

An art history of means: Arendt-Benjamin

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I.

Notre heritage n'est précédé d'aucun testament.
—René Char

Is it possible to conceive anew the relation between art history and philosophy, disciplines with indelibly German birthrights, without abandoning the ruins of its aftermath? After philosophy, after art history: this is more than a temporality, it is an orientation, a movement towards and after that which has been forfeited. And yet, only in the aftermath of each, between art history and philosophy, are we granted our inheritance. What has been given is a tradition that, while irreparable, induces a recollection of what remains. What remains, what returns, is neither art history nor philosophy.

To read and study this relation between generations and disciplines we must confront two unfinished projects that sought to step beyond the demarcations of philosophy and art history, two projects by forebears who rejected the names 'philosopher' and 'art historian': Hannah Arendt and Walter Benjamin.¹ What comes next is unimaginable if we do not return to this pair of German-Jewish émigrés, who succeeded and failed in crossing borders both physical and conceptual. These proper names have long been bound to one another, and each offers art history and philosophy a lesson that has been difficult to receive. The difficulty arises not only from the incompleteness of their respective projects, but also from a certain reluctance to read Benjamin alongside Arendt, Arendt alongside Benjamin.²

This *alongside* or *neben* is at once a preposition of location (beside, next to) and one of exception (against, aside from). If we attend to this *nebenbei*, this simultaneity of Arendt and Benjamin, then perhaps we can understand how and why both reconceive historiography and aesthetics at once. This reconception locates the 'space of history' (*Geschichtsraum*) within the present, that is, as

¹ Arendt rejected being called a 'philosopher' throughout her career; for instance, see her interview with Günter Gaus in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, New York: Penguin Books, 2003, 3-4. For his part, Benjamin made this statement early in his career: 'There is no such thing as art history'.

² I am referring to Arendt's *The Life of the Mind*, New York: Harcourt, 1978 and Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999.

inseparable from representation, the world of appearance and language.³ In ways that run parallel, part, and lose sight of one another before reapproaching, Benjamin and Arendt present us with a mode of thinking about art that insists on the inseparability of aesthetics and history. The stress falls on neither aesthetics nor history, but on the *and*, the conjunction, the bind. The experience of reading one alongside the other underlines what remains to be found amid the ruins of these projects: a 'secret history' offering itself to a reflection that grasps not facts or truth, but the 'transmissibility' (*Tradierbarkeit*) of things.

As an essential aspect of historiography and aesthetics, 'transmissibility' provides a way to step beyond the impasse of contemporary critical practice.⁴ Transmissibility makes possible an interruptive grasping of 'the past in the present'. Although this concept is explicitly associated with Benjamin's work, it colours the entirety of Arendt's work as well. Transmissibility demands that we read each with and against the other in order to end the 'state of emergency' of art and history without resorting to eschatology or the histrionics of political theology.

The concept of transmissibility frames how both Arendt and Benjamin approach history and culture. Benjamin's clearest articulation of transmissibility appears in a letter to Gershom Scholem dated 12 June 1938. Near the end of the letter, he interprets modernity via a synecdochal reading of Kafka, whose work 'represents tradition falling ill'. With modernity, the 'consistency of truth' — tradition as such — has been lost. He writes: 'Many had accommodated themselves to [tradition falling ill], clinging to truth or whatever they happened to regard as such, and, with a more or less heavy heart, had renounced transmissibility. Kafka's real genius was that he tried something entirely new: he sacrificed truth for the sake of clinging to transmissibility'.⁵ Faced with modernity's severance of tradition, Kafka chose to hold fast not to truth, but to the possibility of transmitting an openness to what is absent, to what no longer takes place. Benjamin, as well as Arendt, took from Kafka the lesson that to betray metaphysical truth is to allow temporality to transmit itself, that is, to survive in another space and time. Furthermore, this lesson inspired them to think a space of history from within the aesthetic, the world of artifice. How are we to characterize this 'space' — as interstice, hiatus, threshold, in-between, gap, or even theatre? How does it take

³ Benjamin's phrase the 'space of history' is found in *The Arcades Project*, 458; *Gesammelte Schriften*, eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991, vol. 1, 571.

⁴ Benjamin's Kantian practice of constructing concepts by adding the suffix *-barkeit* (-abilities) is the subject of Sam Weber's astounding collection of essays *Benjamin's -abilities*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008. This text includes an extended discussion of 'citability' and Benjamin's philosophy of language, both of which are both premised on 'impartability' [*Mittelbarkeit*]. Weber does not address the 'transmissibility' in his text. My interest in the concept stemmed primarily from seminars and conversations with Giorgio Agamben at UCLA as well as the concluding chapter of his early book *The Man Without Content*, trans. Georgia Albert, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.

⁵ Benjamin, *Briefe*, eds. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966, vol. 2, 763. Arendt discusses transmissibility in her 'Introduction, Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940', *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, New York: Schocken Books, 1969, 41.

place within human time, rather than transcend it? How does transmissibility reconfigure how we think about art?

By theorizing a space of history Arendt and Benjamin aim not to resolder the 'chain of tradition' but to expose transmissibility, that is, an aesthetic-historiographic originary violence that transmits itself as an openness between past and future, *poiesis* and *aisthesis*. Both acknowledge the violence inherent in any creative event (including but not limited to the creation of an artwork). This violence marks the event with a 'temporal index' that must be grasped by the historian, the spectator, who bears witness at a remove. To cite this index is to seize the contending forces of past and future: to read and study the event urgently is to instantiate the present, a space of history or worldliness in which thought and action are possible. One consequence of this critical gesture is that transmissibility traverses the means-end rationale (*Zweckrationalität*) that Max Weber and others argued is the law of modernity. Neither Arendt nor Benjamin posit a return to traditional aesthetics or art history as a valid response to modernity; instead, they both turn their attention to the materiality of art and memory.

Both intimate that opening this space of history is possible only if we come to understand how and why a work of art is the 'worldliest of all things'. Arendt's phrase 'the worldliest of all things' is meant to stage an aesthetic *and* political critique of modernity. 'Worldliness', she asserts, is 'the capacity to fabricate and create a world', the 'space in which things become public'.⁶ To supplement her understanding of art as 'the worldliest of all things' Arendt constructed an interpretation of Kantian judgment in the postwar period.⁷ Unfortunately, her death in 1975 left unfinished her writing on the concept of judgment, which was to be the third section of *The Life of the Mind*. From this work's two completed sections ('Thinking' and 'Willing') as well as her notes, lectures, and other essays, it is possible to extrapolate how she was conceiving judgment. I will address this in

⁶ Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, New York: Penguin Books, 1993, 209; *Portable Arendt*, 19. The phrase 'the worldliest of all things' appears in *Between Past and Future*, 209. Arendt's category of 'things' is narrower than Benjamin's: hers is limited to works of art in a more traditional sense, whereas Benjamin's category extends to a wider range of man-made and mass-produced objects. On Benjamin's understanding of this category see especially Beatrice Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000. However, neither desires to maintain a mythic, auratic relationship to art, nor do they share the conclusions Martin Heidegger reaches in his meditation on the *thingness* of art. See Heidegger's *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, New York: Perennial, 1975. Many of these issues surrounding varying conceptions of 'things' are found in the extraordinary collection of essays from the pages of the fall 2001 issue of *Critical Inquiry* edited by Bill Brown. This collection has been an invaluable point of reference for my study of Benjamin and Arendt. See Brown, ed., *Things*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004.

