant models and traditions that work off 'important' or 'noteworthy' events and characters, (neo)baroque forms are well situated to address the everyday, which is largely devoid of dramatic crises and earth-shattering resolutions. Speaking of the (forgotten) importance of the baroque tradition of the Trauerspiel (literally 'sorrow play'), a dramatic form popular in eighteenth century Germany, Benjamin points out, troublingly for many of his Marxist colleagues (who felt that an approval of popular art forms necessitated a certain degree of 'selling-out' to capitalism), that this mode of (re)presentation was concerned with the "tiny, fragile human body."[443] These are plays involving the modest measures of everyday people rather than the Gods and Heroes of High Tragedy; the Trauerspiel takes uneventful moments in history, not classical myth or the large arc of historical teleology, as its object.[444]
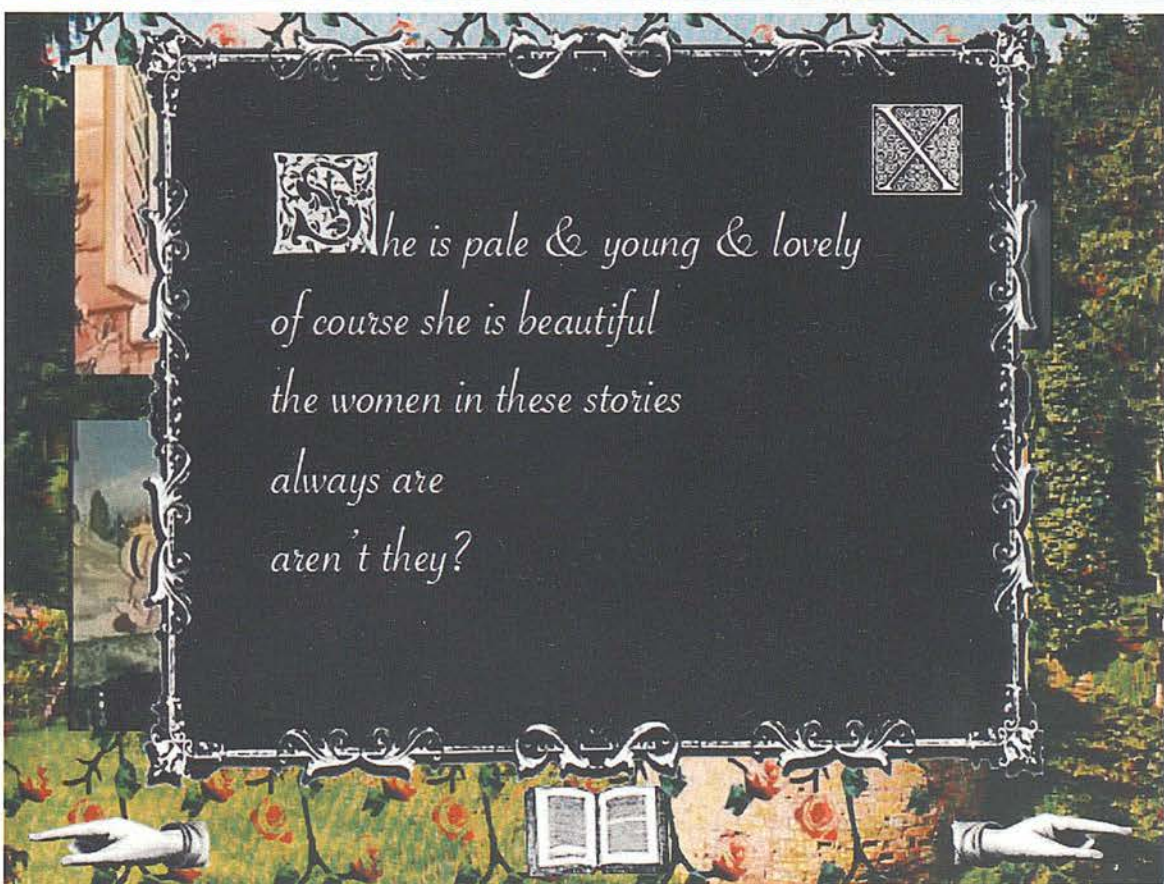
Cubitt frets that the artifice and self-consciousness of the neobaroque film means that it (as opposed to what he terms 'normative' cinema) is not concerned with understanding the world.[445] The baroque Trauerspiel (a category to which *Picture House* and *Hansel & Gretel*, with their irony and melancholic desire to reanimate the forgotten and overlooked, could be said to belong), however, is troubled with just this matter; it is a presentation of the cruelty and suffering in the world, often using the absurd in order to make life bearable, or intelligible.[446] *Picture House*, for example, although it may elicit a dark reading of events, also works off irony and incongruity to provoke laughter (see figures 28 and 29).

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[443] Benjamin, "The Storyteller," I, *SW*, vol. 3, 144.
[444] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 62. Interestingly, Kracauer has argued that the random and fragmented nature of film means that the medium inherently is incompatible with the genre of Tragedy which turns on an "ordered cosmos." Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, L.
[445] Cubitt, *The Cinema Effect*, 242.
[446] George Steiner, introduction to Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 24.

She is pale & young & lovely
of course she is beautiful
the women in these stories
always are
aren't they?

Figures 28 and 29. Stills from *Picture House*.

The work asks us to seriously consider our perpetual responses, what we may take as 'natural' or given in terms of such constructs as gender, cultural narratives, and our usual readings of representations. But in doing so, it asks that we laugh at ourselves, our own blindnesses, our readiness to accept without critically evaluating the world. And although *Picture House* is designed for individual engagement and not the collective viewing experience Benjamin ascribes a force to, the work does rely (at least partially) on a collective knowledge of shared cultural memories to wrench some sense from its entertaining, irritating, and bemusing fragments. *Picture House*, tongue in cheek, would move us out of the prescribed as it asks us to (re)consider the mundane and ordinary. The Trauerspiel is not interested in notions of the transcendent; rather, it is firmly rooted in the mortality of things and people. What could be more 'real'? Benjamin describes how the Trauerspiel, fraught with post-lapsarian angst, is designed to present the world as ruin.[447] As such, these are "plays for the mournful."[448] Benjamin tells us: "Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things."[449] The Trauerspiel, working in the allegorical mode so favoured in the baroque, displays a world laid to waste, and strewn, making it a form that, despite its seventeenth and eighteenth century roots, lends itself well to a critique of modernity.

Working from a (neo)baroque aesthetic, Guy Maddin's strange and strangely humourous filmic worlds are suffused with the "irresistible decay" of a bereft and bankrupt world.[450] Maddin's feature-length films—*Tales from the Gimli Hospital* (1988), *Archangel* (1990), *Careful* (1992), *Twilight of the Ice Nymphs* (1997), *Dracula: Pages from a Virgin's Diary* (2002), *The Saddest Music in the World* (2003), and *Cowards Bend the Knee, or The Blue Hands* (2003)—as well as his shorter works, are all tinted with a melancholic longing.[451] In these worlds, uncannily, the uncanny has become the norm. Maddin's characters are emotionally maimed and physically stunted. Often suffering from mistaken identity or amnesia, the inhabitants of Maddin's mournful tales glide about in a somnambulist state.

