

Introduction

In “Convolute J” of *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin quotes Joseph de Maistre’s account, in *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, of the havoc wreaked by an earthquake on the organisation of exhibits displayed in a natural history museum:

The door to the collection rooms is open and broken; there are no more windows. Whole drawers have fallen out, while others hang by their hinges, ready to drop. Some shells have rolled out into the hall of minerals, and a hummingbird’s nest is resting on the head of a crocodile. What madman, though, could have any doubt of the original intention, or believe that the edifice was built to look this way? [...] The order is as visible as the disorder; and the eye that ranges over this mighty temple of nature reestablishes without difficulty all that a fatal agency has shattered, warped, soiled, and displaced.¹

In Siegfried Kracauer’s 1927 essay on photography, a similar image emerges in his analysis of the scrambling of “natural reality” performed by the intermingling of the undated, disorganised contents of a massive photographic archive. The images contained in this archive (which together constitute a “*general inventory of [...] nature*”²) have, Kracauer writes, “lost [their] relationship to the present”.³ That is to say, the historical “place” of each image is, from the viewer’s perspective, not something that can be easily determined.

In a similar vein to the intermingling of the natural history exhibits described by de Maistre, Kracauer argues that the hodgepodge of images contained in the photographic archive produces a situation in which the

1. De Maistre quoted in: Walter Benjamin: [J86, 2], *The Arcades Project*, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press 1999, p. 377.

2. Siegfried Kracauer: “Photography”, in: Kracauer: *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. by Thomas Y. Levin, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press 1995, p. 61.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

viewer's "habitual" understanding of the "relationship among the elements of nature" is suspended.⁴ In contrast, however, to de Maistre, Kracauer argues that it is neither straightforward, nor desirable, to reestablish the previously ordered relationship between these elements by seeking – as if they were parts of a jigsaw puzzle – to reinstate them to their so-called "natural" positions. On the contrary, Kracauer claims that the freeing up of the order of nature performed by the jumbling of the photographic images encourages the viewer to reconceive the possibilities of both the past and the future outside of the evolutionary conception of the relationship between the past and the present espoused by those who "subject [...] the historical process to the very kind of necessity which we are accustomed to attribute to the workings of nature".⁵

In both Benjamin's writings on history and in Kracauer's final book, *History: The Last Things Before the Last*, the relationship between the natural sciences and historicist accounts of history are discussed in some detail. For both Benjamin and Kracauer, what is problematic about the practice of "assimilating historiography to natural science"⁶ is the degree to which it naturalises the idea that history is constituted out of a series of causally related events that are bound together (under the banner of abstract concepts such as "culture", "enlightenment", and "objective spirit"⁷) by a form of evolutionary progress.

"Historicism", Benjamin writes,

contents itself with establishing a causal nexus among various moments in history. But no state of affairs having causal significance is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years.⁸

For Benjamin, what is problematic about the historicist conception of history as a form of evolutionary progress is the extent to which it naturalises the choices and decisions made by those who are in positions

4. Ibid.

5. Siegfried Kracauer: *History: The Last Things Before the Last*, Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers 1995, p. 36. Hereafter referred to as *History*.

6. Walter Benjamin: "Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History'", in: Benjamin: *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4, ed. by Howard Eiland/Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press 2003, p. 401.

7. Ibid., p. 403.

8. Benjamin: "On the Concept of History", in: Benjamin: *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4, p. 397.

of power. “The rulers at any time”, he writes, “are the heirs of all those who have been victorious throughout history”.⁹ Historicism, in this sense, can thus be seen as a form of “empathy with the victor”.¹⁰ Its delineation of political decisions and events as stepping stones in history’s so-called march of progress toward the future creates a climate within which it is difficult to conceive of the possibilities of the past, the present and the future outside of the parameters established and maintained by the ruling status quo.

