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Walter Benjamin: Traces of Craft

This paper considers Walter Benjamin's theory of the object in the industrial age. Benjamin's work is replete with images of craft practices. Pot-throwing and weaving appear as paradigms of authentic experience and the processes of memory.

Prominent in Benjamin's account of craft practice is the hand that feels and marks its objects; authentic knowledge of the world

is envisioned as a 'grasping hold' of the world. The shift from artisan labour to industrial labour, with its growing redundancy

of the hand in the processes of production, impacts on modes of memory and experience. Benjamin's delineation of modern, industrialized experience is shown to be redemptive. He re-evaluates Dada and photography as manual craft processes that might rediscover a modern authenticity of experience and memory.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin—hand—industrial organization—material culture studies—Modernism—technique

Telling Stories

In 1936 Walter Benjamin completed an essay on the nineteenth-century Russian storyteller Nikolai

Leskov.¹ One theme of the essay is the assertion of storytelling's interlacement in craft. Leskov, Benjamin

tells us, felt bonds with craftsmanship, and faced industrial technology as a stranger. Often

Leskov's stories would feature craftsmen, such as the silversmiths of Tula whose expertise exceeded the most technologically advanced nation of the

time, England.² 'The Alexandrite' presents

another craftsman, the skilful gem engraver Wenzel. Benjamin describes Wenzel as 'the perfect artisan' with 'access to the innermost chamber

of the realm of created things'.³ Craft and craftsmen do not just provide subject-matter and characters,

for Leskov's stories. The very act of storytelling itself he declares to be a craft.⁴

Benjamin's own braiding of craft and narration in 'The Storyteller' goes further to illumine a historical, practical affinity between craft skills and storytelling. The ability to tell stories, Benjamin

tells us, is rooted in two factors; travel to faraway places and knowledge of past local lore.

Benjamin writes:

The resident master craftsman and the travelling journeymen

worked together in the same rooms; and each master had been a travelling journeyman before he settled down in his hometown or elsewhere. If peasants and sailors were past masters at storytelling, the artisan rank was their master class. It combined the lore of faraway places, such as a much-travelled man brings home, with the lore of the past, as it best reveals itself to residents of a place.⁵

The habitat of the storyteller is the craft milieu, in which resident master craftsmen—who know the past, who know time—exchange experiences with travelling journeymen—who know distance, space. The wayfarer's imported ken is the key to Benjamin's ontology of experience. The German word for experience that is handed down, that is experience born of wisdom, a practical knowledge, is *Erfahrung*, and it finds its root meaning

in the word for travel, *fahren*. Through travel craftsmen have experience of the world and a world of experience.

And so, Benjamin tells us, they gain audiences, lured into workshops to graft while netting experiences transmitted from mouth to ear to mouth. The best listeners, insists Benjamin, are the ones who have forgotten themselves, and while their half-conscious minds are engaged in pot-throwing, spinning and weaving, and their bodies are seized by the gentle rhythm of work, the stories they hear forego an existence on paper, imprinting themselves into the listeners' fantasy, awaiting retransmissions, after-lives.⁶ Storytelling

is no simple form of time-passing. It mirrors a

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mode of processing and reconstituting experience.

It intimates how experiences pass into and out of memory. For Benjamin, to reflect on the operations of storytelling, or craft communication and experience, is to ponder the arabesque of labour, experience and selfhood.

The storyteller takes what he tells from experience, his own or others, and makes it the experience of those hearing the tale. True experience is conceived as close and practised knowledge of what is at hand. The hand touches, has practical experience of life. Recurrent in Benjamin's delineations of experience are the words tactile, tactics, the tactical, entering German, as it enters English via the Latin *tangere*, touch. To touch the world is to know the world. Pottery features here—as model and as metaphor—naturally enough as it is a form of *Handwerk*, hand work or artisan labour. Benjamin describes storytelling, the transmission of experience and wisdom, thus: It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprint [Spwr] of the potter clings to the clay vessel.⁷

The hand marks out authentic experience, indicates Benjamin, setting himself within a tradition of humanist anatomical thought that sees the faculty of stereognosis as reliant on touch, a touch that fingers the world's textures, and hands on knowledge of those textures.⁸ In "The Storyteller", as in other essays by Benjamin, potthrowing emerges as a figure of true experience.

