

# The ‘How’ of Knowledge

## With a Postscript/Preview

### on Planetary Perception

Susan Buck-Morss

A person’s past is marked by digressions into unexpected situations that motivate work. They keep us going.

The work appears consistent not because of lived continuity, but because (we can’t help ourselves) there are questions and perceptions that haunt our experiences.

They reappear, they transform themselves. But they don’t go away.

#### Construction

Fragments. Snippets. Clippings. Folders of notes. Boxes of images. Pieces of text that appear as images. Text blocks as snapshots of reality. Footprints, traces of the material world.

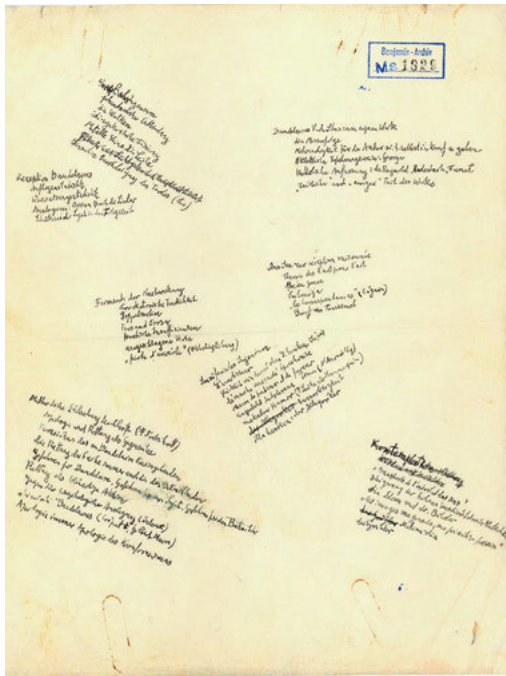
**Walter Benjamin’s Arcade Project:**  
Why it never became a book, why a linear format could not contain his perceptual organizations.

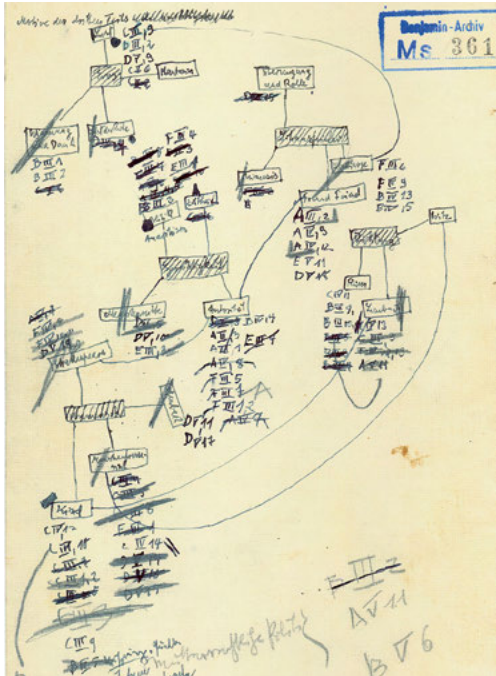
What if you never did write in a linear form? What kind of logic could you claim? Why would you enter a profession of scholarly production? How could you purport to write academic books, research projects, grant proposals, tenure dossiers?

Thought by association.  
Juxtaposition of fragments.

Dialectics in open air, not as a line but a leap, landing you in a different space, as thought’s reorientation.

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[56]

**Benjamin's writing materials:**  
fragments of a collective past.  
Temporary arrangements as experi-  
mental designs, marshalled together to  
fit the task: a literary review, a philo-  
sophical constellation.

#### Visual Organization:

If we think about a book as an appara-  
tus, it becomes interesting to think its  
elements of construction as modules  
of thought. Movable parts. Changeable  
function. Like constructivist furniture.

Rodchenko called socialist com-  
modities 'comrades' because they  
worked with you, conforming to  
the changing needs of daily life.

Folding chairs. Folding beds.  
Multipurpose tables. Personal  
use values.

Pieces of text that transform them-  
selves. Rooms of thought arranged as  
sets for action.



[57]

**Pedagogic function: to teach by seeing.  
“I have nothing to say, only to show.”**

—Walter Benjamin<sup>01</sup>

**“If they don’t give you a seat at the table,  
bring a folding chair.”**

—Shirley Chisholm<sup>02</sup>

01 Walter Benjamin, “Das Passagen-Werk,” in *Gesammelte Schriften: Vol. 5*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Suhrkamp, 1982), 574.

