THE TRADITION OF THE OPPRESSED

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Benjamin is one of the rare philosophers whose writing emerges from the visual. Most of his writings, including those that do not deal directly with visuality, retain traces of gazes, images and material objects. Yet, almost all of Benjamin’s texts were published in the absence of those images to which he implicitly or explicitly referred; the visual citations have been excluded. This is true of the earlier and later editions of his texts, as well as of his books and journal writings. Even the texts Benjamin published during his lifetime, including those that explicitly grew out of visual materials or were directly related to them, usually appeared without the accompaniment of images. Such a practice, I believe, is tantamount to publishing a piece of literary criticism that lacks direct quotations from the analyzed text. And in most cases, interpreters are not even aware of the fact that the text in front of them is actually incomplete.

What I would like do in this essay is to demonstrate what a reading of Benjamin that does take the visual dimension of his texts into account might look like. I will do this primarily in the context of his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility.” My claim is that the aura of the work of art, the loss of which Benjamin apparently laments in this text, was actually a produced authorial effect. Once we understand this, we can in fact
reconstruct two traditions from Benjamin's text for transmitting works of art as well as other texts and artifacts. The difference between the two traditions, I will argue later, lies in the status of the transmitted objects as well as in the practices of transmission. At the center of the first tradition one finds not only irreproducible objects but also "creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery," which Benjamin attributes in that essay to Fascism ("WA," 101). At the center of the second, we see a tradition of reproduction, habituations, distraction, destructions, narratability, and mimicry, all of which characterize aspects of the modes of consumption and use of the masses. When we take the existence of these two traditions and the relation between them into account, we can open new possibilities for understanding the relation in Benjamin's work between the aesthetic and the political. The proposed existence of these two distinct traditions of transmission also sheds new light on a particularly enigmatic text, "Critique of Violence." The reintegration of the visual into his texts makes visible some of Benjamin's "mistakes" in his readings of various texts and images. Through the discussion of these "mistakes," some of which are probably responsible for what is usually considered to be the enigmatic quality of his texts, I will reconsider some of the oppositions contained in his essays. I will therefore read "Critique of Violence" against the grain and deconstruct the opposition between the myth of Niobe and the Biblical story of Korah that Benjamin proposes there.

**Against One Tradition**

In his "Short History of Photography" and "The Author as Producer," Benjamin points to the separation between text and image as a clear mechanism of control that should be resisted and overcome. Benjamin never constructed the visual as a separate realm, but weaved it into the textual in a way that obliges his readers (spectators) to look for the visual, to look at the visual, and then to go back and forth between the visual and the textual. We can start with one example. In the supplement for the XVII thesis of his essay on history, Benjamin examines the locomotive, about which
Marx had also written. For Marx the locomotive was a concept, a thought, through which he imagined a revolution that would plow through world history. Benjamin, on the other hand, observed the locomotive, and his gaze encountered something else: "Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is otherwise quiet. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train, the human race — to activate the emergency brake." In his thinking, Marx rushes past concrete material reality to the general noun "locomotive," and from there he moves to abstract concepts such as "revolution" and "historical process." Benjamin makes his way to history as well, but not before pausing to ponder the minute details of the actual experience. It is neither the general noun (a train, or a handle) nor the concept (the revolution, world history) but rather the materiality of a concrete object, the emergency handle, which mediates for him concrete experience and speculative thought. In the framework of this text on history, which is an ontological-epistemological analysis of catastrophe, his gaze falls upon an emergency handle, and what he sees in that handle is a potential to make "the continuum of history explode" ("THP," 395).

Concrete objects or images, therefore, are left as traces in Benjamin's writings (additional examples from "Theses on the Philosophy of History" include the automaton chess player or the grain of rice on which a whole chapter of the Psalm is written). It has subsequently become almost impossible to reconstruct in an accurate, comprehensive, and systematic manner all those visual passages that were cut from his writings. One day an editor might decide to publish a new and improved edition of Benjamin's complete writings, which would include postcards, pictures, newspaper cutouts, sketches, and the additional documentation of objects and places. Such an edition, I believe, would provide the proper conditions for the transmission of Benjamin's texts. In the meantime, it rests upon contemporary readers to follow the textual traces of this lost visual archive and to pay close attention to the pictures that have ultimately left their marks there; they must be made integral to the practice of reading Benjamin. After all, these pictures speak —
though not verbally — from within the texts, and they are numerous.

