

Photogrammetry in Benjamin's language

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Abstract The categories of Walter Benjamin's Judaic philosophy of language remerge in his essay on photography and thus provide the groundwork for his arguments concerning the work of art.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin, photography, philosophy of language, Judaism, Kant, Messianism, work of art, aura, reproduction, capitalism.



Figure 1. Franz Kafka, Wintergarten, age 5-6.

*die Traurigkeit der Natur sie verstummen. Es ist in
aller Trauer der tiefste Hang zur Sprachlosigkeit,
und das unendlich viel mehr als Unfähigkeit oder
Unlust zur Mitteilung.* (BENJAMIN 1991a: 155)¹

¹ Walter Benjamin: "Silence is the sorrow of nature. To be mute without language is its strongest inclination and is much more than the inability or unwillingness to communicate."

1.1. The image before you dated 1888-1889 features a central European Jewish boy standing in a Wintergarten of palm-trees, flowers, possibly an easel.² In one hand, he holds the wide-brimmed hat of a Spaniard, in the other, what appears to be a marching baton featuring a nub at the top leading to telescopic pointer at the bottom. The boy is dressed in short pants and a woven jacket with the nautical motif of an oversized lapel and rows of buttons on either side. He turns his gaze away from the lens with a distinctly sullen appearance of a boy whose “unermeßlich trauigen Augen” remains unappeased by the idyllic landscape behind him (BENJAMIN 1991c: 375). This photograph of the young Franz Kafka is emblematic of the decline of the medium of photography, writes Walter Benjamin. It is the very same decline that Benjamin first identifies in the concept of the origins of language. Photography, for its part, began with a promise of ontological neutrality, a unique capacity to see between subject and object. However, together with the concept of an original language, it falls into a world of falsehood and illusions — in which language descends from the grace of coherence and identity into a world of multiple meanings, and photography from reason into a world dictated by market forces.

1.2. No different from painting in this regard, photography shares the *potentia* of language to capture and express the *geistige Wesen* of a thing, its intellectual or spiritual substance expressed here in the image of one sad and tired boy, the young Franz Kafka.³ “Dies Bild in seiner uferlosen Trauer,” writes Benjamin

is ein Pendant der Frühen Photographie, auf welcher die Menschen noch nicht abgesprengt und gottverloren in die Welt sahen wie hier der Knabe.
(BENJAMIN 1991c: 375-376)

“This image in its overflowing sadness is a pendant of early photography that humanity has not yet fully abandoned and to appear forlorn in the world like this boy”. Kafka’s sadness comes to represent a loss, a gift that was detectable in the earliest forms of photography, says Benjamin, only to be lost and never to be found again in its immediacy. The innocence attributable to a child of five or six Benjamin views in the young eyes of Kafka, the gaze or sight of a godforsaken world. The motif is the very same that derives from the notion of an original language, an idea that is hued with Benjamin’s brief encounter with some of the primary elements of classical literature in Hebrew. Benjamin develops a philosophy of language that permeates every aspect of his mature historical, linguistic and late aesthetic theory. It also forms the cornerstone of his early intellectual partner, Gershom Scholem, who

² I would like to thank Professors Michael Berkowitz and Martin Roman Deppner for the opportunity to present a version of this paper at the *32nd Bielefelder Fotosymposium - The Jewish Engagement with Photography*, which took place at the Felix Nüssbaum Haus, Osnabrück, Germany, 29-30 November 2012.

³ The comparison to painting is found in W. Benjamin, “Über die Malerei oder Zeichen und Mal,” (BENJAMIN 1991b: 607), but the discussion of the concept of a substance of the intellect is found in the language essay, “Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen” (BENJAMIN 1991a: 143).

later sought to apply the content of this linguistic theory to his history of Jewish esoteric and speculative literature in the Kabbalah. (SCHOLEM 1987)