02 This quote is attributed to Shirley Chisholm by fellow activist Donna Brazile. See for instance Eric Andersson, “See Regina King as Trailblazing Black Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm in *Shirley* First Look Photos,” *People Magazine*, January 9, 2024, <https://people.com/see-regina-king-first-black-congresswoman-shirley-chisholm-shirley-8424082>.

## Early Cinema as Inspiration

Eisenstein controlled the meaning of montage for purposes of political education. But Vertov played with it. The effect was cognitive liberation. He showed us the apparatus.



[58]

Images convey ideas without the abstraction of words.  
Reality talks.



[59]

Images are the storehouse of memory.



[60]

Vertov's film editor Elizaveta Svilova is working at the editing, then seen sorting shots into specific positions on the labelled shelves.



[61]



[62]

The shelves where Svilova stores the film are labelled:

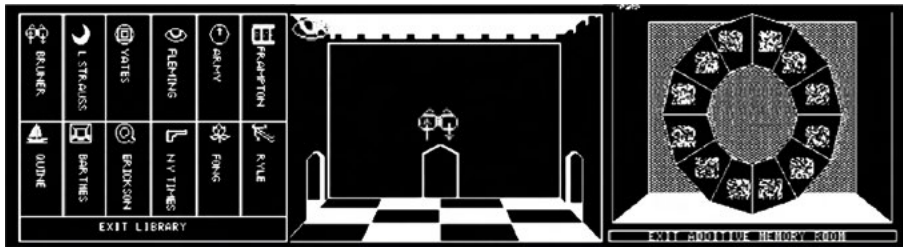
- *City Scenes*
- *Factory*
- *Machines* (cars)
- *Bazaar* (marketplace)
- *Fokusnik* (man with movie camera)



[63]

**“Any person today can lay claim to being filmed.”**

—Walter Benjamin



[64]

**“What, I wondered, would an art of memory look like today...”**

—Robert Edgar<sup>03</sup>

**“For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.”**

—Walter Benjamin<sup>04</sup>

03 Ben Davis, “Memory Theater One: Robert Edgar,” *The Atlanta Art Papers*, 1985, <https://www.mit.edu/~bhdavis/Edgar.html>.

04 Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (Schocken Books 1968), 255.



[65]

**The camera: "I am an eye. A mechanical eye. Freed from the boundaries of time and space, I co-ordinate any and all points of the universe, wherever I want them to be. My way leads towards the creation of a fresh perception of the world. Thus I explain in a new way the world unknown to you."**

—Dziga Vertov, cited by John Berger in *Ways of Seeing*.<sup>05</sup>

John Berger's television series *Ways of Seeing* (1972) cut through the mystification of traditional art history by paying attention to the social realities visible in the paintings, as well as the social implications of where and how they were viewed.

Berger asked "what happens when a painting is shown on a television screen. The painting enters each viewer's house. There it is surrounded by his wallpaper, his furniture, his mementoes. It enters the atmosphere of his family. It becomes their talking point. It lends its meaning to their meaning. At the same time it enters a million other houses and, in each of them, is seen in a different context. Because of the camera, the painting now travels to the spectator rather than the spectator to the painting. In its travels, its meaning is diversified."<sup>06</sup>

Berger's television series became a book, rather than the other way around.

05 Dziga Vertov (1923), as cited in John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Penguin, 1972), 17. The quote can be found in a different translation in Dziga Vertov, "The Council of Three," in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, eds. Annette Michelson and Kevin O'Brien (University of California Press, 1984), 17.

06 Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 19–20.



## Encyclopedia Project

1976: My dissertation on Theodor Adorno was written in the company of students on strike in two countries. Its completion led to a job at the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS), a leftist think tank in Washington, D.C. I was to work on an 'Encyclopedia of Knowledge for Social Reconstruction.' Brainchild of IPS founder Marc Raskin, it aspired for the twentieth century what the French *Encyclopédie* had accomplished for the eighteenth—new knowledge for a new social order.

I would relocate to the affiliated Transnational Institute (TNI) in Amsterdam. I would meet with intellectuals to bring them into the project, the wide-flung friends of IPS and fellows of TNI: John Berger (Switzerland), Susan Sontag (New York), Ivan Illich (Mexico), Paul Feyerabend (Austria), Paulo Freire and Marcos Arruda (Brazil), Egbal Ahmad (Pakistan), Baskar Vashee (Zimbabwe), and Susan George (France).