However to discuss images is not necessarily to talk about art. Art in general as well as works of art in particular play only a minor role in Benjamin’s writings. Even the title of his essay — “The Work of Art in the Age of Reproducibility” — is misleading, as it gives the impression that the “work of art” is a stable category with a self-evident meaning, and that works of art existed, as such at least before the modern era. Benjamin invokes many different kinds of objects, each of which has a strong visual presence, and he explores the visuality that these objects carry with them. Examples include coins, religious relics, altars, stamps, and caricatures. His discussion of these objects and images “extends far beyond the realm of art” (“WA,” 104). Throughout the essay, Benjamin defines the work of art through negation. He points to a certain lack in modern artistic production, a lack that generated out of technical reproduction: “In even the most perfect reproduction, one thing is lacking, the here and now of the work of art — its unique existence in a particular place” (“WA,” 103). The real work of art, what remains unblemished and lacks nothing, the complete work, has a singular “here and now” that the new work of art lacks. Benjamin identifies the “here and now” as the authenticity of the work, and loss of the “here and now” signifies the work’s loss of authenticity. Benjamin’s essay has been the subject of many interpretations, which, despite their differences share a basic assumption: that before the age of mechanical reproduction, works of art were “embedded in tradition” and enjoyed a certain, singular, and irreproducible status as hallowed objects, and that this special aura was lost with the advance of modern technology (“WA,” 105). Benjamin, so it seems, appears to mourn the loss of that aura — a loss that is brought about through the emergence of a new type of mechanical reproduction of the work of art.

It is at first easy to reconstruct a series of oppositions that the essay seems to imply and employ in its own argument: ritual versus exhibition as two contexts for the presentation of works of art; the unique, irreplaceable work of art versus the reproduced work; manual reproduction as opposed to mechanical, that is, technical
reproduction. Like the oppositions that permeate his "Critique of Violence," these oppositions are easily deconstructed and cannot finally be maintained; in fact, Benjamin himself, who undoes them while stating them, does not maintain them throughout. I have shown elsewhere that when these oppositions collapse, it becomes easy to see that Benjamin is mourning the loss of an aura that he has himself invented in his text (*OT*). In other words, I would like to suggest that the aura of the work of art is neither an historical fact nor a claim about the historical status of art, but rather a performative effect of the text and Benjamin's rhetorical melancholy. Reading the essay as a historical narrative overlooks Benjamin's melancholic attitude; I say melancholic because Benjamin names what he assumes to have been a real and preexisting concept only to mourn it, thereby precipitating its loss.

Benjamin started exploring the question of mechanical reproduction in the early thirties, and his first reflections on the subject appear in his 1931 essay "Short History of Photography." Many of the ideas presented there were later incorporated into the various versions of the work of art essay. In the early thirties, it is important to note, the work of art still lacked a clear, commonly accepted institutional identity and definition, as is implied by some of his descriptions. The main institutions that dealt with the display of art in the 1930s — the museum, the salon, and the great exhibitions — placed side-by-side a variety of types of objects and images: engines, paintings, jewelry, photographs, sewing machines, stereoscopes, movies, railroad cars and panoramas; this is an ordering that later classifications would separate. "Works of Art" — whatever they may have meant at the time — were regularly presented in the popular fairs as well as in salons, and they were designed neither to display nor produce some kind of aura. The distinctive and sanctified museum venue for modern art had not yet been institutionalized. It was only in the '30s, when the neutral white space, "the white cube," emerged as the dominant form for the display of a distinctive set of artifacts — works of art — that the purity and sacredness associated with such artifacts could allegedly be displayed and preserved. Prior to that period, art institutions had not yet sanctified
original works, and they were not always interested in the authenticity and originality of the works they put on display. Often works of art were exhibited alongside other objects, and little was done in order to bestow upon these works whatever aura Benjamin describes as existing prior to the modern age.

On July 25, 1938, after completing at least two versions of his text on the work of art together with “Short History of Photography,” Benjamin stayed at Bertolt Brecht’s home in Svendborg where they discussed his notion of the aura. Brecht wrote in his diary: “He uses as his point of departure something he calls the aura.” With this remark — “something he calls the aura” — Brecht grasped the accurate status of the aura within Benjamin’s thought. Benjamin did not describe the loss of a common feature of works of art, but rather formulated this “something” called “the aura” as part of his effort to forge new concepts “useful for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art” (“WA,” 102). When we read the work of art essay with this in mind, it is clear that its historical narrative is not a diachronic one that depicts the loss of a certain object — i.e., an auratic work of art — that had a prior existence, and is now being threatened either by a modernist or a fascist conception of art. Benjamin’s narrative is instead synchronic, describing an arena where two modes of transmission and use actually compete or struggle with one another. At stake are not only objects (whose values are determined within the sphere of art) but political relations and practices that permeate the entire the social sphere.

When Benjamin wrote his essay, the aura — that is, the sanctification of the work of art — was an unintended, unrecognized, and unspoken effect of new practices of display and preservation of art objects, and of the new aesthetic discourse that emerged through and around these practices. Only with the establishment of those shrines — museums devoted to modern art — was the work of art institutionalized as a consistently identifiable point of reference, whose sequential history and transformations could be written in a positive manner.

