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# Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered\*

SUSAN BUCK-MORSS

## I

Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"<sup>1</sup> is generally taken to be an affirmation of mass culture and of the new technologies through which it is disseminated. And rightly so. Benjamin praises the cognitive, hence political, potential of technologically mediated cultural experience (film is particularly privileged).<sup>2</sup> Yet the closing section of this 1936 essay reverses the optimistic tone. It sounds a warning. Fascism is a "violation of the technical apparatus" that parallels fascism's violent "attempt to organize the newly proletarianized masses"—not by giving them their due, but by "allowing them to express themselves."<sup>3</sup> "The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life."<sup>4</sup>

Benjamin seldom makes sweeping condemnations, but here he states categorically: "All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war."<sup>5</sup> He is writing during the early period of fascist military adventurism—Italy's colonial war in Ethiopia, Germany's intervention in the Spanish Civil War. Yet Benjamin recognizes that the aesthetic justification of this policy was already in place at the century's start. It was the Futurists who, just before World War I,

\* I am grateful to Joan Sage for her help with the photographs for this piece.

1. This is the now-conventional English translation (see Harry Zohn, trans., *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt [New York: Schocken Books, 1969]). The literal translation of the German title is significantly different: "The Artwork in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility (*technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*)."<sup>1</sup> I have sidestepped the problem by using a shortened form: Artwork essay.

2. The best reading of Benjamin's Artwork essay remains Miriam Hansen's essay, "Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: 'The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology,'" *New German Critique* 40 (Winter 1987).

3. "The masses have the right to a change in property relations; Fascism seeks to give them a form of expression in the preservation of these relations" (Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 241, trans. modified).

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

first articulated the cult of warfare as a form of aesthetics. Benjamin cites their manifesto:

War is beautiful because it establishes human domination over the subjugated machinery, thanks to the gas masks, the terror-producing megaphones, the flame-throwers, the small tanks. War is beautiful because it initiates the dreamt of metalization of the human body. War is beautiful because it enriches a flowering meadow with the fiery orchids of machine guns. War is beautiful because it fuses gunfire, cannonades, cease-fires, the scents and stench of putrefaction into a symphony. War is beautiful because it creates the new architectural form of big tanks, geometrical flight formations, smoke spirals from burning villages . . .<sup>6</sup>

Benjamin concludes:

*Fiat ars—pereat mundus* " [create art—destroy the world],<sup>7</sup> says Fascism, and expects war to supply, just as Marinetti confesses that it does, the artistic gratification of a sense perception that has been altered by technology. This is the obvious perfection of *l'art pour l'art*. Humanity that, according to Homer, was once an object of spectacle [*Schauobjekt*] for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it is capable of experiencing [*erleben*] its own destruction as an aesthetic enjoyment [*Genuss*] of the highest order. So it is with the aestheticization of politics, which is being managed by fascism. Communism responds with the politicization of art.<sup>8</sup>

This paragraph has haunted me for the twenty-odd years I have been reading the Artwork essay—a period when politics as spectacle (including the aestheticized spectacle of war) has become a commonplace in our televisual world. Benjamin is saying that sensory alienation lies at the source of the aestheticization of politics, which fascism does not create, but merely “manages” (*betreibt*). We are to assume that both alienation and aestheticized politics as the sensual conditions of modernity outlive fascism—and thus so does the enjoyment taken in viewing our own destruction.

The Communist response to this crisis is to “politicize art,” implying—what? Surely Benjamin must mean more than merely to make culture a vehicle

6. Ibid., p. 242 (trans. modified).

7. A distortion of the Baroque original: “Create justice, transform the world,” the electoral promise of Emperor Ferdinand I (1563). See Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* I:3, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhaeuser (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974), p. 1055.

8. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 242 (trans. modified).

for Communist propaganda.<sup>9</sup> He is demanding of art a task far more difficult—that is, to *undo* the alienation of the corporeal sensorium, to *restore the instinctual power of the human bodily senses for the sake of humanity's self-preservation*, and to do this, not by avoiding the new technologies, but by *passing through* them.

The problem of interpreting the closing section of Benjamin's text lies in the fact that, halfway through this final thought (aestheticized politics, politicized art), Benjamin changes the constellation in which his conceptual terms (politics, art, aesthetics) are deployed, and hence their meaning. If we were really to "politicize art" in the radical way he is suggesting, art would cease to *be* art as we know it. Moreover, the key term "aesthetics" would shift its meaning one hundred and eighty degrees. "Aesthetics" would be transformed, indeed, redeemed, so that, ironically (or dialectically), *it* would describe the field in which the antidote to fascism is deployed as a political response.

This point may seem trivial, or unnecessarily sophistic. But if it is allowed to develop, it changes the entire conceptual order of modernity. That is my claim. Benjamin's critical understanding of mass society disrupts the tradition of modernism (far more radically, incidentally, than does his contemporary, Martin Heidegger) by exploding the constellation of art, politics, and aesthetics into which, by the twentieth century, this tradition has congealed.

## II

What I will *not* try to do is to take you through the whole history of Western metaphysics in order to demonstrate the permutations of this constellation in terms of the inner-historical development of philosophy, a decontextualized "life of the mind." Others have done this with sufficient brilliance to make clear the unfruitfulness of this approach for the problem with which we are dealing, because it presumes just that continuity in cultural tradition which Benjamin wanted to explode.<sup>10</sup>

9. Otherwise, the two conditions, crisis and response, would turn out to be the same. Once art is drawn into politics (Communist politics no less than Fascist politics), how could it help but put itself into its service, thus to render up to politics its own artistic powers, i.e., "aestheticize politics"?

10. Heidegger has been particularly concerned with the philosophical wanderings of the key term "aesthetics" in Western philosophy (see, e.g., his lectures from 1936/37—contemporaneous with Benjamin's essay—*Nietzsche: Der Wille zur Macht als Kunst*, vol. 43 of Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe II: Abteilung: Vorlesungen, 1923–76* [Frankfurt a.M.: Vittorio Klostermann, 1985]). For a provocatively critical, contextualized account of the discourse of "aesthetics" within the modern era of European culture, see Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1990). For an excellent intellectual history of the connection between aesthetics and politics in German thought that stresses the importance of Hellenism in general and of Winckelmann in particular (omitted from Eagleton's account), the idea of the Greeks as an "aesthetic" and "cultural" people in contrast to material and imperial Rome, see Josef Chytrý, *The Aesthetic State: A Quest in Modern German Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

But it *will* be helpful to recall the original etymological meaning of the word “aesthetics,” because it is precisely to this origin that, via Benjamin’s revolution, we find ourselves returned. *Aisthētikos* is the ancient Greek word for that which is “perceptive by feeling.” *Aisthēsis* is the sensory experience of perception. The original field of aesthetics is not art but reality—corporeal, material nature. As Terry Eagleton writes: “Aesthetics is born as a discourse of the body.”<sup>11</sup> It is a form of cognition, achieved through taste, touch, hearing, seeing, smell—the whole corporeal sensorium. The terminae of all of these—nose, eyes, ears, mouth, some of the most sensitive areas of skin—are located at the surface of the body, the mediating boundary between inner and outer. This physical-cognitive apparatus with its qualitatively autonomous, nonfungible sensors (the ears cannot smell, the mouth cannot see) is “out front” of the mind, encountering the world prelinguistically,<sup>12</sup> hence prior not only to logic but to meaning as well. Of course all of the senses can be acculturated—that is the whole point of philosophical interest in “aesthetics” in the modern era.<sup>13</sup> But however strictly the senses are trained (as moral sensibility, refinement of “taste,” sensitivity to cultural norms of beauty), all of this is *a posteriori*. The senses maintain an uncivilized and uncivilizable trace, a core of resistance to cultural domestication.<sup>14</sup> This is because their immediate purpose is to serve instinctual needs—for warmth, nourishment, safety, sociability<sup>15</sup>—in short, they remain a part of the biological apparatus, indispensable to the self-preservation of both the individual and the social group.

### III

So little does aesthetics have to do intrinsically with the philosophical trinity of Art, Beauty, and Truth that one might rather place it within the field of

11. Eagleton, *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, p. 13. Eagleton is dealing with the historical birth of aesthetics as a modern discourse (specifically, in the work of the mid-eighteenth-century German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten), and describes the political implications of this anti-Cartesian focus on the “dense, swarming territory” outside of the mind that comprises “nothing less than the whole of our sensate life together,” as the “first stirrings of a primitive materialism—of the body’s long inarticulate rebellion against the tyranny of the theoretical” (p. 13).

12. This was its meaning for Baumgarten, who first developed the “aesthetic” as an autonomous thematic in philosophy. Yet Eagleton is correct to note that the affirmation of sense experience is short-lived in Baumgarten’s theory: “If his *Aesthetica* (1750) opens up in an innovative gesture the whole terrain of sensation, what it opens it up to is in effect the colonization of reason” (Eagleton, *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, p. 15).

13. See, e.g., Rousseau’s discussion of the education of the senses in *Emile*.

14. Baumgarten distinguishes between *aesthetica artificialis* (to which he devotes the majority of his text) and *aesthetica naturalis*, as it is observed in children’s play.

15. Sociability is not only a historico-cultural category, but a part of our “nature.” That much must be granted to sociobiology (and to Aristotle and Marx, for that matter). The mistake is to presume that today’s societies are accurate expressions of this biological instinct. It could be argued, for example, that precisely in its most biological aspect (reproduction of the species), the privatized family is unsocial.

animal instincts.<sup>16</sup> This is, of course, just what made philosophers suspicious of “the aesthetic.” Even as Alexander Baumgarten articulated “aesthetics” for the first time as an autonomous field of inquiry, he was aware that “one could accuse him of concerning himself with things unworthy of a philosopher.”<sup>17</sup>

Just how it happened that, within the course of the modern era, the term “aesthetics” underwent a reversal of meaning so that in Benjamin’s time it was applied first and foremost to art—to cultural forms rather than sensible experience, to the imaginary rather than the empirical, to the illusory rather than the real—is not self-evident. It demands a critical, exoteric explanation of the socioeconomic and political context in which the discourse of the aesthetic was deployed, as Terry Eagleton has recently demonstrated in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. Eagleton traces the ideological implications of this concept during its checkered career in the modern era—how it bounces like a ball among philosophical positions, from its critical-materialist connotations in Baumgarten’s original articulation, to its class-based meaning in the work of Shaftesbury and Burke as an aesthetics of “sensibility,” an aristocratic moral style, and thence to Germany. There, throughout the tradition of German idealism, it was recognized with varying degrees of caution as a legitimate cognitive mode, yet evermore fatally connected with the sensuous, the heteronomous, the fictitious, only to end up in the neo-Kantian schemata of Habermas as (to cite Fredric Jameson) “a kind of sandbox to which one consigns all those vague things . . . under the heading of the irrational . . . [where] they can be monitored and, in case of need, controlled (the aesthetic is in any case conceived as a kind of safety valve for irrational impulses).”<sup>18</sup>

The story is quite incredible, really, particularly when one considers the leitmotif that runs through all of these alterations, the ground from which the “aesthetic” pushes forth in its various forms. It is the motif of autogenesis, surely one of the most persistent myths in the whole history of modernity (and of Western *political* thought before then, one might add).<sup>19</sup> Doing one better

16. Again, the relation is dialectical: if neither the individual nor the social ever exists as “nature,” but always only as “second nature” (hence, culturally constructed), it is equally true that neither the “individual” nor the “social” enters into the culturally constructed world without leaving a remainder, a biological substrate that can provide the basis for resistance.