All were critics of the hegemonic order; some were followed by the CIA.



[66] Handwritten note by John Berger in *Le Monde des livres* (May 16, 1977). Berger writes this note to Raskin who sends it to Buck-Morss.

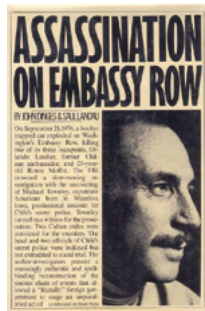
TNI's new director, and my future boss in Amsterdam, was Orlando Letelier, ambassador to the US under Salvador Allende, the elected Socialist president of Chile who died in the presidential palace, a victim of the coup of Augusto Pinochet (backed by Kissinger) on September 11, 1973.

What was the New Knowledge? A series of books? Collaborative writing? A global conversation? If Enlightenment's reason was no longer the claim for universality, was left politics a sufficient bond for collaboration?

How could funding be secured—funding that gave life support to worthy intellectuals in their writings critical of the established order?



On September 21, 1976, during preparations to relocate, Orlando Letelier was assassinated by a car bomb on the streets of Washington. Our co-worker Ronni Moffit died with him. Her husband Michael survived the explosion. I wasn't there; I heard later. The rain, the police response held me up in traffic. We met together at IPS wordless.



against social revolutions, US support of dictators against popular movements, US support of racist regimes of white minority rule. The streets filled with men and women of every nationality, in solidarity with those assassinated in the September rain.

*What is the lesson?* A student rebellion is not a revolution. Solidarity is not personal friendship but a global commitment. Political positioning is a stance toward life. And death.

She commits herself that day to the intellectual tradition of thinkers, wherever they reside, whose lives those in power find expendable.

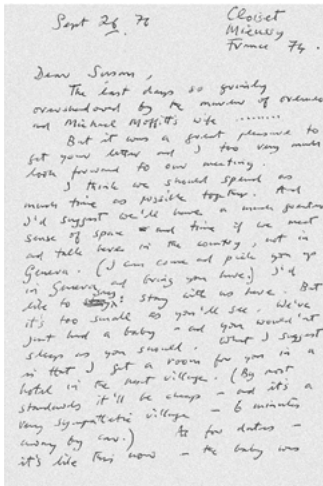
History as repair. Not restoring wholeness, but saving fragments. A radical rescue of tradition. An ethical mandate for work.

[67]–[68]

A student radical with a new PhD knows nothing of the world. She experiences now a political crime of the highest magnitude, the violent deaths of two vibrant people, caused not by accident but by design. It happens in the center of the US capital while government officials turn a blind eye. She finds herself days later in the midst of a massive demonstration by the staffs of embassies of developing nations and others in protest against this assassination as well as so many US actions— in Chile, Brazil, Nicaragua, Cuba, Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe)—US support of coups

## Meeting John Berger

Among the collaborating fellows of TNI was the exemplary thinker in images, John Berger. He invited me to visit soon after my arrival in Amsterdam.



[69]

At lunch, with pad and pen, John proposed this idea of an encyclopedia of knowledge for our time: we should focus on lived experience in its corporeal manifestations—aesthetics in the literal meaning of the term, as sensory perception, where hand and eye, thought and physical practice were not separated in knowledge production and knowledge sharing.

Encyclopedia entries might focus on the use value of things (roads) in their contemporary form (highways) as encountered in daily life.

We sat over lunch and drew lists.

John suggested these words for entries: necessity; leisure; mobility; shelter; tool; age; theft; nudity; war; mirror; food; dust; pain; trust; solidarity; dreams; security/danger/crisis. And places: museum, factory, housing, shops, park, cemetery, bank, asylum office, restaurant, prison, zoos. The point of these would be to make materially visible the lived modernity that needed to be reflected upon, critically.

