CONSTELLATIONS

Walter Benjamin’s Allegories and Montage, and the Contingent Assemblies of Fragments in Art Practice

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“Shousetsu: Heaven’s essence rises, earth’s essence sinks/ North wind, freezing rain”,
<http://www.photonicsmedia.net/autumn/613>. 
ABSTRACT

This project investigates philosophical and artistic strategies that render the world and our experiences within it palpable. As a response to the political milieu of the twenty-first century, this study asks what tactics can art employ in this environment? As Walter Benjamin theorised, art is a technical organisation of experience that bears the imprints of the material world transcribed through technological means. I explore how Benjamin’s methodologies can mobilise materials, fragments, and objects into constellations that make palpable the invisible, the ephemeral, but nonetheless real experiences of our world. By emphasising the experimental and radical aspects of Benjamin’s approach, this study recognises several un-actualised possibilities in his philosophical enquiry. Specifically, this thesis extends his works beyond Hegelian and Marxist materialisms to a materialist aesthetics and a materialist art practice. Speculations on the latent possibilities and critical engagement with practice and philosophical thoughts in these methodologies articulate interstitial approaches that inform my own art practice. In this way the problem of an un-disciplinary approach is analogised within Benjamin’s philosophy of fragmentation, and explored through an engagement with art, history, and philosophy.

Building on the scholarship of Susan Buck-Morss, Howard Caygill, Rolf Tiedemann, and Esther Leslie, I extended Benjamin’s materialism through the works of Manuel De Landa and Jane Bennett. This strategy draws out the non-Kantian aspect of Benjamin’s philosophy by referencing the analytical methods of Gilles Deleuze, David Hume’s critique of causality, and the Humian notion of experience. Benjamin’s speculative critique and his call for the transformation of apparatus in the production of art is explored as a transformational strategy that remains relevant. Framed by a concept of incompleteness, my exploration highlights the materiality of objects in the construction of allegories, and montage as contingent assemblies to articulate a materialist art practice that can function as a meta-framework for the creation, experience, and theorisation of art. This approach in turn folds back into my own art practice to produce a praxis—a theoretical and action oriented engagement with contemporary experience.
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INTRODUCTION

Constellations

0.1 Question

This project asks: what strategies can art develop from Walter Benjamin’s practice of allegory and montage that render the world and our experiences within it palpable? Specifically, this inquiry focuses on experimentation and inventiveness within both Benjamin’s authorship and art practice in creating forms that effectively ‘describe and explain the world in which we live’.1 This thesis examines these methodologies by locating a Benjaminian materialist aesthetics within contemporary contexts.

Previously, I approached a related question of perception in my Master’s thesis through exploring Hong Kong cinema in what Ackbar Abbas termed ‘the culture of disappearance’.2 That study examined the difficulties in presenting and representing reality as experienced in this cultural environment. The key question tackled was the problematic of representation where traditional markers have become obsolete, where signs no longer correspond to anything concrete, and where images elude meanings. In the example of Hong Kong we find the city portrayed as a fusion of East and West reified as the image of an old junk sailing against the backdrop of hyper-modern skyscrapers. Such images speak little of the city itself and much less of the experience of its inhabitants. Here descriptions become abstract; terms used to express qualities of cities like modern, contemporary, and traditional, point to generalities that impart no actual information. This problem is not unique to Hong Kong, it is prevalent everywhere. One can easily conjure up similar iconic images of New York, London, Sydney, or Paris, but when one takes up the task of delineating the experience of living in these cities, one may find that ‘the more you try to make the world hold still in a reflective gaze, the more it moves under you’, and end up grappling with clichés.3 One place can be misrecognised as another, or indeed any other. A description from Benjamin’s Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiel encapsulates this problem: ‘For every idea that comes to mind, the moment of expression coincides with a veritable eruption of images, embodied in the mass of metaphors that lie littered chaotically about’.4 Here for the Baroque allegories, the eruption of images that associates with a single idea causes disjuncture between image and reality as experienced. Likewise, the elusiveness, unreliability, and dissociative quality of images present a very real challenge for artists.
today. The doctoral dissertation presented here extends related objectives with its predecessor in finding ways to move beyond these difficulties.\(^5\)

In Benjamin’s times, diverse cultural forms were transforming into media that conveyed messages and meanings in ever more subtle and sophisticated ways. Fascism and Nazism effectively co-opted many strategies developed by the leftist avant-garde in advancing their own ideologies in the public arena. Susan Buck-Morss puts this appropriation in the context of Benjamin’s own philosophical and political position. She writes:

The Nazi slogan, ‘Deutschland Erwache! (‘Germany, Awaken!’) urged something very different from Benjamin’s conception, not awaking from recent history, but recapturing the past in a pseudo-historical sense, as myth. Hitler used the mass medium of radio to foster a political culture antithetical to that for which Benjamin was working. Fascism reversed the avant-garde practice of putting reality onto the stage, staging not only political spectacles but historical events, and thereby making ‘reality’ itself theatre.\(^6\)

In developing his *Geschichtsphilosophie* Benjamin aims to dismantle these myths, specifically the myth of progress (that asserts the present course of history as an inevitable and necessary result of the past) through a radical materialist historiography. He declares in the ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’:

Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead he grasps the constellation which his own era had formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the ‘time of the now’ which is shot through with chips of Messianic time.\(^7\)

*Das Passagen-Werk* is to achieve the goal of the materialist historian by uncovering ‘the origins of capitalism and the ur-phenomenon of modernity’, and ‘provide the materials necessary for an interpretation of history’s most recent configurations’.\(^8\) Within this undertaking, Benjamin’s twin methodologies of allegories and montage provide the schema within which materials collide with the present moment, forming tentative and contingent constellations. He names this moment ‘dialectics at a standstill’. He notes in a fragment:
It’s not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: it is not progression but image, suddenly emergent.9

This ‘suddenly emergent’ image is to awaken readers from their dream of progress. The title of this thesis, ‘Constellations’, refers to this materialist approach in bringing together fragments that in their incompleteness interrupt, disrupt, and subvert.

In practical terms, I am interested in how Benjamin’s methodologies can mobilise materials, fragments, and objects into structures that are not fixed but malleable. In the context of art, how do audiences manipulate these pliable constellations in ways that allow their own experiences to emerge with those of art? An underlying concept here is Benjamin’s argument for incomplete artworks that allow the spectator’s interaction to transform the work. He articulates this idea in both ‘Author as Producer’ and ‘What is Epic Theatre?’, arguing that the use of montage in Brechtian theatre as interruption ‘compels the spectator to take up a position towards the action’ thereby transforming the technique (of montage) into a ‘human event’,10 turning ‘spectators into collaborators’.11 Their actions not only contribute to the meaning of the artwork, but, more importantly, ensure its continual existence through transformative interpretation. This doctoral dissertation is concerned with processes that experiment with the apparatus and techniques of production, specifically in the assembly of material content, and how this relates the experience of art.

Benjamin’s works provide the tools for this investigation in two ways. First, his materialist approach to artworks forms an important basis for this study. Secondly, his concept of experience and speculative critique inform my methodology. Both Benjamin and Theodor Adorno believe in the vital role art plays in constructing philosophical and political thoughts in the practice of materialistic dialectics. Buck-Morss writes:

[Adorno] and Benjamin both viewed art as a form of scientific knowledge. Perhaps their most important contribution was to redeem aesthetics as a central cognitive discipline, a form of secular revelation, and to insist on the structural convergence of scientific and aesthetic experience. They thereby challenged a fundamental dualism of bourgeois thought, the binary opposition between scientific ‘truth’ and
art as ‘illusion’, which had characterized bourgeois thinking since the seventeenth century.¹²

As I demonstrate in Chapter 4, although Adorno and Benjamin ultimately disagree on what materials can function in a dialectic, the questions of autonomy and material objects remain significant, if not pivotal, to my enquiry into the experience of art. In the current context, this thesis focuses on the material presence of objects within Benjamin’s historical materialism. In particular, it builds upon the direct and critical encounter with artworks that is modelled on Benjamin’s speculative critique. His model of critique and its maturation through his enquiry into modern experience enabled productive engagement with diverse cultural materials. The role of speculation is critical in this process.

0.2 Speculations

The simultaneous publication of *Origins of German Mourning Plays* and *One Way Street* brought together Benjamin’s exploration of Baroque allegories and modern montage. This seemingly antithetical coupling became a driving force in his late *Produktionskreis* with the *Arcades Project* working to redeem allegorical practice through montage. In the absence of an actual *Passagen-Werk*, the task to interpret Benjamin’s methodology becomes one of speculation. Writings such as ‘Pariser Passagen II’, ‘The Rings of Saturn’, the ‘1935 Exposé’, the ‘1937 Exposé’, together with the masses of notes and collected quotes serve to sketch out a skeletal structure for the incomplete work. Later publications such as ‘Some Motifs on Baudelaire’, ‘The Work of Art in the Epoch of Technical Reproducibility’,¹³ and ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ provide further materials.¹⁴ Correspondences, revised drafts, and rejected essays including ‘Central Park’, add to this fragmentary basis. This dissertation works with the incompleteness of Benjamin’s late authorship speculatively, with particular reference to his model of critique. In what follows I provide an outline of Howard Caygill’s exposition on Benjamin’s speculative critique in order to illustrate how this model of critique informs the methodology of this study.

In *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience*, Caygill argues that Benjamin’s concept of experience provides the foundation and ‘constructing principle’ for his works and
philosophy. Benjamin’s early authorship sought to transform the Kantian concept of experience from a transcendental one to a speculative one. This philosophical program is to underlie his subsequent works. Distinct from other neo-Kantian philosophy—especially Hegel’s speculative transformation of Kant into the sphere of phenomenology—Benjamin’s central tenet is to re-cast Kantian philosophy through expanding the concept of experience. His deliberate bringing together of Kantian philosophy and German Romanticism enabled him to extend ‘a speculative side of critique that was latent but underdeveloped in Kant’s transcendental philosophy’, and develop the immanent critique of the German Romantics. Specifically, he criticises Kant’s categories of experience as mechanical—one that draws a distinct and rigid division between object and subject. Benjamin’s dissolution between subject and object in his philosophic program positions the critic very differently from that of traditional criticism. In immanent critique, there are no external criteria for judging the works; rather, the critic is charged with uncovering the criteria for judgement within the works in the act of criticism. In Benjamin’s model, the relationship between art and criticism shifted from one of connoisseurship (merely a matter of taste) based on a given set of criteria to one that is based on experience. Caygill writes:

Benjamin changes the definition of criticism from the exercise of judgement according to a given law to a presentation of its immanent possibilities of transformation […] Such a transformation of the work was achieved through the supplementation of the work’s formal possibilities by critique.  

Furthermore, Benjamin’s speculative critique is an immanent by finite critique. Developing Friedrich Schlegel’s concepts of critique, he takes the work of art to be the medium of reflection (rather than the subject of reflection). So, instead of a ‘bad infinity’ of reflection (where the reflection of subject itself is subjected to further reflection, ad infinitum) that results in an endless task of critique, Benjamin argues that infinity lies in possible configurations. He writes: ‘The infinity of reflection is for Schlegel and Novalis in the first instance not an infinity of progress but an infinity of configuration’. Experience presents this infinite configuration embodied within the work of art. The critic’s task is, thus, to identify these possibilities: both in the origins of the work and its future interpretation. Benjamin concludes his dissertation on the German Romantics by presenting the opposed views of Schlegel and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, where the former argues that critique will eventually identify all possibilities in the work of art and
thereby realises it or completes it, and the latter views that both time and critique will destroy the work of art leaving only ruins that in time will also dissolve. The speculative quality of Benjamin’s model of critique offers a different possibility ‘in which the absolute, rather than completing or dissolving the work, introduces new contingencies into its structure’. Speculative critique uncovers both the contingencies in the making of the work as well as the possibilities of its interpretation. The critic’s task is to discover what is immanent in the work through direct engagement.

In ‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities’, Benjamin challenges previous interpretation of Goethe’s novella *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* by expanding on the concept of the ‘Poetic’ developed in his essay, ‘Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin’. By the Poetic he means: ‘the “sphere” [that] encompasses the “poetic task”’, which in turn is ‘both immanent and external to a poem’. In reading *Elective Affinities*, he singles out the character Ottilie as the embodiment of the Poetic or the ‘truth content’ (*Wahrheitsgehalt*). The relationship between ‘material content’ (*Sachgehalt*) and truth content is central to immanent critique. Material content is sometimes described as appearance or mortal while truth content is hidden and ascribed the quality of immortal. The relationship between the two is binding but not necessarily oppositional. Benjamin establishes that material content can be a symbolic representation of truth content; critique then extracts the truth from the material form. However, he also asserts that this is not always so, especially when reading Goethe. In *Elective Affinities*, material content and truth content are inseparable. If material content is extracted from the work in attempt to reveal the truth content, whatever remains becomes insignificant. When appearance is destroyed, so too is truth. It is not a matter of ‘unveiling’ for the veil is integral to both appearance and truth. Truth ‘cannot be symbolically expressed, but can only be shown’. This relationship between truth content and material content within a work is particularly important for the analyses of allegories in Chapter 1.

Benjamin’s increasing interests in modernity and the radicalisation of his political position influenced the direction and characteristics of his speculative critique as it evolved in his later works. Caygill characterises two phases of this development: ‘strategic’ and ‘productive’. Strategic critique essentially shares the same core as immanent critique, but unlike immanent critique, its focus on experience leads to a more transformative process. Caygill distinguishes this difference:
[In immanent critique, the] critic must find the moments of externality within the work—those moments where it exceeds itself, where it abuts on experience—and to use them as a basis for discriminative judgement. Strategic critique moves between the work and its own externality, situating the work in the context of experience, and being in its turn situated by it.26

Consequently, strategic critique is more perceptive of ‘the articulation of experience within the work’ as well as harbouring a ‘sensitivity to the continual re-invention of the work through critique’ and the corresponding changes to the critique through its engagement with the work.27 That is: in this process of critique, both the work of art and the critique are transformed. The subsequent development of Benjamin’s critique becomes more materialist in approach in its emphasis on critique’s productive role. This position is most evident in ‘Author as Producer’ where he brings together a number of elements that characterise his critique. He rejects the ‘sterile opposition between form and content’ and replaces it with the ‘organising function’, a concept which, Caygill argues, extends the Poetic or constructive principle first found in his Hölderlin essay. Benjamin writes:

an author who has carefully thought about the conditions of production today […] would never be concerned with products alone, but always, at the same time, with the means of production. In other words, his products must possess an organizing function besides and before their character as finished works.28

In particular, condemning the photographic reportage of the New Objectivity movement (Neue Sachlichkeit) as merely a practice that fulfils the functions of fashion and entertainment, Benjamin singles it out as ‘an extreme example of what it means to supply a production apparatus without changing it’.29 He presents Brecht’s epic theatre as a successful model for possessing an apparatus that ‘brings [consumers] into contact with the production process’ turning ‘readers or spectators […] into collaborators’.30 His argument connects the processes of production, critique, and technology; this in turn further consolidates the idea that art must be transformed and re-invented31 as articulated in ‘The Work of Art in the Epoch of Technological Reproducibility’. My thesis teases out aesthetics as embodied in techniques and experience of art through the material presence of objects. This materialist engagement of artworks is particularly important in the second, third, and fourth chapters.
Benjamin’s speculative critique and his concept of experience formed the foundation of his art criticism and provide a valid framework for the analyses in this study. It does so in three ways. First, the engagement with artworks in this thesis is guided by the practice of speculative critique where the truth content of artworks (including my own) is revealed through interacting with its material content articulated in their production processes and structures. By taking a speculative approach, this study foregrounds observation over intention. Secondly, Benjamin’s materialist approach allows experiences, artefacts and debris of modern culture to play a part in critique. Arguments in this dissertation draw on wide-ranging sources of materials to bring about useful constellations. Thirdly, this study takes into practice Benjamin’s calls for the transformation of apparatus. It pays close attention to the experimentation with structures of organisation and presentation within the works. In these ways the study finds possibilities offered in history, theory, and creative practice. It transforms Benjamin’s twin conception of montage and allegory into strategies of art practice through discovering the contingencies of making and unactualised possibilities of its experience.

0.3 Scope

This study draws on Benjamin’s methodologies to augment the production strategies of art and, as such, his writings are interpreted with this purpose in mind. Although this is not strictly a dissertation on his works, the mythologisation of his life within the broader context of a Benjamin scholarship requires some attention. Esther Leslie contextualises her biography of Benjamin within a culture that fetishises the image of a lonely, melancholic hero or an eccentric genius whose death is construed as mysterious, if not suspect. In ‘The Politics of the Walter Benjamin Industry’, Udi Greenberg explores the transmutable symbols the philosopher has come to represent, as expressed in plays, films, songs, novels, monuments, and artworks. A myriad of different social positions identify with the figure of Benjamin: the Leftist academic, the intellectual thinker, the immigrant, the refugee, the survivors of the Holocaust, the dispossessed. Leslie criticises the frequent projection of Benjamin as the failed intellectual as defeatist. She writes:

Apathy and delusion remain the proud conclusions of an intelligentsia without hope. The fact of Benjamin’s extinction comes to be used as the block on a utopia that is longed for but believed unrealizable.
Benjamin’s ‘failure’—his death—is read as proof of the futility of all desire for change, as change will always be defeated or perverted.

This is what Benjamin as cultural document is made to articulate again and again.33

Instead, her biography re-tells Benjamin’s life within his own geographies ‘as active symptoms of his times’34 in order to present ‘an index of possibilities yet to be realized’.35 In an earlier book Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism, Leslie embarks on the task of rescuing Benjamin’s writings, their revolutionary potential, which she argues is suppressed in conformist Benjamin scholarship. She argues:

Benjamin’s political work is still of interest if its strategies and insights can be of use for analysis and action today, if it can be used as a resources and research tool for overpowering present political and cultural conformism, if it can be found to possess continuing relevance.36

This act of drawing relevance from the writings of ‘a dead man’ necessitates capturing past and present in a constellation, ‘telescoping the past through the present’. She employs a similar methodology in the biography where she constructs ‘Benjamin’s life [as] an object involved in a series of collisions, some of which—personal encounters, places, books—generate his extraordinary thinking’37 Like Leslie’s project, this study is interested in presenting possibilities of his works that reflect my own concerns with a materialist art practice.

Leslie begins Benjamin’s biography by listing his remnants: published books, essays, newspaper articles, reviews, radio broadcasts, letters, correspondences, and notes. These are the fragments from which his life is often reconstructed. Even with the continual growth of his posthumous output (with new editions of his works appearing regularly in the original German and in translations), the body of Benjamin’s writings remains fragmentary. As we will see, Benjamin’s practice of drawing from diverse and often seemingly opposing sources lends itself to what Adorno calls a philosophy of fragmentation. His working methods and the state of his archives allow for open and at times ambiguous interpretation. Leslie writes that within Benjamin scholarship:

He has been read as a Kabbalist, a poststructuralist, a messianist, a theologian and a more or less ‘vulgar’ materialist. A variety of political positions have been attributed to him, from left-liberal to communist to anarchist, from tragic defeatist to revolutionary optimist. Typically
those who attribute such stances to Benjamin cast him as a reflection of their own position, or they condemn him to the shadows that are the underside of their own apparently clarified thought: the genre of Benjamin as failure, as misguided, as naïve.³⁸

This study may not be entirely innocent from Leslie’s charge in casting Benjamin’s as a reflection of my own interests, but it does so by embracing the fragmentary nature of his works and exploring their inconsistencies and contradictions. It is sympathetic to his approach in recognising in his works other futures and unactualised possibilities³⁹. In particular, the task to extend Benjamin’s works beyond Hegelian and Marxist materialisms (to a materialist practice of art) requires this thesis to draw affinities between established Benjamin scholarship and a range of philosophical thoughts that may not be conventionally associated with his authorship.

The main primary text of this study is Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project* as it appears in the 2002 Harvard University Press English-language edition translated from the fifth volume of *Gesammelte Schriften, Das Passagen-Werk*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann and published by Suhrkamp Verlag in 1982.⁴⁰ This publication presents a compilation of Benjamin’s notes and collected quotes arranged as they appeared in their original konvoluts of the incomplete Passagen-Werk. This loose collection is contextualised by his 1935 and 1937 exposés, earlier drafts including ‘The Rings of Saturn or Some Remarks on Iron Construction’, ‘Pariser Passagen II’, materials for first sketches and versions, Tiedemann’s introductory essay for the original German edition, ‘Dialectics at a Standstill: Approaches to the Passagen-Werk’, and ‘The Story of Old Benjamin’, an account by Liza Fittko of their escape to the Spanish border. This massive archive serves as an index to Benjamin’s thoughts, where origins and evolution of concepts that underpin his later works (such as dialectics at a standstill) can be traced. Tiedemann’s interpolation of Benjamin’s authorship in ‘Dialectics at a Standstill’ illuminates this immensely dense archive by situating it within its history of development. In 2007, the Benjamin Archive produced the publication, *Walter Benjamin’s Archives: Images, Texts, Signs*, in association with several editors. The volume contains a selection of artefacts including notebooks, postcards, scraps, newspaper articles, and photographs of toys that belonged to Benjamin. These physical objects are presented as colour facsimiles in print form. These fragmentary primary materials, in object form, provide an important dimension to Benjamin’s writings. Essays such as ‘Author as Producer’, ‘What is Epic
Theatre?’, ‘The Work of Art in the Epoch of Technical Reproducibility’, ‘Some Motifs on Baudelaire’, and ‘The Image of Proust’, offer direct engagement with his critical thoughts that relate the development of his methodologies and materialism. His last known writing, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, proves to be the most significant for the questions of materiality and history. Tiedemann’s essay ‘Historical Materialism or Political Messianism? Interpretation of the Thesis “on the concept of history”’ provides a key guide in deciphering the dense and multi-layered thoughts embedded in these theses for the purpose of our inquiry.

Susan Buck-Morss’s The Dialectic of Seeing: Walter Benjamin’s Arcades Project is an essential secondary text. Buck-Morss’s scholarship provides a critical basis for understanding the complexities of Benjamin’s works and thoughts. Although the main subject of the book is Das Passagen-Werk, the project is examined methodologically in relation to his other major works, particularly Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels in its exploration of allegorical forms. Part I of the book focuses on the origins of the project in terms of both Benjamin’s social and cultural positions as well as his experience that led him towards such as a conception; Part II explores the methodology conceived and used by Benjamin in Das Passagen-Werk; and Part III extrapolates the project as guided by various sources including Benjamin’s engagement with Jewish mysticism. Buck-Morss’s earlier dissertation on Theodor Adorno, The Origins of the Negative Dialectics, augments this understanding of Benjamin’s works with Adorno’s development of the negative dialectics, which informs the discussion of the Adorno-Benjamin debate on the role of theoretical mediation in the formation of dialectics in the last chapter of this thesis.

In Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience, Caygill approaches Benjamin’s authorship through his exploration of experience. Caygill argues that Benjamin’s recasting of the Kantian concept of experience lays the foundation for his critical works on literature, theatre, art, and urbanism. The book begins with Benjamin’s re-casting of Kant in the formation of his philosophical program in his early writings. The second chapter traces Benjamin’s extension of immanent critique developed by the German Romantics into speculative critique, which is put to practice in his Habilitationsschrift The Origins of German Mourning Plays, and later transposes into an analysis of Brechtian epic theatre. In the third chapter, Caygill returns to Benjamin’s earlier writings on the experience of colour and graphic arts to contextualise his most widely read (and, Caygill claims, least
understood) essay ‘The Work of Art in the Epoch of Technical Reproducibility’. In the final chapter, Caygill looks at Benjamin’s engagement with urban experience in his earlier writings on cities, *One Way Street*, and the *Arcades Project*. Caygill’s exposition of Benjamin’s model of critique in relation to his *Trauerspiel* study in particular grounds this project’s exploration of allegorical forms in the first chapter.

Other secondary texts instrumental in constructing the arguments in this thesis include Marc Augé’s *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, Peter Osbourne’s ‘Non-places and the spaces of art’, and Martin Stewart’s ‘W.G. Sebald and the modern art of memory’ that situate the discussion on contemporary allegorical practice within supermodernity. Gerhard Ricther’s *Thought-image: Frankfurt School Writers’ Reflections from Damaged Life* and Karoline Kirst’s ‘Walter Benjamin’s “Denkbild”: Emblematic Historiography of the Recent Past’ amongst others ground the discussion on *Denkbilder*. Lloyd Spencer’s ‘Allegory in the World of the Commodity: The Importance of Central Park’ and Karen Feldman’s ‘Not Dialectical Enough: On Benjamin, Adorno, and Autonomous Critique’ inform the analysis on Benjamin’s practice of montage as executed in *One Way Street* as compared to his redeemed allegorical forms in *Passagen-Werk* discussed in relation to the Adorno-Benjamin debate.

