

# The Reproducibility of the *Angelus Novus* in the Moment of Danger

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**Abstract** Walter Benjamin's "Angel of History" inspired by Paul Klee's artwork "Angelus Novus" has become a modern icon that continues to receive international acclaim in markedly different contexts and situations. This reception raises questions about the conditions and implications of carrying Benjamin's allegory and, by extension, modernist icons as such, across cultural, temporal and political borders: Under what conditions can this arguably most radical of canonized mnemonic images of the past century be saved from conventionalization in order to continue to testify to the violence and destruction perpetrated over the course of human history until today? This question is addressed in a juxtaposition of several contrasting interpretations of Benjamin's famous allegory.

**Key words** Angel of History; Memory; Transmission; Benjamin; Iconicity

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Walter Benjamin's "Angel of History" who turns his back to the future and faces the past that lies before him like a heap of rubble, has become an emblem for the

redemptive commemoration of history as catastrophe as well as for the failure to carry out this task. Written in 1940, the figure developed in Benjamin's Ninth Thesis "On the Concept of History"<sup>1</sup> as a comment on Paul Klee's "oil painting with touches of aquarelle"<sup>2</sup> from 1920, which was his most precious possession, represents a bleak view of history associated with the darkest hour of the European Twentieth Century. As has often been remarked, Benjamin's theses "On the Concept of History" constitute not only a microscopic summa and a testament of his thought, but, particularly in the figure of the Angel drawn in the Ninth Thesis, they can also be regarded as a condensation of his views on the task of the historian to confront the past from the perspective of a specific constellation with the present.

My title is a collage of three quotes from Benjamin's work: the essay "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility" (SW 3 101-33), the reference to the title of Paul Klee's painting in the Ninth Thesis, and the passage in the Sixth Thesis that defines the task of the historical materialist in terms of capturing "an image of the past as it presents itself spontaneously to the historical subject in the moment of danger" (*im Augenblick der Gefahr*) (SW 4 391). The continuous and worldwide reception of Benjamin's "Angel of History" in very different contexts and situations over the past decades raises questions about the conditions and implications of carrying Benjamin's icon across cultural, temporal, and political borders.

Benjamin's Ninth Thesis starts out as a description of Klee's "Angelus Novus" and, in a few lines, turns it into an allegory that reaches far beyond anything visible in the painting:



A Klee painting named *Angelus Novus* shows an Angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the Angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The Angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (SW 4 392)

His wings ready for flight, the “*Angelus Novus*” would gladly return to the stance lent to him by Benjamin in one of the most famous allegories of the Twentieth Century. But the storm of fame that blows in his face from countless theoretical, literary, and visual reproductions blocks his path and drives him inexorably forward. The history of the reception of Benjamin’s “Angel of History” who, with his back to the future, is prevented by the storm of progress from making whole again the heap of rubble constituted by world history, raises the question of the extent to which ideas of cultural memory can be transmitted from generation to generation, from one place, time and situation, from one historical and political constellation to another.

The prospects are different today than they were in 1940 when Benjamin wrote his theses, but even now there is no lack of a need for salvation. Still to be saved in our time is all that has been disgraced and denied by the victors, that has been forgotten, and to which the Angel bears witness with his petrified gaze and a silence expressing outrage beyond words. Yet, in the meantime, Benjamin’s Angel has himself been victorious. Finding himself in the basket of desirable cultural consumer goods, he risks not only being subjected to wear and tear through globalised reproduction, but also being instrumentalized for the most arbitrary purposes. The question arises, therefore, whether and under what conditions this arguably most radical of canonised mnemonic images can be saved from conventionalization in order to continue to testify for the violence and destruction perpetrated in the course of human history. And today.

