Where Deeds Wander

A Search Along the Borders of Action in the Works of Hannah Arendt and Walter Benjamin

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The Death of a Storyteller

When we are convinced that the past will usher in a peaceful time, the present will surprise us mercilessly; when we are prepared to make a radical break with the past, the present might surprise us peacefully. Glorifying the idea of historical progress amounts to condoning a barbarous past; it favors the few who have triumphed and mocks the many who have lost. A kind of mockery that is as dishonoring to the dead as it is a danger to the living. And it is precisely this danger that Walter Benjamin, on the eve of one of the most horrific repetitions of barbarism, the holocaust, warned about: "There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is never free of barbarism, so barbarism taints the manner in which it was transmitted from one hand to another" (On the Concept of History, 1968/2006, p. 392).

The seven years preceding his final testament of unsettling concerns, Benjamin wandered through the spaces of the city he 'dreamt of the most' (Surrealism, 1966/1986, p. 182): Paris. The city he called 'a grand library, through which the Seine flows' (Benjamin, 1994/2017). Yet, despite him being a profound literary man, a "*homme de lettres*" (Arendt, 1968/2007, pp. 23, 27, 28), this 'grand library' did not offer him refuge as one. He stranded in Paris as a German jew in exile, just three weeks after the Reichstag burned like a beacon of peril. And although Benjamin managed to gather a group of likeminded intellectuals around him who shared the same fate, one of them being Hannah Arendt, "he lived his […] years in Paris in poverty and isolation" (Hutton, 2008).

The place that often played the protagonist in Benjamin's essays, especially in his surrealism essays—he even crowned it the *embodiment of surrealism*—, became the last labyrinth in which Benjamin found himself lost. Paris had once 'taught him how to wander' (Sontag, Under the Sign of Saturn, 1972/1981, p. 113); during his exile, it taught him how to hide. It was, however, not just the combination of Paris and exile that left him isolated and displaced. Benjamin, as Hannah Arendt puts it, "seemed so old-fashioned, as though he had drifted out of the nineteenth century into the twentieth the way one is driven onto the coast of a strange land" (Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940, 1968/2007, p. 19). The 20th century had always struck him as strange. A strangeness that reached dangerous heights as times grew darker.

In these dark times, Benjamin found both a friend and a kindred spirit in Arendt. In a letter Arendt wrote to Gertrude Jaspers, she described Benjamin as "her best friend in Paris" (Correspondence Hannah Arendt-Karl Jaspers 1926-1969, 1985/1992, p. 41). They talked, played chess, encouraged each other to write, and "read whatever papers they could find" (Hill, 2019). He persistently persuaded her to finish her piece on Rahel Varnhagen; she often visited him in the Bibliothèque Nationale, where he more often than not worked on essays such as "The Storyteller" (Benjamin, 1968/2007) and *"*On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*"* (Benjamin, 1968/2007). Benjamin, unlike Arendt, wrote as if death were on his heels. His production during their Parisian exile was significant, while Arendt wouldn't write most of her works until after the war. In terms of legacy, however tragic, these were strategic moves.

In retrospect, one is inclined to read in some of Benjamin's passages a kind of foreshadowing of his own fate. In "The Storyteller", for example, he writes: "The art of storytelling is reaching its end because […] wisdom […] is dying out" (Benjamin, 1968/2007, p. 96). This inclination is fueled by the fact that, during his attempt to flee the country, when he met Arendt for the last time in Marseilles, he entrusted her with his manuscripts. These manuscripts contained his essay "On the Concept of History", which Arendt read in Lisbon while waiting for the ship that would sail her to safety (Herzog, 2000, p. 2). Benjamin never made it to Portugal. He traversed the Pyrenees with a group of refugees only to end up stranded in Portbou, where the Spanish regime informed them that they would be sent back to France

the following morning, straight into the hands of the Nazis. Benjamin refused to accept this desperate destiny—that night, on the 26th of September 1940, he took his own life.

A life marked by misfortune and melancholy ended in a tragically similar vein—a cruel form of historical irony. But thanks to Theodor W. Adorno, Rolf Tiedemann, Gershom Scholem, and others that felt obliged to honor him by letting his stories live, his legacy found passage to *le monde des lettres*. A notable absence to this group of custodians was Hannah Arendt. It took her 28 year to commemorate her friend and his remarkable contributions to philosophy, cultural criticism, and literature in her essay, first published in 1968 in *The New Yorker*, "Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940" (Arendt, 1968/2007). Only once, as Annabel Herzog remarks (Illuminating Inherritance, 2000), did she (explicitly) mention him earlier, and only once afterwards: "The first […] forms part of thesis 9 quoted in the first chapter of *Imperialism*; the second is a short analysis of Benjamin's use of metaphors, in *The Life of the Mind*, vol. One, *Thinking*" (p. 18). Arendt's philosophical works contain remarkably few references to Benjamin. A meager presence that would be justified if her ideas were not inherit to his thinking, but scholarly work on this reveals the opposite. Many papers, most notably those written by Annabel Herzog (Illuminating Inherritance, 2000), Seyla Benhabib (Hannah Arendt and the Redemptive Power of Narrative, 1990), Liliane Weissberg (On Friendschip in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt Reads Walter Benjamin, 2002), and Gaye İlhan Demiryol (Arendt and Benjamin: Tradition, Progress and Break with the Past, 2018), emphasize the abundant similarities between the two thinkers and their ideas on history, art and politics. It would be entirely appropriate, according to them and others, to describe Arendt's philosophy as, to reiterate the title of Herzog's essay on this subject, an 'illuminating inheritance' (2000).

Reading Arendt can serve as a guide to Benjamin's work. Especially her philosophy of history, most clearly presented in *Between Past and Future* (Arendt, 1961)*, The Human Condition* (Arendt, 1958/2018) and *The Life of the Mind* (Arendt, 1971/1978), is like a structured deepening of Benjamin's rather aphoristic writing on this topic. It is as if Benjamin, who 'thought and wrote poetically' (Arendt, Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940, 1968/2007, p. 50), found his literary reincarnation in Arendt's philosophical prose. Yet it would be unfair if we were to reduce Benjamin's oeuvre to a mere collection of aphorisms that require Arendt's theories to become coherent. I would argue that Arendt's philosophy benefits as much from an understanding of Benjamin's as the other way around. Or, to phrase it differently, both philosophies become clearer when they illuminate *each other*. The orientation of illumination does, however, vary from idea to idea—the subject matter determines the direction.

As mentioned before, direct references to Benjamin are almost absent in Arendt's work. Fortunately, her detailed portrait of him (Arendt, Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940, 1968/2007) does an excellent job in revealing which ideas (and traits) she particularly admires. This essay will therefore serve as an important guide to my investigation into Benjamin's influence on Arendt's philosophy. And while it is more difficult to determine which ideas of Arendt might have influenced Benjamin—after all, she wrote them down after his untimely death—, many of her theories and arguments certainly clarify his work. This thesis will therefore be a study of their philosophies in light of each other, their *mutual illumination*. More specifically, it will be an exploration of their philosophies of history and art in relation to their concepts of *action*. An exploration that, I hope, will reveal *man's remarkable ability to break with the past and begin something new*.

The task of the poet and historiographer […] consists
in making something lasting out of remembrance.
Hannah Arendt (The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern, 1961, pp. 44-45)

The chronicler is the history-teller.
Walter Benjamin (The Storyteller, 1968/2007, p. 95)

History—a Tale of Fragments

Origins

The beginning of history precedes storytelling; the beginning of world history coincides with it. This view seems undisputable to Arendt and Benjamin, whose philosophies of history find their origin in it. A view they share with Cato the Elder, who Arendt quotes on the last page of *The Life of the Mind* Vol. One, "Thinking" (1971/1978): "The victorious cause pleased the gods, but the defeated one pleases Cato" (p. 216). In other words, history 'as it is' transcends remembrance and should be left to the gods, but human history exists by the grace of remembrance and should be *told*. The emphasis on the role of telling, or rather *storytelling*, in history and throughout history is present in both Arendt's and Benjamin's concept of history. They each stress the importance of chroniclers, the 'history-tellers' (Benjamin, 1968/2007, pp. 95-96), in a similar vein: they can 'claim our human dignity' (Arendt, 1971/1978, p. 216) by 'not regarding anything that has ever happened as lost for history' (Benjamin, 1968/2006, p. 390). This emphasis originates from their shared resistance to "modern historiography" (Arendt, 1961, p. 61) or "historicism" (Benjamin, 1968/2006, pp. 396, 397), which, they argue, could not be further removed from its classical origins—and the father of these origins: Herodotus.

Revelation

Arendt describes the essence of Herodotus' history-telling in one of her essays on Immanuel Kant titled "Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy":

> The Greek spectator, whether at the festival of life or at the sight of the things that are everlasting, looks at and judges (finds the truth of) the cosmos of the particular event *in its own terms* [my emphasis], without relating it to any larger process in which it may or may not play a part. He was actually concerned with the individual event, the particular act. […] Its meaning did not depend on either causes or consequences. The story, once it had come to an end, contained the whole meaning. This is also true for Greek historiography, and it explains why […] Herodotus [could] give the defeated enemy his due. (Arendt, 1982/1992, p. 56)

What Arendt expresses here is the ability to let the 'natural light' of an event illuminate itself. The history-teller, like Herodotus, knows this. He resists the temptation to disclose events by placing them behind "a chain of causes which eventually led up to them" (Arendt,

Understanding and Politics, 1953). Arendt is relentless when it comes to historians who allow themselves to be seduced by causality; according to her, these historians 'deny the subject of their own science' (Understanding and Politics, 1953, p. 319). As Seyla Benhabib (The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt, 1996) points out, Arendt views these attempts to establish continuity between historical events, or between past and present, by means of categories like causality or progress—i.e. historical *laws*—as a 'trap op historicism' (p. 64). Arendt describes the danger of this trap as follows:

> Such generalizations and categorizations extinguish the "natural" light history itself offers and, by the same token, destroy the actual story, with its unique distinction and its eternal meaning, that each historical period has to tell us. Within the framework of preconceived categories, the crudest of which is causality, events in the sense of something irrevocably new can never happen; history without events becomes the dead monotony of sameness, unfolded in time […]. (Understanding and Politics, 1953, pp. 319-320)

Anyone who believes that events are part of and *subordinate to* a larger whole, and that they derive their meaning solemnly *from* this whole, is obliged either to refrain from attributing meaning to singular events altogether, or claim, like Hegel does, that he/she stands at the end of history and is able to provide the entire chain of events with a final judgement. Both results are problematic, but Arendt sees the second one as an inevitable consequence of the cardinal error of modern historiography: "Progress as the standard by which to judge history" (Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy, 1982/1992, p. 56).

When the historian examines history through the lens of progress, he poses as, in the words of F. von Schlegel, a "prophet turned backward" (Arendt, 1953, p. 318). Instead of remaining faithful to his own domain of 'novelty', he abandons it for a territory that is alien to him: 'recurring similarities' (Arendt, 1953, pp. 318-319). That is, he trades his profession for prophecy; he turns his attention away from the particular and gives it to the universal. Arendt is, as Beiner writes, determined to reject this tendency: "[She means] to focus on the particular *qua* particular—that is, those "stories" or particular episodes of historical experience whose exemplary meaning cannot be captured by or reduced to some universal narrative of history with a capital H" (Beiner, 2017). The prime examples of particulars *qua* particulars are "great deeds and words" (Arendt, 1961, p. 47)—the obvious subject for ancient historians until philosophers, most notably Aristotle and Plato, turned things around, i.e. until "the men of thought and the men of action began to take different paths" (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 17).

Man's urge for action results, at least partly, from the tragic transience of his existence. Immersed in a world that continuously reminds him of his finite fate, his mortality, man, in an act of existential rebellion, strives for *im*mortality. For the Greeks, the evidence of immortality lay in nature, "which comprehended all things that come into being by themselves without assistance from men of gods […] and therefore are *immortal* [my emphasis]" (Arendt, 1961, pp. 41-42), and in the nature of their gods: "immortality means endurance in time, deathless life on this earth and in this world as it was given, according to Greek understanding, to […] the Olympian gods" (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 18). To approach the realm of these immortals, the Greek 'men of action' believed they had to let their words and deeds—"that is, those things that owe their existence exclusively to men" (Arendt, 1961, p. 44)—transcend their human nature. However, these actions themselves have a fundamental deficiency: they cease to exist the moment they end. They are, in order to escape their fleeting essence, as Arendt explains, in need of one of two things: "But what goes on between mortals directly, the spoken word and all the actions and deeds […] can never outlast the moment of their realization, would never

leave any trace without the help of [*memory* or] *remembrance*" (The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern, 1961, p. 44)

Unfortunately, escaping the mortal realm does not equal joining the immortal one. If memorized action aspires to *enter* the immortal realm, it needs the gift of the historian; only he can grant it passage. This gift is his writing. But to be what Arendt calls 'properly historical', this writing must face the nature of history and avoid the trap of historicism. In Arendt's words: "[Historical writing must recognize] the political nature of history—[it] being a story of action and deeds rather than of trends and forces or ideas […]" (The Human Condition, 1958/2018, p. 185). Annabel Herzog, in her essay "Illuminating Inheritance" (2000), explains why Arendt prefers stories of action over narratives of ideas:

> It is clear that in her mind, stories are the only way to represent the fragmentary nature of individual life, which fights and collapses between past and future, and later reappears crystallized. […] Arendt's [preferred] mode of [historical writing] is 'not history as narrative but stories as lives'. Stories allow [historians] to seize the gap in time created by the lives of individuals, and tales and parables allow [them] to reveal the meaning of events occurring in history in the form of these lives. In this [historical writings] *reflect* the existence and experiences of people in history[; they are a] phenomenal disclosure. (pp. 8-9)

Stories of action disclose the lives they harbor by recognizing their 'political condition' (a matter that will receive attention in the "Distance as immortality" section of the next chapter). They do not, like narratives of ideas, inevitably relegate these lives to an irrelevant part of forces or trends—mere pieces of information or facts that are inferior to the grand scheme of things. On the contrary, they emphasize the exact opposite; their main character is not the *chain*, it is "the interruptions—the extraordinary, in other words" (Arendt, 1961, p. 43). And although these kind of historical stories had, according to Arendt, almost vanished since the 'man of thought' began to hold sway over history, there was one person in particular who, she writes, revived the tradition of history-telling in a most idiosyncratic way, namely Walter Benjamin:

> [His] thinking, fed by the present, works with the "thought fragments" [he] can wrest from the past and gather about itself. Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths, and to carry them to the surface, [his] thinking delves into the depths of the past—but not in order to resuscitate it the way it was and to contribute to the renewal of extinct ages. What guides [his] thinking is the conviction that although the living is subject to the ruin of the time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization, that in the depth of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what once was alive, some things "suffer a sea-change" and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements, as though they waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up into the world of the living—as "thought fragments," as something "rich and strange," and perhaps even as everlasting *Urphänomene*. (Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940, 1968/2007, pp. 50-51)