Benjamin apparently presents the aura as an essential element of the work of art, what actually determines an object as a
work of art; and the story of its loss serves as the pivot for the account of the progressive history of art. This axis of loss that Benjamin chooses to pursue enables him to isolate a certain form of practice — “manual art” — and to turn it into not only a point of departure, but the source and genesis from which all other forms ensue. But through a careful reading, we can recognize that Benjamin blurs the distinction between two different axes of description: 1) the chronological axis, what accounts for the transition from old to new; and 2) the hierarchical axis, or what describes the transition from the authentic to the inauthentic, from the intact object to the deficient one, or from an object possessing an aura to an object bereft of one. As a result of this indistinction, Benjamin presents the difference between the unique and the reproducible as if it were the result of a historical process. Such a reading ignores the fact that by the time Benjamin had written those essays on art and photography, photography had already been an established and institutionalized practice for almost a century, while the so-called authentic, irreproducible “work of art” was just making its start.

In the second section of “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility,” Benjamin writes, “[T]he technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition” (“WA,” 104). This passage can easily mislead a reader into thinking that a homogenic tradition was shattered by the emergence of photography. But in the previous section, Benjamin presents a short history of reproduction: “[O]bjects made by humans could always be copied by humans” (“WA,” 102). Mechanical reproduction enables not only the reproduction of objects and pictures from different times and places, but it also constitutes an altogether other tradition that allows for the transmissibility of objects. This other tradition of transmission, which might be conceived or reconstructed through Benjamin's writings, does not correspond with the tradition that he identifies as the transmission of irreproducible, authentic, and one-timely objects. Mechanical reproduction does not put an end to the one and only tradition; rather, it becomes the latest form of a series of practices that constitute a tra-
dition of their own. The reproduced objects were not necessarily works of art, since the work of art, as Benjamin himself states, was a relatively new category. These reproduced objects could easily be tools, instruments, images, or texts. Manual and mechanical means were used to reproduce objects that could not have remained unaffected, that needed to undergo some sort of process — that is, a process of transmission that would have resulted in their change. The appearance of photography enabled Benjamin (and, as a result, me) to set up retroactively an independent and parallel tradition of reproduction, that would stand in opposition to a tradition in which the objects transmitted are considered unique and irreproducible.

We can therefore talk about two traditions of reproduction and transmission; the distinction between the two is not chronological, since they do not replace each other but rather co-exist with one another. The first tradition transmits irreproducible objects and the second transmits practices of the reproduction of reproducible objects. In the 1930s, Benjamin is witness to the emergence of a certain game of art that constitutes itself as if it were a tradition for the transmission of unique and untouchable objects.

What Benjamin actually does is to identify and reconstruct a parallel tradition that does not center on privileged objects but rather on a practice (namely, reproduction) that is probably much older than the so-called first tradition. In the sacred and singularly (or the one-timely), Benjamin identifies an oppressive potential that threatens the condition of reproducibility, while in the reproducible he identifies a revolutionary potential that threatens the presence of the sacred and one-timely. These two traditions cannot be identified with two distinct types of actions found in different spheres of social action (religion, moral, politics or art). They are rival traditions, in competition, and the movement from one to the other enables transmission as a new beginning: “Each epoch possesses a new possibility which cannot be transmissible by heritage, one which is proper to it, to interpret the prophecies contained in the art of previous periods.” However, in order to preserve its monopoly, the tradition of the irreproducible cannot tolerate the other tradition. It is therefore only from the point of view of the other tradi-
tion, of the transmission of reproducible objects, that the movement between both becomes possible: "Some people pass things down to posterity, by making them untouchable and thus conserving them; others pass on situations, by making them practicable and thus liquidating them" ("AP," 542).

Hence, instead of reconstructing the opposition between a valuable aauratic work of art and a degraded reproduction achieved through mechanical means as two types of objects having a different nature, we might instead see two rival traditions and two different forms of transmission. Where Benjamin writes, "the technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition," ("WA," 104) I propose instead to read "the technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of [one specific] tradition [the tradition of the irreducible and places it within another tradition, the tradition of the reproducible]." Reproducibility lies at the center of this other tradition that consists of imprinting, castings, woodcarving, lithography, photography and later forms of mechanical reproduction.

Both practices of reproduction, the ancient and the modern, made it possible for an image or an object to appear outside the special place designated for its presence. In this sense, if Benjamin’s essay is a eulogy at all, it is, I believe, a eulogy not for the aura of the work of art, but rather to something else — to the loss of the designated place. The loss of place means a transition from a unique place, where one must be present in order to experience the object, to a place in which both the object and the place itself can be experienced without necessarily being there. Benjamin expresses this vividly through a remark by Paul Valéry, which he added to the last version of the "Work of Art" essay in 1939: "Just as water, gas, and electricity are brought into our houses from far off to satisfy our needs in response to a minimal effort, so we shall be supplied with visual or auditory images, which will appear and disappear at a simple movement of the hand, hardly more than a sign" ("WA," 253).

