UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

The Gesture of Collecting:

Walter Benjamin and Contemporary Aesthetics

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Art History

by

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2007

Introduction

Among the notes for his unfinished work on the Parisian arcades, the German-Jewish philosopher and cultural historian Walter Benjamin left behind the following: "Collecting is a primal phenomena of study: the student collects knowledge."[1] The aphoristic importance of this statement, and especially its centrality at the heart of Benjamin's philosophy, can best be understood by considering two supplementary citations. The first is from a letter Benjamin wrote to Theodor W. Adorno dated 31 May 1935. In this letter he confesses that the idea of writing about the arcades, a nineteenth-century architectural and cultural phenomenon that rendered the distinctions between public and private at once porous and definitive, came to him from reading Louis Aragon's surrealist novel, *Le Paysan de Paris*, which begins with an image of the arcades "when the pickaxe menaces them."[2] Attempting to explain their appeal Benjamin writes:

> I could never read more than two or three pages in bed at night before my heart started to beat so strongly that I had to lay the book aside. What a warning! What an indication of the many years which had to be spent between myself and such a reading.[3]

Less an encomium for Aragon's prose than an ecstatic revelation, Benjamin's reading of *Le Paysan de Paris* divulges an image of the arcades as "true sanctuaries of a cult of the ephemeral," an image that compels him to invest years of study. As an instance of "profane illumination," Benjamin suggests that the arcades presented themselves to him;

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[1] *The Arcades Project*, p. 210. From now on this text will be abbreviated *AP*. In Benjamin's *Gesammelte Schriften* (*GS*) the work on the Parisian arcades, *Das Passagen-Werk*, can be found in *GS* V:1-2.

[2] Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant* (originally published in 1926), p. 14.

[3] Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence 1928-1940*, p. 88.

they chose him.[4] At the moment of reading, with his heart racing, excited and anxious, he was instantaneously consigned to studying and explicating the arcades as the "origin" of commodity capitalism for the next thirteen years of his life. At the "origin" of his study—what he called "the theater of all my struggles and all my ideas"—there is an instance of passivity.[5] To grasp something that presents itself is to study: an activity that situates one in a threshold between self-possession and captivation.

The second citation that helps elucidate this notion of studying is from the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, arguably the most brilliant reader of Benjamin. He writes that "those who study are in the situation of people who have received a shock and are stupefied by what has struck them, unable to grasp it and at the same time powerless to leave hold... This *festina lente*, this shuttling between bewilderment and lucidity, discovery and loss, between agent and patient, is the rhythm of study."[6] This "rhythm of study" suggests that any mastery of a subject is in fact necessarily contingent upon time. The moment in which a concept is grasped precedes the moment, so to speak, in which one aimlessly flails for it.

The reception of Benjamin's philosophy in art history has disregarded this "rhythm of study"—the necessity of dwelling over concepts and ideas—in a headlong

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[4] Benjamin's writings on Surrealism center on this concept of "profane illumination," which he calls "a materialistic, anthropological inspiration." See "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia" (1929) and "Dream Kitsch" (1927) in *Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927-1934*. Henceforth all references to the English *Selected Writings* volumes will be abbreviated *SW*. For an examination of how Surrealism influenced Benjamin's philosophy see Margaret Cohen's *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution*.

[5] Benjamin, letter to Gershom Scholem dated 20 January 1930. See *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910-1940*, p. 359.

[6] Agamben, *The Idea of Prose*, p. 64.

rush to utilize his work on aura and allegory, two concepts which have proven invaluable to modern and contemporary art history. The absence of aura (uniqueness, mythic presence) Benjamin addresses in "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (1935-6) shifts our focus from the artwork/master circuit to that of the dissemination and reproduction of an images. His theory of allegory, which is developed through *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928) and his essays on the nineteenth-century French poet Charles Baudelaire, focuses on allegory as a recurring concern in the visual arts from the Baroque through modernity. Importantly, the insights afforded by Benjamin's concepts of aura and allegory have been greatly bolstered by post-structuralism and the decisive challenge it poses to the humanities.

The incorporation of Benjamin's work into art history and other disciplines in the 1980s was shaped by the coterminous and outright contentious reception of deconstruction in Anglo-American academia. For example, Paul de Man's *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (1979) colored the reception of Benjamin's concept of allegory in countless ways, the most salient of which was to enfold his theory of language into deconstructive thought.[7] Along with de Man, Jacques Derrida (undeniably one of Benjamin's most astute and creative readers) has skillfully shown how aspects of Benjamin's philosophy adumbrate the insights of deconstructive criticism. There is no denying the similarities between Benjamin's allegorical logic of language and deconstruction's assertion of the inherent inability of signs to fix meaning; rather, my point is to foreground how an influential and very

[7] See also de Man's essay "Sign and Symbol in Hegel's *Aesthetics*" (1982).

productive theoretical framework ushered Benjamin's work into contemporary aesthetic and cultural discourse, thereby generating a particular set of explications and applications.

For the discipline of art history perhaps the most important moment in the reception of Benjamin's thought comes in Craig Owens's "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism" (1980). This essay identifies allegory as a privileged form of contemporary artistic practice as evidenced by the work of Robert Smithson, Cindy Sherman, Robert Rauschenberg, and others. To explicate this cultural moment, Owens turns to Benjamin's concept of allegory. In an insightful and often brilliant analysis, he explains Benjamin's interest in allegory as a means to "rescue from historical oblivion that which threatens to disappear...a conviction of the remoteness of the past, and a desire to redeem it for the present" (203). Nevertheless, Owens's argument is entirely premised on deconstructive practice. This conceptual background is felt throughout the essay, as in this passage: "Allegory is extravagant, an expenditure of surplus value; it is always *in excess*...the allegorical supplement is not only an addition, but also a replacement. It takes the place of an earlier meaning, which is thereby effaced or obscured" (215). The problem with Owens's essay is not its articulation of a critical post-modernism, but its failure to follow through on aspects of Benjamin's work that diverge from deconstruction's purview.[8]

[8] Owens's concept of critical post-modernism is invaluable and quite unthinkable without deconstruction. He argues that post-modernism works to deny transcendent meaning and any hierarchy of speech (artistic or authorial) over writing/reading.

For example, Owens is right to identify one of the primary aims of Benjamin's study of the seventeenth-century German mourning play (*Trauerspiel*) as the attempt to divulge "the theoretical value of the concrete, the disparate, the discontinuous" (216). However, the full force of Benjamin's philosophy is lessened if his interest in the ruins and detritus of history—its very materiality—is understood only as an interest in what Derrida calls the "materiality of language." For better or worse, Benjamin is being quite literal when he claims that the "truth is concrete" (*SW* 2, 785). Rather than merely privileging the allegorical or celebrating the indeterminacy of meaning, Benjamin's interest in language as such interrupts the allegorical movement of human language with the "expressionless power" immanent within each and every signifying endeavor (*SW* 1, 341). The "expressionless" (*das Ausdruckslose*) is the "truth content" that both originates and impedes representation, what he calls the "material content" (diction, style, imagery, etc.).[9] The task of criticism in Benjamin's philosophy is to recollect what founds the allegorical movement of signification, that is, to present the "expressionless" as "the critical violence which, while unable to separate semblance from essence in art, prevents

