WALTER BENJAMIN AND
THE DISPERSION OF CINEMA

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Cinematic Movement

Cinema, by definition, moves. But what is this movement written into cinematography? In what space—or time, for that matter—does cinematic movement occur? Where are its boundaries, its borders?

These questions take on added urgency as cinema shifts from a filmic to a digital instantiation. Yet, digital cinema is still defined by movement, even if the inscription of that movement has changed.

At an obvious level, of course, cinema is motion pictures, the moving image. As every student of cinema knows, this motion is made technically possible by a sequential movement of individual images, united by the phenomenon that perceptual psychologists call “apparent motion.” Even in digital forms of cinema, it remains the succession of image-fields that produces the effect of kinetic movement upon the screen.

This conception of cinema as a successive movement of images has, however, been contested by various theorists. Perhaps most prominently, Gilles Deleuze has argued that cinema cannot be conceived as “an image to which movement is added” (1986, 2), but that instead movement must be considered intrinsic to the cinematic image, a concept that Deleuze refers to as the movement-image. For Deleuze, of course, cinema is not defined strictly by movement, but I will return to his distinction between the movement-image and the time-image at a later stage.

In any case, the moving image per se—that is, the motion of objects and bodies within the filmic frame—is merely one dimension of cinematic movement. As Deleuze explains, the frame itself may also move (mobile framing), as well as the perspective or position from which shots are taken and combined (montage). It is important to note, however, that these “three dimensions” of cinematic movement refer to movements that take place onscreen or that are implied by what is onscreen (as with movements presumed to take place diegetically, but
offscreen). Taken together, these varieties of onscreen movement have generally been seen as defining cinema; the old arguments between the respective importance accorded to mise-en-scène or montage may, for example, be seen as disputes over the precedence given to different types of cinematic movement.

**Movement and Effects**

These onscreen movements have generally been considered—from Eisenstein to Bazin to Screen theory and beyond—in terms of how they affect, or move, a perceiving subject, whether that subject is conceived as primarily conscious, unconscious, or bodily. These movements, in short, are taken to find their culmination in a receptive subject that serves as the destination at which these movements—and indeed cinema itself—must eventually arrive. Thus, with rare exceptions, cinematic movement has been conceived as directed toward, and subordinated to, an autonomous subject or viewer. From this perspective, cinematic movement on the screen is seen less as a matter of movement qua movement than as merely a matter of effects.

Thus, for example, cinematic movements of the frame and of editing have been seen to evoke a sense of mobility for—or in—the spectator as well, which Anne Friedberg has famously described as the “mobilized and virtual gaze.” Cinematic movement, in this case, reinforces the imagined auto-mobility of the spectator. For Friedberg, this effect of mobility provided by cinema is closely akin to the mobility attributed to the consuming subject, strolling past display windows, browsing an array of goods brought from all over the world. Here, the cinematic illusion of freedom of movement becomes the virtual enactment of the supposed freedom of choice that defines the subject in consumer society.

This sense of subjective mobility is, as Friedberg has herself suggested, foregrounded in many digital technologies as well, where movement from one virtual space or site to another is often closely aligned with consumption. In a digital world, however, these movements are “mobilized” in the service of a process of consumption that is, at once, increasingly global and increasingly customized. If, at a global level, these movements seem to respect no national or geographic borders, they at the same time become effects of the desire for an even more customized mobility and consumption. One might well predict, then, that the future of digital cinema lies in a personalization of its movements, which is already beginning to take shape within the current proliferation of DVD extras, “cinematic” computer games, and video mash-ups, all of which allow movements to be personalized in the interests of an individual subject. Here, movements become personal effects.
Cinematic Tourism

Many early films were in effect travel films, depicting “views” of “distant” lands, much like those afforded by postcards and stereographs to “armchair travelers.” Yet, if even still images allowed viewers to position themselves as sightseers voyaging to distant places, cinema added not only a moving image to the scenario, but also a sense of movement to the viewer’s positioning, much as Friedberg suggested in relation to consumption and shopping. Drawing from Friedberg’s work, Ellen Strain has argued that cinema has often relied upon a similarly mobile “tourist gaze” that positions its viewers as virtual tourists. Indeed, cinema’s mobility has often been employed to simulate for its viewers a sense of travel, a connection that was made explicit early in cinematic history by such attractions as the Lumières’s marórama, Grimoin-Sanson’s cinéorama, and later Hale’s Tours, all of which employed projections of moving scenes to convey the illusion of travel.