⁷ Indispensable to any understanding of Arendt's interpretation of Kantian judgment is the introduction to the edited volume *Hannah Arendt: Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1982. Here Beiner states: 'Arendt's theory of judging is placed within an overall account of the present historical situation...[in which] traditional standards of judgment are no longer authoritative...The supreme danger is abstention from judgment, the banality of evil', 113.

some detail below, but what is certain is the interdependence of judging and thinking; thinking prepares the way for judgment.

Arendt's development of judgment betrays a debt to Benjamin. For instance, Arendt uses a quotation from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (Act I, Scene 2) twice in her work. It is found at the conclusion of the section devoted to 'Thinking' in *The Life of the Mind*. At the end of her discussion of thinking, immediately before a 'Postscriptum' on judgment and historiography, she pens an apostrophe to her future readers about the '*fragmented* past'. 'What has been lost', she writes, 'is the continuity of the past as it seemed to be handed down from generation to generation ... What you are then left with is ... a *fragmented* past, which has lost the certainty of evaluation'.⁸ She reminds us that even though dismantling metaphysics, aesthetics, and modern history was necessary, it is unwise 'to destroy' what remains ('the "rich and strange", the "coral" and the "pearls"'); instead, it is left to us to judge their transmissibility as fragments, which, at least, inscribes hope on the face of things to be read. This Shakespeare quotation is familiar to readers of Arendt because she had used it in her introduction of Benjamin to the English-speaking world in *Illuminations* (1968). So even though he is directly cited only once in Arendt's last unfinished treatise, Benjamin's presence is clearly felt. Arendt begins the last section ('The Pearl Diver') of her essay on Benjamin with the same quotation from *The Tempest* before she adds a few remarks that are relevant here: 'Insofar as the past has been transmitted as tradition, it possesses authority ... Walter Benjamin knew that the break in tradition and the loss of authority which occurred in his lifetime were irreparable, and he concluded that he had to discover new ways of dealing with the past. In this he became a master when he discovered that the transmissibility of the past had been replaced by its citability'. (38) Benjamin's uniqueness, for Arendt, rests with his 'ways of dealing with the past', particularly citation. The recurrence of this Shakespeare quotation suggests that for Benjamin transmissibility and citation must be thought together, but also that Arendt's thinking about Benjamin prepared the way for her concept of judgment: both citation and judgment are ways of dealing with transmissibility, which demands attending to what remains: 'rich and strange' things.

In prompting us to recollect Benjamin the 'pearl diver', Arendt emphasizes that he chose citation as a means to deal with modernity because it 'constitutes the foundation of the activity of a figure with which [he] felt an instinctive affinity: that of the collector'.⁹ In her postwar reminiscence of Benjamin, Arendt addresses Benjamin's interest in collecting a form of 'profane illumination' that traverses the remnants of aesthetics and history to arrive at the political:

inasmuch as collecting can fasten on any category of objects [not just art objects] ... 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

⁸ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 212.

⁹ Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, 105.

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.* (42)

Arendt's interpretation is neither unfounded nor idiosyncratic; instead, it reveals the core of Benjamin's theory of collecting by identifying the intimacy between 'the collector's passion' and the revolutionary (two figures perhaps reconcilable only in Benjamin's work). Her insight into the motivation of Benjamin's 'genuine collector' (*echter Sammler*)—how and why it operates by citing the 'scorned and apocryphal', the outmoded expression (*Ausdruck*) of modernity, in the present—clarifies her own position on judgment.¹⁰ Her assertion that art is 'the worldliest of all things' is incomprehensible without Benjamin's 'genuine collector' who redeems things by judging them. Simply put, it is impossible to solve the riddle of Arendtian judgment without Benjaminian citation. Inversely, Arendt's secular humanism may help us loosen the hold theology exerts over Benjamin's conception of citation. For both, redeeming an object (an artwork or any commodity) as a thing deposes the traditional *technics* of aesthetics, historiography, and politics.

Judgment and citation are aesthetic-historiographic terms that demonstrate how Arendt and Benjamin think politically about art as a now-here, a time-space, wherein the present takes place. Assisting this event is the 'Sisyphean task' of the *histor*, the aesthetic figure of this virtual historiography: Arendt-Benjamin.¹¹ A retrospective figure of what is to come, this *histor* maintains a fidelity to what comes next, after, or beyond our contemporary impasse by citing what remains. This aesthetic figure is guided by an insight that reveals the paradox of transmissibility in its starkest light: passing between what-has-been (*das Gewesene*) and artifice it makes possible an affirmative, creative event of recollection. This confounds historicism while, at the same time, acknowledges that tradition is irreparable.

¹⁰ Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935-1938*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002, 284. Some notable discussions of Benjamin's figure of the collector are: Eckhardt Köhn, 'Sammler' in *Benjamins Begriffe: Zweiter Band*, eds. Michael Opitz and Erdmut Wizisla, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2000, 695-724; Esther Leslie, 'Telescoping the Microscopic Object: Benjamin the Collector', *de-, dis-, ex-*, vol. 3, 1999, 59-93; Michael P. Steinberg, 'The Collector as Allegorist: Goods, Gods, and the Objects of History', *Walter Benjamin and The Demands of History*, ed. Michael P. Steinberg, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996, 88-118; Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and The Arcades Project*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991; and Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997.

¹¹ Aesthetic figures are defined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *What Is Philosophy?* New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, 33. Aesthetic figures assist conceptual personae, a philosopher's 'heteronyms'. Examples of conceptual personae are Plato's 'Socrates', Friedrich Nietzsche's 'Zarathustra' or Descartes 'the Idiot'. An aesthetic figure 'assists' a conceptual persona by creating affects: a presentation of 'sensory becoming' by which 'something or someone is ceaselessly becoming-other (while continuing to be what they are)'. 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 extract an event from things and beings'.