17. Benedetto Croce, cited in Hans Rudolf Schweizer, *Aesthetik als Philosophie der Sinnlichen Erkenntnis* (Basil: Schwabe and Co., 1973), p. 33. Schweizer claims, against Croce, that Baumgarten was not overly concerned or apologetic, and that the real bias against the aesthetic is a later development.

18. Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic* (New York: Verso, 1990), p. 232.

19. The “birth” of the Greek polis is attributed precisely to the wondrous idea that man can produce himself *ex nihilo*. The polis becomes the artifact of “man,” in which he can bring forth, as a material reality, his own higher essence. Similarly, Machiavelli wrote in praise of the Prince who self-creatively founds a new principality, and connects this autogenetic act with the height of manliness.

than Virgin birth, modern man, *homo autotelus*, literally produces himself, generating himself, to cite Eagleton, “miraculously out of [his] own substance.”<sup>20</sup>

What seems to fascinate modern “man” about this myth is the narcissistic illusion of total control. The fact that one can *imagine* something that *is* not, is extrapolated in the fantasy that one can (re)create the world according to plan (a degree of control impossible, for example, in the creation of a living, breathing child). It is the fairy-tale promise that wishes are granted—without the fairy tale’s wisdom that the consequences can be disastrous. It must be admitted that this myth of creative imagination has had salutary effects, as it is intimately entwined with the idea of freedom in Western history. For that reason (an excellent reason), it has been staunchly defended and highly praised.<sup>21</sup>

Yet present feminist consciousness in scholarship has revealed how fearful of the biological power of women this mythic construct can be.<sup>22</sup> The truly autogenetic being is entirely self-contained. If it has any body at all, it must be one impervious to the senses, hence safe from external control. Its potency is in its lack of corporeal response. In abandoning its senses, it, of course, gives up sex. Curiously, it is precisely in this castrated form that the being is gendered male—as if, having nothing so embarrassingly unpredictable or rationally uncontrollable as the sense-sensitive penis, it can then confidently claim to *be* the phallus. Such an asensual, *anaesthetic* protruberance is this artifact: modern man.

Consider Kant on the sublime. He writes that, faced with a threatening and menacing nature—towering cliffs, a fiery volcano, a raging sea—our first impulse, connected (not unreasonably) to self-preservation,<sup>23</sup> is to be afraid. Our *senses* tell us that, faced with nature’s might, “our ability to resist becomes an insignificant trifle.”<sup>24</sup> But, says Kant, there is a different, more “sensible” (!) standard, which we acquire when viewing these awesome forces from a “safe” place, by which nature is small and our superiority immense:

Though the irresistibility of nature’s might makes us, considered as natural beings, recognize our physical impotence, it reveals in us at the same time an ability to judge ourselves independent of nature,

20. Eagleton, *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, p. 64.

21. See Carlos Castoriades, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987).

22. See, for example, the work of Luce Irigaray. For an excellent discussion of the parameters of the feminist debate, see articles by Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, and Nancy Frazer in *Praxis International* 2 (July 1991), pp. 137–77.

23. This “first impulse” might, in fact, be considered superior. But Kant writes condescendingly of the Savoyard peasant who, unlike the enraptured bourgeois tourist, “did not hesitate to call anyone a fool who fancies glaciated mountains” (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987], p. 124).

24. Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, pp. 120–21. Again, from an ecological perspective, this is not a foolish response.



and reveals in us a superiority over nature that is the basis of a self-preservation quite different in kind. . . .<sup>25</sup>

It is at this point in the text that the modern constellation of aesthetics, politics, and war congeals, linking the fate of those three elements. Kant's example of the man most worthy of respect is the warrior, impervious to all his sense-giving information of danger. "Hence, no matter how much people may dispute, when they compare the statesman with the general, as to which one deserves the superior respect, an aesthetic [*sic*] judgment decides in favor of the general."<sup>26</sup> Both statesman and general are held by Kant in higher "aesthetic" esteem than the artist, as both, in shaping *reality* rather than its representations, are mimicking the autogenetic prototype, the nature- and self-producing Judeo-Christian God.

If in the Third Critique the "aesthetic" in judgments is robbed of its senses, in the Second Critique the senses play no role at all. The moral being is sense-dead from the start. Again, Kant's ideal is autogenesis. The moral will, cleansed of any contamination by the senses (which, in the First Critique, are the source of all cognition), sets up its own rule as a universal norm. Reason produces itself in Kant's morality—the most "sublimely" when one's own life is sacrificed to the idea.

"The further Kant goes," Ernst Cassirer writes, "the more he rids himself . . . of the prevailing sentimentality" of the "Age of Sensibility."<sup>27</sup> To be historically accurate, it should be acknowledged that this sensibility, influenced enormously by Johann Winckelmann's conception of Hellenism, was homophilic. It affirmed the aesthetic beauty, first and foremost, of the *male* body. Indeed, homoerotic sensuality may have been even more threatening to the emerging modernist psyche than the reproductive sexuality of women.<sup>28</sup> Kant's transcendental subject purges himself of the senses which endanger autonomy not only because they unavoidably entangle him in the world, but, specifically, because they make him passive ("languid" [*schmelzend*] is Kant's word) instead of active ("vigorous" [*wacker*]),<sup>29</sup> susceptible, like "Oriental voluptuaries,"<sup>30</sup> to sympathy and tears. Cassirer writes that this was

the reaction of Kant's completely virile way of thinking to the effeminacy and over-softness that he saw in control of all around him. It

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid., pp. 121–22.

27. Ernst Cassirer, *Kant's Life and Thought*, trans. James Haden, intro. Stephan Körner (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 269.

28. Was it merely a coincidence that Kant praised as sublime precisely those Swiss alps, the size and precipitous appearance of which so appalled Winckelmann that, upon coming within sight of them in 1768, he abandoned his planned return to Germany and turned back to Italy?

29. Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, p. 133.

30. Ibid., p. 134.



is in this sense, in fact, that he came to be understood. . . . Not only Schiller, who explicitly lamented in a letter to Kant that he had momentarily taken on the “aspect of an opponent,” but Wilhelm von Humbolt, Goethe, and Hölderlin also concur in this judgment. Goethe extols as Kant’s “immortal service” that he released morality from the feeble and servile estate into which it had fallen, through the crude calculus of happiness, and thus “brought us all back from the effeminacy [*Weichlichkeit*] in which we were wallowing.”<sup>31</sup>

The theme of the autonomous, autotelic subject as sense-dead, and for this reason a *manly* creator, a self-starter, sublimely self-contained,<sup>32</sup> appears throughout the nineteenth century—as does the association of the “aesthetics” of this creator with the warrior, and hence with war. At the end of the century, with Nietzsche, there is a new affirmation of the body, but it remains self-contained, taking the highest pleasure in its own biophysical emanations. Nietzsche’s ideal of the artist-philosopher, the embodiment of the Will to Power, manifests the elitist values of the warrior,<sup>33</sup> perhaps “so far distant from other men that he can form them.”<sup>34</sup> This combination of autoerotic sexuality and wielding power over others is what Heidegger calls Nietzsche’s “*Mannesaesthetik*.”<sup>35</sup> It is to replace what Nietzsche himself calls “*Weibesaesthetik*”<sup>36</sup>—“female aesthetics” of receptivity to sensations from the outside.

One could go on documenting this solopsistic—and often truly silly—fantasy of the phallus, this tale of all-male reproduction, the magic art of *creation ex nihilo*. But, although the theme will return below, I want to argue for the philosophical fruitfulness of a different approach, one more in line with Benjamin’s own method in the Artwork essay. And that is to trace the development, not of the meaning of terms, but of the human sensorium itself.

31. Cassirer, *Kant's Life and Thought*, p. 270. Cassirer is citing Goethe’s comment to Chancellor von Muller, April 1818. (The translation in Cassirer’s book is more strongly gendered than Goethe’s text. Thanks to Alexandra Cook for pointing this out.) Goethe’s famous study of Winckelmann (1805) praises him for living a life close to the ancient Hellenic ideal. This included, explicitly, his sensual relationships with beautiful young men. It was Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* that “captivated” Goethe (Cassirer, p. 273).

32. “To be sufficient to oneself and hence have no need of society, yet without being unsociable, i.e., without shunning society, is something approaching the sublime, as is any case of setting aside our needs” (*Critique of Judgement*, p. 136).

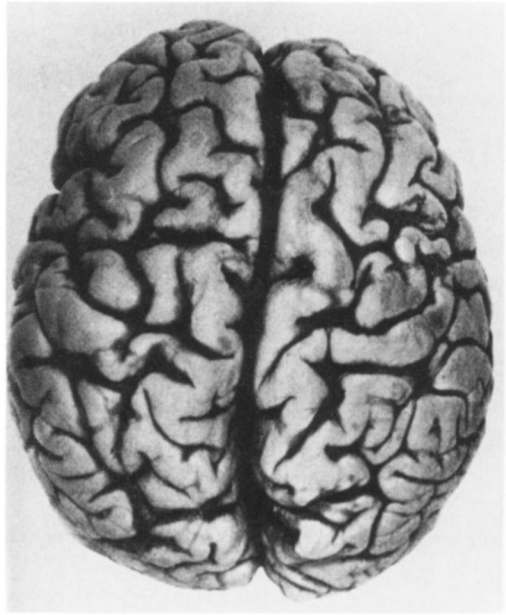
33. The work of warriors “is an instinctive creation and imposition of forms . . . they do not know what guilt, responsibility or consideration are . . . they exemplify that terrible artists’ egoism that . . . knows itself justified to all eternity in its ‘work,’ like a mother in her child” (Nietzsche, cited in Eagleton, p. 237).

34. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 419.

35. Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, pp. 91–92. The dichotomy of terms does not appear in Nietzsche’s text.

36. Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, p. 429.

*Brain of Sonja Kovalevskaya, Russian mathematician (1840–1901).*



#### IV

The senses are effects of the nervous system, composed of hundreds of billions of neurons extending from the body surfaces through the spinal cord, to the brain. The brain, it must be said, yields to philosophical reflection a sense of the uncanny. In our most empiricist moments, we would like to take the matter of the brain itself for the mind. (What could be more appropriate than the brain studying the brain?) But there seems to be such an abyss between us, alive, as we look out on the world, and that gray-white gelatinous mass with its cauliflower-like convolutions that *is* the brain (the biochemistry of which does not differ qualitatively from that of a sea slug) that, intuitively, we resist naming them as identical. If this “I” who examines the brain were nothing *but* the brain, how is it that I feel so uncomprehendingly alien in its presence?<sup>37</sup>

Hegel thus has intuition on his side in his attacks against the brain-watchers. If you want to understand human thought, he argues in *The Phenomenology of Mind*, don’t place the brain on a dissecting table, or feel the bumps on the head for phrenological information. If you want to know what the mind is, examine what it *does*—thus turning philosophy away from natural science to

37. Modern philosophers have quite persistently refused to conflate the brain with the “mind” (alias ego, *ame*, *Seele*, soul, subject, *Geist*). Descartes gave the soul protection from the “body machine” of the brain-nerves-muscles by locating it in “a certain extremely small gland” suspended in the middle of the brain (see *The Passions of the Soul*). Kant’s transcendental consciousness of the self manages to bypass the brain from the start.