It certainly would not be difficult to read Maddin's films as textbook examples of Freudian repression. Yet, this seems a too-easy tact, and one that would not account for

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[447] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 235.
[448] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 19.
[449] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 178.
[450] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 178.
[451] Although *Dracula: Pages from a Virgin's Diary* is a production by the Royal Winnipeg Ballet that Maddin was hired to document (as opposed to his other films which he has written in collaboration with others), it stands alone as a film, one which Maddin has made very much his own, weaving his usual quirky humour and richly textured sets into a sensual patina.

their effects. Rather, I would like to propose an alternate reading of Maddin's Trauerspiels, one that positions these films as something closer to fairy tales with their cautionary wisdom. Maddin's films, I would argue, are about the uncanny. In a way that Benjamin would surely appreciate, they drag secrets out into the open, magnify the oddities of the everyday, and remind us of the quaintness of our world. In doing so, they refute Cubitt's claim that the neobaroque has severed itself from any reference to or concern with the larger world. I would like to focus on Maddin's *Archangel* to draw out these claims.

Archangel

As Christine Buci-Glucksmann, John Berger and others have argued, the uncanny, as Other, is tethered to the feminine, a 'state' or territory that has long been regarded as outside, or ex-centric to the (male) norm.[452] *Archangel* is everywhere imbued with this disconcerting femininity—as, I would argue, are all of Maddin's films.[453] From the start, the film is marked by loss. The opening sequence introduces us to Lieutenant Boles on a ship on his way to the town of Archangel; he has lost his leg and his love. The ship's captain is busily confiscating contraband. We see him throw overboard a bottle of alcohol which one of the passengers has been carrying. He then seizes a vessel from Boles (one uncannily similar in design to the bottle of spirits), which turns out to be the urn holding the ashes of Boles' dead lover Iris. The captain also hurls the urn over the side. Already, in this brief scene, there is a conflation of lost body parts, lost love, and lost spirits. In pursuit of its melancholic theme the action dredges up notions of the double, severings / partings, hauntings, intoxication, and (mis)recognition. As a result, Maddin sets up an equation between (the possession or lack of) sight, mobility, memory, tactility, love, and a coherent self.

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[452] Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Baroque Reason: The Aesthetics of Modernity*. John Berger, in his book *Ways of Seeing* has argued that women, due to the patriarchal system, from the start are positioned as split in two and therefore always accompanied by their own images. Women, Berger proposes, occupy the strange position of being both surveyors and the surveyed. Although Berger does not tie this doubled state to the uncanny, I believe that in perpetually watching themselves as Other, as separate from themselves, we could understand women, with their ghostly shadows, as always already haunted.

[453] In an interview with James Quandt Maddin gives credence to this assumption, stating that cowardice "just feels like the male state of mind somehow. In the battles of the heart, men are cowards." "Purple majesty: James Quant talks with Guy Maddin." Interview with James Quant. ArtForum. 28 July 2006 <http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_10_41/ai_103989792>.

The aesthetic of *Archangel* enforces the sense of forfeiture and longing that plagues the characters of this film. The dream-like world that Maddin has created through the use of an early / precinematic language renders this strange narrative even more peculiar. Heightened contrast of the largely black and white frames and the use of silhouettes which evoke a tradition of shadow puppets, for example, effectively serve to stress the artificial and unreal nature of the film on a narrative, diegetic level, as well as that of the medium of film itself (figures 30 and 31).
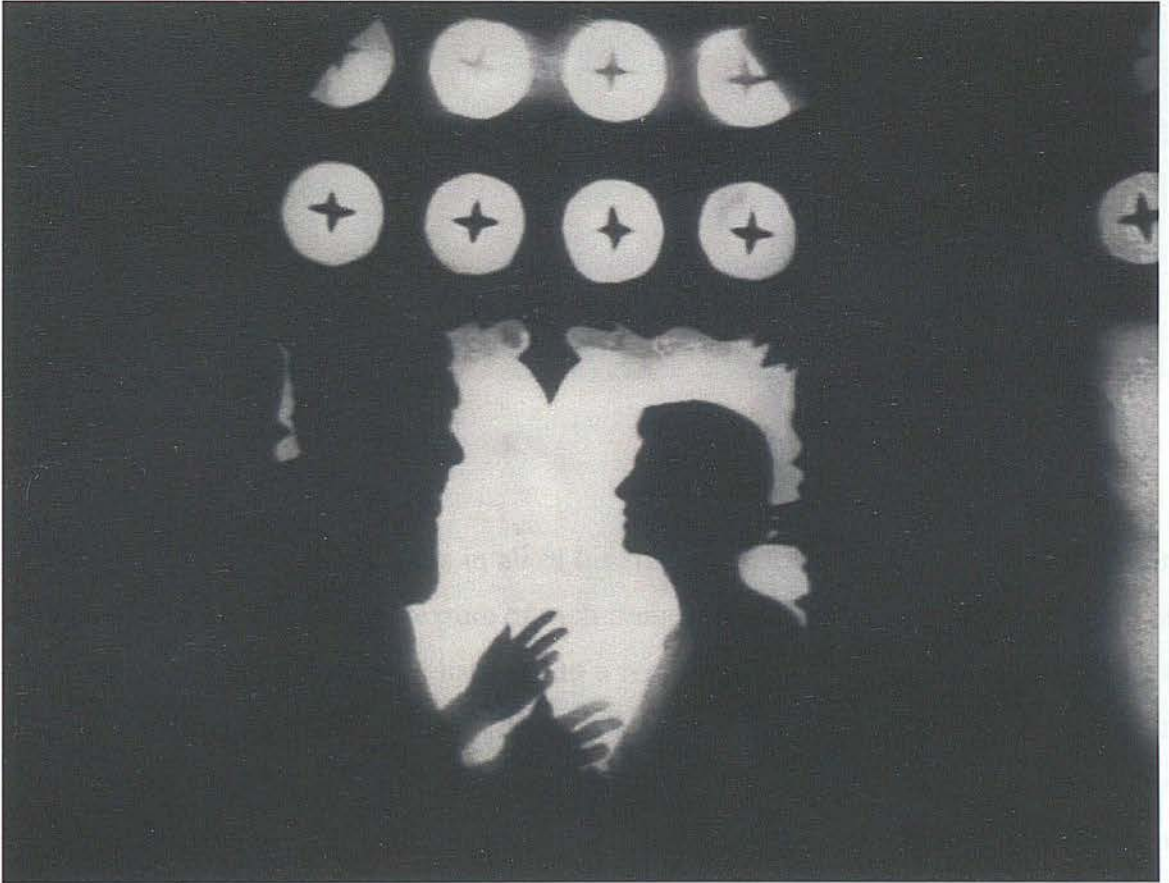

Figure 30. Still from *Archangel*.

Figure 31. Still from *Archangel*.