1.3. The essential concept which links Benjamin's philosophies of language and photography is the image of decline, photography being a medium with a "verletzten Unmittelbarkeit", "damaged immediacy" to borrow from the early essay on language (BENJAMIN 1991a: 153). Language underwent a tragic decline from which one result would be the emergence of multiple names for the same objects, and by extension, multiple languages for the same modes of expression, thus marking a decline of the most primary and basic principle of reason, the law of identity, by which an object is coequal with its name (that $x = x$ and not y). The damaged immediacy of language is expressed in the Hebraic literary motif with a very similar trajectory to Benjamin's reading of photography, the Genesis narrative of the expression of divine language and its fall (BENJAMIN 1991a: 147-150, 153f). Here the Hebraic motif is augmented with a historical narrative in which Marx and the critique of capital begins to coalesce with his earlier Judaic and Kantian anarchism. In Benjamin's short history, photography originates with the charlatans and fruit sellers of the open markets of the 19th century in an innocence toward the intensive mass manipulation of the image and the power of consumption that was manifest in the early to mid twentieth century. With this historical innocence, photography could also bear a philosophical purity or neutrality to the object, only to be discovered later as the primary substance of technically reproducing images of consumption and desire in the marketplace of the twentieth century. For Benjamin, the market distorts the immediacy of the photographic medium to render the image at one with its expression, and thereby its language.

1.4. Published in three separate issues of *Die Literarische Welt* from September to October 1931, Benjamin's "Kleine Geschichte der Photographie" may be considered a critical or discursive prolegomenon to the *Passagenwerk*, as he wrote to Gershom Scholem at the time (ADORNO, SCHOLEM 1978: 541).⁴ The project attempts to construct an intellectual history of European capitalism as manifest in the material objects and culture of Paris in the nineteenth century. It provided the basis for Benjamin's ideas on the fetish character of the commodity, the optical illusions of capitalism and its visual imagination, or what he refers to as the phantasmagoria captured in the illustrations of Grandville, the poetry and prose of Charles Baudelaire and, most keenly, the new photographic methods of montage. In the late work he delves into the concept of the innate innocence of material culture, its philosophical neutrality, which undergoes a complete transformation on the shop-floor of the Parisian arcades.

⁴ The *Passagenwerk* being a large and somewhat obscure research project on the culture and capitalism of the nineteenth century that consumed the greater portion of Benjamin's final years.

1.5. The “Short History of Photography” presents in many respects the *Kernzelle* of the *Passagenwerk*. It is also the locus point in which Benjamin develops the prime operative thesis of the *Kunstwerk* essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility” (1935). The work of art essay, a central component of the *Passagenwerk*, turns on the question of whether artwork has an inner substance that is preserved or destroyed by the new methods of industrial reproduction. These two arguments — the first concerning a declining medium of expression; the second, the liquidation of a *sprachlich- und geistige Wesen*, an inner substance of the intellect nullified or transformed by the new media of communication and expression — lie at the heart of Benjamin’s early work and thus bind his philosophy of language that is imbued with Judaic motifs to his late aesthetic theory.⁵ It is possible to characterize his early ideas on history, language and justice as a preliminary “Philosophy of Judaism” and although the promise of a Jewish philosophy remains largely unfulfilled in Benjamin’s lifetime, the foundations for such a system enter into the crevices of his mature work on aesthetic theory, on Parisian material culture, and his theses on history. (JACOBSON 2003: 25) This philosophy of Judaism, it must be stressed, is not essential in itself — that is, it has no essentialist value — but is nevertheless completely indispensable for an understanding of the foundations and therefore the contours of Benjamin’s work as a whole. The “Short History of Photography”, if it shares a common basis with the early language essay, can be read just in this specific sense as a product of the constellation of the philosophical ideas of the early period.

1.6. The theme that I wish to draw out from the early philosophy of language is the idea of a descent from the original language, the pure unmediated expression of an inner auric point, to a state of multiple words and languages, and the residual question as to whether the aura is still present and audible through the new mediums of expression, the sparks in the lens.

1.7. Turning to his early essay “On Language As Such and the Language of Man” from 1915 (BENJAMIN 1991a), we find Benjamin employing the story of creation to construct a philosophy of language based on a concept of innate meaning. In his analysis, the content of a thing is not expressed through language but in language, such that language and the thing language expresses are themselves inseparable. In this way the creation narrative and that this creation was sounded into being — let there be light and there was light, *יהי אור ויהי אור* — is key to Benjamin’s thinking. This would suggest to Benjamin that the essence of a being or an idea is its language. But, in turn, this raises questions regarding the medium. If a thing or idea is its language, what is the meaning of a metaphor? And, when referring to the divine, what else are we to find in language other than a metaphor? In questioning the idea

⁵ “ ‘Wenn ich einmal meine Philosophie haben werde’—sagte er zu mir—‘so wird es irgendwie eine Philosophie des Judentums sein.’” Gershom Scholem, *Tagebücher*, nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923. Vol. 1/1, 1913–1917, ed. Karlfried Gründer and Friedrich Niewöhner. Frankfurt: Jüdischer Verlag, 1995. S. 391.