Yet, cinema’s link to tourism is more than simply a matter of simulated movement and tourist vistas. As Strain in fact observes, the development of cinema coincided with both the development of the tourism industry and the institutionalization of anthropology, and it has commonly shared their fascination with other locales and cultures. The touristic aspects of cinema play a prominent role in, for example, narrative cinema, where foreign and exotic locales often provide an appealing setting for narratives that rely on the figure of travel and journeys, supported on a formal level by camera movements and editing that position the viewer with the protagonist on his or her journey. Much of cinema’s appeal seems based on the allure of travel, of experiencing new places and seeing unusual sights. Cinema has, in fact, always drawn upon the promises associated with travel, with crossing borders, with seeing and exploring different lands. This allure is not only a matter of cinema’s well-known fascination with the exotic, but also of the promise—shared by both cinema and travel—of adventure, of new sensations, of escaping the familiar and rediscovering an immediacy often felt to be lost in the everyday modern world. Paradoxically, it is precisely the technological mediation of cinema that enables this effect of travel and the concomitant experience of renewed immediacy. Cinema and its digital progeny have continued to rely upon this promise of traveling to, seeing, and experiencing—and indeed, immersing oneself within—other places, and even other worlds. In this sense, the movements of cinema serve to enable a sense of travel—and all the effects that travel promises—that extends beyond the merely global. Here, again, this experience remains centered on the imagined autonomy and mobility of individual subjects.
Cinema as Diaspora

The sense of personal mobility conveyed by Friedberg’s mobilized virtual gaze and Strain’s tourist gaze is, however, enabled by a more literal mobility of cinema: its ability to move physically and geographically, to travel across borders. This ability to travel was made possible, from cinema’s beginnings, by the portability of the Lumière cinematograph, which allowed camera operators to document sites and cultures from around the world, and to project them in other places and at other times.

The portability of the film camera/projector enables cinema to make its images dynamic in a sense that is not limited to the movement of images within the frame, on the screen. For cinema not only allows the recording and projection of images to travel across various borders, it also makes its moving images themselves mobile, portable. The cinema, in other words, is defined not simply by moving images, by movements upon the screen, but also by the movement of these moving images from one place or context to another. This ability to move images, to shift their context from one space and time to another, is often seen as a matter of editing. Yet, this movement is not limited to notions of montage. Even a single-shot film without editing can be shown in another location, and it is necessarily shown at another time. Indeed, this portability is an inevitable result of cinema’s reproducibility. As Friedberg describes it, “The cinematic apparatus is unique in its facility to replay and repeat its own exact form—the identical replication made possible by its photographic base allows the same film to be reprojected at a variety of points in time” (175). While Friedberg is concerned in this passage to emphasize the “repeatability” of cinema, it is clear that this ability to “replay and repeat its own exact form” means that cinematic images can, in fact, never remain in the same place, time, or context. In this sense, cinema has always and unavoidably involved a diffusion or dispersion of images. At this basic level, then, cinema is a diaspora of images.

The Fourth Dimension of Cinematic Movement

Thus, we confront two very different types, two very different conceptions, of cinematic movement: on the one hand, those movements of bodies, frames, and perspective that occur onscreen, and another level of movement in which these onscreen images and movements are themselves made portable: moved, diffused, re-contextualized. This movement of images, of “cinematic movements,” takes place beyond the typical borders of the cinematic screen. It might therefore be considered,
borrowing a phrase from Eisenstein, as the fourth dimension of cinematic movement. Yet, while Eisenstein suggestively links his notion of a filmic fourth dimension to the intersections and overtones of visual and aural dynamics, he still understands these movements as taking place on the screen (again, it is only their effects that go beyond it). He does not consider the movements by which these onscreen movements are shifted, transported, or dispersed to other spaces and times. It will be left to Walter Benjamin to discover the dimension of cinematic movement that occurs beyond the explicit boundaries of the screen: at the level of cinema’s “photographic base,” at the level, that is, of technological reproducibility.