In *Archangel*, Maddin, as he does in all of his films, refuses to let the materiality of film fade into the background. The texture of each frame is emphasized; Maddin will not let us forget that we are watching and listening to a representation that has been captured by a recording device (and has been shaped by earlier representations and techniques). And in emphasizing the wear and tear, the process of aging inherent in all representation (and in all memory), he asks us to (re)consider the transparency of film (and the memories we hold as 'true'), to (re)view the way in which we so readily tend to accept the medium as a window onto a realism that so willingly effaces any traces of its own making. In magnifying the artifice of film, Maddin refuses to let the viewer settle into an untroubled reception of his works. *Archangel* demonstrates this complicated relationship: it is a troubled town and a troubling film, unsettling for both the inhabitants and the viewer. An ever-present uncanniness that lurks just below the surface of modernity results in what Gunning identifies as a state of "overriding uncertainty," a condition which the inhabitants of *Archangel* (and all of Maddin's films) find themselves uneasily attempting

to negotiate.[454]

Maddin's intricate tale of faulty memories, forgetfulness, mistaken identities, and uncertain love is a complex meditation on some of the unsettling qualities of human nature. His Archangel as a site is a disturbingly quiet, almost muted world, despite the war that rages on in the background because no one has yet told the inhabitants that peace has been declared. The somnambulistic state that the characters occupy magnifies the fragility of their memories and their identities; they are seemingly unaware of what goes on around them, and ignorant of, or confused by the relationships they have with others. Troublingly, the lethean habitants of Archangel often seem to not know even who they themselves are. The heightened artifice of *Archangel* emphasizes the uncanny nature of memory; Maddin's allegorical tale repeatedly reminds us of the way that the mutability of our remembrances can erase events and convince us of occurrences.

The modern world, particularly the modern urban landscape, is, for Benjamin, haunted by the spectre of lost futures. As I have demonstrated in the previous chapters, Benjamin describes memory as a medium that gives us access to the past. Film, too, is a medium that grants us the "dark joy" of finding.[455] However, elsewhere Benjamin claims that the present is also a *medium*, a conduit through which the past speaks to us, where memory can be detected in "a new and disturbing articulation."[456] So, it would seem that both memory and the present have recourse to the past (and film, of course, as a *record* of what has passed, itself is memory). What then are the implications of equating memory and the present? One reading would acknowledge that with the belief in progress as inevitable and beneficial the present is already a memory. In our eagerness to attain the 'new and improved' of the future, we abandon the present. Another interpretation, in keeping with Benjamin's desire to excavate a world covered by the rubble of modernity, would be that the past is never really completely passed, never *quite* dead; it lingers on in the present as a ghostly reminder. Whereas death in pre-modern times occupied a public place in the community, uniting people in mourning, by the time of modernity, dying had ceased to be a communal event. People now die alone, in silence, unable to pass on wisdom from their deathbeds. Benjamin comments on the fact that "It used to be that there was not a single house, hardly a single room, in which someone had not once died.

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[454] Gunning "Re-Newing Old Technologies: Astonishment, Second Nature, and the Uncanny in Technology from the Previous Turn-of-the-Century," 46.

[455] Benjamin, BC, *SW*, vol. 2, 611.

[456] Benjamin, BC, 599.

[. . .] Today people live in rooms that have never been touched by death."[457] Benjamin seems to be suggesting that, with the sanitization and clinicalization of death, we, the modern "dry dwellers of eternity," are lamentably no longer touched by the traces of the past.[458] Occupying spaces bereft of any tinge of death, we are no longer haunted by the past, no longer bothered with the histories of the ordinary and the everyday. The poet Earle Birney, grieving the absence of a literary tradition in Canada, once wrote of his fellow citizens that "It's only by our lack of ghosts we're haunted."[459]

Maddin too is concerned with Canadians' inability or unwillingness to honour the mundane and local. Speaking of the lack of interest and respect Canadians have for their folk heroes, Maddin muses that "For some reason, Canadians look through the wrong end of the telescope and make them smaller than life."[460] For Benjamin, this inability to bring into focus and recognize much of our world results in a poverty of experience. He believes we need to (re)train ourselves to this receptivity, fine-tune our senses to pick up the reverberations of the past (and present). And film, as a ghostly mimicking of memory, is a medium which lets the 'dead' speak to us.

In Archangel—an unstable and confounding place—even death is uncertain. Picking their way through a battlefield strewn with corpses, Boles and the mother of the boy, Geza, whom he has helped save, stop over a body. As Boles reaches down to close the soldier's eyes, the soldier 'wakes,' looks for his gun and walks away. They proceed to another corpse. Boles touches her on the back, and she too wakes, as if summoned by supernatural powers from the netherworld, and heads off. The third body he touches does not move. Boles flips him over, and sees rivulets of blood frozen on his face. Boles, as if in benediction, in ceremony of death, says, "Sleep brother. Sleep forever" (see figure 32).

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[457] Benjamin, "The Storyteller," *SW*, vol. 3, 151.
[458] Benjamin, "The Storyteller," 151.
[459] Earle Birney, "Can. Lit.", *The Blasted Pine: An Anthology of Satire, Invective and Disrespectful Verse.* Eds. F.R. Scott and A.J.M. Smith, 116.
[460] Guy Maddin, "Canadian Cult Hero Guy Maddin: "I Have Plenty of Sadness In Reserve."" Interview with Jeremy O'Kasick. indieWire. 9 Feb. 2005
<http://www.indiewire.com/people/people_040217maddin.html>.

Figure 32. Still from *Archangel*.

In the frozen and forgotten Archangel the dead are asleep and the sleeping are mistaken for the dead. The highly stylized sets depicting the battlefield (as well as the town itself) further this sense of Archangel as an oneiric place. Maddin's depiction of Archangel has the feel of a school play; there is a charming naïveté and lack of pretence to the sets he has constructed (see figure 33).

Figure 33. Still from *Archangel*.

The resulting incongruity between the seeming innocence of this world and the suffering of its inhabitants keeps the viewer's reception of the narrative off balance. The apparent ambivalence that the melodramatic characters display towards their plight is further complicated by the highly artificial nature of their filmic environment. Archangel is a world wrapped in perpetual darkness, a Hades shut off from the sun; we never see daylight—an effect enforced in the deep shadows created through Maddin's use of high-contrast black and white film.

But what of the soldiers that get up and walk away? Have they forgotten they are alive? Were they merely battle-fatigued and needing to rest? Whatever the case, theirs is a nether world of shadow, a world of the dead, for in this cold, snowy landscape, these are people living with war, and those still alive, grown numb from death, are left to mourn their lost loves. Geza's mother tells Boles that ghosts wander the battlefields leaving omens that help soldiers to safety. It is well to recall that, according to Benjamin, ghosts, like allegories, come to us from "the realm of mourning." They have an intimate

connection with those who grieve, "those who ponder over signs and over the future."[461] The process of grieving, for Benjamin, reconnects us with what we have lost touch with. An allegorical reading, in Benjamin's figuring, invests 'dead' things with new life, rekindling something of the beauty these ruins once contained; the petrified past can become an "object of knowledge" through which to better understand the present.[462]

Maddin's films certainly can be said to take on a melancholic epistemological function. Their personal basis becomes a vehicle to speak of larger issues; Maddin's memories become proxies for collective remembrances and the way we remember. Maddin's personal recollections become a structure that allows him to sneak up on issues; they become a cunning ruse to address the uncanny nature of all memory and the state of amnesia that prevails in our world. Film is Maddin's chosen medium to sort through his own (often disturbing) memories and their larger cultural implications. It is tempting to read Maddin's filmic reconstructions of memories as a means to investigate his relationships with those figures now dead or lost. But film, for Maddin, does not function as exorcism, permitting him to banish the ghosts that haunt him. For, I believe, Maddin is quite at home with his nagging spirits; he has no desire to see them abandon him. I would argue that, for Madddin, film acts as more of a séance; this is a site where he can have a dialogue with the past and act out alternate versions to what has 'actually' happened. Film, for Maddin, as I believe it is for Benjamin, is a training ground where experience and representation converge in powerful and meaningful ways.