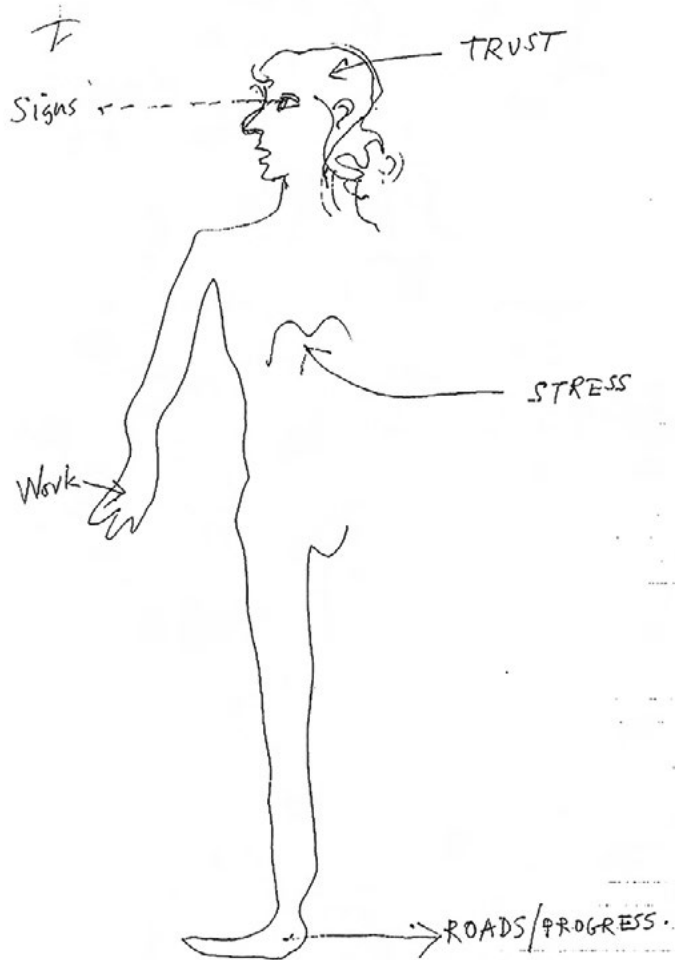
A pilot volume was imagined from A (anger) to Z (zoos). L is for locks (the only security of possession is not a lock technology, but social acceptance of the legitimacy of the private property regime...

Reading reality like a book.

Thinking a book as reality.

The centrality of visual perception to philosophy in our time.

John drew a sketch during lunchtime (I complained it looked like a man. Adjustments were made.)



[70]

## An Experiment: Image as Philosophy/ Philosophy as Image

1978: Mirtos, the south shore of Crete. I sat for months in the crossroads cafés where tourists' romantic dream-worlds and villagers' existential precarity overlapped. In images passing by, with no understanding of the language, I learned to see what was going on. (One foot in the boat, adrift, one on the secure shore of academia...)



[71]

This village experiment was disrupted by being offered a position at Cornell.<sup>07</sup> I said yes. Despite such extraordinary colleagues as Benedict Anderson and Martin Bernal, I was uneasy.



[72]

My task was to teach political theory in the Department of Government where habits of instruction were visually impaired. I wanted to change that. I wrote a proposal for doing philosophy in image form: dialectical negation, capitalist deceptions, class differences, in Vertovian/Eisensteinian fashion. I was told, if I wanted to stay at Cornell, I should drop this project of philosophizing through images.

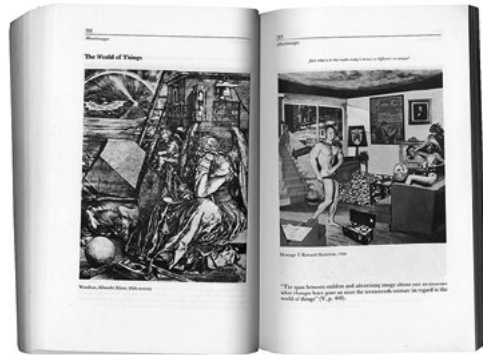
07 Susan Buck-Morss, "Semiotic Boundaries and the Politics of Meaning: Modernity on Tour—A Village in Transition," in *New Ways of Knowing: The Sciences, Society, and Reconstructive Knowledge*, eds. Marcus G. Raskin and Herbert J. Bernstein (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1987).