The loss of a unique place affects the conditions for exercising authority and authority’s mode of appearance. Benjamin was
interested in the question of authority not only in the realm of art, but also in the realm of political power. In the “Work of Art” essay, his movement back and forth between art and politics can be explained by his interest in the new predicament common to both realms: the accelerating loss of the designated, special place of presence — the designated place where power appears and the designated place of religious artifacts and sacred images. It is not a loss of a place of origin that I — or Benjamin — have in mind here, but the loss of a necessary link between place and presence. Benjamin recognized that both politics and art responded to this loss in a similar way: a specific form of compensation for the loss that implied and produced a denial of the loss. This was precisely the role of the new art museum and art gallery that mushroomed throughout Europe and other Western countries: those clean, neutral spaces in which objects appeared as irreproducible, one-time-ly and unique in special or retrospective exhibitions. In effect, the establishment of those shrines resulted in the predominance of a certain mode of artistic activity: specifically, the production of original objects that would justify the existence of privileged ones endowed with a special authority of their own. This mode of artistic activity/production also justifies the claim of the museum to provide a special place to these objects, to give them a hallowed presence. Something similar could be said regarding the realm of politics, but it would take me too long to say it here completely. War and catastrophe, what Benjamin later called the state of emergency, produce the site where power regains its uniqueness and irreproducibility through its management of those sites of disaster (emergency zones) where people “can experience [their] own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure” (“WA,” 122). Those emergency zones compensate power for the loss of its distinct place.

In 1939, while watching the emergence of a new war, Benjamin’s discussion of war changed in tone from prophecy to an almost factual description: “[A]ll efforts to aestheticize politics culminate in one point. That one point is war” (“WA,” 122). In those later versions of the “Work of Art” essay, written in 1938 and 1939, the main purpose of the essay becomes to render Benjamin’s con-
cepts "useless for the purposes of fascism" ("WA," 102). If, as I have just argued, Benjamin believed that art and power shared common conditions, we should ask what in the practice of art he understood to be immune to fascist appropriation. In order to do so, I will further develop the idea of the two parallel traditions — the first tradition being associated with the ritual and the second with the exhibition — and the different forms of transmission that characterize them: "[T]he instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applied to artistic production, the whole social function of art is revolutionized. Instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice — politics" ("WA," 102).

According to Benjamin, the ritual is characterized by "being-present" in a specific place/origin. This "presence" is strictly administered, and not everyone is authorized to watch or perform the ritual. To use Benjamin's example: "Certain images of Madonna remain covered nearly all year round" ("WA," 106). On the other hand, Benjamin characterizes exhibition as being-present-anywhere-but-nowhere-in-particular and as anything-being-exchangeable-for-any-other-thing. Benjamin believed fascism was trying to re-institute ritual and the unique source of authority as a response to the new conditions of reproducibility. However, what is in fact suggested by Benjamin's texts is the reconstruction of that other tradition of the transmission of reproducibility, the main practice of which is destruction directed first of all at the mechanism that endows objects with authority and the locality of sacredness.

Thus contrary to the first tradition, which is centralized and closed, the second is decentralized and open. The first centers on supposedly original objects and authentic relics, expropriating them from the economy of exchange; the other exchanges the object's presence for its image, which is replaceable in principle. The first removes the image or the object from any of its discursive milieus and insists on separating image from text. The second seeks to inscribe its images into narratives, to revive the art of story-telling as a form for the transmission of images, and to refuse any attempt to restore an original image from the stories that are piled one on top of the other, continually changing as they are chained like
beads in the string of tradition.

The Revolutionary Strike

This model of two traditions provides a new key for reading another essay, "The Storyteller: Observations on the work of Nikolai Leskov,"\(^{16}\) and understanding Benjamin's argument concerning the loss of the capacity to share experience with others. He relates this loss to the emergence of the masses as mute spectators watching their own annihilation. He believes that this loss of the ability to share experience and to link what we see to what we can describe originated in the First World War. What Benjamin was actually looking for, starting from his "Short History of Photography" in 1931, and in a more urgent way at the end of the 1940s, was not a certain kind of image that would depict the war differently. He was looking for a certain practice of transmission that would not sanctify what it transmitted. In his observation of images, in his reading of others' text, and in his own writings, Benjamin experimented with different practices of transmission that would meet this requirement. His texts (which include many drafts, different published versions of some key texts, and numerous unfinished fragments) — composed and assembled in the form of montage, full of errors and contradictions, moving as they do between the visual and the textual — disturb readers and induce them to navigate back and forth between the skeleton of the texts and the materials of which they are made. Thus, reading becomes an endless work of theoretical reconstruction, which collapses every time its results are projected back onto Benjamin's examples — those material and visual "episodes" that pervade his texts. In a way, readers are induced to rewrite Benjamin's texts, narrating them once again, and transmitting them in a way that would always be open to new reconstructions.