of representation, Benjamin seeks to enquire into an existence beyond the possibility of expression, here meaning the expression of the existence of the divine within language, our language. In the story of creation, God expressed His inner substance to create man “in His image” but He Himself remains incommunicable, inaudible and untranslatable. The act of creation is performed linguistically and therefore suggests to Benjamin the existence of a divine language distinct from our own. But how then could Adam have known the names of the created beings unless they somehow communicated themselves to him? The name thus becomes the focal point of speculation as to the linguistic expression of an object, the expression of its substance of the intellect, its *Geisteswesen*. With the idea that the animals somehow expressed themselves to Adam in such a way that he was able to recognize and therefore give them their names, Benjamin considers the magic defined in the relationship between an object and its name in the context of revelation, a transmission of this “substance” from the divine to the profane. A transition from the inexpressible to finite expression must take place here as well, whereas the relationship between the expression of the named and the namer is brought fully into theological focus with the problem for Adam of knowledge in God succeeding the act of naming.

1.8. With the speculative narrative in Genesis rendered discursive, Benjamin seeks to address the finite nature of the human word in relation to the infinite nature of God’s. This linguistic transition from God to Adam, from a creating word to a naming one, and, ultimately, after the expulsion, from divine language to the profane, is explained in the concept of translation. In all forms of expression, there is a continuous transporting of one language into another, from the written to the acoustic, from animate to inanimate, from profane to divine. In the expulsion from paradise, the expression of this translation was lost. What emerges in its place is a language of “damaged immediacy” (BENJAMIN 1991a: 153). In the breakdown of an immediate relationship between a name and the thing that is named, a multiplicity of words abound for the same object, just as a multiplicity of languages exist for the same expression. Profane language emerges from paradise damaged and yet human language is not without any recourse to its predecessor, claims Benjamin, seeing within humanity a residue of the creating word of God. This creating word is preserved in profane expression in the language of judgment — the dimension of justice in the profane. This, in brief, is Benjamin’s early Judaic philosophy of language.

1.9. Photography, for its part, provided a venue and the lens, a medium through which the promise of the perception of object neutrality and the problem of damaged immediacy could be revisited. The expression of an inner substance embedded in the name, here understood as the aura of the work of art, can be considered in variation with photography, which offers as a subject of investigation the promise of greater transparency due to its recent origins, in comparison to the written form. But it is also a viable subject due to its rapid technological transformation in a relatively short period of time. Although the lens and the transformation of the image has been

afforded little philosophical attention because of this, its suitability is evident in its operative subject and object division in the image and the lens. Here it may be worthwhile taking a slight detour into Benjamin's coming philosophy to explain the wish or longing for a philosophical neutrality toward experience, this too evidenced by the category of religion (BENJAMIN 1991d: 163).

1.10. It would not be uncommon to distinguish between divine attributes and those qualities of religion that must always be circumscribed by experience. After all, it would follow that only God and not religion (the means of revelation) is divine if religion is to be found in the realm of experience. The neutrality of experience that Benjamin gives voice to in his "The Program of a Coming Philosophy" is precisely the wish for a future philosophy with no distinction between what is conceivable in general and what is conceivable by God alone. The immediacy of this position is no different from the primary argument in the language essay, and he makes this readily apparent in the reaffirmation in this text that "Die Sprache eines Wesens ist das Medium, in dem sich sein geistiges Wesen mitteilt," language is the medium by which the substance of the intellect of a thing is expressed (BENJAMIN 1991d: 157). The camera, as it were, would capture the image in its full and complete state without the preexisting subject-object albatross. The distinction in cognition will be dislodged by a philosophy to come, claims Benjamin. The term radical can be used here in conjunction with the degree to which Benjamin wishes to attribute freedom to reason. Kant demands the complete autonomy of thinking for the purposes of reason. For Benjamin, however autonomy is contingent on a "neutrality" of experience, freed from a subjectivizing ipseity of perception, and although perhaps an illegitimate argument concerning phenomenology, Benjamin calls for a freedom from the empiricism of the study of perception (BENJAMIN 1991d: 164). The concept of neutrality nevertheless remains curious for what would be more partial than experience? The autonomy of epistemic reason is contingent on this neutrality, says Benjamin, but in making such a claim, he must be aware of the troublesome equation of God as merely the sum of his Creation, since being logically greater than the things He creates is already presupposed in the causal definition of a first cause. Here we can identify the intrinsic messianic qualities of Benjamin's Kantianism in relation to a liberation from the worldly binary of subject-object.