Unlike the three dimensions of movement that take place on the cinematic screen, this fourth dimension of movement is not, as Benjamin makes clear, directed toward an autonomous subject or viewer, who would provide a culminating point for these movements. Or perhaps one might say that these movements, as Derrida has noted of writing, do not always arrive at an “intended” address or destination. Indeed, this movement of onscreen movements might be said to proceed by a certain indirection, through a dispersive movement or diffusion that is not determined by its effects upon a subject or viewer. This is not to say that viewers are not affected by this dispersive movement of images, but simply that these effects are not aimed at them. The effects of these movements on viewers are, in other words, secondary to this movement; it is this movement itself—this portability of images—that is determinative.

The Portability of Images

The portability of cinematic images and movements was first recognized by Walter Benjamin. In an essay that continues to be widely misunderstood, Benjamin observes that what distinguishes technologically-reproduced forms such as cinema from traditional artworks is not only a matter of their status as “copies,” but of their ability to be moved, exhibited, and received in different places:

With the emancipation of specific artistic practices from the service of ritual, the opportunities for exhibiting their products increase. It is easier to exhibit a portrait bust that can be sent here and there than to exhibit the statue of a divinity that has its fixed place in the interior of a temple. (2003, 257; 1969, 225)

1Page numbers for Benjamin’s “Work of Art in the Age of Reproducibility” essay here, and throughout, refer to the translation of the “third version” of the essay in Walter
As Benjamin goes on to observe, “The scope for exhibiting the work of art has increased so enormously with the various methods of technologically reproducing it that . . . a quantitative shift . . . has led to a qualitative transformation in its nature” (257; 225). What is decisive in this transformation, however, is not simply the fact that images or copies come to take the place of the original, but that they come to be displayed, exhibited, in a variety of locations. The artwork loses its enveloping sense of unique presence not just because it has been copied, but because these copies are no longer tied to a “fixed place,” no longer embedded “in the context of tradition” (256; 223). Thus, the withering of the aura of the artwork, which has seemed to many scholars the salient point in Benjamin’s essay, is in fact merely an effect of the physical movement or dissemination of the image, across both space and time. The decline of the aura, in other words, is based on this diffusive portability of images, which is inherent in the very processes of technological reproducibility, which are for Benjamin exemplified in film.

Mass Movements

Benjamin’s emphasis on the spatial and dynamic aspects of technological reproducibility has been, as Samuel Weber has observed, obscured in Harry Zohn’s well-known English translation of Benjamin’s essay in Illuminations. As Weber notes, where Zohn emphasized the “substitution of a plurality of copies for a unique existence” that results from reproduction, Benjamin actually describes the replacement of a unique occurrence “with one that is massive or mass-like (massenweise)” (84). For Benjamin, this “mass” always seems to imply a dynamic component, which is made clear when, a few lines later, he describes the process of reproduction as “intimately related” to “the mass movements of our day.”

Benjamin’s conceptualization of the mass in terms of movement echoes in certain ways Siegfried Kracauer’s views of the mass ornament. Kracauer, taking the Tiller Girls as his example, continually speaks of the ornament as involving “mass movements.” Significantly, he explicitly links the “the mass movements of the girls” to the movements of factory work: “Everyone does his or her task on the conveyor belt, performing a partial function without grasping the totality . . . . The hands in the

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Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 4 (2003), but I have also given references to Zohn’s well-known translation of the essay in Illuminations (1969).

2 The newer translation of the “third version” of the Kunstwerk essay (as well as in the “second version” in Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 3), renders this passage as “it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence,” thereby reinstating Benjamin’s emphasis on the “mass.”
factory correspond to the legs of the Tiller Girls” (78-79). Benjamin similarly compares the movements of “the amusement park . . . with its dodgem cars and other similar amusements” to “the training that the unskilled laborer undergoes in the factory” (329; 176). For both Kracauer and Benjamin, mass movements do not suggest anything resembling a collectivist unity, but are characterized precisely by their detachment (detached from notions of totality or community for Kracauer, from tradition or experience [Erfahrung] for Benjamin).