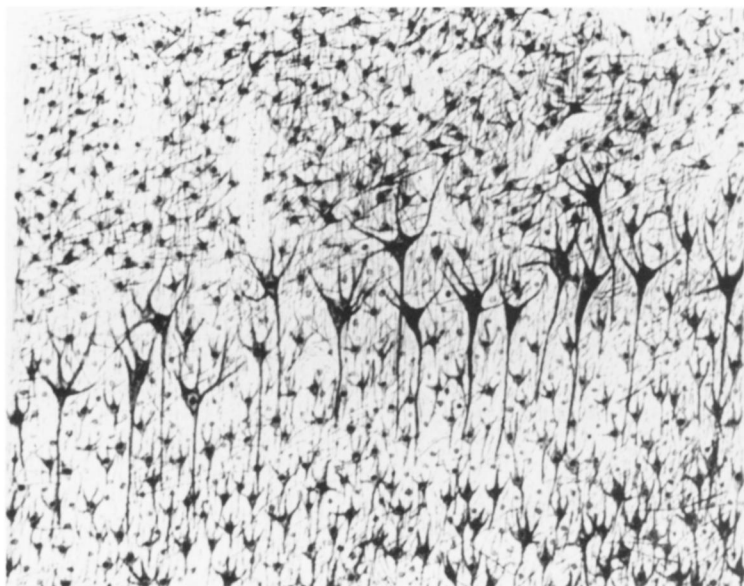
*Vincent Van Gogh. Pollard Birches. 1885.*

the study of human culture and human history. The two discourses henceforth went separate ways: philosophy of the mind and physiology of the brain remained, for the most part, as blind to the activities of one another as the two hemispheres of a “split-brain” patient are oblivious to the operations of each other—arguably, to the detriment of both.<sup>38</sup>

The nervous system is not contained within the body’s limits. The circuit from sense-perception to motor response begins and ends in the world. The brain is thus not an isolable anatomical body, but part of a system that passes through the person and her or his (culturally specific, historically transient) environment. As the source of stimuli and the arena for motor response, the external world must be included to complete the sensory circuit. (Sensory deprivation causes the system’s internal components to degenerate.) The field of the sensory circuit thus corresponds to that of “experience,” in the classical philosophical sense of a mediation of subject and object, and yet its very composition makes the so-called split between subject and object (which was the

38. Contemporary brain research, while impressive in its application of new technologies that allow us to “see” the brain in ever-greater detail, has suffered from too little philosophical and theoretical radicalism, while philosophy risks speaking in a language so archaic, given the new empirical discoveries of neuro-science, that it relegates itself to scholastic irrelevance—or simply to myth.

Recently, there has been an interest in reconnecting the discourses. See, e.g., Patricia Smith Churchland, *Neurophilosophy: Toward a Unified Science of the Mind-Brain* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), J. Z. Young, *Philosophy and the Brain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), and the many books by the prolific author R. M. Young.



*Illustration of cells described by Vladimir Betz.*

constant plague of classical philosophy) simply irrelevant. In order to differentiate our description from the more limited, traditional conception of the human nervous system which artificially isolates human biology from its environment, we will call this aesthetic system of sense-consciousness, decentered from the classical subject, wherein external sense-perceptions come together with the internal images of memory and anticipation, the “synaesthetic system.”<sup>39</sup>

This synaesthetic system is “open” in the extreme sense. Not only is it open to the world through the sensory organs, but the nerve cells within the body form a network that is in itself discontinuous. They reach out toward other nerve cells at points called synapses, where electrical charges pass through the space between them. Whereas in blood vessels a leak is lamentable, in the networks between nerve bundles everything “leaks.” Any cross section of the brain levels show this architectonic discontinuity, and the dendrite-like morphology of their extensions. The giant, pyramid-like layer of cells in the brain cortex was first described in 1874 by the Ukrainian anatomist Vladimir Betz.<sup>40</sup> A decade later, coincidentally, Vincent van Gogh, while a mental patient at St. Remy, found this form replicated in the external world.

39. If the “center” of this system is not in the brain, but on the body’s surface, then subjectivity, far from bounded within the biological body, plays the role of mediator between inner and outer sensations, the images of perception and those of memory. For this reason, Freud situated consciousness on the surface of the body, decentered from the brain (which he was willing to view as nothing more than large and evolved nerve ganglia).

40. Betz left no illustration of the cells he described and that were named after him.

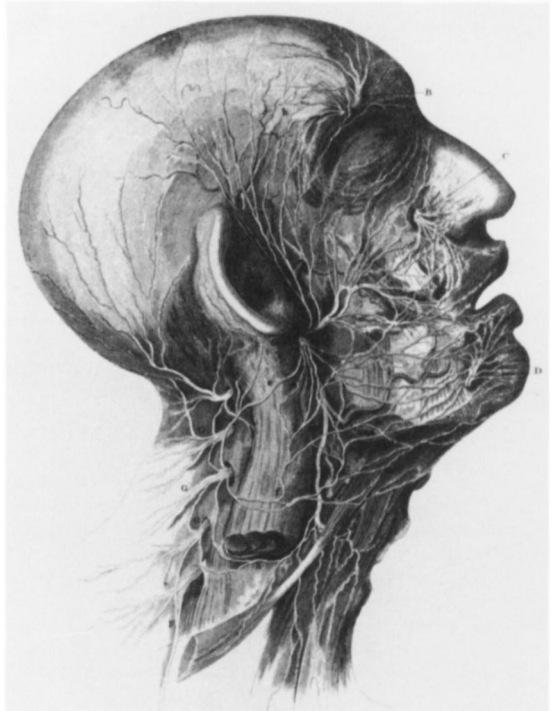
## V

Let us resist for a moment Hegel's abandonment of physiology and follow the neurological inquiry of one of his contemporaries, the Scottish anatomist Sir Charles Bell. Trained in painting as well as surgical medicine, Bell, with great excitement, studied the fifth nerve, the "grand nerve of expression," in the belief that "the countenance is the index of the mind."<sup>41</sup>

The expressive face is, indeed, a wonder of synthesis, as individual as a fingerprint, yet collectively legible by common sense. On it the three aspects of the synaesthetic system—physical sensation, motor reaction, and psychical meaning—converge in signs and gestures comprising a mimetic language. What this language speaks is anything but the concept. Written on the body's surface

41. Cited in Sir Gordon Gordon-Taylor and E. W. Walls, *Sir Charles Bell: His Life and Times* (London: E. & S. Livingstone, 1958), p. 116. In his enthusiasm for the philosophical implications of his discovery, Bell was careless about the physiological ones, with the result that a French colleague preempted him in scientific publication. It led to an unpleasant struggle between them as to who made the discovery first. See Paul F. Cranefield, *The Way In and the Way Out: François Magendie, Charles Bell, and the Roots of the Spinal Nerves* (Mt. Kisco, New York: Futura Publishing, 1974).

The Fifth Nerve. From *Sir Charles Bell, On the Nerves*, 1821.





as a convergence between the impress of the external world and the express of subjective feeling, the language of this system threatens to betray the language of reason, undermining its philosophical sovereignty.

Hegel, writing *The Phenomenology of Mind* in his Jena study in 1806, interpreted the advancing army of Napoleon (whose cannons he could hear roaring in the distance) as the unwitting realization of Reason. Sir Charles Bell, who, as a field doctor performing limb amputations, was physically present a decade later at the Battle of Waterloo, had a very different interpretation:

It is a misfortune to have our sentiments at variance with the universal sentiment. But there must ever be associated with the honours of Waterloo, in my eyes, the shocking signs of woe: to my ears, accents of intensity, outcry from the manly breast, interrupted, forcible expressions from the dying—and noisome smells. I must show you my note book [with sketches of those wounded], for . . . it may convey an excuse for this excess of sentiment.<sup>42</sup>

Bell's "excess" of sentiment did not mean emotionalism. He found his "mind calm amidst such a variety of suffering."<sup>43</sup> And it would be grotesque to interpret "sentiment" in this context as having anything to do with "taste." The excess was one of perceptual acuity, material awareness that ran out of the control of conscious will or intellection. It was not a psychological category of sympathy or compassion, of understanding the other's point of view from the perspective of intentional meaning, but, rather, physiological—a sensory mimesis, a response of the nervous system to external stimuli which was "excessive" because what he apprehended was *unintentional*, in the sense that it resisted intellectual comprehension. It could not be given meaning. The category of rationality could be applied to these physiological perceptions only in the sense of rationalization.<sup>44</sup>

42. Sir Charles Bell, cited in Leo M. Zimmerman and Ilza Veith, *Great Ideas in the History of Surgery*, 2nd ed., rev. (New York: Dover, 1967), p. 415.

43. "It was a strange thing to feel my clothes stiff with blood, and my arms powerless with the exertion of using the knife; and more extraordinary still, to find my mind calm amidst such a variety of suffering. But to give one of these objects access to your feelings was to allow yourself to be unmanned [*sic*] for the performance of a duty. It was less painful to look upon the whole, than to contemplate one" (cited in Zimmerman and Veith, p. 414).

44. Later in his life Bell was to endow this resistance with at least a weak theological meaning, as he described his aversion to animal vivisection, even when he acknowledged its great value to the progress of the art of medicine and practice of surgery: "I should be writing a third paper on the Nerves, but I cannot proceed without making some experiments, which are so unpleasant to make that I defer them. You may think me silly, but I cannot perfectly convince myself that I am authorized in nature, or religion, to do these cruelties—for what?—for anything else than a little egotism or self-aggrandizement; and yet, what are my experiments in comparison with those which are daily done? and are done daily for nothing" (Gordon-Taylor and Walls, *Sir Charles Bell*, p. 111). Note that this comment was made only after he had already dissected, e.g., the nerves of the face of a live ass.

## VI

Walter Benjamin's understanding of modern experience is neurological. It centers on shock. Here, as seldom elsewhere, Benjamin relies on a specific Freudian insight, the idea that consciousness is a shield protecting the organism against stimuli—"excessive energies"<sup>45</sup>—from without, by preventing their retention, their impress as memory. Benjamin writes: "The threat from these energies is one of shocks. The more readily consciousness registers these shocks, the less likely they are to have a traumatic effect."<sup>46</sup> Under extreme stress, the ego employs consciousness as a buffer, blocking the openness of the synaesthetic system,<sup>47</sup> thereby isolating present consciousness from past memory. Without the depth of memory, experience is impoverished.<sup>48</sup> The problem is that under conditions of modern shock—the daily shocks of the modern world—response to stimuli *without* thinking has become necessary for survival.

Benjamin wanted to investigate the "fruitfulness" of Freud's hypothesis, that consciousness parries shock by preventing it from penetrating deep enough to leave a permanent trace on memory, by applying it to "situations far removed from those which Freud had in mind."<sup>49</sup> Freud was concerned with war-neurosis, the trauma of "shell shock" and catastrophic accident that plagued soldiers in World War I. Benjamin claimed this battlefield experience of shock "has become the norm" in modern life.<sup>50</sup> Perceptions that once occasioned conscious reflection are now the source of shock-impulses that consciousness must parry. In industrial production no less than modern warfare, in street crowds and erotic encounters, in amusement parks and gambling casinos, shock is the very essence of modern experience. The technologically altered environment exposes the human sensorium to physical shocks that have their correspondence in

45. Benjamin cites Freud: "For a living organism, protection against stimuli is an almost more important function than the reception of stimuli; the protective shield is equipped with its own store of energy . . . [operating] against the effects of the excessive energies at work in the external world . . ." (*Charles Baudelaire*, trans. Harry Zohn [London: Verso, 1983], p. 115). The text by Freud is *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1921), which returns to one of Freud's earliest schemata of the psyche, the 1895 project which he described as a "Psychology for Neurologists," and which was published posthumously as "Entwurf einer Psychologie." The 1921 essay is the only text of Freud that Benjamin considers here.

46. Benjamin, *Baudelaire*, p. 115.

47. The conception of the "synaesthetic system" is compatible with Freud's understanding of the ego as "ultimately derived from bodily sensations, chiefly from those springing from the surface of the body," the place from which "both external and internal perceptions may spring"; the ego "may be thus regarded as a mental projection of the surface of the body" (Freud, *The Ego and the Id* [1923], trans. Joan Riviere [New York: W. W. Norton, 1960], pp. 15 and 16n).