Officially, I gave up on the project. But its way of working was smuggled into a book on Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project.<sup>08</sup> No one knew where to shelve my book on Benjamin: Philosophy? History? Literature? Political theory? Cultural studies? Critical theory?<sup>09</sup>

Benjamin was brilliant in creating 'dialectical images' as thought-montages of past and present, visible within the text itself:

**"Bomber planes make us remember what Leonardo Da Vinci expected of the flight of man; he was to have raised himself into the air 'in order to look for snow on the mountain summits, and then return to scatter it over the city streets shimmering with the heat of summer.'"**

—Walter Benjamin<sup>10</sup>



[73]

- 08 Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (MIT Press, 1989).
- 09 Richard Bernstein, "Putting Together the Pieces of an Unfinished Book," *New York Times*, July 16, 1990.
- 10 Walter Benjamin, "Das Passagen-Werk," 609.

Lesson one: Dialectics:



[74]

Lesson two: Inequality: Golf Course/Slums:



[75]

Lesson three: Commodity Form:



[76]



An unexpected meeting in Moscow, 1987, with Soviet philosophers just discovering Adorno and Benjamin, led to a sustained collaboration. Valery Podoroga, who wrote on Eisenstein's cinema and Soviet dreamworlds, led a seminar on visual anthropology.<sup>11</sup> He read literature through the sensory traces the texts contained. For five years, as the Cold War order crumbled around us, we conversed and collaborated with and about images.<sup>12</sup>

At Cornell, I began teaching Visual Culture and Social Theory, first with Hal Foster, and later as Director of Visual Studies, a nonexistent interdisciplinary department, housed in a virtual building designed by Patrick Foran who planted a socialist avant-garde construction in the center of the Cornell arts quad.

When slide transparency technology became obsolete, I dropped the large lecture course, shelving my four hundred transparencies and double-mounted slide carousels. The images migrated to a personal website created by the design studio Project Projects, founded by Adam Michaels and Prem Krishnamurthy in lower Manhattan.<sup>13</sup>

In academic publishing, 'figures' and 'texts' are too often treated as different species of thought. Images go to art departments and copy stays with the editor, rather than seeing text blocks as images and images as text. Articles on the website allowed another relationship to grow between them.



[77]



[78]

- 11 Valery Podoroga, *Mimesis: The Analytic Anthropology of Literature* (Verso Books, 2022).
- 12 Susan Buck-Morss, "A Global Public Sphere?," *Radical Philosophy*, no. 111 (2002) 2–10.
- 13 See it here: <https://www.susanbuckmorss.info>.



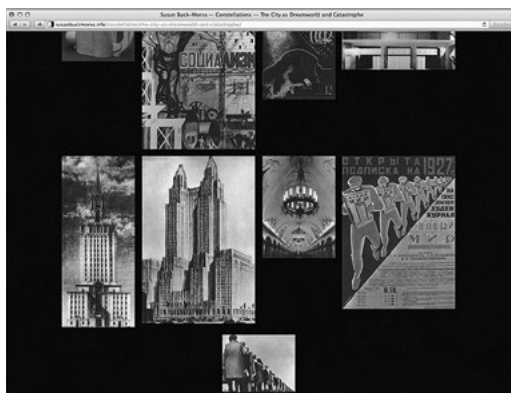
At the CUNY Graduate Center in 2022, I began a new course, “Politics of the Image.” Available materials have multiplied. The issues are crucial to political life.

Students today are at home with the task of constructing ideas with images.

Benjamin’s thinking remains central.

The antidote to aestheticizing politics is perhaps less to politicize art than to politicize perception itself—aesthesis in the original meaning of the word. Any image counts as evidence. Books are not superseded. No technology is. In film, on television, with computers, in books, the ways of seeing transform us. Wikipedia took on the task of knowledge for the twenty-first century. But questions of method, the ‘how’ of knowledge, remain.

**“Remember the Romanian uprising in 1989, when protesters invaded TV studios to make history? At that moment, images changed their function. Broadcasts from occupied TV studios became active catalysts of events—not records or documents. Since then it has become clear that images are ... nodes of energy and matter that migrate across different supports, shaping and affecting people, landscapes, politics, and social systems. They acquired an uncanny ability to proliferate, transform, and activate.”**  
—Hito Steyerl<sup>14</sup>



[79]