Benjamin has provocatively speculated in regard to the resonance of allegory that "Any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else."[463] And, in an echo of his statement, Jeffery Mehlman says this of the uncanny: "what is *unheimlich* about the *unheimlich* is that absolutely *anything* can be *unheimlich*."[464] Allegory, in its insistent capacity to speak of what is not actually present, in its calling up what is hidden, is itself uncanny. All literature, perhaps all representation, addresses the absent, points us to what is not literally there in the pages, on the screen, in the emulsion. With allegory, however, this unhinging is emphatically foregrounded and the felt lack more acute. In an allegorical reading, the world is already a construction—something stands in for and represents something else.

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[461] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 193.
[462] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 182.
[463] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 175.
[464] Jeffery Mehlman quoted by Nicholas Royle in *The Uncanny*, footnote #46, 32.

Maddin's *Archangel*, as I would argue for all of Maddin's films, is an allegory for memory and grieving as processes that are always haunted. The characters in this film are constantly forgetting or on the verge of forgetting their loved ones. They misrecognize and mistake, perhaps even willfully at times, in order to align the past with present wishes. Through the unsettling world of *Archangel*, Maddin exhibits memory's integral role in keeping love alive. For in Archangel, people and events simply cease to be when someone forgets their existence. Given the precarious and perennially new world of Maddin's film, his characters occupy what seems to be a perpetual state of amazement. Dazed, meandering over the flickering screens which Maddin creates in homage to his filmic roots, the characters are constantly startled, shocked by revelations, but cannot quite seem to figure out why their experiences would be so jarring, or to recall what has brought them to their present state. They cannot remember but they are constantly astonished, or on the threshold of astonishment, perhaps precisely *because* they cannot recall and so must at every moment meet the world so unknowingly. Tom Gunning has proposed in an intriguing article that early cinema amazed spectators, not because of some naïve suspension of dis-belief or mistaking of the screened image for reality, but because of the fact that the cinematic apparatus itself caused images to move: it was the creation of the illusion of motion that was so astonishing.[465] The machine at work, what it *did—that* was the marvel. In *Archangel*, the movement, the life that continues, in surprise, despite the pain and sorrow the characters feel, is what is confounding. It is as if the determination to carry on, at the cost of self-deception if necessary, dumbfounds even the characters themselves.

Speaking of cinema's unrealized prospects, Maddin has said that "There's just an amazing wealth of stuff that people had forgotten about or didn't even seem to love or know or care to know about."[466] Maddin's concern becomes manifest in his films which exploit old and forgotten filmic approaches and techniques. His aesthetic steals from the materials and the devices of predialogue and early sound film and the genre of melodrama, but he reinvents them in a highly personal filmic language (see figure 34).

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[465] Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator," 114-133.
[466] Maddin, "Melodrama as a Way of Life: Guy Maddin and Isabella Rossellini Talk About "Saddest Music,"" interview with Andrea Meyer. indieWire 2004. 9 Feb. 2005
<http://www.indiewire.com/people/people_040503maddin.html>.

Figure 34. Still from *Archangel*.

For him the forgotten futures of film are a repository of possibilities "full and ready to discharge its payload of history." In the unused and unvalued of film's history "Everything seem[s] ready to move forward, at any moment, back into the time of its heyday."[467] As a result, the densely textured frames of his films have squeezed out any trace of realism; artifice overflows everywhere. Even the dialogue is rendered odd, if not suspect, as the actors deliver purposefully stilted, awkward lines.[468] *Archangel*, like all Maddin's films, has a patina of wear about it that evokes early film. Marked with scratches that would indicate repeated projections, the intertitles (spelled out in letters that appear fuzzy around the edges because presumably blurred over time) jitter, as if the sprockets of the film have been worn and no longer run smoothly through the projector. The sound, too, with its pops and hisses, helps to enforce the aged feel of the film. Maddin's desire to work with film as "a kid on the first day of kindergarten with a new box of crayons" is apparent in his willingness to use (or at least elicit the look of)

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[467] Maddin, *From the Atelier Tovar: Selected Writings*, 187.
[468] In discussing the German dramatic form of the Trauerspiel Benjamin explains that often the dialogue sounds as if it were a caption "beneath an allegorical engraving," an effect that is certainly echoed in Maddin's own extremely stylized dialogue. Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 196.

outdated techniques such as hand-tinted film.[469] In *Archangel*, a mostly black and white film, Maddin colours two sequences. In a scene towards the end of the film, when the Huns attack young Geza and the boy's father in their house, Maddin tints the stock (or, again, at least achieves this look) a fiery orangey-red, which emphasizes the bloody violence that the scene depicts. These 'hot' scenes Maddin contrasts with the battlefield sequence which he has coloured a Prussian blue, emphasizing the cold, numbing effects of the war (see figures 35 and 36).

Figure 35. Still from *Archangel*.

[469] Maddin, "Melodrama as a Way of Life; Guy Maddin and Isabella Rossellini Talk About "Saddest Music,"" interview with Andrea Meyer.

Figure 36. Still from *Archangel*.

Maddin's use of camera, too, lends itself to the feeling of a production that survives from an earlier time. Hand-held shots and soft focus help to establish the impression that *Archangel* is a film that came about before contemporary technologies that contribute to the production of flawless, transparent films. The deliberately stagy scenes Maddin composes as *tableaus vivant* remind the viewer of pre-dialogue film with its dependency on gesture and staging to convey the narrative. Throughout *Archangel* snow slowly sifts to the ground. Maddin has created a fairy tale world of magic and mystery. *Archangel*, shot mostly with quite tight framing, takes on a claustrophobic air. Maddin shuns traditional establishing shots; from the start we are right 'there' in Archangel, implicated in the characters' actions and irresponsible behaviours as they anxiously remind us of our own foibles, forgetfulness, and failures. In *Archangel*, Maddin has created a microcosm of demented enchantment; this squeezed, snowy environment comes to feel like a snow-globe, one of those hermetically sealed worlds of wonder that swirl in shaken blizzards (figure 37).

Figure 37. Still from *Archangel*.

In their contrived complexity, neobaroque films invite us to engage in self-reflexive play; they offer us innervation in their themes and techniques. The pleasure Maddin takes and gives in his work is, in part, that of the exhibitionist. Tom Gunning has written in an apt statement that the aesthetic of a "cinema of attractions" is involved in a presentation and celebration of constructedness. A cinema of attractions self-consciously displays its structure in order to rupture transparency and 'naturalness'—the attributes on which narrative-driven cinema capitalizes and depends. Engaging the wonder and curiosity of the spectator through a display of virtuosity, a cinema of attractions invites an active engagement from that same viewer in following associations, bridging juxtapositions, and constructing relationships amongst disparate fragments.[470] Or, to put this into different words, a cinema of attractions invites the spectator to take up and be taken up by the filmic aura in an innervated exchange. Eschewing a linear narrative that would make a movie easily understood, a cinema of attractions in full mode as confrontational display relies on the spectator to move beyond the frame and draw on his or her imagination to comprehend the nature and effect of its moving images. As with the mobile allegorical

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[470] Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," 57.

emblem whose significance is dependent on the individual's knowledge and experience, a cinema of the kind Gunning identifies plays off possibility, refusing any singular or stable reading. Its baroque heritage, one which favours open, permeable structures, is especially evident in Maddin's films.