1.11. The topic returns here to the neutrality of the photographic medium, an onto-philosophical positioning that the existing literature of photography is unable to address, he writes. The problem, as he terms it, is "die Versuche, der Sache theoretisch Herr zu werden," that is: to allow the object to be the determining feature and thus fostering a spiritual drive to materialism that need not sacrifice the subject (BENJAMIN 1991c: 369). Photography, he intimates, is marked by the object's theoretical centrality at the same time as its absence. This means, presumably at first glance, the absolute materiality of the lens, and its primacy over the frame of reference or points of mutual reference. Yet unlike the concern of phenomenology, where the causation of the intersubjectivity of object and subject becomes

paramount, photography appears to present an immediate reconciliation within its characteristic features. In the first instance, the lens is the beacon of scientific neutrality, the operative principle being that what is not captured by the lens cannot be created by it. But what ultimately has primacy? Does opportunity make the photographic image? Is it the object of view? Or must we credit the photographer, still further, the technological means? If the adage is true that “Gelegenheit macht Diebe” — literally that “opportunity makes thieves” — then the work of art is a purloining of images in abject neutrality as to its motives and causation, thus making crime the mother of all aesthetics. Opportunity, however, is strictly speaking the source of crime as much as light is the source of an image: one cannot live without opportunity but it is very difficult to see it as a cause of action. So causation, or lack thereof, cannot be the determining factor of this radical neutrality, but rather the self-expression of its substance, its *geistige Wesen*.

1.12. It is no wonder that the new technologies were termed a “französischen Teufelskunst” (French devils-art) as the *Leipziger Anzeiger* once decried, evoking the classic Franco-Prussian divide but also the confessional lines around the so-called prohibition of images, photography in its *geistige-sprachliche Wesen* a potential grounds of sacrilege, *eine Gotteslästerung*. So Benjamin quotes rather freely from the *Leipziger Anzeiger* in his “Short History of Photography” to illustrate the motif of criminal sacrilege of the photographic method: “Der Mensch ist nach dem Ebenbilde Gottes geschaffen und Gottes Bild kann durch keine menschliche Maschine festgehalten werden,” “Man is created in the image of God and God’s image cannot be captured by human machine” (BENJAMIN 1991c: 369).⁶

1.13. To the reader who knows Benjamin as a paragon of modernity, the quote appears as a counter-position to be easily defeated or simply written off. Yet when taken in conjunction with the arguments concerning language and the coming philosophy, we see a carefully considered response to the problem of causation: the auric gives rise to the image, the image cannot give rise to the aura.

⁶ The *Leipziger Anzeiger* (Leipziger Tagesblatt und Anzeiger: Amtsblatt des Königlichen Amts- und Landgerichtes Leipzig und des Rathes und Polizeiamtes der Stadt Leipzig) was published from 1833 to 1905. The quotation can be traced to Karl Albert Dauthendey (1819-1896) as told to his son Max (1967-1918) published in: “Der Geist meines Vaters. Aufzeichnungen aus einem Begrabenen Jahrhundert” / Max Dauthendey, München: Langen, 1921. Cited elsewhere in: M. Dauthendey, 1912, in Ges. Werke I, 49f. Max Dauthendey, *Der Geist meines Vaters*, München: Albert Langen, 1912, p. 61. According to Helmut Gernsheim, *Die Fotografie*, Wien: Fritz Molden, 1971. s. 23, the citation is a fiction, but I find the authenticity of the opinion entirely plausible.