Yet, where Kracauer stresses the mechanical regularity and rationalized abstraction of these detached movements, Benjamin instead stresses their contingent, dispersed, and indeed unsettling qualities. For Benjamin, the “mass,” like the film, is “torn apart” (zurstückelt), scattered, strewn in pieces that must then “be assembled in accordance with new laws.” In this context, we can understand Benjamin’s frequent descriptions of film, reproduction, and mass movements in terms that suggest an explosive, scattering movement: from the “shattering of tradition” that he associates with techniques of reproduction to the “dynamite of the split second” by which film “explodes” the everyday world.

To read these figures, as is frequently done, as implying simply a fragmentation of the modern world is to undercut Benjamin’s emphasis on the volatile, dispersive movements involved. It is precisely these unsettled and unsettling movements that explain the connection between mass movements and processes of reproduction such as cinema. Benjamin, in fact, explicitly links mass movements to the movement that “detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition” and the parallel movement at the level of reception, which permits “the reproduction to reach the recipient [dem Aufnehmenden] in his or her own situation” (254; 221). Of course, for Benjamin, “the most powerful agent” of these dispersive mass movements “is film.”

**The Shock Effect**

A similar sense of dispersed and unsettling movement inflects Benjamin’s conception of shocks, which buffet those on the streets of the city, factory workers, and film viewers alike:

Moving through this traffic [of a big city] involves the individual in a series of shocks and collisions. At dangerous intersections, nervous impulses flow through him in rapid

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3While Zohn’s translation in *Illuminations* describes “multiple fragments which are assembled under a new law” (234), Weber takes particular note of their dispersed status, and thus, their relation to Benjamin’s notion of “reception in a state of distraction.” See Weber, especially pages 91-92, whose points have deeply influenced my reading here.
succession, like the energy from a battery. Baudelaire speaks of a man who plunges into the crowd as into a reservoir of electric energy. Circumscribing the experience of the shock, he calls this man “a kaleidoscope equipped with consciousness.”

... Thus, technology has subjected the human sensorium to a complex kind of training. There came a day when a new and urgent need for stimuli was met by the film. In a film, perception conditioned by shock [shockförmige Wahrnehmung] was established as a formal principle. What determines the rhythm of production on a convey or belt is the same thing that underlies the rhythm of reception in the film. (“On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” 2003, 328)

Benjamin, on the one hand, describes these shocks as “stimuli” and a “kind of training.” This terminology suggests the extent to which Benjamin’s conception of shocks draws not only from Freud, but also from behaviorist ideas of stimuli and conditioned responses, which Benjamin applies broadly to the effects of technology and modernization on human beings. Although behaviorism has often been derided for espousing an overly mechanistic, physiologically based view of human behavior, Benjamin and many Marxist thinkers of the time recognized that this supposedly reductive, “mechanistic” view of behavior also held the potential for change, for social movement. If, after all, human responses could be conditioned, they could also be changed. It is precisely this potential for retraining human perception and responses that explains the importance that Benjamin attaches to the experience of shocks and therefore to the processes of mechanization and technology—including cinema—that are its basis.

It is also significant, however, that Benjamin figures these shocks in explicitly electrical terms, which he compares to “energy from a battery” and “a reservoir of electric energy.” For Benjamin, then, shocks—much like an electrical charge—are defined by their energy, their dynamic potential, their ability to move, to flow. As with electricity too, this flow can only occur through contact. When, therefore, human beings come into contact with shocks, the effect is physical, like a collision on the streets—or an electrical jolt. These shocks “jolted the viewer, taking on a tactile quality” (267; 238). The shock effect, in other words, is transmitted to, and through, the body. Indeed, Benjamin argues, these shocks flow through the human body like “nervous impulses,” which are, of course, also electrical.