[9] These issues are discussed by Benjamin in his essay "Goethe's Elective Affinities" (1924-5) and in the introduction to *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (henceforth *OGTD*). The expressionless is a central concept of Benjamin's early writings and it is intimately connected with his distinction between commentary and critique. Commentary seeks the material content (*Sachgehalt*) of a work of art; critique seeks the truth content (*Wahrheitsgehalt*). He writes that "the material content and the truth content, united at the beginning of a work's history, set themselves apart from each other in the course of its duration, because truth content always remains to the same extent hidden as the material content comes to the fore" (*SW* 1, 297). The truth content is the openness to language as such, that is, the full unadulterated creative force of *poiesis*, that must be crafted into a form, a material content. Material content or form is the semblance (*Schein*) of the truth content. The expressionless is what "arrests this semblance, spellbinds this movement" (340). This truth-content is not something that can be represented or wielded as power or knowledge, rather it is an auto-exhibition of truth. He insists that the expressionless completes the work; it interrupts it, creating a caesura in its beautiful semblance so that "every expression simultaneously comes to a standstill, in order to give free reign to an expressionless power inside all artistic media" (*SW* 1, 341). Therefore, it is something beyond the artist or poet that interrupts the language of artistic production. Beyond either *poiesis* and *technē*, there is the expressionless.

them from mingling...[and] completes the work, by shattering it into a thing of shards, into a fragment of the true world" (*SW* 1, 340). Whereas an allegorist composes these "shards" and "fragments" into expressive, multivalent representations, the collector—the other half of Benjamin's conceptual pair—gathers them and attempts to recollect the "truth-content" of human artifice. In short, what Owens overlooks is the logic of Benjamin's statement that "in every allegorist hides a collector" and "in every collector hides an allegorist" (*AP* 211).

While the importance of collecting as both an engagement with material culture and a form of memory has been noted in the scholarship on Benjamin, it has yet to receive attention commensurate with its importance for Benjamin himself.[10] It is curious that there has been little sustained interest in Benjamin's thoughts on collecting, given his statement about *The Arcades Project*: "Here, the Paris arcades are examined as though they were properties in the hand of the collector" (*AP* 205). He suggests that if the relation between a collector and his objects is fully understood, then his own approach to the arcades will become transparent. Because Benjamin never finished *The Arcades Project*, leaving us only a labyrinth of notes and idea sketches, his provocative clue takes on added importance. In fact, I would argue that this clue points to the practice of collecting as *the* underlying metaphor of Benjamin's philosophy. Simply put, there is no study of the arcades without his interest in collecting.

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[10] Discussions of Benjamin's interest in collecting while fairly common are too often superficial and dissatisfying. Of course, there are some key exceptions, including Hannah Arendt's introduction to *Illuminations*, "Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940,"and Eckhardt Köhn's entry "Sammler" in the second volume of *Benjamins Begriffe*, a compilation of the key concepts in Benjamin's philosophy put out by the current editors of the Benjamin archive in Germany. In addition, the concluding chapter of Agamben's *The Man Without Content*, and Michael Steinberg's "The Collector as Allegorist: Goods, Gods, and the Objects of History" in *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History* have been important starting points for my study.

The centrality of collecting to Benjamin's thought is evidenced by the manner in which he discusses his overarching intentions for *The Arcades Project*. In one early note he states the defining thesis of his entire unfinished work:

> What would the nineteenth century be to us if we were bound to it by tradition? How would it look as religion or mythology? We have no tactile [*taktisch*] relation to it. That is, we are trained to view things, in the historical sphere, from a romantic distance. To account for the directly transmitted inheritance is important. But it is still too early to form a collection. Concrete, materialistic deliberation on what is nearest is now required.[11]

This statement suggests that at the moment of its composition Benjamin associated collecting with religion and mythology, with what is auratic or only spectrally present. However, an interesting change occurred over the decade or so that Benjamin continued to work on this project. His thinking about collecting shifted from a form of mythic distance to precisely a "concrete, materialistic deliberation on what is nearest." Over the course of the 1930s, as he compiled the materials for his study, Benjamin decided (perhaps because of the worsening geopolitical situation) that it was, in fact, time "to form a collection" that could answer the fundamental questions concerning the relationship between modernity and the nineteenth century, between the present and a silent dislocating immanence within it.

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[11] This note is from the "first sketches" Benjamin composed from mid-1927 to early 1930. See *AP* 831. Over the course of his research, his ideas change along with his personal and the larger political circumstances. I would argue that his reevaluation of collecting stems in large part from his work on the essay "Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian," which took place from the summer of 1934 to 1937 when it was published. This reconsideration of collecting and its relation to historiography comes, admittedly, through working on an essay that Benjamin himself expressed "a certain feeling of contempt" (Adorno and Benjamin, *Correspondence* 169). Importantly, this "contempt" stems not from an extended meditation on collecting, but rather from Benjamin's reading of Fuchs's own writings.

This historiographic wager that it was time "to form a collection" is inextricable from Benjamin's famous description of his philosophy as an attempt to fan "the spark of hope in the past."[12] In her postwar reminiscence "Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940," no less a thinker than Hannah Arendt articulated the primacy of collecting to his philosophy:

> Collecting springs from a variety of motives which are not easily understood...And inasmuch as collecting can fasten on any category of objects (not just art objects, which are in any case removed from the everyday world of use objects because they are 'good' for nothing) and thus, as it were, *redeem the object as a thing* since it now is no longer a means to an end but has its intrinsic worth, Benjamin could understand the collector's passion as an attitude akin to that of the revolutionary...*Collecting is the redemption of things which is to complement the redemption of man.*[13]

Here Arendt offers more than a quirky interpretation of Benjamin; rather, she identifies the constellation of concepts at the heart of his philosophy. She arrives at this conclusion by identifying redemption and revolution as primary concerns for Benjamin. Then, she shows how collecting fits into this constellation by noting the intimacy between "the collector's passion" and the revolutionary (two figures perhaps reconcilable only in Benjamin's work). Because Arendt addressed this constellation within a reminiscence originally published in *The New Yorker* she was unable to explain fully how she formulated her position on collecting vis-à-vis redemption/revolution. This dissertation will retrace and elaborate Arendt's thinking; that is, it will explicate Benjamin's theory of

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[12] This phrase is from Benjamin's last work, "Theses on the Philosophy of History." See the seventh thesis in *Illuminations*, p. 255. All subsequent references to this text will be designated by an *I*.

[13] Italics mine; *I* 42. With the exception of Adorno, Arendt's postwar recuperation of Benjamin's work has proven invaluable. Not only does she keep Benjamin's memory alive, but her own philosophical leanings (studying with Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers) color her understanding of Benjamin and provide an alternative to Adorno's positioning of him within the Frankfurt School. Arendt was married to Günter Stern, Benjamin's cousin, and so was in contact with Benjamin from the early 1930s. Their interactions grew more regular when they were both in Paris.

collecting as the redemption of the object as a thing.[14] As Arendt's commentary intimates, this theory of collecting (what Benjamin terms a "collector's value" or "Liebhaberwert") pervades his thoughts on aesthetics, historiography, and politics.

By taking Arendt's commentary as the motivating factor for this dissertation, my reading of Benjamin sets out to answer a series of questions about collecting that articulate some of the most pressing concerns of *The Arcades Project* as a whole. What does "a true collection," as Benjamin calls it, show us? How is it more than a melancholic accumulation of objects-at-hand? How does the gesture of collecting—a form of destructive memory—interrupt the paralysis of modernity? Put another way, how is collecting an antidote to what Baudelaire called an "artificial paradise" or "Spleen"? Why does Benjamin insist that collecting is an activity "wagered against spleen"? These questions necessitate that I address how Benjamin constructs a relation between materiality (architectural forms, *objets d'art*, etc.) and memory. An understanding of this relation proffers a way to interpret precisely how he approaches materialist historiography.