In this dissertation, materialism is approached through the works of Manuel De Landa and Jane Bennett, which introduce new materialisms in relation to philosophy and contemporary social politics. The non-Kantian aspect of Benjamin’s philosophy is drawn out through De Landa’s neo-materialism that references the analytical methods of Gilles Deleuze, David Hume’s critique of causality, and the Humean notion of experience. The works of Jane Bennett provide a grounding on the discussion of matter and physical materials in extending Benjamin’s materialism. One latent strand in this thesis that presents a possible trajectory for a Benjaminian materialism is Quentin Meillassoux’s speculative materialism. Meillassoux’s ontological re-casting of the Kantian concept of ‘thing-in-itself’ permits the existence of objects without subject. By transforming transcendental existence of thing-in-itself into a materialist one, Meillassoux establishes a philosophical framework that allows materialism to be practised through speculations. This speculation does not claim necessary conditions for things but rather asserts the contingencies of reality. Thus speculative materialism relates to Benjamin’s speculative critique in two ways that are relevant to this thesis: the act of
speculation gives primacy to experience, and a materialism that accedes to things an autonomy independent of human thoughts. This connection to speculative materialism emerges from the engagement of artworks and Benjamin’s methodologies. It is therefore latent and not fully developed in this dissertation. The philosophical underpinning required to extend Benjamin’s works through speculative materialism is also beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, speculations on how this extension may function are discussed in the conclusion.

Interdisciplinarity is both inherent in Benjamin’s writings and a feature of modern experience. Andrew Benjamin and Charles Rice argue in *Walter Benjamin and the Architecture of Modernity* that:

> [A]llowing modernity to emerge as a genuine object of study necessitates that philosophical considerations work in and with studies of art, film, literature, and urbanism. Modernity demands a necessary interdisciplinarity. Responding to that demand does not mean the effacing of disciplines. Such a move would mute serious study by failing to grasp the multi-faceted nature of modernity. Interdisciplinarity is the construction of an affinity between disciplines in which it is in holding to their differences that there then can be points of accord.\(^1\)

A. Benjamin and Rice argue that a reading of Walter Benjamin cannot be removed from his materialist aesthetics. This thesis works from this basis and approaches the intersection between Benjamin’s writings and practice through examination of diverse forms of literature and art that include diaries, *zuihitsu* writings, sculptures, installations, performances, photo-books, videos, films, and online works. This project does not provide surveys of artistic works or movements, much less genre-based investigations; rather, it looks at works across traditional disciplines. These works examined, including my own practice, are selected for their pertinence to each strand of arguments presented in this thesis. Here, questions are tackled with the engagement with art within productive historical and theoretical frameworks.

### 0.4 Structure

The reader may notice that my dissertation’s title is divided to form the chapters’ headings. This aggregative model reflects the constellation structure that brings together four strands of explorations.
The first chapter lays the groundwork for the discussion on Benjamin’s twin concept of allegory and montage. The chapter presents a historical outline of their development within Benjamin’s authorship as guided by Caygill’s interpretive argument in *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* and Susan Buck-Morss’s *The Dialectic of Seeing*. The argument puts Benjamin’s *Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels* and the *Arcades Project* into a dialectical relationship in order to make the allegory–montage connection apparent. Baroque Christian allegories as articulated in the *Trauerspiel* study are contrasted with allegorical practice of the classical world and modern allegories in the works of Charles Baudelaire. Benjamin’s 1939 essay ‘Some Motifs on Baudelaire’ is central in delineating modern allegorical practice in relation to nineteenth-century temporality. Benjamin’s analyses of both Baroque allegories and those of Baudelaire are transposed to the context of supermodernity, within which I look at the works of filmmaker Wong Kar-wai. I argue that his films continue to confront the intensified conditions of modernity which have resulted from the shift in temporal structure by engaging with the sociopolitics of Hong Kong allegorically. On one hand, some characteristics of the Baroque mourning plays are evident in Wong’s films; on the other hand, his works share many common strategies with Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* in breaking with myths that sustain the concept of political fate. In using Wong’s film works as a focus, I explore how Benjamin’s strategies are used in film works. I argue that, unlike Baroque mourning plays with their ‘passive melancholy’ and Baudelaire’s works with his ‘political resignation’, Wong’s works provide an extra dimension of time that allows his audience to overcome loss and mourning to live within time. This relationship between allegory and time is key to Benjamin’s use of montage in the *Arcades Project*.

The second chapter builds on previous analyses of allegory practices to explore Benjamin’s conception of montage as envisaged in *Das Passagen-Werk*. I begin with an exploration of the incomplete work in the context of its history and subsequent speculations on its intended form. The investigation here, however, is less concerned with what the *Arcades Project* would have been were Benjamin able to bring it to fruition than the possibilities of his method. More precisely, what is the montage mechanism that allows fragments to be captured momentarily in a constellation? How would a Benjaminian montage function in art, films, sculptures, and installations? Benjamin’s dialectical image provides the key to these questions. Specifically, I explore dialectic
images that are constructed through critical encounter with objects—that is a montage of physical objects that may result in moments of recognition. Rather than conceiving a Benjaminian montage as film or photomontage practice here, I argue that conceptualising *Das Passagen-Werk* as a *wunderkammer* offers alternative ways of thinking about montage: as curiosity cabinets that offer arrays of things for audiences to juxtapose and that give rise to new meanings. To consolidate this concept of object montage, I analyse the artworks of Joseph Cornell, Sarah Sze, Mark Dion, and Sarah Walko. I also discuss two of my works: *The World of Things*, and the collaborative project, *Konvolut K*, as experimentation on montage forms that open up possibilities.

The third chapter focuses on the methods of assembly. First, by speculating on a possible Benjaminian materialism, and asking specifically what are the materials of history, I argue that his historical materialism is distinct from that of Marx. In particular, the use of *Denkbilder* (thought-images) in bringing materials together through montage and allegory is central to this difference. I suggest that a new materialist perspective has the potential to extend Benjamin’s materialism into art practice. De Landa’s *A Thousand Years of Non-Linear History* provides a contemporary example of a new materialism that dissolves the notion of progress by asserting the contingency of history in materialist terms. Building on these two materialisms that allow historical narratives to emerge, film form is taken as an analogue of history to identify new approaches to materials and narratives. Stella Bruzzi’s objections against Hayden White’s belief that history without cogency and internal cohesion can amount to nothing but lists, annuals, chronicles, and meaningless information opens up the discussion on alternative assembly methods of narratives.  

In this context, we examine the compilation films of Emile de Antonioni, Kevin Rafferty and Erik Gandini, and the works of Chris Marker and Patrick Keiller. Benjamin’s *Denkbilder* presents a framework for looking at construction methods that assemble material fragments into constellations that are capable of bringing about moments of recognition.

This final chapter brings together explorations of Benjamin’s allegorical forms, montage principles, and assembly methods to extend a Benjaminian materialism into art practice. I begin by looking at the different notions of incompleteness in Benjamin’s authorship with reference to the Kabbalah, Marx’s commodity fetishism, and his own immanent but finite critique. Within this notion of incompleteness is an unresolved tension
between atemporality and history. With this in mind, we investigate the transformation of the emblematic Denkbilder of One Way Street into the dense and fragile allegorical constellations of Das Passagen-Werk. Benjamin persisted with loose fragments in a deliberate absence of narrative framework against the insistent urging of Adorno to give form by providing theoretical mediation. Recognising the affective capacity of visual images, the autonomy of objects, and the aesthetic function of the Arcades Project offer possibilities beyond the ‘dialectic without argumentation’ debate. I present two possibilities: extending the textual Denkbilder through a re-introduction of the visual coupled with the integration of the materiality of objects into the image, and the adoption of zuihitsu as a disembedded schema for loose fragments within multiple narratives. Guided by Leslie’s exploration of Benjamin’s notion of Kraftwerk, I explore the possibility of materialist Denkbilder in the works of Tacita Dean. The photobooks of Rinko Kawauchi and the multiscreen installations of Hiraki Sawa are analysed as Denkbild-zuihitsu that bring everyday fragments to the fore as thought-images, coalescing into constellations through the physical dimensions of object-form. I offer my almanac projects as an example where materialist Denkbilder are constructed within a zuihitsu framework. I propose the almanac as a viable medium for the practice of fragmentation. Benjamin’s refusal to employ narratives as frameworks for his allegorical constellations is responded to by the almanac projects’ inclusion of multiplying narratives that emerged from the interactions between fragments. These strands of argument do not necessarily converge. Instead, each chapter’s engagement with history, philosophy, and art explore the different aspects of Benjamin’s methodologies in order to identify the latent possibilities yet to be actualised.

The latent possibilities in these methodologies speculate on a materialist aesthetics that informs my art practice. This thesis’s critical engagement with practice and philosophical thoughts sketches out a context that situates my ongoing works. Specifically, mine is a practice that does not sit comfortably within conventional technique-based art disciplines. A significant issue for an interstitial practice is the difficulty of dialogue owing to the absence of common features that define established artforms. To strategically participate in productive conversations requires a framework that enables one not only to think about such a practice, but, more importantly, how one might talk about it. The Australia Council for the Arts’ 2013 initiative to fund ‘Emerging and Experimental Arts’ ventures to define such practices and highlights the significance of
such a task in contemporary contexts.\textsuperscript{45} In outlining the section’s parameters, the funding guidelines state that it:

supports new artistic practice that does not fall within the existing funding guidelines of the artform boards. This includes creative processes such as interdisciplinary and hybrid arts, and cross-disciplinary projects involving artists and practitioners from other fields.

We support artists to experiment with process and artistic outcomes of their work, enhancing their capacity to make conceptual or practical leaps in our knowledge and perception of what constitutes art.

Artists working in this field create works that transform our experience of art—it is challenging, new and as yet unresolved in terms of its position within established artforms.\textsuperscript{46}

A defining feature of this category is the exploration of ‘new forms of art making’ in ‘rapidly changing environments’.\textsuperscript{47} What does this mean in practical terms? This dissertation foregrounds related research questions that engage with the practice of fragmentation and materialist aesthetics. What role does a materialist practice play in a continuously changing technological landscape? How does my own fragmentary practice relate to this re-definition of art and experience? Is a materialist aesthetics capable of developing a language that articulates the creation, experience, and theorisation of new artforms? If so, what will this language be like and how will it function? I begin the search for answers to these questions by examining Benjamin’s methodologies of allegories and montage.

\begin{enumerate}
\item Ackbar Abbas, \textit{Hong Kong: The Culture and Politics of Disappearance} (Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong, 1997).
\item Ibid. 26.
\item This project began as a reaction to how images are manipulated for political ends in many facets of civil society at the beginning of the twenty-first century when the making of meanings has become elusive and slippery.
\end{enumerate}


11 Ibid. 98.


14 The title of this essay ‘Über den Bergriff der Geschichte’ has also translated as ’On the Concept of History’.


16 Ibid. 45.


18 Where the absolute is also immanent in experience through the philosophy of infinite reflection developed by Benjamin, extending from Schlegel and Fichte.


24 The truth content of *Elective Affinities*, Benjamin argues, is the relationship between beauty and death embodied by the character, Ottile. The criticism of Friedrich Hölderlin’s poems gives Benjamin’s speculative critique many of its forms and tools. This is discussed in detail in section 3 of Chapter 1. See also Caygill, *Walter Benjamin*, 35–6.


26 Ibid. 64.

27 Ibid. 64.

28 Benjamin, ‘The Author as Producer’, 98.

29 Ibid. 95.
Ibid. 98.

This concept is developed in the work of art essay.


Ibid. 231.

Ibid. 233.


Leslie, Walter Benjamin, 231.

Ibid. 230.

I am paraphrasing Caygill’s description of Benjamin’s approach here. See Caygill, Walter Benjamin, 69.

As a non-reader in German, I rely on translations of primary literature and secondary literature produced by German readers in English or in translation. This limited access to the original texts needs to be signalled as the subtleties of Benjamin’s conscious use of the German language to create new concepts (such as Geschichtsphilosophie) can be missed or misconstrued. In addition, more recent scholarship offers alternative translation to existing words, terms, or titles, producing different readings. For instance, an older English translation of Trauerspiel is ‘tragic drama’. A more recent ‘mourning play’ is a translation of trauer meaning ‘mourning’ and spiel meaning ‘play’.


A version of Chapter 1 has been published as ‘Time Without End: Exploring the Temporal Experience of Wong Kar-Wai’s 2046 Through Walter Benjamin’ in A. Benjamin and Rice (eds.), Walter Benjamin and the Architecture of Modernity, 150–173.


Australia Council for the Arts established an Art and Technology Advisory Committee in 1984 and began to fund a range of interdisciplinary activities. The Performing Arts Board founded the Hybrid Arts Strategy in 1994 to support similar development in broader artistic practices. This was replaced by the New Media Arts funds established in 1996. This, in turn, was superseded by the New Media Arts Board formed in 1998. The Board ceased in 2005 in the Council’s restructure and was replaced by the Inter-Arts Office. In 2013 this office is replaced by the Emerging and Experimental Arts section. See Elaine Lally, Discussion Paper, New Media Art Scoping Study (Sydney: Centre for Cultural Research, University of Western Sydney, 2006) <http://www.academia.edu/162999/Discussion_Paper_New_Media_Art_Scoping_Study>, accessed 31 May 2013.


The fund’s sector plan for 2012-2013 places emphasis on the intersection between science, technology and art, experimentation and processes in interdisciplinary practices, and the role of audience or community not only in the reception but also the production of works. It acknowledges the difficulties and the problematics that may arise from
placing these artists within a defined sector. The sector plan is a result of community consultation.
In this chapter, I begin by laying the groundwork for discussing Walter Benjamin’s methodologies of allegory and montage within the historical contexts of his authorship. I bring together Baroque allegories as articulated in *Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels* and Benjamin’s extended investigation into modern allegories in the works of Charles Baudelaire.¹ This examination looks at the transition of allegorical practice from classical antiquity, to Christian Baroque, to nineteenth-century modernity. Benjamin’s 1939 Baudelaire essay ‘Some Motifs on Baudelaire’ is central in delineating modern allegorical practice in relation to nineteenth-century temporality and informs his formulation of allegorical practice in the *Arcades Project*.

This chapter transposes Benjamin’s analyses of both Baroque allegories and those of Baudelaire to the context of supermodernity, within which I examine the practice of filmmaker Wong Kar-wai.² I argue that his films continue to confront the intensified temporal structure of modernity by engaging with the socio-politics of Hong Kong allegorically. On one hand, some characteristics of Baroque mourning plays are evident in Wong’s films; on the other hand, his works share with the *Arcades Project* some common strategies that break the myths that sustain the concept of political fate. Wong’s works embody a transformative relationship between art and technology in their technical organisation of temporal experience. I argue that, unlike Baroque mourning plays with their ‘passive melancholy’ and Baudelaire’s works with his ‘political resignation’, Wong’s works provide an extra dimension of time that allows his audience to overcome love, loss and mourning, to live within time.³

1.1 Dialectical methodologies

‘Allegory is in the realm of thought what ruins are in the realm of things’.⁴ What did Benjamin mean by this? In the physical world of things, ruins provide access to historical truths. Analogously, allegories are sites where the attentive can uncover philosophical truths. Benjamin’s engagement with allegorical practice began with his works on the German Romantics. His 1919 doctoral dissertation substantiates the idea of ruination. In this work, he arrived at a developing model of speculative critique by...
bringing together his earlier re-casting of the Kantian concept of experience with the
German Romantics’ immanent critique. In re-defining the ‘absolute’ as ‘philosophical
experience of truth as revelation’, speculative critique provides Benjamin grounding
from which he approaches history materialistically.\(^5\) His encounter with Marxist theory
and practice and his interests in the Kabbalah took his exploration into ‘the possibility
of metaphysical knowledge of the objective world’ to formulate an aesthetic
materialism.\(^6\) For Benjamin, ‘objects are “mute” but their expressive […] potential
became legible to the attentive philosopher who “named” them’.\(^7\) The task is akin to an
archaeologist whose task it is to render the past intelligible through remnants. For a
materialist historian, objects are invested with meanings, fragments of history, and his or
her task is to re-create contexts for these ruins that allow them to speak. To understand
Benjamin's conception of montage, it is necessary to first explore his works on
allegorical practice. The usage of allegory can be traced back to the ancient Greeks.
Montage, on the other hand, is a distinctly modern principle. Benjamin used these
methodologies dialectically. The analogy of allegory and ruins is the nexus that connects
his theory of allegory with his development of montage principles in the \textit{Arcades Project}.
A brief account of two overlapping production cycles (\textit{Produktionskreis}): the Germanic
phase, and one that begins with \textit{One Way Street}, helps illuminate this relationship.

In 1924 Benjamin went to Capri with the purpose of working on his habilitation
dissertation (\textit{Habilitationsschrift}) on seventeenth-century German mourning plays.\(^8\) Here
his discussions with two individuals greatly influenced the direction of his thinking: the
Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, whom Benjamin met earlier at the University of Bern,
and the Bolshevik Latvian actress and theatre director, Asja Lacis, with whom he
developed an intimate relationship. His conversations with Bloch and the encounter
with Lacis brought him into contact with Marxism and radical Communism.\(^9\) Lacis
learnt of Benjamin’s habilitation thesis on Baroque dramas and questioned his purpose
for concerning ‘oneself with dead literature’.\(^10\) Indeed, Benjamin’s growing interests in
Marxist practice were making it increasingly difficult to complete his academic work.
The nature of his \textit{Habilitationsschrift} was highly abstract, and as such, it was closed to his
new experiences. Despite this conflict, Benjamin defended his project that was to ‘bring
into the discipline of aesthetics a new terminology’—to fully realise the potential of
allegory, an ambition he was still very much driven to fulfil.\(^11\) At the same time,
however, Benjamin could not ignore the changes in his thinking. He conceived of a new
writing project ‘to develop [contemporary and political moments in his thinking] and to do this experimentally, in extreme forms’. This project allowed him the freedom to incorporate his new thinking, to experiment with new forms of texts, and to bring into being new experiences. This became the book, *One Way Street* (*Einbahnstrasse*).

Benjamin’s habilitation thesis *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* was published simultaneously with *One Way Street* in January 1928 by the same publisher. He worked on these two projects concurrently yet they cannot be more different. The subjects of exploration, the styles of writing, and the experiences of the readers are almost antithetical. One is concerned with an archaic practice of the seventeenth century, whilst the other is immersed in experiences of modernity. The text in the *Trauerspiel* study is dense, highly theoretical, and requires expert knowledge from the reader; whilst *One Way Street*’s short passages, pioneering a new way of writing (the *Denkbild* form), are often humorous in their evocation of scenes from everyday life. One looks to the past, the other to the future. How can one author produce two works that seem so contrary in almost every way? Indeed, for Benjamin himself, the *Trauerspiel* study marks the end of his first production cycle whilst *One Way Street* begins a new one. However, he later writes in a fragment in *Konvolut N* of the *Arcades Project*, ‘The book on the Baroque exposed the seventeenth century to the light of the present day. Here, something analogous must be done for the nineteenth century, but with greater distinctness’. The thread that binds the two works cannot be overlooked. Susan Buck-Morss’s re-phrasing of their seemingly antithetical nature makes this relationship clear: ‘The *Trauerspiel* study attempts to “redeem” allegory theoretically. *One Way Street* does this practically and transforms the meaning of redemption in this process. Not the allegorical object (tragic drama), but the allegorical practice is redeemed’.

These production cycles are not isolated phases; they are not only part of a continual investigation, but more importantly, their development is integrated. Allegorical practice remains central to Benjamin’s authorship and continues to develop from *One Way Street*, to ‘Some Motifs on Baudelaire’ and the *Arcades Project*. An allegorical practice transformed through montage was to provide him with the means to make history discernible. History, like truth, cannot be grasped directly. In *One Way Street*, under the title of ‘Technical aid’, Benjamin writes:
Nothing is poorer than a truth expressed as it was thought. Committed to writing in such a case, it is not even a bad photograph. And the truth refuses (like a child or a woman who does not love us), facing the lens of writing while we crouch under the black cloth, to keep still and look amiable.18

By engaging allegories, Benjamin asserts the presence of truth. Bainard Cowan writes, ‘allegory shows a conviction that the truth resides elsewhere […] The affirmation of the existence of truth […] is the first precondition for allegory; the second is the recognition of its absence. Allegory could not exist if truth were accessible’.19

In his second Produktionskreis, Benjamin experimented with creating a montage of allegorical objects or allegorical Denkbilder (thought-images) that allow truth to reveal itself. An exploration into the evolution of allegorical practices is critical to understanding Benjamin’s methodology.

1.2 Allegory and modernity

An allegory can be considered as an extended metaphor that functions within a structured system or context. Unlike analogies, the function of allegories does not rely on rational or logical reasoning, but rather they appeal to the imagination. The ancient Greek philosophers employed allegories as a way to illuminate ideas. ‘Plato’s cave’ in The Republic is a well-known example of allegorical practice in antiquity. Parables, such as Aesop’s Fables, are short allegorical tales with underlying morals. In mediaeval Europe, allegorical practice changed significantly from the model in classical antiquity in that it became primarily theological. Dante’s Divine Comedy marks the pinnacle of mediaeval allegorical practice in the Christian tradition and Edmund Spenser’s The Faerie Queene extends this practice into the early Renaissance period.20 In both of these examples characters and events embody Christian virtues and vices. It is the task of the reader to uncover meanings embedded within the layers of narratives and contemplate their significances within the Christian cosmos. Northrop Frye described this type of practice as ‘naïve allegory’ where the metaphors are one-dimensional with a one-to-one mapping.21 Readers exercise their pre-existing knowledge in Christian theology in order to access the hidden text. Similarly, allegorical forms developed in the fine arts require the viewer to contemplate the image and uncover meanings embodied by the emblems.
Montage of visual images is often used as picture puzzles within which lie God’s words to be deciphered. The fifteenth-century painting *La Primavera* by Sandro Botticelli provides an example (Plate 1.1). This form of reading through allegory is considered to be interpreting God’s language. In Christian cosmology, the natural world is filled with divine meanings. Allegories provide the necessary means for meditation. The duty of a Christian is to labour through intelligence and faith towards the revelation of truth.

Benjamin’s *Trauerspiel* study focuses on Baroque allegorical practice in seventeenth-century German mourning plays. Baroque allegories are monumental, their images extravagant, and their details excessive. Unlike naïve allegories, there is no simple one-to-one mapping of signs to referents; the relationship between images and meanings is often convoluted. The signs of the seventeenth-century material world filter into the Baroque emblem and become a montage of visual images. Albert Dürer’s *Melancolia I* presents an example from the sixteenth century (Plate 1.1). The printed image deals extensively in allegorical forms. The archangel Michael sits with his head in his hand, poised with a writing implement in the other. He seems frozen, unable to act. A clutter of natural and human-made objects surrounds him; each item alludes to a multitude of readings. Melancholia results from inertia caused by the weight of these objects in the material world. When comparing Dürer’s print with the fifteenth-century *La Primavera*, the difference in allegorical practice is evident. In the earlier painting, the references used by Botticelli are embodied in the human figures. Each of these characters is a personification of a concept; each adopts a defined role. Whilst interpretations of the image may vary, the use of allegory is relatively straightforward. In comparison, allegorical practice in the seventeenth century functions within a world of multivalent imagery and experiences as illustrated by Dürer’s piece. Buck-Morss proposes that this is attributed to the abundance of signs from both classical and Christian cosmologies in seventeenth-century allegories. She argues that the translation of pagan cosmologies into a Christian one further added to this multiplicity. The pagan gods embodied the classical view of nature and their survival in the Christian era was only enabled by their debasement. The outward appearance of the pagan god might have been retained but its meanings changed to conform to the new religion’s focus on death, guilt, and decay. The goddess Venus, once the embodiment of divine love and nature, became a representation of human love and sexual desire in the Christian era. Her fecundity became earthly passion and lust, prone to decay. Baroque allegories rescue nature by
devaluing it. In particular, the cycles in the natural world were ignored in favour of the linear process of decay. To deal with multiplication and contradictions, allegorists increased the number of emblematic images in their works.\textsuperscript{24} Meanings were no longer fixed but transform according to the will of the allegorist. The style of allegory became an exercise in aesthetics. Allegorists used signs to denote their opposites: the figure of death is used to imply life, the idea of transitoriness suggests eternity. Meanings became multiple and antithetical. The result was a system that is arbitrary, fragmentary and chaotic. This increasing complex relationship between signs and referents made the task of deciphering God’s language difficult. The over-abundant objects and signs in the natural and material world were interpreted as Satan’s laughter that obscured the clarity of God’s language. Since truth resides in God alone, only revelation can lead to salvation and the inability to decipher meanings eventually leads to hell. For the Baroque allegorists, both nature and the present world were transitory. Loyalty to this transitory world can only lead to melancholy and hopelessness. Political action or intervention is futile. Hope is reserved for the afterlife. German allegorists abandoned both nature and politics in search for truth. In Baroque German mourning plays, melancholy results from a passive contemplation of the world in decay and the betrayal of nature.