48. "Recollection is . . . an elemental phenomenon which aims at giving us the time for organizing the reception of stimuli which we initially lacked" (Paul Valéry, cited in Benjamin, *Baudelaire*, p. 116).

49. Benjamin, *Baudelaire*, p. 114.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 116.



psychic shock, as Baudelaire's poetry bears witness. To record the "breakdown" of experience was the "mission" of Baudelaire's poetry: he "placed the shock experience at the very center of his artistic work."<sup>51</sup>

The motor responses of switching, snapping, the jolt in movement of a machine have their psychic counterpart in the "sectioning of time"<sup>52</sup> into a sequence of repetitive moments without development. The effect on the synaesthetic system<sup>53</sup> is brutalizing. Mimetic capacities, rather than incorporating the outside world as a form of empowerment, or "innervation,"<sup>54</sup> are used as a deflection against it. The smile that appears automatically on passersby wards off contact, a reflex that "functions as a mimetic shock absorber."<sup>55</sup>

Nowhere is mimesis as a defensive reflex more apparent than in the factory, where (Benjamin cites Marx) "workers learn to coordinate their own 'movements to the uniform and unceasing motion of an automaton.'"<sup>56</sup> "Independently of the worker's volition, the article being worked on comes within his range of action and moves away from him just as arbitrarily."<sup>57</sup> Exploitation is here to be understood as a cognitive category, not an economic one: The factory system, injuring every one of the human senses, paralyzes the imagination of the worker.<sup>58</sup> His or her work is "sealed off from experience"; memory is replaced by conditioned response, learning by "drill," skill by repetition: "practice counts for nothing."<sup>59</sup>

Perception becomes experience only when it connects with sense-memories of the past; but for the "protective eye" that wards off impressions, "there is no

51. Ibid., pp. 139, 116–17. "Baudelaire speaks of a man who plunges into the crowd as into a reservoir of electric energy. Circumscribing the experience of shock, he calls this a '*kaleidoscope* equipped with consciousness'" (p. 132).

52. Ibid., p. 139.

53. Benjamin uses the term "synaesthesia" here in connection with the theory of correspondences (ibid., p. 139). He may have been aware that the term is used in physiology to describe a sensation in one part of the body when another part is stimulated; and, in psychology, to describe when a sense stimulus (e.g., color) evokes another sense (e.g., smell). My use of "synaesthetic" is close to these: it identifies the mimetic synchrony between outer stimulus (perception) and inner stimulus (bodily sensations, including sense-memories) as the crucial element of aesthetic cognition.

54. "Innervation" is Benjamin's term for a mimetic reception of the external world, one that is empowering, in contrast to a defensive mimetic adaptation that protects at the price of paralyzing the organism, robbing it of its capacity of imagination, and therefore of active response.

55. Benjamin, *Baudelaire*, p. 133.

56. Ibid. Benjamin continues (quoting *Capital*): "Every kind of capitalist production . . . has this in common [ . . . ] that it is not the workman that employs the instruments of labor, but the instruments of labor that employ the workman. But it is only in the factory system that this inversion for the first time acquires technical and palpable reality" (p. 132).

57. Ibid., p. 133.

58. In the 1844 manuscripts, Marx notes: "The *forming* of the five senses is a labor of the entire history of the world down to the present." For Marx sensory life is "real"; man is to be "affirmed in the active world not only in the act of thinking, but with all his senses." In equating reality with sensory life, it is the materialist, Marx, who "aestheticizes" politics, in the authentic meaning of the term. Benjamin is close to Marx here.

59. Benjamin, *Baudelaire*, p. 133.

daydreaming surrender to faraway things.”<sup>60</sup> Being “cheated out of experience” has become the general state,<sup>61</sup> as the synaesthetic system is marshaled to parry technological stimuli in order to protect both the body from the trauma of accident and the psyche from the trauma of perceptual shock. As a result, the system reverses its role. Its goal is to *numb* the organism, to deaden the senses, to repress memory: the cognitive system of synaesthetics has become, rather, one of *anaesthetics*. In this situation of “crisis in perception,” it is no longer a question of educating the crude ear to hear music, but of giving it back hearing. It is no longer a question of training the eye to see beauty, but of restoring “perceptibility.”<sup>62</sup>

The technical apparatus of the camera, incapable of “returning our gaze,” catches the deadness of the eyes that confront the machine—eyes that “have lost their ability to look.”<sup>63</sup> Of course, the eyes still see. Bombarded with fragmentary impressions they see too much—and register nothing. Thus the simultaneity of overstimulation and numbness is characteristic of the new synaesthetic organization as *anaesthetics*. The dialectical reversal, whereby aesthetics changes from a cognitive mode of being “in touch” with reality to a way of blocking out reality, destroys the human organism’s power to respond politically even when self-preservation is at stake: Someone who is “past experiencing” is “no longer capable of telling . . . proven friend . . . from mortal enemy.”<sup>64</sup>

## VII

Anaesthetics became an elaborate technics in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Whereas the body’s self-anaesthetizing defenses are largely involuntary, these methods involved conscious, intentional manipulation of the synaesthetic system. To the already-existing Enlightenment narcotic forms of coffee, tobacco, tea, and spirits, there was added a vast arsenal of drugs and therapeutic practices, from opium, ether, and cocaine to hypnosis, hydrotherapy, and electric shock.

Anaesthetic techniques were prescribed by doctors against the disease of

60. Ibid., p. 151. Benjamin’s observation is in total accord with neurological research. The neurologist Frederick Mettler reports “a contradiction” between the reflective calm necessary to be creative (and to *invent* machines) and the destruction of this calm milieu “by the very machines and increased productivity which the reflective mind creates.” He notes that you have merely to be *present* to drive a car, whereas creative reflection is “absent-minded” (*Culture and the Structural Evolution of the Neural System* [New York: The American Museum of Natural History, 1956], p. 51).

61. Benjamin, *Baudelaire*, p. 137.

62. Ibid., pp. 147–48. In this context, film reconstitutes experience, establishing “perception in the form of shocks” as its “formal principle” (p. 132). *How* a film is constructed, whether it breaks through the numbing shield of consciousness or merely provides a “drill” for the strength of its defenses, becomes a matter of central political significance.

63. Ibid., pp. 147–49.

64. Ibid., p. 143.

“neurasthenia,” identified in 1869 as a pathological construct.<sup>65</sup> Striking in nineteenth-century descriptions of the effects of neurasthenia is the disintegration of the capacity for experience—precisely as in Benjamin’s account of shock. The dominant metaphors for the disease reflect this: “shattered” nerves, nervous “breakdown,” “going to pieces,” “fragmentation” of the psyche. The disorder was caused by “excess of stimulation” (*sthenia*), and the “incapacity to react to same” (*asthenia*). Neurasthenia could be brought about by “overwork,” the “wear and tear” of modern life, the physical trauma of a railroad accident, modern civilization’s “ever-growing tax upon the brain and its tributaries,” the “morbid ill effects attributed . . . to the prevalence of the factory system.”<sup>66</sup>

Remedies for neurasthenia might include hot baths or a trip to the seashore, but the most common treatment was drugs. The “chief” of all drugs used for “nervous exhaustion” was opium, because of its twofold impact: “it excites and stimulates for a short time the brain-cells, and then leaves them in a state of tranquility, which is best adapted to their nutrition and repair.”<sup>67</sup> Opiates were “the leading children’s drug throughout the nineteenth century.”<sup>68</sup> Mothers working in factories drugged their children as a form of day-care. Anaesthetics were prescribed as sleeping aids for insomnia and tranquilizers for the insane.<sup>69</sup> Procurement of opiates was unregulated: patent medicines (nerve tonics and painkillers of every sort) were money-making, transnational commodities, traded and sold free of governmental control.<sup>70</sup> Cocaine, first extracted from Peruvian coca in 1859 by the European Albert Niemann, became widely used by the end of the century.<sup>71</sup> Hypodermic syringes were available for subcutaneous injections beginning in the 1860s.<sup>72</sup>

The use of anaesthetics in medical surgery dates, not accidentally,<sup>73</sup> from

65. The term “neurasthenia” was publicized by the New York doctor George Miller Beard. By the 1880s it had taken a prominent place in European discussions. Beard himself suffered from nervous debilitation, and gave himself electrotherapy (shocks) “to replenish exhausted supplies of nerve force” (Janet Oppenheim, *Shattered Nerves: Doctors, Patients and Depression in Victorian England* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1991], p. 120).

66. Cited in Oppenheim, *Shattered Nerves*, pp. 44, 87, 95, 96, 101, 105.

67. Thomas Dowse (1880s), cited in Oppenheim, pp. 114–15.

68. Oppenheim, *Shattered Nerves*, p. 113.

69. Martin S. Pernick, *A Calculus of Suffering: Pain, Professionalism, and Anaesthesia in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985) p. 83.

70. Controls (e.g., England’s Pharmacy and Poison Act of 1908) were not passed until the twentieth century.

71. Owen H. Wangensteen and Sarah D. Wangensteen, *The Rise of Surgery: From Empiric Craft to Scientific Discipline* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1978).

72. Oppenheim, *Shattered Nerves*, p. 114.

73. I have not found reference to Charles Bell’s practice during surgery, but his French counterpart, Larry, surgeon for Napoleon’s army, froze the limbs to be amputated with ice, or knocked the patient unconscious. Larry was willing to experiment with nitrous oxide, which was known in his time, but the suggestion was considered by the majority of the French Royal Academy to border on the criminal (Frederick Prescott, *The Control of Pain* [London: The English Universities Press, 1964], pp. 18–28).



*Late-nineteenth-century advertisement for patent medicine.*



*Caricature of nitrous oxide (ether) frolics. 1808.*

this same period of manipulative experimentation with the elements of the synaesthetic system. "Ether frolics," the nineteenth-century version of glue-sniffing, was a party game, in which "laughing gas" (nitrous oxide) was inhaled, producing "voluptuous sensations," "dazzling visible impressions," "a sense of tangible extension highly pleasurable in every limb," "entrancing visions," "a world of new sensations," a new "universe composed of impressions, ideas, pleasures, and pain."<sup>74</sup> It was not until mid-century that the practical implications for surgery were developed. It happened in the United States when, independently, medical students in Georgia and Massachusetts participated in these "frolics." A Georgia surgeon, Crawford W. Long, noted that those bruised during the celebrations felt no pain. At a party in Massachusetts, medical students gave ether to rats in high enough doses to make them immobile, producing total insensibility. Crawford Long used anaesthetics successfully in operations in 1842. In 1844 a Hartford, Connecticut, dentist performed tooth extractions with nitrous oxide. In 1846—in a much more sober, legitimating atmosphere than the "ether frolics"—the first public demonstration of general anaesthesia was given at Massachusetts General Hospital,<sup>75</sup> whence this "wonderful discovery"<sup>76</sup> spread rapidly to Europe.