Here a few extreme examples of contrasting interpretations: although they appear only few years apart, an ideological gulf lies between Gershom Scholem’s

and Otto Karl Werckmeister's complaints about the misuse of Benjamin's Angel. In 1972 Scholem rebukes those, who "quote him like holy scripture."<sup>3</sup> The guilty ones come from the "New Left," the 68' Marxists, at the moment when "the reception of Benjamin had just got into full swing" (BE 35). Scholem contrasts their conversion of the "Angel of History" from an "image of meditation" into a political weapon with a "true understanding of Benjamin's genius" (BE 35) and points these Marxist deniers of the true Holy Scripture (BE 46), towards Benjamin's "link to the mystic tradition" (BE 46). Admittedly, Scholem also holds the Marxist terminology Benjamin himself "slipped over" his thinking (*wobei das marxistische Element etwas wie eine Umstülpung des metaphysisch-theologischen ist*) (BE 35) partly responsible for this denial of his mystical inclinations. In 1976, Werckmeister, from a radically orthodox Marxist perspective, likewise complains about those who have turned the Angel into an "icon of the Left."<sup>4</sup> If Scholem described Klee's drawing positively as an "image for meditation," then for Werckmeister this term — he uses the German word "*Andachtsbild*" taken from the theological register — becomes a witness for the prosecution. The guilty parties, to whom the Angel has become a "devotional picture," are for Werkmeister too the "left-wing intellectuals" (BA 242), but his critique comes from a much different position in "Walter Benjamin's Angel of History" Werkmeister calls Benjamin's allegory "a composite literary icon for left-wing intellectuals with uncertain political aspirations" and "an icon of the left ... that has seemed to hold out an elusive formula for making sense of the senseless, for reversing the irreversible, while being subject to a kind of political brooding all the more protracted the less promising the prospects for political practice appear to be" (BA 242). Werckmeister objects not to an absence of mysticism but to a lack of political commitment. The leftist dissidence, now with the blessing of the Establishment, refers to Benjamin's Angel without the least *praxis* and existential risk. For Werckmeister, like for Scholem, Benjamin has himself fostered the misuse. He makes it easy for the "politically powerless" of today to hold on to the cultural superstructure without any true political practice and try to strike saving sparks from his "politically most helpless phase" (BA 243).

Scholem and Werckmeister counter what they consider to be the misguided reception of Benjamin's Angel with the history of its origins and genesis — one from a theological, the other from a Marxist perspective. Intending to provide evidence of the mystical origin of the Angel, Scholem introduces Benjamin's autobiographical sketch "Agesilaus Santander," probably written during a bout of malaria fever, which describes the *Angelus Novus* as a "newly created Kabala protector" and the Talmudic legend quoted by Benjamin, in which — allegory

of actuality — “angels, new ones, are created in huge crowds at every moment and after they have sung their hymn before God, cease and fade away” (BE 47). Scholem reconstructs the genesis of Benjamin’s Angel from demonology, the Christian iconography of the Baroque, Jewish mysticism, anagrammatic poetic practice, and Benjamin’s love life. In his early texts the Angel is first of all the beloved, later the figure of the self waiting for the Angel patiently and at a distance, and finally the “occult reality” of Benjamin himself (BE 62). In the last stage of the development of Benjamin’s relationship to Klee’s painting, as reconstructed by Scholem, the Angel becomes the emblem of ideas of a failed Messianic deliverance. Finally, it ends up in “distorting Marxist form” (BE 67) as the familiar history-blasting allegory, which, according to Scholem, is nevertheless — even in Benjamin’s own imagination — still propelled more by messianic hopes than by materialistically determined means of production. Thus Scholem disposes of the political significance of the parable and rescues the Angel as evidence of his belief in Benjamin’s close relationship to mysticism and to the Jewish cultural tradition as such.