In his reading of Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History”, Kracauer argues that in order to critique this model of historical development, one must also critique the concept of chronology upon which it is based – a model within which the passing of time is heralded as “the matrix of a meaningful process”.¹¹ In *History: The Last Things Before the Last*, Kracauer states that the historicists “unquestionably confide in the magic of chronology” in their delineation of the historical process. But how, he asks, would our conception of history change if “their confidence turn[ed] out to be unwarranted?” What if “calendric time is not the all-powerful medium they suppose it to be”, but rather “an empty indifferent flow which takes along with it a conglomerate of unconnected events?”¹²

In an attempt to not only debunk the historicist conception of the significance of chronological time, but also to provide an alternative to the historicist perspective, Kracauer outlines the workings of memory in a manner reminiscent of Marcel Proust (the writings of whom had a significant impact on the development of both Kracauer and Benjamin’s analyses of a form of historical knowledge that would challenge the historicist position). The irrelevance of chronological time, Kracauer notes, can be “confirmed by the mechanics of our memory”.¹³ Echoing Proust’s distinction, in *In Search of Lost Time*¹⁴, between voluntary and involuntary forms of recollection (the details, and significance, of which will be discussed in Chapter 1) Kracauer claims that the most vivid memories of the past are often those we are unable to date. “Perhaps”, he speculates, this is because

9. “Paralipomena to ‘On the Concept of History’”, p. 406.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *History*, p. 150.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 149.

14. Marcel Proust: *In Search of Lost Time*, (6 Vols.), London: Vintage 1996.

Only the volume and page numbers will be given hereafter.

the memory for qualities develops in inverse ratio to the chronological memory: the better equipped a person is to resuscitate the essential features of encounters that played a role in his life, the more easily will he misjudge their temporal distances from the present or play havoc with their chronological order. These errors must be laid to the difficulty for him to transfer his memories from their established places on his subjective time curve to their objective positions in chronological time – a time he never experienced.¹⁵

For Benjamin too, what is significant about Proust's conception of involuntary memory is the extent to which the experience of "*Jetztzeit*" ("now time") with which it is associated exists "outside the range of time and its measurements".¹⁶ According to Proust, the experience of the past in the present evoked by involuntary memory is not the past as viewed from the perspective of the present, but rather "the past just as it was *at the moment when it was itself the present*".¹⁷ Thus, in stark contrast to the image of the past presented by historicism (within which each period or event is viewed retrospectively as a transitional point in history's so-called journey of progress toward the present), the experience of the past evoked by involuntary memory is one in which the historical "place" of the past has not yet been determined.

In Benjamin's writings on history, it is clear that Proust's account of the experience of the past in the present evoked by involuntary memory had an important impact on the development of his analysis of a form of historical knowledge that would challenge the historicist position. "The concept of historical time", Benjamin writes, must form "an antithesis to the idea of a temporal continuum".¹⁸ In contrast to historicism, the "founding concept" of a political engagement with the past "is not progress but actualization".¹⁹ Echoing Proust, he claims that to treat the past politically means to create a situation in which "everything past (in its time) can acquire a higher grade of actuality than it had at the mo-

15. History, p. 149.

16. Proust: Vol. 4, p. 441.

17. Proust: Vol. 6, p. 429. My emphasis. In "Convolute N", Benjamin states of this experience: "It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: Image is dialectics at a standstill". [N2a, 3], The Arcades Project, p. 462.

18. "Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History'", p. 407.

19. [N2,2], The Arcades Project, p. 460.

ment of its existing”, because it is the “actualization of former contexts [which] puts the truth of all present action to the test”.²⁰

Within this schema, the shake-up of the natural history exhibits performed by the earthquake described by de Maistre could be said to exemplify what Benjamin describes as the “blasting of historical continuity”²¹ performed by a political historiographical practice that has liberated itself from the “vulgar historical naturalism”²² characteristic of historicist accounts of history as a form of evolutionary progress. In a similar vein to Kracauer’s analysis of the disordered state of the photographic archive, the jumbling of the natural history exhibits (so whimsically embodied in the image of the hummingbird’s nest that has landed on the head of a crocodile) could be said to open up a space within which the historical “place” of the exhibits (and, by extension, the relationship between the past and the present) can be re-imagined and re-explored.