Maddin's work seeks to recuperate ways of telling and ways of knowing that have almost fallen from cinematic memory,[471] as do my own works *Picture House* and *Hansel & Gretel*. The results produced by Maddin, the "laureate of Futurepast," have an odd originality; these are images we've seen before, but not quite.[472] The quirky, disturbing and ironically humorous worlds Maddin gives us come to us from dreams, float into our awareness from old movies and anecdotes we seem vaguely to remember, but cannot quite place. We do not know when or where, exactly, cannot quite put our finger on it.[473] Maddin's films skitter over memory, tease us into a place where we're not sure of our own recollections. It is as if these films create the memory we forgot we never had, an idea that my own work plays with as well. Maddin's fairy tales are allegories of the modern world. Through them he gives voice to topics such as death, incest, desire, and the uncanny, subjects that remain unspoken when we live in our most habitual lives. Allegory, with its indirect correlations, allows Maddin effectively to broach these topics through a more circuitous route.

John Law and Kevin Hetherington have described allegory as the point somewhere between seeing and saying.[474] In their open endedness, both *Picture House* and *Hansel & Gretel* can certainly be read allegorically. However, *Picture House* literally engages in bringing into play the point between seeing and saying: the work functions partially off a tension created between the written text (which also exploits the graphic nature of language), and the range of juxtaposed images and sounds. The discrepancy between what is said in the text and seen and heard on the screen opens up a network of possible interpretations. In this thinking allegory becomes a *process*, a performance, a path taken, the joining of two (or more) points. In reading allegory we engage in a kind of puzzle solving. To make sense of what we perceive we mull things over, turn them this way and

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[471] It is hardly surprising that, while enjoying international recognition as a cult figure, Maddin's quirky, complicated films have largely been ignored by the mainstream American market, which is built on realist transparent narrative.

[472] Maddin, "Far From the Maddin Crowd." Interview with Border Crossings: A Magazine of the Arts. 35.

[473] Maddin himself admits to (re)making movies that he has never seen or have never existed. See *ArtForum* interview with James Quant.

[474] John Law and Kevin Hetherington, "Allegory and Interference: Representation in Sociology." 5 Feb. 2005 <http://64.233.161.104/search?q=cache:0HsnNYJgknsJ:www.comp.lancs.ac.uk/sociology/papers/law-hetherington-allegory-interference.pdf+walter+benjamin+monad&hl=en>.

that in order to effectively translate perception into communication. Similarly, Gilles Deleuze has argued that the baroque, shunning a classical, linear, closed construction, can be thought of as a structure comprised of endless folds.[475] The fold, Deleuze tells us, is an "operative function" of the baroque.[476] In endless pleating, and eternal incompletion, the allegorical fold connects what is seen with what is said. A way of speaking of what is not present, allegory—a clever magician—works off misdirection and sleight of hand.

conclusion

Advocate of straying, of losing oneself in the folds, Benjamin takes up the task of legitimizing the mode of allegory. Presenting multiple entry points, the allegorical fold, for him, allows one to wander into and wonder at the labyrinth of associations which permit a range of readings. Benjamin's own writings, such as "A Berlin Chronicle," employ an allegorical structure to give voice to the ghosts of the past. As ruin, allegory becomes a mournful structure on which to hang various versions of events, including ones that might have not (yet) been.

In film, I believe Benjamin sees the possibility of forgotten futures, cinema's as yet unrealized outcomes, one of which can be traced back to a baroque heritage. Early cinema drew from this baroque approach, celebrating artifice and engaging the spectator in a visceral experience. This palpable give and take between screen and skin Benjamin identifies as innervation—the harmonious balance of humans and technology. Part of our inability to engage technologies in responsible ways, Benjamin seems to say, is due to our neglect of the past and all its lessons. We need to mourn what has passed, for in grief we come to terms with what is no longer present. We can see this haunted mourning in Maddin's films, which can be read as Trauerspiels, lamentations of what not only cinema could have been and yet could be, but of our own unfulfilled lives. Maddin's films overtly draw from early and precinematic techniques, but reinvent these 'naive' approaches to film in innovative ways to comment on memory and mourning. My own works, *Picture House* and *Hansel & Gretel*, too, participate in reanimating 'primitive' filmic techniques, and as such belong to the tradition of a cinema of attractions which tangles the viewer in a

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[475] Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque.*
[476] Deleuze, *The Fold*, 3.

(neo)baroque web of artifice, involving him or her in ways that are more than metaphorical. In my work, I am engaging in a media archaeology, excavating the past in order to make sense of the present, to listen to silenced stories and look to forgotten futures.

Conclusion

a remembrance service

The art of getting lost developed out of a desire to research, explore, and more fully understand the relationship between technology, memory, and communication that has underpinned my practice for many years now. In order to reflect upon, contextualize, and articulate my own practice I have attempted to trace Benjamin's often convoluted and obscure constellation of film, mimesis, memory, experience, representation, and communication.

It is difficult to come to any definite conclusions regarding Benjamin's theories on film and his use of terminology. In part, the fact that Benjamin's oeuvre spans several decades and the bulk of his writings were never published in his lifetime, account for something of their fragmentary nature. Over the course of Benjamin's writing career he circled around and recycled ideas; his repeated working of material in different contexts and at different times lead to variations and mutations in his theories. It's likely that, unable to publish much of his writing, Benjamin did not develop his notes and scraps into a polished format that might have clarified some of his key terms such as innervation, aura, dialectical image, *Erfahrung*, *Erlebnis*, and may have prompted him to elaborate his thoughts on film. However, I believe it is equally likely that part of the elusiveness of Benjamin's texts is deliberate. In formatting his texts as elliptical, aphoristic fragments, Benjamin sought to foreground language and complicate any easy reading. In his intentional use of words, Benjamin hoped to duplicate the complex relationship between representation and experience, stressing the many possible outcomes made available when we carefully consider the connections the archive of nonsensuous similarities conjures up. Taking cues from the Dadaists and Surrealists who pushed the boundaries of 'common sense,' Benjamin attempted to make his texts perform what it was they were representing.

My project, too, engages this tension between form and content. It is a dissertation that is comprised of both reflective text and artistic practice, and artistic text and reflective practice. Not only does it explore issues that circulate around experience and representation, it also seeks alternate ways of working through Benjamin's theories on film. In keeping with the hybrid nature of my project, and with Benjamin's desire to

excavate alternate paths, I plan to explore what may appear to be unconventional routes for disseminating my dissertation in addition to the usual publication venues. I am particularly interested in the ways in which this project lends itself to a digital format. I plan to produce an online version of my dissertation to exploit Benjamin's notion of a constellation of ideas interrelated through (hyper)links; again, bringing form and content, theory and practice into an integral relationship.