Werckmeister’s history of the origin of the Angel, augmented by much detailed knowledge, takes a somewhat different direction. Where Scholem criticizes Benjamin for giving in to Marxist seductions, with which he only masked his metaphysical — and Jewish — intentions, Werckmeister is critical of Benjamin’s abandonment of a truly Marxist perspective and of having, in the 1940s, taken refuge in metaphysical speculations, replacing his commitment to a revolutionary *praxis* with a resigned vision of paralysis in the face of history. Werckmeister’s interpretation of Benjamin’s “Angel of History” unfolds primarily by way of references to revolutionary politics and to literature. He uncovers links to André Breton, Karl Kraus, Ernst Fuchs and Karl Jochmann, and discovers a fantastic analogy between the hope of Benjamin’s Angel “reawakening the dead” and the novel *Moravagine* by Blaise Cendrars Benjamin was writing about at the time: At the end of Cendar’s novel, a film-maker plays a scene backwards. In this scene, he has shot the destruction of Paris as announced by Angels above the portal of Notre Dame. But now the buildings are made whole again and the dead rise up (BA 259). This fascinating but also somewhat grotesque speculation about the origin of what inspired Benjamin’s parable of the “Angel of history”’s redemptive aspirations could not be further removed from Scholem’s celebration of Benjamin’s hidden metaphysical claims. It is, however, ultimately unimportant whether the messianic-revolutionary hope of Benjamin’s Angel derives from film reels played backwards or from holy scrolls, which Scholem supposes he discerns in the hairdo of Klee’s

Angel. In either case it is questionable whether his story of the origin of Benjamin's allegory is sufficient to discredit its reception-history and to lament that it is unfaithful to Benjamin's original intention. It is after all Benjamin himself who, in "Literaturwissenschaft und Literaturkritik" writes, that the influence of works (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) "is by no means of less importance than their genesis" and that "only in their afterlife do they find their true purpose — not as art object but as political tools to shape history."<sup>5</sup>

One could indeed go on showing the extent to which Benjamin's "original" text is already a conglomerate of transpositions, displacements, and transferences. Giorgio Agamben, for example, supplements the history of the origin of Benjamin's Angel by linking it to neo-Platonic mysticism, late Hermetics, Gnosticism, early Christianity and Persian and Islamic Angelology, as well as the pre-animist studies of Preuss and Bachofen's primeval swamp myths.<sup>6</sup> Agamben also complains that Benjamin's theses have degenerated into clichés (P 152) and to him, too, it is the Left that is the guilty party, referring glibly to Benjamin's allegory in the name of the oppressed. Agamben, however, unlike Scholem and Werckmeister, is concerned neither with mysticism nor with political praxis. Instead, in a more philosophical vein, he calls for a gesture of destruction that would prevent a misunderstanding of what it means for the historian to save a past that has been silenced or forgotten. A mere reconstruction or restoration would only assimilate the mode of transmission of the cultural memory of the oppressed to that of the oppressor. (P 153)

For Agamben, Benjamin's radicalism lies in his belief that to redeem the past is "not to restore its true dignity, to transmit it anew as an inheritance for future generations." Rather, Agamben concludes that for Benjamin the redemption to be performed by the historian is to save the past and its artefacts "from a determined mode of its transmission" (P 152). In Agamben's understanding of Benjamin, the culprit is "the way in which it is valued as 'heritage'", something "more insidious than its disappearance could ever be" (P 152). For Benjamin, Agamben writes, what is at issue is "an interruption of tradition in which the past is fulfilled and thereby brought to its end once and for all.... To redeem the past is to put an end to it, to cast upon it a gaze that fulfils it" (P 153).

Agamben's rejection of the use of Benjamin's allegory for a new historiography written from the perspective of *concrete* losers and oppressed is in some ways justified. It corresponds to Benjamin's idea of salvation as a rupture that would put a stop to the existing bad state of affairs *altogether* and bring the past *as such* to its messianic conclusion. It is, however, doubtful whether a mere gaze would suffice to make whole again the pile of debris signifying the violence

of destruction in history and to awaken its dead. Benjamin's Angel "gazes" indeed, but his unfilled desire to save the past lies in an *action* that he cannot fulfil. Furthermore, it is perhaps also necessary here to draw Benjamin's own conception of the past into a new constellation with the present, which in the theses "On the Concept of History" is described as a relation to the past at the "moment of danger" (SW, 4 391).