Indeed, the disorder among the exhibits described by de Maistre also resembles the rubble heap of historical materials out of which Alexander Kluge’s 1979 film *The Patriot* (*Die Patriotin*) is constructed: a film which challenges the viewer to reconceive the possibilities of both the past and the future outside of the framework imposed by historicism, whose “identification of history with nature”, Kracauer states, “not only unduly minimizes[s] the role of contingencies in history”, but “preclude[s] man’s freedom of choice, his ability to create new situations”.²³ As I discuss in detail in Chapter 6, this desire to emphasise the “role of contingencies in history” is a driving force behind Kluge’s highly experimental film, television and literary work. Why, Kluge asks, do “we carry in us such a fixed conception of the probable order of events, which is only the sum of what is impressed upon us by the objective history or the media? Why do we hang on to it so energetically, while the imagination circles elsewhere [...] and while] the sum of improbabilities is just as great as the sum of all probabilities”?²⁴

In keeping with Kluge, the work of Benjamin and Kracauer discussed in this book is driven by a desire to emphasise the role of contingencies in history, to maximise one’s freedom of choice, and to stimulate one’s capacity for imagination into reconceiving the possibilities of

20. [0,5], *The Arcades Project*, p. 857.

21. [N10a,1], *The Arcades Project*, p. 475.

22. [N2,6], *The Arcades Project*, p. 461.

23. *History*, p. 37.

24. Claus Philipp: “Vertrauenswürdige Irrtümer: Ein Gespräch”, *Kolik*, No. 13 (2000), p. 10.

the past and the present outside of the parameters of the status quo. The aim of the book is thus not to provide an overview of the work of each of these three figures. Rather, through a detailed analysis of Benjamin, Kracauer, and Kluge's engagements with a range of different subjects (including topics as diverse as literature, film, theatre, photography, historiography, and television), each of the chapters seeks to draw out the extent to which the concept of imagination plays a central role in their analyses of a mode of perception and experience that could serve as a catalyst for the creation and sustenance of a desire for "a better nature".²⁵

The concept of imagination to which the title of the book refers is, however, not a strictly defined, stable concept. Rather, it is a term which is employed (in a fashion reminiscent of Benjamin's delineation of the mimetic faculty²⁶) to refer to a capacity which facilitates both a process of mediation between the outside world and one's own experiences and memories, and an active, creative relationship to one's environment that is neither circumscribed, nor hindered by the conception of the possibilities and limitations of the present maintained by the ruling status quo.²⁷

In Benjamin's writings on both mimesis and proletarian children's theatre, it is the capacity for imagination demonstrated in children's play which serves as a model for a mode of perception and cognition that is not inhibited by what the adult world deems to be appropriate and/or possible. Within this schema, the child's imagination functions in a manner comparable to the earthquake described by de Maistre. Indeed, what is significant about the capacity for imagination demonstrated in children's play (a topic which also emerges in my analysis of the work of Kracauer and Kluge) is the extent to which "it decomposes all creation;

25. [J76, 1], *The Arcades Project*, p. 362.

26. See "Doctrine of the Similar" and "On the Mimetic Faculty", in: Benjamin: *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, ed. by Michael W. Jennings/Howard Eiland/Gary Smith, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press 1999, pp. 694-698, and 720-722 respectively. Benjamin's analysis of the significance of the mimetic faculty will be discussed in Chapter 2.

27. As Kluge and Oskar Negt have pointed out, within this schema, the imagination is "not a particular substance (as when one says 'so-and-so has a lot of imagination'), but the organizer of mediation". See Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge: *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press 1993, p. 37.

and with the raw materials accumulated [...], it creates a new world – it produces the sensation of newness”.²⁸

In Parts 1 and 2 of the book (which focus on the writings of Benjamin and Kracauer) the sense of possibility associated with the production of this “sensation of newness” is discussed across a range of different contexts. While Chapter 1 focuses on Benjamin’s writings on Marcel Proust (and the impact that Proust’s conception of involuntary memory had on the development of Benjamin’s childhood reminiscences), Chapters 3 and 4 explore Benjamin and Kracauer’s analyses of the role that an experimental film practice could play in stimulating the spectator’s capacity for imagination into reconceiving the possibilities of the present.

As I discuss in detail in each of these chapters, absolutely central to Benjamin and Kracauer’s analyses of the radical possibilities of film is the extent to which the camera’s extension of the spectator’s vision beyond the realm of subjective intention facilitates a mode of perception and experience which challenges our previously held conceptions about the material world -- a theme which is also taken up, in Chapter 2, via an analysis of Benjamin’s delineation of the expansion of the capacity for perception and experience generated by his experiments with hashish.