In the second production cycle of Benjamin’s authorship he extended his exploration of Baroque allegorical practice to its modern application in the works of Charles Baudelaire. Here the focus of allegories shifts from the Baroque conception of nature to the relationship between nineteenth-century capitalism and the ‘new’ nature of urbanised industrialism. Baudelaire’s 1857 publication of \textit{Les Fleurs du Mal} was controversial.\textsuperscript{25} Its expression of decadent modern experience through the prism of pre-modern Christian themes is unusual for the period. This adoption of allegorical practice at first puzzled literary critics who proceeded to explain this as a ‘continuity of literary tradition despite the disruptive shocks of modern experience’.\textsuperscript{26} Benjamin disagreed with this interpretation. In the \textit{Trauerspiel} study he argues that allegory is often used at a time of discontinuity, most often as a result of war, social disruption, or material depravity. Baudelaire lived in a time of material abundance, yet he confronted the new ‘just as the seventeenth-century allegorists confronted antiquity’.\textsuperscript{27} Benjamin considered Baudelaire’s use of allegory to be tactical. Benjamin writes in ‘Central Park’: ‘The devaluation of the world of objects in allegory is outdone within the world of objects itself by the commodity’.\textsuperscript{28} Commodities are objects whose traces of materiality and
imprints of the world that produced them have been stripped away by their function within the economic system—they are denoted solely by their use-values. Buck-Morss writes: ‘If one considers the concept of value, the actual object is regarded only as a sign; it connotes not as itself, but as what it is worth.’\textsuperscript{29} The object, abstracted from its physical and material presence, becomes a sign whose significations may be arbitrary and ephemeral. As abstract entities, commodities become vessels into which consumers invest their unconscious dreams. Commodities filled with desires crystallise into wish images that serve to generate and affirm myths. In Baudelaire’s time, these hollowed-out objects increased exponentially. Advertisements of the nineteenth century function as mythic phantasmagoria that eased the emblem of the commodity’s passage into the private dream-world. Baudelaire writes: ‘the whole visible universe is but a storehouse of images and signs’\textsuperscript{30}.

In Baudelaire’s poetry, allegories move into an inner world to re-discover the meanings in impoverished objects. Buck-Morss writes: ‘Baudelaire] showed not the commodities filled with private dreams, but private dreams hollowed out as commodities’.\textsuperscript{31} He consciously undermines the image of new nature disguised as old. Where advertisement humanises products, he shows the mechanisation of organic nature: the human body is multiple, mass-produced articles, and takes on industrialised forms. The most significant figure for Baudelaire is the Prostitute. It presents the image of the commodity and seller as one—a commodity in human form. Baudelaire shows the woman in the form of the Prostitute whose corporeal presence has been abstracted and (re)invested with private and illusory dreams of pleasure and sexual love. The Flâneur, who takes pleasure in physical and intellectual wandering, is inverted as the shopper whose leisure has become work dedicated to browsing in arcades and department stores. The prized possession of the Collector is supplanted by the Souvenir. The collection of the Wunderkammer, whose material presence once imagined immense possibilities, is inventorised as past moments, dead possessions, and catalogued items with fixed meanings. In their commodification and rationalised classification, the collected items are frozen motionless for eternity. In his poetry Baudelaire shows these figures as sites where desires are met with insatiability, where pleasure bears fruitless repetition, and where beauty is nothing but fetishist imaginings.\textsuperscript{32} The hollowed-out figures are the source of emptiness where melancholia turns into ennui. In Baroque allegories abandoned nature and its hollowness conjure the image of hell; for Baudelaire, it is the hollowness of the inner world that projects the
same image. Hell is this life. Baudelaire’s use of allegory rages against the ‘harmonious façade’ of nineteenth-century Paris and tears the surface of the mythic phantasmagoria. Allegory breaks open the commodity that is filled with private dreams and tries to remember the object-in-itself.

Benjamin regards Baudelaire’s poetry as antithetical to mythic forms. Benjamin writes in his *1939 Exposé*:

> The key to the allegorical form in Baudelaire is bound up with the specific signification which the commodity acquires by virtue of its price. The singular debasement of things through their signification, something characteristic of seventeenth-century allegory, corresponds to the singular debasement of things through their prices as commodities. This degradation, to which things are subject because they can be taxed as commodities, is counterbalanced in Baudelaire by the inestimable value of novelty.  

For Baudelaire, ‘the appearance of the new’ is the ‘appearance of always-the-same’; the sensation of the new is repetitious and the only novelty remaining is death. He attacks the ‘harmonious façade’ of historical progress as the phantasmagoria of ‘empty time’ and the ‘sectioning of time’ with no continuity.

When confronted by endless repetitious time, Baroque allegoricists made a leap of faith and asserted that only death and resurrection of the soul could offer salvation. Action in this mortal life is futile. Benjamin criticises Baroque allegoricists’ conclusion as idealistic. Buck-Morss summarises Benjamin’s critique:

> When the allegorists, claiming that the fragments of failed nature are really an allegory of spiritual redemption as their opposite, a redemption guaranteed only by the Word, when they declare evil as ‘self-delusion’ and material nature as ‘not real’, then, for all practical purposes allegory becomes indistinguishable from myth.

While Baudelaire refused this Christian resolution of resurrection, he could only hold onto ruins in despair. To rescue allegory from such fate and renew allegorical practice in opposition to myths, Benjamin must ‘avoid the betrayal of nature of the Baroque spiritual transcendence and […] the political resignation of Baudelaire’. His strategy is to create allegorical objects by re-investing history into objects that have lost their temporality from the process of abstraction. In the Christian era, the classical world is hollowed-out and their images are preserved as empty cases. Baroque allegoricists
favour the use of petrified and decaying nature as emblems. Images such as human skeletons, half-decaying corpses, and the place of skulls, signify the transience of nature. Situated within history, the existence of these hollowed-out figures in the present becomes ruins. For Benjamin’s own purpose, ruins are ‘highly meaningful fragments’ that encapsulate the fragility and transitoriness of capitalism. These broken fragments can never be reformed but simply exist as evidence of past failures and destruction. Just as ruins provide proof of civilisation’s fleetingness, allegories present an avenue to make transparent historicism’s claims of inevitability. The Konvolut of the Arcades Project house a collection of the broken fragments of nineteenth-century industrialism. Benjamin’s intention is to create dialectic images from these ruins using montage. Buck-Morss writes:

Dialectical images are a modern form of emblematics. But whereas the Baroque dramas were melancholy reflections on the inevitability of decay and disintegration, in the Passagen-Werk the devaluation of (new) nature and its status as ruin becomes instructive politically […] And the fleetingness of temporal power does not cause sadness; it informs political practice.36

Just as allegories in Baudelaire’s poetry make visible this hollowing-out process of capital industrialism and allow new nature to speak, Buck-Morss writes, “The allegorical mode allows Benjamin to make visibly palpable the experience of a world in fragments”.37

1.3 Mourning and time

The experience of endless repetitious time is a central feature of modernity. In Peter Osborne’s exposition on global capitalist modernity, he asserts that modernity is primarily a schema from which both the term’s usage to label a historical period and its expression as a social formalism are derived.38 These secondary applications are set in temporal relation to ‘the new’. The new does not only sever the future from the past and the present, but also defines the past and the present through negation. At the same time, for the new to be meaningful to the present and the past, it must also cease to be different. Conversely, in maintaining this difference the new becomes merely repetitious. In this way, the modern experience of temporality loses its finiteness; instead of ending with the apocalypse, the end of time is forever delayed without the possibility of redemption. Borrowing Benjamin’s angel of history, Stewart Martin describes this modern temporality in relation to capitalism: ‘the passage of time is
experienced as perpetual destruction. This functions as theological-archaic correspondence to the abstract labour time of capitalist accumulation; the endless horizon of surplus value unveiled as wreckage unto oblivion’.39

This temporal order underpins both Baroque allegorical practice of nascent modernity and Baudelaire’s allegories of nineteenth-century ‘high-capitalism’. Enveloped within this perpetual deferment of end time is the inability to fulfil desires induced by capitalism. In Baroque mourning plays, hellish repetition is manifested as senseless lamentation and mourning. In Baudelaire’s poetry, this is embodied in figures such as the Prostitute, the Flâneur, and the Collector. Buck-Morss writes of Benjamin’s exploration of this image of Hell in the Arcades Project ‘as a configuration of repetition, novelty, and death’.40 In Konvolut B ‘Fashion’, Benjamin notes:

The epigraph from Balzac is well suited to unfolding the temporality of hell: to showing how this time does not recognize death, and how fashion mocks death; how the acceleration of traffic and the tempo of news reporting […] aim at eliminating all discontinuities and sudden ends; and how death as caesura belongs together with all the straight lines of divine temporality. Were there fashions in antiquity? Or did the “authority of the frame” preclude them?41

Fashion is an emblem of modernity—a motif that is strictly a product of capitalist modernity. Fashion’s very existence is a result of the temporal order it instils. So too is ennui. Konvolut D, ‘Boredom, Eternal Return’, is dedicated to the collection of quotations and notes concerned with this modern condition. The French word ‘ennui’ is often translated as ‘boredom’ in English, but the original meaning of the word describes a more severe feeling of repression. Baudelaire begins Les Fleur du Mal by addressing his readers (Au Lecteur), in which he names ennui as the worst of all modern miseries:

Il en est un plus laid, plus méchant, plus immonde!
Quoiqu’il ne pousse ni grands gestes ni grands cris,
Il serait volontiers de la terre un débris
Et dans un bâillement avalerait le monde;

C’est l’Ennui! L’œil chargé d’un pleur involontaire,
Il rêve d’échafauds en fumant son houka.
Tu le connais, lecteur, ce monstre délicat,
—Hypocrite lecteur,—mon semblable,—mon frère!

There’s one more damned than all. He never gambols,
Nor crawls, nor roars, but, from the rest withdrawn,
Gladly of this whole earth would make a shambles
And swallow up existence with a yawn…

Boredom! He smokes his hookah, while he dreams
Of gibbets, weeping tears he cannot smother
You know this dainty monster, too, it seems—
Hypocrite reader!—You!—My twin!—My brother!  

Benjamin identifies ennui as a condition of endless waiting in the times of eternal recurrence. His 1916 essays ‘The Happiness of Ancient Humanity’, ‘Socrates’, and ‘On the Middle Ages’ indirectly locate the oppressive despair in the modern period by comparing the concept of happiness in ancient classical civilisation with that of the Christian era. Benjamin argues that, in ancient Greek culture, happiness is understood to be the victory endowed by the Gods. Tragedy also generates happiness as it fulfils destiny that is willed by the Gods. It is within this completion and fulfilment the absolute resides. In comparison, in Christian mourning plays of the seventeenth century, an abyss has opened up separating humanity from divinity and the absolute is removed. God is no longer accessible, destiny is prolonged, and fate cannot be fulfilled. The experience of time itself is transformed. Howard Caygill summarises:

[T]ime is open-ended; God is remote, and the completion of time in the advent of the absolute has both already happened in the birth of Christ and is eternally deferred in the Last Judgement. In the mourning play, the organising principle is not completion in and of time, but repetition.  

Central to the transformation of the nature of time in mourning plays is the shift in ‘forms of consciousness and experience’ to the modern. Benjamin links early modernity to the prevalence of Protestantism and the emergence of capitalism. Extending from Max Weber’s The Protestant Ethic (1904) and The Spirit of Capitalism (1904), Benjamin does not argue that capitalism is a result of the Protestant faith, but rather capitalism itself became a religion (as argued in his 1921’s ‘Capitalism as Religion’). The concept of capitalism as religion provides the context for mourning plays, where fulfilment or reunion with God is forever deferred. It is the loss of complete-able time or fulfilled fate that is mourned in these dramas. Benjamin’s argument is reinforced by the comparison of the deep structural differences between the German mourning play and Greek tragedy. While tragedy actively fulfils time, the actions in mourning plays are ‘inauthentic’ and ‘empty’. The writers of the Trauerspiele were witnesses to the temporal
transformation brought about by early capitalism. Greek tragedy occurs in time; mourning play can only move in space.

In the context of the late twentieth century, Osborne argues that capitalism’s manifestation as a global hegemony has given rise to a new spatial model that subsumes the temporal logic of modernity. Through the globalisation of the capitalist economy, the ubiquitous modernity can no longer be periodised by terms such as ‘late’ or ‘post’ because it is clear that it is not coming to an end (modernity seems to have multiple beginnings but no ends). Temporal coding of modernity, such as colonisation, imperialism, and the Cold War, gives way to the ‘distribution of temporal differentiation at a global level’. In other words, the multiplicity of modernity (for instance, models or stages of capitalist economies in different countries or regions) is contained within a global social space rather than along temporal periodisation. Departing from the temporal logic defined by the new, parallel timelines run within one global spatial order. In shaping this global spatial order, historical and geo-political definitions give way to movement of the capital through systems such as transportation, trade economy, and information and communication technologies within the globe. This is a more intense form of modernity and Osborne borrows Marc Auge’s term to name it ‘supermodernity’.

What forms do allegories take in supermodernity? In what follows, I tackle allegorical practice in supermodernity using the film works of Wong Kar-wai. Wong’s tales of missed opportunities, repetition, regrets, lamentations, and mis-recognition extend the modern form of mourning plays in the contexts of supermodernity and hyper-capitalism. Like Baudelaire’s unlikely choice of the Christian problem of sin as a device to confront the conditions of capitalist modernity, Wong faces the late twentieth century by turning to earlier times. Wong completed eight directorial works from 1988 to 2004, three of these—Days of Being Wild (1990), In the Mood for Love (2001), and 2046 (2004)—are set in the 1960s. Within this informal trilogy, references to characters, events, and instances from earlier films are drawn out, re-configured and re-presented in later ones. For example, it is implied that the two characters played by Maggie Cheung in Days of Being Wild and In the Mood for Love share a common name, Su Li-zhen and could well be the same person (in 1960 and 1962 respectively). Days of Being Wild ends with the cabaret dancer Mimi/Lulu (Carina Lau) going to the Philippines in search of
Yuddy (Leslie Cheung). She lives on in 2046 having grown older and weary in the intervening years. The main protagonist of In the Mood of Love, Chow Mo-wan (Tony Leung Chiu-wai) is given a new lease on life in the 2004 film but with an entirely different persona. These multiplying narrative threads and intersecting timelines criss-cross Wong’s films, forming intricate webs of mémoire involontaire. Hints to past events (fictional or factual) that may trigger audiences’ memories are littered throughout the film. In 2046, the exquisite cheongsam (長衫) is reminiscent of In the Mood of Love. The room of Bai Ling’s (Zhang Ziyi) in 2046 recalls that of Yuddy’s in Days of Being Wild (Plate 1.2). Dialogue is also laden with references that points to other narrative events. The taxi scenes in 2046 in particular deliberately repeat and recall former reincarnations in In the Mood for Love (Plate 1.3). Gestures, movements, and poses reiterate this throughout. Music used in preceding films is played in the later works. The tunes immediately conjure up images and feelings from other stories and other times. Wong is upfront about these repetitions, complex references, and re-departures from the same theme in his films. He describes 2046 as a conclusion to his works to date (as of 2004) or perhaps a resolution to his long-term obsession with 1960s Hong Kong. This time period has a special significance for him, he recalls:

I came to Hong Kong from Shanghai in 1963. For me, the Hong Kong then is a very memorable place, as if even the sun shone brighter, and radio waves permeated the air... But memory has its own ways of modifying the past. At that time, everything seems slow. I did not intend to accurately recreate the 1960s [in Days of Being Wild], I just wanted to realise some of my own memories of this past.

This realisation can be interpreted as Wong’s attempt to make sense of the relationship between his memories and the constantly shifting, flowing experience of his ‘now’. Unlike Trauerspiel, Wong’s films are not an affirmation of melancholia or nostalgia. Like Baudelaire’s works, their relationship with the past is conscious. However, they do not suffer from Baudelaire’s political resignation. Wong’s works are deeply political. Like Benjamin, Wong’s focus on the past is strategic. Buck-Morss writes of Benjamin’s methodology: ‘A construction of history that looks backward, rather than forward, at the destruction of material nature as it has actually taken place, provides dialectical contrast to the futurist myth of historical progress (which can only be sustained by forgetting what has happened).’ I argue that Wong’s films take an extra step beyond mourning and ennui to glimpse at the present from both within and without time through their constructed temporal structures.
The temporal structures in Wong’s films are determined by two factors: first, his conceptual exploration and formal experimentation with narratives; and secondly, his idiosyncratic production processes. Having begun his practice as a scriptwriter, Wong experiments extensively with storytelling where he creates variations of a single instance, re-configures existing narratives, and allows strands to proliferate into multiple permutations. *Ashes of Time* (1994) presents convoluted tales of lost loves and forgotten friendships told over layers upon layers of dream time, lived time, past and future times. The rhythmic, circular, and epic quality of the film is to a large part owed to the number of transformations it underwent during a difficult and over-extended production period. As Wong simultaneously re-wrote and re-shot parts of the film, actors changed roles, characters appeared and disappeared, plots dissolved and re-formed. *Chungking Express* (1994) was shot, edited and completed using spare stock and equipment during the momentous editing task of *Ashes of Time*. Originally conceived as a composite of three stories, *Chungking Express* retained only two with the third segment mutated into a subsequent single work, *Fallen Angels* (1995). Completed films are also open to reconfiguration. Kristen Daly writes:

> *2046* arrived for its premiere at the Cannes Film Festival in pieces. The opening was delayed as the last few reels arrived. Reviewers saw a movie in the midst of the editing process […] Innumerable copies of *2046* exist. […] It came out over the course of a year or more, after five years in production, from what reviewers wrote, versions were variable in different countries and on the published and imported DVDs.

The dynamic relationships between narratives, characters, and edits are facilitated by the interaction between the script and filmmaking process. His filmmaking process begins with scripts as the scaffolds with which he situates the narratives and characters within. It is during filming and editing when decisions (including on length of shots, sequences of scenes, and narrative paths) are determined. Rather than illustrating words in a script, narratives emerge from the material processes of filmmaking. In this approach, the script acts as a rough map giving direction to the act of filming, while the meaning the work embodies is discovered as the film is made. His cinematographer Christopher Doyle remarks that what ‘feels right’ ends up being what is followed. He recounts:

> Wong says that it’s only as he edits the film that he finds the meaning of much of what we have shot. We didn't really know what certain details or colours or actions meant at the time. They anticipated where
the film would take us. They were images from the future at that time that we've only just arrived.  

The physical materiality of filmed images holds the resonance of the emerging narrative that is discovered during editing. This is evident in Doyle’s description of how a particular scene was shot in *Happy Together* (1997):

‘Is this part real or imaginary?’ I ask William [Cheung, Art Director and Editor]. We’re on our own again today, Wong's still working out whether this part is a flash forward dream sequence or the last stop on Tony's [the character Lai Yiu-fai] physical and spiritual journey and another possible end of the film. We have no idea which image should be what, so we shoot it both ways. All we know is the real parts are to be shot on the real film stock, the same one we've used in the rest of the film. While the flatter, less saturated stock we've been forced to replace our depleted original stocks with will represent an imaginary view.

In this way, the material form of the image embodies temporality of experiences in the films. This practice manifests the transformative relationship between art and technology explored in Benjamin’s ‘Work of Art in the Epoch of Technical Reproducibility’ where the dichotomy of form and content is dissolved and replaced by techniques and organisation. The iterative and generative process in creating scenarios, imagery, and editing structures give form to Wong’s ‘style’.

Doyle remarks, ‘All Wong’s films are like CD-roms, full of endless possible versions, and certain “virtual realities”’. His films are a technical organisation of time.

Like variations on a theme in music compositions, Wong’s films present different explorations and expressions of the same thematic. In ‘Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin’, Benjamin defines the core or quintessence of a poem as the ‘Poetic’: ‘the “sphere” [that] encompasses the “poetic task”’, which in turn is ‘both immanent and external to a poem’. In Friedrich Hölderlin’s two poems, Benjnin locates the same Poetic and asserts that the two poems were configurations of the same Poetic, namely the idea of death in life. The first version explores death in life in that if courage is to defend life from death, then beauty can only be a consolation. The second version approaches the concept differently: if courage is to take life through death, that is to accept death as a necessary part of life, then life becomes beauty. In a similar way, Wong’s stories have the same Poetic, but each presents a different exploration, expression, and conclusion. This is particularly evident in his 1960s trilogy where the
experience of time is at the very centre of each story. In *Days of Being Wild*, one minute is singled out to mark a beginning of a relationship. Yuddy persuades Su Li-zhen to look at his watch together as the second hand makes a full 360-degree revolution. He then says: ‘April 16, 1960, one minute before 3 o’clock in the afternoon, you were with me. Because of you, I'll remember that one minute. From now on, we are friends of one minute. This is a fact, you can't change it, because it is the past’.

When asked whether he remembers what he did on 16 April 1960 at 3 o’clock in the afternoon, minutes before his death, he remembers Su. *In the Mood for Love* focuses on an intense but short relationship between Su Li-zhen and Chow Mo-wan. The Chinese title of the film *Huayang Nianhua* (花樣年華) references the 1946 song *Huayang De Nianhua* (*In Full Bloom*) by Zhou Xuan. *Huayang Nianhua* can be loosely translated as ‘Years in Bloom’, in which *nianhua* (年華), an old fashioned colloquial term derived from formal written Chinese, implies not only ‘years’ but ‘flowering, glorious years’. Significant years of our lives are often always recognised in retrospective. The title speaks of this reality, summarised by a text passage at the end of the film. It reads:

> The months and years that have gone by
> are encased behind
> a dusty pane of glass,
> visible but intangible.

> He has never stopped cherishing all that belongs to this past.

> If only he could smash
> through the dusty pane of glass,
> then he would be able to step back into those disappearing years.

The film expands this window of time by magnifying the events of the everyday in exquisite detail. The repeated use of the instrumental *Yumeiji’s Theme* coupled with slow-motion serves to create a sense of time in suspension. In one scene, the camera frames Su from the top of the steps as she descends. Between the steps landing and the bustling noodles stores below, Su awkwardly meets Chow. The camera follows the characters as they pass each other. Variations of this same sequence are repeated a number of times in the film. The slow motion and repetition of the theme music sets this scene apart, imparting a heightened sense of time. Like a gramophone record revolving on an old turntable, the repetition not only intensifies the moods generated in the two scenes, but also connects them together. *2046* intensifies this theme of lost time.
by creating more convoluted cycles of intensely lived experiences. Wong replays variations of the same sequence. In the restaurant scene that concludes Chow’s break up with Bai Ling, bodies waltz through the narrow thoroughfare, the Main Theme returns on the audio track orchestrating the bodies in graceful slow-motion as the camera tracks slowly backwards in the crowded space (Plate 1.4). Again, the camera frames the figures tightly as they jostle past one another exchanging intimate glances. There are pauses at key points in this sequence—fleeting moments of recognition as Chow and Bai pass each other. Chow speaks on narration: ‘Sometimes we crossed paths but we pretended not to have seen each other. Although it seemed a pity, it was probably for the best’. It is implied by the narration that the scene is remembered from a future perspective. It is as if it is being endlessly replayed, re-examined, and re-lived.

Music provides the underlying temporal structures for all of Wong’s films. Initially envisaged as three operas, musical thematic and tempos remain a central compositional element in 2046. The accompaniment of music pieces with the major characters or narrative threads, namely Bai Ling with Siboney and Chow’s unrequited love for Wang Jing-wen (Faye Wong) with Casa Diva (from the opera Norma), acts as variations of the 2046 Main Theme by Shigeru Umbebayashi. The Main Theme functions as a refrain, bringing the viewers back to a starting point. This musical structure is incorporated in the narrative. In the film, Chow writes two stories. ‘Two O Four Six’ is a newspaper serial that tells the story of men and women who strive to find a place called 2046, a place where nothing ever changes. ‘Everyone who goes to 2046 has the same goal, that is to find his or her lost past’. The second story ‘2047’ is a gift to Wang. It is a story of asynchronous temporal disjuncture. It is a story of a man (Takuya Kimura) who boarded a high-speed train to escape from 2046. In what seems an interminable journey, he falls in love with an android cabin attendant (Faye Wong), but their asynchronous speeds prevent their connection. The former is a story of hellish repetition, obsessive remembering, and despair; the latter is a story of struggle, overcoming dejection and finding hope. Chow wallows in the same journey as the characters in ‘2046’. He searches for Su in order to relive his past, to regain the missed opportunity to ask her (once again) to leave with him. Chow, like all other characters in the film, is in love with his past and is unable to move on. In a frozen present, he is caught in repetitive loops of affairs and fruitless relationships. His liaisons with three women, Black Spider (Gong Li) whose name is coincidentally also Su Li-zhen, Bai Ling, and Wang Jing-wen, offer him
the chance of redemption and the possibility of change, but his inability to sever with
the past means he remains imprisoned. At the end of each affair, he returns to the same
starting point.