In characterizing his research as an inflection on Marxist historical materialism, Benjamin writes that his work "deals fundamentally with the expressive character [*Ausdruckscharakter*] of the earliest industrial products...the rags, the refuse [*die*

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[14] This "collector's value" (*Liebhaberwert*) will be addressed in detail in Chapter Two, "A Sisyphean Task." In *On Collecting: An Investigation into Collecting in the European Tradition*, Susan Pearce sheds light on how Benjamin's concept of *Liebhaberwert* is a sort of disavowed origin of collecting practice: "collecting is an act of subversion, in that the theme which runs through it is the intention to overturn the world of accepted material values, not just monetary values although this element is not absent, but also the values of quality, fidelity to evidence, purity and normality in which the social world is grounded. The accepted order is subverted when very ordinary, everyday things, things which are worthless by 'accepted' moral or aesthetic standards, are collected with the same obsessive care which others would lavish upon 'acceptable' material" (188-9).

Lumpen, den Abfall]," so as "to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components...to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event...to grasp the construction of history as such" (*AP* 460-1; *GS* V:1, 574-5). By turning his attention to the ruins of the arcades, Benjamin hopes to recollect out of the smallest component the "total event," that is, the very "origin" of modernity inscribed in the "expressive character" of the prefabricated, industrial ephemera of the nineteenth century.[15]

Attempting to read the "origin" of modernity, Benjamin engages several "modes of behavior," including the flâneur, the gambler, and the storyteller; but it is the collector with whom he has the greatest affinity (*SW* 1, 479). His affinity for this figure stems neither from his own predilection for collecting (books or children's toys) nor from his father's career as an antiquarian; rather, collecting preoccupies him because it allows for an extended consideration of what he calls "my favorite topic, dwelling [*Wohnen*]" (*SW* 2, 479; *GS* VI, 435). Benjamin's fascination with this "mode of behavior" originates with a belief that collecting, as a form of dwelling with objects, opens a threshold (*eine Schwelle*) between the what-has-been and the now, that is, the proper "sphere of history"

[15] Benjamin's concept of origin (*Ursprung*) is developed in the "Epistemo-Critical Prologue" of *OGTD*. It enfolds the Platonic theory of the forms as well as his early thoughts on temporality and transience. An "origin" is not something that occurs once and is then transcended; rather, it is what remains present and latent (but not as a result of its coming before) throughout each subsequent appearance or articulation. The "origin" of modernity is thus caught up in an ebb and flow, in a rhythmic motion of memory and oblivion, permanence and transience. Rejecting any attempt to simply return to an origin, Benjamin devises a critical praxis that empties the notion of a "return" of any linear, regressive denotation. What he forwards instead is a philosophical task: a reading of phenomena that divulges the immanence of origin and the ways in which it becomes legible through later, historically specific, appearances. See *OGTD*, pp. 27-56.

(*Geschichtsraum*).[16] Unlike the historicist notion of a linear conception of temporality in which the past simply precedes the present, Benjamin's proper "sphere of history" is a threshold between the what-has-been (what falls to the side of experience) and the now wherein knowledge occupies a "sphere of total neutrality in regard to the concepts of both subject and object...a unity of experience that can by no means be understood as a sum of experiences" (*SW* 1, 104, 109). Because he posits a manner of dwelling that exceeds normative (bourgeois) existence, Benjamin's thoughts on collecting are not limited by the activities of actual, modernist collectors.

Whenever he discusses collecting in his work, Benjamin moves between characterizations of the nineteenth-century socio-historical figure of the collector and an ideal version that he names the "genuine collector" (*echter Sammler*). Distinct from both actual nineteenth-century European collectors like Alexandre du Sommerard and the nostalgic and often biting parodies of these men seen in literary works like Honoré de Balzac's *Cousin Pons* (1848), Benjamin's genuine collector is a "*positive* countertype." The genuine collector, who undertakes "the liberation of things from the drudgery of being useful," "represents the consummation" of the socio-historical collector *and* the allegorist (*AP* 209). This "positive countertype" dwells in a "zone of indetermination"

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[16] *AP* 458. Benjamin repeatedly refers to the concept of a "threshold" through *The Arcades Project*. He writes: "The threshold must be carefully distinguished from the boundary. A *Schwelle* [threshold] is a zone. Transformation, passage, wave action are in the work *schwellen*, swell, and etymology ought not to overlook these senses. On the other hand, it is necessary to keep in mind the immediate tectonic and ceremonial context which has brought the word to its current meaning" (*AP* 494). His understanding of a "threshold" becomes clear when, defining the dialectical image, he insists that there must by no point of temporal contiguity between a moment of the past and a moment of the present, but only a threshold between them. The dialectical image presents itself in this threshold. See also *AP* 214. Both Samuel Weber's "Streets, Squares, Theaters: A City on the Move—Walter Benjamin's Paris" and Winfried Menninghaus' *Schwellenkunde: Walter Benjamins Passage des Mythos* address this concept of the threshold.

between humanity and things by wielding a "practical memory," that is, a "profane manifestation of 'nearness'" (*AP* 205).

Because he dwells in this "zone of indetermination" between humanity and things, Benjamin's genuine collector can be understood as an "aesthetic figure." Aesthetic figures are defined by Gilles Deleuze and Fèlix Guattari in their collaborative effort *What Is Philosophy?* (1991) as "assistants" to a philosopher's conceptual personae. They explain that a "conceptual persona is not the philosopher's representative but, rather, the reverse: the philosopher is only the envelope of his principal conceptual persona and of all the other personae who are intercessors [*intercesseurs*], the real subjects of his philosophy."[17] Simply put, an aesthetic figure complements a philosopher's conceptual persona; an aesthetic figure "assists" a conceptual persona by creating affects. An affect is defined as

> not the passage from one lived state to another but man's nonhuman becoming...[it] is neither an imitation nor an experienced sympathy, nor even an imaginary identification...[t]he affect certainly does not undertake a return to origins, as if beneath civilization we would rediscover, in terms of resemblance, the persistence of a bestial or primitive humanity...[rather] it is a question only of ourselves, here and now. (173-4)

[17] Deleuze and Guattari emphasize that conceptual personae are "the philosopher's "heteronyms," and the philosopher's name is the simple pseudonym of his personae" (64). Examples of conceptual personae are Plato's "Socrates," Friedrich Nietzsche's "Zarathustra" or Descartes "the Idiot." In a statement that clearly connects to their more well-known collaboration *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), Deleuze and Guattari write: "The role of conceptual personae is to show thought's territories, its absolute deterritorializations and reterritorializations...They are no longer empirical, psychological, and social determinations, still less abstractions, but intercessors, crystals, or seeds of thought" (69).

An aesthetic figure deals in affects, that is, a "sensory becoming" by which "something or someone is ceaselessly becoming-other (while continuing to be what they are)."[18] For Deleuze and Guattari, more important than any difference between conceptual personae and aesthetic figures is the overall construction of thought, that is, the ways in which aesthetic figures assist "the task of philosophy": to create concepts capable of "extract[ing] an event from things and beings" (33).

Furthermore, they argue that philosophy is "the art of forming, inventing, and fabricating concepts." They conceive of a concept as "the contour, the configuration, the constellation of an event to come" which "does not refer to the lived, by way of compensation, but consists, through its own creation, in setting up an event that surveys the whole of the lived" (33-4). Within Benjamin's philosophy, the materialist historian is the principal conceptual persona: the bearer of concepts that challenge traditional historicism. By forming a concept like the dialectical image (*das dialektische Bild*), his conceptual persona "*speaks the event*, not the essence or the thing."[19] The arcades

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[18] Italics mine; Deleuze and Guattari, p. 177. They add: "The difference between conceptual personae and aesthetic figures consists first of all in this: the former are powers of concepts, and the latter are powers of affects and percepts. The former take place on a plane of immanence that is an image of Thought-Being (noumenon), and the latter take effect on a plane of composition as image of a universe (phenomenon)" (65).