Redemption

In his essay "The Storyteller" (1968/2007), Benjamin, like Arendt, praises Herodotus—"the first storyteller of the Greeks" (p. 89)—for his distinctive ability to tell stories. His stories, he

discovered, distinguish themselves by possessing two rare qualities: 'they refrain from giving explanations and refuse to be exhausted by time' (The Storyteller, 1968/2007, p. 90). To show this, Benjamin cites a tale from Herodotus' book *Historia* that, according to him, is the epitome of a historical story:

> It deals with Psammenitus. When the Egyptian king Psammenitus had been beaten and captured by the Persian king Cambyses, Cambyses was bent on humbling his prisoner. He gave orders to place Psammenitus on the road along which the Persian triumphal procession was to pass. And he further arranged that the prisoner should see his daughter pass by as a maid going to the well with her pitcher. While all the Egyptians were lamenting and bewailing this spectacle, Psammenitus stood alone, mute and motionless, his eyes fixed on the ground; and when presently he saw his son, who was being taken along in the procession to be executed, he likewise remained unmoved. But when afterwards he recognized one of his servants, an old, impoverished man, in the ranks of the prisoners, he beat his fists against his head and gave all the signs of deepest mourning. (The Storyteller, 1968/2007, pp. 89-90)

What caused Psammenitos' sorrow? What drove him beyond the borders of his indifference? Was it, as Montaigne thought—""Since he was already overfull of grief, it took only the smallest increase for it to burst through its dams"" (Benjamin, 1968/2007, p. 90)—, the straw that broke the camel's back? Possibly… but conflicting interpretations, Benjamin demonstrates, are equally convincing:

> But one could also say: The king is not moved by the fate of those of royal blood, for it is his own fate. Or: We are moved by much on the stage that does not move us in real life; to the king, this servant is only an actor. Or: Great grief is pent up and breaks forth only with re- laxation. Seeing this servant was the relaxation. (The Storyteller, 1968/2007, p. 90)

The truth of the matter is negligibly irrelevant *if* one reads it as a historical *story*, and not as historical *information*. A genuine story does not dictate the truth; its message or lesson is sufficiently unsuggestive to pass as advice. That is, Benjamin claims, the nature of every historical story: 'It contains, openly or covertly, something useful and gives counsel to readers' (The Storyteller, 1968/2007, p. 86). Not by forcing a single perspective, but by revealing a multitude of perspectives. Benjamin poetically expresses that such stories—which, strictly speaking, resemble *art* rather than *information*—recognize "the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday" (Surrealism, 1966/1986, p. 190). In more prosaic terms, they reveal to the 'listener' the myriad perspectives and possible choices inherent to man's phenomenological experiences that he in turn will recognize as identical to his own. A true historic story *contains* stories, just as lives contain possibilities—in this way it unveils the phenomenological condition of human action.

Yet merely recognizing the inherent multiplicity of one's *own* perspective or possibilities does not equate to a political view. The true art of a historical story—which is synonymous with the craft of the chronicler and 'the benefit of his method' (Benjamin, 1968/2006, p. 396)—lies, as Benhabib eloquently explains (in a section on Arendt, but it applies equally to Benjamin's view), in its capacity to grant its spectator "the ability "to take the standpoint of the other," and this [does] not mean emphasizing or even sympathizing with the other, but rather the ability to *recreate the world as it appeared through the eyes of the others* [my emphasis]" (Hannah Arendt and the Redemptive Power of Narrative, 1990, p. 183).

By doing so, Benjamin argues, a historical story "[substitutes] a political for a historical view of the past" (Surrealism, 1966/1986, p. 182).

The difference between the historical view—that is, the view of historicism—and the political view, equivalent to the sight of the history-teller, lies in their expectation of the availability of 'past moments'. Ronald Beiner, in his essay "Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of `history" (1984), explains what Benjamin means by this:

> The first, represented by Ranke, seeks to contemplate "the way it really was." The second, associated with Nietzsche, proclaims: "We need history, but not the way a spoiled loafer in the garden of knowledge needs it." […] According to the outlook of historicism, the truth of history is *always "there"* [my emphasis], awaiting our contemplation. […] For historical materialism, in contrast, the past must be *"seized"* [my emphasis]: what is required is "to seize hold of a memory as it flashed up in a moment of danger" (theses V-VI). If we miss the moment, the past is irretrievable. "The true picture of the past flits by" (thesis V). (pp. 426-427)

What the history-teller, the 'historical materialist' in "On the Concept of History" (Benjamin, 1968/2006), does, is retrieving moments in the past that are being smothered and belittled by historicism's celebrated sequence of events. Saving past moments from this sequence is a rescue attempt—'they are in *danger*' (Benjamin, 1968/2006, p. 391)—and an act of rebellion; it pierces the cloak of homogeneous time:

> The historical materialist approaches a historical object only where it confronts him as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a messianic arrest of happening, or (to put it differently) a revolutionary chance in the fight for the *oppressed* [my emphasis] past. He takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the *homogeneous* [my emphasis] course of history […]. (Benjamin, 1968/2006, p. 396)

The history-teller constantly struggles with the dominant narrative of historicism; he defies its grip on history, determined to undermine it, rupture it. Benjamin essentially describes a battle for the past—always taking place at its *end*—between two opposing forces. He formulates these two forces in various ways throughout his work, but his most vivid—and poetic—choice of words resides in thesis IX of "On the Concept of History", in which he elucidates the forces through the metaphor of the *angel of history*:

> There is a picture by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. *This is how the angel of history must look* [my emphasis]. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is *this* storm. (Benjamin, 1968/2006, p. 392)

There is no shortage of interpretations of this thesis, one of Benjamin's most famous writings, but not all are equally convincing. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, for example, have, according to Otto Karl Werckmeister (Walter Benjamin's Angel of History, or the Transfiguration of the Revolutionary into the Historian, 1996, pp. 243-244) and Gregory Marks

(What the Angel Sees (Reading Benjamin's Theses IX & X), 2023) misappropriated the angel for their own critical theory. This is most evident when they claim that "[t]he angel which, with fiery sword, *drove* [my emphasis] humans out of paradise and on to the path of technical progress, is itself the symbol of that progress" (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1987/2002). This understanding, Marks argues, proposes a " […] likeness between this Angel of history and the angel that stands at the gates of Eden, forbidding the return of humanity to its state of primordial innocence and condemning us to lives of labor" (What the Angel Sees (Reading Benjamin's Theses IX & X), 2023). But as Benjamin explicitly states, it is the storm that drives the angel unstoppably into the future, not the angel that drives us into the future; and it is not the angel that represents progress, it is the storm (On the Concept of History, 1968/2006, p. 392).

A more plausible interpretation is postulated by Marks, which he in turn bases on remarks made by Gillian Rose (Judaism and Modernity, 1993, p. 209):

> Without an earthly solution to the human conflicts that trouble the Angel, and without intercession from on high, Benjamin's allegory describes a "traumatized Angel," which is unable to praise God and His works and therefore never able to leave this world, but is nevertheless driven onwards by the chaos that reigns over the earth; "he cannot stay and he cannot dissolve, but must impotently watch in horror the single catastrophe of History, the infernal raging caused by the same paradisical storm, as it piles up its debris at his feet." Far from a positive ideal for historical thought, the Angel speaks to our incapacity to fully grasp the motions of history, to bridge the gap between history and observer, and to intervene and prevent the destruction that bears down upon our heads. (What the Angel Sees (Reading Benjamin's Theses IX & X), 2023)

Marks argues that the angel is passive and melancholic. He is willing to help humanity, to intervene, but it is not he—or any other heavenly being, as Cato wrote earlier—who is responsible or able to 'stand still, wake the dead, and reassemble the shattered' (Benjamin, 1968/2006, p. 392). Most of us aren't either; only the history-teller, Benjamin claims, can handle the catastrophe, only he can brave the storm.

The history-teller, as Benjamin formulates it elsewhere, 'should regard it as his task to brush history against the grain' (On the Concept of History, 1968/2006, p. 392). In other words, his task, driven by the conviction that to neglect the ruins is to disgrace humanity, is to defy historicism by redeeming parts of the past. When Benjamin talks about this redemptive venture, he could not be more serious about its necessity; according to him 'even the dead aren't *safe*' (On the Concept of History, 1968/2006, p. 391). However gruesome or unjust their demise, historicism imprisons the dead, the fallen, in its causal stream of succession, and reduces them to a necessary and irrelevant part of it—*it justifies their defeat*. The task of the history-teller, the chronicler, is, instead of losing the defeated to history, rescuing them from it—the history-teller *redeems the dead*: "The chronicler who narrates events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accord with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history" (Benjamin, 1968/2006, p. 390).

Hiatus

If we were to imagine a fusion of Arendt's and Benjamin's chroniclers, and we would let this imagination run its course, it could, eventually, present us with an image of a contradictory figure. Reconciling remembrance of great deeds *and* tragic fates seems, at least intuitively, a problematic endeavor. It is difficult to praise the heroic without dishonoring the defeated, and it seems impossible to honor the vanquished without blaming the victors. Yes, Arendt and Benjamin find common ground in salvaging past events from the totalizing and destructive

ideology of progress—but Arendt emphasizes that these events are characterized by action, a phenomenon "judged only by the criterion of greatness" (The Human Condition, 1958/2018, p. 205), while Benjamin articulates the necessity of rescuing "the dead [, who] will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious" (On the Concept of History, 1968/2006, p. 391). This almost compels us to conclude that they are rescuing nemeses…

We have already witnessed that Arendt's and Benjamin's unorthodox view on history originated from a similar objective. Benjamin wanted to investigate "the concept of time in order to understand the notion of progress" and "to break free from [it by examining] those particular events and instances that interrupt history's straight, singular, homogenous narrative" (Arendt and Benjamin: Tradition, Progress and Break with the Past, 2018, p. 151). Arendt aimed to understand progress in order to "break the chain of narrative continuity, to shatter chronology as the natural structure of narrative, to stress fragmentariness, historical dead ends, failures and ruptures" (Benhabib, 1990, pp. 181-182). Phrased differently, they both found in history-telling the spell that could lift the curse of this 'homogeneous continuity'. And although their distinctive descriptions evidently tend to emphasize different aspects of it, Benjamin and Arendt share the belief that 'lifting the curse' is both a revelation and a redemption. Brushing history against the grain, as Benjamin calls the chronicler's spell, not only salvages the forgotten; it also reveals that history's "site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time […] shot through with splinters of messianic time" (On the Concept of History, 1968/2006, pp. 395, 397). And breaking up the narrative of historicism, as Arendt argues, not only requires human action to claim a position in history; it also demands the standpoint of the dead that are *defeated*, which, as Herzog remarks, "turns out to be a destructive standpoint because it dissociates the linearity of the victors' commemoration and wrecks conformist historical narrative" (Illuminating Inherritance, 2000, p. 15). In other words, *revealing* the radical possibilities of human action and *redeeming* the dead silenced by historicism are inseparably linked.

Recognition

To understand the relationship between possibilities embedded in human action and the tragic victimhood of past lives, we'll need to, Benjamin believes, 'discover a secret agreement between past generations and the present one' (On the Concept of History, 1968/2006, p. 390). That is, we'll have to recognize a bond between the present and the past which brings them closer together—so close that a causal chronological concept of history, which necessarily enforces *distance*, becomes virtually impossible to uphold:

> Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal nexus among various moments in history. But no state of affairs having causal significance is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be *separated* [my emphasis] from it by thousands of years. The historian who proceeds from this consideration ceases to tell the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. He grasps the *constellation* [my emphasis] into which his own era has entered, along with a very specific earlier one. Thus, *he establishes a conception of the present as now-time* [my emphasis] […]. (Benjamin, 1968/2006, p. 397)

The present is always connected to specific moments in the past: revolutionary tendencies resemble past revolutions, social upheaval mirrors previous movements of discontent, the oppressed are victims of hierarchies recognizable from earlier eras. A connection that is *accessible* to those able to approach these past moments as fragments, notice them as they 'flash up before their eyes', and retrieve them in crystallized forms. This notion

of ‘access’, as Frederic Jameson explains, “secures the radical difference of the past, in all its moments, at the same time that is preserves the freshness of its rediscovery, under conditions which make it alone possible and demand explanation in their own right” (The Benjamin Files, 2022, p. 15). Explaining past moments in their own right comes down to recognizing they were, at their time of happening, situated in *a* present. Rejecting the notion of universal history, which ‘musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time’ (Benjamin, 1968/2006, p. 396), occurs most effectively when its moments are recognized as interruptions, as monads that the history-teller captures when he ‘telescopes time through the present’ (Benjamin, 1982/1999, p. 471), i.e. when he glances through the window of the present as *now-time*. His own specific circumstances reflect in this window—they influence his view and are, as it were, the stains on the glass that slightly obscure the past. He avoids polishing this glass, which would result in a clear view and give the impression of past moments ‘as they were’ (Benjamin, 1968/2006, p. 391)—the ploy of historicism Benjamin sees through. Instead, he argues, the history-teller recognizes that ‘the true *image* of the past *flits* by’:

> The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its *recognizability* [my emphasis], and is never seen again. “The truth will not run away from us”: this statement […] indicates exactly that point in historicism’s image of history where the image is pierced by historical materialism. (Benjamin, 1968/2006, pp. 390-391)

Puncturing historicism’s notion of ‘eternal history’, a historical perception that, according to Herzog, postulates “a linear succession of [always available] instants” (Illuminating Inherritance, 2000, p. 5), comes down to what she calls a ‘reversal of the ordinary time-history relation’: “Paradoxically, time becomes historical when it is interrupted, in its interruption” (Illuminating Inherritance, 2000, p. 5). The *images* of the past, “as opposed to representations of a linear historical process, have the capacity to show time as [interruption]” (Herzog, 2000, p. 8). At the sudden moment they appear to the attentive historian’s eyes, he seizes them and ‘lifts them out of the homogeneous course of history’ (Benjamin, 1968/2006, p. 396). He then carries the images of the past so close to the present that its reflection on their surfaces create the illusion of an absolute coincidence, an elimination of differences. In other words, a *synthesis* of past and present. Benjamin is not seduced by this illusion; a synthesis of past and present requires absolute knowledge of both—i.e. Hegelian knowledge at the end of history—and restricts the possibilities of the present to those of the past. In other words, a true synthesis leaves, as Kia Lindroos (Aesthethic Political Thought: Benjamin and Marker Revisited, 2003) explains, no room for the *unknown*, an essential element in Benjamin’s thinking:

> [Benjamin favors the] possibility of a dialectical *Nicht-Synthesis*, which would be understood as an earlier idea that develops into the moment of temporal disruption, *Now-time (Jetztzeit)*, in his late work. When Benjamin emphasizes on the singular moment of now, he includes the interruption, the non-synthetic moment in the temporal course. This opposes the Hegelian idea of a movement of history that is characterized in terms that are confined to synthesis. In Hegelian terms, the historical phase is possible to examine after “closed” synthetic interpretation. For Benjamin, this interpretation would not be possible, since his dialectics concern *more than reconciliation*, as his concept of history also includes the aspect of the *unknown*. (p. 239)

The unknown element in every moment, whether past or present, owes its existence to Benjamin's idea of now-time. We must read 'unknown' here in an empirical or epistemological sense. Moments cannot be known by gathering all their 'facts', exhausting and exploiting them until they've got nothing left to hide. They can, however, as Marks concludes from Benjamin's Trauerspiel-essay, 'be considered complete in historical terms *while* remaining altogether indeterminate empirically' (What the Angel Sees (Reading Benjamin's Theses IX & X), 2023). This completeness of moments or events, in the sense of being irreducible to those preceding and exceeding it, is the essence of now-time: a moment out of time, one that transcends time, in which radical possibilities, the radical *new*, take place.