### VIII

It was not uncommon in the nineteenth century for surgeons to become drug addicts.<sup>77</sup> Freud's self-experimentation with cocaine is well known. Elizabeth Barrett Browning was a morphinist from late youth. Samuel Coleridge began his life-long addiction at the age of twenty-four. Charles Baudelaire used opium. By mid-nineteenth century habitual drug-taking was "rampant among the poor," and "spreading" among the "affluent, even among royalty."<sup>78</sup>

Drug addiction is characteristic of modernity. It is the correlate and counterpart of shock. The social problem of drug addiction, however, is not the same as the (neuro)psychological problem, for a drug-free, unbuffered adaptation to shock can prove fatal.<sup>79</sup> But the cognitive (hence, political) problem

74. Effects of nitrous oxide reported in Prescott, p. 19.

75. See Wangensteen and Wangensteen, pp. 277–79.

76. Prescott, p. 28. Acceptance of anesthetics was not without resistance. Cultural encoding of the meaning of pain included a strong tradition that held pain was "natural" or God-intended (especially in childbirth), and beneficial to healing. Resistance to the insensibility of general anaesthetics was also political: Elizabeth Cady Stanton "objected to a woman's surrendering her consciousness and body to a male doctor" (Pernick, pp. 16–61). "Long after 1846, alcoholic stupor remained an acceptable surgical anodyne" (ibid., p. 178).

77. Wangensteen and Wangensteen, *The Rise of Surgery*, p. 293.

78. Oppenheim, *Shattered Nerves*, p. 113.

79. See Hans Selye, *The Stress of Life*, 2nd ed., rev. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), p. 307. In an article published the same year as Benjamin's Artwork essay (1936), Selye first defined "Stress Syndrome" as a "Disease of Adaptation," that is, an inability of the organism to meet a (nonspecific)



lies still elsewhere. The experience of intoxication is not limited to drug-induced, biochemical transformations. Beginning in the nineteenth century, a narcotic was made out of reality itself.

The key word for this development is phantasmagoria. The term originated in England in 1802, as the name of an exhibition of optical illusions produced by magic lanterns. It describes an appearance of reality that tricks the senses through technical manipulation. And as new technologies multiplied in the nineteenth century, so did the potential for phantasmagoric effects.<sup>80</sup>

In the bourgeois interiors of the nineteenth century, furnishings provided a phantasmagoria of textures, tones, and sensual pleasure that immersed the home-dweller in a total environment, a privatized fantasy world that functioned as a protective shield for the senses and sensibilities of this new ruling class. In the *Passagen-Werk*, Benjamin documents the spread of phantasmagoric forms to public space: the Paris shopping arcades, where the rows of shop windows created a phantasmagoria of commodities on display; panoramas and dioramas that engulfed the viewer in a simulated total environment-in-miniature, and the World Fairs, which expanded this phantasmagoric principle to areas the size of small cities. These nineteenth-century forms are the precursors of today's shopping malls, theme parks, and video arcades, as well as the totally controlled environments of airplanes (where one sits plugged in to sight and sound and food service), the phenomenon of the "tourist bubble" (where the traveler's "experiences" are all monitored and controlled in advance), the individualized audiosensory environment of a "walkman," the visual phantasmagoria of advertising, the tactile sensorium of a gymnasium full of Nautilus equipment.

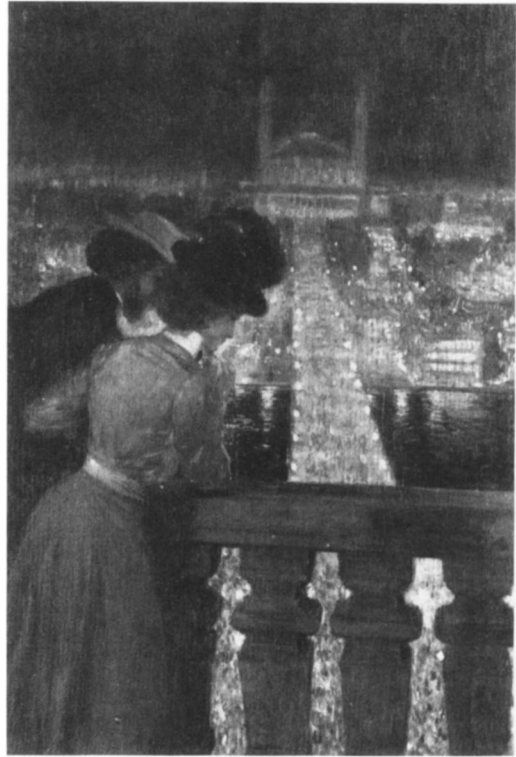
Phantasmagorias are a technoaesthetics. The perceptions they provide are "real" enough—their impact upon the senses and nerves is still "natural" from a neurophysical point of view. But their social function is in each case compensatory. The goal is manipulation of the synaesthetic system by control of environmental stimuli. It has the effect of anaesthetizing the organism, not through numbing, but through flooding the senses. These simulated sensoria alter consciousness, much like a drug, but they do so through sensory distraction rather

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demand made on it with adequate adaptive reactions. Stress was "the common denominator of all adaptative reactions in the body." It went through three phases if the external demand continued unabated: alarm reaction (general resistance to the demand), adaptation (an attempt, successful in the short-run, to coexist), and finally, exhaustion, resulting in passivity (lack of resistance, and possibly death).

80. Technology thus develops with a double function. On the one hand, it extends the human senses, increasing the acuity of perception, and forces the universe to open itself up to penetration by the human sensory apparatus. On the other hand, precisely because this technological extension leaves the senses open to exposure, technology doubles back on the senses as protection in the form of illusion, taking over the role of the ego in order to provide defensive insulation. The development of the machine as tool has its correlation in the development of the machine as armor (see below). It follows that the synaesthetic system is not a constant in history. It extends its scope, and it is through technology that this extension occurs.

*Franz Skarbina. View of the Seine and Paris at Night. 1901.*



than chemical alteration, and—most significantly—their effects are experienced collectively rather than individually. Everyone sees the same altered world, experiences the same total environment. As a result, unlike with drugs, the phantasmagoria assumes the position of objective fact. Whereas drug addicts confront a society that challenges the reality of their altered perception, the intoxication of phantasmagoria itself becomes the social norm. Sensory addiction to a compensatory reality becomes a means of social control.

The role of “art” in this development is ambivalent because, under these conditions, the definition of “art” as a sensual experience that distinguishes itself precisely by its separation from “reality” becomes difficult to sustain. Much of “art” enters into the phantasmagoric field as entertainment, as part of the commodity world. The effects of phantasmagoria exist on multiple levels, as is visible in a turn-of-the-century painting by Franz Skarbina.<sup>81</sup> The view is of the World Fair in Paris in 1901, depicted in the doubly illusory form provided by lighting at night. The painting is a *Stimmungsbild*, a “mood-painting,” a genre,

81. See John Czaplicka's discussion of this painting in “Pictures of a City at Work, Berlin, circa 1890–1930: Visual Reflections on Social Structures and Technology in the Modern Urban Construct,” *Berlin: Culture and Metropolis*, eds. Charles W. Haxthausen and Heidrun Suhr (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), pp. 12–16. I am grateful to the author for pointing out the relevance of the *Stimmungsbild* for the discussion at hand.



then in fashion, that aimed at depicting an atmosphere or “mood” more than a subject. Despite the depth of the view, visual pleasure is provided by the luminous surface of the painting that shimmers over the scene like a veil. John Czaplicka writes: The city is “reduced to a mood of the beholder. . . . The experience of place . . . is more emotional than rational. . . . There is subtle denial of the city as artifice . . . and a subtle relinquishing of humanity’s responsibility for having made this environment.”<sup>82</sup>

Benjamin describes the flaneur as self-trained in this capacity of distancing oneself by turning reality into a phantasmagoria: rather than being caught up in the crowd, he slows his pace and observes it, making a pattern out of its surface. He sees the crowd as a reflection of his dream mood, an “intoxication” for his senses.

The sense of sight was privileged in this phantasmagoric sensorium of modernity. But sight was not exclusively affected. Perfumeries burgeoned in the nineteenth century, their products overpowering the olfactory sense of a population already besieged by the smells of the city.<sup>83</sup> Zola’s novel *Le Bonheur des Dames* describes the phantasmagoria of the department store as an orgy of tactile eroticism, where women felt their way by touch through the rows of counters heaped with textiles and clothing. In regard to taste, Parisian gustatory refinements had already reached an exquisite level in post-Revolutionary France, as former cooks for the nobility sought restaurant employment. It is significant for the anaesthetic effects of these experiences that the singling out of any one sense for intense stimulus has the effect of numbing the rest.<sup>84</sup>

The most monumental artistic attempt to create a total environment was Richard Wagner’s design for music drama as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total artwork), in which poetry, music, and theater were combined in order to create, as Adorno writes, an “intoxicating brew” (surmounting the uneven development of the senses and reuniting them).<sup>85</sup> Wagnerian music drama floods the senses and fuses them as a “consoling phantasmagoria,” in a “permanent invitation to intoxication, as a form of oceanic regression.”<sup>86</sup> It is the “perfection of the illusion that the work of art is reality sui generis.”<sup>87</sup> “Like Nietzsche and subsequently Art Nouveau, which he anticipates in many respects, [Wagner] would like single-handed to will an aesthetic totality into being, casting a magic spell

82. Ibid., p. 15.

83. See Benjamin: “The recognition of a scent . . . deeply drugs the sense of time” (*Baudelaire*, p. 143).

84. See Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), p. 53. This specialization of sense stimulation causes an uneven development of the senses; they are transformed within industrial societies at different rates.

85. Theodor Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: NLB, 1981), p. 100. Adorno makes the point that “in advanced bourgeois civilization every organ of sense apprehends . . . a different world” (p. 104).

86. Ibid., pp. 87, 100.

87. Ibid., p. 85.

and with defiant unconcern about the absence of the social conditions necessary for its survival.”<sup>88</sup> It is this pseudo-totalization that, for Adorno, makes Wagnerian opera a phantasmagoria. Its unity is superimposed. Whereas, “under conditions of modernity,” in the “contingent experience of the individual” outside the opera house, “the separate senses do not unite” into a unified perception, here “disparate procedures are simply aggregated in such a way as to make them appear collectively binding.”<sup>89</sup> In lieu of internal musical logic, the Wagnerian opera evokes a surface “unity of style,” one that overwhelms by not pausing for breath.<sup>90</sup> Unity is mere duplication, which “substitutes for protest”;<sup>91</sup> “the music repeats what the words have already said”; the musical motifs recur like an advertising theme; intoxication, the ecstasy that might have affirmed sensuality, is reduced to surface sensation, while the content of the dramas is life’s negation: “the action culminates in the decision to die.”<sup>92</sup>

Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*, “intimately related to the disenchantment of the world,”<sup>93</sup> is an attempt to produce a totalizing metaphysics instrumentally, by means of every technological means at its disposal. This is true of dramatic representation as well as musical style. At Bayreuth the orchestra—the means of production of the musical effects—is hidden from the public by constructing the pit below the audience’s line of vision. Supposedly “integrating the individual arts,” the performance of Wagner’s operas “ends up by achieving a division of labor unprecedented in the history of music.”<sup>94</sup>

Marx made the term phantasmagoria famous, using it to describe the world of commodities that, in their mere visible presence, conceal every trace of the labor that produced them. They veil the production process, and—like mood pictures—encourage their beholders to identify them with subjective fantasies and dreams. Adorno comments on Marx’s theory of commodities that their phantasmagoria “mirrors subjectivity by confronting the subject with the product of its own labor, but in such a way that the labor that has gone into it is no longer identifiable”; rather, “the dreamer encounters his [her] own image impotently.”<sup>95</sup> Adorno argues that the deceptive illusion of Wagner’s art is

88. Ibid., p. 101. “The basic idea is one of totality: the *Ring* attempts, without much ado, nothing less than the encapsulation of the world process as a whole” (ibid.).