Judgment and citation here signify aesthetic-historiographic becomings wherein a space of history opens between an event and its representation. This is the promise of transmissibility.¹² Within the space of history, the sphere of spectators and actors, there is not consensus (despite Arendt's wish); rather, there must be *dissensus*, argument, discourse, ethics. This commonplace is so only if it is *massenweise*: virtual not artificial, particular not universal, political not solipsistic.¹³ Our inheritance, then, is this *histor* who understands how and why Benjamin's genuine collector's stance is 'in the highest sense, the attitude of an heir'.¹⁴ What becomes of art history and philosophy lies in-between, which opens only in an originary violence that rends any relation, that renders us inheritors of 'pearls'.

II.

Despite the incompleteness of Arendt's writing about judgment, the concept itself is well-developed in her work. She addresses it in the finished sections of *The Life of the Mind* as well as in a series of lectures published as *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* in 1982. The earliest iteration of judging appears in her essay 'The Crisis of Culture: Its Social and Its Political Significance' (1960) where judgment is a strategy to confront mass society, that is, the absence of culture and politics. To diagnose this depoliticized mass society, Arendt undertakes an historical examination of culture (art in particular) that traces its reduction to a 'cultural' commodity in the postwar period. Postwar mass society represents the apotheosis of *Homo faber*. She summarizes:

¹² I would like to add that this promise has also been developed in another context by Georges Didi-Huberman in *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs From Auschwitz*, trans. Shane B. Lillis, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008. Here he implicitly supports the ethical connections between transmissibility and art historiography. In discussing four images taken from within a gas chamber at Auschwitz by a member of the *Sonderkommando* Didi-Huberman argues: 'If the risk they took signifies the hope they placed in such a transmission of images, should we not take this transmission itself very seriously, and concentrate attentively on the images in question, not as deceptive artifacts but rather as "instants of truth", whose importance was emphasized by Arendt and Benjamin?', 62. In addition to binding transmissibility, Benjamin, and Arendt together, he also cites a passage from Arendt that underscores my reading: 'Lacking the truth, [we] will however find *instants of truth*, and those instants are in fact all we have available to us to give some order to this chaos of horror. These instants arise spontaneously, like oases in the desert', 31.

¹³ Weber develops this concept of '*massenweise*' from Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility" in *Mass Mediauras: Form, Technics, Media*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996, 76-107. My thinking here is also informed by the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri on the concept of the 'common'; see *Commonwealth*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009. In fact, despite clear differences with Arendt, Hardt and Negri clarify their concept of the common by stating: 'We agree in this regard with Hannah Arendt's conception of politics as the interaction and composition of singularities in a common world'.

¹⁴ Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927-1934*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999, 491.

The moment this point of view [fabrication, means to an end, use value] is generalized and extended to other realms ... [it] threatens not only the political realm ... it also threatens the cultural realm itself because it leads to a *devaluation of things as things* which ... degenerate into mere means.¹⁵

Arendt's position that the 'devaluation of things as things' indicates the loss of culture and tradition ('the thread of tradition is broken') must be interpreted against her claim that art is 'the worldliest of all things', that is, 'fabricated not for men, but for the world'. (209) She measures the distance between politics (a 'world'), which requires culture, and depoliticized, anomic mass society that demands everything be consumed, valued only in terms of whether or not it serves some presupposed end (be it biological, psychological, or even aesthetic). In contemporary mass society we are never free from 'all the cares and activities of the life process', which extend into an all-consuming affair.¹⁶ In short, we are never 'free for the world and its culture'. (205) The transformation of art into an image-commodity—into just another element of a society of spectacle—goes hand-in-hand with a loss of history, a loss of 'the world once common to [us] all'. (90) 'In the situation of radical world-alienation', Arendt writes, 'the loss of nature and the loss of human artifice in the widest sense, which would include all history—has left behind it a society of men ... without a common world which would at once relate and separate them'. (89) Arendt's discussion of art as an exception to this rule, as something outside the 'life process' inextricable from history itself, is wholly dependent on the Kantian notion of judgment.

Beginning with 'The Crisis of Culture' and continuing through her unfinished opus, Arendt sought to construct a political philosophy (a Kantian theory of political judgment) from Kant's aesthetic philosophy.¹⁷ Her entire discussion of judging employs the Kantian language of aesthetic judgment (taste as communicable, without an antecedent universality). However, unlike political action, which must take into account its ends, judgment must 'abstract from any consideration of ends; aesthetic judgment must make no reference to teleology'.¹⁸ Aesthetic judgment is impartial and privileges taste over genius (in Kant's terms); whereas political judgment, premised on action, is inseparable from ends and aims. The question is whether or not it is possible, as Arendt claims, to move from the

¹⁵ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 216.

¹⁶ Arendt adds: 'Mass culture comes into being when mass society...consume[s] the cultural objects, eats them up and destroys them', 207.

¹⁷ The idea of a virtual Kantian philosophy marks another commonality with Benjamin. As is well known, Benjamin characterized his own 'coming philosophy' as originating in Kantian experience. See *Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996, 100-110. In a letter to Scholem from 1917 he writes: 'Whoever doesn't ... treat [Kant] with the utmost respect, literally, as a *tradendum*—to be transmitted and passed down (no matter how much he must subsequently be reshaped), understands absolutely nothing of philosophy' (cited in Weber, *Benjamin's -abilities*, 11; see *Briefe* vol. 1, 150).

¹⁸ Beiner, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 135.

aesthetic to the political via Kantian judgment. Because Arendt decides to make this move, she has to side with the spectator (world-citizen) over the agent or enactor, as evidenced by her shift from arguing for an 'act of judging' with connotations of action (political) to a 'faculty of judgment' (a capacity of the mind).¹⁹ Despite this qualitative reconsideration of judging, she is determined to extract from Kantian aesthetic judgment a general 'faculty of judgment' that, while not political in and of itself, would be on the side of politics.²⁰

Arendt defines this faculty of judgment as 'the most political of man's mental abilities' because it deals with particulars (events) without subsuming them under general rules; it is the ethical dimension of thought. By aligning judgment with thinking she invests in the political aspects of retrospection and historiography because the 'movement of thinking loosens the hold of universals ... and thus frees judgment to operate in an open space of moral and aesthetic discrimination and discernment'.²¹ In her schema judging requires thinking as well as communicating one's position about a past event. Judgment is contemplative, retrospective action: a spectator is at a remove from the event (work of art or political decision) and thus can presumably be disinterested, meaning, in part, open to memory. As Julia Kristeva points out, for Arendt the 'spectators are the ones who "accomplish" history, thanks to a thought that follows the act. This accomplishment takes place through recollection, without which there is simply nothing to recount'.²² If the spectator-judge must recollect and be impartial, then no conceptual *deus ex machina* such as 'History' itself can guarantee meaning in advance. Thus, a political aspect of judgment reveals itself as an implicit critique of any philosophy of history that supplants individual mental activity with the 'pseudo-divinity' called 'Progress' or 'History'.