One of Wong’s techniques is to construct temporal experiences using familiar cinematic
devices. In 2046, the marking of time is an example where the juxtaposition between
cinematic language and filmic image creates an asynchronous tension between
December 1968’, and ‘24 December 1969’ act like a metronome marking various points
in the unfolding narrative. However, just as these inter-titles tell time they also
deliberately lie about time. Two scenes in the film in particular accentuate the tension
between experienced time and told time by juxtaposing shots of stillness with
suggestions of the rapid passing of time. At the end of ‘2047’, long shots and close-ups
of an android staring dreamily outside the train intercut with the intertitles: ‘one hour
later’, ‘ten hours later’, ‘a hundred hours later’, ‘a thousand hours later’. It is as if she
ceases to function and remains there for a thousand years. When attempting to change
the ending of ‘2047’, Chow sits at his desk, pen poised. As the pen hovers above the
page the surrounding light changes from light to dark to light. The same intertitles flash
up to announce the passing of time—a hundred hours have passed. The markers of
time have become arbitrary. Wong’s frequent play with the shooting speed and running
speed of the film produces another form of asynchronicity. Scenes in ‘2047’ are
composed by physically slowed-down movement of the actors filmed at half-speed (12
frames per second) but played back at normal speed, creating a different sense of time.

In the narrative, these asynchronous temporalities produce ineffective mourning. When
Chow first encounters Wang he hears faint muttering in the room adjacent to his.
Peering through the wall partition, he sees Wang pacing back and forth repeating in
Japanese: ‘Yes, I will come with you’, ‘Yes, I understand’, ‘Let us go’. These are answers
to her Japanese lover’s request to leave with him. At the time when he asks her to leave
with him, she remains silent and watches him leave. When he returns and begs her to
answer, too afraid to disobey her father, she does not speak a word. He leaves for the
final time and in his absence these affirmative answers come too late. Like the android
in ‘2047’, her responses are out of time, discordant, fragmented with disassociative
meaning. This hellish repetition and endless waiting manifests as senseless utterances in
the language of lamentation and mourning. Wang’s answers are reduced to mutterings that mourn for her lost love and future happiness. Her laments echo in the empty room, number 2046, repeating in empty time. In Wong’s films, meanings are lost with an end of a relationship mourned repetitiously, drawing the characters into a time loop where they endlessly relive their pasts. This parallels Benjamin’s interpretation of *Trauerspiel*. Caygill writes, ‘For Benjamin, the mourning play evokes this lament for the loss of significance or the removal of the absolute through an intensified question of loss’. Wong’s works, however, suggest that there is a way out of this time loop.

1.4 Myths and extra-temporality

In Greek tragedies, fate is destiny preordained by the Gods. Fate foretells from the beginning what will come to pass. Caygill writes, ‘The death of the hero is the completion of a fate, bearing witness to the manifestation of the Gods in the human and natural worlds’. When fate is fulfilled, time completes. In contrast, Messianic time is linear and open-ended; it starts with the Fall and ends with the prophesied second coming of Christ. The Messianic end time occurs at an unknown time in the future. In the Catholic doctrine, Matthew’s Gospel proclaims, ‘But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only’ (Matthew 24: 36). This end is continually delayed. This Christian prophecy functions similarly to classical mythologies except the foretold fate is yet to be fulfilled. Unlike Greek mythologies where the fulfilment of the prophesied fate demonstrates the Gods’ will, in Christian theologies it is the fate’s non-fulfilment or more precisely its potential fulfilment that makes God omnipotent. Both are mythical in the sense that they provide narratives that explain the present state of affairs. Whilst myths serve to sustain both the circular temporality of the ancients and the open-ended Messianic time, it is the latter that is more forceful and adaptable to produce the narratives that underlie modernity. The open-ended temporal structure of Messianic time provides the structure of many modern narratives, from capitalism’s eternal deferment of fulfilment to the imminence of catastrophe. Buck-Morss writes: ‘they reappear in the most recent cosmological speculations […] to throw the responsibility to God for the terrifying situation that humans beings themselves have created’. Myths can serve to provide stability and validity to the current status quo and present events leading up to the present as inescapable destiny. Benjamin sees the myth of historical progress as the
most dangerous precisely because to believe in such myths is to surrender autonomy and self-determination. Buck-Morss continues:

[Myth] dictates that because human beings are powerless to interfere in the workings of fate, nothing truly new can happen, while the concept of history implies the possibility of human influence upon events and with it, the moral and political responsibility of people as conscious agents to shape their own destiny.79

Das Passagen-Werk is to allow history to take place by destroying the myth of progress, whether this may be the industrial might of a nation, the unprecedented growth of material wealth, or the march of technological advancement.

Wong’s works challenge the concept of fate in a similar context. An underlying dimension of his works (from 1990 to 2004) is concerned with the socio-politics of Hong Kong, and specifically in relation to the idea that the future is predetermined. This is unsurprising if one considers how the people of Hong Kong never had direct representation in the treaties that determined its governing. The first Opium War (1836–1842) ended with the cession of Hong Kong Island to Great Britain under the ‘Treaty of Nanjing’ in 1842.80 The Kowloon Peninsula (with Boundary Street acting as the northern border) and Stonecutters Island were ceded to Britain in October 1860 under the ‘Convention of Peking’. In 1898, under the second ‘Convention of Peking’, Britain formally leased Lantau Island and north of Boundary Street (which came to be known as the New Territories) for a period of 99 years. In 1982, fifteen years before the expiration of this lease, Britain opened talk with China concerning ‘the question of Hong Kong’. The result was the signing of the ‘Joint Declaration of the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of the People’s Republic of China on the Question of Hong Kong’ in 1984. Hong Kong’s sovereignty reverted back to China on 1 July 1997. In the intervening 12 years that led to this date, the people of Hong Kong waited for their (pre)determined future. Throughout its history, the lack of direct political representation in the city’s governance gave rise to a certain political apathy or passivity in the population.81 The situations surrounding the eventuation of the Joint Declaration provided further justification for the perception that the residents of Hong Kong neither had the rights nor the responsibilities to influence the political future of their city. The Chinese Government’s handling of the student protest in Tiananmen Square in 1989 were perceived by Hong
Kong people as clear evidence of its stance on democracy and freedom. The event triggered what became the highest peak of migration out of Hong Kong and confidence in the city was in crisis.\textsuperscript{82} As a form of assurance the Chinese government made a promise that the ‘way of life’ in post-1997 Hong Kong ‘shall remain unchanged for 50 years’.\textsuperscript{83} The film \textit{2046} is about this promise. If ‘50 years without change’ can be offered as a kind of assurance, what kind of comfort does this promise bring and at what cost? As the character Wang asks: ‘Is there anything in this world that will not change?’

These sentiments are explored in Wong’s works in scenarios of waiting and fate. Characters in Wong’s films often find themselves trapped in situations from which they are unable or unwilling to move away. They wait for their fates to unfold. In \textit{Ashes of Time}, Ouyang Feng (Leslie Cheung) runs an inn in a desert. He marks time using the ancient Chinese Almanac and deliberates on seasonal predictions and the cautionary warnings it offers. Occasionally he acts as the middleman for people seeking revenge but he himself represses any emotions. Ouyang is imprisoned in the desert and his way of life by the memory of his lover and her betrayal. Yuddy in \textit{Days of Being Wild} lives in a self-fulfilling myth of freedom and destruction. He justifies his detachment from life by constructing the story of a legless bird that must keep flying because it cannot land. Lai Yiu-Fai in \textit{Happy Together} stays in a chronically destructive relationship with Ho Bo-Wing because he believes in Ho’s rhetoric that they can ‘start over’. \textit{Fallen Angels} is populated by characters who border on forms of social autism; each perpetuating the myths that entrap them: a woman believes unyieldingly in the promise ‘I will never forget you’, a man who decided never to speak again in response to his mother’s sudden departure, an assassin who wishes to change his life but remains indecisive, and his agent who is in love with him but with whom she is too afraid to meet. These characters remain passive in their prescribed illusions and miseries, creating narratives that justify their own inertia. Wong shows us how these self-deluding narratives are, in the end, unsustainable.

Ouyang eventually leaves the desert realising that ‘the harder you want to know whether you have really forgotten something, the clearer you remember it’.\textsuperscript{84} In the last moment of Yuddy’s life, he realises that the legless bird was not flying to avoid death but was stillborn from the beginning. Lai Yiu-Fai eventually refuses Ho Bo-Wing the chance to start over as he realises there is nothing left in their relationship that can be renewed. The characters are awakened painfully (sometimes fatally) from the fantasies and myths of their own making. Wong’s films often end with the beginning of a journey where the
characters can take back the right and the responsibility of living their own lives. These endings offer glimpses beyond the alluring myths, outside of prescribed fate, and external to time.

To bring about the abrupt awakening from the myth of historical progress, Benjamin constructs his project, not with the monuments of history, but rather its refuse. Buck-Morss writes, ‘Benjamin sought out the small, discarded objects, the outdated buildings and fashions which, precisely as the “trash” of history, were evidence of its unprecedented material destruction’. He writes of the project’s methodology in a fragment in *Konvolut N*:

> The first stage in this undertaking will be to carry over the principle of montage into history. That is, to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event, and therefore, to break with vulgar historical naturalism.

Wong’s 1960s trilogy is similarly constructed out of ‘small individual moments’ and small, insignificant characters in Hong Kong’s past. Wong’s materials correspond with some of Benjamin’s keywords. In his films, the Flâneur and the Collector are manifested as the ‘teddy boy’, the dandy, the playboy, or the cad; the Prostitute dazzles with her glamorous Fashion; the Gambler acquires a quiet dignity in her desperation; bodies move through the Mirrored Interiors of dance halls and hotel rooms. Rather than realistic portrayals of people or places, characters and sets in Wong’s films are embodiments of ideas (Plates 1.5). They are symbols that have decayed with time and have become allegories. Viewing from the contemporary contexts of Hong Kong, the audience is reminded that these characters and places have long been extinct (or perhaps they never existed as portrayed in the films). They exist as ruins. The costuming, props, and set designs in the films incorporate actual materials of history. The clothing and accessories worn by the characters, the ways they move and gesture, the interiors they inhabit, the objects they handle, hint at a time past. Wong’s deliberate exaggeration of the appearances of objects suggests, however, that this past only exists in memory. The opulent furnishing of the dance hall, the exquisite cheongsam, the ‘retro’ fittings of the restaurants, the seductive gestures of the courtesans are highly stylised on screen, drawing attention to the tension between the past and its remembrance (Plate 1.6). The
knowledge of their absence in the present generates desire and longing. In investing the temporal element (a sense of history) into these objects, they become allegorical.

Specifically, the traditional dress, *cheongsam* in the films plays a significant role. *Cheongsam* （長衫 literally means ‘long dress’) originates from the costumes of Chinese Qing Dynasty courts called *qipao* (旗袍 or banner quilt). The dress was modernised after the fall of the Qing Dynasty in Shanghai in the 1910s. When Shanghai’s émigrés fled from Communist China to Hong Kong in the 1940s they brought with them the modern *cheongsam*. By the 1950s *cheongsam* was a standard form of dress for women in Hong Kong and in the 1960s it was adopted as a uniform by the service industry. By the 1970s *cheongsam* had largely been replaced by ‘western-style’ clothing. Today, the traditional dress exists mainly as a uniform and formal wear. Despite its many manifestations, *cheongsam* still retains its connotations of traditional Chinese female virtues. In contemporary Hong Kong, a wearer of *cheongsam* is fully aware of the values she implies by putting on the traditional costume. Wong’s 1960s trilogy makes use of *cheongsam* as a filmic image. The appearance of the dress in *In the Mood for Love* and *2046* is particularly extravagant and excessive. The former is set in 1962, Su Li-zhen and her landlady Mrs Suen are the only characters in the film who wear *cheongsam*. As a migrant from Shanghai and a mature woman, Mrs Suen’s choice of *cheongsam* over other modern clothing is appropriate for her age and social status. Su, on the other hand, is a young Hong Kong woman working professionally as a secretary who has chosen the traditional *cheongsam* over the modern dress. In contrast, Chow’s wife, whose age is similar to Su’s, is seen only wearing dresses. Su’s choice of clothing is symbolic. The *cheongsam* here is a seductively beautiful gown but also a straitjacket that enforces traditional values it embodies (Mrs Suen, the other wearer of *cheongsam*, also functions as an enforcer of these values). Caught between a rapidly modernising culture and the unceasing imposition of traditional values, Su’s long dress is her uniform as the reluctant protector of the very morality that imprisons her. Despite the pain caused by her husband’s infidelity, she is expected to keep up the front of respectability for her boss, negotiating the complex arrangements between him, his wife, and his mistress. Set four years later from 1966 to 1969, *cheongsam* in *2046* is only worn by women who work in nightclubs and gambling halls. They include Mimi/Lulu, a cabaret performer, Bai Ling, a nightclub hostess, and Black Spider, a professional gambler. By the mid-1960s
Cheongsam had evolved into a glamorous uniform for women working in the entertainment and service industries. Instead of restricting their lives as it did for Su in the previous film, the function of cheongsam here is reversed. The dress preserves the appearance of women’s virtues by conforming to the appearance of respectability. It allows women freedom to move in a world that was deemed morally dubious. Wong uses cheongsam as symbol that represents traditional Chinese feminine virtues; at the same time he allows this status to be undermined. We see this symbol of Chinese womanhood simultaneously as alluringly beautiful costumes and an outdated mode of dress. The object in the present context cannot be separated from its place in history. It exists as a ruin that reminds us of the eternal passing of time.

In the Trauerspiel study, Benjamin re-defines symbols and allegory through time: symbol is the eternal in an instantaneous present, a fleeting eternity; allegory is the fleeting eternal passing. Neoclassicism sees the ruins of antiquity as sign of eternal truth while Benjamin takes ruins as the evidence of material transiency. Benjamin makes use of this distinction in his analyses of Greek tragedies and German mourning plays. The symbol makes a finite image infinite by ‘freezing the moment’; in allegory, whilst the difference between appearance and essence is marked, ‘all meanings are subject to time’. In Wong’s films, objects encapsulate multiple timelines in the present: fictional past, remembered past, the audience’s past. The symbol’s eternal presence is undermined by the act of remembering, revealing what appears on screen as ruins. Wong injects temporality into these symbols, transforming them into allegories. Finiteness returns to time through allegory. Benjamin presents this ‘dialectic reversal’ in The Origin of the German Mourning Play. Caygill writes: ‘When allegory turns upon itself, the occasion for mourning becomes one of affirmation, a celebration of the finitude of the thought of finitude. This is not a return to a symbolic affirmation of the presence of the eternal in the finite, but an allegory of the finitude of the finite’.

Mourning and melancholy are tied to the incompleteness of time. In 2046 Chow misunderstands the nature of time. He believes it is infinite. He tells Bai Ling, ‘I don’t have anything except plenty of time’. He proposes that everyone’s surplus time can be borrowed and repaid. Likewise, relationships can only be temporary transactions. Bai Ling is offended by the thought that people are simply ‘time-fillers’ for Chow, but she too fills her time until ‘the right person comes along’. By recognising the finiteness of
the past, Wong’s characters are emancipated from mourning and the loss of time’s finitude. At 2046 draws to an end, Chow leaves Bai Ling for the last time, and the camera tracks slowly left to follow him across the hallway, down the stairs, and into the night. On screen, an intertitle flashes up: ‘He did not turn around. It was as if he boarded a long, long train, in the boundless night, towards a hazy future.’ Like a coda to the main phrase, Chow catches a taxi, but this time he sits at the back, alone with no companion. ‘How long does it take to leave 2046? No one knows,’ writes Chow, ‘For some, it is relatively easy; for others it will take tremendous will’. Chow realises that he will never find his lost love in the place where nothing changes. He at last stands outside of time, albeit momentarily, and recognises ‘the finitude of the finite’.

Benjamin pays particular attention to the extension of mourning in the ‘distorted recognition’ in memory. In ‘Some Motifs on Baudelaire’, Benjamin employs Baudelaire, Freud, and Proust as guides to unearth the nature of modern experience. He construes that to live with the constant shocks of modern life, everyday occurrences are only ‘processed’ at the level of the merely lived through (Erlebnis) rather than forming fully as experience (Erfahrung). The formation of modern experience relies on navigating through shock to allow conscious and unconscious memory to converge. In Proust’s In Search of Lost Time, mémoire involontaire overlay with mémoire volontaire to produce experience. Towards the close of Finding Time Again, the narrator is confronted with the effects of ageing when he meets friends and acquaintances in a social gathering. He realises that it is the extra-temporal dimension in remembering that gives it pleasure:

[The being within me who was enjoying this impression was enjoying it because of something shared between a day and the present moment, something extra-temporal, and this being appeared only when through one of these moments of identity between the present and the past, it was to find itself in the only milieu in which it could live and enjoy the essence of things, that is to say outside of time.]

His epiphany reminds him that for experiences to be meaningful they must also be lived within time—that is the passing of time. Similarly, in 2046 Wong offers us a story of Hong Kong from an extra-temporal dimension. He embeds this temporality in the audio track of the film’s concluding credits. Intervoven with the theme music are ‘the radio waves that permeated the air’ evoking moments of the city’s history: Hong Kong’s first television broadcast, its recovery from the ruins of war, its rise in the economic miracle, Margaret Thatcher’s ominous foretelling that: ‘Hong Kong will maintain its
economic systems and way of life for fifty years after the first of July, 1997’, as we consider the promise of time without change. Wong’s films allow us to take a glimpse from outside of time, borrowing Martin’s words, to ‘exit the negative temporality of the new, accessing time outside history, a completed time’.

* 

Temporal conception defines allegories from those of classical antiquity, to the overladen imagery in the Baroque Trauerspiel, to the figures in Baudelaire’s poetry, and to Wong Kar-wai’s filmic images of supermodernity. The cyclical and fulfilled temporal order of Greek mythology gave way to the incomplete and open-ended time of the Christian worldview when the Messianic coming is eternally delayed. Confronted with the multiplying and excessive imagery in nascent modernity, the Baroque allegorists abandoned the possibility of meaning in mortal life for the promise of future salvation. Baudelaire reveals modernity’s temporal order of the new as hellish repetition of ‘always-the-same’. For Baudelaire, modern experience can only be approached allegorically. Commodity provides the most fitting allegory that makes manifest the modern human condition. Supermodernity is an intensified form of this condition, whose temporal order is spatialised to encompass coexisting multiple, iterative and variable timelines in a global space, where relations are re-defined by flow. Wong’s filmmaking embodies the transformative relationship between art and technology in creating a technical organisation of time that makes palpable the experience of supermodernity. In his 1960s trilogy, he re-invests a sense of history into the unchanging symbols of Hong Kong and, in doing so, transforms them into allegories.

In confronting Wong’s allegorical objects as ruins, an extra-temporal dimension of remembrance opens up, from which they are experienced. Allegorical practices here are shown to respond to different temporal orders and experiences. Benjamin’s project to redeem allegorical practice is likewise specific to his time. Acting as a nexus between his two produktionskreis, allegories of the Baroque Trauerspiel are transformed into the emblematic Denkbilder of One Way Street. The Arcades Project was to be an intensification of these Denkbilder and montage is key to this process. Benjamin’s conception of montage is the focus on the next chapter.

2 The term ‘supermodernity’ is used here in reference to Marc Augé’s work. See Marc Augé, Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity (London and New York: Verso, 1995).


4 Benjamin, The Origin of German Mourning Plays, 178.

5 Buck-Morss, The Dialectic of Seeing, 13.

6 Ibid. 13.

7 Ibid. 13.

8 A habilitation thesis is a requirement for applicants of professorial positions in German universities. A Habilitationsschrift is usually published as a work.

9 Bloch suggested Benjamin read Georg Lukács’s History and Class Consciousness.


11 Lacis paraphrased Benjamin’s reply as she recounted their conversation. See Lacis, Revolutionär im Beruf, 43–4 quoted in Buck-Morss, The Dialectic of Seeing, 15.


13 For example, Howard Caygill begins the introduction of Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience with the descriptions of Benjamin’s production cycles marked by the Trauerspiel study, One Way Street, and the Arcades Project. Caygill refers to Benjamin’s letter to Gershom Scholem dated 20 January 1928. See Howard Caygill, Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), xii.


15 Howard Caygill argues that the development of capitalism provides another connecting theme. He writes, ‘it is important not artificially to separate the Origin of the German Mourning Play from the later work on nineteenth-century capitalism. The two projects are complementary: one analyses the culture of nascent capitalism, the other the culture of high capitalism’. See Caygill, Walter Benjamin, 57.

16 Buck-Morss, The Dialectic of Seeing, 18.

17 Konvolut] of the Arcades Project is a collection of writings and research on Baudelaire. It is the largest component of the project. The essay sourced extensively content from this Konvolut.


At the opposite pole of Frye’s continuum is factual reportage. Allegorical forms in post-Renaissance literary fiction moved towards the mid-point of this continuum, creating complex allegories.

In the example of *Primavera*, the characters that are present from common readings are Venus (love) and the Three Graces, Flora (spring), and Mercury (protection).


The practitioner of allegory is also known as an allegorist. I am using the term, allegoricist, to conform with Buck-Morss’s usage.

For the 1857 publication of the volume, Baudelaire was successfully prosecuted for ‘insult to public decency’. He was fined and six poems from the original edition were banned from the publication unit 1947.


Ibid. 178.


Ibid. 201.

Ibid. 170.

Ibid. 18.


Osborne, ‘Non-places and the Spaces of Art’, 183.

Wong Kar-wai (dir.), 阿飛正傳 *[Days of Being Wild]* (In-Gear Film, 1990 Wong Karwai (dir.), 花樣年華 *[In the Mood for Love]* (Jet Tone Productions, 2000); Wong Kar-wai (dir.), *2046* (Jet Tone Films, 2004).

The naming of characters in Wong’s films appears arbitrary. The filmmaker seems to prefer ordinary and commonplace names for his characters. For example, the characters’ names Lai Yiu-fai and Ho Po-wing in *Happy Together* are ‘borrowed’ from two of his crew members. Names, like Su Li-zhen, are typical and somewhat old-fashioned names found in Hong Kong. Wong takes advantage of their commonplace quality by reusing the names in several films.

Rather than treating the later films as sequels, it is more useful to think of these works as permutations or other possibilities of the existing story, or experiments using the
same characters. The transformation of the protagonist Chow Mo-Wan from a quietly spoken, mild mannered, and sensitive young man to a sly, decadent, deceitful playboy is so drastic that it remains somewhat unconvincing. The actor Tony Leung spoke about the difficulties in playing the same character but with almost entirely different personalities in an interview. He resolved this difficulty and ‘got into character’ by adopting a pencil-thin moustache for the new Chow to give him a point of difference. See Mark Walters, ‘Tony Leung talks about 2046’, Big Boy Fan [webpage], (2005) <http://www.bigfanboy.com/pages/interviews/tonyleung/2046.html>, accessed 19 Jun. 2013.

48 For example, Wong references the political unrest in Cambodia in 1963, and the 1966 and 1967 riots in Hong Kong in In the Mood for Love.

49 Cheongsam is a colloquial Cantonese term commonly used in Hong Kong to refer to this traditional dress. The formal term is Keipo (in Cantonese) and Qipao (in Mandarin Pinyin).

50 The method of unburdening your untold secrets concludes In the Mood for Love and opens 2046. The reference to the ‘legless bird legend’ appears first in Days of Being Wild as its central narrative theme. Its mention in 2046 references the former film.

51 This scene also echoes a taxi scene with the two characters, Lai Yiu-fai and Ho Po-wing, set in Buenos Aires in Happy Together.

52 Jimmy Ngai, Sichu Wang Jiawei, Luo Sahji (Hong Kong: Chen Mi-ji, 1994), 27. My own translation.

53 Buck-Morss, The Dialectic of Seeing, 95.

54 Wong Kar-wai (dir.), 東邪西毒 [Ashes of Time] (Jet-Tone Production, 1994).

55 Wong released a version of Ashes of Time titled Ashes of Time Redux in 2008. This film is yet again another re-edited permutation of the original story.

56 Wong Kar-wai (dir.), 重慶森林 [Chungking Express] (Jet-Tone Production, 1994).

57 Wong Kar-wai (dir.), 墮落天使 [Fallen Angels] (Jet-Tone Production, 1995).


59 Christopher Doyle, Don’t Try for me Argentina: Photographic Journal (Hong Kong: City Entertainment, 1997), unpaginated.

60 Ibid. unpaginated.

61 Ibid. unpaginated.

62 I put the word style in quotation here to emphasise that the look and feel of the film owes to the process of making rather than consciously prescribing or dictating these aspects of the work beforehand.