Let us take as an example thesis IX from Benjamin's "Theses on a Philosophy of History." We can forget for a moment what we know about it regarding progress, the future and the past, and focus instead on the relationship between text and image, retrieving
traces of Benjamin’s gaze, in an attempt to reconstruct his way of looking — specifically with regard to the painting by Paul Klee. The fact that Klee’s picture was painted after the First World War and bought by Benjamin in 1921, the same year in which he wrote “Critique of Violence,” is usually ignored together with the fact that he waited nineteen years before writing about it in 1940. As we examine the painting, we should keep in mind not only that Benjamin’s treatment of it was a response to the start of the Second World War, but that it was also a response of the experience of the First World War. When Benjamin looks at Klee’s painting, he imagines the angel as a figure for a survivor of the First World War: “[The angel] seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open” (“TPH,” 392). The angel is unable to say anything whatsoever. Benjamin describes a moment of silence, a speechlessness that could last forever. The year is 1940. Benjamin knows that this angel saw the First World War, and now he induces the angel to watch the newly emergent war as well. Benjamin is interested in the angel’s gaze no less than he is interested in the differences between that gaze and his own. These differences will be helpful in the process of re-inscribing into language the frozen, mute images that left their imprint on the war’s survivors. For Benjamin, this process should not take place in solitude; he is placing himself beside the angel and asking for his testimony.

What Benjamin is doing here, I suggest, is leaping into the painting and positioning himself somewhere near the angel, vis-à-vis the vantage point created by the painting, and from there articulating the visual fields opened not only in front of him but also between him and the angel. Benjamin does not engage in the typical history of art by describing, for example, what we should see when we look at the painting; rather he narrates what the painted angel sees as well as what “we” see. Who are we? Are we the spectators? Are we the readers? Are we Benjamin? Does Benjamin refer to himself and the angel as a “we” comprised of survivors of the First World War that are now facing the Second? Whomever this “we” designates, the visual field of the war is now shattered and the
different gazes cannot be orchestrated into a single one. Benjamin consequently blurs the stable distinction between image and spectator and forces the picture to become a field of relations. In this open space created between him, the angel, and “us” — whoever this “us” may be — the experience of war can be negotiated without transforming it into a unique and sacred representation of war. It thereby enables “us” in Benjamin’s words to “bring about a real state of emergency” (“TPH,” 392). By state of emergency, I mean what is created by the general, revolutionary strike: the strike of the soldiers who would refuse to go to war, refuse to sacrifice themselves or others for the sake of such a unique and sacred image of war or for the sake of the image of the one sovereign power that invariably initiates it.

This healing of post-traumatic muteness — that is, giving words to hitherto unspeakable experience — is or may be a form of political resistance. By stating the differences between what he sees and what the angel sees, Benjamin initiates the first step in the effort to destroy the unique image of war which sovereign power has a great interest in maintaining: “Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls at his feet” (“TPH,” 392, emphasis added). The angel refuses in seeing to recognize a solitary, repetitive image of war and persists on saying that it is actually the structure of disaster. In a short text, “The Destructive Character,” written in 1931, the same year in which he wrote his “Short History of Photography,” Benjamin describes the “destructive character” as standing “in the front line of traditionalists.” We can simply say that those who have a destructive character take part in the web of relationships that comprise tradition. There have always been such characters within tradition, and there always will be. Their destructive actions have no validity or meaning for a tradition unless they are made from within that tradition. But in the context of my discussion of the “Work of Art” essay, we can say that those with a destructive character are those who have left tradition and now find themselves belonging to an alternative tradition in which the destructive character can blossom. The first interpretation
implies that there is no place outside tradition; the second implies that outside the conservative tradition, there is another tradition: "The destructive character knows only one watchword: make room. And only one activity: clearing away" ("DC," 541). In the "Work of Art" essay, Benjamin reinstates for the destructive character, actually for himself, an alternative tradition which does not abolish the first tradition; it has instead destroyed its monopolistic claim on the transmission of what is worthy of transmission. Even when it seems that the destructive character destroys and annihilates every bit of tradition, that the destroyer lacks all respect for tradition, it is easy to remember his predecessors and to anticipate his posterity. They are all attached to one another within the same tradition. One transmits to the other the tradition of destroying: "What exists he reduces to rubble — not for the sake of the rubble, but for that of the way leading through it" ("DC," 542).