When Benjamin writes about 'time *filled* with now-time' (On the Concept of History, 1968/2006, p. 395), he means that time, as long as man inhabits it, contains the potential for radical possibilities, radical change. Now-time is Benjamins testament of man's capabilities, more specifically the power of his actions. Man, existentially bound to the present 'at all times', is capable of resisting the compelling force of the past as well as the prophetic pull of the future. He *causes* the rupture in time by acting. The history-teller understands this: he displays the actions of man to reveal both its radical possibilities and the resulting discontinuity of history. Phrased differently, he reveals *fragments as possibilities*.

According to Benjamin, as we have read earlier, the historical materialist would not even have to distinguish between 'major and minor events' (On the Concept of History, 1968/2006, p. 390) to bring possibilities of action to light; breaking the continuity of time is man's phenomenological state of being. But, as his actions tend to be suppressed by causal narratives and chronological explanations, the history-teller's cunning has eye for those moments that almost write history themselves. In thesis XIV, Benjamin gives a concrete example of this collaboration between an exemplary moment and the cunning historian: '[T]o Robespierre ancient Rome was a past *charged* [my emphasis] with now-time [*Jetztzeit*], a past which he *blasted* [my emphasis] out of the continuum of history. The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome reincarnate' (On the Concept of History, 1968/2006, p. 395). In other words, Robespierre managed to *tell* history in such a way that it inspired radical change: the French revolution.

Ironically, Robespierre also inspired many barbaric practices. It would not have been surprising, then, if Benjamin, instead of characterizing him as an exemplary historian, had portrayed him as someone who treated people as mere 'obstacles to progress'. The very opposite of breaking with history. Benjamin was undoubtedly aware of this, as this contradiction symbolizes his understanding of history: "There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (On the Concept of History, 1968/2006, p. 392). Many have exposed history in such a way that it inspired people to reformulate a depressive narrative, to rise up, to fight oppression… but *actual* redemption, the *abolition* of barbarism, the *last* revolution— events like these still hide behind the veil of the future. Radical acts, revolts, and revolutions, told and retold by those able to portray them as interruptions in history, have shown humanity the possibility of change; they just have not found their ideal successor. Be that as it may, they do, Benjamin believes, contain traces of it, hints at their fulfilment, clues of possibilities that transcend their own—in Benjamin's own words: "[they are] shot through with splinters of *messianic time* [my emphasis]" (On the Concept of History, 1968/2006, p. 397).

Benjamin derives the idea of messianic time from the Jewish belief in the coming of the messiah—a theological principle that implies the arrival of a savior. In the Old Testament, the 'Torah' in Judaism, we find several references to this savior, for example in Numbers ('what I see is not in the present, what I perceive is not near. A star rises from Jacob, a scepter from Israel. […] from Jacob arises a ruler' (De Bijbel - Literaire Editie NBV21, 2021, pp. 25: 17, 19)) and in Isaiah ('Here is my servant, I will uphold him, he is my chosen one, in him I

delight, I have filled him with my spirit. He will make all nations know justice. […] He will not be extinguished or broken until he establishes justice in the earth […]' (De Bijbel - Literaire Editie NBV21, 2021, pp. 42: 1, 4)). Benjamin captures the essence of these prophecies—'the arrival of redemption'—and applies it to the order of the profane, or rather 'the profane order of the profane' (Theologisch-Politiek Fragment, 1977/2020, p. 51) . In doing so, he sheds the messianic of its original religious implications.

When Benjamin mentions messianic possibilities present within moments, within now-time, he means, according to Richard Wolin (From Messianism to Materialism: The Later Aesthetics of Walter Benjamin, 1981), that man's actions in the profane order can "arrest the progress of time" and establish the radical new, rendering them *reminiscent* of the messianic—but only if they do *not* actively strive for 'the Kingdom of God' (pp. 89-91). He changes a passive waiting for an uncertain heavenly arrival into an active profane pursuit of the profane with an uncertain end. In other words, the Benjaminian messianic principle is a '*weak* messianic power'; it denotes a beginning instead of a goal, a possibility instead of a prophesy. The history-teller reveals this power. He shows, *without* prophesizing about ultimate ends, man's ability to rupture time by creating the radical new. In doing so, he actualizes the possibilities he wrests from the past. In Arendt's prosaic words (who quotes and clarifies Benjamin):

> "The genuine picture may be old, but the genuine thought is new. It is of the present. This present may be meager, granted. But no matter what it is like, one must firmly take it by the horns to be able to consult the past. It is the bull whose blood must fill the pit if the shades of the departed are to appear at its edge" (*Schriften* II, 314). Out of this present when it has been sacrificed for the invocation of the past arises then "the deadly impact of thought" which is directed against tradition and the authority of the past. (Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940, 1968/2007, pp. 44-45)

She aptly summarizes Benjamin's preferred approach to history as a subtle interplay between sacrifice, incantation, and impact. An interplay that is inherently political; it involves a critical evaluation and actualization of structures of oppression and injustice in the past, in order to expose those in the present. One that, in Lindroos' words, "signifies an explicitly temporal shift from an historical toward a political perception of time"—one that transforms the present into a "moment that inspires political action, which [must be] understood here as a change that strives to cause a rupture in into the chain of historical similitude" (Lindroos, 2003, p. 239). Or, as Jameson puts it, an interplay that "breaks with continuities and homogeneous time (or progress) [and] incorporates our present and a Now-time into its multiple moments of the past, from which we are to *draw the strength* [my emphasis] for our own future, […] our multiple futures" (The Benjamin Files, 2022, p. 245). We can discover the strength the radical new demands from us in the past. A strength the chronicler reveals; he leads us through an enchanted past into a present that embraces change. His artworks of old *show* the new. A gift, Benjamin believes, other forms of art possess as well. We will return to this matter in the next chapter.

Reconciliation

Benjamin uses mystical and biblical elements, such as the *angel of history* and the *messiah*, and limits them to the sphere of the profane. He 'desecrates the profane' to uncover the fragments of history. Arendt goes one step further: she avoids the profane-sacred relationship altogether by adopting an entirely secular view of history. Her redemptive aspect lacks biblical

references, as does her idea of creation. Yet both contain traces of Benjaminian concepts—as if they have undergone a secular rebirth.

It should not be underestimated that despite Arendt's undeniable interest in revealing the role of man's capacity for action—the originality of it and "the uniqueness of […] its truth-revealing power" (Kang, 2013)—in history, writing history, for her, is also 'necessarily an attempt at salvation' (A Reply, 1953, p. 77). An attempt, by transcending facts and telling 'provocative and principled stories' (Herzog, 2000, p. 15), to destroy the continuous narration of history and thereby liberating its silenced victims. Such a narration is, according to Arendt, always some form of an idea of progress, and therefore of prophecy—it postulates an historical *law*. The danger of this kind of historical thinking is that, when pushed to its limits, as Arendt writes in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951/1973) before quoting Benjamin's *angel of history*, it is "ready to sacrifice everything and everybody to supposedly superhuman laws of history" (p. 143). Her attempt to destroy this historical perspective is therefore not an aggressive act against history itself; it is an effort to redeem those who became victims of progress and reveal the fundamental human capacity that progress-thinking structurally overlooks. One that *actually* determines the 'direction' of history by incessantly interrupting it: action.

We have read that Arendt makes a sharp distinction between ancient history-telling, and modern historicism. She describes the development from the former to the latter as a decline of proper historical thinking. The primal cause of this decline, Arendt argues, is twofold: the necessary 'position' of the historian combined with the preference for thinking at the expense of the appreciation of action. The first Arendt explains as follows:

> Action reveals itself fully only to the storyteller, that is, to the backward glance of the historian, who indeed always knows better what it was all about than the participants. […] it is not the actor but the storyteller who perceives and "makes" the story. (The Human Condition, 1958/2018, p. 192)

This is a necessary condition for history-telling, but combined with the philosophical preference for thinking, it heralded the decline of the ancient profession. According to Arendt, this combination was prepared by Parmenides, continued by Socrates, and reached its culmination in the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle: "[They] no longer believed that mortal men could "immortalize" […] through great deeds and words" (The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern, 1961, pp. 46-47). Their discovery of thoughts, seemingly eternal and independent of human affairs, resulted in the belief that 'becoming immortal' was best achieved, or at least equaled, by dwelling in the vicinity of thought's 'eternal ideas'. A philosophical reinterpretation of immortality that ushered in the regression of history-telling:

> Hence the old paradox [—that greatness was understood in terms of permanence while human greatness was seen in precisely the most futile and least lasting activities of men—] was resolved by the philosophers by denying to men not the capacity to "immortalize," but the capability om measuring himself and his own deeds against the everlasting greatness of the cosmos, of matching, as it were, the immortality of nature and the gods with an immortal greatness of his own. *The solution clearly comes about at the expense of "the doer of great deeds and the speaker of great words."* [my emphasis] (The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern, 1961, pp. 46, 47)

And although this did not immediately lead to a rigorous replacement of the pre-Socratic historiography—Arendt indicates that Roman historians still cherished the old tradition (The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern, 1961, p. 64)—, it did indicate a change in the

dominant way of understanding history. And with the help of the advent of the Christian era, in which the veneration of 'greatness' could not possibly be maintained ("[f]or the very simple reason that, according to Christian teachings, the relationship between life and world is the exact opposite to that in Greek and Latin antiquity […]" (Arendt, 1961, p. 52)), understanding history became devoid of human greatness: not worldly actions, or even that which they were supposed to equal, nature, could lay claim to immortality; only the individual, the human *being*, became the possible candidate for (otherworldly) endless life.

Through Christianity, the distance between the earthly affairs and the contemplative *observers* of history, that which made them believe in the objectivity of their observations, was increased to such an extent that even the arrival of the modern scientific insight that objective knowledge is unattainable—"[that] a *Ding an sich*, that is the truth-revealing faculty of experience in an absolute sense, could be left in abeyance" (Arendt, 1961, p. 56)—did not persuade the history-thinkers enough to abandon their objectivity. On the contrary, it led them, in an attempt at self-preservation, Arendt argues, to seek refuge in the 'older natural sciences':

> The curious and still confusing point about the historical sciences was that they did not take their standards from the natural sciences of their own age, but harked back to the scientific and, in the last analysis, *philosophical* [my emphasis] [objective] attitude which the modern age had just begun to liquidate. Their scientific standards, culminating in the "extinction of the self," had their roots in Aristotelian and medieval natural science, which consisted mainly in [objectively] observing and cataloguing observed *facts* [my emphasis]. Before the rise of the modern age it was a matter of course that quite, actionless, and selfless *contemplation* [my emphasis] of the miracle of being, or the wonder of God's creation, should also be the proper attitude for the scientist, whose curiosity about the particular had not yet parted company with the wonder before the general from which, according to the ancients, sprang philosophy. (The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern, 1961, p. 50)

The most notable and influential figure who avoided the limitations of new-modern science by finding refuge in what Arendt calls "the old dream western metaphysics has dreamt" (Thinking, 1971/1978, p. 207) was Hegel. He fulfilled the quintessential philosophical ambition of transcending the uncontrollable and unpredictable realm of human action by, in Arendt's words, "bringing about a reconciliation of Mind and World" (Willing, 1971/1978, p. 40). And although human action was originally a political problem for philosophers because it hindered a makeable state with foreseeable ends, Hegel, in Arendt's reading of him, turned action into a historical problem; it stood in the way of a comprehensible course of history (and future): "It was Hegel who, by constructing a sequential history of philosophy that corresponded to factual, political history […] actually broke with the tradition, because he was the first great thinker to take history seriously, that is, as yielding *truth* [my emphasis]" (Willing, 1971/1978, p. 45). A course that, because of its 'dialectic progression', reveals itself only at its end, at its 'final synthesis' (Arendt, Traditie en de Moderne Tijd, 1961/2023, pp. 60-71). And in Hegel's case, as Arendt notes, only to *him*: "the philosopher becomes the organ of the Absolute Spirit [of history], and the philosopher is Hegel himself" (Thinking, 1971/1978, p. 96). This is also the reason why Hegel's philosophy had no *direct* (negative) political consequences—he ended history because the *truth* was his goal:

> [F]or Hegel, the importance of the concept of history was primarily *theoretical* [my emphasis]. It never occurred to [him] to apply this concept directly by using it as a principle of action. Truth [he] conceived of as being revealed to the contemplative backward-directed glance of the historian, who, by being able to see the process as a

> whole, is in a position to overlook the "narrow aims" of acting men, concentrating instead on the "higher aims" that realize themselves behind their backs. (Arendt, 1961, p. 77)

The negative political consequences of this concept of history, *the final nail in the coffin of action*, arrived, Arendt Argues, when Marx transformed it into a political theory of history. Arendt claims, in her idiosyncratic reading of Marx, that he considered himself, like Hegel, capable of unveiling the course of history. But he, Arendt argues, claimed, unlike Hegel, that history was not guided by a spirit that revealed itself at the end; history was *man-made* and had not been completed. This thinking, as we will see, has not, as Marx envisioned, led to a classless conclusion. On the contrary, it lead, in a darkly ironic turn of events, to oppressive disasters.

Arendt believes that for Marx, it was not some mysterious force that dictated the progress of earthly events, but human fabrication—'work' in Arendt's terminology. Viewing history as one long dialectic succession of class struggle (oppression of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie and the resulting proletarian revolutions), he envisioned that history could not possibly go in any other direction than to the eventual "emancipation of man from labor" (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 130). Whether this prophetic declaration is utopian in nature is, just like the exact complexities of dialectics (which, according to Arendt, are completely at odds with Marx's (and Hegel's) prediction of the future: 'pure dialectics requires either permanent destruction or that time never ends, in other words infinite progress, as long as humans exist on earth' (Willing, 1971/1978, pp. 47, 50)), irrelevant for the purpose of this essay. What *is* relevant is that Marx, according to Arendt, regarded progress *and* its end as simultaneously man-made *and* inevitable.