History cannot be the 'ultimate judge' because, for Arendt, judgment signals our desire to take responsibility for the past as such; to interrupt the autotelic movement of 'Progress' by recognizing the rights and obligations of the spectator, not just the actor. 'If judgment is our faculty for dealing with the past, the historian', she argues, 'is the inquiring man who by relating [the past] sits in judgment over it. If that is so, we may reclaim our human dignity, win it back as it were, from the pseudo-divinity named History ... without denying history's

¹⁹ Beiner astutely lays out this terrain in his interpretative essay; see 93-4.

²⁰ Since Arendt's appropriation of Kantian reflective judgment has been the subject of insightful and often pointed critiques by Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jürgen Habermas, among others, I will not go into the full assessment of it here. From the perspective of art history and aesthetics, Karen Lang's *Chaos and Cosmos: On the Image in Aesthetics and Art History*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006, is a valuable text that deals in part with the problems of Arendt's attempt to construct a political philosophy on a foundation of Kantian judgment.

²¹ Beiner, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 112.

²² Julia Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, trans. Ross Guberman, New York: Columbia University Press, 2001, 72.

importance but denying its right to being the ultimate judge'.²³ Such an argument represses even Kant's own philosophy of history.²⁴ Not only does she refuse to confront fully Kant's philosophy of history, she rejects every philosophy of history whose 'subject is not individual citizens but the human species taken as a whole', including those of Vico, Hegel, and Marx.²⁵ Arendt claims that when the subject of any philosophy of history is the human species as such or, worse yet, some overarching concept like the 'Spirit', we cannot judge past events in their particularity and, therefore, they are incommunicable. This is her objection to any philosophy of history: each is end-driven, unworldly and, in a real sense, only an aestheticization of politics. Arendt resists Kant's reliance on a metaphysical teleology to assure the coming of a universal cosmopolitan world-citizen, in particular, and the unrelenting emphasis on process—teleology as a *technics* of politics—in Kant, Hegel, Marx, and others in general, because each forfeits singularity by overwriting it in advance with the end. She concludes that with teleology the 'process alone makes meaningful whatever it happens to carry along' and acquires 'a monopoly of universality and significance'.²⁶ Consequently she gives the notion of judging two inseparable tasks: to interrupt any formalized historical process and to assist the creation of a world. Thus, judging as interruption is 'one, if not the most, important activity in which sharing-the-world-with-others comes to pass'. (221)

Although Arendt's dismantling of the modern concept of history may not have resulted in a comprehensive political philosophy, her elaboration of judgment provides a reconsideration of the implicit political aspect of art. She avers that

²³ Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 216. In texts such as *On Revolution*, New York: Viking Press, 1965, Arendt's demonstrates her point. The failures of historical actors (e.g., Paris Commune of 1871) are still events that must be rescued from the 'oblivion of history, thereby salvaging a portion of human dignity'. 'Events of this kind possess what Arendt, following Kant, calls "exemplary validity". By attending to the particular *qua* particular, in the form of an "example", the judging spectator is able to illuminate the universal without thereby reducing the particular to universals', Beiner, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 127.

²⁴ See Paul Ricoeur, 'Aesthetic Judgment and Political Judgment According to Hannah Arendt' in *The Just*, trans. David Pellauer, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000, 94-108. Here Ricoeur pinpoints Arendt's repression of Kant's own philosophy of history as precisely what disables her extension of aesthetic judgment into a political theory. His critique is decisive when he argues that without reference to Kant's philosophy of history, notably his *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View* (1784), which predates *The Critique of Judgment* (1790), Arendt simply cannot justify extending aesthetic judgment into a political one. Ricoeur shows that Kant's work on the philosophy of history utilizes much of the conceptual language that reappears in *The Critique of Judgment*, especially communicability, plurality, and the exemplarity of the particular. In addition, he stresses the necessity of distinguishing between reflection and retrospection. While Arendt characterizes judgment as retrospective, reflecting on past events grants a critical distance essential to future political judgment. By foregrounding the connection Kant makes between reflection and hope in his philosophy of history, Ricoeur asserts that he forwarded a 'disposition' that would reconcile the teleological and the cosmopolitan points of view.

²⁵ Ricoeur, 'Aesthetic Judgment', 103.

²⁶ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 64.

judging is a truly human praxis oriented towards past events, including the creation of works of art, 'the worldliest of all things'. Whereas the continuum of past and future, without present, depends on the 'business of everyday life', which is 'indifferent to the thingness of an object', judgment engages artworks as things, as the material presence of the historical process gone awry, as an exception to the rule of means-end necessity and consumption (208). For Arendt, a work of art allows each individual to sense a structural gap between past and future; thereby making possible the creation of a world. Judgment shelters art from any world-historical process, but providing it asylum is only possible if we can 'forget ourselves, our cares and the interests and urges of our lives, so that we will not seize what we admire but let it be as it is, in its appearance'.²⁷ To let art be in its appearance is not merely an ontological experience or simply one of leisure; rather, it enacts an aesthetic-political strike against mass society and its temporality. It is a momentary experience that exposes how and why 'the full actuality' of humanity is only attainable if we learn to live in this gap of time between past and future (13).

The work of art does not lie between the past and future; rather, it scumbles the tenses because it is transmittable. Art transmits the disquiet of the past (to play on Hegel's phrase 'the quiet of the past') to the future. This disquiet of the past—its haunting, repetitive aspect—is a clamor that causes anxiety and dread as much as the unknown future does. Judgment is the faculty that faces this disquiet; it responds to the vital transmissibility of the past by attempting to found a present wherein humanity possesses the 'full actuality' of its being. Such an act is suggested by one of Arendt's favorite parables by Kafka:

He has two antagonists; the first presses him from behind, from his origin. The second blocks the road in front of him. He gives battle to both ... His dream, though, is that some time in an unguarded moment—and this, it must be admitted, would require a night darker than any other night has ever been yet—he will jump out of the fighting line and be promoted, on account of his experience in fighting, to the position of umpire over his antagonists in their fight with each other.²⁸

Much of Arendt's political philosophy, especially as it relates to history and art, is inscribed in this 'thought-event.' She characterizes these 'antagonists' as the past (pressing him from his origin) and the future (blocking the road before him, coming towards him as in the German *Zukunft* and the French *avenir*). Arendt explains: 'In other words, the time continuum ... is broken up into the tenses past, present, future, whereby past and future are antagonistic to each other as the no-longer and the not-yet only because of the presence of man, who himself has an "origin" ... this

²⁷ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 201. By 'seize' Arendt means to force it into some predetermined utility.