14 Hito Steyerl, “Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?,” *e-flux Journal* 49 (2013).

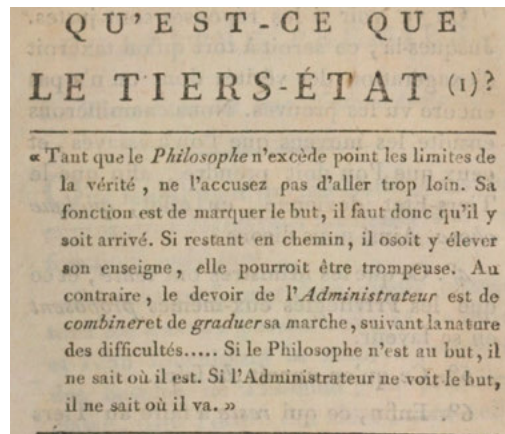
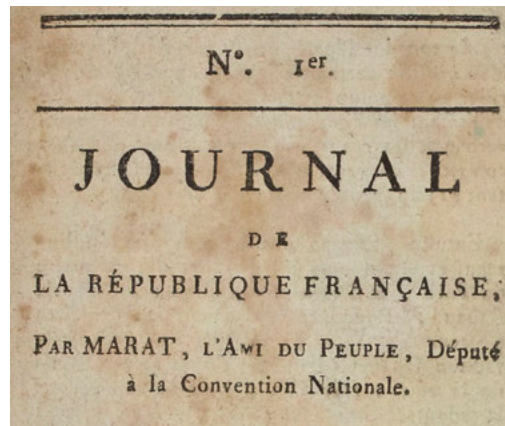
## Postscript/Preview on Planetary Perception

Critical Theory has missed the opportunity to respond to the ecological crises of our time. Nature too has agency, within a scale of time and space that dwarfs the (Kantian) anthropocentric world. Hence a return to post-Hegelian (Marx-Adorno) approaches to history/nature (Marx's *1844 Manuscripts*, Horkheimer & Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*) is not enough.

I am proposing something more radical: a rejection of the Kantian doctrine (prominent in Habermas' work) that knowledge divides into three forms, characterized by distinct and different critical methods of analysis: Reason (1<sup>st</sup> critique), Morals (2<sup>nd</sup> critique) and Aesthetics (3<sup>rd</sup> critique). As a philosophical positioning, none of them speaks to the holistic transformation of consciousness that is required as a political response the ecological crises: Reason leads to instrumental/transactional politics and (perhaps) the rationalization of revolutionary violence; Moral purity (Hegel's 'beautiful soul') may send individuals to heaven but they leave a sullied earth behind; Aesthetics, understood today in the diminished sense of 'art,' enacts political protest as 'autonomy' that cannot escape the financial interests of the artworld.

Seeing is an aesthetic form of cognition. Images matter. Perception shifts our sight from the era of the 'posts' (post-modernism, post-Marxism, post-colonialism) and acknowledges our situation as pre-planetary.

We need a transformation in vision.



[80]–[81]

## GAZETTE NATIONALE, OU LE MONITEUR UNIVERSEL

N<sup>o</sup>. 21.

DU 20 AU 21 JUILLET 1789.

De Paris.

*Suite des détails des circonstances qui ont amené la prise de la Bastille, et relation de cet événement.*

Les citoyens de tout rang, de tout ordre, de tout âge, tous les Français qui se trouvent dans la capitale se font inscrire sur la liste des soldats de la Patrie, et se décorent de la cocarde verte. Il est statué que chaque district formera des patrouilles pour garder la ville, qu'on s'incorporera avec les brigands, afin de les désarmer sans effort, et que le prévôt des marchands livrera aux moyens de fournir promptement des fusils et des munitions de guerre (1).

Après cet arrêté, les drapeaux de la ville furent déployés, on fit des décharges de canons, pour tenir les citoyens en alerte, on établit des tranchées, des barricades dans les faubourgs et dans quelques rues du centre; on posta par-tout des corps-de-garde; et, en moins de trente-six heures, Paris présenta l'image d'une ville de guerre, et vit dans son enceinte au moins cent mille hommes qui se divisèrent par compagnies, nommèrent des commandans, et veillèrent à la tranquillité publique.