[19] Deleuze and Guattari, p. 21. In *The Arcades Project* Benjamin writes: "These images are to be thought of entirely apart from the categories of the 'human sciences', from so-called habitus, from style, and the like. For the historical index of images not only says that they belong to a particular time; it says, above all, that they attain to legibility [*zur Lesbarkeit*] only at a particular time...It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present casts its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been [*das Gewesene*] comes together in a flash with the now [*das Jetzt*] to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural [*bildlich*]. Only dialectical images are genuinely historical—that is, not archaic—images. The image that is read—which is to say, the image of the now of its recognizability [*das Bild im Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit*]—bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded"

themselves are a dialectical image: a stereographic moment of the past and the present that renders legible the what-has-been (*das Gewesene*), rather than the past, in the now-time (*Jetztzeit*).[20] Conversely, it is Benjamin's aesthetic figure, the genuine collector, characterized by "sensations: percepts and affects, landscapes and faces, visions and becoming," who is oriented not toward the event, but toward "*the essence or the thing*."[21] This orientation is an "attentiveness" to alterity, to the becoming-other of humanity expressed through materiality; the genuine collector recollects things that are "the scorned and apocryphal," that is, another becoming immanent within the "origin" of modernity.[22] The praxis of Benjamin's philosophy—the collusion of his conceptual persona and aesthetic figure—is succinctly articulated through his citation of Remy de Gourmont's desire "to create history with the very detritus of history" (*AP* 543). The possibility of this kind of "passive creation" inflects our common understanding of collecting practice.

(463; *GS* V:1, 577-8). See also his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," especially the fifth and sixth theses.

[20] The key phrase in Benjamin's definition of this concept is that there is no point of temporal continuity between these two moments, rather there is only a threshold in which the event—the "turn of recollection" as the (in)experience of modernity—is to be located.

[21] Deleuze and Guattari, pp. 177, 21.

[22] *SW* 3, 284. Benjamin's term for "attentiveness" is *Aufmerksamkeit*; see *SW* 2, 812 and 592; *GS* II:2, 432 and IV:1, 407-8. An important connection between him and Adorno arises here. As Bill Brown writes: "Indeed, Theodor Adorno [in *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 184-94], arguing against epistemology's and phenomenology's subordination of the object and the somatic moment to a fact of consciousness, understood the alterity of things as an essentially ethical fact. Most simply put, his point is that accepting the otherness of things is the condition for accepting otherness as such" (*Things* 12). On the (a)symmetry between Adorno and Benjamin see Beatrice Hanssen's "Adorno and Benjamin: Against Historicity" in *Walter Benjamin's Other History*, pp. 13-23, and Agamben's "The Prince and the Frog: The Question of Method in Adorno and Benjamin" in *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*, pp. 107-124.

Benjamin's theory of collecting is at once based in and divergent from Euro-American cultural discourse on collecting. A standard understanding of collecting is voiced by John Elsner and Roger Cardinal in the introduction to their edited volume *The Cultures of Collecting* (1994): "The history of collecting is thus the narrative of how human beings have striven to accommodate, to appropriate and to extend the taxonomies and systems of knowledge they have inherited" (2-3). In addition to this explanation of collecting, there remains another less common and more disruptive approach in which collecting can also challenge "the accepted patterns of knowledge" by resisting closure and opening "its eyes to existence – the world around us, both cultural and natural, in all its unpredictability and contingent complexity" (5-6). Ultimately, Benjamin sides with this idiosyncratic and inherently political interpretation of collecting. His take on collecting is neither a taxonomic-antiquarian obsession with the material culture of the past nor a neurotic fixation on a particular object that indicates the presence of an absence (that is, the Freudian logic of the fetish). On the contrary, his interest rests *only* with a radical variant of collecting that perceives "the revolutionary energies that appear in the 'outmoded' [*Veralteten*]" and the "trick by which this world of things [*Dingwelt*] is mastered," that is, "the substitution of a political for a historical view of the past.[23] Disinclined to follow the trajectory of humanistic collecting practice (of which Freud's collecting activity is very much a part), Benjamin is "less on the trail of the psyche than

[23] *SW* 2, 210; *GS* II:1, 299-300. This is a conception of collecting that Benjamin sees reflected in the activities of Surrealism which, like Benjamin himself, takes Paris itself as "the center of this world of things" (*SW* 2, 211). Hal Foster unpacks this intersection of Surrealism and Benjamin regarding the "outmoded" admirably in his *Compulsive Beauty*, see especially chapters six and seven.

on the track of things."[24] Therefore, his writings on collecting recast historiography and aesthetics as a critical philology of the material culture of modernity, that is, how we understand ourselves depends on how we read and engage the material world that surrounds and "advances" on us.

Moreover, the political and historiographic nature of Benjamin's inflection of collecting discourse renders his aesthetic figure an impractical model for artistic practice, although more often than not his theory of collecting has been used by art historians to interpret work like Kurt Schwitter's *Merzbau* and Marcel Broodthaer's *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles.*[25] Benjamin's writings on collecting prove feeble scripts for artists to enact as well as lackluster instructions for the interpretation of artworks. Designating his genuine collector an aesthetic figure constitutes a rejection of the notion of an artistic persona; it is done to demonstrate how and why this figure "assists" Benjamin's attempt to account for the incursion of readymade commodities on

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[24] *AP* 212. It is well known that Freud's personal collection of antiquities played a central role in the development of that "infinitesimal calculus" he originated called psychoanalysis. His collection exerts a determining influence on his theories of mourning and melancholia, fetishism, the very structure of the human psyche, and, of course, dream interpretation. In her essay "Psychoanalysis and the Legacies of Antiquity" Ellen Handler Spitz writes: "Intimately present in his visual field on a daily basis and physically proximate, close enough to touch, these objects—statuettes, busts, vases, reliefs, tablets, receptacles—ever growing in number, formed...a thickly textured stage-set against which his patients' narratives and his interpretations of them were played out" (*Freud and Art* 154). See also John Forrester's "'Mille e tre': Freud and Collecting" in *The Cultures of Collecting*, pp. 224-251.

[25] See Esther Leslie's "Telescoping the Microscopic Object: Benjamin the Collector," Douglas Crimp's "This is Not A Museum of Art" in *On the Museum's Ruins*, and Rosalind Krauss' *"A Voyage on the North Sea": Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*. The last two texts rely heavily on Susan Buck-Morss' ambitious *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and The Arcades Project*. This critique of "a selective reading of Benjamin" has also been levied by Barbara Jaffee, who believes that Buck-Morss' "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Work of Art Essay Reconsidered" signifies how and why she, Krauss, and others are "forced into rear-guard" actions like "policing boundaries" when they refuse "any uncoupling of Benjamin's affirmation of new mass cultural and technological forms from their political specificity as anti-aesthetic practice" (Jaffee 93, 112, note 30). I would argue that an extended examination of Benjamin's theory of collecting, one which does not shy away from his concepts of recollection and "pure means" could reorient the discourse on aesthetics/anti-aesthetics.

the production of artworks by configuring a relation to material expression as "pure means." This "collector's value" is less valuable as an accurate historical interpretation than as an instance of the movement of thought. In other words, Benjamin's thoughts on collecting do not articulate a practice to be emulated (by artists or cultural historians); rather, they define a situation from which to rethink the dissolution of art within the "world of things."