Marx equated the phenomenon of action with the 'making of history'. And although this 'neglect of action' itself different not so much from the old political-philosophical 'attempt to escape from the fragility of human actions by construing it to the image of making' (Arendt, The Human Condition, 1958/2018, pp. 222-223), Marx' distinctive approach lay in the fact that he saw the 'higher purposes'—which, according to Hegel, revealed themselves only to the philosopher's backward gaze—as political *goals* that could be consciously planned (Arendt, 1961, pp. 77-78). The danger of this transformation of the 'Hegelian higher aims' into planned intentions, into *products* of human making, was, as Arendt writes,

> that meaning and meaningfulness were transformed into ends—which is what happened when Marx took the Hegelian meaning of all history—the progressive unfolding and actualization of the idea of Freedom—to be an end of human action, and when he furthermore, in accordance with tradition, viewed this ultimate "end" as the end-product of a manufacturing process. (The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern, 1961, p. 78)

Marx proclaimed that only the end of history, the end product of collective human fabrication, could be considered meaningful. In other words, he equated *meaning* and *end*. This, according to Arendt, proves that he did not understand that meaning could never be the *goal* of action, a phenomenon that can only be meaningful in itself, as the history-tellers understood, and has no place in the 'means and ends' logic of fabrication. Unfortunately, this fundamental lack of insight—of which Marx served here only as an example, i.e. as an articulation of the historical thinking of his era—could easily gain a foothold in a world where, according to Arendt, a proper understanding of action was already virtually absent. The most fateful realization of this was totalitarianism—a new form of rule that denied (the meaning of) human action more radically than ever before.

The development of the concept of history just described can be summarized as "the escape into the "whole," [which] is prompted by the meaninglessness of the particular" (Arendt, 1961, p. 83). If this flight is extended theoretically, it ends in an absurdity in which the particulars (actions, details, exceptions, etc.) will be arbitrarily chosen, ignored, praised or sacrificed in favor of the favorite whole—the dreamed law of history. Totalitarianism, according to Arendt, has taken this theoretical absurdity and put it into practice: "The totalitarian phenomenon, with its striking anti-utilitarian traits and its strange disregard for factuality, is based in the last analysis on the conviction that *everything* [my emphasis] is possible […]" (The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern, 1961, p. 87).

We will not go into the distinctive political constellation of totalitarianism (in all its forms) here; what serves the purpose of this essay are the consequences of historicism. Totalitarianism, a 'rule based on arbitrary historicism', has had terrible consequences for those who, according to the 'chosen law'—regardless of whether this represents the progress of, for example, the Germanic Aryan or the working-class Russian—stood in the way of the progress of history and the intended future. In other words, pure historicism put to practice necessarily suppresses action, that which will never conform to its law. The only active human capacity that is still allowed is 'participation in *building* history' (Arendt, 1951/1973, pp. 465-468). Anything that prevents this is tantamount to breaking down history—and action, as we have seen, is without exception a *break*. Arendt, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951/1973), phrases this as follows:

> Terror is the realization of the law of movement; its chief aim is to make it possible for the force […] of history to race freely through mankind, unhindered by any spontaneous human action. As such, terror seeks to "stabilize" men in order to liberate the forces of […] history. It is this movement which singles out the foes of mankind against whom terror is let loose, […] no free action […] can be permitted to interfere with the elimination of the "objective enemy" of History […] The inhabitants of a totalitarian country are thrown into and caught in the process of […] history for the sake of accelerating its movement; as such, they can only be executioners or victims of its inherent law. (pp. 465, 468)

The reign of terror that results from a mutilation of the past and an incarceration of the future is, Arendt argues, the catastrophic consequence of uninhibited historicism. Historicism is not confined to the theoretical; it is a concept of history that harbors serious danger. Dismantling it must therefore be done, according to Arendt, by redeeming its victims—those who have been suppressed, silenced or erased by its concrete corollaries. Kang expresses Arendt's redemptive purpose adequately:

> For Arendt, "storytelling" has the capacity to reveal meaning in the midst of "what would otherwise be an unbearable sequence of sheer happenings"; it fortifies the spirit in the face of adversity and prevents the past from falling into oblivion. Arendt's sense of [redemptive storytelling] is grounded […] in a sensitivity to loss, defeats, and unexpected reversals of fortune." (Origin and Essence: The Problem of History in Hannah Arendt, 2013, p. 140)

The redemptive aspect of storytelling gives voice to the victims of history. Those who had their ability to act, their freedom, taken away.

Arendt's chapter on Action in *The Human Condition* begins with a quote of Isak Dinesen that reads: "All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them" (1958/2018, p. 175). This is one side of salvation: an attempt to assuage a kind of

historical remorse and grief—to pay tribute to the fallen. Another is, according to Arendt, to show what they were victims *of*—who *defeated* them. For they were opponents of a certain ideology, a false narrative of past and future. In other words, a redemptive story reveals those who stood in the way of progress—those who were banished to *the wrong side of history*.

What are perhaps the most poignant examples of such stories are Arendt's own essays remembering victims of history, collected in her work *Men in Dark Times* (1955/1970). One of the essays included in this collection is the work central to this enquiry: "Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940" (Arendt, 1968/2007). Arendt, who, like Benjamin, *practiced what she preached*, exposes how he and his contemporaries were unreasonably forced out of history in antisemitic and later totalitarian Germany. A quote from Goldstein that she cites expresses the experience of such victims like no other: ""It is easy to show the absurdity of our adversaries' arguments and prove that their enmity is unfounded. What would be gained by this? That their hatred is *genuine*"" (Arendt, 1968/2007, p. 30). In other words, what is the point of speaking (or acting) in a world where its meaning is forgotten? It only reveals its own tragic pointlessness. Arendt shows that in times of ideologically based denial of groups or peoples, those deemed obstacles to the future (as was the case for Jews in totalitarian Germany), a tragic sense of hopelessness exists. One that results from the *experience* of being on the wrong side of history. This hopelessness, she writes, is best expressed by Benjamin himself:

> No one has expressed this more clearly than Benjamin in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," and nowhere has he said it more unequivocally than in a letter from Paris dated 1935: "Actually, I hardly feel constrained to try to make head or tail of this condition of the world. On this planet a great number of civilizations have perished in blood and horror. Naturally, one must wish for the planet that one day it will experience a civilization that has abandoned blood and horror; in fact, I am … inclined to assume that our planet is waiting for this. But it is terribly doubtful whether *we* can bring such a present to its hundred- or four-hundred-millionth birthday party. And if we don't, the planet will finally punish us, its unthoughtful well-wishers, by presenting us with the Last Judgment." (Arendt, 1968/2007, pp. 37-38)

Difference

It should be evident now that in both Arendt and Benjamin, revelation and redemption are inextricably linked. One cannot, they argue in unison, give voice to the fallen in history without bringing the cause of their demise to light, just as every story that reveals actions necessarily exposes the danger of its oppression. This shared conviction is reflected in their emphases on the fragmentary nature of the past, that is, their indistinguishable unequivocal denials of progress, as well as in their belief that the fragmented past requires the pen of the history-teller. They agree that he bears the burden of preventing fragments from disappearing into the oblivion of progress. Benhabib acknowledges this agreement by calling it their shared "method of fragmentary historiography" (Hannah Arendt and the Redemptive Power of Narrative, 1990, p. 182).

The idea that Arendt adopted her convictions from Benjamin's, or was at least 'deeply inspired by them' (Benhabib, 1990, pp. 186-189), is in my opinion evident from affirmative references to his description of 'history as ruins' ('the angel of history' in *Origins of Totalitarianism* and "Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940") and passages that positively describe *his* history-telling ('the pearl diver' in *The Life of the Mind* and "Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940"). What is less clear is whether there exists a direct similarity between their intended *causes* of fragmentation. Benjamin's messianic power, a religion-based phenomenon, seems too far removed from Arendt's secular idea of action. This apparent irreconcilable difference has led

Demiryol to the assessment that "Arendt did not subscribe to Benjamin's messianic impulse […]" (Arendt and Benjamin: Tradition, Progress and Break with the Past, 2018, p. 152). Phrased differently, Demiryol considers Arendt's politically tinted concept of action incompatible with Benjamin's theological angle. Herzog provides a comparable evaluation; she believes Arendt did adopt Benjamin's view of history, but "regarded her own thinking as much more political than that of Benjamin" (Illuminating Inherritance, 2000, pp. 3, 20).

The cause of these assessments lies, I suspect, in the idiosyncrasy of Benjamin's work. His writing is, in Arendt words, "absolutely incomparable […] that is to say completely *sui generis*. To describe adequately his work and him as an author within our usual framework of reference, one would have to make a great many negative statements" (Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940, 1968/2007, p. 3). His work bears the stamp of the sacred, but he was, Arendt argues, 'neither a theologian nor religious' (Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940, 1968/2007, p. 4). And he often used Marxist terminology, such as 'dialectics' and 'historical-materialism', but Arendt repeatedly emphasizes that he rejected Marxism and Marxist prophecies (Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940, 1968/2007, pp. 10, 11, 12). Arendt, in other words, implicitly suggests that Benjamin's messianic principle contains no religious or prophetic elements that would distinguish it from her own concept of action. On the contrary, if his religious, mystical and prophetic elements are regarded as unconfined to traditional methods, and instead interpreted as *poetic* or *metaphorical*, they might come surprisingly close to Arendt's secular views.

Arendt defends this view of Benjamin; she argues that his writing is saturated with metaphors and poetic elements—the strongest currents of his thinking. They have, in her words, "enabled Benjamin […] to write a prose of such singularly enchanting and enchanted closeness to reality" (Arendt, 1968/2007, pp. 15-16). I believe this reading is right; his messianism, angelic references, and mystical elements should, rather than as being bound to traditional philosophical or theological disciplines, be read as artistic linguistic experiments that *borrow* ideas from Marxism, theology, and literature. His most elusive but simultaneously defining phrases should be interpreted as an expression of a method that is, as Arendt formulates it, *sui generis*. In doing so, the *appearance* of an unbridgeable disparity between his and Arendt's explanations of the *cause* of the fragmented past, i.e. man's ability to *break* with the past, disappears. It reveals, in other words, that this disparity is brought about by differences in methodology, not differences in beliefs. This does not mean that their beliefs *are* identical—Arendt's phenomenological explanations leads to different conclusions than Benjamin's predominantly metaphorical and poetic writing—but it does ensure a mutual rapprochement. This does require some effort; Benjamin's complex thinking does not lend itself to easy unraveling: "What is so hard to understand about Benjamin is that without being a poet he *thought poetically* and therefore was bound to regard the metaphor as the greatest gift of language" (Arendt, 1968/2007, p. 14). Yet approaching his work as irreducible to a traditional method will, according to Arendt, inevitably bring his apparently heavenly or mystical elements, such as the messianic, closer to worldly affairs: "[Through] linguistic "transference", [the metaphor and the poem] enable us to give material form to the invisible—"A mighty fortress is our God"—and thus to *render it capable of being experienced* [my emphasis] (Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940, 1968/2007, p. 14).

The differences between Arendt's and Benjamin's methods are, in my opinion, most evident in their approaches to art. These approaches, in a sense, *disclose* their methods (or lack thereof), enabling us to understand other aspects of their works with more clarity. The next chapter will therefore be an exposition of both their methods and their theories of art, with the ultimate aim of discovering the relationship of their concepts of 'the radical new'.

Acting and speaking men need […] the help of the artist,
of poets and historiographers, of monument builders or writers,
because without them the only product of their activity, the story
they enact and tell, would not survive at all.
Hannah Arendt (The Human Condition, 1958/2018, p. 173)

[The] instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be
applicable to artistic production, the total function of art
is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins
to be based on another practice—politics.
Walter Benjamin (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1968/2007, p. 224)

Art—a Transcendent Tradition

Descent

The historical course of art is a turbulent one—it experienced paradisiacal harmonies, reached heights that transcended humanity, became almost invisible through heavenly distances, and finally descended to earth. The past of art is characterized by the uncontemporary and the unattainable; fleeting life had little to do with it. It is therefore all the more untraditional that art in modern times suddenly started to coincide with man's mortality. It suddenly lost its 'uniqueness, its aura', as Benjamin claims in his artwork essay (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1968/2007), as well as its 'ability to resist the perishability of life', as Arendt argues in her essay on culture (The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and its Political Significance, 1961). Art, once characterized by its *distance* to man, now occupies the mortal planes. Stories that immortalized man's deeds have been replaced by information; statues that were once worshiped as gods have turned to stone; paintings that depicted the holy fled from their cathedrals and now roam the earth. The journey of art can be described as *a descent from great distance*—a description on which Arendt and Benjamin would agree. But when it comes to the consequential *proximity* of art in modernity, their assessments diverge.

As we have read before, Arendt and Benjamin share an appreciation for pre-Socratic times. The period where storytelling was introduced by Herodotus and became the leading way of dealing with history. But whereas Arendt appreciates this ancient epoch almost exclusively for this form of art "[which captures] heroic deeds and [supplies] them with an immortality that surrounds men but which mortals do not possess" (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 232), Benjamin recognizes it not only as the birthplace of 'brushing history against the grain and showing its fragmentary nature' (On the Concept of History, 1968/2006, p. 392), but also, as Wolin noticed, as a period when "[Man's] intercourse with the heavens was characterized by the "ecstatic trance," an infinite wonder in the contemplation of what is both nearest to us and what is remotest to us—and never of one without the other. [His] absorption in a cosmic experience […]" (From Messianism to Materialism: The Later Aesthetics of Walter Benjamin, 1981, p. 94). In other words, Benjamin and Arendt share an appreciation for the ancients' relationship with history, but only Benjamin expresses praise for their relationship with the cosmos. These different views of the pre-Socratic period are, in my opinion, partly the cause of their dissimilar

assessments of the post-Socratic developments of art. They reveal a great deal about their concepts of art and, subsequently, the differences between their ideas about 'man's ability to break with the past and bring about change'.