Further, my project criss-crosses many areas: Benjamin studies, film studies, film theory, media studies, cultural studies, cultural geography, archaeology, architecture, memory studies, popular culture, modernism, the baroque, theories of media convergence, practice as research, for example. The fact that my work spans such a wide range of disciplines and approaches makes it valuable for many areas. My hope would be that what I have produced can provide something akin to a toolkit. I would like to think of it as a collection of implements that offer a means to work on the interconnectedness of ideas. Ideally, the reader / viewer could roam through the texts, interrogating the familiar and stumbling across the unexpected, selecting strands to further explore. If this were to happen the reader would creatively simulate the peripatetic figure so dear to Benjamin.

The ability to perceive and engage with—to experience—the irrational, for Benjamin, necessitated both a getting lost from our usual conscious selves and a valuing of a bodily, sentient engagement with the world. In privileging the body as a site of reception in viewing film, Benjamin rescues it from the oblivion of the unknowable and the unvalued. I believe we can think of the interpenetration Benjamin sees between film and body—the process of innervation—as something akin to the role of supplement that he assigns to the translation. The exchange between screen and skin compensates for what each lacks; in film, representation is (re)connected with the body, the site of experience. And although this (re)suturing is, of course, only provisional, in folding the body back into film, Benjamin makes an attempt to recuperate experience. He makes a plea for a renewed appreciation for and connection with the past, which he hopes will be facilitated by film's ability to press us into making new connections in the world.

In keeping with his desire to reconnect experience and the body, I have argued that in the *Technik* of film, Benjamin sees the possibility of creating an opening for the (re)emergence of a ritual form of communication which privileges embodied experience and the sharing of those lived moments over the reportage of 'facts.' Film, in Benjamin's

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thinking, is not only mimetic instructor, it functions as modern storyteller, too; it performs a remembrance service, screening to us what it is we have forgotten and alerting us to the cost of that forgetfulness. At its best, film, in its semblance of shared communication, is able to touch viewers in ways that are meaningful and move them to stray from a routine which veils the marvelous and malevolent lurking in quotidian life. In urging us to dodge our conscious selves and explore the world with a 'first sight' Benjamin is hoping we will be prompted into new connections.

In the process of (re)cognizing similarities, Benjamin, I believe, saw an opportunity for us to brush up against experience, to lessen the gap between sensory apprehension and conscious registration. Benjamin, I would argue, hoped that in viewing film we become aware of the associative behaviour which, for the most part, we unwittingly engage in all the time. In becoming heedful of the act of drawing correspondences we are better equipped to (re)cognize the ways in which the customs and beliefs we may readily accept as natural or inevitable are themselves products of perceived proximities, choices made, and voices privileged. Something of the 'brushing up' against experience is discernable too, I think, in Benjamin's concept of dialectics at a standstill. That figure of paralysis contains a similar instant in which the past (representation) and present (the lived moment of experience) almost merge. Like positive and negative ends of magnets which can never completely meet, but nonetheless, when pushed together produce a palpable force before veering off from each other, in Benjamin's dialectics at a standstill, past and present generate a spark, an arc of energy that pulses from one to the other, electrifying and infusing both past and present with new life as it generates a new possible future.

My works *Picture House* and *Hansel & Gretel* play with these sparks, these moments of collision between past and present. Concerned with the role of memory and a recuperation of the 'outmoded,' my practice engages in what Vivian Sobchack has named a "mnemonic aesthetic."[477] This archaeological approach, Sobchack explains, "both practices and privileges devices and operations that serve to fix and preserve the fleeting ephemera of memory."[478] *Picture House* and *Hansel & Gretel* ask us to (re)consider the mundane and familiar. The (neo)baroque nature of my works has involved drawing from a potentially inexhaustible database of images, sounds, and words, to construct a structure which permitted me to mobilize issues of memory, representation, cultural narratives,

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[477] Sobchack, "Nostalgia for a Digital Object."
[478] Sobchack, "Nostalgia for a Digital Object."

film and digital technologies, reproduction, and allegory. Something of my intent and approach towards my practice has been summarized years ago by Benjamin himself: "That which lies here in ruins, the highly significant fragment, the remnant, is, in fact, the finest material in baroque creation. For it is common practice in the literature of the baroque to pile up fragments ceaselessly, without any strict idea of a goal, and, in the unremitting expectation of a miracle, to take the repetition of stereotypes for a process of intensification."[479]

My 'cinemas of attraction' speak to us about the importance of remembering the past and those moments of "what if" or "just supposing" before those instants were diverted in resignation to a narrative we since have become almost persuaded is as natural as breath and inevitable as death. Get 'real' we say, and, mistaking what in the past others, or we ourselves, have chosen for what is inexorably fixed and 'true,' we unthinkingly accede. *Picture House* and *Hansel & Gretel* ask that we do not so readily accept the given. Through the strange guises and disorienting artifice of these works I would wish that our doubts may surface and be shaken into life. My desire and intent with these works is that they be able to show our world in a way that urges us to think about what it is we are experiencing so that we not unheedingly set it aside.

In continuation of these concerns, I plan to work on an 'Edinburgh Chronicle,' a project that will implement Benjamin's idea of a bio-map. I would like to weave my personal experience of Edinburgh with historical and archival materials to reflect on such notions as an immigrant experience, national identity, and the commercialization of culture. Another future project I would like to undertake would involve a list of the items found with Benjamin when he died: a "leather attaché case (but no manuscript), a man's watch, a pipe, six photographs, an X-ray, a pair of glasses, a few letters and newspapers, along with other papers, and a bit of money."[480] Not only is this a strange collection of items to begin with, but the lack of detail given about these *memento mori*—those few small traces—peaks my curiosity. What to make of such modest remains of a life? What were the photographs of? Who were the letters to? What were the "other papers?" What of the strange oddities in that list—the X-ray! Where did that come from? I am excited about what might be done in weaving these strange things into a new constellation, in suturing these fragments of Benjamin's life into something more; in letting these mundane objects

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[479] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 178.
[480] This inventory is given by the editors, Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings in "Chronology, 1938-1940," *SW*, vol. 4, 445. Frustratingly, they themselves do not reference where they found this information.

tell a story. The results, I hope, would reflect something of the pleasure, frustration, and admiration I have come to feel towards Benjamin, having worked so closely with him over these last years.

Both projects will continue in the vein of the database works I have executed for my dissertation. I am very much interested in developing 'Edinburgh Chronicles' and the 'Benjamin list' as a range of outputs—computer-based works, object installations, and critical essays—that seek out unorthodox methods and venues for dissemination. For each project I am keen to continue my exploration of the potential and effects of an interactive narrative which plays upon a peripatetic and haptic experience, in both virtual and 'actual' ways. For example, working from many of the theories I've explored here, I intend to develop a version, or at least a segment, of the 'Edinburgh Chronicles' as an actual 'tour' through the city of Edinburgh that the participant embarks on, casting her or him as a contemporary flâneuse / flâneur, perhaps, inasmuch as this is feasible, enlisting these individuals to gather and recount their ambulatory findings as part of the project.[481]

The 'spectacular' exhibitions of *Picture House* and *Hansel & Gretel* telescope recycled materials, bringing the past into the present in ways that I hope would both delight and disconcert the reader, a similar experience perhaps to the one Benjamin describes in viewing the odd combinations of old and new in the windows of the arcades. The works, in a way, become a representation of my experience in exploring Benjamin's theories; maps of my travels through Benjamin. As representation, as translation, they are not— cannot be —complete or completely accurate. As Benjamin himself is at repeated pains to point out, inevitably a transformation takes place in all representation; both a copying and a corrupting occur as we attempt to communicate experience. But the process of translation importantly also involves a "transformation and a renewal of something *living*."[482] And, as a source concerned with what is ignored and derided at the cost of what is remembered and privileged, I believe that Benjamin's ideas are still very much alive and relevant.