Figure 2. Newhaven Fishwives, ca. 1845 David Octavius Hill (Scottish, 1802–1870); Robert Adamson (Scottish, 1821–1848). Salted paper print from paper negative 11 5/8 x 8 9/16 in. (29.5 x 21.7 cm)

2.1. The aura as the locus is already evident in the first image of young Kafka but the observation does not rest on the author's work but on the presence communicated within the image. Benjamin also discusses a series of images taken by the Scottish painter and pioneer of photography David Octavius Hill with Robert Adamson, known as the *Newhaven Fishwives* from 1845.⁷ Here, on the themes which were later to form the cornerstone of the *Kunstwerk* essay between reproduction and an original aura, the technical precision of the *Newhaven Fishwives* illuminates something unexpected, bringing to light a different view than merely a portrait of the subjects. The image expresses a "magical quality"⁸ that he here terms a "winzige Fünkchen," the tiniest spark in which, not by intention but by mere "chance," a "Hier und Jetzt" is created: a here and now, a presence in the image, an authenticity expressed in mediation by reproduction, and thus an enchantment frozen in time, which we may call a kind of magic as it cannot be predicted (BENJAMIN 1991c: 371). This presence is an "unscheinbare Stelle," a non-illuminating point in itself that is able to present the future as an eternal extension of the present moment. It is, as if into a space entirely moved by consciousness, the unintentional has entered. Benjamin calls this the "optical-unconscious" of the work and we mark thereby the entrance of psychoanalysis into his thought (BENJAMIN 1991c: 371). The optical-unconscious is exposed by the light of lens, a spark which in the tiniest of seconds releases its unfurling or extension in Kantian terms, its "Ausschreitens," says Benjamin. This

⁷ Newhaven is a fishing village which, at the time, was a mile and a half down the hill from Edinburgh. From the website of the possessor, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York: "Since most of the men's work was at sea and therefore not only beyond the reach of the camera but also impossible to capture with the long exposure times of the calotype process (thirty seconds or more in full sunlight), Hill and Adamson paid particular attention to the labor of the women and to the sense of community that bound them together." <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1997.382.19>

⁸ Magic may suggest an unanticipated momentary revelation. For a more extensive discussion, see E. Jacobson, *Metaphysics of the Profane* (2003: 93-99).

occurs through the key technique of photography: the magnification of time. The optical-unconscious functions much the same way as psychoanalysis describes the drives: they are unannounced and unexpected. Like the function of the psyche, it transcends abstraction and takes on physiognomic aspects by the system of temporal magnification in the same way that biology relies on the microscope to reveal worlds underneath worlds that are presumed not to exist. The discovery rests neither with the objects alone nor their expression, for the natural images captured in photographs could never attain their influence without being reproduced technically. The magic, as it were, also did not require the subjects to be conscious of posterity. It demanded just the opposite: to be very much present within the moment.

2.2. Benjamin's engagement with materialism becomes evident in two forms. The expression of the *geistige Wesen* of a thing is localized within its object-status, thus neutrality within the originating standpoint. However, the loss of power of photography to express the substance of the intellect of things coincides with Benjamin's growing awareness of the power of capital, the imaginaries of consumption, and ultimately how the social technologies will be rendered to the use of the market. This is not to the detriment of his observations concerning *das Geistige* — obviously Spirit in an entirely non-Hegelian sense — but as a historical materialism, a short history of the use of a technological medium. Indeed, before the introduction of its market potential, photography was possessed by “biblischen Segen,” he writes, meaning a Genesic benediction no different than the idea of the medium of language resting blissfully in the garden of Eden. The medium was first protected from the ravages of the market. The development of capitalism out of the 19th century however proved a force too powerful to resist simply on the basis of its truth-content. Photography became the consort of capital and through the photographic image, aspiration turned manifest as never before in the lifelike quality of consumables. Unattainable objects were suddenly rendered accessible in an image. The “Teufelskunst” was not in the lens but the market that dictated its usage (BENJAMIN 1991c: 369). The images created by photography became the phantoms of the market in their “uferlosen Trauer” (BENJAMIN 1991c: 376). Photography, once the medium of the absolute innocence of reason succumbs to image-making for the falsehood of the market.

2.3. There may however be some messianic respite from the tale of desperation. The lens may be enslaved but not the aura. In principle, the aura's exposure is matched only by its technical capability, and thereby also a contradiction ensues, for the aura can only be known by that which would technically negate its originality. The aura in this sense must exist in a form of artistic completion, a “Künstlerische Vollendung,” a creating though never finished, which captures beginnings and ends at one moment (BENJAMIN 1991c: 376). This *Künstlerische Vollendung*, possibly similar to Franz Rosenzweig's aesthetic category of *das Fertigwerden*, is an auric moment neither manifested by the lens nor suppressed by it, but only materially possible through it