63 Doyle, Don’t Try for me Argentina, unpaginated.

64 Caygill, Walter Benjamin, 36.

65 This one minute on screen is less than one minute in actual time.

66 This passage from In the Mood for Love is my own translation.

67 The title 2046 is written here as it is spoken in Cantonese.

68 This echoes similar scenes in In the Mood for Love when Su Li-zhen walks into the living room, bringing cigarettes for her husband. Through a doorway, we see the neighbours playing a game of mahjong. Su sits near the doorway by her husband’s side. Chow Mo-wan’s wife enters the small space. Su stands up against the door as she let Chow’s wife through the narrow gap into the room shortly followed by Chow leaving the room. The movement with which the bodies slide past each other, gracefully
negotiating each other’s space, is slowed down, exaggerated and juxtaposed with the rhythmic rhumba music. The movement of the bodies is stretched out in time, they appear to dance.

My own translation.

Wong’s films are heavy with musical references. His films’ titles are often directly derived or allude to song titles. For example, *As Tears Go By* (1988) is a play on the song title ‘As Time Goes By’, probably most well known for its use in *Casablanca* (1942). *Happy Together* uses the 1967 song of the same title by The Turtles for the film’s ending. *In the Mood for Love* references Nat King Cole’s *I’m in the Mood for Love*; his songs are used extensively in the film. The Chinese title for *In the Mood for Love*, *Huayang Nianhua* is a direct reference to *Huayang De Nianhua (In Full Bloom)* by Zhou Xuan, which is used in the film.

There are many examples. In *Days of Being Wild*, when Su Li-zhen breaks up with Yuddy, she find herself back at his apartment even when she promised herself never to return. It is suggested in *2046* that after failing to track down Yuddy in the Philippines (who, in fact, has been killed), Mimi/Lulu becomes trapped in various destructive relationships. Karen Mok’s character and Michelle Reis’s character in *Fallen Angels* share similar fates.


Ibid. 53.

In Christian theologies, this return of Christ fulfils the Messianic prophecy, one that is essentially eschatological. The fate of humanity: salvation, redemption, or damnation, is decided upon at the Last Judgement.

For example, the Christian faith explains the cause of pain and suffering as the result of the Fall (or the original sin); the reason for enduring suffering itself is justified by salvation of the soul after death or at the Last Judgement (when fate will be fulfilled). Promise of happiness in the eternal afterlife is one feature of Catholicism. This is typified by the passage in Gospels of Matthew and Luke, generally known as ‘The Beatitudes’. The text is said to be Jesus’s sermon on the Mount: ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness for theirs is the kingdom of heaven’.

Buck-Morss writes that the use of myths to justify the present state of affairs is not limited to any particular discourse or era. According to Buck-Morss, the revolutionary theologies of Georg Lukács and Ernst Bloch also express ‘[t]he redemptive task of the proletariat […] in Messianic terms’. See Buck-Morss, *The Dialectic of Seeing*, 231. Many ‘doomsday’ scenarios follow the pattern of Messianic end time.

Ibid. 78.

The British took possession of Hong Kong Island in January 1841, over a year before it was formally ceded to Britain under the ‘Treaty of Nanjing’.

In all of these instances, the people of Hong Kong were either represented by the Chinese government or by the Hong Kong Governor (who was appointed by the British Government). Neither the officials in China nor Hong Kong Governors were
democratically elected by Hong Kong residents. In regard to the Hong Kong people’s political apathy, there have been a handful of exceptions. Most notably, the riots in 1956 and 1967 were influenced by the leftist politics in China. Together with the Hong Kong 1966 riot, these events were underlined by general social unrest and dissatisfaction with the British Colonial Government. It is also demonstrable that the population of Hong Kong had increased political awareness since the 1982 Sino-British talks on the ‘question of Hong Kong’.

82 This was the greatest wave of migration out of Hong Kong.
83 Article 5 in the Basic Law constitution states that, ‘The socialist system and policies [of the People’s Republic of China] shall not be practised in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, and the previous capitalist system and way of life shall remain unchanged for 50 years’.
84 My own translation.
86 Benjamin, The Arcades Project, 461.
87 Cheongsam was banned in China in 1966 as it was deemed to represent bourgeois values. See Hazel Clark, ‘The Cheung Sam: Issues of Fashion and Cultural Identity’ in Valerie Steele and John S. Major (eds.), China Chic: East Meets West (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 155–65.
88 The most widely seen uniform that has been modelled on cheongsam is the uniform of female staff working at Chinese restaurants and secondary school uniforms for girls. The school uniform is a loose-fit version of cheongsam. This choice is said to reflect the values the school holds for the students and their education. It is not uncommon to hear students complain that their uniform is old-fashioned.
89 For example, the Miss Hong Kong beauty pageant contestants wear a range of costumes in the different sections of the competition. They generally wear cheongsam when they return to stage for the announcement of the winners. The winners have been crowned in their cheongsam since 1975. (The annual pageant started in 1973.)
90 Reportedly it took Maggie Cheung around 5 hours to complete make-up, hair, and costuming for each shoot. She was sewn into the cheongsam she wore (that is switching into the clothing rather than using a simple zip, buttons, or other fasteners). The dresses frequently split when she sat down. Zhang Ziyi underwent training to wear and move in the highly tailored dresses. In an interview, she commented that in addition to wearing the very tight cheongsam, she found walking in the very high heels whilst balancing a handbag on one arm and holding onto the fur collar was physically very demanding. See Zhang Ziyi On Set & Interview (MadMan Films, 2004).
91 This is with the exception of Su Li-zhen (Maggie Cheung) who appears in the memory of Chow. Other female characters from a more respectable background, like Wang and her sister, appear in western clothing.
93 Ibid. 61.
94 As suggested by his statement in narration: ‘I learnt to make the most out of these social situations. These relationships last only as long as the morning dew, but who cares? What in the world lasts forever?’. The frequent use of vernacular phrases, ‘fung cheung jok hing/ fengchang zuoxing’ (逢場作興) means a situation that is purely meant for socializing or entertaining purposes (meaning no serious relationship should be expected); ‘mou sei ching yan/ wushui qingren’ (霧水情人) describes lovers who part as the morning mist disperses.
The stories in Wong’s films can also be compared to the narrative structure of Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, where the thematic of love, friendship, and time recur throughout the narrator’s remembrance of his life. As he reflects on this life at the end of the novel, he notices that events in his life form patterns. His consuming love affair takes the model of Swann’s affair with Odette; his experience echoes that of the older man. Similarly, we find these patterns in Wong’s characters—repeating and echoing their pasts or the pasts of others. In this way, truth content is explored and re-explored in different works.
Plate 1.1
Sandro Botticelli, La Primavera, c.1482. Tempera on panel.
Albrecht Dürer, Melancolia I, 1514. Engraving.
Plate 1.2. Top to bottom:
Plate 1.4. Top to bottom:
Plate 1.5. Top to bottom:
CHAPTER 2

Montage principle

Building on previous analyses of allegory practices, this chapter explores Walter Benjamin’s conception of montage as practised in the Arcades Project.¹ I begin with an introduction to the history and context of this incomplete work. Rather than speculations on how Das Passagen-Werk would have been were Benjamin able to bring it to fruition, the exploration focuses on the possibilities of his method. More precisely, what is the montage mechanism that allows fragments to be captured momentarily in a constellation? How would a Benjaminian montage function in art, films, sculptures, and installations? I explore critical encounter with objects—a montage of physical objects—that may give rise to dialectical images. Rather than conceiving a Benjaminian montage in terms of filmic montage or photomontage, I argue that conceptualising Das Passagen-Werk as a wunderkammer offers ways to extend montage practice. To consolidate this concept of object montage, I analyse the artworks of Joseph Cornell, Sarah Sze, Mark Dion, and Sarah Walko. I also discuss two of my works: The World of Things, and the collaborative project, Konvolut K, as experimentation on montage forms that open up possibilities.

2.1 The Arcades Project

Susan Buck-Morss prefaces the second section of The Dialectic of Seeing by reminding readers that there is no actual Passagen-Werk.² Benjamin worked on the project for thirteen years from 1927 while still living in Berlin until his death in 1940.³ The concept of the project can be traced back to a planned collaborative article with Franz Hessel entitled ‘Passages’. Benjamin previously worked with Hessel on the translation of Marcel Proust’s À la Recherche du les Temps Perdu and intended to continue their collaboration with an essay that explores the Parisian arcades. The proposed work was never realised, but it represents an early formulation of Das Passagen-Werk based on which Benjamin wrote the commissioned essay, ‘Paris: the Capital of the Nineteenth Century’, published by the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research.⁴ Later the Institute commissioned the 1939 exposé, written in French, in hope of interesting sponsors in America.⁵ These writings formed the materials for the proposed book ‘Paris Arcades: A Dialectical Fairytale’. In 1934, Benjamin relocated to Paris shortly after Hitler’s Nazi party came to
power. While in Paris he worked extensively on the *Arcades Project* in the Bibliothéque Nationale. During this time, the project expanded into massive volumes of notes, citations, quotes, and other collected materials. The notation and *Konvolut* system were developed at this time. The project also began to acquire much of its social and political dimension, particularly in relation to Marxism. From 1937 to 1939, Benjamin focused on a proposed book on Baudelaire that further influenced the shape of the archives. Germany invaded France in the spring of 1940; when Paris fell Benjamin was forced to leave for America via Spain. When his party was retained at the Spanish border town Portbou, Benjamin committed suicide. Before Benjamin fled Paris, he entrusted the *Passagen-Werk* notes to George Bataille who hid them inside the Paris’s Bibliothéque. Together with the 1935 and 1939 exposés these archives comprise the *Arcades Project* that was first published in German and edited by Rolf Tiedemann in 1982. A completed *Passagen-Werk*, however, does not exist.

In the absence of the complete work, the archived fragments, the exposés, Benjamin’s correspondences, and related published works: the Baudelaire essay, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproducibility’, and ‘Theses on the Philosophy History’, provide a framework for speculating on its intended form. Benjamin frequently referred to the project as ‘the book’ in his correspondences. Indeed, the exposé of 1939 introduces the project with ‘the subject of this book’. Yet the intended form of this ‘book’ is elusive. It seems intuitive to assume that the six section headings of the exposés would form six distinct chapters. However, both the 1935 and 1939 exposés focus only on a small amount of materials collected, leaving out the vast majority in the growing archives. Buck-Morss argues, ‘The 1935 exposé could have been the *Passagen-Werk* had Benjamin been willing to discard these previous constellations – and not to construct new ones. He seems to have been not at all disposed to do either’. Moreover, Benjamin continued to add to the other sections of the project right up to 1940. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin point out that the massive archives are speculated to simply serve to house raw materials for Benjamin’s other published works. They write:

> [S]ince the publication of the *Passagen-Werk*, it has become customary to regard the text which Benjamin himself usually called the *Passagenarbeit*, or just *Passagen*, as at best a ‘torso’, a monumental fragment or ruin, and at worst a mere notebook, which the author
supposedly intended to mine for more extended excursive applications.\(^{11}\)

Having examined the papers kept at the Bataille Archive, Michael Espange and Michael Werner put forward the argument that the planned Baudelaire book would have eventually subsumed the *Arcades Project* book. Buck-Morss rejects this supposition. She states that the papers in the Bataille Archive ‘provide … simply no evidence that Benjamin himself ever considered the *Passagen-Werk* a “failed” project, or that the Baudelaire study had come to replace it’.\(^{12}\) She argues that the *Arcades Project* was still the central concern for Benjamin as late as 1938 as revealed by his correspondences with Max Horkheimer.\(^{13}\) She cautions, ‘Every attempt to capture the *Passagen-Werk* within one narrative must lead to failure’.\(^{14}\) The *Arcades Project*, even in its incomplete form, provides significant insight into Benjamin’s authorship.\(^{15}\) Benjamin described the project as the ““Copernican revolution” in the practice of history writing”\(^{16}\). The *Arcades Project* presents a crystallisation of Benjamin’s mature philosophy developed through all his production cycles (*produktionskreise*). The ambitiousness of the project testifies to his commitment to a materialist historiography. I hypothesise that the significance of the *Arcades Project* lies in its potential to function as a meta-framework capable of inventing new forms and methodologies for the construction of history.

Throughout the thirteen years Benjamin worked on the project he collected numerous *images* of the nineteenth century in the form of photographs, prints, quotes, and citations gleaned from books, magazines, newspaper, and advertisements in addition to his own notes and commentaries.\(^{17}\) The voluminous collection is housed in thirty-six *Konvolut*, alphabetised and numbered with a coding scheme for cross-referencing purposes. *Konvolut* is a German term that ‘has a common philological application: it refers to a larger or smaller assemblage – literally, a bundle of manuscripts or printed materials that belongs together’.\(^{18}\) These indexically organised *Konvolut* together with the 1935 and 1939 exposés comprise the incomplete *Arcades Project* in the 1982 German publication. These alphabetised and numbered ‘chunks of quotations’, however, present no definite narratives.\(^{19}\) Their sheer weight and density can be oppressive to any reader and, as Buck-Morss remarks, is capable of ‘plung[ing] their interpreter into an abyss of meanings, threatening her or him with an epistemological despair’.\(^{20}\) Despite this the published project as it stands is not simply a shapeless mass of random materials offered
for readers’ arbitrary interpretation. Buck-Morss writes: ‘To say that the *Passagen-Werk* has no necessary narrative structure so that the fragments can be grouped freely is not at all to suggest that it has no conceptual structure, as if the meaning of the work were itself totally up to the capriciousness of the reader’. She argues that the shape of the collection is very much determined by Benjamin’s political orientation and theoretical concern. Rolf Tiedemann likens Benjamin’s project, as it stands, to an unbuilt house with the exposés and other existing writings, notes, and correspondences serving as the construction plans while the massive archives provide the building materials. In particular, he suggests that asides from the exposés, three essays published in the last decade of his life provide important access points to the project. ‘The Work of Art in the Epoch of Technological Reproducibility’ provides clues to the *Arcade Project’s* methodology; the Baudelaire essay and its first draft offer ‘a miniature model’ of the incomplete work; and his last work ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, which draws heavily from *Konvolut N*, sums up the ‘theory of knowledge’ on which the *Arcades Project* is based. Together with other fragments, Benjamin’s intended methodology can be sketched out. Tiedemann writes, ‘Benjamin’s intention was to bring together theory and materials, quotations and interpretation, in a new constellation compared to contemporary methods of representation’.

While the exact intended form of the *Passagen-Werk* is open to conjecture, its aims and focus remain unambiguous. The project is grounded in *Geschichtsphilosophie*—a term Buck-Morss argues should be more accurately translated as ‘philosophical history’. Its objective is to dispel the ‘myth of automatic historical progress’: the notion that history progresses naturally. The notion of progress, inherited from the Enlightenment, developed into a prevalent ideology that permeated into all areas of thought. The most salient example is the application of Darwinism in a social context to justify inequality as evolutionary progress. By equating natural history with social progress the proponents of social Darwinism naturalise the class system and assert the present as a logical summation of a given narrative rather than as contingencies of factors. The notion of progress appealed equally to Marxist revolutionaries as it did to Social Democrats. Benjamin writes in the ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’:

Social Democratic theory, and even more its practice, have been formed by a conception of progress which did not adhere to reality but made dogmatic claims. Progress as pictured in the minds of Social Democrats was, first of all, the progress of mankind itself […]
Secondly, it was something boundless, in keeping with the infinite perfectibility of mankind. Thirdly, progress was regarded as irresistible, something that automatically pursued a straight or spiral course. Messianic temporality, where the end is continually delayed to some future time, further serves to impose a linear direction onto the concept of time to which history must also conform. Benjamin’s ‘Copernican revolution in historical perception’ is to overturn this relationship between past and present. The Arcades Project is to actualise his Geschichtsphilosophie in doing away with this ideology of progress once and for all. He writes: ‘It may be considered one of the methodological objectives of this work to demonstrate a historical materialism which has annihilated within the idea of progress’. Benjamin’s historical materialism would elude the inevitable autonomous future plan implied by idealism and positivistic historicists’ time-travel into the past. Geschichtsphilosophie is to rescue history from the myth of inescapable destiny and the ideology of progress.

Benjamin draws on various philosophic strands from his previous Produktionskreis into this framework. His earlier works on the German Romantics and his Trauerspiel study in particular provided the groundwork for reviving allegories in modern terms. He notes, ‘The book on the Baroque exposed the seventeenth century to the light of the present day. Here, something analogous must be done for the nineteenth century but with greater distinctness’. Central to this transposition is Benjamin’s extension of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s ur-phenomenon (Urphänomen). Goethe remarks that the biological sciences, unlike the physical and chemical sciences, build their knowledge upon observations of forms. Biological species, for example, are usually identified through their appearances. In this sense biological life is manifested in its physical structures; in other words, their appearance reveals their core. Benjamin furthers this concept of ur-forms by describing them as ‘ideal symbols’ through which the code takes on tangible shapes. Georg Simmel quotes Goethe: ‘The blue of the sky reveals to us the fundamental law of chromatics. One would never search for anything behind the phenomena; they themselves are the theory’. In Simmel’s elaboration significant characteristics of an object are inherent in the object itself since these qualities are manifested materially within the object. He emphasises that this shift is metaphysical rather than epistemological. Benjamin references Simmel in extending the concept of ur-phenomenon from the Trauerspiel study to the Arcades Project.
In studying Simmel’s presentation of Goethe’s concept of truth, I came to see very clearly that my concept of origin in the Trauerspiel book is a rigorous and decisive transposition of this basic Goethean concept from the domain of nature to that of history […] Now, in my work on the arcades I am equally concerned with fathoming an origin. To be specific, I pursue the origin of forms and mutations of the Paris arcades from their beginning to their decline, and I locate this origin in the economic facts.35

The continuity between the German Mourning Plays study and the *Arcades Project* is important to the latter in two respects. First, the uncovering of the origin of nineteenth-century early capitalism as the ‘ur-form of the present’ hinges upon the development of the ur-phenomenon concept.36 Secondly, its focus on materialism, a decisive move away from idealism, allows the project to formulate a materialist history. Benjamin states in *Konvolut N*:

> This research—which deals fundamentally with the expressive character of the earliest industrial products, the earliest industrial architecture, the earliest machines, but also the earliest department stores, advertisements, and so on—thus becomes important for Marxism in two ways. First, it will demonstrate how the milieu in which Marx’s doctrine arose affected that doctrine through its expressive character […]; but, second, it will show in what respects Marxism, too, shares the expressive character of the material products contemporary with it.37

The *Arcades Project* was to achieve this through the method of materialist physiognomy, which aligns precisely with the concept of the ‘ur-form’. As Tiedemann explains, ‘Physiognomics infers the interior from the exterior; it decodes the whole form from the details; it represents the general in the particular’.38 This focus on objects and the concrete enables Benjamin to “read” historical social phenomena as if they were natural historical ones.39

The Parisian arcades presented themselves as an ideal site for Benjamin’s natural historical study on nineteenth-century capitalism and bourgeois culture. The alluring commodities of this time projected captivating phantasmagorias. The subterranean steel and glass-covered walkways were the ‘centres of commerce in luxury items’, ‘a world in miniature’, a collective dreamworld. By the late nineteenth century, the shops inside these arcades and their specialised products were superseded by large-scale department stores and their mass-produced consumer goods.40 Benjamin described the Parisian
 arcades in palaeontological terms, comparing them to the natural geological wonder left by Mount Vesuvius’s eruption—a snapshot of history. In the arcades, out-dated commodities and paraphernalia, visible through the shops’ dusty windows, were preserved perfectly as fossils. Das Passagen-Werk is an archaeological exploration in locating the origin of capitalism by identifying it through the small and insignificant debris found in the new nature of nineteenth-century industrialised urbanism as the material manifestation of history. Unlike public monuments whose display marks time, these ‘trash’, ‘rags’, and ‘refuse’ reside within the unconscious of society.

The Surrealists were the first to place significance on what society discards in the outmoded. The works of early Surrealists, Louis Aragon’s Paysan de Paris (1926) and André Breton’s Nadja (1928) present key texts on these outmoded arcades. In the essay, ‘Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia’, Benjamin praises the Surrealists for ‘perceiv[ing] in the revolutionary energies that appear in the “outmoded”’ and showing readers the ‘profane illumination’ of reality by experiencing it as if it were a dream. He too aimed to ‘carry such profane illuminations into history by acting as an interpreter of the dreams of the nineteenth-century world of things’. Tiedemann argues that ‘the concept of the concrete’ and the dream are the two opposing poles of Benjamin’s project. He writes:

By turning the optics of the dream toward the waking world, one could bring to birth the concealed, latent thoughts slumbering in that world’s womb. Benjamin wanted to proceed similarly with the representation of history, by treating the nineteenth-century world of things as if it were a world of dreamed things.

Like the Surrealists, Benjamin approached the material world of the nineteenth century as if it were a dream, but he would go further; his aim was to banish mythology from history irrevocably. At the end of the Surrealism essay Benjamin criticises the Surrealists for their failure to ‘bind revolt to revolution’ through its ‘pernicious romantic prejudices’ which channelled their energies into esoteric explorations and threatened to trap them into a permanent dream-state. He scrutinised this dreamworld and saw it as nightmare that has served to ‘reactivat[e] the mythical forces’, misdirect the technological potential of nineteenth-century industrialism, and ultimately prevent history from taking place. It is a nightmare that we must wake up from. His own project was to bring about this awakening—induced by the dialectic image. Benjamin asks rhetorically:
Is awakening perhaps the synthesis of dream consciousness (as thesis) and waking consciousness (as antithesis)? Then the moment of awakening would be identical with the ‘now of recognisability’, in which things put on their true—surrealist—face. Thus, in Proust, the importance of staking an entire life on life’s extreme dialectical point of rupture: awakening.  

This awakening is the revolutionary moment when the collective becomes conscious of itself and in the same instant history is freed from the notion of progress. ‘The continuum of history’ is blasted open by the ‘dialectic point’ of awakening. The continuity in historical time is dissolved and in its place are constellations where the past and the present collide ‘to such an extent that the past achieves a “Now” of its “recognisability”’. This is the principal aim of Benjamin’s *Geschichtsphilosophie*. He puts it plainly in a passage in *Konvolut N*:

> It’s not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For a while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent.

The *Arcades Project* is to bring together modern allegories that are the phantasmagorian images of the nineteenth century by the way of montage to allow the dialectic image to emerge. Let us now turn our focus to how this ‘dialectics at a standstill’ is actualised.

### 2.2 Dialectics at a standstill

Tiedemann identifies two distinct forms of dialectical image in the development of *Das Passagen-Werk*. The term ‘dialectical image’ was first used to suggest ‘dream-images or wish-images of the collective’ that connects to an *ur-past*. In particular, Benjamin was thinking of how the products of new technologies in the nineteenth century mimicked archaic forms. *Konvolut F* consists of a quotation by Léon Pierre-Quint: ‘In the beginning, railroad cars look like stagecoaches, autobuses look like omnibuses, electric lights like gas chandeliers, and the last like petroleum lamps.’ This, Benjamin asserted, is indicative of the social collective’s inability to imagine the potential of new nature; as a result it simply recalled the utopian desire harboured in its unconscious. The industrial
revolution was a pivotal point when the rate of change was so great that society reacted by harking back to earlier times as if by intuition. This is articulated in the 1935 exposé:

Corresponding to the form of the new means of production, which in the beginning is still ruled by the form of the old (Marx), are images in the collective consciousness in which the new is permeated with the old. These images are wish images [...] In the dream in which each epoch entertains images of its successor, the later appears wedded to elements of primal history <Urgeschichte> that is, to elements of a classless society. And the experiences of such a society – as stored in the unconscious of the collective – engender, through interpenetration with what is new, the utopia that has left its trace in a thousand configurations of life, from enduring edifices to passing fashions.52

Benjamin further equated the dialectical image with the dream image in section V. This conception was firmly rejected by Theodor Adorno as an ‘undialectical proposition’. Adorno responded in a letter:

If you transpose the dialectical image into consciousness as a ‘dream’, you not only rob the concept of its image [...] but it is also deprived of precisely that crucial and objective liberating potential that would legitimate it in materialist terms [...] the dialectical image is nothing but the way in which the fetish character is perceived in the collective consciousness, then [...] the commodity world might well reveal itself as Utopia, but hardly [...] as a dialectical image of the nineteenth century as Hell.53

Adorno argues that by equating the dialectic image with the collective’s unconscious dream of utopia, Benjamin’s project was to stray from its original aim. Adorno’s criticism gave Benjamin no choice but to abandon his line of argument. Despite this change of direction, or perhaps because of it, the concept of the dialectic image appears strengthened in another crystallisation. He notes in Konvolut N, ‘[t]o thinking belongs the movement as well as the arrest of thoughts. Where thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions – there the dialectic image appears’.54 This was rephrased in ‘The Theses of the History of Philosophy’:

Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes a Messianic cessation of happening, or put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight of the oppressed past.55
In suspending time, albeit momentarily, the past and the present collide forming a constellation that is the ‘recognizability of the Now’. Arriving at this ‘time of the now’ (jetztzeit) is the goal of the materialist historian; and montage is Benjamin’s method to achieve ‘dialectics at a standstill’.