Distance as aura

The first sign of a difference in Benjamin's and Arendt's understanding of art lies not in their descriptions of history-telling as the first 'historical form of art', but in Benjamin's notion of something that predates this—in his description of a time that is *pre*historical. This period that precedes history, from which man was 'thrust into the future by a storm' (On the Concept of History, 1968/2006, p. 392), occupies a mysterious position throughout Benjamin's writings. Similar to the 'paradise' in the angel metaphor, we also find, as Michael Löwy (Walter Benjamin and Surrealism, 1996) points out, references to this *pre*historic time in other rather proverbial expressions and citations present in his body of work: "matriarchy (Bachofen), primitive communism, the classless, stateless community, a primal harmony with nature, the paradise lost […], or the earlier life in which the adorable springtime had yet to lose its scent (Baudelaire)" (p. 19). These 'nostalgic memories of a distant past' take shape in various ways throughout his oeuvre, ways that are often quite difficult to reconcile. Benjamin refers, for example, to this 'obscure past' in "The Storyteller" (Benjamin, 1968/2007) by quoting parts of Leskov's story "De Alexandrite", in which it is described as "that old time when the stones in the womb of the earth and the planets at celestial heights were still concerned with the fate of men" (p. 96). While elsewhere (Benjamin, On Some Motives in Baudelaire, 1968/2007) he describes it himself as "the earth [in] a mere state of nature" (p. 185). It is as if, by alluding to the *pre*historic exclusively in poetic ways, Benjamin attempts to protect the mystery of this 'paradisical past', to keep paradise at a *distance*.

Benjamin's mysterious references to a distant harmony are, in my opinion, not his obstinate attempt to keep his beliefs far from comprehensible, or to deliberately obscure them, but rather, as Löwy argues, an attempt to poetically commemorate the *loss* of "an archaic or prehistoric experience [of] harmony with nature" (Walter Benjamin and Surrealism, 1996, p. 19). And despite Benjamin's ambiguity about the circumstances of this loss—which at times seems reminiscent of the biblical 'fall of man' and at others simply denotes a pre-political state of nature—we can, according to Löwy, say with certainty that he deems it impossible to *return* to it: "Benjamin is not recommending a return to the past but […] a digression through the past and towards *a new future*" (Walter Benjamin and Surrealism, 1996, p. 19). The notions of 'a blissful past' are rather melancholic memories of an irretrievable age supplanted by, as we have read, a history of barbarism and obscured by, as we will see, the *aura* of traditional artworks: "To his horror, the melancholy man sees the earth revert to a mere state of nature. No breath of prehistory surrounds it: […] no *aura* [my emphasis]" (Benjamin, 1968/2007, p. 185).

Benjamin does not tell us exactly when, according to him, traditional works of art appeared in history, and thus the period of 'auratic art' began. Maybe, as Arendt writes, it corresponds with the rise of western metaphysics, which "begins with an awareness of [an] invisible harmonious order of the *kosmos*, which is manifest in the midst of the familiar visibilities […]. The philosopher marvels at the "non-visible harmony," which, according to Heraclitus, is "better than the visible"" (Thinking, 1971/1978, p. 143). Benjamin's description of that which the aura of the work of art hints at and simultaneously obscures is somewhat similar to this: "the "unique manifestation of a *distance*" [my emphasis] [that] envelops […] a mere state of nature" (On Some Motives in Baudelaire, 1968/2007, pp. 188, 185). In any case, it is clear that Benjamin assesses 'the age of the traditional work of art' as a period in which radical (political) change could, because of their *aura*, not in any way be the function or result of its artworks, which showed only glimpses "out of the womb of time" (On Some Motives in

Baudelaire, 1968/2007, p. 187) of something magical, heavenly or beautiful *as* something unattainable.

To understand what Benjamin means by the 'aura of artworks', one has to understand that he developed this concept during its disappearance: the time when art became *technically* reproducible. In his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1968/2007) Benjamin works out a theory of "art in its traditional form" (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1968/2007, p. 220) in order to understand the aesthetic, cultural and political implications of its transformation. The appearance of radio, photography, new forms of printing, and film, in short, modern audio and visual media, had, Benjamin noticed, 'reached a level where they began to make the whole of the traditional works of art their object and to subject their effect to the most profound changes' (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1968/2007, p. 219). The incorporation of art into the industrial and technical age revealed its traditional qualities that until then were hidden behind the veil of self-evidence. Reproduced art, Benjamin argues, changed form; it underwent a metamorphosis that caused certain old properties to disappear. A metamorphosis through which, Benjamin argues, the basis for at least one of these properties, *authenticity*, disappeared, namely the 'spatial-temporal restriction' of traditional artworks: "Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be" (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1968/2007, p. 220).

Before its dramatic *displacement*, artworks possessed three essential characteristics, three properties that were part of its essence, namely 'authenticity, durability, and uniqueness' (Benjamin, 1968/2007, pp. 220, 221, 223). Benjamin describes the authenticity of traditional artworks as 'the here and now' of its existence. The reproduction of traditional works of art whose 'ontological characteristic' is their authenticity, such as 'a medieval manuscript from the 15th century' (Benjamin, 1968/2007, p. 220), was labeled as forgery. Phrased differently, the reproduced product as a duplicate is inauthentic compared to an original that derives its characterization *from* its own unique existence, i.e. its unique *time and place*. This combination of temporality and spatiality are, in the case of traditional artworks, Benjamin argues, without exception lost after reproduction. By this Benjamin does not mean that the original loses its place and time, that is, its authenticity; what is lost is its *authority as a work of art*. Benjamin explains this as follows:

> Reproduction touches in the case of the work of art a highly sensitive core. That core is authenticity. The authenticity of the thing is everything that can be handed down to it from its origin, from its material durability to its historical *testimony*. And because the latter rests on the former, in the reproduction, in which the former has withdrawn itself from man, the latter, the historical testimony of the matter, is also shaken. That is indeed the only thing, but what is being shaken is the *authority of the case*. (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1968/2007, p. 221)

While the authority of the work of art—that which it, according to Benjamin, derives from testimony and permanence—was previously inherent to the work of art itself, it loses this power in an era where the definition of art is not determined by its *resistance* to reproducibility, but *by* its reproducibility. In other words, before the reproduction techniques, the work of art was recognized by its uniqueness; in the age of reproduction, it is characterized by its serial existence. The unique existence of the traditional artwork, which enabled it to single-handedly withstand the test of time and stubbornly establish itself in history as an authoritative object, had, with the advent of reproduction, suddenly become redundant. And with it, as Benjamin

writes, that which always accompanied the artworks of old: “being imbedded in the fabric of tradition” (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1968/2007, p. 223).

By emphasizing the embedding of the traditional work of art in tradition, Benjamin does not so much indicate a content or ‘what is represented’, but rather a *function*. Works of art distinguished themselves by their uniqueness—they occupied an exceptional place in the world of things. Their typical headstrong and self-contained nature enabled them to withdraw from the fleeting nature of mundane things, or in other words, things characterized by transience and replaceability. They stand disobediently and unwaveringly in the world, destined to endure its turbulent course, and thereby *distinguish* themselves. It should therefore be no surprise, Benjamin argues, that they ‘originally arose in service of magical and later religious rituals’ (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1968/2007, p. 223). In other words, works of art were cultic objects; this is how they found their expression. Objects that deserve to be labeled as art owe this to the way in which they were used, how they have stood the test of time throughout their history as authoritative centers of revolving praises, incantations, spells and worship, i.e. as beacons and safeguards of traditions: “In other words, the unique use value of the “authentic” work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value” (Benjamin, 1968/2007, p. 224). And what is important to understand, Benjamin claims, is that the ‘art’s auratic mode of existence’ never completely rids itself of this ritual function—art has always thanked its existence to rituals, and rituals without exception revolved around works of art. In this sense, works of art had an exceptional mode of existence, one that was untouchable and incomparably durable. By functioning as the epicenter of magical, sacred or religious practices, artworks created a certain air of unapproachability around them, they distanced themselves from trivial things—a *distance* Benjamin expresses with the term *aura*:

> The definition of the aura as ‘a singular appearance of a distance, no matter how close it is’, means nothing other than the cult value of the work of art formulated in the categories of spatiotemporal perception. Distance is the opposite of proximity. The essentially distant is the unapproachable. After all, unapproachability is the main quality of the cult image. In its essence it remains a ‘distance, however near’. The proximity that one can force upon art’s matter does not detract from the distance that it preserves as an appearance. (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1968/2007, p. 243)

The distance that characterized the traditional work of art, its aura, should thus not be understood as a sacred quality, but as a spatiotemporal phenomenon that was incomparably *suited* to rituals, sacred or otherwise. Art was, as Susan Buck-Morss succinctly summarizes, not necessarily something otherworldly, but it was always recognizable “as a sensual experience that distinguishe[d] itself precisely by its separation from “reality”” (Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered, 1992, p. 23). The rise of the beauty cult, which is not based on the ritual worship of something sacred, but on the veneration or admiration of beauty, proves this according to Benjamin. The aura of the work of art is not dispelled when the arts became secularized, but now owes its existence to the beauty of the work of art, which is, Benjamin claims, like the beauty of landscapes, ‘equally unattainable, irreproducible and therefore just as much an appearance of a distance, however close’ (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1968/2007, pp. 222, 223).

Art in its secular form and before the advent of technical reproduction served the cult of beauty, the last cult of art, in which, according to Benjamin, “[it] is still recognizable as secularized ritual” (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1968/2007, p. 224). However, this comes to an end when the beauty of art is no longer inextricably linked to

its objects, that is to say, through technical reproduction, it is no longer limited to the here and now of the work of art itself. The advent of this aura dissolving development enabled beauty to leave its cultic domain and extend, through photos, films, indistinguishable copies, and endless amounts of duplicates indefinitely to all reproductions of its 'original carrier'. Put differently, art for the sake of beauty limited to its original objects, *beauty as origin and guarantor of authenticity and uniqueness*, became impossible, and led, Benjamin claims, to a revolution of art: "for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility" (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1968/2007, p. 224).

The emancipation of art constitutes its actualization. Producing to reproduce means producing to display—to cross the boundaries of the cult, the aura, and venture into the world. According to Benjamin, this was not an artistic choice or a voluntary surrender to new art forms, but in a certain sense an innovative *requirement* that the era of technical reproducibility had imposed on the work of art: "With the emancipation of the various art practices from ritual go increasing opportunities for the exhibition of their products" (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1968/2007, p. 225). Art has entered the public realm by breaking with the tradition that separated it from it: its foundation on cult. We have seen that, according to Benjamin, serious changes have occurred before in the history of the work of art—what was magical in its earliest appearance later became religious; what was religious was surpassed by the beautiful. However, these developments all took place on cultic foundations and were therefore restricted to its boundaries. In other words, they all found their condition of existence in the aura—their distance from the ordinary, the everyday, and therefore the public sphere and the political, i.e. their *autonomy*, was their raison d'être. The break with this cultic tradition was, therefore, Benjamin claims, art's first *emancipatory* movement: "When the age of mechanical reproduction separated art from its basis in cult, the semblance of its autonomy disappeared forever" (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1968/2007, p. 226). This happened on the one hand because the *spatiotemporal* distance of the traditional arts collapsed: "technical reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself" (Benjamin, 1968/2007, p. 220), and on the other, which, I believe, represents the most subversive transformation of art, because the 'mediums of reproduction'—copy, photography, film, etc.—simultaneously became radical new forms of art themselves, through which the entire domain of art, as Benjamin puts it, "has left the realm of the "beautiful semblance" which, so far, had been taken to be the only sphere where art could thrive" (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1968/2007, p. 230). Art had shed its unapproachable distance and became 'actualized'—*it broke with its past* and, according to Benjamin, for the first time in its history, stepped down from its transcendental throne to 'descent into the sphere of the political' (Steiner, 2001): 'The entire social function of art has been turned upside down. Instead of its foundation on ritual, it is founded on another practice: namely, its foundation on politics' (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1968/2007, p. 224).

The descent of art allowed for new possibilities. *The politization of art*, as Benjamin calls it, enabled it to open up and *pierce* reality, lay bare its hitherto hidden or obscured structures and exposed its fragmentary nature. However, this revolutionary development was accompanied by a dangerous downside. Art, liberated from the constraint of its cultic tradition and suddenly available for political purposes, proved defenseless against their transformation into instruments of 'political' oppression. Benjamin calls this the *aestheticization of politics*: "giving [the] masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves" (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1968/2007, p. 241). The power that art lent to oppression was unparalleled; it pushed it to new depths, culminating in totalitarianism, which

it served as an aesthetic advocate of superiority, violence, and hatred. But even though Benjamin himself was the victim of this aesthetic barbarism—of which he was most lucidly aware—he remained obstinately optimistic in a strange, nostalgic way about the political possibilities of the liberated and actualized arts.

For Arendt, things are different. Her phenomenological delineation of works of art can be summed up as follows: "[They] bestow a measure of permanence and durability upon the futility of mortal life and the fleeting character of human time" (The Human Condition, 1958/2018, p. 8). Therefore, Arendt believes art's descent from a distance, its actualization—which, like Benjamin, she sees as a typical modern development—is neither a politization of art nor an anesthetization of politics, but rather a *disappearance* of art. In other words, whereas Benjamin argues that art's modern 'approximation to reality' equals its politization, Arendt claims that its descent is a development in which it loses its ties to the political. Not because art *turns into* something ephemeral, but because it *disappears* in a world where man's appreciation for permanence vanishes—*art's descent equals its departure*.

Distance as immortality

Arendt's story of the descent of art can be summed up as a decline of the appreciation of permanence and durability—of which art, whose excellence is measured by the ability to withstand the life process and become permanent appurtenances of the world" (The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and its Political Significance, 1961, pp. 205-206), is *the* embodiment. This decline is closely related to the aforementioned disappearance of the historical appreciation of action—the human activity that, according to Arendt, can only gain its permanence, its *place in the world*, through the arts: "word and deed can [only] endure in the world to the extent that [art] is bestowed upon it. Without [art], that is, the radiant glory in which potential immortality is made manifest in the human world, all human life would be futile and no greatness could endure" (The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and its Political Significance, 1961, p. 218). The root of this view lies in Arendt's method—which, unlike Benjamin's elusive artistic approaches, she herself describes as "nothing more than to think what we are doing" (The Human Condition, 1958/2018, p. 5) and results in her famous tripartite division of the human active life, the *vita activa*: labor, work, and action.

These delineations of 'doings' should not be understood as Arendt's attempt to approximate the human essence, either metaphysical or epistemological, or as *one directional* understandings of different doings. Rather, they are to be interpreted as "fundamental human activities […] that each correspond to one of the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man" (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 9). In other words, activities that correspond to certain conditions and at the same time reinvigorate and confirm those conditions—the conditions appear *as* conditions through the human activities that correspond to it: "Whatever touches or enters into a sustained relationship with human life immediately assumes the character of a condition of human existence. […] The impact of the world's reality is felt and received as a conditioning force" (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 9). The terms labor, work, and action should therefore be understood as spheres in which a specific *interaction of activities and appearances* take place. What Arendt means to establish is thus, as Lewis Hinchman and Sandra Hinchman (In Heidegger's Shadow: Hannah Arendt's Phenomenological Humanism, 1984) formulate it, "how individuals see what they are doing, even if subsequent reflection leads them to *misclassify* [my emphasis] their own activity" (p. 197). Misclassification is of crucial importance here; the human condition that Arendt describes phenomenologically, i.e. how it *appears* to us, consists of spheres of conditioned and conditioning activities, not of some empirical of metaphysical essence or classification. That is, our possibilities in the world will never, strictly speaking, disappear as long as our conditions do not profoundly change—i.e. as

long as we remain human—but we can confuse, deny or forget them, which culminates in the disruption of the balance of man's *plural* condition, and therefore of the balance of his world.