That the hand, with its tactility, is central in Benjamin's comprehension of experience, or more specifically in Benjamin's vision of redemption or recovery of experience under threat, is intimated in his aphorism, 'Salvation includes the firm, apparently brutal grip'.⁹ Grasping the truth, seizing

the future; the hand is a political organ. But it does not work in isolation. Intrinsic to the craftsman, and the gesticulating storyteller, too, is the accord of soul, eye and hand.¹⁰ Thinking, seeing, handling in tandem, this mesh grants a praxis. Storyteller—fashioning his material, human life—and craftsman—fashioning his—mould their raw matter, Benjamin tells us, in a solid, useful, and unique way.¹¹

Stories, mirrors of true experience, and crafted objects alike are solid, useful, unique. The aesthetics of the useful and unique story or the crafted pot could not be more removed from the attributes of cheap mass-reproduction, or from those of fine art. The story and the pot are formed by a life that has something to tell. Good stories relate a practical knowledge; good potters relate a wisdom based on praxis. Here, outlining wisdom, Benjamin's metaphorical language picks up another type of craft labour, weaving. He writes: 'Counsel woven into the fabric of lived life is wisdom.'¹² It is such woven wisdom that the storyteller hands on.

In 'The Image of Proust' (1929), Benjamin correlates Proust's textual practice and weaving. Reflecting on Proust's flabelliform writings, Benjamin binds memory work, dream work and text work together in an image of handiwork; the weaving of memory. Benjamin notes that the Latin word for 'text', *textum*, means 'something woven', a web.¹³ Neither plot nor personality dispatch 'strict weaving regulations', but memory, such as is activated in dreams, a tightly plaited skein tangling the linear passage of time. The individual artistic voice and the convolutions of plot are the reverse side of memory's continuum, intermittences relegated by Benjamin to the pattern on the back of the carpet.¹⁴ In the foreground, Proust as weaver reflects on the workings of remembering, sourcing thereby social and collective structures of language and fantasy. Such *Handwerk* is a *Lebenswerk*. Weaving becomes a figure for authentic memory or the procedure of rendering the infinity of memory.

Proust verifies, for Benjamin, the textured and textual processes of memory. In dreaming we forget our conscious thoughts in order to access our memories. When we wake we remember where we left off the night before, and, Benjamin writes, the 'few fringes' of the 'carpet of lived existence that forgetting has woven in us' fall from our hands.¹⁵ To access the crafted curlicues of dream-truth, memories, which as Proust and Benjamin recognize are infinite, Utopian, curious

and surreal, entails forgetting the illusion of self. Dream images and memories are the woven ornaments of self-forgetting, incubators of the story that forms itself like the pot, unconsciously,

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as planned, Benjamin says, 'as the lines on the palm of our hand'.¹⁶

That Benjamin conceives texts—and memory, too—as material, as woven, is no surprise; it is a part of his most literally understood materialism.

The collector Eduard Fuchs advises Benjamin to approach history as a materialist, adumbrating the entwinement of the warp [*Textur*] of the present and the weft [*Einschuf!*] of the past.¹⁷

Materialism, historical or dialectical materialism, is alert to the fabrication of the past and the multithreaded nature of the present, shot through with that past.

Work on the Body

Benjamin's metaphors of craft, of potting and weaving, allude to a former pre-industrial mode of labouring. Of course, this mode may be romanticized, but it allows Benjamin to shade in the tendencies of an epoch, to tell a story of change, not just from past to present, but from present into future, too. This former craft mode is submerged in mass industrial society, and together with it begins to sink the mode of experience that it engendered. Technology has stormed the human body, subjecting the human sensorium to a complex training,¹⁸ and provoking a 'crisis in perception'.

¹⁹ Soul, eye and hand are disjointed.