If at the time and place of the Angel-parable's genesis — Nazi-occupied Europe — the danger was obvious and definable in world-historical terms, then today it is less unambiguous and appears more difficult to attribute to a single origin of destruction. Rather than pushing the abstraction of Benjamin's universal historical pile of debris any further — whether in a mystical direction like Scholem's, in a Marxist one like Werckmeister's, or in a philosophical- anarchist one like Agamben's, it may be more relevant today to measure the possible significance — the impact and limitations — of Benjamin's "Angel of History" against more circumscribed, localized and concrete danger zones in the Twenty First Century.

It may not be purely accidental that it is an Israeli art theorist who casts doubts on the dismayed powerlessness of the Angel critically regarded by Werckmeister (and before him by Bertolt Brecht) as the primary message of Benjamin's *Denkbild*. For Azoulay, it is precisely the Angel's speechless shock in the face of the disasters of the past that lends him a potentially active role about the dangers of the present. The art historian, theorist of photography, and political activist Ariella Azoulay stresses the positive and productive aspect of the Angel's silent paralysis and interprets this interruption of continuous speech as a condition of a different speech and other images based on Klee's painting and Benjamin's text. Azoulay's primarily visual reading of Benjamin's Ninth Thesis refers to an error initiated by its author himself and blindly adopted by his readers: that the Angel's "fixed gaze" stares straight at the heap debris in front of him. As a glance at Klee's *Angelus Novus* confirms, the Angel is indeed rather looking to the side and squinting beyond the edge of the picture. This observation allows Azoulay to designate the Angel as the paradigm of a transmission in which reader and viewer do not have "the passive role of saving and preserving a closed and sacrosanct relic"<sup>7</sup> but instead "the active role of the destroyer, of the apostate, exterminator", who is consciously unfaithful to the status and origin of the petrified image, in order "to tell the picture anew."<sup>8</sup> The sideways, squinting gaze itself also transgresses both the limits of the original picture and the bounds of Benjamin's allegory, in order to open a space in which it is both preserved and destroyed in new images and new texts.

Azoulay's comprehensive affirmation of a use of the picture that does not only reach beyond the original, but also, as Benjamin demands of citations, tears and quotes it out of its original context and possibly even destroys it. Such an affirmation can easily draw on Benjamin, to whom "the life of the original" only achieves its "constantly renewed most recent and encompassing development" through "translations, which are not mediations."<sup>9</sup> As Azoulay emphasizes, Benjamin himself borrows an image and translates it into a new one, without trying either to imitate the original or create a corresponding substitute in language. He takes from it, rather, an essential mode of relationship, in the light of which, out of the destructive transformation of the original countless new angels can emerge.

## Notes

1. Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in: *Selected Writings* vol. 4 1938-1940, transl. by Edmund Jephcott et al. ed. By Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003): 389-400. References to Benjamin's *Selected Writings* henceforth (SW, vol., page number).
2. Georges Steiner, *The Poetry of Thought. From Hellenism to Celan*, New York: Laughlin, New Directions, 2011, p. 175.
3. Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin und sein Engel*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 1983, p. 35, henceforth (BE, page number). All translations from this book are mine.
4. Otto Karl Werckmeister: „Walter Benjamin's Angel of History, or the Transfiguration of the Revolutionary into the Historian", in: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (Winter, 1996), S. 239-267, here p. 242, henceforth, (BA, page number)
5. Walter Benjamin: „Literaturgeschichte und Literaturwissenschaft“, in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Frankfurt a. M: Suhrkamp. 1972-1999, vol. 3, p. 290.
6. Giorgio Agamben, "Benjamin and the Demonic". In: *ibid.*, *Potentialities*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999, p. 145, henceforth (P, page number)
7. Ariella Azoulay, *Once Upon A Time: Photography Following Walter Benjamin* (in Hebrew), Tel Aviv: Bar Ilan University Press, 2006. Translated by Azoulay in an unpublished manuscript.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Walter Benjamin, "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers," in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 4.1, p. 9-21, here p. 11.

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