Arendt's story of the decline of history-telling and the rise of historicism was based on such a misunderstanding of man's condition; the denial of history consisting of breaks and fragments in favor of progress emerged from a denial of the sphere of action. However, this development is part of an overarching development: the descent of art. In contrast to Benjamin's account of the history of art, which so far bears little resemblance to his story of the disappearance of history-telling, Arendt's account of its course, I think, corresponds to her explanation of the disappearance of artists, including history-tellers, and is inextricably linked with the disappearance of action. In fact, her description of the peculiar place of art within the spheres of human activity explains the withdrawal of both the phenomenon of art in general *and* action. To understand this, we must find out where, according to Arendt, the work of art originates from, where it flourishes, and where it withers. For this we will first have to explore the condition of the human activity that is completely blind to works of art, namely *life*, and its embeddedness in *nature*.

Nature is not to be seen as a conscious entity concerned with the things that proceed from it and perish in it; nature, in Arendt's terminology, is an indifferent cyclical realm of always-being of which all living beings, including humans, are part (The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern, 1961, pp. 41, 42). In this sense, nature more closely resembles the universe—"where everything, if it moves at all, moves in a cyclical order" (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 19)—than that which 'it permeates and makes it alive': life (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 96). Although life is dependent on nature, which represents both its womb and its grave, it is at the same time always in conflict with this 'over-all gigantic circle'. Arendt expresses this visually by describing life as a linear line (between birth and death) within the circularity of nature. Life then is what all living things have in common; being born out of nature and returning to it, i.e. being mortal things within the grand scheme of nature that itself is neither alive nor death, neither mortal or immortal, but eternal—"where no beginning and no end exists and where all natural things swing in changeless, deathless repetition" (The Human Condition, 1958/2018, p. 96).

The paradoxical internality of life is, however, that its (finite) permanence—the limited extension of its linearity—depends on a cyclical movement as well. An individual living being (that which the term life strictly speaking delineates according to Arendt) is necessarily involved in a repetitive endeavor of consumption and excretion in order to survive. In other words, during its linear existence, life takes and returns, consumes and discards from and to nature in order to sustain and survive—"the ever-recurring cycle of […] life […] which man shares with other living things and which forever retains the cyclical movement of nature" (Arendt, 1958/2018, pp. 97, 99) is life's struggle against its re-absorption into the 'lifeless' eternity of nature. In other words, man's biological rebellion against the cycle of nature is itself cyclical. This rebellion, this repetitive activity of survival, is what Arendt calls the activity of *labor*:

> Labor is the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body, whose spontaneous growth, metabolism, and eventual decay are bound to the vital necessities produced and fed into the life process by labor. *The human condition of labor is life itself*. (The Human Condition, 1958/2018, p. 7).

For the laborer, or the *animal laborans* as Arendt calls it, everything appears in light of the condition of life, and its doings, which it shares with other biological life forms, are therefore aimed at survival. What the *animal laborans* does to survive, to sustain its life, is consume, "and the activity which provides the means of consumption is laboring" (Arendt, 1958/2018,

p. 99). Here we encounter the mutually reinforcing activities and appearances within the sphere of labor: all activities within this sphere are concerned with life and are therefore always a means of producing that which can be consumed in order to produce again… See here the swift cycle of life and the corresponding cyclical activity of labor—a self-sustaining activity between birth and death *withing* the endless succession of growth and decay of life in nature.

Growth and decay do, however, not appear to the *animal laborans*. Arendt argues that laboring resembles nature to closely for it to appear as a swift cycle of growing and decaying (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 100). Put differently, for nature to appear as a growing and devouring process, the laborer would have to produce things meant to *endure* this devouring force. But the laborer produces *to* devour—the only form of permanence that appears to it is strictly speaking not permanence, but the fragile durability of its own life and the life of its species. Labor, in other words, is just as devouring and destructive as nature; neither 'benefits' from the durability of things, except from the durability of themselves (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 100). This, however, only appears from the standpoint of a human activity that does not correspond to nature but opposes it by taking "matter out of nature's hands without giving it back to her in the swift course of the natural metabolism of the living body" (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 100). In other words, an activity which *condition* is not life, but one that, as Margaret Conovan puts it, "gives permanence and significance to human existence because it outlasts individual life" (Politics as Culture: Hannah Arendt and the Public Realm, 1985, p. 619).

We humans are, Arendt claims, not only beings that live on the earth; we also *inhabit the world*. This world, as opposed to the earth of growth and decay "of which labor remains an integral part and which it never transcends" (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 145), is, she writes, "the man-made home erected on earth and made of the material which earthly nature delivers into human hands" (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 134). This is not a world made by the *animal laborans*, who 'makes' things only to consume them, 'which would leave no world at all' (Conovan, 1985, p. 619); it is a world that "consists not of things that are consumed but of things that are *used* [my emphasis]" (The Human Condition, 1958/2018, p. 134). A world that is not, like the earth on which the laborer lives, given to us by nature and characterized by growth and decay, but, Arendt writes, erected by us in order to *withstand* decay: "If nature and the earth generally constitute the condition of human *life*, then the world and the things of the world constitute the condition under which this specifically human life can be at home on earth" (The Human Condition, 1958/2018, p. 134). This condition Arendt calls *worldliness*, and the human activity that corresponds to it she calls *work*:

> Work is the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence, which is not embedded in, and whose mortality is not compensated by, the species' ever-recurring life cycle. Work provides an "artificial" world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings. Within its borders each individual life is housed, while this world itself is meant to *outlast and transcend them all* [my emphasis]. *The human condition of work is worldliness* [my emphasis] (The Human Condition, 1958/2018, p. 7).

The most characteristic feature of this artificial world is, according to Arendt, its relative durability, by which it offers "mortals a dwelling place more permanent and more stable than themselves" (The Human Condition, 1958/2018, p. 152). A feature that is the result of the work of the *homo faber*, "the fabricator of the world" (The Human Condition, 1958/2018, p. 126), whose pursuits are not tailored to the standards of life, but to "utility and beauty, [the] standards of the world" (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 152). These standards shape *homo faber's* activities as he walks through the world; the artifacts he encounters there, the hammers and houses, the paths

and cities, all made by human hands to uphold the world, serve as a condition for his activities—man is baptized as a worker by the world.

What is important to understand, however, is that the *homo faber* does not *work*, "at least, not primarily", Arendt writes, "to help the human life process" (The Human Condition, 1958/2018, p. 151). On the contrary, he works to *transcend* life. In a sense, *homo faber* is fighting a similar battle as the *animal laborans*; both protect something from the devouring threat of nature. But where the animal laborans protects his own life, *homo faber*, by building the domain that we inhabit with fellow human beings, "the common world [that] gathers us together" (The Human Condition, 1958/2018, p. 52), protects, according to Arendt, his 'humanness':

> Without taking things out of nature's hand and consuming them, and without defending himself against the natural processes of growth and decay, the *animal laborans* could never survive. *But without being at home in the midst of things whose durability makes them fit for use and for erecting the world whose very permanence stands in direct contrast to life, this life would never be human* [my emphasis]. (The Human Condition, 1958/2018, p. 135)

There is, however, a tension between the use-character of things and the permanence of the world. A tension that arises out of the process of making, i.e. the internality of the work-process that underlies all worldly things. When *homo faber* fabricates objects, "everything", Arendt claims, "is judged in terms of suitability and usefulness for the desired end, and for nothing else" (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 153). The end product, the object *homo faber* aims to bring into existence based on his thought, justifies, produces, and organizes the means to make it. And in so far as *homo faber* is a fabricator, deeming all things mere tools and implements for his desired end product, he, Arendt Argues, "instrumentalizes, and his instrumentalization implies a *degradation of all things into means* [my emphasis]" (The Human Condition, 1958/2018, p. 156). His activity of making, that is, his *work*, compels him to think "in no terms but those of means and ends" (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 155). But because the only *end* homo faber knows is the end of his activity, which is the object he *intends* to make, all things he encounters in the world are reduced to means: "all ends are bound to be of short duration and to be transformed into means for some further ends" (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 154). In other words, *homo faber sees nothing but use objects*. The ultimate consequence of this, according to Arendt, is that although the world of things—which gives stability to mortal men by taking things out of nature's hand and transforming them into durable unnatural objects—is the result of the work of *homo faber*, the way he views and treats this world *threatens* its durability, for the use of things, the only activity *homo faber* engages in, wears things down. The activity of homo faber is in a sense self-defeating: he builds the world, yet he is incapable seeing meaning in its durability, its permanence. In fact, according to Arendt, *homo faber* is 'incapable of understanding meaning at all' (The Human Condition, 1958/2018, p. 155); his "means-end rationale" (The Role of Aesthetics in the Politics of Hannah Arendt, 2001, p. 48), as Karin Fry adequately phrases it, excludes it from his world. Arendt calls this "the perplexity of utilitarianism […] the philosophy of *homo faber* par excellence", which she describes as follows:

> [It] gets caught in the unending chain of means and ends without ever arriving at some principle which could justify the category of means and end, that is, of utility itself. The "in order to" has become the content of "for the sake of"; in other words, utility established as meaning generates meaninglessness. (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 154)

There is no way out of this unending cycle of meaninglessness because neither ends nor means can, according to Arendt, because of their *interdependence*, be considered meaningful. Meaning, in other words, does not exist in the sphere of *work*; it cannot be found either in the ends of fabrication, the famous 'end in itself', because, as we have seen, all ends are immediately reduced to means in this sphere, or in the fabrication process, i.e. in "the subjectivity of use itself", which would "degrade the world of things", the ends that *justify* this process, and would strip the ""valuable" things themselves [of] their own intrinsic "value"" (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 155). In short, the sphere of *work* is a sphere devoid of meaning—the *homo faber* builds the world, but he does not value its permanence, nor does he understand the concept of meaning. But this does not entail, Arendt emphasizes, that all things *homo faber* fabricates in this sphere *contribute* to meaninglessness. When man fabricates, as Arendt formulates it, "in his highest capacity" (The Human Condition, 1958/2018, p. 173), he is capable of creating objects that can escape the clutches of instrumentalization, transcend it, and acquire a level of permanence that grants them an important place in a completely different sphere of activities. Objects that do not serve *homo faber*, who deems them *useless*, but acting and speaking men, 'whose meaningful deeds they immortalize' (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 56).

The most distinctive creations of homo faber, which rise above his own sphere to take their place as "the most worldly of all things" (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 172) among the public activities of man, are works of art. This new realm into which they transcend, or rather, this sphere where they can *appear* as works of art, is the third and final sphere of man's active life—the sphere of action. The activities that take place in this realm are not bound to the circular necessities of life or the linear instrumentality of fabrication; they thank their 'existence' to man's capacity to begin something new. Beginning is, Arendt argues, not to be confused with the man's urge to consume or his capability to craft, both strictly speaking private activities of beginning 'something' and bound to a foreseeable end; it is "not the same as the beginning of the world; it is not the beginning of something but of *somebody* [my emphasis], who is a beginner himself" (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 177). She therefore likens it to the birth of man—drawing on the Augustinian conviction "that there be a beginning, man was created before whom there was nobody", she argues that beginning, man's ability to act, is rooted in birth, in *natality*. And although Arendt points out that labor and work are also connected to this "most general condition of human existence" (The Human Condition, 1958/2018, p. 8), it is action that "has the closest connection with the human condition of natality" (The Human Condition, 1958/2018, p. 9) because it takes place among men, and thus discloses that which is also born: "a distinct and unique being among equals[—]" (The Human Condition, 1958/2018, p. 178). But as opposed to birth, which strictly speaking is a private 'miracle', the 'disclosure of somebody' inherent to action is, Arendt argues, always a disclosure to others and concerns either "the world of things" (The Human Condition, 1958/2018, p. 182) or "the subjective in-between […] which consists of deeds and words and owes its origin exclusively to men's acting and speaking directly *to* one another" (The Human Condition, 1958/2018, p. 183). So, although rooted in natality, the activity of action is conditioned by the fact that men live *together*:

> Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the *human condition of plurality* [my emphasis], to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world. (The Human Condition, 1958/2018, p. 7)

Plurality, which, according to Arendt, is also "*the* condition of all political life" (The Human Condition, 1958/2018, p. 7), must be understood as having a twofold character of equality and distinction. Two characteristics that might seem contradictory, but are in fact, she argues, complementary and equally necessary for appearance of action. For although equality

of man makes it *possible* to understand and recognize each other through action, without distinction between men there would be no need for action at all (Arendt, 1958/2018, pp. 175-176). And it is *through* action and speech, Arendt believes, that both are revealed to us: "Speech and action reveal this unique distinctness. Through them, men *distinguish* [my emphasis] themselves instead of being merely distinct; they are the modes in which human beings appear to each other […] *qua* men" (The Human Condition, 1958/2018, p. 176). In other words, *who we are* is not concealed in some essence that we can discover in private isolation (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 188), i.e. through the activities of labor or work; it must, Arendt believes, be revealed to us by acting "in sheer human togetherness"—"[the] disclosure of who somebody is [through] action needs for its full appearance the shining brightness we once called glory, and which is possible only in the *public* [my emphasis] realm" (Arendt, 1958/2018, pp. 178, 180). In other words, action, the condition of which is plurality, rendering it "the political activity par excellence" (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 9), needs, as Conovan accurately puts it, "a solid, durable common world, […] a space within which people act and appear in the presence of one another" (Politics as Culture: Hannah Arendt and the Public Realm, 1985, p. 620). Not only because action and speech are "never possible in isolation" (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 188) and can therefore never take place in the private realm—where, as we have seen, only the activities of labor and work, independent of plurality, occur—, but also because action and speech are inherently frail and fleeting—'incapable of lasting longer than the occurrence of their activity' (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 173).