89. Ibid. p. 102.

90. Ibid. “The style becomes the sum of all the stimuli registered by the totality of the senses.”

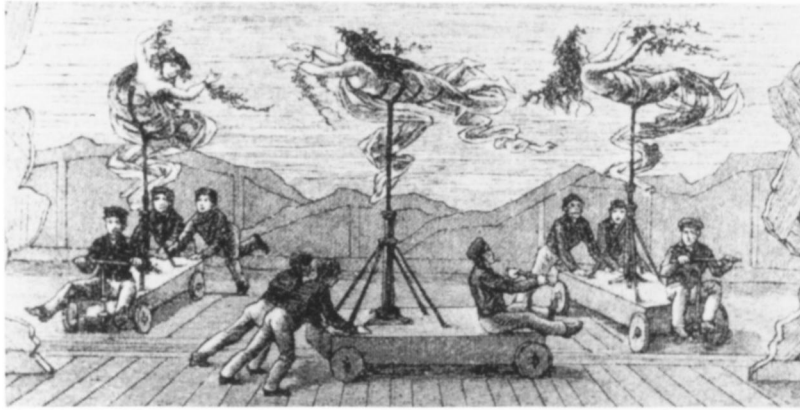
91. Ibid., p. 112. “The aesthetics of duplication is substituted for protest, a mere amplification of subjective expression that is nullified by its very vehemence.”

92. Ibid., pp. 102–103.

93. Ibid., p. 107.

94. Ibid., p. 109. Adorno cites “evidence from Wagner’s immediate circle”: “On 23 March 1890, that is to say, long before the invention of the cinema, Chamberlain wrote to Cosima about Liszt’s *Dante* symphony, which can stand here for the whole tendency. ‘Perform this symphony in a darkened room with a sunken orchestra and show pictures moving past in the background—and you will see how all the Levis and all the cold neighbors of today, whose unfeeling natures give such pain to a poor heart, will all fall into ecstasy’ ” (p. 107).

95. Ibid., p. 91.



*The swimming machines in action*



*... as seen by the audience*

### *Swimming machines for Das Rheingold.*

analogous.<sup>96</sup> The task of his music is to hide the alienation and fragmentation, the loneliness and the sensual impoverishment of modern existence that was the material out of which it is composed: “the task of [Wagner’s] music is to warm up the alienated and reified relations of man and make them sound as if they were still human.”<sup>97</sup> Wagner himself speaks of “healing up the wounds with which the anatomical scalpel has gashed the body of speech.”<sup>98</sup>

96. Wagner’s oeuvre resembled “the consumer goods of the nineteenth century which knew no greater ambition than to conceal every sign of the work that went into them, perhaps because any such traces reminded people too vehemently of the appropriation of the labor of others, of an injustice that could still be felt” (ibid., p. 83).

97. Ibid., p. 100.

98. Cited in ibid., p. 89. In this context we can understand Benjamin’s praise of Baudelaire (a

## IX

The factory was the work-world counterpart of the opera house—a kind of counter-phantasmagoria that was based on the principle of fragmentation rather than the illusion of wholeness. Marx's *Capital* (written in the 1860s and thus a part of the same era as Wagner's operas) describes the factory as a total environment:

Every organ of sense is injured in an equal degree by artificial elevation of temperature, by the dust-laden atmosphere, by the deafening noise, not to mention danger to life and limb among the thickly crowded machinery, which, with the regularity of the seasons, issues its list of the killed and the wounded in the industrial battle.<sup>99</sup>

We have learned from recent writing on social history that doctors were “uniformly horrified by the grisly body count of the industrial revolution.”<sup>100</sup> The rates of injuries due to factory and railroad accidents in the nineteenth century made surgical wards look like field hospitals. At Massachusetts General Hospital in mid-century (after introduction of general anaesthetics), nearly seven percent of all patients admitted received amputations.<sup>101</sup> As most hospital patients were charity cases, this group was largely from the lower class.<sup>102</sup> Threatened bodies, shattered limbs, physical catastrophe—these realities of modernity were the underside of the technical aesthetics of phantasmagorias as total environments of bodily comfort. The surgeon whose task it was, literally, to piece together the casualties of industrialism achieved a new social prominence. The medical practice was professionalized in the mid-nineteenth century,<sup>103</sup> and doctors became prototypical of a new elite of technical experts.

Anaesthesia was central to this development. For it was not only the patient who was relieved from pain by anaesthesia. The effect was as profound upon the surgeon. A deliberate effort to desensitize oneself from the experience of

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contemporary of both Wagner and Marx), for confronting modern shock head-on, and for being able to record in his poetry precisely the fragmented and jarring, even painful sensuality of modern experience in a way that pierces through the phantasmagoric veil. He writes that “the possible establishment of proof that [Baudelaire's] poetry transcribes reveries experienced under hashish in no way invalidates this interpretation” (*Das PassagenWerk*, vol. 5, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann [Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1992], p. 71). (For Benjamin's own experiments with hashish, see *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6.) Indeed, in an era of sensory numbing as a cognitive defense, Benjamin claimed that insight into the truth of modern experience was “seldom to be had in a sober state.”

99. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, ch. 15, section 4.

100. Pernick, *A Calculus of Suffering*, p. 218.

101. Ibid., p. 211.

102. Until the discovery of the importance of antiseptics, upper-class operations were performed at home, anaesthesia being administered with a “bottle and a rag” (ibid., p. 223).

103. The American Medical Association was established in mid-century. Prior to this, there was no regulation as to who was authorized to perform surgery.

the pain of another was no longer necessary. Whereas surgeons earlier had to train themselves to repress empathic identification with the suffering patient, now they had only to confront an inert, insensate mass that they could tinker with without emotional involvement.

These developments entailed a cultural transformation of medicine—and of the discourse of the body generally—as is exemplified clearly in the case of limb amputations. In 1639, the British naval surgeon John Woodall advised prayer before the “lamentable” surgery of amputation: “For it is no small presumption to Dismember the Image of God.”<sup>104</sup> In 1806 (the era of Charles Bell), the surgeon’s attitude evoked Enlightenment themes of Stoicism, the glorification of reason, and the sanctity of individual life. But with the introduction of general anaesthesia, the *American Journal of Medical Sciences* could report in 1852 that it was “very gratifying to the operator and to the spectators that the patient lies a tranquil, passive subject, instead of struggling and perhaps uttering piteous cries and moans, while the knife is at work.”<sup>105</sup> The control provided to the surgeon by a “tranquilly pliant” patient allowed the operation to proceed with unprecedented technical thoroughness and “all convenient deliberation.”<sup>106</sup> Of course, the point is in no way to criticize surgical advances. Rather, it is to document a transformation in perception, the implications of which far surpassed the scene of the surgical operation.

Phenomenology uses the term *hyle*, undifferentiated, “brute” matter—to describe that which is perceived but not “intended.” Husserl’s example is Dürer’s engraving on wood of the knight on horseback. Although the wood is perceived along with the knight’s image, it is not the *meaning* of the perception. If you are asked, what do you see? you will say, a knight (i.e., the surface image), not a piece of wood. The material stuff disappears behind the intent, or meaning of the image.<sup>107</sup> Husserl, the founder of modern phenomenology, was writing at the turn of the century, the era when professionalization, technical expertise, division of labor, and the rationalization of procedures were transforming social practices. Urban-industrial populations began to be perceived as themselves a “mass”—undifferentiated, potentially dangerous, a collective body that needed to be controlled and shaped into a meaningful form. In one sense, this was a continuation of the autotelic myth of creation *ex nihilo*, wherein “man” transforms material nature by shaping it to his will. New were the theme of the social collectivity, and the division of labor to which the creative process now submitted.

For Kant the domination of nature was internalized: the subjective will,

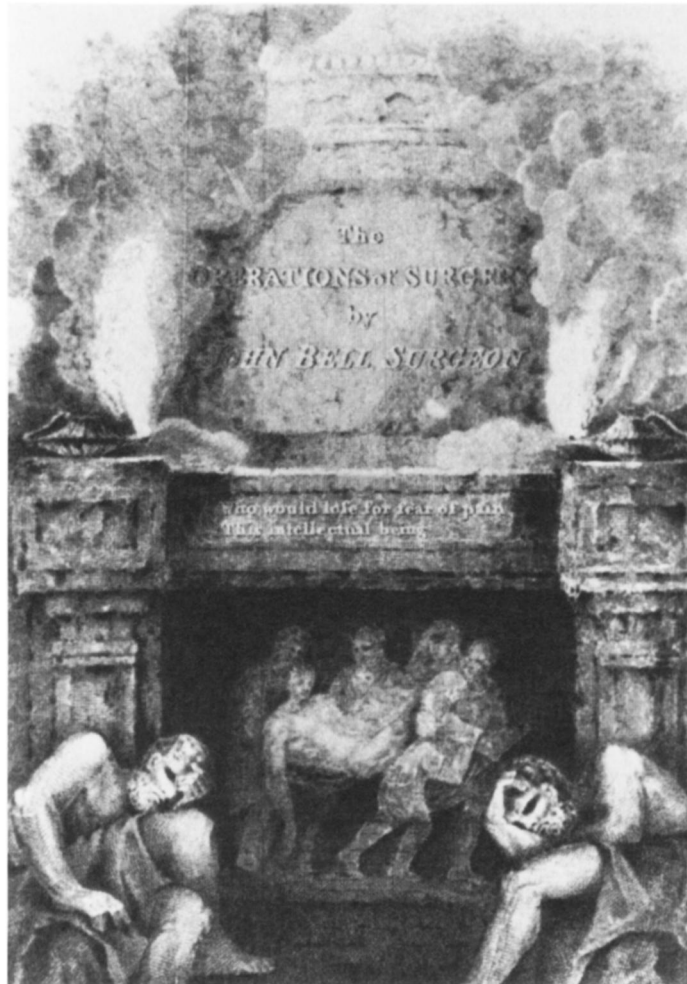
104. Cited in Wangenstein and Wangenstein, *The Rise of Surgery*, p. 181.

105. Cited in Pernick, *A Calculus of Suffering*, p. 83.

106. Cited in *ibid.*, p. 83.

107. I discuss the connection between Husserl’s conception and early cinema in Anthony Vidler, ed., *Territorial Myths* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).





Frontispiece from Sir Charles Bell, *The Principles of Surgery*, 1806:  
 “Who would lose for fear of pain this intellectual being?”

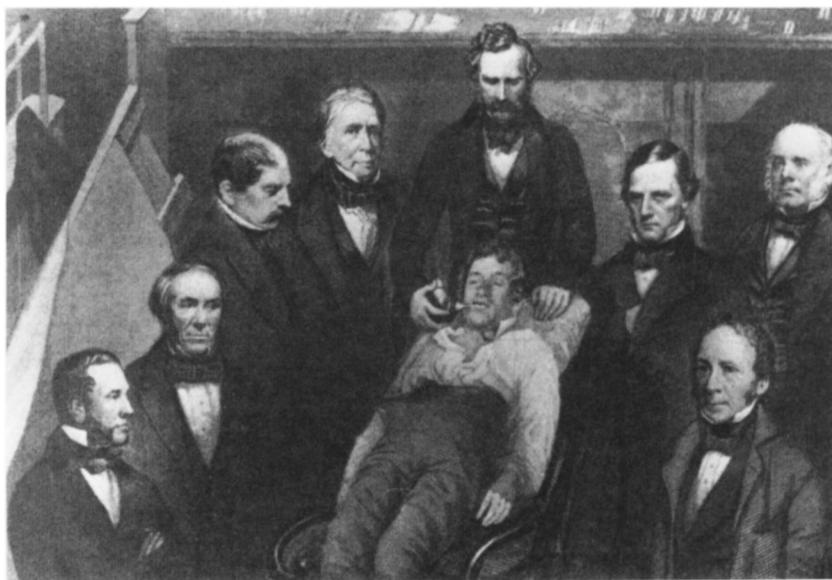
the disciplined, material body, and the autonomous self that was produced as a result, were all *within* the (same) individual. In early-modern autogenesis the autonomous subject produced *himself*. But by the end of the nineteenth century, these functions were divided: the “self-made man” was entrepreneur of a large corporation; the “warrior” was general of a technologically sophisticated war machine; the ruling prince was head of an expanding bureaucracy; even the social revolutionary had become the leader and shaper of a disciplined, mass-party organization.