Benjamin's anthropology of industrialized humanity submits to the discussion of experience in modernity the neurological category of shock. There are those who feel work's hard slaps on the body, while others are cushioned in the wellupholstered seats of management. The technofrenzy of the First World War was made possible by nineteenth-century technological advance, and that war marks for Benjamin a re-editing of experience. From factory to battlefield the experience of shock, physical and psychic, constitutes the norm. Technology dictates a syncopated, dislocating rhythm to which workers and soldiers must permanently react. The division of labour compels a mechanical measure of labour time, the voided, homogeneous time of manufacture. The work process, especially the factory drill, de-skills operators. Industrial work processes are an 'automatic operation', wherein each act is an exact repetition of the last. Benjamin remarks:

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Marx had good reason to stress the great fluidity of

the connection between segments in artisan labour [Handwerk]. This connection appears to the factory worker on an assembly line in a detached, reified form. Independently of the worker's volition, the object being worked upon, comes within his range of action and moves away from him just as arbitrarily. 'Every kind of capitalist production . . . , ' writes Marx, 'has this in common, that it is not the workman that employs the instrument of labour, but the instrument of labour that employs the workman. But it is only in the factory system that this reversal for the first time acquires technical and palpable reality.'²⁰

Capitalist instruments of labour operate the worker, and factory machinery gives this transposition a technically concrete form. Machinery turns animate, humans become adjuncts to the machine. This is a different loss of self, an alienation, not an ingress into reverie. The modern unskilled worker, claims Benjamin, is sealed off from experience as *Erfahrung*.²¹ Benjamin quotes Marx: 'In working with machines workers learn to coordinate their own "movement to the uniform and unceasing motion of an automaton".'²² That automaton mass has liquidated its weave of memories.

The hand—so crucial to the *Handwerker* (artisan or craftsman)—is made redundant by technological advance. In 'The Storyteller' Benjamin comments that the role of the hand in production has become more modest. Again he draws the analogy with storytelling. Here the role of the hand lays waste. Benjamin continues:

After all, storytelling, in its sensory aspect, is by no means a job for the voice alone. Rather, in genuine storytelling the hand plays a part which supports what is expressed in a hundred ways with its gestures learnt of work.²³

Stories are lost; that is to say, textured experience, graspable experience, is lost because of the loss of the weaving and spinning activities that went on while they were heard. The web that cradled storytelling is unravelling at all its ends.²⁴

Benjamin relates elsewhere the tale of the hand's redundancy for production; notably in his most famous essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility' (1935-8).²⁵

Here he tells how, until the arrival of mechanical

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reproduction, pictures had been made by hand, parallel to the manufacture of goods before the development of industrial machinery. Mechanical reproduction in art, beginning with wood cut technology, advances sporadically, until it attains a qualitatively new stage in lithographic reproduction. Lithographic duplication permits mass

quantities and speedily changing forms. The invention of photography and film provokes a further speed-up effect, basing reproduction not on the pace of a hand that draws, but on the seeing eye in conjunction with the machinery of the lens. Culture's co-ordination with the body has transformed. The time of the machine, not the time of the hand, determines production. In 'The Storyteller' Benjamin quotes Paul Valery on how once the artisan had imitated the patient processes of nature, but now no longer. Valery writes: Miniatures, ivory carvings, elaborated to the point of greatest perfection, stones that are perfect in polish and engraving, lacquer work or paintings in which a series of thin, transparent layers are placed one on top of the others—all these products of sustained, sacrificing effort are vanishing, and the time is past in which time did not matter. The modern person only works at what can be abbreviated.²⁶

Industrial speed-up has transformed conditions of production and standardized what is produced. An allegory from *The Trial* by Kafka evokes for Benjamin the endlessly returning bad infinity of mass reproduction. The insistent painter-dealer Titorelli impresses on Josef K. the same painting, redone again and again, modelling so capitalism's eternal return of the ever-same culture.²⁷ The mode of repetition of the artisan's story as it is passed on from mouth to mouth, reworked through the unique experience of listeners, degrades here into a mechanical, dead reiteration. Body accedes to machinery.