Acting and speaking men, whose activities consist of noting but deeds and words and are therefore inherently *immaterial*, need, Arendt believes,

> the help of *homo faber* in his highest capacity, that is, the help of the artists, of poets and historiographers, of monument builders or writers, because without them the only product of their activity, the story they enact and tell, would not survive at all (The Human Condition, 1958/2018, p. 173)

The public realm, then, is not only a spatial domain where men, surrounded by and in constant contact with the 'web' of human relationships, can gather around, disclose their uniquely distinct view of the 'objective' world and the world of human affairs, and where "one [can] excel [and] distinguish oneself from all others" (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 49); it is also, as Conovan wrote, "a solid, durable common world" (Politics as Culture: Hannah Arendt and the Public Realm, 1985, p. 620) which offers a "guarantee against the futility of individual *life* [my emphasis]" (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 56) by absorbing and solidifying the only intrinsically meaningful but 'equally futile' (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 197) human activities, i.e. action and speech, in its most permanent appearances and "make shine through the centuries whatever men may want to save from the natural ruin of time" (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 55). These most permanent appearances, Arendt argues, are works of art—the products of *homo faber* that are not subject to consumption or use, but instead transcend these spheres of activities to serve the "doing of great deeds and the speaking of great words"—which on their own "will leave no trace, no *product* [my emphasis] that might endure after the moment of action and the spoken word has passed"—by immortalizing them. Arendt explains art's immortalization of action most lucidly in the following passage:

> In this permanence [of art], the very stability of the human artifice, which, being inhabited and used by mortals, can never be absolute, achieves a representation of its own. Nowhere else does the sheer durability of the world of things appear in such purity and clarity, nowhere else therefore does this thing-world reveal itself so spectacularly as the non-mortal home for mortal beings. It is as though worldly stability has become

> transparent in the permanence of art, so that a premonition of immortality, not the immortality of the soul or of life but of something immortal achieved by mortal deeds, has become tangibly present, to shine and to be seen, to sound and to be heard, to speak and to be read. (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 168).

In other words, Arendt believes that without works of art—"the most intensely worldly of all tangible things" and therefore the objects that are most *distant* to the futility of life and earthly 'reality' (The Human Condition, 1958/2018, p. 199)—that provide us with a "common world [that] we enter when we are born and [that] we leave behind when we die", that is, without this transcendence into a potential earthly immortality, "*no politics, strictly speaking, no common world and no public realm, is possible* [my emphasis]" (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 55). For action, and thus politics, to have a *place* on this world, and not fade into oblivion, it needs, Arendt argues, the help of the worker in his highest capacity, the *artist*—of which we have already seen an example in the form of the history-teller. Only works of art and their immortalizing capacity can grant the public realm the permanence for action to appear as something meaningful and lasting; without them, public deeds and words, the essence of politics for Arendt, will leave no trace, cannot possibly be remembered, and will thus be 'forgotten'. As a result, the entire sphere of action will increasingly seem less relevant—causing works of art, which appear only *as* works of art in this sphere, to slowly disappear. It is therefore, in my opinion, justified to conclude with Conovan that, according to Arendt, "art and politics […] are interrelated and even mutually dependent" (Politics as Culture: Hannah Arendt and the Public Realm, 1985, p. 624).

So, according to Arendt, for society to possess political consciousness, that is, to understand the intrinsic meaningfulness of *acting and speaking in the public realm*, it needs a substantial body of workers to provide its world with works of art. It needs, in other words, worldly things that are excluded from use and enjoy the greatest possible distance from the perishable things devoured by the *animal laborans*. A distance that, according to Arendt, with the advent of industrialization, technical reproduction and mass society—in short: modernity—has collapsed. And whereas Benjamin, as we have seen, argues that this *descent of art* enabled its *actualization*, Arendt argues that art's descent equals its *departure*, leaving the domain of action desolate (The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and its Political Significance, 1961, p. 218).

Culture relates to objects and is a
phenomenon of the world; entertainment relates to
people and is a phenomenon of life.
Hannah Arendt (The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and its Political Significance, 1961, p. 208)

The trick by which this world of things is mastered
—it is more proper to speak of a trick than a method—
consists in the substitution of a political
for a historical view of the past.
Walter Benjamin (Surrealism, 1966/1986, p. 182)

Modernity—a Paradigm of Proximity

Tradition

The descent of art, Benjamin and Arendt believe, marks a break in its traditional role in society. Both argue that art had its origins in, and derived its right to exist from, its role as guarantor of tradition. But whereas Benjamin argued this traditional function of *auratic* art—because of its distinctive *distance* from reality, regardless of whether this had mythical, religious or profane (in the form of beauty) origins—was cultic/ritualistic, non-political and therefore it inhibited action, Arendt claimed the opposite. She described the traditional role of art, precisely because of its immortal distance from earthly reality, as the guardian of the realm in which action can appear and thus as essential to the political. Their notions of the break with the traditional role of art, which, according to both Benjamin and Arendt, coincides with the rise of modernity, are therefore, in my opinion, opposite to each other. The cause of this contradiction lies, I suspect, in their different concepts of the human capacity to 'break with the past'—that is, in *action*.

We have already seen that within their strikingly similar theories of 'fragmented history', two crucial concepts emerged, both of which could be loosely defined as 'the human capacity to break with the past by beginning something radically new', namely *weak messianic power* (Benjamin) and *action* (Arendt). In the following comparison between their assessments of art in modernity, the difference between these concepts, in my opinion, emerges. And here the history-teller, so central to their concepts of history but not explicitly mentioned in their descriptions of the developments of art that I described above, plays an illuminating role.

The rise of modernity is characterized by roughly the same crucial developments in Benjamin's and Arendt's art-related descriptions. Namely, the technical reproduction, the rise of mass society, and secularization. However, their interpretations of these developments show strong discrepancies. Discrepancies that, in my opinion, can be traced back to their methodological approaches, and have their origins in their different convictions about *man's capacity to break with the past and begin something new*.

Intoxication

The old gift of artworks to provide us with traditions, which it gathered around it and carried through time on the shoulders of its authority, has, According to Benjamin, been lost. Artworks

now appear naked and displaced; torn from its ritual protection and cast off from its cultic foundation, it reaches the modern man not as tradition, but as a '*present* past' (Herzog, 2000, p. 7). The embedding of art in 'old history', provided by the tradition of customs, wisdom and narratives, whose authority did not tolerate falsifiability and critical attitudes, has been replaced by its place in a new, political past. A development that, according to Lindroos, can be understood as the "[d]econstruction [of] the "intimate bond" between historical reality and its representation [in art]" (Aesthethic Political Thought: Benjamin and Marker Revisited, 2003, p. 237). A bond contained in the aura of traditional art, which resisted appropriation—but once art was stripped of their aura, it became 'defenseless' (Benjamin, 1968/2007, p. 223). We've already seen that, for Benjamin, this loss of the traditional role of art, equal to the loss of its content as 'distant to reality', can be summarized as the loss of the aura of art. A loss that was heralded by the advent of technical reproduction. The 'general formula of this development', as Benjamin calls it, can be described as follows:

> the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it [actualizes] the object reproduced. (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1968/2007, p. 221)

The reproduction of art, which constitutes its actualization, is closely related to the rise of mass society according to Benjamin—it *depends* on it; without a receptive mass, reproduction remains aimless and languishes (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1968/2007, p. 221). And the close collaboration between these two modern developments, which according to Benjamin must be understood as the actualization of art, that is to say its loss of distance and therefore its politicization—a view that Arendt, as we will see, rejects—, and the mass reception of art, that is to say its democratization, results in "the adjustment of reality to the masses and of the masses to reality" (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1968/2007, p. 223).

According to Benjamin, the consequence of this revolutionary interaction of democratization and actualization of art, of which photography and film are the standard bearers, is twofold, namely a joint change in perception *of the collective*. I will not go into Benjamin's thorough analysis of the specific differences between photography and film here; these are definitely interesting in themselves, but do not, in my opinion, serve the purpose of this study. What does serve its purpose is what both photography and film have in common according to Benjamin, namely their ability to 'penetrate reality most intensively' (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1968/2007, p. 234) and the fact that they are not only *accessible* to the masses, but can simultaneously *represent* the masses—the masses become both *spectator* and *part* of its images: "Any man today can lay claim to being filmed. […] Thus, the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character" (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1968/2007, pp. 231-232).

The intimate coincidence of these two developments, the uncovering of reality and the masses, leads to the breaking up, even the explosion, of the things we were so familiar with. Traditionally embedded in cults, rituals or culture, the objects surrounding us were part of a larger whole and thus no cause of surprise—they could not, as Benjamin formulates it, *shock* us. In other words, the components of reality, Benjamin believes, appeared as familiarities—they were bound to the structures of tradition, social, political or otherwise (Benjamin, 1968/2007, pp. 236, 237). But the camera and the reproduction of its penetrative products made short work of the traditional collective experience: 'they brought that which was usually far away close; made that which was invisible bright; put that which was too near to be perceived

at a comfortable distance; and that which had been obscured by speed they brought to a standstill' (Benjamin, 1968/2007, pp. 236, 237). In the following passage, Benjamin expresses this 'revolution of images' concisely:

> By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring commonplace milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film [and photography], on the one hand, [extend] our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, [they manage] to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action. Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film [and photography] and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung *ruins and debris* [my emphasis], we calmly and adventurously go traveling. With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. *The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formations of [reality]* [my emphasis]. (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1968/2007, p. 236)

A passage that Richard Wolin, in my opinion, adequately epitomizes: "When the stream of life's movement is brought to an abrupt halt, "sheltered in the presence of onlooking strangers," the customary and familiar are viewed in a radically new light" (From Messianism to Materialism: The Later Aesthetics of Walter Benjamin, 1981, p. 97). And despite the fact that, as we will see, this upheaval of reality in its 'naked' form—that is to say without the help of "the reader, the thinker, the loiterer, the flaneur" (Surrealism, 1966/1986, p. 190) who can view it from a distance and channel it—cannot itself, according to Benjamin, bring about a revolutionary actualization; 'the image space' (Surrealism, 1966/1986, p. 192), as he calls it, is laying the groundwork for it. The space of images is preparing the masses for a possible transformation of perceptions and the chance of unleashing *dormant messianic powers*.

The *fragmented reality* that appears in the space of images, the modernity of art, is, Benjamin believes, different than 'the reality that meets the eye, if only because an unconsciously penetrated space takes the place of a space consciously explored by man' (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1968/2007, pp. 236-237). But what this penetration of the optical unconscious, this discovery of the fragmentary *through* images *as* fragments, first and foremost brings about is, Benjamin argues, not a radical insight into the nature of reality, or the historical or political situation of man; it primarily causes an uncritical attitude: "the masses seek distraction" (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1968/2007, p. 239). An attitude that he believes George Duhamel has captures accurately in the following phrase: ""I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images"" (Benjamin, 1968/2007, p. 238). Benjamin calls this attitude of the masses entrenched in the sphere of images their *intoxication*. To understand what Benjamin means by intoxication, it is, in my opinion, sufficient to read Wolin's clear explanation of that which most corresponds to, and which Benjamin often synonymizes with, the phenomenon of intoxication, namely the dream:

> it is not the latent or unconscious meanings of dreams that attracts Benjamin, but the dream *images* [my emphasis] themselves. The dream, for Benjamin, becomes an autonomous source of experience and knowledge, a hidden key to the secrets and mysteries of waking life. Dreams become the *repositories of the utopian visions of mankind*, they serve as the refuge of the aspirations and desires that are denied to man

> in the sphere of material life itself (From Messianism to Materialism: The Later Aesthetics of Walter Benjamin, 1981, pp. 97-98).

What Wolin describes here is that, according to Benjamin, the way in which dreams, consisting of apparently unrelated fragments, can give us new insights into waking life is reminiscent of man's intoxication by the image fragments that surround him in modernity. They offer no clear overview, no unambiguous clarifying message, no rational explanation; rather, they break up these false narratives by capturing the irrational and the fragmentary in countless images. And, like dreams, this *intoxication* by the space of images, Benjamin believes, can lead to *illumination*.

What is now emerging in Benjamin's exposition of modernity can, I think, be described as a turning point—the leap from dispersion to redemption, from intoxication to 'profane illumination,' from oppression to revolution. But this, as we have seen, does not happen automatically; the fragmentation of reality, which has been shattered by the approximation of art and has come closer to the masses through images and fragments, relates, in my opinion, in its own form to man in a similar way as information does according to Benjamin, namely without the interference of a critical attitude: "Information […] lays claim to prompt verifiability. The prime requirement is that it appears "understandable in itself" (The Storyteller, 1968/2007, p. 89). And this comparison becomes even stronger when we realize that the opposite of information in modern times is the ancient artform we encountered before: historical stories. For it is, in my opinion, this ancient artform that Benjamin believes must be revived in order to, in his words, "win the energies of intoxication for the revolution" (Surrealism, 1966/1986, pp. 189, 190). A revival that must not remain true to its origins but must take on a new appearance; one capable of 'erasing the historical view of the past against the political one' (Benjamin, 1966/1986, p. 182). A metamorphosis that, according to Benjamin, is reserved for the art movement that meanders like a flaneur through the debris of modernity: surrealism—the new history-telling.

Preservation

Up until the point of the 'revival of history-telling', Arendt's account of the transformation of art in modernity seems to resemble Benjamin's. Differences in terminology notwithstanding—Arendt calls technical reproduction *mass distribution*, and she would rather call image space *entertainment space*—, she would agree with Benjamin that art is actualized in modernity. But where in Benjamin this observation essentially lacks a clear assessment, this is clearly not the case with Arendt. She characterizes the products of reproduction not as actualized art; according to her, these are not works of art at all:

> The commodities the entertainment industry offers are not "things," cultural objects, whose excellence is measured by their ability to withstand the life process and become permanent appurtenances of the world, and they should not be judged according to these standards; nor are they values which exist to be used and exchanged; they are consumer goods, designed to be used up, just like any other consumer goods. (Arendt, 1961, pp. 205-206)

What is immediately striking is that Arendt—in this passage as well as the essay it is part of—is talking about 'cultural goods' instead of 'works of art'. I follow Conovan in her assessment that object of culture *are* works of art, which is supported by Arendt's conviction that "art works are cultural objects *par excellance*" (The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and its Political Significance, 1961, p. 211)—the two definitions are so interchangeable that, for the sake of

clarity, I will omit the 'negligible differences' (Politics as Culture: Hannah Arendt and the Public Realm, 1985, pp. 623-624). Cultural *objects* should, however, not be confused with *culture*. As Arendt explains, the word culture is etymologically rooted in the Latin word *cultura*, which in turn is derived from the verb *colere*: "to cultivate, to dwell, to take care of, to tend and *preserve* [my emphasis]—and it relates primarily to the intercourse of man with nature in the sense of cultivating and tending nature until it becomes fit for human habitation" (The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and its Political Significance, 1961, pp. 211-212). However, the definition has changed over the centuries. According to Arendt, culture no longer means cultivating nature as a living environment, but cultivating the world—and therefore the works of art that hold it up like columns supporting the space of a temple. Culture is, as Conovan aptly summarized, the interaction between, or perhaps even the symbiosis of, action and art (Politics as Culture: Hannah Arendt and the Public Realm, 1985, p. 621). And Arendt believes that certain developments in modernity, namely the triumph of labor and the loss of appreciation for immortality, have caused culture to deteriorate. In other words, modernity, Arendt argues, is marked by the joint and simultaneous departure of art and action.