Instead of serving as a model for artistic practice or as another interpretative tool to be applied to certain artworks (both options betray his notion of pure mediality), Benjamin's reading of collecting should provoke a reassessment of contemporary aesthetics as a whole. Concepts central to aesthetics such as *poiesis* (artistic production), memory, and humanity's psychic investments in objects linger in the margins of his thoughts on collecting, thereby reasserting their continued relevance for any attempt to rethink our benighted relation to works of art, let alone to one another. Beyond even the transformative possibilities of photography and film, Benjamin's focus on collecting allows us to study a relation to objects that is more vital, more complex and more charged (psychically and even ontologically) than our contemporary relation to works of art. More than even a phenomenological situation that characterizes human existence, collecting allows Benjamin to conceive a *para-ontology*, a manner of human being beside itself. Collecting is oriented toward an event of thought: "the thing of thinking," potentiality.

Potentiality (*potenza*) is the centerpiece of Agamben's philosophy. His work on this concept constructs a genealogy that extends from Aristotle to Martin Heidegger, but

has Benjamin's philosophy as its genetic marker. For instance, in his "Berlin Chronicle," Benjamin confesses not only his logic of studying, but also a conception of human being as such: "It is likely that no one ever masters anything in which he has not known impotence [*Ohnmacht*]; and if you agree, you will also see that this impotence comes not at the beginning of or before the struggle with the subject, but at the heart of it" (*SW* 2, 596; *GS* VI, 466). "At its center," each and every "endeavor" (whether writing a book or the course of a human life) is marked by this ability not-to, an impotence. Agamben's understanding of potentiality lies within Benjamin's statement:

> In the history of Western culture there is only one formula that hovers so decidedly between affirmation and negation, acceptance and rejection, giving and taking...[potentiality] shows itself on the threshold between Being and non-Being, between the sensible and the intelligible, between word and thing, [it] is...the luminous spiral of the possible. (*Potentialities* 267)

Potentiality defines a manner of human being that "does not remain below itself, that does not *presuppose* itself as a hidden essence that chance or destiny would then condemn to the torment of qualifications, but rather exposes itself...without remainder."[26] This "manner of being" is an ethical experience of being "able to not-be," that is, being "capable of [one's] own impotence" (*C* 35). It is "the being most proper to humankind," Agamben argues, "the only ethical experience" (*C* 43-4).

The concept of potentiality provides a way to read Benjamin's theory of collecting as a remarkable instance of "hope in the past" that focuses on ethics, politics, and aesthetics at once. Rather than having to express through artistic or linguistic means some hidden individual or cultural essence, the genuine collector simply gathers the cast-

[26] Agamben, *The Coming Community*, p. 28. Henceforth abbreviated *C*.

off remainders of culture and tradition so that in the here and now our form-of-life is grasped as such, that is, exposed "without remainder." This encounter with inert, silent matter refracts not what we must become or what we have been, but what we always will have been: our form-of-life, which cannot be articulated, represented, or expressed through any historical task. As the unbecoming face of humanity, potentiality is inextricably bound with Benjamin's faith in the hidden possibilities of the past and our ability to grasp these immanent moments of disjuncture. His position here is premised on an exposure of human being as *Jetztsein* or now-being, that is, as potentiality, an openness to language as such.

This *affective* exposure or now-being is both a product of and an ethico-political means to counter the modern subject's fundamental alienation from its language, its scopic regime, and its historical environment. The sadness that colors Benjamin's late work, especially the "Theses on the Philosophy of History," suggests an extended elegy for a humanity estranged from itself, existing in the aftermath of a "tremendous shattering of tradition." It is his aesthetic figure—the genuine collector—who embodies the potentiality (both the debasement and possibility) of this epochal predicament. Modernity inaugurates a society of spectacle that, however destructive and alienating, contains something like "a positive possibility that can be used against it," that is, "for the first time it is possible for humanity itself to experience its linguistic essence – not this or that content of language, or this or that truth proposition, but the *fact itself that one*

speaks."[27] The simple fact that *there is language* erupts between the image and the thing. It is there that we must learn to dwell, especially as it is where our very *ēthos*, our way of being—*Jetztsein*—takes place.

To experience this form-of-life requires only a turn toward the "world of things," which indexes language as such. Benjamin's late modernist position becomes evident when contrasted with the ninth of Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies*. The key stanza reads:

> Praise the world to the Angel, not what's unsayable.
> You can't impress him with lofty notions...Therefore show him
> some simple object, formed from generation to generation
> until it's truly our own, dwelling near our hands and in our eyes.
> Tell him of *things*.[28]

For Benjamin, in the aftermath of modernity, it is impossible even to show "some simple object, formed from generation to generation." To "tell of things" means only to silently gesture. Rather than attempt to express what is "unsayable," his gesture of collecting is an affect, an exposure of potentiality: our *dwelling-in-language as such*.[29] Gesture is a

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[27] Agamben, *Mezzi Senza Fine*, p. 92. See the English Translation, *Means without End*, p. 115. I will cite the Italian edition as the translations are mine, except where indicated by a reference to the English translation only.

[28] Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, translated by Edward Snow, p. 54-55. Here is the original German: "Preise dem Engel die Welt, nicht die unsägliche, *ihm*/kannst du nicht grosstun mit herrlich Erfühltem.../Drum zeig/ihm das Einfache, das, von Geschlecht zu Geschlechtern gestaltet,/als ein Unsriges lebt, neben der Hand und im Blick./Sag ihm die Dinge." In a letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé dated 8 August 1903, Rilke wrote: "Only things speak to me" (*Letters* 122.)

[29] For Agamben, this dwelling-in-language as such is an *experimentum linguae*, the being-in-language-of-the-nonlinguistic, which is "only in play, never possessed, never represented...because of this it is the possible, but empty, place of an ethics, of a form-of-life" (*Profanazioni* 75). Christopher Fynsk explains that, for Benjamin, criticism means to read language as such, not a signified meaning, but language (*die Sprache*) where it gives itself (*Language and Relation* 190). My position here is untenable without Agamben's work on gesture. See his "Kommerell, or On Gesture" in *Potentialities*, "Notes on Gesture" in *Means without End*, and "L'autore come gesto" in *Profanazioni*. In addition, Werner Hamacher's essay

speechless dwelling *within* language; it indicates what lays in wait at the origin of human language: an exhibition of the expressionless (*das Ausdruckslose*).[30]

Collecting is commonly understood as a form of storytelling because collectors tell their objects; narrating how they were acquired, their historical and stylistic importance, provenance, etc.[31] For Benjamin, however, the presentation of things is a gesture, an ethical aphasia, because there is no accompanying story, but only a presentation of the thing itself. An "event of deprivation"—a refusal to empathize with, consume, or narrate mute objects—defines the "aesthetic" (as in *aisthesis*, sensation) origin of Benjamin's recollection of modernity.[32] His intriguing statement "I have nothing to say, only show" announces an attentiveness to things as things. Therefore, at the moment of the dissolution of aesthetics (*der Verfall der Aura*), the collector enters stage left so to speak, as an aesthetic figure attentive to the "heightened graphicness" of fragments, ruins, remnants.[33] Amidst the epochal transfigurations of modernity Benjamin

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"The Gesture in the Name: On Benjamin and Kafka" in *Premises: Essays on Philosophy from Kant to Celan* has been a touchstone. I return to this concept throughout the dissertation.

[30] The expressionless is the silence within human signifying practices that exhibits how language as such (*die Sprache*) is transmitted through human language. Human language, a privileged (but by no means the only) form of language as such, must recollect what is being transmitted through it. Thus an exhibition of potentiality is nothing other than a grasping of what is transmitted in and through human language, that is, language as such.

[31] "Collections are essentially a narrative of experience...so the narratives into which they can be selected and organized are a kind of fiction, and it is no accident that both fiction and collection are a characteristically modernist European way of telling experience" (Pearce 412).

[32] See Mieke Bal's "Telling Objects: A Narrative Perspective on Collecting" in *The Cultures of Collecting*, p. 111.