²⁸ Kafka's parable 'HE' is cited by Arendt twice; see *Between Past and Future*, 7, and *Life of the Mind*, 202.

in-between is called the present'.²⁹ The present is a battleground. She intimates that the unimaginable 'dark night' — contemporaneity — is created, in fact, by our removal from the fight. For this reason Arendt rejects the dream of Kafka's character to 'be promoted' to the 'position of umpire', insisting that we must not acquiesce to these forces. For Kafka's dreamer Arendt substitutes a 'fighter', one who *judges*, one who is not 'a passive object inserted into the stream, to be tossed about by its waves', but who 'defends his own presence and thus defines ... "his" antagonists ... without "him", there would be no difference between past and future'.³⁰ The fighter creates the present by interrupting the flow of contending forces (past and future), and resisting the equilibrium that would create a timeless, unchanging eternity.³¹

A certain tension exists between Arendt and Benjamin regarding this 'gap' or present: Benjamin firmly locates it within historical time whereas she wavers between Benjamin's view and concluding that this gap or 'time-sensation' only occurs in thought. In the thirteenth thesis on the philosophy of history Benjamin makes a contrasting statement. 'History', he writes, is 'the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled with the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*]'.³² This *Jetztzeit* or now-time is not merely the present (*Gegenwart*) and, moreover, it appears precisely within historical time. For her part, Arendt wagers that this 'small non-time space in the very heart of time' is not possible in historical or biographical time. She claims that only insofar as an individual thinks can one 'live in this gap between past and future, in this present which is timeless'.³³ Whereas culture and the world can be inherited and handed down by tradition this small non-time space cannot be: 'Each new generation, every new human being ... must discover and ploddingly pave anew the path of thought'. (210) Arendt adds that although this gap between past and future cannot be inherited or handed down by tradition 'every great book of thought points to it somewhat cryptically'. (210) She speculates that

the strange survival of great works ... is due to their having been born in the small, inconspicuous track of non-time which their author's thought had beaten between an infinite past and an infinite future by accepting past and future as directed, aimed, as it were, at themselves — as *their* predecessors and successors, *their* past and *their* future — thus establishing a present for themselves. (210-1)

²⁹ Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 203.

³⁰ Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 207-8.

³¹ Although originating in the medieval philosophy of Duns Scotus, whom Arendt admired, as a *nunc stans* ('standing now'), this 'gap' is 'not a model and metaphor of divine eternity' nor is it 'a historical datum'; rather, it 'seems to be coeval with the existence of man on earth', *Life of the Mind*, 210.

³² Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 261.

³³ Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 210.

Despite her claim that this gap is not inheritable, does not Arendt suggest that works of art survive because they shelter their own natality so to speak, their own origin? Is this not part of the lesson of transmissibility learned from Kafka? It is not so much the physical appearance of this temporal aporia in a work of art as much as its very possibility, which ‘springs ... from the clash of past and future’. (211) After the fragmentation of the past, what then are we to judge? a world of appearance that only confirms a melancholic act of salvage? No. We are to judge whether or not this temporal aporia is present, dislocating the even semblance of tradition.

According to Arendt, works of art are not culture or tradition as such, but only fragments that allow us to recollect ‘the continuity of the past as it *seemed* handed down from generation to generation’. (212) This is transmissibility. Works of art possess a certain potency not because of the historical continuity they write, but because their very creation—the action of genius and *poiesis*—has its origin in this temporal aporia. For us, on the side of taste and *aisthesis*, reflecting on the fragmented past, it is left to judge not the formal structure or expression of the artwork, but the trace of that openness to the future, to what is never fully present but sent ahead, forwarded. To judge this trace or fragment means grasping the work of art as a particularity, as an example (*Bei-spiel*), that plays beside itself, that plays between imagination and understanding, between *poiesis* and *aisthesis*, between past and future. This *between* is the detour of transmissibility, which takes place only where it deposes itself momentarily. Judgments are a second-order interruption; they intervene in a situation dictated by absence and by a fundamental rupture that has disclosed tradition. To judge a work of art is to think the relation between past and future as an ontological act that borders on the political: the gesture of an aesthetic-historiography to come.

Arendt gives her judging figure, constructed from pre-modern culture and Kantian philosophy, a name retrieved from the artistic and historiographic registers of antiquity: *histor*. The etymology of the concept ‘history’, she explains, is ‘Greek in origin and derived from *historein*, to inquire in order to tell how it was—*legein ta eonta* in Herodotus. But the origin of this verb is again Homer (*Iliad* XVIII) where the noun *histor* (“historian”, as it were) occurs, and that Homeric historian is the *judge*’. (216) At stake in this act of naming is ‘a whole set of problems by which modern thought is haunted, especially the problem of theory and practice and all attempts to arrive at a halfway plausible theory of ethics’. (216) Judgment is not knowledge; it is the ethical activity of the *histor* who defends ‘this small track of non-time’ to save things ‘from the ruin of historical and biographical time’.³⁴ Arendt’s *histor* narrates singularities (events, artworks) in order to transcend historical and biographical time.³⁵ But is it not possible to conceive of this activity

³⁴ Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 211; *Between Past and Future*, 13.

³⁵ Narrative is essential to Arendt’s political philosophy. As I do not have the space here to address it fully I will only cite from Kristeva’s remarkable ‘Life as a Narrative’ in *Hannah Arendt* where she distinguishes Arendt’s take on narrative from the narrative theory of historians like Paul Ricoeur and others: ‘For Arendt, political life may be inseparable from the narrative that makes its conflicts visible

without transcending human temporality? Arendt overlooks how Benjamin's 'philosophy of history', which certainly shares her disdain of teleology, maintains a structure of temporal immanence. To Arendt's figure of the *histor* I would add two elements of Benjamin's materialist historiography: first, his 'constructive principle' that thinking 'involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well', that is, 'to blast open the continuum of history'; second, his 'cautious detachment' from cultural treasures, that is, inversely his genuine collector's attentiveness (*Aufmerksamkeit*) to kitsch and outmoded commodities.³⁶ Admittedly, the latter made Arendt somewhat uneasy, but without her, Benjamin's desire 'to capture the portrait of history in the most insignificant representations of reality, its scraps, as it were' would not illuminate a passage beyond negative dialectics, beyond the eschatology of the contemporary.³⁷

III.