Dada-facture

Do not think that this is a tragic tale of irreversibility and that Benjamin's animus is a frustrated nostalgia for the past world and past work of *Handwerk*. Benjamin recoiled from the First World War, propelled thereby to revile the economic system that he saw blasting its destructivity into being, but further he sensed a beyond that was also in some ways a restoration or a rescue of experience; and its seed-bed was the technical present. Benjamin's 'Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility' traces the transition from *Handwerk* to *Kunstwerk*, from craft to art—from unauthored object to authentic authored valuable. Cult value is banished by authenticity—a calibre that is assured by a knowable author and translates into monetary and exhibition value. But Benjamin's essay also scents possibilities for a post-bourgeois object, a non-auratic multiple, prefigured in photography and film. This technical multiple does not squash out authentic experience but translates it into objectforms and forms of experience appropriate for a

modern age. These forms, like the forms that cradled craft, fan a spark of a life that is integrated harmoniously with labour. Damaged life may heal itself; through tapping recuperative energies vented in industrial culture. The trajectory continues: from *Handwerk* to *Kunstwerk* to *Kraftwerk*.

For the post-bourgeois object of the new mass art, a mass-reproduced art, the same metaphors re-surface as are encountered in 'The Storyteller'. Tactility, closeness, indexicality, at handness mark out this new potential art for and by the masses. For Benjamin, the mass appropriation of art signals literally a manhandling of cultural products. The mass-reproduced copy can be manipulated. It is 'tactile'. Tactility, the ability to touch, are sensuous concepts that relate new art to the physical presence of the collectively receiving body. Tactility and shock—forces that act on the body—negate any ideal of artistic autonomy. Benjamin dislodges from a bodiless idealist aesthetic based on beautiful illusion (*schoner Schein*). Idealist conceptions of culture are seen to be wound into a narcissistic ideology that argues art is born from itself. Benjamin's approach recovers the substratum of aesthetics sensuously. Locating sensuous perception as the root meaning of the Greek notion of *aisthesis*, aesthetics and art are charted along the development of the human sensorium. For Adorno, such a move is characteristic of Benjamin's behaviouristic anthropological materialism, and he labels it a positivism that takes its measure from the human body.²⁸

This physico-spatial 'bringing closer' of new

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cultural forms allowed by mass reproduction provides a 're-modelling' of pre-industrial folkloric relations of space. Crucial to the earlier epic tradition is a reliance on the propinquity of a collective of listeners. Industrial capitalist relations corrode the oral communicability of experience, but technical reproduction reimburses that change, instituting new potential for a familiarity between receivers and producers, once more in the form of collective experience: through mediated mass-produced things. Space is recovered technically.

The artist refitted as producer is a slogan drawn from the realms of industry rather than the painter's studio. Benjamin proposes modern objects that smash through the contemplative, becoming useful, serviceable, and if not unique, then the experiences to be had with them are. The web (*Gezwebe*) that Benjamin had spun as a cat's cradle of memory is evoked again as figure of

reality, into which the modern culture producer penetrates.²⁹ Analysed, for instance, by a camera, the web of time and space is interrogated, or made knowable, but differently to the way that the travelling journeyman and the resident artisan knew it. For Benjamin, the modern work of culture finds its template in architecture, itself a penetrable space that is experienced through 'tactile reception'.³⁰ Hands feature again then, although it must be said that their role in cultural production is somewhat brutal, indeed invasive. Benjamin contrasts the magician who heals through the laying on of hands to the surgeon who intervenes in the body, augmented by machinery. The magician is like a painter, glossing over a surface, the surgeon is like a filmmaker who cuts in to the web of reality, and spawns thereby parameters for new ways of telling stories, new modes of reproducing experience, based in shock and mass-reproduction.

'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility' professes the displacement of the authentic object under new conditions of mass reproduction. In technically reproduced art—that is, objects whose very basis is technological—there can no longer be a significant notion of an originality that is valued for its inviolate authenticity. The reproduction of an object on celluloid stands as a copy of itself, and no

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longer a unique representation. The essay speaks of the non-reproducible quality of authenticity—in German, *Echtheit*?¹ The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity.

In 'A Small History of Photography' (1931) Benjamin also speaks of authenticity, but uses the Latin-derived word *Authentizität*. 'A Small History of Photography' underscores the indexicality of the photograph, its chemical connection to actuality that captures a moment in time and exports it into the future. The photographic object brings objects closer for inspection, providing an imprint of traces of the world.³² It reveals traces (*Spuren*), not of the potter's handprint, but of the objective modern world.