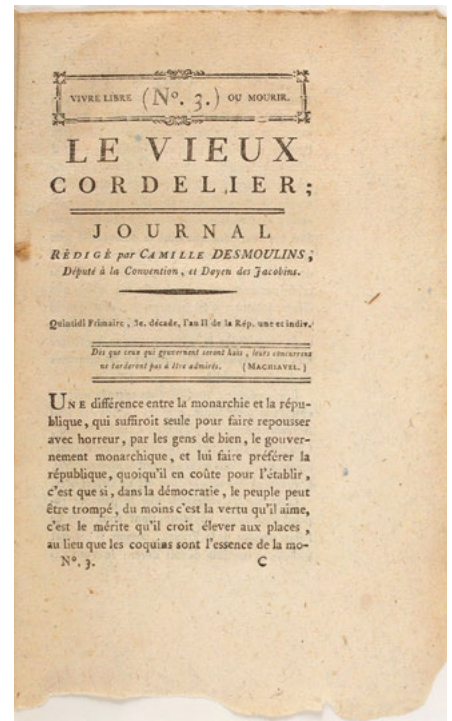
Les intrépides Gardes-Françaises viennent aussi, au nombre d'environ trois mille, se ranger sous les étendards de la Patrie, pour partager les périls et diriger les efforts de ses défenseurs. Leurs chefs avaient depuis quelque temps pénétré les sentimens qui les animaient, et cherché les moyens de rendre

leur patriotisme inutile à la capitale, et peut-être funeste à ceux qui l'éprouvaient. On prétend d'abord l'ordre de les réunir au camp de Saint-Denis, et leur ordonne d'y aller sans armes. C'était les envoyer à la bouchevie; ils refusent de marcher. L'hôpital du Gros-Caillois, on fait entendre à le canoniers qu'il est important qu'ils aillent garder l'hôtel de Richelieu, considéré en ce moment comme quartier-général; et dès qu'ils sont partis, on cherche à enclouer leurs canons. Quelques-uns d'eux, restés à l'hôpital, s'aperçoivent de la manœuvre, et vont avertir leurs camarades: ils quittent aussitôt l'hôtel de Richelieu. Le sixième bataillon abandonne ses casernes, tous courent à l'hôpital d'où ils transportent leurs canons dans leur poste la rue Verte.

[82]

In the French Revolution, news of the public assemblies spread through the European presses, which made journalism central to modern political life. Literacy was not universal, but this was a specifically bourgeois revolution.

Mediation through the word—then as now—softened the violence of revolutionary acts, so that even as restrained a man as Kant could, at the end of his life, have 'enthusiasm' for the revolutionaries.



[83]



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The task is not to 'think' the world differently but to see it differently—no longer as a globe (1492 to the present), but as a planet (in images sent back to us from space), which Heidegger disparaged as “a mass of matter deposited somewhere,” and Arendt feared marked the end of politics.<sup>15</sup>

On the planet seen from space, there are no political divisions into nations. Technology shows us a different topology, alienated from human 'common sense.' The question is whether the mediated experience that it provides, in wounding human institutions can heal them again. The anaesthetic effects of distant war-killings are reversed when cell phones (close to our bodies) show us, daily, the devastating

bodily harm inflicted on persons who speak to us of their pain. Instead of attempting to 'scale up' politics (world government), the technological reproducibility of sensory experience meets us at home.

The old ways of interpreting the world ring false when they repeat the conceptual mappings of the past. Under conditions of the technological transformation of experience—we can call this 'mediated immediacy'—the act of perception itself has changed. We *see* a world before we comprehend it, before we can articulate its meaning. Under conditions of mediated immediacy, spaces of appearance overflow national boundaries.

What Habermas recently called the 'fragmentation of the public sphere' on the national level can lead to the assemblage of a different order. My point is that spaces of appearance cannot—can no longer be—(merely) national. Our challenge is to develop a political understanding commensurate with a Planetary Public Sphere.

15 Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, ed. Albert Hofstadter (Haper Collins, 2009), 41; Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 1–2.





[85]–[87]

The truly revolutionary aspect of the 2011 events that unfolded with the Arab Spring was the creation of a new trans-local archipelago of democratic events on every continent, that was visible to a planetary population.<sup>16</sup>

We experienced their unfolding viscerally, as affects, in perceptions that, once seen could not be made *un*-seen. These affects echoed in 2024, when ‘the people’ acted democratically to occupy public space in Bangladesh,

South Korea, Georgia, and, in the early days following the fall of Assad, in Syria as well. This challenged, once again, the presumption of the unseeability of the non-Western world. (Once seen, these images cannot be un-seen).

The planetary is already here, visible in the mediated immediacy of the world we share. As political actors we find ourselves within it. Reflection/action is required.