This figure of electrical flow into and through the body reminds us of the similarity of these shocks to the concept of innervation which Benjamin discussed at various times throughout his work, including in earlier versions of the *Kunstwerk* essay. Innervation is a physiological process, through which energy or stimuli are transmitted through the
nerves to various parts of the body. In Benjamin’s usage, innervation therefore represents a kind of internal counterpart to external shocks or stimuli. It is precisely this transmission or flow of stimuli from external to internal that subjects “the human sensorium to a complex kind of training.” Shocks, then, do not simply jolt the consciousness that comes into contact with them; they enter and, in fact, alter the bodily pathways and processes by which they are perceived or received.

Here, Benjamin’s reference to Baudelaire’s figure of “a kaleidoscope equipped with consciousness” serves to suggest that shock effects have, in fact, made human perception and consciousness secondary to a corporeal perceptual apparatus that is explicitly figured in terms of mechanical movement. This apparatus, when moved or jolted, causes various fragments to fall into a series of complex, changing patterns. It is of course not coincidental that a similarly mechanical apparatus—and a similar series of fragmentary movements and combinations—is apparent in film, where, as Benjamin argues, “perception conditioned by shock was established as a formal principle.”

It is notable that Benjamin does not describe the shock effect of films as simply affecting perception, but as conditioning it. Indeed, it appears that, in film, shock becomes the very form through which perception occurs. Thus, much as in Baudelaire’s figure of a perceiving kaleidoscope, film becomes part of the bodily perceptual apparatus, through which images, refracted and recombined in the process, flow into and through the body. In contrast to the totalizing visual perception of the traditional artwork, which depended on a certain distance, this technological process of apperception involves a tactile, corporeal appropriation and assemblage of fragments—echoing Benjamin’s famous contrast between the magician and the surgeon, the painter and the cameraman (263-64; 233-34).

Clearly, Benjamin sees shocks as closely related to the role of editing or montage in films, as when he observes that the shock effect of film is “based on successive changes of scene and focus which have a percussive effect on the spectator” (267; 238). Yet, for Benjamin, montage often seems to be virtually synonymous with technological reproducibility, which is what makes it possible for images to be arbitrarily cut out of their original context, moved, dispersed, and combined in new ways. If, then, we take seriously Benjamin’s assertion of a dramatic shift in apperception, film can no longer be seen merely as an object of perception. Instead, the technical processes of film, including montage, themselves become part of this more haptic, bodily perceptual process. It is here that Benjamin moves beyond the efforts of Eisenstein and Vertov to change human perception via (the stimuli of) montage. He proposes that perception has, with the rise of technological reproducibility, itself come to operate through montage—which is to say,
through precisely the same kind of technical processes by which film moves and reassembles images.

**Unconscious Optics and Distraction**

Seeing film—with its continual movement and assemblage of images—as part of the perceptual process, rather than simply as an external object of perception, also enables a better understanding of Benjamin’s notion of the “optical unconscious” of film. Significantly, Benjamin compares this “optical unconscious” to the “instinctual unconscious” discovered by psychoanalysis (266; 237), thus suggesting an interaction between the unconscious reception of images and the unconscious impulses of the body. When, therefore, he notes, “it is another nature which speaks to the camera as compared to the eye. ‘Other’ above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious” (266; 236-37), he is not simply suggesting, as is often assumed, a bringing to consciousness of those aspects of life that had previously gone unnoticed. Rather, he suggests what had been seen as an external, visual space becomes permeated by, interwoven with, an unconscious space. Benjamin’s optical unconscious is not, then, entirely “optical”; through it, images are “taken in” not only at an unconscious level, but also at a tactile, bodily level. The optical unconscious therefore seems to correspond to Benjamin’s discussion in his essay on “Surrealism” of the technologically based interpenetration of an image-space (one that, however, “can no longer be measured out in contemplation” [1986, 191]) with a body-space.