In 'The Author as Producer' (1934) Benjamin reports that the 'revolutionary strength of dadaism' lies in its 'testing art for its authenticity' (*Authentizität*).³³ Authenticity rests on the incorporation into cultural artefacts of real-life fragments—cigarette stubs, cotton reels, bus tickets, scraps of textile such as the tatters of lace used by Hannah Hoch, *Dada-monteur* by night and lace designer by day; sometimes she used her lace

patterns in her photomontages. Dada frames a found segment of the world. The public, confronted by excerpted splinters from the material world, learns that 'the tiniest authentic fragment of everyday-life says more than painting'. Here again Benjamin brings in the hand, recounting a modern version of the potter's handprint. His rendition of the new authenticity of modern montage art recounts how its use of traces of the objective world is as significant, as legible, as evidencing as the bloody fingerprint (*Fingerabdruck*) of a murderer on a page of a book, a fingerprint that says more than the page's text. Fingerprints and the handprints of the potter are not signatures; such traces differ from the individuating, authenticating autographs of high art. Their virtue lies in their hinge with actuality, not their market value. Dada and Co. are modern storytellers, modern weavers and throwers of experience. Leskov, Shklovsky informs us, in 'Art as Technique' (1917), wrote in colloquialisms, not high-flown literary language.³⁴ Poetic truth is found in the ordinary, in the quotidian, not the sublime. And that too was the lesson of low modernism, the metro-modernism of Joyce, Duchamp or Max Ernst.

Witchcraft and the Dream Collector

Whilst writing 'The Storyteller', Benjamin was engaged in another study, titled 'Eduard Fuchs, the Collector and Historian'. Here he focuses on collecting, and once more frames his theme as one of touch, closeness and intimacy. Collectors, 'physiognomists of the object world', are people with tactical instinct, who engage in practical remembering, handling things that are loved both for their own sake and as windows through which the past might be understood, and a Utopian future can be glimpsed. As Benjamin writes in an article on book-collecting called 'Unpacking my Library' (1931):

One only has to watch a collector handle the objects in his glass case. As he holds them in his hands, he seems to be seeing through them into their distant past as though inspired.³⁵

The true collector loves things, fondles them as emblems that promise memory and knowledge about circumstances of production. Searching out the origin and durational existence of things, the collector, Benjamin tells us, knows about them in a way that appears archaic in an age of mass-reproduction.³⁶ And yet at the same time, in his efforts to divine a redemption of mass-reproduction, beyond capital, Benjamin foresees a democratic age of appropriation, a

wholesale handling, specifically of reproducible and reproduced cultural artefacts, now stepping out to greet their audiences, themselves turned producers [of meanings]. In notes to the *Passagenwerk*, Benjamin sets the tactical collector in opposition to the optically oriented *flaneur*. Ownership and possession are related to the tactical and stand in specific contrast to the optical. Collectors are people with tactical instinct. By the way, given the recent turn away from naturalism, the primacy of the optical, so dominant in the previous century, has ceased.³⁷

Merrily Benjamin asserts that the epoch of the optical, characterized by contemplation and perception at a distance, is on the way out as the epoch of handling comes in.

Benjamin was a collector, of books and of children's toys. He was also a collector of images and objects that had been torn free of the epochs that produced them. That is why he rummaged through archives and flea markets, snatching up words and things that throbbed for him with unfulfilled and Utopian energies from the past, the weft (*Einschuf*) of the past stiflingly entangled in the warp (*Textur*) of the present.

Urban technological debris is most charged in this regard. It confesses a psychoanalysis of things, things congested, it would seem, with the contents of a desirous social consciousness. Benjamin also collected his own dreams, which he wrote down, and sometimes he interested journal editors enough to get them published. These dreams were on the trail of social and political wishes as they sparkled en route through his psyche. What could be a more obscure object of desire than this strangely crafted magical object that beckoned Benjamin one night in 1932. It is to be found in a long dream, called 'The Initiate'—so regard this as a story and me as the storyteller.

Benjamin writes:

I see myself in Wertheim department store in front of a flat little box with wooden figures, such as a little sheep, just like the animals that made up Noah's ark. But this little sheep is much flatter and made of a rough, unpainted wood. The toy lured me to it. As the salesgirl shows it to me, it transpires that it is constructed like a magic tile, as found in many magic boxes: with little panels around which are wound colourful ribbons. These panels are loose and shift, all turning blue or red, according to how the ribbons are pulled. This flat magic toy pleases me all the more after I see how it works. I ask the salesgirl the price and am astonished that it costs more than seven marks. Then I make a difficult decision not to buy. As I turn to go, my gaze falls on something unexpected.