In order to understand Benjamin's desire to read these 'scraps' as a kind of 'portrait of history' it is best to begin with a quotation characterizing his genuine collector: 'Some make things transmittable (this marks the conservative nature of all collectors), others make situations handy, citable [*zitierbar*] so to speak: these are the destructive characters'.³⁸ A distinction is made here between the figure of the collector, who makes things 'transmissible' (*tradierbar*), and the 'destructive character' who makes situations 'citable' (*zitierbar*). However, this is not a simple distinction. In considering the concept of transmissibility (*Tradierbarkeit*), Benjamin first turns to the figure of the collector and attempts to think the relation between the present and the past as a relation between a collector and his objects. In place of the nineteenth-century caricature of the collector as a sort of hapless, fetishistic antiquarian or as an inveterate souvenir hunter, Benjamin reconciles two seemingly opposite figures—the bourgeois collector and the destructive character—into a 'genuine collector' in-between 'The Destructive Character' and the other crucial essay from the same year (1931), 'Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting'. While the latter is more well-known and often taken as his definitive statement on collecting, it remains incomplete without the former, as Benjamin

to each spectator, but only to the extent that political life can resist its own aestheticization, can be conceived as an "activity" (*praxis*) that cannot be reduced to its own "product" (*poiesis*), and can allow itself to be shared by the irreducible plurality of human being', 94-5.

³⁶ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 262, 256.

³⁷ Cited in Arendt, 'Introduction', 11. In 'The Crisis of Culture' Arendt says that the 'intellectualization of kitsch' [quoting Harold Rosenberg] is 'justified on the grounds that mass society, whether we like it or not, is going to stay with us into the foreseeable future; hence its "culture", "popular culture [cannot] be left to the populace"', 197. Her essay questions whether or not the relationship between 'mass society and culture will be ... the same as the relation of society toward the culture that preceded it'.

³⁸ Benjamin, *SW* 2, 542. 'Einige machen die Dinge tradierbar (das sind vor allem die Sammler, konservative, konservierende Naturen), andere machen Situationen handlich, zitierbar sozusagen: das sind die destruktiven Charaktere', *GS* IV:2, 1000.

makes clear in his assertion that ‘collectors are people with a tactical instinct’: that is, the ‘true, greatly misunderstood passion of the collector is always anarchistic, destructive’. (489; *GS* III, 216) This ‘tactical instinct’ is absolutely necessary to the activity of the destructive character, who is also curiously a ‘traditionalist’.³⁹ This complementarity of destruction and preservation presents Benjamin’s genuine collector as one who wields a critical form of memory (recollection) by *citing* the transmitted elements of the past in the present.

By closely examining the intertextuality between the essay on book collecting and the essay on the early modern Austrian writer Karl Kraus, it becomes apparent that Benjamin’s decision to align the gesture of collecting—transmissibility—with citation is supported by his theory of language.⁴⁰ For Benjamin, citation is exemplified by the work of Kraus, who gives citation an ‘unmistakable aggressive force’.⁴¹ In ‘Unpacking My Library’, Benjamin writes that only in private collections do ‘objects get their due’.⁴² In a ‘genuine collection’ things ‘get their due’ because they are not merely transmitted from the past, but rather they are *cited* in the present, thereby robbing modernity of the semblance of tradition it feigns. The translation of the German phrase ‘ihrem Recht’ as ‘get their due’ misses the allusion to justice (*judgment*), which forges a conceptual link with citation.⁴³ Citation denotes both an act of quoting and a juridical, even theological, summons. Thus, in his essay on Kraus, while discussing citation, we find a phrase similar to ‘ihrem Recht’. In defining Kraus’s ‘basic polemical procedure’ Benjamin writes: ‘A single line, and not even one of his, is enough to enable Kraus to descend, as saviour, into this inferno ... In the quotation that both saves and punishes, language proves the matrix of justice’.⁴⁴ Here we see the phrase ‘die Mater der Gerechtigkeit’, ‘the matrix of justice’. The semantic link between ‘Recht’ and ‘Gerechtigkeit’ is crucial because this connotation of judgment colours Benjamin’s thoughts on a ‘genuine collection’, which exists in relation to the true ‘matrix of justice’: language as such.⁴⁵

³⁹ Benjamin writes that the ‘destructive character stands in the frontline of traditionalists’, *SW* 2, 542.

⁴⁰ See particularly Benjamin’s ‘On Language as Such and on the Language of Man’ in *SW* 1.

⁴¹ Recall Benjamin’s memorable line: ‘Quotations in my work are like wayside robbers who leap out, armed, and rob the idle stroller of his conviction’, *SW* 1, 481.

⁴² Benjamin, *SW* 2, 491.

⁴³ Benjamin, *GS* IV:1, 395. Citation and judgment are explicitly bound in Benjamin’s thought: ‘To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of the past—which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments. Each moment it has lived becomes a *citation à l’ordre du jour*—and that day is Judgment Day’, *Illuminations*, 254.

⁴⁴ Benjamin, *SW* 2, 453, 454.

⁴⁵ Benjamin explicitly associates Kraus’ use of citation with ‘a Platonic love of language’ (*SW* 2, 453). The Platonic Thing, ‘the thing of thinking’ is ‘the very opening in which something like a tradition is possible’; see Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999, 104, 105. ‘The thing itself’, Agamben adds, ‘therefore has its essential place in language, even if language is certainly not adequate to it, on account, Plato says, of what is weak in language. One could say, with an apparent paradox, that the thing itself, while in some way transcending language, is nevertheless possible only in language and by virtue of language: precisely the thing of language’.

The transition between Benjamin's philosophies of language and history is only possible through citation, which unlike transmissibility, preserves a relation to the original context and/or experience by its destructiveness. If in citation 'the two realms—of origin and destruction—justify themselves before language', then there is a logic of immanence at play in the temporality of modernity, that is, not one epoch superseding the next, not a relation of *archē* and *telos*, but instead an immanent temporal structure laced with singularity and repetition, alterity and movement.⁴⁶ This logic reinforces Benjamin's discussion of origin (*Ursprung*). He asserts that the type of critical history he desires 'distinguishes that which concerns us as originary in historical experience from the pieced-together findings of the factual. "What is original [*ursprünglich*] never allows itself to be recognized in the naked, obvious existence of the factual; its rhythm is accessible only to a dual insight. This insight ... concerns the fore-history and after-history of the original"'.⁴⁷ In contrast to the historicist alluded to in the phrase 'pieced-together findings of the factual', Benjamin's genuine collector has the Sisyphean task of rendering things citable, that is, grasping the transmission of the past as a situation wherein fore- and after-history reveals an 'origin' that survives in the present. Citation destroys the illusion of any discrete temporal context with the uncanny presence of the what-has-been, which is immanent within any and every instantiation of a present. The goal of citation is 'not to preserve, but to purify, to tear from context, to destroy'.⁴⁸ A citation robs the past of any pretense of completion—of any claim to posit itself—by rendering it incapable of fulfilling itself in the present; it does not transmit the past as much as force it to take place as irretrievable. Thus, the paradox of the genuine collector, who dwells with the particular in the world of appearance, is a recognition that both transmissibility and citation coalesce as '*the only power in which hope still resides that something might survive this age—because it was wrenched from it*'. (455)

Genuine collecting, therefore, is neither hysterical, pathological collectionism, nor is it symptomatic of a *taedium vitae*.⁴⁹ On the contrary, the genuine collector, with a 'fidelity to things and to the individual', enacts 'an obstinate, subversive protest against the typical, the classifiable'.⁵⁰ Quite unlike the stereotypical antiquarian figure, the genuine collector collects objects that are 'scorned and apocryphal', that is, objects without any presupposed aesthetic and economic value. By collecting things without presupposed value, a genuine collector dwells destructively in 'a mysterious relation to ownership' that challenges

⁴⁶ Benjamin, SW 2, 454.