For Benjamin, then, it is precisely this interweaving of image and body that characterizes reception in a technological age, which he, in a famous phrase, characterized as reception “in a state of distraction” (268; 239). Yet, for Benjamin, this reception is, as I have already suggested, closely related to the processes of film’s production. This linkage is readily apparent in Benjamin’s observation that “Film, by virtue of its shock effects, is predisposed to this form of reception” (269; 240). What is often less clear is what Benjamin meant when he referred to the concept of distraction. Part of this difficulty lies in the translation of the German word *Zerstreuung* as “distraction” or “absent-mindedness.” The connotations of *Zerstreuung*, as Weber has observed, “are far richer than the essentially privative terms ‘distraction’ and ‘absentminded’ might lead one to believe. The root of the German word—the verb *streuen*—is cognate to the English ‘strew, strewn’ and carries with it a strong spatial overtone” (92). Thus, the reception of the film—which closely corresponds to Benjamin’s conception of the masses—involves not so much a
loss of attention as a scattering, which matches the status of cinematic images as interruptive and dispersed, as “torn apart” [zerstückelt].

This linkage between the processes of production and reception is also demonstrated in Benjamin’s description of the way film is shot or “taken” (aufgenommen) and received or “taken up” (aufnimmt) by the viewer (dem Aufnehmenden). Benjamin, as I have already noted, describes this process of “taking up” as a tactile appropriation or absorption, which he clearly sees as matching—and indeed taking on the characteristics of—the technological appropriation of images in the film production process. This “distracted” reception, then, involves a dispersing of “natural” perception in two closely related senses. First, as Benjamin observes, distraction is the “antithesis” of concentration. Thus, distracted reception is dispersed inasmuch as it takes place in an arbitrary, incidental, and not wholly conscious fashion, in contrast to the rapt concentration demanded by the traditional work of art. Second, this reception does not, as is necessarily the case with the traditional artwork, coalesce in an autonomous individual consciousness, which is by definition fixed in place and time. Instead, it “takes place” through a displacement or dispersion of the conscious “subject,” so that reception no longer occurs through an individual consciousness, but rather, is unconsciously absorbed “through the collective”: that is, by the dispersed, “distracted masses” (268; 239).

This collective “mass,” one example of which can be found in the crowds of the modern city, is defined not only by its diffusion, but by its constant and unconscious appropriation of images. Indeed, the mass’ “state of distraction” is defined by its ability to “take up” these images in much the same way that the film apparatus does. Yet, for Benjamin, as we have seen, this diffused, unconscious appropriation is also figured as a bodily, tactile absorption. This collectivity is a kind of diffused, technologized body that, as it continually absorbs the stimuli, the images, that jolt it (and that alter its perceptions and responses), can no longer be entirely separated from the space of images. This is not simply a body affected by moving images, but a truly cinematic body in which, or through which, images move. Here, there is no longer a fixed boundary between the perceiving subject and images, for these images have become part of this dispersed body’s tactile experience.

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4As Weber observes, “The fact that the same German verb—aufnehmen—is used to designate cinematic production as well as reception suggests that both ends of the process share some very basic features” (91).
Aesthetics, Politics, and Property

Although it is obvious that Benjamin sees the unsettling dispersion brought about by technological reproducibility as opening the possibility for a revolutionary politics, he was also well aware that technological reproducibility and film could be turned to the service of aestheticized, auratic values, as his discussion of the fascist use of newsreels and propaganda films makes clear. Indeed, at a broader level, Benjamin recognized that the shocks and dispersion of modern life could produce a sense of displacement and anxiety in society. Fascism’s “aestheticization of politics” was precisely a response to this anxiety, promising a restoration of that sense of aura and tradition that were felt to have been lost in modern society. Yet, as Benjamin observed, this restoration was made possible by the very processes of technological modernity that fascism decried. Here, it becomes clear that Benjamin does not indulge in a simplistic technological determinism, of which he has sometimes been accused. Rather, he seems to see the unsettling, dispersive tendencies of technology and the resulting decline of the aura of the artwork as a kind of primary process, which can nevertheless always be re-settled, channeled, or re-appropriated within the strictures of a fascist—or capitalist—political context. Thus, Benjamin’s ideas should by no means be seen limited to the political situation of his time, any more than they should be seen as restricted to mechanical technologies (another common assumption about Benjamin’s work).