Technology affected the social imaginary. The new theories of Herbert Spencer and Emile Durkheim perceived society as an organism, literally a “body” politic, in which the social practices of institutions (rather than, as in premodern Europe, the social ranks of individuals) performed the various organ func-

tions.<sup>108</sup> Labor specialization, rationalization and integration of social functions, created a techno-body of society, and it was imagined to be as insensate to pain as the individual body under general anaesthetics, so that any number of operations could be performed upon the social body without needing to concern oneself lest the patient—society itself—“utter piteous cries and moans.” What happened to perception under these circumstances was a tripartite splitting of experience into agency (the operating surgeon), the object as hyle (the docile body of the patient), and the observer (who perceives and acknowledges the accomplished result). These were positional differences, not ontological ones, and they changed the nature of social representation. Listen to Husserl’s description of experience, in which this tripartite division is evident even in one individual, the philosopher himself. Husserl writes in *Ideen II*:

If I cut my finger with a knife, then a physical body is split by the driving into it of a wedge, the fluid contained in it trickles out, etc. Likewise, the physical thing, “my Body,” is heated or cooled through

108. Spencer wrote in 1851: “We commonly enough compare a nation to a living organism. We speak of the ‘body politic,’ of the function of its several parts, of its growth, and of its diseases, as though it were a creature. But we usually employ these expressions as metaphors, little suspecting how close is the analogy, and how far it will bear carrying out. So completely, however, is a society organized upon the same system as an individual being, that we may almost say there is something more than analogy between them” (cited in Robert M. Young, *Mind, Brain and Adaptation in the Nineteenth Century*, 2nd ed. [New York: Oxford University Press, 1990], p. 160).



William T. Morton administering anesthesia at the Massachusetts General Hospital, October 16, 1846.



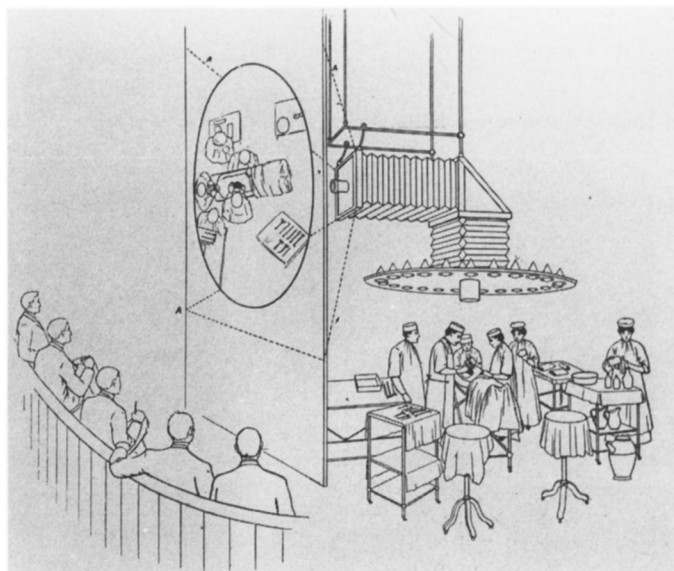
contact with hot or cold bodies; it can become electrically charged through contact with an electric current; it assumes different colors under changing illumination: and one can elicit noises from it by striking it.<sup>109</sup>

This separation of the elements of synaesthetic experience would have been inconceivable in a text by Kant. Husserl's description is a technical observation, in which the bodily experience is split from the cognitive one, and the experience of agency is, again, split from both of these. An uncanny sense of self-alienation results from such perceptual splitting. Something similar happened at this time in the operating room.

The Enlightenment practice of performing surgical procedures in an amphitheater (whose grandeur rivaled the Wagnerian stage) went through a radical alteration with the introduction of general anaesthetics. The initial impact was to heighten the theatrical effect, as (we have already noted) neither surgeon nor audience had to bother with the feelings of the insensate patient. Here is a description of an early amputation under general anaesthesia:

The Catlin, glittering for a moment above the head of the operator, was plunged through the limb and with one artistic sweep made the

109. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, vol. 1, trans. R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), p. 168.



*Diagram of an operating theater. c. 1890.*

flaps or completed a circular amputation. After several aerial gyrations the saw severed the bone as if driven by electricity. The fall of the amputated part was greeted with tumultuous applause by the excited students. The operator acknowledged the compliment with a formal bow.<sup>110</sup>

A radical alteration occurred at the end of the century, when discoveries in germ theory and antiseptics transformed the operating room from theatrical stage into a tile-and-marble, scrubbed-down, sterilized environment. At the Tenth International Medical Congress in 1890, J. Baladin of St. Petersburg described the first use of a glass partition to separate students and visitors from the operating arena.<sup>111</sup> The glass window became a projection screen: a series of mirrors provided an informative image of the procedure. Here the tripartite division of perceptual perspective—agent, matter, and observer—paralleled the brand new, contemporary experience of the cinema. In the Artwork essay, Walter Benjamin discusses the surgeon and cameraman (as opposed to the magician and painter). The operations of both surgeon and cameraman are nonauratic; they “penetrate” the human being; in contrast, the magician and painter confront the other person intersubjectively, as Benjamin writes, “man to man.”<sup>112</sup>

## X

The German writer Ernst Jünger, several times wounded in World War I, wrote afterwards that “sacrifices” to technological destruction—not only war casualties but industrial and traffic accidents as well—now occurred with statistical predictability.<sup>113</sup> They had become accepted as a self-understood feature of existence, thereby causing the “Worker,” as the new modern “type,” to develop a “Second Consciousness”: “This Second and colder Consciousness is indicated in the ever-more sharply developed capacity to see oneself as an object.”<sup>114</sup> Whereas the “self-reflection” characteristic of psychology of the “old style” took as its subject matter “the sensitive human being,” this Second Con-

110. Cited in Wangenstein and Wangenstein, *The Rise of Surgery*, p. 462.

111. *Ibid.*, p. 466.

112. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 233.

113. As part of the “professionalization” of medicine and of the depersonalization of the patient, statistics set up norms of surgical practice and, by the end of the nineteenth century, due to such statistical knowledge, health insurance companies became a historical possibility. They allowed human suffering to be calculated: “Whoever dies is unimportant; it is a question of ratio between accidents and the company’s liabilities” (Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 1979), p. 84.

114. Ernst Jünger, “Über den Schmerz” (1932), *Samtliche Werke*, vol. 7: *Essays I: Betrachtungen zur Zeit* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1980), p. 181. Partial translation in Christopher Philips, ed., *Photography in the Modern Era* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989).

sciousness “is directed at a being who stands outside the zone of pain.”<sup>115</sup> Jünger connects this changed perspective with photography, that “artificial eye” which “arrests the bullet in flight just as it does the human being at the instant of being torn to pieces by an explosion.”<sup>116</sup> The powerfully prosthetic sense organs of technology are the new “ego” of a transformed synaesthetic system. Now *they* provide the porous surface between inner and outer, both perceptual organ and mechanism of defense. Technology as a tool and a weapon extends human power—at the same time intensifying the vulnerability of what Benjamin called “the tiny, fragile human body”<sup>117</sup>—and thereby produces a counter-need, to use technology as a protective shield against the “colder order” that it creates. Jünger writes that military uniforms have always had a protective “character of defense”; but now, “*Technology is our uniform*”:

It is the technological order itself, that great mirror in which the growing objectifications of our life appear most clearly, and which is sealed against the clutch of pain in a special way. . . . We, however, stand far too deeply in the process to view this. . . . This is all the more the case, as the comfort-character [read phantasmagoric function] of our technology merges ever more unequivocally with its characteristic of instrumental power.<sup>118</sup>

In the “great mirror” of technology, the image that returns is displaced, reflected onto a different plane, where one sees oneself as a physical body divorced from sensory vulnerability—a statistical body, the behavior of which can be calculated; a performing body, actions of which can be measured up against the “norm”; a virtual body, one that can endure the shocks of modernity without pain. As Jünger writes: “It almost seems as if the human being possessed a striving to create a space in which pain . . . can be regarded as an illusion.”<sup>119</sup>

We have seen that Adorno identified Art Nouveau as a continuation of Wagner’s commodity-like phantasmagoria. Again, surface unity provided the phantasmagoric effect. Just before the war, this movement denied the experience of fragmentation by representing the body as an ornamental surface, as if reflected off the inside of technology’s protective shield. The outbreak of war made such denial no longer possible. The Berlin Dada Manifesto of 1918

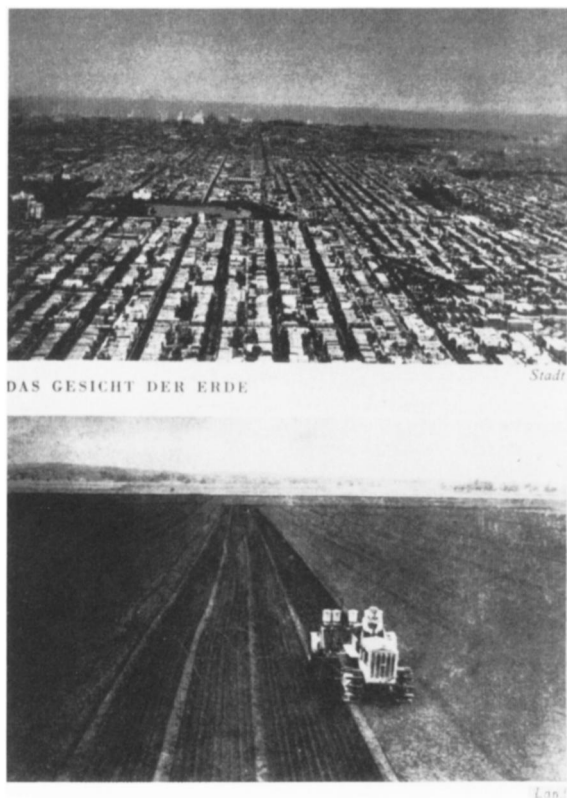
115. Ibid.

116. Ibid., p. 182.

117. He writes in “The Storyteller” about the impoverishment of experience due to the First World War: “A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body” (Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 84).