The destructive character, Benjamin continues, cannot be alone: "Just as the creator seeks solitude, the destroyer must be constantly surrounded by people" ("DC," 542). Contrary to the creator, who seeks to "pass things down to posterity, by making them untouchable and thus preserving them," the destructive character "pass[es] on situations, by making them practicable and thus liquidating them" ("DC," 542). Photography can illustrate both scenarios. People from the first tradition might try to make a photograph untouchable from the moment it depicts the irreproducible, thereby adopting the photograph into the tradition of the unique. The destructive character will do everything to destroy the petrified image together with the sacred moment it allegedly depicts and to pass the image on to others as "practicable," something to be used and changed in and through its transmission.

The Photographic Image Cannot Be Appropriate(d)

The photograph as an object, a piece of material, can change hands and be preserved by the first tradition. But no tradition can appropriate the photographed image. The photographic image can only be transmitted. In the Arcades Project, Benjamin refers to
the camera as a producer of pictures, with each shot producing another unique picture.” This is not the technical picture that portrays a man’s mere use of a machine, but an image that results from their encounter, or in Benjamin’s own words: “What makes the first photographs uniquely one of their kind is perhaps this: they are the first image from the encounter between man and machine” (PS, 692). It is not this first “encounter between man and machine” that is important, but the fact that these are the first images to have been produced by such an encounter. This image presents the encounter neither from the perspective of the photographer nor from that of the photographed person; it is an image obtained from the encounter itself. Since the encounter usually bring together not only a person and a machine, but also the photographer and the photographed person, and these two are then joined by a third, the spectator, we may conclude by saying that the image of the encounter can never be fully appropriated by any of the partners; it always lies between and is shared among them.

In his “Work of Art” essay, Benjamin discusses the work of French photographer Eugène Atget. Atget’s corpus consists of thousands of images of a deserted Paris, and many of them, hazardously chosen, became an abstract visual synonym for the “crime scene.” Benjamin writes: “Atget . . . took photographs of deserted Paris streets. It has justly been said that he photographed them like scenes of crimes. A crime scene, too, is deserted; it is photographed for the purpose of establishing evidence. With Atget, photographic records begin to be evidence in the historical trial” (“WA,” 108). Those few lines that Benjamin wrote about Atget became notorious and have been repeated blindly and extensively. What exactly is the scene of crime depicted by Atget’s camera? What is the crime to which these photos bear testimony? None of the nine published editions of Benjamin’s text with which I am familiar include any visual references to Atget. I do not know which of Atget’s images Benjamin saw or remembered when he was writing these lines. But Benjamin does discuss these photos as evidence produced for a trial. If we indeed seek to find some record for the trial that Benjamin perceived, we might not limit our-
Eugène Atget, “La Villette, fille publique faisant le quart, 19e. Avril 1921.”
Courtesy: The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY.
selves to the main corpus of Atget's photographs which might illustrate only metaphorically the notion of a crime scene, and look instead to the periphery of the body of images.

Among the thousands of photographs of the city, there are a few frames in which some actual figures appear. These evidentiary photographs candidly show city dwellers — prostitutes, tramps, and vagabonds — who were banned from the city streets, and whose banishment could be understood as what had turned the city streets into the scene of a crime. In two photos dating from the beginning of the 1920s, we can see several filles publiques ("public girls"); the women are not shown in the street itself but peripherally, at the doors of houses. Their bodies, on which new urban regulations were being written, were removed from the city's public spaces, but they could not be hidden completely behind the building walls. In the photographs, the women are standing on the doorstep of the house to which they belong. Is it their home? A brothel? Yet they also extend, almost slide, a bit from out the front door. One woman is standing on the doorstep leaning forward somewhat, while the other is sitting on a chair at the entrance to the house, and her elbow is slightly inserted back through the open door (or so it seems, given the angle of view Atget has chosen) perhaps in order to leave an opening for negotiation with the policeman or the supervisor who will come to arrest her for showing herself in public.

Of course let us not forget that Benjamin was a consummate draftsman and consistently reiterated fragments of his ideas, but always with slight variations in each version. I have chosen to read these photographs by Atget with the help of a passage from the Arcades. It is a fragment that Benjamin copied from Paris' newly written regulations on prostitution (PS, 517). According to these regulations, prostitutes should have been removed from the streets of Paris and shoved behind locked doors, thus cleansing the public domain of their provocative presence. These regulations imposed constraints and restrictions governing freedom of movement and speech on these public girls. Policemen were given the authority to expel from city streets women who walked alone in public, to
stamp them with the shaming sign "whore" and to ban them from the public space. Going back and forth between the regulations copied into Benjamin's text and the images in Atget's corpus, between Benjamin's description of Atget's photographs and the photographs themselves, we can understand the crime scene as Benjamin might have imagined it. Viewing these photographs and the expansion of globalized trafficking in women, we may even actualize Benjamin's *mot d'ordre* — "to bring about a real state of emergency" ("TPH," 392) — as a call for a "real state of sexual emergency." Finally, we can ask whether it is not the case that outlawing prostitution through police regulation was a case of blurring the distinction between law preserving and law instituting violence, and whether eliminating prostitutes from the public sphere, an act that renders them almost invisible was not reminiscent of other acts of violence in which people suddenly disappear as a result of sovereign intervention. We might even be prompted to think about the moment in "Critique of Violence" — a moment I return to below — in which the earth opens its mouth and swallows a group of rebels.