⁴⁷ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, London and New York: Verso, 1999, 45-6.

⁴⁸ Benjamin, SW 2, 455.

⁴⁹ In Convolute H of *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin contrasts 'collectionism' (denoting as a neurological disorder, a "mania") with collecting done by children, which approaches his idea of genuine collecting (208).

⁵⁰ Benjamin, GS III, 216.

the historicism of commodity culture, specifically its pathological means-end logic.⁵¹ Simply put, Benjamin wagers that the ‘scorned and apocryphal’ — the insignificant (*Ausdruck*) — transmit the expressionless (*Ausdruckslose*) ‘origin’ of modernity.⁵²

In the précis to his unfinished archaeology of modernity, *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin characterizes the activity of collecting as something akin to Sisyphus’s punitive, repetitive task. Rather than a hopeless undertaking, Benjamin views collecting as a situation from which an event of dispossession and rescue can arise. As he explains:

The collector ... makes his concern the enlightenment [*die Verklärung*] of things. To him falls the Sisyphean task of divesting things of their commodity character by taking possession of them. But he bestows on them only a collector’s value [*den Lieberhaberwert*], rather than use value. The collector dreams his way not only into a distant or bygone world but also into a better one ... in which things are freed from the drudgery of being useful.⁵³

At the center of this Sisyphean task is transmissibility, which shelters within itself a dislocating, disappropriating form of memory. As Benjamin tells us, even though ‘ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to things’, the ‘collector’s passion borders on the chaos of memories’.⁵⁴ Thus, to actualize another form of ownership one must confront this ‘chaos of memories’ and extract from it a relation to things that ‘does not emphasize their functional, utilitarian value — that is, their usefulness — but *studies* and *loves* them as the scene, the stage, of their fate’.⁵⁵ Benjamin’s collector’s value is a form of ethico-political memory that ‘studies and loves’ things by recollecting their evocative existence, that is, the interpolative presence of things dispossessed of their use value. In the French version of the précis, written four years after the original, Benjamin increases the emphasis on

⁵¹ Benjamin states that a collector’s very being (*das Dasein des Sammlers*) is ‘a mysterious relation to ownership’ (SW 2, 487; GS IV:1, 387). Some of the phrases I am using in this section such as antiquarian and critical history allude to a text often cited by Benjamin: Friedrich Nietzsche’s *The Use and Abuse of History*, trans. Adrian Collins, New York: The Library of Liberal Arts, 1957. I deal with this intersection more substantially in the first chapter of my *The Gesture of Collecting: Walter Benjamin and Contemporary Aesthetics*, forthcoming.

⁵² Benjamin’s phrase from ‘Unpacking My Library’ — ‘esteem for the insignificant [*Ausdruck*]’ — shows this semantic connection. See SW 2, 668 and GS III, 366. With words reminiscent of his explanation of the destructive character, Benjamin defines *das Ausdruckslose* as ‘the critical violence’ in which ‘the sublime violence of the true appears as that which determines the language of the real world according to the laws of the moral world ... Only the expressionless completes the work, by shattering it into a thing of shards’, SW 1, 340. See also Winfried Menninghaus, ‘Das Ausdruckslose: Walter Benjamins Kritik des Schönen durch das Erhabene’ in *Walter Benjamin 1892-1940 zum 100 Geburtstag*, ed. Uwe Steiner, Berlin: Peter Lang, 1992, 33-76.

⁵³ Translation emended; see Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 9 and GS V:1, 53.

⁵⁴ Benjamin, SW 2, 492, 486.

⁵⁵ Italics mine; SW 2, 487. As ‘collectors are physiognomists of the world of things’ they ‘turn into interpreters of fate’, Benjamin adds. See also his essay ‘Fate and Character’ (1921) in SW 1.

memory by a slight change to the passage cited above. The phrase ‘The collector dreams his way’ becomes ‘Le collectionneur se plaît à susciter un monde’: the collector *evokes* a better world.⁵⁶ By evoking or rousing another world, the collector presents objects without any use; they are only ciphers of this other world. Collected *things* are not symbols of this other world; rather, they are stop-gaps within the present (modernity) indicating the immanence of the what-has-been (*das Gewesene*), the ‘unlived’ as opposed to the ‘lived’ experience of the past within the present.⁵⁷ The French text moves the collector’s value away from a simple notion of ‘dreaming’ by foregrounding memory, because the act of evocation carries a connotation of recollection, of calling to mind. The Sisyphean task can thus be refined: it deposes any utilitarian notion of memory or possession, thereby opening a threshold between individual and collective memory that presses the ‘nether side’ of the past—the what-has-been—toward light. This threshold is opened because things are not simply souvenirs of the past, memories of what has occurred; rather, they are colophons of that which can never be remembered, oblivion. In other words, the task Benjamin sets the genuine collector is to recollect the *irretrievability* of the what-has-been, to bear in mind the calculus of relation between the present and the sheer unwieldy amount of ‘historical happenings’ that exceeds the frame of the historicist past.⁵⁸

Benjamin names his alternative concept of memory ‘recollection’ (*Eingedenken*), which implies bearing something in mind. Recollection signifies less a form of projective wish-fulfillment than a historiographic, ethical responsibility. To bear something in mind is not to simply to make it present; quite the contrary, recollection recalls nothing but the fact that something is absent. A recollection is the index of absence; it bears in mind that which must be borne. Benjamin’s genuine collector maintains a relation with the what-has-been, that which cannot be recalled. To be faithful to what has been forgotten so that it becomes unforgettable is the vocation of the genuine collector.⁵⁹ Thus, (re-)collecting is a destructive gesture, a form of critical historiography, whose decisive motivation is, paradoxically, not accumulation but attrition: that is, an ascetic attentiveness to the

⁵⁶ Benjamin, *GS V*:1, 67.