[33] *AP* 461. It is my position that Benjamin's "striking critique" of modernity does not rest entirely with photography and film; rather, it is primarily grounded in his diagnosis of the end of narration or storytelling, defined as the transmissibility of human experience. The end of storytelling signals an unprecedented *Formensprache* (our openness to language as such). In the case of collecting, this

discerns an "aesthetic relation" (Marx's phrase) between the detritus of capitalism (*das Ausdruck*) and the expressionless (*das Ausdruckslose*).

Whereas Benjamin's early notion of criticism aimed at "shattering" works of art, his later work on collecting demonstrates that fragments and ruins need not be created, since they are presented time and again by the commodity. Modernity instigates an onslaught of objects that poses a serious challenge to any notion of humanism. This challenge is not met by the production of artworks alone. However, when "art comes into contact with the commodity" and vice versa, Benjamin writes, "a new kind of learning," a new way of knowledge is opened (*SW* 3, 142). Hence the ontological, historiographic, and political nature of the genuine collector. As a response to the art-commodity bind, Benjamin's aesthetic figure responds with "a new kind of learning," that is, with gesture, with simply exhibiting things without speaking. By bearing another relation to language as such, another *affective* form of "aesthetic" experience, the genuine collector interrupts human becoming: the way we flee from language as such.[34] This interruption is an affect: a becoming-other while remaining what one is.[35]

Formensprache is exhibited through our *extimate* (as in an intimate exteriority) relations with things. This term "extimacy" was coined by Jacques Lacan. It signifies "the intimate exteriority" that is "the Thing [*das Ding*]," the focus of his seventh seminar, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (139). Lacan spends the entirety of discussing how in Freud's system objects and words are "closely linked," but *das Ding* is "found somewhere else" (45).

[34] For Benjamin, the expressionless is an interruption: "For just as an interruption can, by a word of command, extract the truth from the speech of a liar, in the same way the expressionless...completes the work by shattering it into fragments, reducing it to the *smallest* totality of semblance, a totality that is a great fragment taken from the *true* world" (*SW* 1, 225).

[35] Recall that Deleuze and Guattari defined an affect as a "nonhuman becoming of man." Thus, an exhibition of actuality without remainder in the present is inhuman only to the degree that humanity signifies a continual becoming. To be inhuman is perhaps the most difficult task, that is, to accept humanity as such, without empathy or pathos.

The "turn" or "Kunstgriff" of Benjamin's philosophy presents how the "outlived world of things" [for example, kitsch]...advances on the human being."[36] Only an ethical experience of the "language of things" actualizes the radical implications of potentiality. The genuine collector's familiarity with the "language of things" exposes the "origin" of human language; its "quivering" between thing and word, speech and language, *bios* (individual life) and *zoē* (collective life).[37] To (re)collect is to dwell in the threshold between *das Ausdruck* and *das Ausdruckslose*. It is this without (*–los*) that marks our form-of-life as such. The manner in which we are compelled by things supports Agamben's assertion that the

> human being is the being that, bumping into things and only in this encounter, opens up to the non-thinglike [*al non-cosale*]. And inversely, the human is the one that, being open to the non-thinglike, is, for this very reason, irreparably consigned to things. (*C* 102-3)

The "non-thinglike" is potentiality, our openness to language as such. Thus Benjamin's gesture of collecting is an attempt to read "the language of *things*, starting from things and returning to us changed, *with all the humanity that we have invested in things*."[38] For

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[36] Benjamin, "Dream-Kitsch." see *SW* 2, 4. Recently there has been an interdisciplinary "turn to things" whose epicenter is Brown's edited volume of *Critical Inquiry*, entitled *Things* (2004). Of particular note is the relation Brown's thesis that "genealogy of things has yet to be written" bears to deconstruction (14). This recent interest in material culture and cultural history has its basis in Derrida's early work on the French poet Francis Ponge who enacts a "siding with things" (*le parti pris des choses*). See Derrida's *Signéponge/Signsponge* (1984). Other seminal moments in the form of cultural analysis forwarded in the essays Brown gathers are Arjun Appadurai's edited volume *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (1986) and Susan Stewart's *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (1984). As a whole, this "turn to things" has been beneficial to my work on Benjamin.

[37] Benjamin develops this notion of "the language of things" in "On Language as Such and On the Language of Man." *SW* 1, 65.

[38] Italics mine; Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, p.76. This extraordinary statement is from his posthumously published Charles Eliot Norton lectures which were to be given at Harvard University in 1985.

him, to read and recollect mimetic experience (similarity in difference) signifies the last remnant of aesthetic tradition; this last remnant is bequeathed to the genuine collector: it is memory.

As Jean-Luc Nancy writes: "the singular plurality" of the arts has been reduced to only one of its aspects, but perhaps its most important: *ars memoriae*.[39] Benjamin's reinscription of the *ars memoriae* is what he terms recollection (*Eingedenken*): a de-limiting form of memory, that is, an impotence that is paradoxically a great strength. This neologism "Eingedenken" opposes two common German words for "memory": *Erinnerung* and *Gedächtnis*. For him, the former denotes a conception of memory applicable before the socio-cultural transformations of modernity. This term also has a distinctly Hegelian connotation that Benjamin rejects. The latter signifies "remembrance" and is often used in the context of memorials. Rather than deploy either a conception of memory no longer historically and ontologically appropriate or one indelibly colored by death and melancholy, Benjamin conceives of "Eingedenken" as an active, redemptive, and open form of memory. As Rebecca Comay observes:

> the 'Ein-' prefix signifying here in fact precisely the *opposite* of the unifying inwardness of a thought affirming its self-actualization as a culture... or *Bildung* (the opposite, in a word, of the Hegelian *Erinnerung* which it lexically recalls)...Benjamin's *Eingedenken* is no longer strictly one or inward (*Ein-*) and no longer strictly thought (*-Denken*). It announces, rather, a mindfulness or vigilance which refuses to take in (or be taken by) a tradition authorizing itself as the continuity of an essential legacy, task or mission to be transmitted, developed or enacted...*Eingedenken* marks the impasse or 'standstill' of thought as such.[40]

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[39] See his "Why Are There Several Arts and Not Just One?" in *The Muses*. pp. 1-39.

[40] Comay, "Benjamin's Endgame" in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, p. 260. I agree with Comay's interpretation of Benjamin's *Eingedenken* up to her concluding remarks where she

I am translating Benjamin's *Eingedenken* as "recollection," a gathering together again, an active bearing in mind.[41] My aim is to distance this neologism from any traditional notion of "remembrance" or "memory." Moreover, the inextricable tie between Benjamin's concept of memory and materiality reveals the necessity of thinking recollection as *(re)collection*, that is, a turn of memory *in* and *through* the "language of things."

Benjamin's longstanding interest in the "language of things" evinces the openness inherent in his concept of recollection. Within his philosophy, openness is a philosophical-theological concept that paradoxically *renders completeness* (*Vollständigkeit*). This "peculiar category of completeness" is a primary aspect of collecting; it is an openness that divulges the truth of the matter: that what seems discrete, complete, known, is, in fact, contingent, incomplete, unknown.[42] This is recollection (*Eingedenken*), which "restores possibility to the past, making what happened incomplete and completing what never was": it is "neither what happened nor what did not happen

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surmises that it "thus announces the return of lost possibilities as the return of the repressed" (261). There are a couple of problems with this statement. Briefly, her characterization of Benjamin's "recollection" as Proustian/Freudian is complicated by the essay "Berlin Childhood around 1900" (see Chapter Four). Secondly, to grasp fully what happens in the "turn of recollection" it is essential to engage what Benjamin means when he writes that "[*Eingedenken*] can make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and the complete (suffering) into something incomplete" (*AP* 471; *GS* V:1, 589). I contend that this is done only through Agamben's concept of potentiality.