**Revolutionary Violence**

Let me turn now to Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" and show how the reading of the two traditions I have proposed may help us understand a key and often misunderstood point. This text has been at the center of several important interpretations, the most famous being those of Derrida and Agamben. In a paper that tries to reconstruct the text's architectural structure, I also contributed to this effort.21 When I wrote the paper, I shared with others some assumptions regarding the last paragraphs of the "Critique of Violence," which presents the opposition between mythical violence, exemplified by the story of Niobe, and divine violence, exemplified by the story of Korah. The assumption is that the text in general leads towards this crucial opposition, and that the proper reconstruction of this opposition, on which the understanding of divine violence depends, will provide a key for comprehending the text as a whole.
It is also commonly understood that the opposition was meant to be exclusive and that Benjamin takes sides when presenting it — specifically against mythical violence, which is precisely the violence that abounds all around him (and us), in an expectation of the resurgence of divine violence.

Only recently, I realized that by sharing this assumption, I have abandoned my task as a reader of Benjamin — to go back and forth between text and image — and thus participated in the creation of an aura around “Critique of Violence.” In other words, I read the text as a member of the first tradition, the tradition of the irreproducible and untouchable. So I would like to conclude this paper by proposing a new reading of his last paragraphs in “Critique of Violence,” one that would be attentive to the visual in the scene of horror and that would make use of the distinction between the two traditions I have reconstructed from his later “Work of Art” essay.

Of course, no photographs were taken when Niobe was turned into a stone and Korah swallowed by the earth, but across the years some pictures were drawn, and Benjamin might have had those in mind. Yet, I have no evidence for this. In this case, I must rely on the text alone, in which no image is mentioned; but we do find, very clearly, the presence of spectators. Therefore, although we lack images, we have at least some scenes to watch. These spectators are watching very particular images — images of horror. The first image is of Niobe, the second is of the people who watch Korah’s disappearance. The text presents these two stories as illustrations for the opposition between mythic violence and divine violence. The reader is compelled to reconstruct the opposition between these two types of violence by superimposing the opposition on another one — that between the stories of Niobe and Korah. Although many interpretations attempt to assert the existence of these oppositions, in reconstructing them, we see that they actually bear more similarities than they do differences.

A few examples of these similarities will probably suffice. Regarding the biblical story of Korah, divine violence strikes immediately “without warning and without threat” (“CV,” 250). At the
same time, divine violence is not only inflicted as an abrupt blast, but it is part of a structured ordeal, and at a certain point is even negotiated between Moses and God. In the myth, Niobe also loses most of her family practically at once. And if some of her fourteen offspring were spared death, as indicated by some versions of the myth, it was also due to negotiation. Korah leaves behind him a band of people in varying degrees of association and kinship who, like Niobe, witness the act of violence and lament the loss, and, like Niobe, they may also be bound by guilt. Niobe, the heroine of "her" story did not really stay alive, as we learn that she too disappeared into the earth or merged with it by becoming a stone. Divine violence, which does not shed blood according to Benjamin, might have concealed the image of the bodies from a hypothetical biblical photographer's visual field, but the image of the disaster was not omitted (at least not by those who gave testimony to it): "[T]he ground beneath them split; the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and their homes" (Num 16:32). . . . "[A]nd the next day all the community of the Israelites raised complaints against Moses and Aaron" (Num 17:6). The scene was even recorded by the Biblical cameraman, or author, who might have been present at the site of the disaster and who captured well the sounds of horror: "[A]nd all Israel that were round about them fled at the cry of them" (Num 16:34, emphasis added). Niobe was punished by the gods because she dared to challenge their absolute supremacy, upon which their rule of law was based. Korah was punished because he dared to challenge the privileges of power granted to Moses, Aaron and Aaron's sons, whom God had appointed as his principal servants. In both cases the execution of the punishment in public is part of an effort of self-preservation on the side of the existing power; one cannot fail to identify this effort in both stories with law preserving violence.