It would seem that, despite Benjamin's hopes, we still have not managed to incorporate technology into our lives in responsible and productive ways. The "state of emergency," within which Benjamin sees the world as held, is the outcome of an official version of

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[481] I'm thinking here of Janet Cardiff's works such as *Whispering Room, The Paradise Institute*, and her audio walks which all involve the viewer as active participant, amplifying a sensual, embodied experience.
[482] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator, *SW*, vol. 1, 256. Emphasis added.

events told at the expense of alternate histories.[483] The resulting distortion and decay of collective memory leads to a sense of alienation and disenfranchisement. As a consequence modernity is haunted by a pervasive sense of dislocation and lost connections. History has become for most of us little more than a pile of disconnected catastrophes which grows higher and higher.[484] In similar thinking, Canadian literary theorist and critic Northrop Frye, speaking of lost vision in the world, notes that we have "descended into the indifferent and alien nature that we see around us now" and that there can be no recovery until one "realizes that the pleasure gained by dominating and exploiting, whether of his fellow man or of nature itself, is a part of that hell-world."[485]

The disaster, as Benjamin sees it, comes from respecting the status quo, the unthinking acceptance of a notion of progress that crushes and silences that which opposes it.[486] The aftermath of this devastation is cultural oblivion. And what does it mean for us as a society if we do not know the past, above all the unofficial past, that has shaped us? What sort of future can a society have when it has forgotten its history—including, most importantly perhaps, the might-have-been? What is being forgotten and what has gone unspoken? Linda Hutcheon has commented on the fact that, ironically, despite the amnesiac state of the modern condition, the inundation of images that come to us from the past through digital technologies has meant that our memories are constantly refreshed.[487] But whose memories are these? Whose memories are being resuscitated and commemorated? What happens to collective memory when the significance of events is no longer experienced and mobilized by a collective? As Maddin's amnesiatic characters so disconcertingly demonstrate, when actions are disconnected from any sense of responsibility and accountability, the consequences can be disastrous. In light of pressing questions such as these, I believe Benjamin's advice to get lost and seek out alternative routes is as pertinent today, if not more relevant, than it was at the time Benjamin wrote his wayward words.

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[483] Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," VIII, *SW*, vol. 4, 392, see also "Theses on the Philosophy of History," VIII, *Illuminations*, 257, and *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 74.
[484] Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," IX, *SW*, vol. 4, 392, see also "Theses on the Philosophy of History," IX, *Illuminations*, 257-8.
[485] Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*, 75-76.
[486] Benjamin, *Arcades*, [N9a, 1], 473.
[487] Linda Hutcheon, "Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern." Toronto: The University of Toronto English Library, 1998. 7 Dec. 2002 <http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/criticism/hutchinp.html>.

Chronology

1656 Christiaan Huygens develops the magic lantern.

1800 Paris' first arcade, the Passage des Panoramas built.

1818 Karl Marx born May 5, Trier, Prussia.

1822 Louis Daguerre and Charles Maire Bouton build The Diorama, a special effects theatre in Paris.

1827 Niépce credited with producing the first successful photograph.

1839 Louis J.M. Daguerre patents the daguerreotype, a photographic process that considerably reduced previous exposure times.

1848 Marx and Engels publish the *Communist Manifesto*.

1851 The Crystal Palace built to house The Great Exhibition in London.

1856 Sigmund Freud born May 6, Freiberg, Austia-Hungary.

1861 James Clerk Maxwell takes the first permanent colour photograph.

1876 Alexander Graham Bell beats Elisha Gray in being the first to patent the telephone.

1877 Thomas Edison invents the phonograph.

1879 Eadweard Muybridge devises the zoopraxiscope, a disk on which images (each with incremental change) were painted or printed and appeared animated when the disk rotated.

1879 Thomas Edison invents the first commercially viable incandescent electric lamp.

1882 Etienne-Jules Marey perfects the 'photographic gun' which can record 12 exposures per second.

1883 Karl Marx dies.

1887 Eadweard Muybridge publishes *Animal Locomotion*, a collection of 781 photographic prints he produced using multiple cameras to record movement.

1888 George Eastman invents the Kodak, a camera that came preloaded with film (and coins the slogan "you press the button, we do the rest"), which, after exposure, the camera and its contents were returned to an outlet for processing.

1888 Louis Aimé Augustin Le Prince applies for patent for devices for taking and projecting motion pictures. Early 1890 Le Prince disappears without a trace.

1889 Paris Exposition, construction of Eiffel Tower.

1891 Thomas Edison applies for patents for Kinetograph (motion picture photographing camera) and Kinetoscope (motion picture viewing apparatus).

1892 Walter Benjamin born July 15 in Berlin.

1895 The Lumière brothers patent the 'Kinétoscope de (en) projection,' a single device that was both camera and projector. Shortly after, the brothers publicly screened their first film *La Sortie des Ouvriers de l'Usine Lumière* ('Workers leaving the Lumière Factory').

1895 Jazz music begins to become popular.

1897 Georges Méliès begins producing films which featured theatrical effects to exploit the medium's illusionistic possibilities.

1899 Freud publishes *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

1900 First recorded screening of a sound film. However, it wouldn't be until the 1930s when the problems of synchronizing image and sound would be solved and make the 'talkies' a commercially viable format.

1901 Freud publishes *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*.

1913 Charlie Chaplin hired by Keystone Film Company and develops his 'Tramp' character.

1914 Assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand.

1914-1918 World War I.

1914 Benjamin attempts immediately to enlist in the army in the hopes that this will enable him and his friends to stay together. He is rejected. On August 8th Benjamin's friend the young poet Fritz Heinle and Heinle's girlfriend commit suicide as an act of protest against the war.

1915 Benjamin meets Gershom Scholem whom becomes a life-long friend.

1916 Benjamin meets German lyric poet Rainer Maria Rilke. Writes "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man."

1916-1920 Height of the dada movement.

1917 Marcel Duchamp exhibits *Fountain*, a porcelain urinal which he signs R. Mutt.

1917 Russian Revolution. A Provisional Government was established after the overthrow of the Czar. Months later Vladimir Lennon leads the October Revolution in which the Bolsheviks ousted the Provisional Government. Subsequently Russia is at civil war until 1922 when the victorious Communists establish the Soviet Union.

1917 The German army decide Benjamin can be of service but he is given exemption due to an (self-induced) attack of sciatica. Benjamin decides to pursue a doctorate in philosophy and does so at the university of Bern in order to avoid the German draft.

1919 Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks and D. W. Griffith found

United Artists in an attempt to circumvent the ever-increasing consolidation of power by the Hollywood studios.

1919 Treaty of Versailles.

1919 Benjamin makes the acquaintance of Hugo Ball, Emmy Hennings and Ernst Bloch.

1920 Benjamin publishes his dissertation *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*.

1921 Benjamin purchases Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, the painting that was the inspiration for Benjamin's "On the Concept of History." Writes "The Task of the Translator."