The construction has transformed itself. The flat panels stand stiffly upright, as a sloping plane; at one end is a gate. It is filled with a mirror. In this mirror I am able to see what is taking place on the sloping plane that is a street: two children are walking on the left hand side. Otherwise it is empty. All this is under glass. But the houses and the children on the street are brightly coloured. Now I can no longer resist; I pay the price and put it about my person. In the

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evening I intend to show it to friends. But there is unrest in Berlin. The mob is threatening to storm the cafe where we have met; in feverish consultation we survey all the other cafes, but none appear to offer protection. So we make an expedition into the desert. There it is night; tents are erected; lions are close by. I have not forgotten my dainty, which I want to show everyone. But the opportunity does not arise. Africa is gripping everyone too much. And I wake up before I can reveal the secret which I have subsequently come to understand: the three phases into which the toy falls. The first panel; that colourful street with the two children. The second: a web of fine little cogs, pistons and cylinders, rollers and transmissions, all of wood, whirling together in *one* level, without person or noise. And finally the third panel; the vision of a new order in Soviet Russia.³⁸

The magical dream-object, not unlike the wooden Russian toys he collected, reveals itself to have reference to a fantasized ideal social order, represented, at least in tendency, in the postrevolutionary Soviet Union, positively infantile, organized around play, not work, colourful, bright, fulfilled. Benjamin's objects may be real or imagined (for as the surrealists intuited, objects are both objective and dreamt). He shows how those objects are invested with social Utopian desire. Benjamin's materialism of objects solicits a liberation of objects from the fetishizing snares and deadening repetitions of capitalism, but he wishes to salvage the power of enchantment for the purposes of social metamorphosis. Futurism, dada, surrealism use magical strategies, Benjamin divulges. These avant-gardes set off magical experiences, *Erfahrungen*, venting a concealed reality subtending everyday subject/object commerce.

³⁹

Benjamin's dream, in its being dreamt and in its retelling, causes the tools of Enlightenment rationalism, as manifested in Freud's talkingcure, to collide with the snags of enchantment and a fascination with marvellous, if profane illumination. Here we return to Leskov, and the world of the fairy-tale; for essentially, Benjamin says, Leskov's craft was that of telling fairy-tales; stories in which the little people learn how to

liberate themselves through crafty cunning and in complicity with nature.⁴⁰ Benjamin's dreams too are fairy stories about a possible future state of freedom, achieved, if it can be achieved, through the cashing in of objects' magic significances.

⁴¹

Benjamin's surrealist-tinged psychoanalysis of objects returns our object, craft, to its etymological origin. Craft stems from the Saxon word for power, force or strength—in German this is the meaning of the word *Kraft*. Frequently this sense of craft was endowed with magical or devious connotations. It is still to be found in this sense in the word crafty, and in the word witchcraft, a thing that fascinated Benjamin and which he analysed.⁴² Witchcraft proposes a special relationship with objects and words, not unlike Benjamin's. Witchcraft accents the uncanniness of objects, such as charms, and the trickiness of words, as in incantations.

What emerges from all this is a sense in which Benjamin's understanding of objects—craft objects, mass-reproduced objects—includes essentially an understanding of experiences to be had with objects, and memories evoked by objects or encoded in objects—memories of objects in all possible senses. Crafted objects, specifically the pot, provide a model of authentic experience, the experience of a person imprinted on to the objects that he or she brings into being, and tapestry offers a model of authentic memory, the weave of past and present experience and Utopian possibility. In the case of the modern mass reproduced object, however, despite new conditions of production, such intimacy and imaginative investment in objects may still be possible. Craft as mode of activity translates into craft as a power, an obscure power, nestling in the imaginatively conceived object.