[41] The conceptual background of my choice includes the Platonic concept of *anamnēsis* (recollection), which I discuss further in chapter three. There is a rhythm in Benjamin's theory of collecting between the passive and the active; this rhythm is nothing other than potentiality.

[42] See *AP* 204, 471.

but, rather, their potentialization, their becoming possible once again."[43] The genuine collector *recollects* and thereby bankrupts any system of value through an "esteem for the insignificant [*Ausdruck*]" (*SW* 2, 668; *GS* III, 366).

This "esteem for the insignificant" lies at the heart of Benjamin's definition of a collection as "a new, expressly devised historical system," that is, "a grand attempt to overcome the wholly irrational character of the object's mere presence at hand [*das völlig Irrationale seines blossen Vorhandenseins*]" (*AP* 204-5; *GS* V:1, 271). The mention of the object's mere presence at hand, particularly through Benjamin's use of the analogous German compound *Vorhandensein*, alludes to Martin Heidegger's contention that our primary encounter with objects is practical: they are "at hand" (*Zuhandene*).[44] Opposing the instrumentality of Heidegger's notion of objects as *ob-jecta* (placed before and opposite for our use), Benjamin posits that *things* (not objects) are essentially impractical,

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[43] Agamben, *Potentialities*, p. 267. This is why Agamben cherishes the title character of Herman Melville's short story "Bartleby the Scrivener." His formula "I would prefer not to" occurs only after all of his work is completed. He has no task left to fulfill; he is only his being as such, which is without work. On this figure, Agamben adds: "Our ethical tradition has often sought to avoid the problem of potentiality by reducing it to the terms of will and necessity. Not what you *can* do, but what you *want* to do or must do is its dominant theme...The formula that he [Bartleby] so obstinately repeats destroys all possibility of constructing a relation between being able and willing...It is the formula of potentiality" (254, 255). Bartleby's inaction reveals precisely where we are undefeatable. The suspension of the normative order of things his inaction instigates, which does not become an end in itself, constructs a situation in which an ethical event is possible. With Bartleby we can state that gesture is the *Ausdrucksweise* of the *Ausdruckslose*—the expressive mode of the expressionless—which leads us back to the curious silence inherent in genuine collecting: "I have *nothing* to say, only show."

[44] Heidegger *Being and Time*, division one, part III. Because of their shared interest in language as such, that is, the simple fact that *there is language*, which Heidegger writes as "Die Sprache spricht" (language as such presents *itself*) in *On the Way to Language* (1959), any examination of Benjamin's philosophy is drawn into a conversation about its "startling proximity" (Fynsk's phrase) to Heidegger's thought. It must always be kept mind, however, that Benjamin saw his work as diametrically opposed to Heidegger's philosophy. In a letter dated 20 January 1930 to Gershom Scholem, Benjamin, in discussing his work on the arcades, writes: "It seems certain that...an introduction that discusses epistemology is necessary...a discussion of the theory of historical knowledge. This is where I will find Heidegger, and I expect sparks will fly from the shock of the confrontation between our two very different ways of looking at history" (*Correspondence of Walter Benjamin* 359-60). To my mind, Agamben's work represents the most successful negotiation of Benjamin and Heidegger to date.

useless: they "lie beyond the grid of intelligibility...outside the grid of museal exhibition, outside the order of objects."[45]

As an antithesis to Heidegger's phenomenological ontology, which privileges human being (*Dasein*) and human language, Benjamin's theory of collecting is an engagement with things that exceeds practicality and anthropocentric humanist notions. It posits a "language of things" that exposes our consignment to things, a fact at once epochal (as indicative of capitalist modernity) and ontological (instrumental human language as a profanation of language as such).[46] As Bill Brown states: "The question is less about 'what things are for a given society' than about what claims on your attention and on your action are made on behalf of things...How does the effort to rethink things become an effort to *re*institute society?" (9). What Benjamin's aesthetic figure assists is a "turn of recollection" (*eine Wendung des Eingedenkens*) that could break the reign of myth, exception, and barbarism that humanity has created (*AP* 388). The "turn of recollection" rouses us from the soporific cult value of capitalism, the "new dream-filled sleep that came over Europe" as Benjamin writes (*AP* 391). By dwelling with things, the collector is thus attuned to the "turn of recollection." As a "mode of behavior,"

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[45] Brown, *Things*, p. 5. He adds: "We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily...Temporalized as the before and after of the object, thingness amounts to a latency (the not yet formed or the not yet formable) and to an excess (what remains physically or metaphysically irreducible to objects). But this temporality obscures the all-at-onceness, the simultaneity, of the object/thing dialectic and the fact that, all at once, *the thing seems to name the object, just as it is, even as it names some thing else*" (4, 5).

[46] Hanssen unpacks this element in Benjamin's philosophy in her remarkable *Walter Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels* (1998). See especially chapter 10 "The Response to the *Kreatur*," pp. 150-162.

collecting deposes any present conceived as mythic or auratic.[47] Simply put, the gesture of collecting grasps in the here and now what is "truly bare and austere," the *Jetztsein* of humanity as *alteritas*.[48]

The genuine collector's attentiveness to the world of things constructs a situation in which an event of redemption can erupt from within the realm of the profane; it is, as Benjamin insists, a "great art of making things seem closer" that presents a "real humanism" for which justice and happiness are the rule rather than the exception. To understand his materialist historiography—his desire to read "what has never been written"—we must grapple with his wager that "being past, being no more, is passionately at work in things."[49] Perhaps this is why he concludes his essay "Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting" by contemplating the "happiness [*Glück*] of the collector."[50] For Benjamin, an image of happiness traverses our lives, but it only becomes legible if we engage the language of things:

> Happiness for us is thinkable only in the air that we have lived, among people who have lived with us. In other words, there vibrates in the idea of happiness...the idea of redemption [*Erlösung*]. This happiness is founded on the very despair and desolation which were ours.[51]

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[47] The manner in which Benjamin associates the auratic with the myth and the Nietzschean eternal return is evidenced by several comments he makes throughout *The Arcades Project*. Perhaps the most direct articulation is the following: "Life within the magic circle of the eternal return makes for an existence that *never emerges from the auratic*" (italics mine; *AP* 119).

[48] *AP* 326. It should be noted that Heidegger's "Lecture on Humanism" is the text that passes through Agamben's concept of potentiality and thereby colors my reading of Benjamin. See Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, pp. 217-265.

[49] Benjamin borrows this phrase "to read what was never written" (*was nie geschrieben wurde, lessen*) from Hugo von Hofmannstahl's "Der Tod und der Tod" (1884). See the conclusion of Benjamin's "On the Mimetic Faculty" (1933) and the epigraph to "Convolute M: The Flâneur" in *AP*.

[50] A similar connection is made in his "Old Forgotten Children's Books" (1924), see *SW* 1, 406-413.

[51] I have slightly emended the English translation of this passage. See *AP* 479; *GS* V:1, 600.