If you are not convinced yet of the similarities between these stories which prevent them from illustrating a real difference between mythic and divine violence, let me read what Benjamin writes toward the very end of his essay, where it seems that all our effort to differentiate both forms of violence are doomed to fail:
“[L]ess possible and also less urgent for humankind, however, is to decide when unalloyed violence has been realized in particular cases. For only mythic violence, not divine, will be recognizable as such with certainty unless it be in incomparable effects, because the expiatory power of violence is invisible to men” (“CV,” 252).

Regarding expiatory power, we learn while reading the biblical story that expiation was not the result of divine violence but of a certain ritual performed by Aaron, the high priest. The day after the earth swallowed Korah and his company, the people rebelled again in protest against the death of Korah and his people. God begins to strike them, by inflicting them with a plague, but Aaron, upon Moses’ instruction, places cense in the censer in order to achieve the expiation of those rebels: “And Moses said unto Aaron, take a censer, and put fire there in from off the altar, and put incense, and take it quickly unto the congregation, and make an atonement for them, for there wrath gone out from the Lord; the plague is begun” (Num 16:46). Thus, expiatory power was given to Moses and Aaron as a means of stopping not only divine violence but of stopping revolutionary power as well. This expiatory power stayed invisible to men, specifically to those men who rebelled against the death sentence inflicted upon Korah and his company. Maybe it is not so much that they could not see it, but that they refused to recognize it for what it was — expiatory power.

It is important for Benjamin to distinguish between the use of unalloyed violence and the determinate affirmation that unalloyed violence was indeed in use in a particular case. This distinction allows one to suppose or claim that the use of unalloyed violence is not solely identified with one kind of violence. Having said this, we can suggest that the “as such,” in the second sentence — “for only mythic violence, not divine, will be recognizable as such” — refers to the use of unalloyed violence mentioned in the previous sentence. I therefore suggest that the phrase means, “Only mythic violence, not divine, will be recognizable as unalloyed violence.” Thus, both mythic violence and divine violence can make use of unalloyed violence, even though they cannot both be recognized as using it and recognized while using it. The use of an unalloyed
means towards an end is part of or an effect or expression of expiatory power, something that both kinds of violence possess and which remains invisible to men in the case of divine violence. Having pointed out this similarity between the mythic and divine violence, I suggest now to read anew these lines together with the few lines that precede them: “But if the existence of violence outside the law, as pure immediate violence, is assured, this furnishes proof that revolutionary violence, the highest manifestation of unalloyed violence by man, is possible, and shows by what means” (“CV,” 252). The revolutionary violence mentioned here, is not only not identical with each of these two forms of violence, mythical and divine, but it is actually placed in opposition to both of them. Thus, toward the end of his essay, Benjamin makes room for another (and final) opposition, much more sustainable in his writings — the opposition between the violence inflicted upon men by power (be it God or God’s power) and revolutionary violence, as it is used, for example, by Niobe or Korah, which is a power that challenges the existing power and its claim for total and unified sovereignty. Now, if we understand both Niobe and Korah as rebels and read them into Benjamin’s last paragraph, we can say that it is less important for humankind to know whether or not either actually used unalloyed means than it is to retrieve their use of revolutionary violence from out of an oblivion, as a violence that testifies to the permanent presence of such revolutionary violence outside the totality and self-preservation of the one law. Thus Niobe and Korah become part of what Benjamin will later call “the tradition of the oppressed”; at the very least they are examples of “the destructive character” that acts within the second tradition, whose existence and principles I have tried to retrieve out of Benjamin’s essays on art and on the destructive character.

1 A first version of this text was presented at a seminar led by Judith Butler on Walter Benjamin at The University of California, Berkeley in 2006.
3 Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings Volume 1 – 1913-1926 (Cambridge, MA: The

4 See my discussion of Benjamin’s “mistakes” in Ariella Azoulay, *Once Upon a Time: Photography Following Benjamin* (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Bar Ilan University Press, 2006). See specifically footnote number 6. Hereafter cited as OT.


8 Perhaps there were no emergency handles in train engines in Marx's time, but even if there were, it is doubtful that Marx would have noticed them.


11 It is important to note that, on the one hand, works of art are not the only type of object that the tradition transmits, and that, on the other hand, the other tradition, too, transmits works of arts among other objects.

12 One can hardly miss here the affinity between Benjamin’s thought and Arendt’s concept of natality.

13 The excerpt is taken from a version of the essay on the work of art that was written in French. See Walter Benjamin, *Ecrits Français* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 180.

14 The conquest of space has intensified in recent years, but even in Benjamin’s time colonization of space through optics and transport had reached impressive proportions.

15 In the 1980s, the largest wave of the working through mourning of art occurred in the museological space. Numerous exhibitions throughout the world addressed the subject. See, for example, Yves Alain Bois, *Endgame* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), an exhibition and catalogue that dealt with painting’s work of mourning.


18 For the “inappropriability” of photographs see my argument in *The Civil Contract of Photography* (NY: Zone Books, forthcoming).