Broken Pots

And to end then, back to the beginning and thoughts on pots and telling stories. In an early essay, titled 'The Task of the Translator', Benjamin alludes to pottery. This is in the course of contending the impossibility of literal translation, of transmitting a story unaltered from one language to another. He speaks here of translation as the gluing together of fragments of a vessel. These fragments must match one another in the smallest details, but they need not be like one another.⁴³

¹¹

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This image draws on Issac Luria's cabbalistic concept of *tikkun*. According to the doctrine of *tikkun*, vessels of God's attributes were broken

and this breaking of the vessels scattered divine sparks in fragments throughout the material world. These fragments must be brought together, the pots remade, a task both secular and divine. Much like the meshing of shards of montage, or the restorative practice of Benjamin's Angelus Novus, the angel of history, the world is to be put back together—but it is a montage praxis, using debris and rubbish, the broken pots and torn scraps, not the high, sublime reordering of harmony in a bloodless, hands-off aestheticism.

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Notes

i See Walter Benjamin, 'The storyteller', in *Illuminations*, Fontana, 1992 or 'Der Erzähler', in *Gesammelte Schriften* (hereafter G.S.), 11:2, Suhrkamp, 1991. 'The storyteller' was written at the same time as Benjamin's most famous essay, known in English as 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction'. This essay is also included in *Illuminations*, which, together with *One-Way Street* and *Charles Baudelaire* (both Verso, formerly New Left Books), provides a good cross-section of Benjamin's wide-ranging writings. Benjamin's essay on art and mass-reproduction has received enormous amounts of critical attention in art, film and photography theory, in the years since John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972) introduced its theses to a book-reading public and television audience. Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) has also contributed to design theory. This German-Jewish writer's influence is manifest not only in thinking about mass-reproduction and its consequences for design, but also in techniques of writing histories of objects in urban, industrial societies, as deployed in Benjamin's uncompleted *Arcades Project* (1927-40) and his 'Theses on the philosophy of history' (1939-40). John A. Walker's *Design History and the History of Design* (Pluto Press, London, 1989) records Benjamin's influence on design history and historiography in a number of areas: writing design histories as a type of 'excavation'; the theoretical interest in the fragment; the fascination with pastiche; and the attention directed towards spaces of consumption, the erotics of shopping and questions of aesthetic pleasure.

2 See Nikolai Leskov, 'The left-handed artificer', in *The Enchanted Pilgrim* (translated by David Margarshack), Hutchinson International Authors, 1946.

3 'The storyteller', p. 106 or 'Der Erzähler', p. 463.

4 'The storyteller', p. 91 or 'Der Erzähler', p. 447.

5 'The storyteller', p. 85 or 'Der Erzähler', p. 440. Note that, on occasion, for example here, I have modified Harry Zohn's translation of Benjamin.

6 'The storyteller', pp. 90-1 or 'Der Erzähler', pp. 446-7-

7 'The storyteller', p. 91 or 'Der Erzähler', p. 447.

8 See footnote 9 in J. H. Prynne's 'A Discourse on Willem de Kooning's *Rosy-fingered Dawn at Louse Point*', in *Act 2*, edited by Juliet Steyn, Pluto Press, 1996, p. 53-

9 See *Passagenwerk*, G.S., V:i, p. 592.

10 'The storyteller', p. 107 or 'Der Erzähler', p. 464.

11 See 'The storyteller', p. 107 or 'Der Erzähler', p. 464.

12 'The storyteller', p. 86 or 'Der Erzähler', p. 442.

13 'The image of Proust', p. 198 or 'Zum Bilde Prousts', pp. 311-12.

14 Barthes uses a similar metaphorical language in discussing Proust. In 'From work to text' (1971) he writes of the 'textual' novelist: 'If he is a novelist, he is inscribed in the novel like one of his characters, figured in the carpet, no longer privileged, paternal, aletheological, his inscription is ludic. He becomes, as it were, a paper-author: his life is no longer the origin of his fictions but a fiction contributing to his work; there is a reversion of the work on to the life (and no longer the contrary); it is the work of Proust, of Genet which allows their lives to be read as a text.' See Barthes' text reprinted in *Art In Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, edited by Paul Wood and Charles Harrison, Blackwell, 1992, pp. 944-5.

15 'The image of Proust', p. 198 or 'Zum Bilde Prousts', p. 311.

16 'The image of Proust', p. 208 or 'Zum Bilde Prousts', p. 322.