It is, in my opinion, difficult to determine what Arendt thinks is the causal relationship between the rise of the "mass society of laborers" (The Human Condition, 1958/2018, p. 118) and the "almost complete loss of authentic concern with immortality" (p. 55). I will therefore treat these two matters as inseparable developments that together are responsible for both the disappearance of art and thus the public realm, and the fall into oblivion of action.

Arendt dedicates the rise of labor and its 'entry' into the public realm to two developments that have a mutually reinforcing relationship and together herald the expulsion of *homo faber*: the *division of labor*, the efficiency of which introduces mass production (The Human Condition, 1958/2018, pp. 124-125), and abundance, "the ideal of the animal laborans" (The Human Condition, 1958/2018, p. 126). Arendt explains this combination of the capabilities and requirements of the animal laborans and its 'victims', *homo faber* and its crafted objects, as follows:

> The endlessness of the laboring process is guaranteed by the ever-recurrent needs of consumption; the endlessness of production can be ensured only if its products lose their use character and become more and more objects of consumption, or if, to put it another way, the rate of use is so tremendously accelerated that the objective difference between use and consumption, between the relative durability of use objects and the swift coming and going of consumer goods, *dwindles to insignificance* [my emphasis]. (The Human Condition, 1958/2018, p. 125)

Put differently, in modernity, a paradigm that, according to Arendt, is dominated by the combination of mass production and mass consumption, the work of *homo faber* has become redundant because its crafts cannot satisfy the gluttony of the *animal laborans*—the fruits of his work, "the "unnatural" and purely worldly stability of the human artifice", have been reduced to 'mere obstacles to the cravings of consumers' (The Human Condition, 1958/2018, p. 126). And as an inevitable consequence, a most dire consequence that is, "not even the "work" of the artist is left; it is dissolved into play and *has lost its worldly meaning* [my emphasis] (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 128). In other words, *modernity marks the departure of art*. What remains, according to Arendt, is therefore not *art*, but *entertainment*. Now that all 'things made' arise from the labor of the animal laborans and in service of mass society, no useless crafts, no permanent things, no artificial immortality will ever be the result of efforts of man or appreciated as such; the animal laborans produces to consume and consumes to produce, and all relatively durable things, especially works of art, "must be altered in order to become

entertainment, [they] must be prepared to be easily consumed" (The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and its Political Significance, 1961, p. 207).

A world without art—"the only things without any function in the life process of society; strictly speaking, they are fabricated not for men, but for the world which is meant to outlast the life-span of mortals, the coming and going of generations" (The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and its Political Significance, 1961, p. 209)—is, Arendt Believes, no world. Our earthly home, the place where we *live* and will always *create* things,

> becomes a *world* [my emphasis] in the proper sense of the word only when the totality of the fabricated things is so organized that it can resist the consuming life process of the people dwelling in it, *and thus outlast them* [my emphasis]. (Arendt, 1961, p. 210)

The immortality of the world, granted to it by its most resilient and extraordinary objects, works of art, 'gives testimony to the entire recorded past of human actions' (Arendt, 1961, p. 202)—works of art are the tangible memory of the only intrinsically valuable activity of human beings: their actions *among* others and *on* the world. And that is not all; artworks create the space within which these actions, which are just a beginning and would disappear into thin air without preservation in the world, take place and where they can transcend their ephemerality. In other words, without the most immortal things that man can make, he will be born on an earth without remembrance, "the mother of all arts" (The Human Condition, 1958/2018, p. 95), without historical tales of action—an earth on which "the living activities of action, speech, and thought would lose their reality at the end of each process and disappear as though they never had been", *an earth without a world*. Phrased differently, an earth without a world, Arendt believes, is an earth on which action, man's most meaningful and least enduring activity, has no place to roam. So, man's ability to break with the past, to begin something utterly new in the form of deeds and words, is, Arendt argues, conditioned by the plurality of men, but needs an immortal home to take place and endure at all—*to break with the past is to preserve it*.

Revolution

Benjamin's notion of man's ability to break with the past is much more radical, much more ruthless than Arendt's—but only if it concerns breaking with the *barbaric* past and thus all 'documents of culture' (On the Concept of History, 1968/2006, p. 392). And his idea of beginning something new is equally more radical than Arendt's—even though it ultimately draws back on something ancient, something *pre*historic. Whereas Arendt believes that the activity of breaking with the past and beginning something new simultaneously preserves its home, i.e. requires an historical world to take place and persist, Benjamin argues that a radical break with the past requires a broken material world, whose historical ties are severed and whose fragmentary nature is laid bare.

Modernity, Benjamin thinks, is awash with innumerable actualized works of art—countless *images*, "the ruins of modernity—visible "in a thousand configurations of life, from permanent buildings to ephemeral fashions" (Wolin, 1981, p. 99), that approach men like historical events approach the history-teller: as "nomads" (On the Concept of History, 1968/2006, p. 396). That is, as, in the words of Susan Sontag (Under the Sign of Saturn, 1972/1981), "a whole (that is, complete) and a fragment (so tiny, the wrong scale)" (p. 124). We have seen that Benjamin considers this image-space to be the precondition of 'the revelation of new material structures' (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1968/2007, p. 236)—dormant revolutionary potentials, freed from the grip of tradition, that need the help of the new history-tellers, the surrealists, to be revealed and inspire "a profane illumination, 'a materialist and anthropological inspiration'" (Löwy, 1996, p. 19).

Yet, as Löwy writes, Benjamin remains somewhat vague about 'the relation of these *dormant things* to revolution' (Walter Benjamin and Surrealism, 1996, p. 19). The leap from dormancy by means of the magic writings of the surrealists to revolutionary inspiration for the masses, who, Benjamin admits, 'are bound to respond foolish to surrealism' (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1968/2007, p. 235), seems fairly naïve. Especially because Benjamin seems to believe that in the image space of modernity, resembling Arendt's views, "things press too closely on human society" (Cohen, 1989, p. 103) for them to reveal the "*images of utopia*, that is, *images of a classless society*" (Wolin, 1981, p. 99) to the masses without the help of those able to maintain a critical *distance*. A *distance* that, as we will see, is not reserved for the masses, but only for certain 'old-fashioned figures' (Arendt, 1968/2007, p. 45) like flaneurs and collectors—in Sontag's words, "the dying independent intelligentsia," (Under the Sign of Saturn, 1972/1981, pp. 133, 134) who 'out of a subversive protest', as Arendt formulates it, 'have always attempted to destroy the coherence of things that once gave them a place in a larger living whole, but in modernity only had to stoop to collect the precious fragments in the ruins of the past' (Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940, 1968/2007, p. 45).

When Benjamin describes the masses in relation to the explosion of images, he employs terms that I find similar to Arendt's description of the masses in relation to entertainment: 'an uncritical mass that is only capable of expressing itself automatically' (On Some Motives in Baudelaire, 1968/2007, p. 176); 'an amorphous crowd of passers-by whose pace at which they rush past each other is not pleasant' (pp. 165, 167); 'a mass that arouses fear, disgust and horror in those who observe it' (p. 174); 'those who revert to a state of savagery—that is, of isolation' (p. 174). In other words, the effect of the combination of mass society and the space of images is one of intoxication, and in no way awakens the dormant revolutionary potentials present in things freed from their embedding in the 'culture of barbarism'. For this, the *distance* of flaneurs and collectors, but most importantly that of the surrealists, is required. Those who, Benjamin believes, peer through the 'turbulent veil of the masses' (On Some Motives in Baudelaire, 1968/2007, p. 168) and see how things relate to the revolution:

> They bring the immense forces of "atmosphere" concealed in […] things to the point of explosion. [That is the] trick by which this world of things is mastered—it is more proper to speak of a trick than a method—[, which] consists in the substitution of a political for a historical view of the past. (Surrealism, 1966/1986, p. 182)

This trick is nothing less than, as Löwy points out, "the profane illumination of the surrealists [, which] lies in 'magical experiments with words' in which 'slogans, magical formulas [Zauber-formel] and concepts' intermingle" (Walter Benjamin and Surrealism, 1996, p. 19). Their experiments with words, most notably the poetic ones of Baudelaire, revealed to Benjamin the capability of surrealist art to unveil the fragmentariness of modernity, its break with the past, and reveal that *in* this new constellation of things, *in* this break that closely resembles *now-time*, the possibilities for radical revolutionary change "became a *real possibility*" (Wolin, 1981, p. 99). In other words, surrealist art could, according to Benjamin, illuminate the "network of correspondences [of modernity] with pre-history—correspondences which he viewed as the ultimate stimulus to utopia *or* classless society" (Wolin, 1981, p. 99). The following poem of Baudelaire comes, according to Benjamin, closest to this revolutionary surrealist illumination:

> *Nature is a temple in which living pillars*
> *Sometimes give voice to confused words;*
> *Man passes there through forests of symbols*
> *Which look at him with understanding eyes.*

Like prolonged echoes mingling in the distance
In a deep and tenebrous unity,
Vast as the dark of night and as the light of day,
Perfumes, sounds, and colors correspond.
(Correspondences, 1954, p. 25)

The fact that Benjamin believed such rather esoteric and mysterious poetry could herald a revolution of the 'intoxicated masses' probably does not speak so much for his revolutionary realism; rather, it betrays that he believed that, as Arendt puts it, 'there is a language of truth in which the last secrets that all thought deals with are stored tensionlessly and even silently' (Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940, 1968/2007, p. 50). Secrets that Benjamin, inspired by the great German poet Goethe,

> derived directly from the only world view that ever had a decisive influence on him, from Goethe's conviction of the factual existence of an *Urphänomen*, a [primordial] phenomenon, a concrete thing to be discovered in the world of appearances in which 'significance' (Bedeutung, the most Goethean of words, keeps recurring in Benjamin's writings) and appearance, word and thing, idea and experience, would coincide. […] He was concerned with the primordial phenomenon of history, and when he speaks of 'primal history', he aims at a poetic representation in which modernity appears 'as an original form of primal history' and from which 'the primordial historical moment of the past' can be deduced. This seemed possible to him, because the collapse of tradition had exposed the 'primeval historical moments' in all of history. (Arendt, 1968/2007, p. 12) (Arendt, 1968/2021, p. 39)

Whether this is an actual reflection of his revolutionary believes, or rather the sign of the hope of someone who is hopeless, is debatable. A debate that goes beyond the limits of our endeavor; after all, what we are looking for is Benjamin's idea of man's capacity to 'break with the past and begin something new', which I think the foregoing hints at. A capacity that the history-teller, as we have seen, aimed to unveil, and which Benjamin in this context described as "the present as now-time shot through with splinters of messianic time" (On the Concept of History, 1968/2006, p. 397). But this messianic potential has been dormant throughout history—waiting, as it were, for an event that could free it from the clutches of tradition. The event that released it, Benjamin believes, was the revolution of art. Descended from its auratic heights, art suddenly approximated reality and was able to reveal its fragmentary structure—it severed the ties of modernity to tradition. And, according to Benjamin, only the surrealists were able to actualize the now freed messianic potential by revealing to the masses the possibility of reviving an 'ancient harmony with life' stored in the present through the ""the deadly impact" of new thoughts" (Arendt, 1968/2007, p. 46).

Disconnected from progress, progression, and tradition—the accumulation of rubble—the messianic splinters were suddenly there for the taking. And only those, Benjamin believes, who can 'extract the image of primordial history from the most unsightly details of existence, in the waste, as it were' (Arendt, 1968/2021, p. 41), are able to probe deeper into history than anyone else. Those who are able to bridge, or rather undermine, history and discover the ties to a primal paradise in the fragments of reality from where the storm of progress has been blowing for centuries. A primal phenomenon that the *new* history-tellers, the surrealists, can *actualize*. They reveal that, as Wolin articulates lucidly,

> [the] old and new are ultimately interchangeable; for the "old," classless society of the primal past will ultimately become the "new" or utopia; and the "new," the ruins of modernity, will at this point will turn into the old itself—i.e. pre-history" (From Messianism to Materialism: The Later Aesthetics of Walter Benjamin, 1981, p. 99).

Thus, I believe it is evident that the ability to break with the past according to Benjamin entails much more than, as Arendt believes, *action as beginning in the immortal world among men*. For Benjamin, breaking with the past means *breaking with the whole history of barbarism*, the historical-cultural past that was nothing but "one single catastrophe" (On the Concept of History, 1968/2006, p. 392). And beginning something radically new is not, as Arendt argues, synonymous with the actions of individual man; it entails collective action, a collective revolt, a *revolution*—but *only* if that revolution realizes a long-forgotten pre-historic harmony. In other words, *only if that revolution disarms the storm blowing from primordial paradise and reverses its direction.*

A Temple of Ruins

It is hard to imagine how Paris, in those seven years before it fell into the hands of totalitarianism, must have appeared to Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt. The last remnants of European culture in the midst of a wasteland of barbarism? A porous fortress in which cafes, books, and conversations turned out to be the vain defense mechanisms against the ruthless violence of those who saw all forms of plurality and culture as archenemies? What is certain is that the relationship between culture and freedom, between *art* and *action*, was disrupted and lost its self-evidence. How was it possible that Europe, where the Polis and the Res Publica were cast in marble, where words of Homer and Herodotus still wove our tales, and where people not only dealt and spoke with fellow human beings but were assisted by the words and deeds of several millennia of ancestors, became the birthplace of, and could not withstand, forces of the most degrading cultural destructions?

The European world of centuries of immortalized words and deeds, the European world of art, became the continent of barbarism. And the question that forced itself on Benjamin and Arendt was: should action preserve this world, or supplant it? Acting, Benjamin and Arendt claimed, entails breaking with the past and beginning something new—but how *radical* should this break be? And how *novel* the new? I have attempted to show their views on these issues by comparing them in light of their philosophies of history and art.

History, Benjamin and Arendt argue in unison, should be a *tale of fragments* if it is to reveal man's ability to break with the past and begin something new. But it has become clear that their notions of this human ability differ. For Arendt, this ability is individual *action* conditioned by plurality, which requires a world of art—a solid realm that transcends us through its immortal distance. For Benjamin, it is a *messianic power*, a dormant possibility for collective revolt, for *revolution*. One that requires art as well, but not art as a distant auratic phenomenon; it requires *actualized* art that severs humanity's bond to barbarism by illuminating its ties to paradise.

There remains much to be discovered in the unique philosophical legacies of Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt. Legacies that I certainly do not claim to have completely exhausted. But I do believe that I have contributed to an illuminating of their philosophies in light of each other—to a *mutual illumination*.

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