118. Ibid., p. 174.

119. Jünger, p. 184.



From Ernst Jünger, *The Transformed World*, 1933: “*The face of the earth: city, country.*”

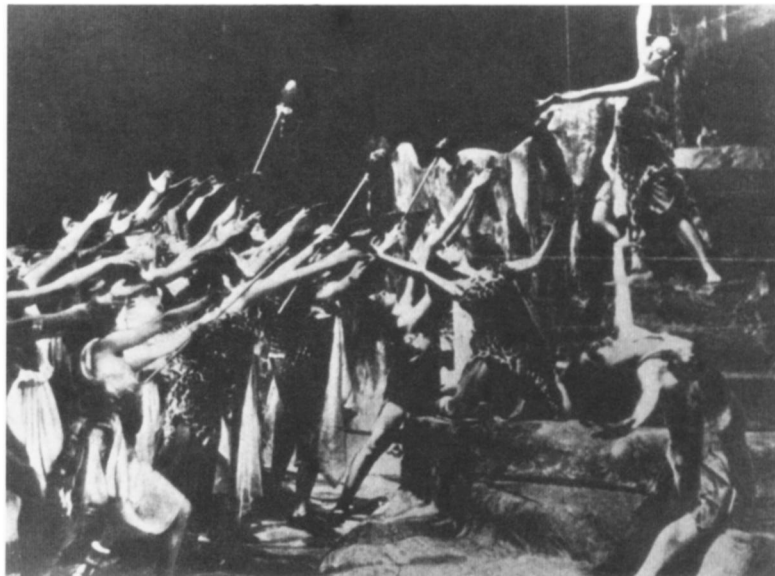
announced: “The highest art will be the one which in its conscious content presents the thousand-fold problems of the day, the art which has been visibly shattered by the explosions of last week, which is forever trying to collect its limbs after yesterday’s crash.”<sup>120</sup> It is possible to read the portraits of Expressionist artists as bearing on the surface of the face, unarmored and exposed, the material impress of this technological shattering. (This is totally opposed to the fascist interpretation of Expressionism as degenerate art, which ontologizes the surface appearance, and reduces history to biology.) The vigorous, postwar movement of photomontage also made the fragmented body its stuff and substance.<sup>121</sup> But the effect was to piece the fragments together again in images that appear impervious to pain. For example, in Hannah Höch’s 1926 montage *Monument II: Vanity*, the image is unified with precision, creating a coherent (if disturbing) surface—yet without the superimposed unity of the phantasmagoric.

120. Cited in Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, rev. ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), p. 68.

121. Benjamin speaks positively in the Baudelaire essay of cinematic montage as turning fragmentation into a constructive principle.







*Performance of Wagner in Bayreuth in 1930.*



*Hitler in the Reichstag.*

## XI

We are—by a long detour—back to Benjamin's concerns at the end of the Artwork essay: the crisis in cognitive experience caused by the alienation of the senses that makes it possible for humanity to view its own destruction with enjoyment. Recall that this essay was first published in 1936. That same year Jacques Lacan traveled to Marienbad to deliver a paper to the International Psychoanalytic Association that first formulated his theory of the "mirror stage."<sup>122</sup> It described the moment when the infant of six to eighteen months triumphantly recognizes its mirror image, and identifies with it as an imaginary bodily unity. This narcissistic experience of the self as a specular "reflection" is one of *mis(re)cognition*. The subject identifies with the image as the "form" (*Gestalt*) of the ego, in a way that conceals its own lack. It leads, retroactively, to a fantasy of the "body-in-pieces" (*corps morcelé*). Hal Foster has situated this theory in the historical context of early fascism, and pointed out the personal connections between Lacan and Surrealist artists who made the fragmented body their theme.<sup>123</sup> I believe one can push the significance of this contextualization very far, so that the mirror stage can be read as a theory of fascism.

The experience Lacan describes may (or may not) be a universal stage in developmental psychology, but its importance psychoanalytically comes only after-the-fact, as deferred action (*Nachträglichkeit*), when the recollection of this infant fantasy is triggered in the memory of the adult by something in his or her present situation. Thus the significance of Lacan's theory emerges only in the historical context of modernity as precisely the experience of the fragile body and the dangers to it of fragmentation that replicates the trauma of the original infantile event (the fantasy of the *corps morcelé*). Lacan himself recognized the historical specificity of narcissistic disorders, commenting that Freud's major paper on narcissism, not accidentally, "dates from the beginning of the 1914 war, and it is quite moving to think that it was at that time that Freud was developing such a construction."<sup>124</sup>

The day after Lacan delivered his paper in Marienbad he deserted the Congress and took the train to Berlin, in order to watch the Olympic Games being held there.<sup>125</sup> In a note to the Artwork essay, Benjamin commented on these modern Olympics, which, he said, differed from their ancient prototypes inasmuch as they were less a contest than a proceeding of exact, technological

122. In fact this paper was never published. A different version, reported here, appeared in 1949.

123. See Foster, "Armor Fou," *October* 57 (Spring 1991). This section is strongly indebted to Foster's insights.

124. *The Seminars of Jacques Lacan, Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953–54*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller and trans. John Forrester (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988), p. 118.

125. See David Macey, *Lacan in Contexts* (New York: Verso, 1988) for an account of Lacan's Marienbad/Berlin trip.



measurement, a form of test rather than competition.<sup>126</sup> Drawing on Jünger, Foster points out that fascism displayed the physical body as a kind of armor against fragmentation, and also against pain. The armored, mechanized body with its galvanized surface and metallic, sharp-angled face provides the illusion of invulnerability. It is the body viewed from the point of view of the “second consciousness” described by Jünger as “numbed” against feeling. (The word narcissism comes from the same root as narcotic!) But if fascism thrived on the representation of the body-as-armor, it was not its only aesthetic form relevant to this problematic.

## XII

There are two self-definitions of fascism that, in closing, I would like to consider. The first is a description by Joseph Goebbels in a letter of 1933: “We who shape modern German politics feel ourselves to be artistic people, entrusted with the great responsibility of forming out of the raw material of the masses a solid, well-wrought structure of a *Volk*.”<sup>127</sup> This is the technologized version of the myth of autogenesis, with its division between the agent (here, the fascist leaders) and the mass (the undifferentiated hyle, acted *upon*). We will remember that this division is tripartite. There is as well the observer, who “knows” through observation. It was the genius of fascist propaganda to give to the masses a double role, to be observer as well as the inert mass being formed and shaped. And yet, due to a displacement of the place of pain, due to a consequent mis(re)cognition, the mass-as-audience remains somehow undisturbed by the spectacle of its own manipulation—much like Husserl cutting open his finger. In Leni Riefenstahl’s 1935 film, *Triumph of the Will* (of which Benjamin, writing the Artwork essay, was surely aware), the mobilized masses fill the grounds of the Nuremberg stadium and the cinema screen, so that the surface patterns provide a pleasing design of the whole, letting the viewer forget the purpose of the display, the militarization of society for the teleology of making war. The aesthetics allows an *anaesthetization* of reception, a viewing of the “scene” with disinterested pleasure, even when that scene is the preparation through ritual of a whole society for unquestioning sacrifice and ultimately, destruction, murder, and death.

In *Triumph of the Will* Rudolf Hess shouts out to the crowd in the arena: “Germany is Hitler and Hitler is Germany!” And so we come to the second self-definition of fascism. The intentional meaning is that Hitler embodies the entire power of the German nation. But if we turn the camera on Hitler in a nonauratic

126. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* I, p. 1039.

127. Cited in Rainer Stollman, “Fascist Politics as a Total Work of Art,” *New German Critique* 14 (Spring 1978), p. 47.

manner, that is, if we use this technological apparatus as an aid to sensory comprehension of the external world, rather than as a phantasmagoric, or narcissistic, escape *from* it, we see something very different.

We know that in 1932 (under the direction of the opera singer Paul Devrient) Hitler practiced his facial expressions in front of a mirror,<sup>128</sup> in order to have what he believed was the proper effect. There is reason to believe that this effect was not expressive, but reflective, giving back to the man-in-the-crowd his own image—the narcissistic image of the intact ego, constructed against the fear of the body-in-pieces.<sup>129</sup>

In 1872, Charles Darwin published *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, expressing his own indebtedness to the work of Charles Bell. Darwin's book was the first of its kind to make use of photographs rather than drawings, which allowed a greater precision of analysis of the facial expressions of human emotions. If one compares photographs of Hitler's facial expressions as he practiced in front of a mirror with the photographs in Darwin's book, one might expect to find that his expressions connote aggressive emotions—anger and rage. Or, one might presume that Hitler should have tried to project the impervious, “armored” face that Jünger describes, and that was so typical of Nazi art. But in fact the two emotions described by Darwin that match Hitler's photographs are quite different from both of these.

The first emotion is fear. Listen to Darwin's description:

As fear increases into an agony of terror . . . the wings of the nostrils are wildly dilated . . . there is a gasping and convulsive motion of the lips, a tremor on the hollow cheek . . . eyeballs are fixed on the object of terror . . . the muscles of the body may become rigid . . . hands are alternately clenched and opened . . . [t]he arms may be protruded, as if to avert some dreadful danger, or may be thrown wildly over the head.<sup>130</sup>

There is a second emotion identifiable in Hitler's gestures. It is what Darwin calls “suffering of the body and mind: weeping,” and the relevant photographs are, specifically, the faces of screaming and weeping infants. Darwin writes:

128. Hitler had so strained his voice organs by 1932 that a doctor advised him to train his voice with Devrient (born Paul Stieber-Walter), which Hitler did between April and November of that year, during his election touring. (See Werner Maser, *Adolf Hitler: Legende Mythos Wirklichkeit* [Munich: Bechtle Verlag, 1976], p. 294n.)

129. Max Picard speaks from direct experience of the absolute “nullity” that was Hitler's face, “a face not like one who leads, but like one who needs leading” (Picard, *Hitler in Ourselves*, trans. Heinrich Hauser [Hinsdale, Ill.: Henry Regnery Company, 1947], p. 78).

130. Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, preface Konrad Lorenz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 291.

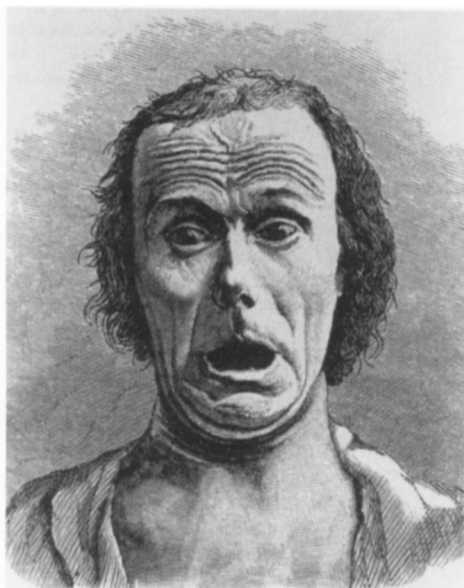


FIG. 20.—Terror, from a photograph by Dr. Duchenne.

*Above and below: From Charles Darwin, The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals, 1872.*



*Above and below: Heinrich Hoffman. Hitler Oratorical Pose. 1932.*



The raising of the upper lip draws upward the flesh of the upper parts of the cheeks, and produces a strongly-marked fold on each cheek—the naso-labial fold—which runs from near the wings of the nostrils to the corners of the mouth and below them. This fold or furrow may be seen in all the photographs, and it is very characteristic of the expression of a crying child. . . .<sup>131</sup>

The camera can aid us in knowledge of fascism, because it provides an “aesthetic” experience that is nonauratic, critically “testing,”<sup>132</sup> capturing with its “unconscious optics”<sup>133</sup> precisely the dynamics of narcissism on which the politics of fascism depends, but which its own auratic aesthetics conceals. Such knowledge is not historicist. The juxtaposition of photographs of Hitler’s face and Darwin’s illustrations will not answer the complexities of von Ranke’s question of “how it actually was” in Germany, or what determined the uniqueness of its history. Rather, the juxtaposition creates a synthetic experience that resonates with our own time, providing us, today, with a double recognition—first, of our own infancy, in which, for so many of us, the face of Hitler appeared as evil incarnate, the bogeyman of our own childhood fears. Second, it shocks us into awareness that the narcissism that we have developed as adults, that functions as an anaesthetizing tactic against the shock of modern experience—and that is appealed to daily by the image-phantasmagoria of mass culture—is the ground from which fascism can again push forth. To cite Benjamin: “In shutting out the experience [of the inhospitable, blinding age of big-scale industrialism], the eye perceives an experience of a complementary nature, in the form of its spontaneous after-image.”<sup>134</sup> Fascism is that afterimage. In its reflecting mirror we recognize ourselves.

131. Ibid., p. 149.

132. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 229.

133. Ibid., p. 237.

134. Benjamin, *Baudelaire*, p. 111.