In Konvolut N: ‘On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of progress’ Benjamin notes, ‘Method of this project: literary montage. I needn’t say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible to come into their own by making use of them’. What does Benjamin mean by literary montage? How does he intend to ‘not inventory but allow’ the refuse ‘to come into their own’? Adorno interprets this method of ‘literary montage’ as nothing more than images and quotations succeeding each other without any context, commentary, or framework. He writes, ‘Benjamin’s intention was to eliminate all overt commentary and to have the meanings emerge solely through a shocking montage of the material’. He believed this ‘pure montage’ could not work as the formulation is insufficiently dialectical. His main objection was that ‘the simple juxtaposition of contradictory elements made the dialectical images merely reflect contradictions instead of developing them through dialectical argumentation’. He maintained that a dialectical relationship could not form without theoretical mediation. Unconvinced by Adorno’s interpretation, Tiedemann puts forward an alternative supposition on Benjamin’s intention, one that pivots upon his approach to materials. He writes: ‘Benjamin’s thinking was invariably in dialectical images […] His philosophy progressed imagistically, in that it sought to “read” historical social phenomena as if they were natural historical ones. Images became dialectical for this philosophy because of the historical index of every image’. The material contents as well as contexts of images and objects are critical to the construction of Benjamin’s dialectical image. Their roles directly relate to his materialist physiognomy.

Building on Goethe’s ur-phenomenon, Benjamin’s materialist physiognomy pays close attention to the appearance of things. In Benjamin’s correspondence, he referred to an album where he kept copies of illustrations, prints, and pictures that, to him, capture iconographic moments of the period in question. Amongst the materials filed in the Konvolut were advertisements, newspaper excerpts, journal reviews, and quotations. Whether pictorial or written, these materials are open yet concrete platforms where
viewers or readers can discover truths in the physiognomics of things. As Buck-Morss explains: ‘Whenever form they took, such images were the concrete, “small, particular moments” in which the “total historical event” was to be discovered, the “perceptible ur-phenomenon [Urphänomen] in which the origins of the present could be found’. In this way, the arcades, the world exhibitions, the flâneur, the marketplace, the streets of Paris, the interior, and Haussmann’s Paris in the Arcades Project are modern allegories that encapsulate origins of capitalism, to be unearthed by the materialist historian. The simultaneous openness and concreteness of images and objects provide the agency for Benjamin’s Geschichtsphilosophie. Montage is the enabling device that allows images, objects, categories, and keywords to be arranged in multifarious configurations forming multiple juxtapositions.

Buck-Morss uses the photomontage works of John Heartfield to explain Benjamin’s method. In Heartfield’s poster Deutsche Naturgeschichte (‘German Natural History’) the idea of ‘natural history’ is represented allegorically. The image depicts three German chancellors: Ebert (the first chancellor), Hindenberg (the last president of the Weimar Republic), and Hitler (the incumbent chancellor), in three stages of metamorphosis. The heads of the three figures are transplanted onto bodies of the Death’s Head Moth in three transitional forms: Ebert as a caterpillar, Hindenberg as a chrysalis, and Hitler as the fully-fledged moth. The poster works on three levels that play with the meaning of metamorphosis: the insect’s metamorphosis in nature, the metamorphosis in myths (where humans transform into animals), and the metamorphosis of political figures in history. This simultaneous attribution of multiple meanings and values in the photomontage allows the concepts of nature, myths, and history to exist independently. More importantly, ambiguity allows the gap between signs and referents to remain open. Rather than presenting defined or fixed meanings, this approach allows meanings to remain fluid and in transition. The allegorical image functions dialectically in this space through the constant switching between the language code and its referent. It is in this gap that ‘the medium of thought remains open’. Buck-Morss notes that Heartfield’s photomontages are ‘images for reading’ (Lesebilder) and function as emblems. Similarly, Benjamin created written montage in One Way Street in the form of thought-images (Denkbilder). These modern emblems similarly ‘[rely] on the semantic gap between the terms of nature and history to identify critically’ the paradoxes and contradictions spurred by the myth of ‘history’s natural progresses’.
Benjamin gleaned materials from modern cityscapes: street signs, shop fronts, newspapers, posters, and train rides, for the construction of his *Denkbilder* in *One Way Street*. He singles out montage as a premium method of working that ‘interrupts the context into which it is inserted’ and in doing so, ‘counteracts illusions’.  

Buck-Morss argues that his form of montage is like a Chinese Puzzle whose ‘juxtaposed element […] cohered around a central idea’. Like the Eiffel Tower that is constructed from specifically designed and manufactured parts using a strong yet flexible technique, the images and quotations collected in the *Arcades Project* are the engineered parts to be assembled using commentary as the bolts to hold them in place. At the same time, however, Benjamin is aware that montage is capable of doing exactly the opposite. The panorama is an example where the technique is utilised to create seamless illusory views of history, nature, and geography. Developed from historical paintings, panoramas blossomed in the nineteenth century as a popular form of mass entertainment where the public could be immersed in encompassing views of constructed history. In panoramic images the sign and the referent remain intact. As Buck Morss explains:

> Not the medium of representation, not merely the concreteness of the image or the montage form is crucial, but whether the construction makes visible the gap between sign and referent, or fuses them in a deceptive totality so that the capture merely duplicates the semiotic content of the image instead of setting it into question.

Benjamin values filmic montage for its capacity to produce shock through disjunction, opening up spaces where experience can be transformed. In Tara Forrest’s essay, ‘Experimental Set-ups: Benjamin on History and Film’, she argues that Benjamin’s appreciation of the film medium is its ability to ‘[shake] up our perceptual habits and, in doing so, encourages us to view the world around us, as if for the first time, from a rejuvenated perspective’. Insights can be gained by comparing Benjamin’s conception with the montage practice of the Soviet avant-garde and in particular, the theories of Sergei Eisenstein.

The works of Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, Lev Kuleshov, and Vsevolod Pudovkin provide alternative approaches to classical (or, to use Eisenstein’s term, orthodox) film editing techniques where the focus is invariably on producing continuity in narrative structures. Continuity systems, such as the one developed and used in Hollywood cinema, can be
likened to nineteenth-century panoramas in their projection of seamless illusory space and time. For the Soviet avant-garde, montage and its role were fiercely debated by different ‘schools’. For Kuleshov, montage serves to organise and shape film materials in a way that ‘is inextricably linked to the artist’s world-view and his ideological purpose’. According to Eisenstein, ‘the Kuleshov school’ (referring particularly to Pudovkin) saw montage as ‘linkages of pieces. Into a chain […] Bricks, arranged in series to expound an idea’, a principle Eisenstein rejected. For Eisenstein, ‘montage is conflict’. He writes, ‘As the basis of every art is conflict (an “imagist” transformation of the dialectic principle)’. Montage, then, is fundamentally dialectical in both a Hegelian and a Marxist sense. At the start of his essay, ‘A Dialectic Approach to Film Form’, he writes:

The projection of the dialectic system of things
into the brain
into creating abstractly
into the process of thinking
yields: dialectic methods of thinking;
dialectic materialism—

...PHILOSOPHY

The projection of the same system of things
while creating concretely
while giving form
yields:

...ART

More practically, ‘Montage is an idea that arises from the collision of independent shots—shots even opposite to one another’. In this sense, ‘from the collision of two given factors arises a concept’, one that does not exist in the constituent parts. This emergence model is one of ‘Synthesis—arising from the opposition between thesis and antithesis’. I argue that the key difference between an Eisensteinian montage and Benjamin's conception lies in the concept of synthesis.

In a Benjaminian model, montage opens up a gap between sign and referent; the fragments are not synthesised, but rather must remain unreconciled. In this gap, the dialectical image flashes up, and, for the briefest of moments, time is suspended. This conception of montage entails that parts must remain fragmentary because ‘the shock-like organisation and sensation of film can be undermined when the autonomy of each fragment is subordinated to a piece of a larger picture, or a cog driving a larger narrative’. Even with a basis in conflict, collision, and shock, through montage
disparate elements are drawn together with the audience’s injection of meaning to produce a whole. In Eisenstein’s own words, the practice of montage is achieved, ‘by combining these monstrous incongruities we newly collect the disintegrated event into one whole’.  

In order to more firmly grasp Benjamin’s dialectic image (as compared to filmic or Eisensteinian montage), his studies on Brechtian theatre provide significant instructions. In the essay ‘What is Epic Theatre?’ Benjamin draws parallels between the film medium and the modern form of theatre:

Like the pictures in a film, epic theatre moves in spurts. Its basic form is that of the shock with which the single, well-defined situations of the play collide. The songs, the captions, the lifeless conventions set off one situation from another. This brings about intervals which, if anything, impair the illusion of the audience and paralyze its readiness for empathy. These intervals are reserved for the spectators’ critical reaction.

The audience of epic theatre is not immersed in staged actions or plots. Instead, it stands apart and remains conscious of its status as external observer. The aim is not to elicit empathy from this audience, but rather, to encourage clear rational thinking. This is achieved, as Caygill points out, where ‘the untragic hero […] presents a number of counterfactual possibilities for the audience to weigh up and judge’. Forrest outlines this process of defamiliarisation (Verfremdung or Verfremdungseffekt) in Brechtian theatre:

Brecht argues that the ‘radical separation of the elements’ (Brecht ‘The Modern Theatre’ 37) characteristic of epic theatre cultivates a spectator who is actively encouraged to participate in the meaning-making process which is generated, but not circumscribed directly by, the various situations that are presented by the play. Within this schema, the audience retains a critical distance from the action on stage. The spectator is not drawn passively (via processes of character identification) into a fictional world, but is situated outside as an observer who brings his or her critical faculties to bear on the scenarios presented by the play.

This participatory audience takes on the role of collaborators in the production of meaning within the apparatus of epic theatre. Benjamin further maintains, ‘the art of the epic theatre consists of producing astonishment rather than empathy [instead] of identifying with the characters, the audience should be educated to be astonished at the circumstances under which they function’.
or estranged by the staged actions of the play. Benjamin describes this process in ‘The Author as Producer’:

Epic theatre does not reproduce conditions; rather it discloses, it uncovers them. This uncovering of the conditions is effected by interrupting the dramatic processes; but such interruption does not act as a stimulant; it has an organizing function. It brings the action to a standstill in mid-course and thereby compels the spectator to take up a position towards the action.\textsuperscript{88}

When interruption defamiliarises a circumstance, an action, or a gesture, montage ‘becomes a human event’.\textsuperscript{89} Montage in epic theatre is achieved through \textit{verfremdung} of familiar circumstances in their re-staging. Positioned at a critical distance, the audience’s experience of shock and astonishment transforms into moments of recognition. This distance is crucial for the dialectic image.

For Benjamin’s \textit{Arcades Project}, montage is the technique that momentarily brings captured allegorical fragments (from images and objects) together into constellations, creating the conditions capable of precipitating dialectics at a standstill. Like filmic montage, shock is central to this device; however, unlike cinema, the preservation of the gaps between fragments is critical in Benjamin’s model. In addition to the strategies of epic theatre where defamiliarisation replaces immersion, I put forward two conditions that augment Benjamin’s engagement with materials in his method of montage: distraction, and a return to tactility. Both are discussed in his ‘Work of Art in the Epoch of Technical Reproducibility’ essay in relation to new forms of art—technical organisation of modern experience. Benjamin writes, ‘Reception in a state of distraction, which is increasing noticeably in all fields of art and is symptomatic of profound changes in apperception, finds in the film its true means of exercise’.\textsuperscript{90} Caygill clarifies that ‘by “distracted” Benjamin does not mean a lack of attention, but rather a different, more flexible mode of perception. This form of perception is a response to the effects of the technological transformation of space and time’.\textsuperscript{91} At the end of the essay, architecture is exemplified as the ‘speculative site’\textsuperscript{92} that is ‘appropriated by use and by perception—or rather by touch and by sight’\textsuperscript{93}. Benjamin writes:

\begin{displayquote}
Tactile appropriation is accomplished not so much by attention as by habit […] For the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at their turning points of history cannot be solved by optical means, that is by contemplation, alone. They are mastered gradually by habit, under the guidance of tactile appropriation.\textsuperscript{94}
\end{displayquote}
From this exploration into a Benjaminian montage, I tentatively sketch out a framework where defamiliarisation replaces immersion, distraction is favoured over contemplation, and tactility is combined with optics. Speculating on such a model of materialist aesthetics in relation to Benjamin’s historiography Andrew Benjamin and Charles Rice write, ‘Benjamin’s argument [...] that perception is both historical and inextricably bound up with the development of the techniques of perception, is a claim that draws together experience, history and the material presence of objects’. Following this cue, I take an expansive route to investigate the aesthetic relationship between objects, experience, and history, giving equal importance to contexts (or circumstances) of the artwork, to the audience’s mode of perception, and to our exteroception senses. I defer an examination of Benjamin’s use of images, specifically, in the construction Denkbilder, to the succeeding chapters in order to expand the Benjaminian method of montage by turning the attention to the physical montage of material objects.

2.3 Physisgnomics of the thingworld

The Arcades Project is built on a solid relationship with material objects based on Goethe’s concept of ur-phenomenon in the development of materialist physiognomics. Here, material objects (in the forms of industrial products, architecture, and artefacts) are invested with attention on their physical appearances and material qualities in order to find clues pertaining to past and present. Speaking of Benjamin, Adorno writes:

His [philosophy] is driven not merely to awaken congealed life in petrified objects—as in allegory—but also to scrutinize living things so that they present themselves as being ancient, ‘ur-historical’ and abruptly release their significance. Philosophy appropriates the fetishization of commodities for itself: everything must be metamorphized into a thin thing in order to break the catastrophic spell of things.

For Benjamin, material objects are not simply commodities but have lives of their own. The collector is receptive to this. He or she relates to objects in a way that ‘does not emphasise their functional, utilitarian value—that is their usefulness—but studies and loves them as the scene, the stage of their fate’. Rather than a fetishistic preoccupation, this ‘mode of working’ exemplifies a complete integration between thinking and material practice. Material culture plays a significant role in Benjamin’s speculative recasting of
the Kantian concept of experience. Buck-Morss writes: ‘he believed the meaning which lay within objects included their history most decisively and that the ‘quasi-magical cognitive attitude toward historical matter remained basic to Benjamin’s understanding of materialism’. How does this relationship between objects, history, and experience manifest?

In an article written for the weblog, 3 Quarks Daily, Tom Jacobs explores the potency of objects in dialectical relationships beginning with his visit to the New York Historical Society. There he encountered a display consisting of a random array of strayed objects collected after the ‘September 11th’ aftermath. His reaction surprised him:

Unexpectedly, and even against my better judgment, I found myself overwhelmed by a wash of powerful and contradictory feelings: sadness, anger, nationalism, and perhaps most of all: a deeply-felt connection to a moment in history and to the lives lost in the event (and to one in particular). [...] In the presence of this display, material objects turned unsettlingly fluid, potent, and peculiar. Twisted metal was transformed into a startlingly beautiful artefact evoking an incoherent mixture of thought and feeling. A pack of cigarettes became excessively and strangely resonant, overdetermined, both sacred and completely mundane.

This experience informs Jacobs’ inquiry where he questions the abstraction of things and of our relationships to things formulated in Marxist historical materialism. He asks: ‘But what if our relationships to things are not abstract, not commodities, but rather fully material, sensuous, erotic, and aesthetic things of intense fascination? And more specifically, how does our relationship to these types of things shape our understanding of the past?’

He approaches these questions by quoting a key scene from Ralph Ellison’s novel, Invisible Man. Here, the narrator chances upon an assortment of possessions laid casually on the pavement. Nearby, their owners, an elderly couple, are being evicted. He is confronted by the eclectic collection of personal affects amassed over a lifetime, each with its past and present. Like Jacobs, the ‘invisible man’ is overcome by a powerful flood of images, memories, and emotions:

I turned and stared again at the jumble, no longer looking at what was before my eyes, but inwardly-outwardly, around a corner into the dark, far-away-and-long-ago, not so much of my own memory as of remembered words, of linked verbal echoes, images, heard even when not listening at home. And it was as though I myself was being dispossessed of some painful yet previous thing which I could not bear to lose [...] And with this sense of dispossession came a pang of vague
re cognition: this junk, these shabby chairs, these heavy, old-fashioned pressing irons, zinc wash tubs with dented bottoms—all throbbed within me with more meaning that there should have been.¹⁰³

Jacobs identifies this moment definitively as Benjamin’s dialectical image. Here, dialectic at a standstill is evoked through encounter with a physical montage of material objects in a manner similar to a Proustian moment of recognition. This echoes Benjamin’s materialism in its emphasis on the experiences of objects. More significantly, the embodiment of history within objects underlies Benjamin’s Geschichtsphilosophie. Tiedemann writes: “The prolegomena to a materialist physiognomics that can be gleaned from the Passagen-Werk counts among Benjamin’s most prodigious conceptions. It is the programmatic harbinger of that aesthetic theory which Marxism has not been able to develop to this day.”¹⁰⁴

Evidence of this materialist physiognomics can be found in Benjamin’s own archives. Erdmut Wizisla of the Walter Benjamin Archives at the Academy of Arts in Berlin describes these archives as ‘consist[ing] of images, texts, signs, things that one can see and touch’, and that there are ‘points at which topicality flashes up, places that preserve the idiosyncratic registrations of an author; subjective, full of gaps, unofficial.’¹⁰⁵ He further notes:

Benjamin’s mode of working is marked by the techniques of archiving, collection, and constructing. Excerpts, transpositions, cuttings-out, montaging, sticking, cataloguing and sorting appear to him to be true activities of an author. His inspiration is inflamed by the richness of materials. Images, documents, and perceptions reveal their secrets to the look that is thorough enough.¹⁰⁶

In extending his ‘mode of working’, I pursue this line of enquiry into the relationship between objects and experience by first exploring the Wunderkammer as a physical montage of objects, followed by analyses of artworks that similarly make use of object collections.

Barbara Maria Stafford’s analysis of the Wunderkammer in ‘Revealing Technologies/Magical Domain’ has significance when considering the Arcades Project. Stafford argues these ‘overflowing rooms (Kunstkammern, Wunderkammern) and teeming cabinets (Kabinettschränke, Kunstschränke, Wunderkabinette, Wunderschränke)’ are instruments that aid in mapping the expanding world and its inhabitants’ place within. She compares the
Wunderkammer to optical instruments that connected humans to both the larger cosmos and the microscopic universe. She writes:

Putting distant things in contact with one another in order to make connections obliges the collector’s five senses to converge in a kind of synesthesia. The sensory heightening of palpable objects through their forced proximity in an enveloping cabinet has a remarkable parallel in the spatial compression achieved by optical instruments.¹⁰⁷

Correspondingly, Eiland and McLaughlin’s description of Benjamin’s incomplete project is analogous to a Wunderkammer in its aim:

to grasp such diverse material under the general category of Urgeschichte, signifying the ‘primal history’ of the nineteenth century. This was something that could be realised only indirectly, through ‘cunning’: it was not the great men and celebrated events of traditional historiography but rather the ‘refuse’ and ‘detritus’ of history, the half-concealed, variegated traces of the daily life of the ‘collective’, that was to be the object of study, and with the aid of methods of the nineteenth-century collector of antiquities and curiosities, or indeed to the methods of the nineteenth-century ragpicker, than to those of the modern historian.¹⁰⁸

Wunderkammer housed vast collections of exotic and marvellous objects, both naturally occurring specimens and human-made artefacts. Fuelled by the spirits of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, and made possible by European exploration, trade, and colonisation, these eclectic assortments of things would later provide the material basis for many modern museums. From the sixteenth century onwards and for the following three centuries, these collected objects served to both satisfy and provoke the quest for knowledge. The well-known illustration of a sixteenth-century Wunderkammer, Ferrante Imperato’s Dell’Historia Naturale, shows Stafford’s spatial compression in the organisation of natural objects (Plate 2.1). In the spacious room a large taxidermied crocodile dominates the centre of the arched ceiling. Fanning out in all directions from its body are ornate shells, crustaceans, decapods, molluscs, echinoderms, fish, lizards, amphibians, and other fossilised remains of fantastic creatures laid out in a grid-like pattern. Bookcases packed with voluminous books stand on the right-hand side of the room. Atop are rocks, minerals, and corals. An elegant tree branch and a sawfish rostrum hang off the higher shelves. Opposite are cabinets adorned with seashells, seastars, tiny crabs, and feathers. Large birds preserved in various stern poses stand proudly on the top shelves. Set in some of the alcoves are miniature cabinets housing minerals, corals, and other precious gems. The frontispiece, Musei Wormiani Historia,
similarly shows a seventeenth-century collection of wondrous and curious objects (Plate 2.1). In this smaller room, seven birds, four fish, a bear, and a canoe hang from the ceiling’s rafters. On the left wall are two impressively large turtle shells surrounded by a sawfish rostrum, a penguin, an iguana, a small armadillo, a Komodo dragon, snakeskin of a python, a monkey, and other curious specimens. On the right-hand wall, horns, antlers, and skulls hang between the windows. High on the centre wall are assortments of arrows, swords, and blades. On the lower shelves, human-made artefacts and natural objects mingle; amongst these are statues, statuettes, clothing, trinkets, shells, and sea creatures. Below, collected objects sorted into labelled boxes sit beside one another. These organisational schemes in part follow a material physiognomic logic where shapes, sizes, colours, and general appearances form the basis of the objects’ groupings. The spatial arrangement of a collection serves to deliver narratives that underlie the collector’s enterprise. Frances Terpak’s description of the illustrated eighteenth-century de Pauli family collection offers such an example:

In the cabinet itself, natural and man-made objects jostle for the viewer’s attention. Organized disarray abounds: crucifixes, votive hands, portrait miniatures, small bronzes, oriental daggers, carved coconut shells, a glass prism, a cylindrical mirror, and a narwhal horn sit side by side. A few of the cabinet’s drawers stand open, revealing antique coins and gems. Stationed just a few steps from the dispensing pharmacy, the de Paulis’ storeroom and, especially, their cabinet illustrated the family’s learning, medical expertise, and worldly success.¹⁰⁹ In this case the narrative speaks of the patron’s worldly position. Terpak cites other collections such as that of Levinus Vincent in eighteenth-century Netherlands, whose display was designed to exalt the beauty of God’s creation and to awaken in its visitors the mysteries of the cosmos. Still, for other contemporary collectors such as Albert Seba, the pursuit of knowledge underlay both the selection of objects and their cataloguing. Earlier in 1565, Samuel Quiccheberg, advisor to Albrecht V of Bavaria and curator of his collection,¹¹⁰ published a treatise, Inscriptiones vel tituli Theatri Amplissimi, concerning the organisational principles of such collections.¹¹¹ In this instructive manual he developed the idea of Kunstkammer as a ‘theatre of the universe’¹¹² that categorises things into classis (classes) and inscriptiones (or sub-categories). Like other classification frameworks, Quiccheberg’s schema is guided by a central narrative that affirms a belief system. It can likewise be argued that the classification systems developed and used by
early museums of the nineteenth century continued to project prevalent narratives of the time.

My purpose here is not concerned with the nature of these narratives, but the experience of material objects embedded within. In a Benjaminian constellation the thread that ties disparate elements together emerges from the object-groupings rather than from a pre-existing framework. It is also important to draw a distinction between the organisational strategies used in a Wunderkammer and those in a museum. The directive that underlies the categorisation of objects in a Wunderkammer tends to be expressive (for example, for the glorification of God’s creation) rather than assertive (in the demonstration of scientific knowledge, for instance). The Wunderkammer schema provides a precondition for montage of objects, which allows seemingly unrelated objects to sit side-by-side in a ‘spatial compression’, to create previously unseen connections. This method continues to have validity and legitimacy in the way we experience material objects. This is particularly useful when examining how this exploratory model transforms into different experimental arrangements of objects as artworks.