Indeed, Benjamin’s conception of technological reproducibility is perhaps even more applicable to the processes of digital reproducibility, through which images and sounds are transformed into data, dispersed, and consumed. Here, as with the images of cinema, digital information is, by definition, broken out of its previous context, becoming portable, capable of being moved and “exhibited” anywhere. This dispersion is, in fact, inherent in the very idea of information. When we speak of “bits” of information, we are not speaking of solid, static elements (which is not to say that data is not material), but of dynamic relations. As in Benjamin’s electrical metaphor of “shocks,” data may be seen, like other forms of electromagnetic radiation, as either particles or waves, but in either case, this information is defined by its movement, by the fact it is necessarily moved from one context to another—which is to say, by its tendency toward dispersion. Of course, this dispersion can always be redirected, re-embedded within the fabric of traditional commercial and property relations, which are generally couched in the rhetoric of consumer choice and self-expression. Here, Benjamin’s evaluation of fascist uses of media remains highly relevant to today’s struggles over what is euphemistically called “intellectual property”: “Fascism attempts to organize the newly proletarianized masses while leaving intact the
property relations that they strive to abolish. It sees its salvation in
granting expression to the masses—but on no account granting them
rights” (269; 241). This “expression,” which for Benjamin is related to
“the putrid magic” of commodification (261; 231), serves to maintain the
stability of property relations by casting images and information—as
Friedberg suggested of the cinematic “mobilized, virtual gaze”—in terms
of a personalized consumer choice and mobility. It redirects the inherent
dispersion of reproducibility, so that informational flows can be
channeled, metered, commodified. In this context, we might note the
almost obsessive emphasis given by information and network
developers to demarcating sites, locations, and boundaries. The
movements of information must, it seems, always be prevented from
going astray; information must therefore be given a “proper” address
and a destination, as with any form of property. This is all the more
necessary when the property in question is virtual.

The Displacement of History

Yet, for all the emphasis that he gives to figures of spatial movement
and dispersion, closeness and distance, the optical and the tactile,
Benjamin never sees space entirely apart from time. Although it is
perhaps the case that he tends to emphasize the spatial aspects of
dispersion in the Kunstwerk essay, the broader context of his work makes
clear that, for Benjamin, technological reproducibility and the dispersive
effects it brings about are temporal phenomena just as much as they are
spatial. The decline of the aura, for example, not only allows the artwork
to be removed from its previous spatial location, but from its historical
emplacement as well; for the aura or uniqueness of the work of art is, as
Benjamin notes, “identical to its embeddedness in the context of
tradition” (256; 223). Technological reproducibility not only “detaches
the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition,” it also (in concert
with the changed mode of reception) leads “to a massive upheaval in the
domain of objects handed down from the past—a shattering of tradition”
(254; 221).

The “far-flung debris” that are the result of film’s “dynamite of the
split second” are also the debris of history, the ruins of a linear historical
continuum or narrative “exploded” by technological reproducibility. It
is precisely their status as ruins that allows images to be removed from
this narrative, making them liable to tactile appropriation, to being
seized or taken up, within a “state of distraction.” In the same way that
the “camera gave the moment a posthumous shock” (“On Some Motifs,”
328), Benjamin’s notion of historical materialism recognizes that events
only become “historical posthumously” (“On the Concept of History,”
Indeed, much like cinema, “materialistic historiography” is, for Benjamin, “based on a constructive principle” (396). It therefore allows the causal or linear movement of history to be arrested “in a constellation saturated with tensions.” This arrest “gives that constellation a shock” (396). It is precisely this interruption of the flow of time that enables “a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past” by blasting “a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history” (396). Benjamin’s notion of historical materialism, then, reconfigures the images of the past in new conjunctions or assemblages in much the same way that film does.