In "Walter Benjamin and His Angel," Gershom Scholem explains that for Benjamin happiness has "a wholly new meaning" because it is "based on the conflict between the 'once only' and the 'yet again'...the unique, the 'once only' [and] precisely *not* that which one has lived through...but rather the wholly new and as yet unlived" (77). This (im)possibility of happiness—of redemption within the profane—orients Benjamin's work; it is the ground on which he erects the entirety of his materialist philosophy. For him, to grasp the profane is the "quietest approach" of redemption: the actualization of the as yet unlived, the potentiality of the what-has-been. Unlike nihilism, recollection grasps the *profane as profane*; it recollects nothing other than oblivion, the *agrapha* (the unwritten) that dislocates the fictive atemporality of the present: the eternal return of the same.[52]

Although Benjamin's critical gaze is retrospective—focused on what his "angel of history" sees as a "single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet"—its force is exerted on the future (*I* 257). The future here is not simply a promise in time, a temporal extension, but rather it is a now-time: the actualization of the promises of the past inscribed in the dream-nightmare of modernity. It is worth noting that Benjamin's essay "Unpacking My Library" originally bore a slightly different ending than the one found in the final published versions. It reads:

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[52] Aristotle confirms what Benjamin approaches here. In his *Nichomachen Ethics* he declares that happiness (*eudaimonia*) is a kind of activity, one that requires experience (a "complete life" he terms it) and excellence. The "without work" (*argós*) of humanity is a kind of life inseparable from an activity of the soul and action undertaken with excellence; the best and most complete excellence is happiness. As a figure of the just (*der Gererchte*), Benjamin's genuine collector grasps what has been forgotten, oblivion as such. In other words, happiness. This is why "forgetfulness does not occur in relation to them," Aristotle argues (106). The referent of the phrase "to them" is the just, that is, those who recollect happiness. See Book I of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, especially 1102a5-1103a10.

"Glück des Sammlers, Glück des Einsamen...Der Sammler stillt sein Schicksal."[53] Here Benjamin relates the collector's happiness (*Glück*) to his solitude (*Einsamkeit*). Rather than merely accepting our isolation from other people—our fate—in a defeatist, silent manner, Benjamin's genuine collector "nurses" (*stillt*) it. This tactical countermove is an awareness of the situation in which "tradition...has fallen ill" and so the genuine collector responds by playing destructively, producing what Proust called "*un étrange sectionnement du temps*" (*SW* 4, 174). Solitude, the genuine collector's "awareness of time's empty passage"—the abyss that "divides him from his fellow men"—is transformed into a "tactic of attrition" that knows only this rule: to "surrender to the abyss...we see also just where the abyss actually opens."[54]

This dissertation explicates Benjamin's aesthetic figure of the genuine collector as a hinge between his thoughts on historiography, aesthetics, and ethics. It is the genuine collector's tactile and mnemonic relation to mere things that opens Benjamin's philosophy to an afterlife other than that of a curious modernist artifact. I will argue that by enlisting the "language of things" for his "primal history of modernity" Benjamin's theory of collecting conceives a way to understand our relation to things not as the

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[53] At the Benjamin Archive in Berlin I was able to see his author's copy of the version originally published in *Die Literarische Welt*. The passage cited here is in the printed version but Benjamin marked it out because he was not satisfied with this ending and asked for it to be removed. This request was made too late and the text was printed in with this ending, but with a note from the editor sharing Benjamin's wishes. For more on this text see Benjamin's 25 July 1931 letter to Theodor Adorno and *GS* IV:2, 997-8. The definitive version now reads: "Glück des Sammlers, Glück des Privatmanns."

[54] *AP* 351, 337, 353. Benjamin was very interested in Bertolt Brecht's notion of *Ermattung*, attrition. For a sense of the conversations between Benjamin and Brecht see "Notes from Svendborg, Summer 1934" (*SW* 2, 783-791) and his diary entries from 1938 (*SW* 3, 335-343). In his introduction to Benjamin's *Understanding Brecht*, Stanley Mitchell notes that after Benjamin's death Brecht wrote a very pessimistic poem using the notion of "tactic of attrition [*Ermattungstaktik*]" to symbolize their relationship. It reads: "Tactics of attrition are what you enjoyed/Sitting at the chess table in the pear tree's shade./The enemy who drove you from your books/Will not be worn down by the likes of us" (xviii).

proliferation of souvenirs, but as the very situation from which a thought-event can arise. Remarkably the thought-event of Benjamin's philosophy is the redemption of humanity.

In the first chapter, "A Critical Historian," I explain how Benjamin conceives his genuine collector vis-à-vis Friedrich Nietzsche's "critical historian." This relation reveals not only the centrality of collecting to Benjamin's materialist historiography, but also how he conceives collecting as a critical philology of the material culture of modernity aimed at interrupting and deposing any historicism that upholds "our culture of barbarism." Benjamin's genuine collector wields a gesture of citation, of calling forth and judging, that discloses its hidden aspect: the "destructive character."

Chapter Two, "A Sisyphean Task," explicates Benjamin's difficult concept of pure means through a discussion of his wager that the collector's value (*Liebhaberwert*) exceeds any system of use and exchange value. A collected thing is thereby "useless," a pure means of recollection. Collecting is not an end in-itself, but only a gesture, a mediality that signifies another form of action. Focusing on the "Sisyphean task" of the genuine collector presents an alternative to the well-worn contention that Benjamin binds the aesthetic, the ethical, and the political only in the technological possibilities proffered by film and photography. More than these particular historical instances, it is Benjamin's dialectic of memory and oblivion, that is, happiness as an ethico-political experience, that bears the weight of a "coming philosophy."

The third chapter, "Allegory and Collecting," addresses the intricacies of Benjamin's statement that in every collector there is an allegorist and vice versa. Despite the prevalence of commentaries on allegory, the secondary literature on Benjamin is

curiously silent on how collecting tempers and transforms it. Following Benjamin's lead, the work of Charles Baudelaire plays a central role here. His work represents an decisive attempt to deal with the nineteenth-century inventions of the masses and the commodity. Moreover, the debasement of memory in the form of the souvenir links Benjamin's reading of Baudelaire's modern *Trauer* with his thoughts on recollection. It is with and against Baudelaire that Benjamin hones his thinking on materiality, memory, and gesture in order to move from symbolism to allegory to recollection. Just as allegory replaces the symbol, Benjamin extends Baudelaire's concept of allegory into an ethico-political means, that is, recollection.

"The Irretrievability of the Past," the fourth chapter, is an extended meditation on the reception of Benjamin's philosophy, in particular his autobiographical essay "Berlin Childhood around 1900," by the contemporary German prose writer W. G. Sebald. As an act of "quoting without quotation marks" Sebald's last work *Austerlitz* is indelibly colored by Benjamin's thoughts on (re)collecting. My focus is on the curious materiality of the black-and-white photographs that interrupt Sebald's prose. By confessing that his narrator *collects* these photographs, Sebald presents us with the shared of wager of his and Benjamin's work: is it possible to construct a relationship to that which must remain irretrievable? Is it possible to have a relationship with the *immemorial*, which is precisely what can neither be forgotten nor remembered? Their respective work posits that if we can begin to read what is inscribed on the faces of things, a practice which must forfeit any humanist notions of agency and empathy, then a relationship to the "what-has-been" becomes possible. By examining Benjamin's theory of recollection and Sebald's

"storytelling," with its compelling collection of photographs, I argue that a relation to mere things can reveal an ethics of historiographic and narrative writing premised not on factual representation, but on *the irretrievability of the past*.

The conclusion, "The Face of Things" sketches the importance of understanding Benjamin's theory of recollection for contemporary thought, particularly its call for aesthetic discourse to be redressed. Aesthetics has only adorned "the expressionless" aspect of the work of art with an aura of religiosity and shoddy mysticism. Denying the aesthetic realm any privilege, Benjamin interrupts "the play of appearances" and thereby constructs a threshold wherein our consignment to art and artifice—our aesthetic life—could *finally* present itself as a "subversive...critical interstice in an otherwise instrumental world." In short, we are faced with the necessity of surveying our ethical and political situation, that is, understanding the degree to which the production of artworks and our nonplussed relations with them no longer open a place, a gap or threshold from which human action and knowledge takes place.