Indeed, what is fascinating about Benjamin’s analysis of the mode of perception facilitated by both hashish intoxication and the camera is the extent to which it is associated with the opening up of an “image space” within which the “natural” order of things is momentarily suspended. In a passage that resonates strongly with the effects of the earthquake described by de Maistre, Benjamin argues that the significance of film lies in its capacity (through devices such as framing, close-up, slow motion, and editing) to “explode [...] the prevailing world into rubble”²⁹ and, in

28. Charles Baudelaire quoted in: Benjamin: [J34a,1], *The Arcades Project*, p. 290. Benjamin’s delineation of “the destructive character” also resonates with this image. “The destructive character”, Benjamin writes, “sees nothing permanent. But for this very reason he sees ways everywhere. Where others encounter walls or mountains, there, too, he sees a way. [...] Because he sees ways everywhere, he always stands at a crossroads. No moment can know what the next will bring. What exists he reduces to rubble – not for the sake of the rubble, but for that of the way leading through it”. Benjamin: “The Destructive Character”, in: Benjamin: *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, p. 542.

29. Gertrud Koch: “Cosmos in Film: On the Concept of Space in Walter Benjamin’s ‘Work of Art’ essay”, in: *Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin/Peter Osborne, London and New York: Routledge 1994, p. 210.

doing so, to open up a space within which the possibilities and limitations of the current situation can be re-imagined and re-explored. In this regard, Benjamin writes, film

manages to assure us of a vast and unsuspected field of action [*Spielraum*]. 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 [*weitverstreuten Trümmern*].³⁰

The role that an experimental film and television practice could play in rejuvenating our capacity for perception and imagination is also taken up in Part 3 of the book via an analysis of the work of Alexander Kluge – a figure who is, in many regards, an heir to the ideas and concerns that preoccupied Benjamin and Kracauer. In a similar vein to both these figures, Kluge argues that the task of a political film practice is not to immerse the spectator in a fictional world, but to rejuvenate the audience's capacity for imagination into reconceiving the possibilities of the past and the present. Indeed, if Benjamin argues that film's radical potential lies in its capacity to explode the world around us into rubble, then Kluge's film and television work (which is itself constructed out of a diverse collection of "raw materials" – including photographs, diagrams, interviews, maps, clips from movies, and documentary footage) could be said to take this potential a step further.

In a similar vein to the undated, disorganised contents of the photographic archive described by Kracauer, what is significant about the "raw materials" out of which Kluge's film and television work is constructed is the extent to which they actively encourage the audience to draw on their own imagination and experience in aid of the creation of different cultural and historical imaginaries. Indeed, as I argue in Chapter 6 of the highly eclectic imaging practice characteristic of *The Patriot*, meaning is not to be found in any particular image (nor in the film as a whole), but in the thoughts, associations, and impressions sparked by the relationship between the materials – connections that encourage the

30. See Benjamin: "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility" (Third Version), in: Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 4, p. 265, and Benjamin: "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit", in: Benjamin: Gesammelte Schriften (7 Vols.), ed. by Rolf Tiedemann/Hermann Schwepenhäuser, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1991, Vol. I.2, pp. 499–500.

spectator to think about the “place” of both the past and the present in different terms.

For Kluge, Kracauer, and Benjamin, the task of a political film/literary/historiographical/television practice is not to provide the audience/reader with the image of a different kind of future, nor to channel the viewer’s/reader’s observations and associations into conceiving of the benefits of a particular political outlook. Rather, as I demonstrate in the book (through an analysis of a diverse range of topics that span a broad range of historical periods), the work of each of these figures is driven not only by a desire to denaturalise the current state of affairs, but to cleave open a space within history’s so-called march of progress toward the future within which the possibilities of both the past and the present can be imagined and explored anew.

Finally, in the conclusion to the book, I seek (via an analysis of a short but, nonetheless, highly evocative passage in Kluge’s 2003 *Die Lücke, die der Teufel läßt*) to draw out the relevance of some of the concerns addressed in the book for the contemporary political context, within which war and violence continue to be waged in the name of historical progress.