(ROSENZWEIG 1993: 270).⁹ Before the Parisian images of Eugene Atget, whom Benjamin refers to as the precursor to surrealism, the aura suffocated under the conventional techniques of portrait photography and art of *Retusch* (the touch-up). These he sees as a product of the capitalist turn to essentially bury every access to the subterranean grottos of momentary authenticity. “Er reinigt diese Atmosphäre, ja bereinigt sie: er leitet die Befreiung des Objekts von der Aura ein” (BENJAMIN 1991c: 378) – Atget images purged from Paris the makeup used to hide the aura and thus introduced “the liberation of the object from the aura”. This should not be understood as the liberation of materialism from the aura, nor should we think of this as a blind defense of secularism. He does not seek the liquidation of the aura, or a rarefied original, by mass reproduction. It can be read in reverse: the liberation of the object is also the freeing of the aura from its strictly chronological occurrence. In this sense, the *Newhaven Fishwives* is rendered tactile and experiential even 150 years after its occurrence. Its *geistige Wesen* is communicable and expressive. Atget’s images, he continues, “saugen die Aura aus der Wirklichkeit wie Wasser aus einem sinkenden Schiff,” “They suck the aura from reality like water from a sinking ship.” The medium rescues this substance — an intellectual, discursive *geistige* core content — from a drowning humanity. But what is the substance? “Ein sonderbares Gespinst von Raum und Zeit: einmalige Erscheinung einer Ferne, so nah sie sein mag” (BENJAMIN 1991c: 378). What is aura? A unique flash of space and time? A single appearance of something distant that is made so near as to enable it being experienced again.

2.4. This typifies the aim of photography for Benjamin: the liberation of the object from the aura for the liberation of the aura from object. Obviously the two elements, like form and content, are paired phenomenological necessities of the photograph. There could never be the one without the other. Benjamin praises the remarkable aspect of Atget’s lumpen portraits in pulling the aura out of its *Wirklichkeit*, the reality that surrounds it, like water from a sinking ship. One saves the passengers, to be sure, with a sinking ship, not the water. But where would a ship be without it? The aura is everywhere but it is only accessible to us through the medium of revelation. It is a point of reference, a measure between space and time but also the form of singularity in distance which is made present before us. And thus this liberation only speaks to a form of freedom from the binary of subject and object, not the separation of the essences. Benjamin therefore does not call for the liquidation of the aura through the new technologies of mass reproduction but rather the liberation of the aura from the reification and abstraction from the actual persons and ourselves in whom the image originates. This feature of photography is the keyhole through which the unity of materiality and perception begins: The key is to bring the viewer closer to its originality that is not rarefied, not simply an “Überwindung des Einmaligen,” (BENJAMIN 1991c: 378) or an overcoming of singularity through reproduction, but a return to the unique, authentic and extraordinary quality in its

⁹ Rosenzweig terms this a “gehaltvoller beseelter Zusammenhang” that is capable of arriving at “ein im ästhetischen Sinn, Fertiges, Abschließendes zustande” (1993: 270).

presence in our time — in other words: “das Hier und Jetzt des Kunstwerks” (BENJAMIN 1991e: 437).

2.5. The subject-object division is eviscerated by the medium, as there is no meaningful distinction between original and reproduction in the photographic image. The work of art is so wedded to its reproduction in this form that it wins its singularity through the de-hulling of the object through the lens. Photography returns to the pure form, the divine language, to become “schöpferisch,” meaning creative but truly *Genesisic*: it will return to the narrative of creation if it is able to emancipate itself from the physiognomic, political and scientific interests of an age that has turned it into “Fetisch” to become, as it were, itself again (BENJAMIN 1991c: 384).

2.6. Photography is a measure, thus always presenting or actualizing the distance between the world and its redemption. Photography is always photogrammetry between these two poles. Franz Rosenzweig understood these moments in a grand historical sweep that was punctuated by momentary sparks of creation, revelation and ultimately redemption. For Benjamin, as he became ever more cognizant of his historical moment and thus engaged with the promise of Marxism as a method, the mediums of language, image and thus photography to render the momentary accessible, to precipitate a return to origins and thereby to link beginnings and ends in such a way that they might release the wellsprings of redemption, proved to be his primary cause. “Das Schöpferische am Photographieren,” he concludes, “ist dessen Überantwortung an die Mode. ‘Die Welt ist schön’ – genau das ist ihre Devise” (BENJAMIN 1991c: 383). In other words, the divine creationist element in photography is its response to the permeability of the world with nothing more brief than fashion. Invoking Genesis: “ ‘The world is beautiful’ — exactly this is its device.”

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