Like curators of Wunderkammern, artists work with objects in a non-determinant way, paying utmost attention to the materiality of objects. In what follows, I examine a number of assemblage works beginning with an analysis of Joseph Cornell’s practice. The rationale for choosing to look at Cornell is twofold. First, by regarding his methodology as that of an artist-as-collector, I examine things with reference to Jane Bennett’s ‘call of things’: a sensitivity towards the materiality of physical objects. Secondly, Cornell’s pursuit to create ‘museums without walls’ in his works is instructive for speculating on the Arcades Project. By focusing on materiality in the processes of collecting, assembly, and experience, this analysis suggests alternative ways of thinking about materials and experience in relation to Benjamin’s Geschichtsphilosophie. I further this investigation by considering the experience of Sarah Sze’s assemblage installations, the process of assembly using alternative taxonomical and classification logics in Mark Dion’s practice, and the poetic interruptions created in Sarah Walko’s collection of found objects in the last section of this chapter. I conclude with an analysis of two of my own works to conceptualise possible Benjaminian models of montage in artistic practice.
Of particular interest to my investigation is artists’ relationships with ordinary, unremarkable everyday objects. In exploring montage of physical objects, Jane Bennett’s vital materialism and her exploration of the ‘call of things’ provides a significant basis from which we can consider materiality. In brief, Bennett’s project advocates equal ontological status for non-living and living things. In *Vibrant Matter: a Political Ecology of Things*, she draws from analyses of actual incidents to illustrate vitality (or ‘thing-power’) in all matter: metal, fatty acids, worms, electricity. In this political ecology of things, no separation exists between animate and inanimate objects; all things play a part in an interconnected network that precipitates into events. She writes, ‘My aim […] is to theorize a vitality intrinsic to materiality as such, and to detach materiality from the figures of passive, mechanistic, or divinely infused substance’. Matter has agency to affect. In ‘Power of the Hoards: Future Notes on Material Agency’, she examines the nature of this materiality more precisely by looking at the practice of hoarders. She writes, ‘Hoarding is of interest to me because it is one site where the appearance of the call of things seems particularly insistent, and I’ve turned to hoarders for help in the admittedly paradoxical task of trying to enunciate the nonlinguistic expressivity of things’. Using Henri Bergson’s definition of perception as a subtractive process (that is screening out what is irrelevant to our immediate needs) Bennett speculates that hoarders are poor at this perceptual process and therefore excel at responding to the call of things. ‘Normal perception is biased toward instrumentality rather than vibrancy, simplification rather than subtle reception’. In her schema, a hoarder is at the extreme end of a spectrum that spells: ‘owner, connoisseur, collector, archivist, pack-rat, “chronically disorganized”’, a list that describes a range of human perception in their relationships with things. Artists, it can be argued, through their practices exercise a receptivity to the call of non-human and non-living things. Bennett also speculates on this commonality between hoarders and artists; she proposes:

Let’s at least consider the possibility that the person who hoards and the artist who creates share something of a perceptual comportment, one unusually aware of or susceptible to the enchantment-powers of things. Hoarders and artists hear more of the call of things—to conjoin with them, play with them, respond to them.

Joseph Cornell, a fervent collector, was certainly ‘susceptible to the enchanting powers of things’. Known for his assemblages: shadow boxes, two and three-dimensional
collages, book-objects, and film works, Cornell collected materials from a large variety of sources including museums, libraries, archives, department stores, ‘five-and-dime stores’, second-hand stores, antique shops, Asian shops, taxidermy shops, pharmacies, newspapers and magazines. He stored his growing collection in a double-storey house on Utopia Parkway in Flushing, Queens, where he lived with his mother and brother. Lynda Roscoe Hartigan describes this collection at the time of his death in 1972:

‘Some three thousand books and magazines, hundreds of record albums, thousands of pieces of paper comprising his diaries and correspondence, and truly uncountable numbers of two- and three-dimensional ephemera all coexisted in his modest house—from cellar studio to attic, on shelves and table tops, along the floors and stairs.’

Cornell began collecting in the 1920s, a decade before he made his first artwork when he explored his expanding world, cultivated new interests, and made new discoveries. His diary entries from the 1940s onwards record his ‘wanderlust’ around Manhattan in a state he called ‘métaphysique d’éphéméra’, a term borrowed from Gérard de Nerval. Cornell’s finely-tuned receptivity to objects, spaces, and environments is clear in his detailed descriptions of his experiences. Of his outing on July 15, 1941, he writes:

‘Into the city and all the way up to the Museum of the American Indian to find it closed! Compensation in the buoyant feeling aroused by the buildings of the Geographic Society in their quiet uptown setting. An abstract feeling of geography and voyaging I have thought about before of getting into objects, like the Compass Set with map. A reminder of earliest school-book days when the world was divided up into irregular masses of bright colours, with vignettes of the pictorial world scattered, like toy picture-blocks. An Alaskan totem pole in the front of the museum prior to installation, longer than and as round as a telephone pole.’

On this trip, he continued onto the Museum of Natural History where he marvelled at ‘the breath-taking collection of birds’ nest in their original condition complete and replete with eggs’, exclaiming ‘the sweetness and ingenuity of the smaller ones’; in the bookshop he found ‘a mottled blue and green coiled shell, also a shiny white and pink one’ irresistible; venturing into the Hayden Planetarium—a ‘moving experience’; there, he noted ‘the astronomical paraphernalia: charts, transparencies, broken meteors, and especially compass curios are intriguing’. Entries such as these articulate Cornell’s connection to objects and spaces, often crystallising into moments of what he later termed, témoignages (or testimonials). Mary Ann Caws describes these as ‘witnesses to a condition of sudden grace that Cornell was fond of seeing everywhere’.
entries a star is placed besides these témoignages: ‘★…windblown ship on water warm
overflowing smile …’,129 ‘★ Stars exceptionally resplendent - SICKLE bring and clear
overhead midnight’130, ‘★ another rose of orange sunset’,131 and ‘★ icy roads’.132 Other
starred items describe subtle moods, fleeting sensations, and elusive feelings. Caws
writes, ‘Convinced as he is that capturing the memory in words will somehow give it
objective status’ Cornell’s diaries and notes are filled with ‘momentary passions […]
made into objects’133

Like his attempt to make manifest these témoignages through writing, his practice strived
to capture the at once palpable and evasive moments in object form. In Cabinet of
Natural Philosophy (Object) (1934, 1936–40) the bottle labelled ‘sol solaire’ is filled with
bright yellow powder, ‘Mirage’ contains a blue illustration of a seated dog, and ‘Analyse
spectral de la grenouilles dans les temps calmes’ is replete with an emerald green
substance (Plate 2.2). In this way the artist substantiates impermanent feelings and
sensations as tangible material objects. Cornell’s assemblages hinge upon the materiality
of their components: cut glass cubes in Taglioni’s Jewel Casket (1940), thimbles in Beehive
(Thimble Forest) (1943–8), rings and iron filing in Untitled (Sand Box) (c.1944), paper
doilies and small plastic lobsters in A Pantry Buffet (for Jacques Offenbach) (1942) (Plate 2.2).
Comparing his own boxes to those of Cornell, Robert Rauschenberg said, ‘A big
difference in our attitudes is that I dragged ordinary materials into the art world for a
direct confrontation, and I felt Corne
ll incorporated highly select materials to celebrate
their rarification’.134 This rarification may describe the affects of estranged objects. Like
Benjamin’s materials collected for Das Passagen-Werk, Cornell’s use of discarded objects
is deliberate.135 Their intentions differ, but both practices align with the Surrealists’
interests in the outmoded.136 Surrealism exposes the uncanny through the estrangement
of objects. Cornell’s objects recall Adorno’s comment on Benjamin that ‘He insisted on
looking so close at all things that they became alien. And as alien they revealed their
secrets’.137 Outmoded or discarded objects are estranged objects alienated from their
temporal contexts. Having shed their use-values, objects expose their materiality.
Cornell’s Untitled (Pharmacy) (1943) offers a selection of objects: a cooper spring coil, a
shell, a glass marble, a downy feather, blue fluid, a section of a map and so on in small
corked and glass-stoppered bottles, pleasingly arranged in a grid inside a cabinet (Plate
2.3). In Petit Musée (1947) and Museum (1944) ordinary materials are sealed in cloth-
bound vials held in place inside wooden boxes with hinged lids (Plate 2.3). The
assembly and display methods in Cornell’s box constructions further displace the objects from their original contexts, and in doing so enhance their enigmatic materiality. Moreover, Cornell’s materials are ordinary, mass-produced products. If he was celebrating these objects, as Rauschenberg suggests, he would be celebrating the qualities emanating from their common, cheap, and mass-produced origin. Cornell writes excitedly in the diary entry on December 18, 1954 of the ‘wonderful world with finds in the basement of new Grant’s - clown Xmas tree ornaments - also greenish-blue cello - seraphim, and bird [...]—thinking of a “parrot for Scarlatti” inspired by this dazzle of tinselled color— its richness and the sprit of shopping in bright surroundings’. In Cornell’s works, these objects transmogrify ephemerality into relative permanence. The profane qualities of these materials become sacred in the process of rarification.

Selected components in Cornell’s works coalesce around a thematic informed by a conceptual structure. He took cue from Stéphane Mallarmé’s declaration that ‘a poem is a mystery for which the reader must seek the key’ in using a ‘key picture’ (sometimes in the form of texts) to bring an internal coherence to the collection of objects and provide a point of access for the audience’s exploration. The Crystal Cage (portrait of Berenice) (1934-67) is a dossier of materials that presents a portrait of Berenice, an imaginary character (Plate 2.4). The work consists of unmouted clippings, cuttings, and scraps kept in a wooden briefcase. The key in this work is an accompanying short story written by Cornell in the style of a report on the ‘unearthed’ materials that allude to Berenice’s adventures. This text leads the viewer into interacting with the collected imagery and fragments in imagining her life. Physical interactivity, or more accurately, participation is inherent in Cornell’s dossier works and portable chest collections such as Untitled (The Life of Ludwig II of Bavaria) (1941-52) (Plate 2.4). These works require the viewer to take out the content, peruse the materials, and arrange them as he or she sees fit. This process encourages the audience to ponder the relationships and significance between components. Likewise, his museum cabinet pieces, often presented with their lids open, beckon viewers to take out the vials, examine them closely, compare them, or even rearrange them. Cornell kept these explorations open-ended by selecting objects that bear tangential relationships, encouraging his audience to interact with the concepts, content, and allusions of the works. The artist came to see his works (and his processes) as museums of sorts where his viewers may freely make associations between
the elements in the works, gaining ‘direct access to the projects browsing through them as if through a Victorian album, a bookstall, or even a second hand store’.143

Cornell’s fluid acts of browsing, collecting, ordering, and making provide opportunities for tangential relationships between elements to form, eventually culminating in scrapbooks, written reports, typed documents, informal surveys, and working models. Exploration is an encompassing term Cornell used to describe these activities. He associated [...] the literal “sweepings” from his studio floor with “all the rich cross-currents ramifications”.144 Using receptacles like folders, files, envelopes, paper bags, boxes, and tins to house his ever-expanding collection of debris, discarded objects, and ephemera, his ordering of the materials did not follow universally agreed logics. Taxonomic grouping presents a practical solution for sorting physical objects (such as shells, plastic shells, pegs, boxes). In the main, Cornell’s own interests served to filter and collate the diverse materials. Bennett argues that what distinguishes hoarders’ compulsive collecting from artists with collecting compulsion is the former’s relationality to things that is neither utilitarian nor aesthetic. An artist’s collection on the other hand is, in general, brought together by aesthetic affect. As Benjamin did for Das Passagen-Werk, Cornell kept materials in files and dossiers, keeping extensive notes on the developing portfolios. The accretion of notes, images, texts, and scraps gave rise to random mingling and free associations, allowing materials to crystallise into constellations. Arranged in an exploratory organisation materials coalesce around a central thematic or poetic. In this way, objects within Cornell’s works ‘offered the tantalizing prospect of keeping the “cross-current in flux”’.145

This fluidity between exploration and constellation underlies Cornell’s practice as he formulated new methods of working with his collected objects.146 His conception of Garden Centre 1944 (GC44) (1944–70) as ‘a museum without walls’ illustrates one such experimentation (Plate 2.5).147 The ambitious project was set out as a portfolio or album of sorts inspired by his experiences of working at a Bayside garden centre in 1944. In an attempt to retain, replicate or resurrect ‘The nursery’s Arcadian atmosphere, combined with an avalanche of impressions and dreams inspired by his bicycle rides along streets, through meadows, and by the water’, he conceived of a ‘journal album’ or a ‘journey album’ that evokes a contemplative and dreamy reflection on nature.148 He began with Alain-Fournier’s Le Grand Meaulnes (The Wanderer) (1912) as the key to bring together
diverse materials. Dividing the project into seven associated themes *GC44* took on the form of a visual novel. He envisaged each chapter as a portfolio containing imagery grouped around its central theme of exploration. Using a similar method to that of *Portrait of Ondine* (1940), the collected images are presented like plates mounted on heavy watercolour paper (Plate 2.5). Images include Japanese prints, medieval illuminated manuscripts, historical photographs, contemporary magazine cuttings, and quotes. The ambitious nature and complexity of the project made it difficult for Cornell to complete. Some working notes indicated that Cornell wanted to supply “experiences” via sets of numbers (of the pages, to be looked at in a given order) at the same time as the plates are loose,\(^\text{149}\) the reader can also “enter” the “House on the Hill: via the plates of his own choosing”.\(^\text{150}\) In other notes he pondered whether to arrange the group of images with notes or commentary, or whether perhaps the visual images may be sufficient to convey experiences without written text or further supplement.

The act of browsing is therefore central not only in the production process of images but also in their reception. His unrealised *An updated proposal for an installation* outlines an ambitious sketch for ‘a three-dimensional, multisensory “exploration” complete with a series of boots à la Coney Island, plans for seating, music, and poetry readings’ immersing the visitors in the experience.\(^\text{151}\) Cornell’s aim was to allow the audience to project their own experiences and thoughts, build relationships, establish connections between parts, and form unique interpretation of the work. He even considered the possibility of the ‘Utopia house [becoming] a home museum and/or experimental workshop’.\(^\text{152}\) His intention was utopian, strongly advocating for artists and society to make use of the communication and education capacity of art. Cornell believed that wonders, miniature worlds, and aspects of realities and dreams embodied by his works would inspire others to likewise take the time to explore the world about them, to “pursue beauty and knowledge in the “warp and woof of daily life”, just as he had”.\(^\text{153}\) He saw the acts of observation, exploration, browsing, and experimentation as essential in learning and creative practice. Hartigan’s description of Cornell’s practice as ‘a constellation of works in various state of readiness’ continues to recall to Benjamin’s philosophical history as well as *Das Passagen-Werk*.\(^\text{154}\)
2.4 The world of things

Building on the analysis of Cornell’s practice, I further consider how objects function in artworks by examining the practices of three contemporary artists: Sarah Sze, Mark Dion and Sarah Walko. The works of these artists are materially, conceptually, and contextually rich. My analyses focus specifically on how things operate within the artworks and in their production processes. How do these artists respond to the ‘call of things’? How do they allow objects to reveal their secrets? Bennett’s three key observations of ‘slowness’, ‘porosity and contagion’, and of ‘inorganic sympathy’, provide an avenue for teasing out the affects of objects in these works. By delving deeper into montage of objects, I speculate on different permutations that may arise from Benjamin’s montage principles. Bennett speaks of her vital materialist’s task of finding ‘ways of talking that select for the active powers of things and expose a material agency in which human perception and conceptualization participate but do not exhaust’. While she suggests poetry as one such site of investigation, here I propose art as an equally valid path for exploring objects in their potential to create constellations. This chapter concludes with analyses of two of my own works. Thinking specifically from the perspective of artistic practice, these closing examinations serves as a way to conceptualise feasible models that work meaningfully with objects and fragments.

Fragments and objects compose Sarah Sze’s installations that present simultaneous macroscopic and microscopic worlds. Her use of architectural spaces, play with perspective (particularly the effect of foreshortening with deliberate exclusion of referential scales), engagement with drawing practice, and articulation of gestures present the audience with an enveloping and wondrous experience. Visitors encounter an array of everyday materials at all scales: bottle caps, paper clips, pot plants, push-pins, matches, aluminium ladders, plastic spoons, screws, retractable measuring tapes, electric fans, desk lamps, bottles, venetian blinds, cut paper, wires, funnels, light globes, cotton buds, clamps, towels, and folding chairs. Some pieces incorporate custom-cut shapes of polystyrene, foams, and wood. As if carried up by their own vital forces the objects fuse into an artful hoarde that exists on a fractal scale where one thing mimics another while delicately connected; these things are poised on the verge of mutation and transformation. In these works, things are at once alive and inanimate, moving and still, forming and disintegrating. Sze began exploring this mode of working with materials
during her graduate year at the School of Visual Arts, New York.\textsuperscript{157} She reports two instances when she felt compelled to respond materially to the particular moment in time:

I was going to make a sculpture on the floor out of materials from the grocery store and had to take the stairs because the elevator was broken. I had this idea of laying down a grain of rice on each stair—one on the first, two on the second, and so on - so you got this very gradual progression up the nine stories […] And with the second thing I did, there was a woman who had left the program and you could use her empty studio space for an installation, I took all this eraser dust - pencil eraser, so it was a dirty pink—and dusted the entire room and then took out all her furniture.\textsuperscript{158}

Encouraged by her experiences she continued to experiment with materials in an intuitive way. For the piece \emph{Untitled (Soho Annual)} (1996), exhibited at the \emph{Soho Annual} in New York, she created countless objects by sculpting white toilet paper (Plate 2.6). These artefacts were then laid out on available surfaces in a hallway. For an installation in her studio, \emph{Untitled (Studio)} (1996) she added store-bought objects: Saltine crackers, foil-wrapped chocolates, fruit loops, peanut butter, chewing gum, mints, chocolate truffles; tools and utensils found in a studio: slide holders, slide boxes, push pins, pens, razor blades, charcoal pencils; and other things: keys, hair-pins, shoes, wires, and so on (Plate 2.6). On these multiple grid-arrangements of things rose delicate and haphazard structures built using toothpicks and glue. These wavering towers stretched above the tiles of grouped objects towards the corner wall where one climbed up to the ceiling.

Aggregation of objects acquires dynamism and energy in her works through the rhythm of the compositions. \emph{Capricious Invention of Prisons} (1999) installed at the Venice Biennale exemplifies this sense of aliveness, as if the objects’ vital forces were unleashed by the artist’s arrangement (Plate 2.7). Imbued with a wildness that is reminiscent of metal in the cyberpunk film \emph{Tetsuo} (1989) but with a lightness of a child’s fantasy of her possessions being alive while she sleeps, the elements twist, turn, bounce, and dance across the luminously white exhibition space from a window at one end to a small storage enclosure at the other end. Sze describes the piece:

\[T]\e idea for the Venice space was that the piece sped up and slowed down and then accumulated around lights […] it also had this feeling of lifting and flying across the space that was in flux […] \[T]\e piece had a kind of tail that went into the canal […] and when the boats went by it would move and gently tap the glass.\textsuperscript{159}
In their placement and arrangement, Sze creates associations and tensions between the assembled objects, between their materiality and their human-endowed meanings, between their physicality and the space within which they are situated. She works with a sense of intuition that is derived from ‘a conversation about what a material can and wants to do’. In these ways her practice is deeply rooted in the materiality of things. She explains that for her the process and experience are ‘really more about visual pleasure. And people’s attraction to things—there’s something about objects becoming attractive and that sense that it’s hard to figure out why you want to be with them or look at them or touch them’. Bennett’s concept of ‘porosity and contagion’ is useful here in order to articulate this attraction. She writes: ‘It is in the nature of bodies, Spinoza said, to be susceptible to infusion / invasion / collaboration by or with other bodies. Any extant contour or boundary of entithood is always subject to change; bodies are essentially intercorporeal.’ Within Sze’s works, objects, things, and bodies are porous and contagious. When situated within her works this ‘intercorporeality’ of the viewer’s body allows objects to infuse and permeate, forming of a continuum that integrates all bodies with the surrounding space. For a moment, the audience experiences an aesthetic pleasure derived from the dissolution of boundaries and fusion with materiality. Here lies the compelling appeal of these complex object-montages.

Objects play an equally collaborative role with human agency in Mark Dion’s practice whose focus falls on the relationship between material culture and human experiences. Taking existing narratives presented by science, history, and politics as his departure points, Dion re-enacts aspects of these scenarios in his own context, presenting his own accounts. Speaking about his engagement with ‘pre-Enlightenment traditions of organising nature, he says, ‘I’m trying to imagine how things could have been different, to follow branches on the tree of knowledge that died of dry rot’. In his works, the arrangement of material objects is integrated with the narrative context that is being explored or challenged. The form of a rubbish pile in Concrete Jungle (1992), for example, speaks of the entwinement of human consumer culture and the lives of urbanised non-human animals (Plate 2.8). Mingled amongst the semi-organised refuse in upturned bins, overfilled bags, and rubbish heaps are once-living, taxidermic ‘r-selected’ species: crows, pigeons, cats, rabbits, raccoons and the like. The life-size diorama offers a view of an unromantic urban ecology where the focus shifts from humans to their co-inhabitants—the opportunistic species that continually adapt to changing environments.
In a similar way Dion’s earlier collaborative works with William Schefferine narrate concerns of ecological politics through deliberate montage of objects set within specific contexts in a straightforward or perhaps didactic manner. *Selections from the Endangered Species List (the Vertebrata) or Commander McBrag Taxonomist* (1989) presents a vignette of, presumably, Commander McBrag’s room where a wooden swivel chair sits beside a small wall-mounted bureau: coloured envelopes are neatly arranged in the desk’s upper compartments, and underneath are small stacks of wildlife reference books, index cards, and a few collecting paraphernalia (Plate 2.8). On the desk are a heavy typewriter, papers and pens, a bowl of plastic animal figurines, ‘cereals’, and some implements. On the wall are framed illustrations and drawings of classified animal species accompanied by a mounted buck’s head on the far right. On the floor, nets rest on a butterfly and moth collection and a collecting kit stored in a canvas bag. In defence of the work (against the charge of being didactic), Dion says:

> [I]t tried to visualise two different processes that have a dialectical relationship to one another—the task of naming animals as one ‘discovers’ them (as in Linnaeus), and naming animals as they die off and disappear (as in the endangered species list) [...] We wanted our work to convey the reality of contradictions like that. Moreover, all the works contained massive amounts of details and layering. Perhaps they were didactic, but at least they weren’t boring. Humour was an important factor.¹⁶⁴

Adding to this absurdist approach, physical objects play a less literal and more ambiguous role in his later works, such as *The Library for the Birds of Antwerp* (1993) and *The Delirium of Alfred Russell Wallace* (1994) (Plate 2.9). Displaced objects imagine different contexts and possibilities for their own existence: in the former as mementos that trace the history of the homo-avian relationship within a museum for birds (where twenty-eight African finches lived for the duration of the exhibition), and in the latter as the agents of human curiosity. Material artefacts come into their own in Dion’s durational performative works where narratives of collecting and scientific classification are embedded in the acts of creating the work. In *The Department of Marine Animal Identification of the City of New York (Chinatown Division)* (1992), *The N.Y. State Bureau of Tropical Conservation* (1992), *The Upper West Side Plant Project* (1992), the installation sites do not resemble empty film sets, objects do not function as mere props, and rather than a director behind a set, the artist becomes the explorer, traveller, amateur scientist, natural philosopher, and performer who is gathering samples (largely edible marine
species from Chinatown, remaining specimens from an earlier expedition to a South American rainforest, fruit, vegetables and plants from the nearby Broadway markets), preserving, classifying, and assembling the collections that the audience could observe over the duration of the exhibitions (Plate 2.10). The artwork becomes a process. Liza Craziose Corrin writes, “This insistence on displaying his own problematic and fetishizing relationship to objects produces carefully staged events that become an unpredictable theatre of restrained chaos, undermining the notion of scientific objectivity.”

Dion continues this development in his devices of alternative taxonomical classification. By working with the curiosity cabinet model his taxonomies deliberately blur boundaries that separate the living, once-living, non-living, natural, artificial, and fake. His collections are less definitive and more open-ended in his response to the materiality and physicality of the objects: sizes, shapes, types. In a typical Dion’s Wunderkammer, objects’ histories commingle with sets of contextual narratives, such as lived experiences of individual retired servicemen situated within Dutch colonial and related military histories in Project for the Royal Home for the Retirees, Bronbeek (1993), or the personal and institutional politics of collectors, curators, and museums played out within the history and culture of collecting in Collectors Collected (1994). In projects such as Cabinet of Curiosities (2001) at the Weisman Art Museum, University of Minnesota, Dion worked within institutional frameworks collaborating with scientists, historians, museum curators, collectors, and students to create arrangements of existing collections. Speaking of the project, Microcosmographia, Cabinet of Curiosities for the University Tokyo Museum (2002), Dion recalls, ‘As with the Weisman project, the participants were my eyes and ears, the spies who infiltrated the orphan collections throughout the institution.’ In these works how other participants responded to objects contributed to the design of alternative taxonomies.