This reconfiguration is for Benjamin very much a political act, for in the place of a ritualized, historically embedded objects and images, it substitutes dialectical images, “saturated with tensions.” Politics, for Benjamin, is always tied to a revolutionary disruption or interruption of the linear movement of history, the flow of history’s narrative. His comparison of this disruption to “a messianic arrest of happening” has perplexed many critics and led to interpretations of his work that stress the tension between his Marxism and his Messianism. No doubt, Benjamin’s insistence on a “notion of the present which is not a transition, but in which time takes a stand [entstehl] and has come to a standstill,” is in many ways inimical to orthodox Marxist conceptions of history as a progressive, causal movement (396). Yet, if Benjamin argues that the present can be no longer be seen as part of the continuum of past, present, and future, and should instead be seen as “time filled full by now-time [Jeztzeit]” (395), it is precisely in order to rescue both the present and the events of the past from their contextualization within a bourgeois narrative of history, or Progress.

**Benjamin with Deleuze**

Benjamin’s conceptions of cinema, time, and history share a curious resemblance to Gilles Deleuze’s conceptions of movement and time in cinema. In Deleuze’s time-image, movement becomes subordinated to time (although not in the sense of a succession or sequence), leading to what Deleuze describes as “purely optical and sound situations.” Yet, Deleuze’s distinction between the movement-image and the time-image is based on a notion of movement that is, ultimately, directional; when movement loses its direction, its extensibility, its sense as an action (of bodies, on bodies), it becomes a directly temporal phenomenon.

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5Part of what is curious about this resemblance is that, despite Benjamin’s engagement with Bergson’s thought, and the general similarity of his interests to those of Deleuze, Benjamin’s name is not even included in the index of either volume of Deleuze’s *Cinema* books.
interrupting the elaboration of movement in space. In the time-image, as Deleuze notes, “time is out of joint and presents itself in the pure state” (271). This untimeliness explains why the time-image is, for Deleuze, associated with irrational cuts, aberrant movements, and false continuities. The direct presentation of time, in this sense, involves a perpetual movement or becoming that is, nevertheless, not going anywhere in particular. This becoming is not subordinated to a directional movement, either spatially or historically. It is “outside” of history and the present, oriented toward the possibilities of the future. In What is Philosophy?, Deleuze and Guattari describe it, in terms that certainly echo Benjamin, as related to “the infinite Now, the Nun that Plato already distinguished from every present: the Intensive or Untimely, not an instant but a becoming” (112). Similarly, Deleuze writes, “We will then think the past against the present and resist the latter, not in favour of a return but ‘in favour, I hope, of a time to come’ (Nietzsche) . . . . Thought thinks its own history (the past), but in order to free itself from what it thinks (the present), and to be able, finally, to ‘think otherwise’ (the future)” (1988, 119). It is no doubt the case that Deleuze places more emphasis on the “future” and on “becoming” than does Benjamin. Yet, it is amply clear that Benjamin’s tendency to “brush history against the grain” (392) is oriented toward revolutionary change and an experimentation in thinking and writing that seem closely related to Deleuze’s own project.

This comparison to Deleuze may help us better understand the extent to which Benjamin, like Deleuze, sees cinema as a model for thinking otherwise. Just as Benjamin stresses the possibilities offered by the discontinuity and dispersion of film, he emphasizes a similar discontinuity and dispersion in his views of history and politics. Benjamin, in other words, sees film, or technological reproducibility more generally, as crucial to the historical and political redemption of the past, which disperses the historical continuum in much the same way that it disperses the work of art, allowing it to be seized and reassembled in new ways, in new constellations of images. Yet, as we have seen, Benjamin also links this shift in cinematic/historical “reception” to a perceptual or bodily change, in which the individual consciousness—and its reception—also becomes dispersed, absorbing images in an incidental, interruptive fashion, taking them in at an unconscious, tactile level. Yet, Benjamin did not simply write about these tendencies. His own work on the Arcades Project—in which the ruined images of the past are (through Benjamin’s method of literary montage) arrested and recontextualized in a new constellation—demonstrates precisely how “thinking the past” can disperse the boundaries that our present continues to impose on the movements of thought. It is a work that
continues to jolt and retrain the way that we “take up” images, movements, and temporality, even in a digital age.

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References