1922 Mussolini becomes Prime Minister of Italy.

1923 Marx's *The German Ideology* published posthumously.

1923 Benjamin introduced to Theodor W. Adorno and Siegfried Kracauer.

1924 Benjamin meets Asja Lacis and becomes involved with Marxism.

1924 André Breton's "The Surrealist Manifesto" published.

1925 Sergei Eisenstein makes the silent film *Battleship Potemkin* which glorifies the 1905 battle between crew and commanders but also tests Eisenstein's theories of montage.

1925 Hitler's *Mein Kampf* published in Germany.

1925 Benjamin completes his Habilitation dissertation *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama* which is subsequently rejected by the University of Frankfurt, ruining his aspirations of an academic career.

1926 Warner Brothers produce *Don Juan*, the first mainstream film to use recorded sound (the soundtrack did not include dialogue).

1927 The Jazz Singer is the first feature-length movie to have synchronized dialogue sequences.

1927 Benjamin begins *Passagen-Werk* (*The Arcades Project*).

1927 The first electronic television image, about the size of a postage stamp is transmitted by Philo Farnsworth in his San Francisco Laboratory.

1928 Mickey Mouse makes his first appearance in *Steamboat Willie*. The soundtrack for this film was also the first to have been entirely created and assembled in post-production.

1928 Publication of Benjamin's *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama* and *One-Way Street*.

1928 John Logie Baird transmits a mechanical television its signal from England to the United States.

1929 Benjamin's essay "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia" is published. He begins a series of radio broadcasts for children in Frankfurt and Berlin. Asja Lacis introduces Benjamin to Bertolt Brecht.

1931 Benjamin's "Little History of Photography" published.

1932 The Duke Ellington recording of "It Don't Mean a Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing" starts the 'swing music' dance craze.

1932-1934 Benjamin works on "Berlin Childhood around 1900," which results in two versions; one completed in 1934 and the other which he works on until 1938. Neither version published during his lifetime.

1932 Benjamin begins "A Berlin Chronicle," an altered version of "Berlin Childhood around 1900." He never completed it, nor was it published during his lifetime.

1933 Adolf Hitler appointed Chancellor of Germany.

1933 In March, Benjamin goes into exile in Paris. Writes "The Doctrine of the Similar" and "On the Mimetic Faculty." Benjamin's brother arrested in Germany.

1933-1945 Nazi Germany (Third Reich).

1933 The first episode of "The Lone Ranger" radio series is broadcast.

1935 AEG/Telefunken exhibits the first magnetic tape recorder in Germany.

1935 Benjamin completes first version of "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility."

1936 Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility" appears in French translation. "The Storyteller" published.

1936 Leopold Mannes and Leopold Godowsky, Jr., two professional musicians, invent Kodachrome, a colour film for both still and motion photography.

1936 Beginning of Spanish Civil War. First BBC television transmission. SS Deathshead division established to guard concentration camps. Olympic Games held in Berlin

1936 Franco publicly proclaimed *Generalísimo* of the National army and *Jefe del Estado* (Head of State). Franco's army received support from Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy.

1936-1939 Spanish Civil War.

1937 Nazis mount the *Degenerate Art* exhibition with the intent of ridiculing the modernist artworks which they displayed with aesthetic disregard and labeled with derisive descriptions.

1938 Munich Agreement; Nazis annex Austria.

1939 Freud dies.

1939 Nylon stockings invented. Outbreak of Second World War.

1939-1945 World War II.

1939 Benjamin interned in France from September to November. "Some Motifs in Baudelaire" published.

1940 Benjamin writes "On the Concept of History."

1940 Walter Benjamin commits suicide in Port Bou, Spain to avoid falling into the hands of the Nazis.

1942 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno edit the omnibus volume *Walter Benjamin zum Gedächtnis* (To the Memory of Walter Benjamin) in which the *Theses* on *the* Philosophy *of* History first appears.

1945 August 6 United States drops atomic bomb on Hiroshima. August 9 United States bomb Nagasaki.

1945-1991 Cold War.

1953 Joseph Stalin dies. Nikita Khrushchev succeeds him, serving until 1964 when his party removes him and installs Leonid Brezhnev in his place.

1954 RCA Victor releases the first color television sets

1955 Theodor W. Adorno and Gretel Adorno edit the two-volume selection of Benjamin's *Schriften.*

1956 Elvis Presley's first single *Heartbreak Hotel* released.

1961 Construction begins on the Berlin Wall which divides East and West Germany.

1961 Selection of Walter Benjamin's works published posthumously as *Illuminationen.*

1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.

1963 Compact stereo tape cassettes and players are developed by Phillips.

1964 The Beatles appear on the Ed Sullivan Show.

1965 Nam June Pail uses Sony Portapak to videotape Pope Paul VI's New York procession. This is widely believed to be the first 'consumer' use of Sony's new video technology.

1966 *Briefe*, a two-volume collection of Benjamin's writings, edited by Gershom Scholem and Theodor Adorno published.

1968 *Illuminations*, an English translation by Hanna Ardent of Benjamin's text published.

1969 Ken Thompson and Dennis Ritchie begin developing the UNIX operating system, and "B" (1969) and "C" (1972) computer languages at AT&T Bell Labs.

1969 Intel introduces the first Microprocessor.

1969 The United States Department of Defense develops ARPANET (Advanced Research Projects Agency Network), which eventually becomes the Internet.

1971 First EMail program SNDMSG (Send Message) created by Ray Tomlinson at BBN Technologies.

1972 Suhrkamp's publication of 7 volumes of Benjamin's collected writings begins; completed in 1989.

1976 VHS technology introduced to the consumer market.

1979 Margaret Thatcher elected Prime Minister of Britain.

1980-1988 Iran–Iraq War.

1981 MTV Music TV Cable Network debuts on the air at Midnight, August 1st.

1981 Ronald Reagan elected President of the United States of America (serves until 1989).

1981 First IBM PC released.

1982 Falklands War.

1982 The CD (Digital Compact Disc) is introduced to consumer market.

1983 Sony releases the first consumer camcorder.

1984 Apple Macintosh release their computer (128K).

1985 Mikhail Gorbachev succeeds Konstantin Chernenko as General Secretary of the Communist Party.

1989 Fall of the Berlin Wall.

1990 John Major becomes Prime Minister of Britain.

1991 USSR collapses.

1991 Gulf War.

1996 The DVD (Digital Versatile Disc) introduced to the consumer market.

1996 *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings. Volume 1, 1913-1926* published by Belknap Press.

1997 Tony Blair elected as Prime Minister of Britain (serves until 2007).

1999 *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings. Volume 2, 1927-1934* published by Belknap Press.

2000 *Napster*, an internet file sharing site created.

2001 George W. Bush elected President of the United States.

2001 Apple releases the iPod.

2001 Twin Towers bombed.

2002 *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings. Volume 3, 1935-1938* published by Belknknap Press.

2002 *Walter Benjamin: The Arcades Project* published by Belknknap Press.

2003 George Bush disregards UN decision and, with the support of Tony Blair's New Labour government, invades Iraq.

2004 *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings. Volume 4, 1938-1940* published by Belknknap Press.

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