17 'Eduard Fuchs, collector and historian', in *One-Way Street*, New Left Books, 1979, p. 362 or 'Eduard Fuchs, der Sammler und der Historiker', in G.S., 11:2, p. 479.

18 See *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, New Left Books, 1973, p. 132 or 'Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire' (1939), in G.S., 1:2, p. 630. See also Benjamin's 1939 review of the *Encyclopedic Française*, in G.S., 1H, p. 583^

19 *Charles Baudelaire*, p. 147 or 'Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire', p. 645.

20 *Charles Baudelaire*, pp. 132-3 or 'Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire', p. 631.

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21 See *Charles Baudelaire*, p. 133 or 'Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire', p. 632.

22 *Charles Baudelaire*, pp. 132-3 or 'Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire', p. 631.

23 'The storyteller', p. 107 or 'Der Erzähler', p. 464.

24 See 'The storyteller', p. 91 or 'Der Erzähler', p. 447.

25 'The work of art in the age of its technical reproducibility' was written in the same period as 'The storyteller'. Both were begun in the mid-1930s. They are frequently analysed in tandem and shown to provide quite contradictory, indeed irreconcilable, accounts of Benjamin's stance toward modernity.

26 'The storyteller', p. 92 or 'Der Erzähler', p. 448.

27 See *Passagenwerk*, in G.S., V:2, p. 686 and pp. 675-6.

28 See Adorno's letter to Benjamin of 6 September 1936 in G.S., VII:2, p. 864.

29 See 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction', in *Illuminations*, p. 227 or 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit', in G.S., 1:2, pp. 459 and 496, and G.S., VII:i, P- 374-

30 See 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction', p. 233 or 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit', in G.S., 1:2, pp. 466 and 505, and G.S., VII: 1, p. 381.

31 For example, see 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction', p. 214 or 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit', in G.S., 1:2, pp. 437 and 476, and G.S., VII:i, p. 352.

32 'A small history of photography', in *One-Way Street*, p. 256 or 'Kleine Geschichte der Photographie', in G.S., II:i, p. 385.

33 'The author as producer', in *Reflections*, Schocken Books, 1986, p. 229 or 'Der Autor als Produzent', in G.S., 11:2, p. 692.

34 See Shklovsky's text reprinted in *Art In Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, edited by Paul Wood & Charles Harrison, Blackwell, 1992, p. 278.

35 See 'Unpacking my library', in *Illuminations*, p. 62 or 'Ich packe meine Bibliothek aus: Eine Rede über das Sammeln', in G.S., FV:i, p. 389.

36 See *Passagenwerk*, in G.S., V:i, p. 279.

37 See *ibid.*, p. 274.

38 'Der Wissende', in G.S., FV:i, pp. 422-3.

39 See 'Surrealism', in *One-Way Street*, p.227 or 'Der Siirrealismus', in G.S., II.1, p. 297.

40 'The storyteller', pp. 101-3 or 'Der Erzähler', in G.S., 11:2, pp. 457-8.

41 Strangely enough, Eleanor Marx relates how her father also told stories, not dissimilar from Benjamin's dream. She relates in 'Recollections of Mohr' that Marx 'was a unique, an unrivalled story-teller' and goes on to reveal the scenario of one of her favourites, 'Hans Rockle', a tale that went on for months and months:

Hans Rockle himself was a Hoffmann-like magician, who kept a toy-shop, and who was always 'hard up.' His shop was full of the most wonderful things—of wooden men and women, giants and dwarfs, kings and queens, workmen and masters, animals and birds, as numerous as Noah got into the Ark, tables and chairs, carriage, boxes of all sorts and sizes. And though he was a magician, Hans could never meet his obligations either to the devil or the butcher, and was therefore—much against the grain—constantly obliged to sell his toys to the devil. These then went through wonderful adventures—always ending in a return to Rockle's shop.

(From Lee Baxandall & Stefan Morawski (eds.), *Marx and Engels on Literature and Art*, Telos Press, 1973, p. 147.) A strain of Gothic Marxism surfaces.

42 See, for example, 'Hexenprozesse', in G.S., VII: 1, pp. 145-52-

43 See 'The task of the translator', in *Illuminations*, p. 79 or 'Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers' (1921), in G.S., IV:i, p. 18.

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