⁵⁷ This idea of the what-has-been arises from Benjamin’s distrust in any representation of the past. Rather than presume to represent the past ‘as it truly was’—a presumption he refers to as the narcotic of nineteenth-century historicism—Benjamin’s materialist philosophy of history attempts to deal with the what-has-been, which is irreducible to what is commonly referred to as the past. See especially Convolute N of *The Arcades Project*.

⁵⁸ The ‘irretrievability of the past’ is discussed in Benjamin’s essay ‘A Berlin Childhood around 1900’, *SW 3*, 344. I have written on this concept in ‘The Immemorial, or The Pit of Babel: On W.G. Sebald’s Photographs’ *Deixis*, vol. 1, Spring, 2007.

⁵⁹ For this understanding of vocation I am indebted to Agamben. See his *Idea of Prose*, trans. Michael Sullivan and Sam Whitsitt, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995. He concludes: ‘Fidelity to that which cannot be thematized, nor simply passed over in silence, is a betrayal of a sacred kind, in which memory, spinning suddenly like a whirlwind, uncovers the hoary forehead of oblivion. *This attitude, this reverse embrace of memory and forgetting which holds intact the identity of the unrecalled and the unforgettable, is vocation*’, italics mine, 45.

unstable, to the liminal things that are homeless within human history. Playing with the detritus of human history, genuine collecting accepts discontinuity. In fact, instead of transmitting only discontinuity, the *atopos* or *obliviousness* of things, the gesture of collecting is citation, which opens a caesura within time by seizing the movement between the what-has-been and the future.

The genuine collector (*re-*)collects with an attentiveness to larger, collective desires that remain unfulfilled within modernity. 'A collector lives a piece of dream life', Benjamin writes.⁶⁰ In conceiving modernity as a 'dreamtime' (*Zeit-traum*), Benjamin desires to develop 'the art of experiencing the present as waking world, a world to which that dream we name the past refers in truth' because 'awakening is namely the dialectical, Copernican turn of recollection [*die dialektische, kopernikanische Wendung des Eingedenkens*]'.⁶¹ In the threshold between habit and attentiveness there is 'ein Stück Traumleben' that must be grasped in an awakened state. With each new acquisition, each new thing, what was habitual (the presence of mere things) becomes the focus of attention. The genuine collector recollects not the dream, but rather the 'fragment of another history' — that to which we are *oblivious* — existing within the present; not as dream, but as a dislocating presence at the heart of modernity.⁶² The genuine collector recollects nothing other than the transmissibility of the collective dream-image — happiness, justice, redemption — by citing it in the present. The destructive, awakening element of collecting is the transmission of a charged, potentially citable, situation: a threshold between habit and attentiveness where 'the irretrievability of the past' takes place. It is here that Benjamin relates the genuine collector (a solitary individual) and the masses, the collective.

For Benjamin, this threshold is a 'constellation of awakening', that is, a possibility for the solitary individual to seize the remnants of a collective dream-image, which he also calls happiness.⁶³ This threshold between is nothing other than the 'intermediate world' Benjamin discerns in Kafka's work: 'a token of hope which comes to us from that intermediate world — *at once unfinished and*

⁶⁰ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 207.

⁶¹ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 389; GS V:1, 491.

⁶² Werner Hamacher, 'Afformative Strike: Benjamin's "Critique of Violence"' in *Destruction & Experience: Walter Benjamin's Philosophy*, eds. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne, Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2000, 122.

⁶³ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 458. Perhaps this is why he concludes his essay 'Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting' by contemplating the 'happiness [*Glück*] of the collector'. 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'; see his "Walter Benjamin and His Angel" in *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*, ed. Gary Smith, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991, 77. This (im)possibility of happiness 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.

commonplace'.⁶⁴ The what-has-been survives in this intermediate world: survival requires judging the past, interrogating it, until it yields to the weight of the what-has-been. Survival is a historiographic task, a Sisyphean task, not to transmit the tradition of barbarism, but to judge and condemn 'cultural history' in favor of an *historia abscondita*. As Benjamin makes clear: 'cultural history lacks the destructive element which authenticates both dialectical thought ... It may augment the weight of the treasure accumulating on the back of humanity, but it does not provide the strength to shake off this burden so as to *gets its hands on them*'.⁶⁵ Instead of an oppressive cultural history, Benjamin proposes a critical one able to cast off the dead weight of the past—Sisyphus's rock—and actualize the present.

IV.

Arendt and Benjamin share a commitment to actualize the present, a project directly related to larger divergent ethical and political goals. Surveying these goals requires an aesthetic figure of this virtual historiography: the *histor*, a virtuality that 'can never hope to be fully instantiated or exhausted in any one realization, [which] remains open to the future'.⁶⁶ This aesthetic figure only exists between Arendt and Benjamin: recollected by Arendt, passing through Benjamin's 'genuine collector'. After Arendt's humanism, before Benjamin's materialism, there is the *histor's* gesture—retrospective, judging, facing the thingness (*Dinglichkeit*) of representation (whether visual or linguistic) in order to remediate the impoverishment of experience. This gesture has the characteristics of the 'strike'—the striking effect of citation—because the 'sphere in which this caesura intervenes would be that of aesthetic ideology in art and politics'.⁶⁷ Thus, its 'peculiar duality of wanting to preserve and wanting to destroy', which, as Arendt herself noted, defines the 'ambiguity of gesture'.⁶⁸ By deposing aesthetic ideology the *histor* does not simply re-write history, but gestures toward the expressionless (*das Ausdruckslose*) inscribed on the face of things. To grasp the expressionless, this transmissible index, we must come to understand how it alters our reading of the past; how exhibition and gesture supplement narration, that is, how and why what-has-been shuttles between situations and events. As Arendt and Benjamin contend, 'we have been endowed' with the ability to impart *an-other* history, an *an-archic* history. Thus, the 'turn of recollection' is always already a *Fortleben*, a living on, that is also a living away from, otherwise.⁶⁹ After all, *sisyphos* in Greek signifies a 'man of extremely keen taste', that is, an *exemplar* that we must 'forget ourselves' if we are to judge the world, survive ourselves, and to recollect the future of the image.

⁶⁴ Italics mine, Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 118.

⁶⁵ Italics mine, SW 3, 268. This is my slightly emended translation of the original text; see GS II:2, 478.

⁶⁶ Weber, *Benjamin's -abilities*, 14.

⁶⁷ Hamacher, 'Afformative Strike', 122.

⁶⁸ Arendt, 'Introduction', 41-2.

⁶⁹ This definition of *Fortleben*, distinct from *Nachleben*, is from Weber, *Benjamin's -abilities*, 65.

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