Processes continue to evolve throughout Dion’s practice with fieldwork taking an increasingly central role. The durational aspect is emphasised in these works, creating a sense of ‘slowness’. Bennett defines ‘slowness’ as the comparative slow rate of change of inorganic objects, which is preferred by hoarders (and perhaps other collectors). This ‘slowness’ is expanded in Dion’s works in a series of processes: the process of travel, the process of collecting, the process of post (in the tradition of ‘mail art’), the process of
assembly, and the process of experience. In *Travels of William Bartram, Reconsidered* (2008) Dion journeyed through America’s South, tracing the steps of William Bartram, the eighteenth-century naturalist (Plate 2.11). Informed by Bartram’s books, diaries, travel journals, and artworks, Dion travelled roughly along the same paths taken by his historical guide some two centuries earlier. At each stop he took in the contemporary environs, tasted local food, met up with friends (both travellers and residents), visited historical sites, particularly cemeteries, and collected insects from public parks, samples from water ways, found objects, souvenirs, and tit-bits from flea markets. At intervals Dion and the project’s participants would upload images, photographs, texts, and video footage to the project’s website, leaving a fresh layer of digital artefacts along the trail. Physical objects, including Dion’s watercolour paintings of interesting finds, were periodically mailed back to Bartram’s Garden in Philadelphia where the artist returned to sort, classify and assemble a public exhibition upon the journey’s completion. The once living and non-living objects, whose decay is slow (or slowed through preservation), bear witness to the changefulness of time. They speak of a densely woven set of narratives: the lives of William Bartram (and his father, John Bartram), natural history, the American civil war, local histories, contemporary culture, environmental politics, climate change, and the artist’s travels. The relating of travel tales through objects is not new in Dion’s practice. An earlier work, *A Tale of Two Seas: An Account of Stephan Dillemuth's and Mark Dion's Journey Along the Shores of the North Sea and Baltic Sea and What They Found There* (1996) is a two-sided display cabinets housing the collected objects of the artist’s travel (Plate 2.10). Dion says of the work, ‘I always thought about this project as an attempt to produce a sculptural equivalent to the travelogue genre. You know, something not landscape painting, not a road movie, not a photo diary, not a scientific expedition or any other document of a voyage; but something which incorporated aspects of all of those expressions’. In the more recent work, Dion housed the collected objects in original cabinetries, bought furnishing in sympathy with the historical period, and contemporary custom-designed displayed pieces, all thoughtfully positioned in the interiors of John Bartram House in Bartram’s Garden. The installation articulated the transformative experience of travel in material form. The spatial dimension of the house allows the audience to navigate in a multidirectional and multilayered environment within which they leisurely encounter the collected objects.
Like Dion and Sze, Sarah Walko works intimately with objects in her practice. She creates sculptures, boxes, installations, collages, poems, fiction, and video works with the things she collects. Her approach can be loosely situated within a Surrealist tradition and recalls the practice of Joseph Cornell. As in Cornell’s works objects within Walko’s assemblages undergo processes of transformation and rarification. Unlike Cornell, however, human culture is not an overt concern for Walko. Instead, her focus is on the intersection between the organic and inorganic worlds. The extensive range of debris incorporated in Walko’s works appears limitless: keys, bones, strings, false eyelashes, hair, soil, torn printed pages, dead leaves, cereal, feathers, light globes, cotton reels, animal skulls, shells, peppercorns, matchsticks, coloured paper, sticks, drift wood, paint brushes, necklaces, chains, moss… The appeal of her collection rests on the objects’ materiality rather than any particular meanings or associations the audience may bring to them. The attraction to things Sze refers to in her own practice is also part of the affect of Walko’s works. Applying Bennett’s concept of inorganic sympathy to Walko’s assemblages, we can sense beauty, pleasure, and desire emerging from the bond between organic and inorganic things. Pieces such as *this is the kind of book, rare in our arid age, which takes root in the heart and grows there for a lifetime* (2011) resemble a bower bird’s nest of precious junk and debris: a pair of used and burnt out electric sockets, a cut book block, hedges of moss, an electric-blue plastic peg, a luminously red string tied in an ornamental pattern of knots, are placed in a seemingly ad hoc structure built out of torn pages of a yellowed book (Plate 2.12). The pleasing affect seeps out from the jumbled assemblage of the living and the dead.

Objects are almost always estranged in Walko’s works. In situating them far from their original contexts, she reveals an uncanniness in their very materiality. In *many things to sew with* (2011) various things are placed in test-tubes: a coil of blue string, thick strands of curly strawberry blond hair, a lock of reddish brown hair, dried plant roots still in granular soil, transparent green plastic beads; the vessels piled up in a box (Plate 2.11). Test-tubes are the chosen vessel in many of Walko’s installations, making explicit allusion to laboratory practice. When displayed en masse in multiples each test-tube of materials is presented to the audience for observation and scrutiny, while their assemblage maps out a larger material terrain. Walko uses different canvases to provide a different orientation for her works. The transparent containers she uses—microscope slides, test-tubes, perspex boxes, bell-bottomed flasks, glass bowls—are at once clinical.
and jewel-like. In *Flight Compartment* (2010) a white feather with a black tip, a piece of red nylon string, a reel of mercerised cotton, a piece of gauze fabric, a thick fibrous rope, fragments of a book, a string of glass beads, a cartoon-like clock-hand, a golden plastic bell and other Christmas tree decorations are artfully jammed into a shiny perspex box (Plate 2.12). Despite the apparent mass of the objects, the box appears weightless, as suggested by the title. In other works materials are housed in worn wooden boxes, arranged on paper trays, expanded between book covers, or on matchboxes. The materiality of each canvas brings to the objects their own histories (and secrets).

Walko’s taxonomies and curatorial logics are far more elusive that those of Dion. Things may be selected in accordance with their sizes, colours, shapes, and textures, but their eventual assemblies are more oblique. Like Sze, Walko collaborates with the agency of the material objects she collects, releasing their volatility in spatially complex arrangements. Installations such as *Walking Up a Down Room* (2008) and *Glass Orchestra* (2008) confront the audience with hundreds and thousands of fragments captured in a brief constellation (Plate 2.13). In the same instance, individual fragments that compose these works, minuscule sculptures built on miniature platforms of matchbooks, glass slides, and music boxes require the audience to shift their human scale and re-focus their eyes onto these tiny worlds. The fluctuation and ambiguity suggest an alterity in these things. Celina Jeffrey writes of Walko’s works that ‘there is an interplay of the micro- and macro-cosmic: of matter inverting and receding while simultaneously unfurling and exploding in magnitude’. Walko fashions poetic interruptions out of material objects, presenting insistent questions not only of humans’ relationship to things but the relationships between things. The practices of Sze, Dion, and Walko collaborate with material objects which, in Levi Bryant’s words, ‘allows us to encounter even the familiar things of our everyday life in their independent thingliness, seeing them, perhaps, for the very first time’.

**Praxis I**

To further explore the physical montage of material objects, I now turn to two of my own projects. In 2011, I was commissioned by curators Lizzie Muller and Bec Dean to create an artwork for the exhibition *Awfully Wonderful: Science Fiction in Contemporary Art*...
(Appendix). At the point of the commission the project was committed to nine other works, ranging from performances, site-specific installations, sculptures, photomontages, to video works. My more unusual brief was to arrange ten objects on loan from the Powerhouse Museum in the exhibition space. These objects were obsolete scientific instruments from the nineteenth to twentieth centuries: a circumferentor, a theodolite, a musical automaton (bird in a cage), a model of Barlow’s Wheel, a ‘Bijou’ coin-in-the-slot phonograph, a spectroscope, a Curta Type II (mechanical calculator), an ‘electromassage’ machine, a Sinclair ZX80 personal computer, and an optical instrument for the measurement of astronomical photographs. As devices of wonder these objects mapped our place in the universe: some measure the space and time that humans inhabit, some entertain, whilst others intentionally deceive; some are beautifully designed and crafted while others are mass produced. As obsolete technologies their original contexts have long dissolved through the passage of time and their original use-values have been obscured. In their estrangement, they obtain a sense of mystery. Like the archaic, orphaned things in Walko’s works these objects acquire a poetic quality. As physical objects they speak of the enchantment things hold in our world. Curiosity is often aroused by the obscurity of outmoded things. The most direct and immediate response to these devices is to know through their physical make-up: size, weight, appearance, and their features: encased prisms, wooden crank, sharp brass teeth, glossy bakelite case, plastic keys, delicate glass tubes, and finely engraved calibrations.171

In speculating on the functions of physical components, we imagine the place they once held in the human world, or perhaps we imagine a place for them in our world or in some future world—their lost contexts are replaced by their experience. Echoing Sze’s approach, I make use of these conversations with the material objects in my work.

My initial concept was to intermingle the ten objects with the nine artworks in the exhibition space with the omission of explanatory texts. This approach extends the Wunderkammer model by allowing the objects agency without fixing their narratives. The estranged objects adopt a new context within the contemporary art exhibition. The disjunction between their original use-values and their physical presence as exhibits, between their utilitarian sensibility and the companion artworks' conceptual concerns, opens up gaps where questions arise. The montage of objects here creates uncertainties that encourage visitors to wonder about their narratives, ponder over underlying connections, and imagine different possibilities. Working within the practical constraints
of the exhibition, the ten objects are divided into four groups thematically and according to their physical dimensions. The first group consists of instruments and calculators that map the human world: the nineteenth-century surveying instrument, such as the circumferentor, the copper and brass theodolite, the early fully functional mechanical calculator—Curta Type II, the pioneering miniature personal computer—Sinclair ZX80, and the large optical instrument once used by the Sydney Observatory for the global ‘Carte du Ciel’ (Map of the Sky) project in early twentieth century. The second group contains two devices that amuse: the ‘bird-in-cage’ musical automaton of a Parisian origin and the enterprising Edison’s ‘Bijou’ coin-in-the-slot phonograph. The third group comprises of two machines that harness invisible forces: a model of Barlow’s Wheel used to demonstrate electromagnetism and the dubious ‘electromassage’ machine. The fourth group includes only the single large spectroscope used by the observatory for atmospheric analysis. I designed four vitrines to house the groups of objects, paying specific attention to the objects’ spatial positioning in relation to each other and the lines of sight. The bottom of each vitrine is lined with a polished mirror and enclosed within rectangular perspex casing. These shiny and glistening surfaces form an integral part of the objects’ context. The four vitrines were placed amongst the other artworks in the exhibition. The audience navigated between objects and artworks using a double-sided annotated map I produced. On this map the ten objects, represented as small drawings of the devices, and the nine artworks, denoted by the names of the artists, are placed into sets of imaginary spheres, beginning with the ‘human physical realm’ at the centre, extending out to ‘the physical world’ and ‘the world of non-living things’, further to ‘limits of human perception’ and ‘edge of human physical limits’, beyond to ‘the realm of imperceptible things’ and ‘logics and rational thoughts’, all circumscribed by ‘dystopias and utopias’ and ‘boundless imagination’. Working with Muller connections between artworks, between objects, between artworks and objects were drawn on the diagram. A plan of the physical exhibition layout is included overleaf accompanied by interpretative texts. Using this map visitors were asked to participate in the exhibition by making their own discoveries. By working with the Wunderkammer model and focusing on the materiality of the objects, the completed artwork entitled The World of Things (2011) became a subtle but prominent thread that underlay the theme of the exhibition. It was the platform for creating different constellations of science and fiction.
A decade earlier, I developed a similar model that gives rise to constellations from fragments in a collaborative project with Redmond Bridgeman—*Project X* (1999). Shortly after the commencement of this thesis I re-developed this work by restructuring both its internal organisational structure and user-interface with the addition of new materials in order to further extend its Benjaminian approach to material exploration. The resultant work, *Konvolut K* (2006), reflects this renewed engagement with Benjamin’s method of montage (Appendix). Specifically, it makes reference to Benjamin’s own *Konvolut K*, labelled, ‘Dream City and Dream House; Dreams of the Future, Anthropological Nihilism, Jung’. The work presents a navigable snapshot of Perth—the state capital of Western Australia with a current estimated population of 1.83 million. Formerly the Swan River Colony, the settlement was established in 1829 under the auspice of Captain James Stirling. As the only capital city on the West Coast of the continent its identity has always been tied to its geographic isolation from the East Coast urban centres. Despite advances in modern transportation and telecommunication, the city maintains this perception of isolation. In many ways Perth is an unremarkable city: its generic skyline can easily be mistaken as any other; its suburban sprawl that stretches eighty kilometres up and down the coast is typical of Australian coastal cities. Nevertheless, the experience of the city has its own idiosyncrasies. In the city one finds buildings disappear overnight and are subsequently reconstructed as façades. Places are developed and redeveloped. The new is made to appear old. Perth City Council continually engages in attempts to ‘breathe life back into the city’ with various renewal schemes. The city seems to be always on the verge of becoming. As elsewhere, images are prone to produce mythical narratives. The greatest fear (and also the main complaint) of its inhabitants is that the city is boring. In undertaking this mapping project Bridgeman and I took on tasks similar to those of Dion in his *Travels of William Bartram, Reconsidered*. However, instead of travelling to new landscapes and immersing ourselves in alien and strange cultures, we were exploring the slippery and elusive environs of a place in which we lived.

The work is composed of objects found in Perth and collected over eight years. As the collection grew several types came to prominence: memorial statues, public art (sculptures), hoardings, signs, façades, and construction sites. These are rendered with fragments of materials including photographs, illustrations, diagrams, animations, sound recordings, newspaper clippings, advertisements, quotations, and original expositions.
The visual, auditory, and textual threads coalesce around five thematics that we identify as evocative of Perth’s narratives: biosphere, stasis, strata, construction, and panorama. The programmed navigation in the online work allows visitors to access content in various ways such as maps, tours, scrolls, and filing cards.

*Konvolut K* opens with an aerial map of the Australian continent. An oversized aeroplane symbol flies across the land and reaches the location on the map marked ‘K’; on the speakers a flight attendant welcomes us to Perth. On clicking the flashing ‘K’, our giant aeroplane lands on Perth Airport’s runway; losing no time we are transferred to the terminal. A taxi in the form of a red rectangle takes us on a speedy ride to the centre of the city. The urban map fades and a Transperth bus drives along the top navigation bar stopping before a typical train route diagram with five destinations. We are asked: ‘Where to?’ Hovering over the stops shows the five thematic sections: biosphere, stasis, strata, construction, and panorama. Arrival at each destination is preceded by a ‘preloader’: two children (from the standard children crossing traffic sign) walk in front of a lit sign announcing the waiting time (for the files to load); when loading completes the sign displays: ‘Train arriving’. A two-carriage Transperth A-series electric train enters, stops briefly to pick up the children before disappearing off screen. Many such scenes in *Konvolut K* play with the idea of physical travel in the city but the execution always retains spatial ambiguity. Navigable space within the online work is not an analogue of physical space.174 Space is experienced simultaneously as representation: aerial maps, urban road directories, elevations, and its medium—screen image.

Photographs in the project similarly function in this in-between space. Some photographs and newspaper clippings are presented simply as stacks for visitors to shuffle and browse; others are viewed as scrolls. In the panorama section, the two children take visitors to survey six series of photographs (filed in *Konvoluts*). Parodying a walking tour viewers ‘click and drag’ the children horizontally along the screen as the photographic images slide in and out of view responding directionally to the cursor’s movement. The images are of painted hoardings erected around building sites in Perth. Many of these murals were used to block views to the construction of the controversial ‘Northbridge Tunnel’. The illustrations on these hoardings speak of different perceived narratives of Perth: isolated oasis, city founded on agricultural wealth, land of immense past, colonial outpost, and so on. Some functioned like uncanny backdrops to city life.
For example, the life-size illustration of the hoarding outside the Woodside Plaza construction site (near the corner of St. George’s Terrace and Milligan Street) spatially conflates the idealised rural settings of the state’s agricultural regions with ordinary vistas of Perth’s central business district. As captured in the photographs of Konvolut 6, two tourists casually stroll along the terrace, in the background—a cartoon tourist takes a photograph; a businessman checks his mobile phone as the sheep farmers inspect their herds behind him; passengers wait at a bus stop with a scene from the Perth Royal Show serving as a backdrop; a small four-wheel drive vehicle is set against two country folks riding their horse on the painted hoarding. When these life-size collages are experienced in real-time, they capture a momentary montage of contrasting elements without losing the gap that allows the constant switching between sign and referent.

Statues and public art sculptures found around the city display similar potential to create montages. A number of figures emerged as guides in Konvolut K, (the statue of) Captain James Stirling rose as the most prominent. Stirling appears in the work as a photograph of his statue that depicts the Lieutenant-General in the act of proclaiming the settlement of Western Australia. Unveiled in 1979 by Prince Charles in roughly the same place as its present location (at the entrance of Foundation Square adjacent to Perth Town Hall)\(^{175}\), the statue stood outside the Rural & Industries Bank of WA until 1994 when the eleven-storey building was demolished and hoardings were erected around the site. For a brief period before its removal to a Midland workshop for storage, the statue was wedged between layers of hoardings and could only be seen obliquely from a north-bound approach. The photograph used in the project was taken by Bridgeman during this time when someone, perhaps a conscientious contractor or witty worker, put a protective hard hat on the statue. This unintentional montage of the first Governor donning a piece of modern construction headgear opens up spaces for speculating on the foundation narratives of a city. Was the founding of Perth less a matter of colonial conquest than a business of property development? Is the city’s preoccupation with property investments an inheritance from its historical origins in laissez faire capitalism of the nineteenth century? Are the constant development, redevelopment, and their ensuing conflicts subconscious re-enactments of its colonial heritage?

In the same way, bronze-cast public sculptures of native fauna, peculiar and accidental façades, ‘tilt-up’ construction sites, and cryptic signs found around Perth are curious
objects that offer extra-spatiality and extra-temporality for montage to occur. The slowness, porosity, and barely hidden vitality of these objects continuously throw up accidental spatial collages, momentary marriages of elements, conflation of timelines, confusion of places with their environs that are at once changing and static. *Konvolut K* captures some of these montages in its collection of found fragments: three bronze male kangaroos drink from an artificial billabong on the busy St. George’s Terrace; the oxidised bearded dragon spouts water opposite a coiled up python on a water fountain in Russell Square encircled by various types of stylised medium-density dwellings intentionally suggestive of elsewhere; a cloudless blue sky fills the windows and doorways of the heritage-listed Railway Hotel’s reconstructed façade on Barrack Street; large concrete drainage piping embeds in excavated earth in the construction of artificial Venetian canals and bridges in extensive gated housing development outside of Mandurah; silent signs that communicate questions of being: ‘Don’t ask why you are here, just be glad you are’, currency of thoughts: ‘What you thinking right now?’, or the metaphysics of time: ‘Home time, Good time, Our time, Play time, Time to move…’. In these dioramas of a dream city objects become allegorical through their accidental spatial montage.

* In this chapter, I begin the investigation into Benjamin’s principles of montage by exploring the history of the *Arcades Project* and speculations on its intended form. I trace the incomplete work’s relationship to Benjamin’s *Geschichtsphilosophie* and his intention to ‘redeem allegorical practice’ through the montage in the context of modernity. This method is to demolish historicism’s illusions of temporal continuum by precipitating dialectics at a standstill. As opposed to filmic montage which results in the synthesis of fragments, Benjamin’s model relies on a dialectic that necessitates a gap between sign and referent. His writing on Brechtian theatre reveals the role estrangement or defamiliarisation play in his montage practice; while he praises distraction (as a different perceptual mode to contemplation) and the tactile sense as the most worthy agencies in modern art in the context of technological possibilities. Following this cue I expand my framework to consider material objects as facilitators of the dialectical image. In doing so, I speculate on the mechanism of a Benjaminian montage more incisively. Jacob’s use of the key scene in Ellision’s *Invisible Man* illustrates how physical objects can bring about the point of awakening. Stafford’s writing on the *Wunderkammer* helps imagine
what montage of objects may be like and how it may function. The works and practices of Cornell, Sze, Dion, and Walko examined with reference to Bennett’s vitalist materialism and the call of things shows us not what the Arcades Project might have looked like, but more significantly, some parallel possibilities. Examination of my own works, The World of Things and Konvolut K approaches the same questions from a methodological perspective, drawing out how physical montage of material objects may be created, resulting in moments of recognition.

In Konvolut J, Benjamin includes a quote by de Maistre that describes a museum after an earthquake, when the content of the cabinet lay scattered and disordered:

One can form a perfectly adequate idea of the universe by considering it under the aspect of a vast museum of history exposed to the shock of an earthquake. The door to the collection room is open and broken, there are no more windows. Whole drawers have fallen out, while others hang by their hinges, ready to drop. Some shells have rolled out into the hall of minerals, and a hummingbird’s nest is resting on the head of a crocodile. What madman, though, could have any doubt of the original intention, or believe that the edifice was built to look this way?117

Perhaps Benjamin was to take the approach of this madman in his Geschichtsphilosophie. If so, how may a jumble of objects in disarray and broken fragments tenuously arranged form constellations that inform us about history and experience? In the next chapter, I approach these questions by examining what may constitute the materials of history and how these materials may be assembled.

3 These earliest notes pre-date the publication of One Way Street and The Origin of German Mourning Plays.
4 This essay is more commonly known as the exposé of 1935. Adorno praised this essay as ‘the glorious first draft’.
5 See Benjamin, The Arcades Project, x.
6 Buck-Morss cautions that these stages should not be regarded as developmental, rather they constitute ‘an overlay of material and an overlapping of concerns’. See Buck-Morss, The Dialectics of Seeing, 57.
7 Confusion and misinformation surrounding his death and the loss of his possessions fuelled further mysteries. His cause of death was certified as cerebral haemorrhage and
he was buried in the local Catholic cemetery under the name of Dr. Benjamin Walter. These circumstances led to much conjectures. Esther Leslie discusses the implications of this in the last chapter of her biography of Benjamin. See Esther Leslie, Walter Benjamin (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), 216–233.

8 Walter Benjamin, Das Passagen-Werk, Gesammelte Schriften, v., ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1982).

9 Benjamin, The Arcades Project, 14.


11 Benjamin, The Arcades Project, x.

12 Buck-Morss, The Dialectics of Seeing, 207.


15 Buck-Morss doubts that there was ever a complete Passagen-Werk (that was rumoured or imagined to be lost after Benjamin’s flee from Paris). She also questions whether there would have been one had he lived. She cautions against the danger of fantasising a lost complete Magnus Opus that would create a romantic cult around a work that is to be revered. See John Hughes (dir.), One Way Street: Fragments for Walter Benjamin (Ronin Films, 1992).

16 Buck-Morss, The Dialectics of Seeing, x.

17 From 1930s onwards, the proportion of citations outnumbered his written commentaries and the volume of materials grew staggering.

18 Eiland and McLaughlin discuss how the term Konvolut does not have an exact translation in English. Related words such as files, sheaf, and folders, have too strong a connotation of office organisation to give an accurate meaning of its original philological application. They choose to use an Anglicised word ‘convolute’ as a translation. I use the original German term throughout this thesis. See Benjamin, The Arcades Project, xiv.


20 Buck-Morss, The Dialectics of Seeing, 54.

21 Ibid. 54.

22 Tiedemann, ‘Dialectics at a Standstill’, 931.

23 Ibid. 931.

24 Buck-Morss, The Dialectics of Seeing, 80.

25 Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution replaces cyclical conception of nature with the arrow of time by tracing a defined progression of organisms from simpler to more complex ones.

26 Benjamin argues that this notion of historical progress is based on a contradiction. That is: in a social context, conquering other civilisations and bringing about the obliteration of these cultures, in fact, amount to regression rather than progression.


28 Benjamin, The Arcades Project, 388.

29 Benjamin, The Arcades Project, 460.

30 Tiedemann, ‘Dialectics at a Standstill’, 942.

31 Benjamin, The Arcades Project, 459.
In contemporary terms, the appearances of living things that is their phenotypes is directly related to their genetic codes, their genotypes.


Tiedemann, ‘Dialectics at a Standstill’, 940.

Tiedemann, ‘Dialectics at a Standstill’, 943.


Tiedemann, ‘Dialectics at a Standstill’, 934.

Ibid. 935.


Ibid. 463–4.

Tiedemann, ‘Dialectics at a Standstill’, 942.


In this thesis, I use the terms ‘dialectical image’ and ‘dialectic at a standstill’ interchangeably.

Tiedemann, ‘Dialectic at a Standstill’, 932–41.


Ibid. 4.


Ibid. 252.


Ibid. 205. The Adorno-Benjamin debate is examined in more detail in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

Tiedemann, ‘Dialectics at a Standstill’, 943.


In Part II of *Dialectics of Seeing*, Buck-Morss combines these keywords forming four chapter headings within which she explores aspects of Benjamin’s argument.

For a detailed analysis, see Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing*, 60–2.


Ibid. 62.

Ibid. 67.
These structures are akin to designed children’s building blocks such as Lego™ or Meccano™, with component pieces being interchangeable but also having specific purposes.


73 As well, the role of montage in filmic practice on the whole had been frequently revisited and revised by the filmmakers themselves over time. In The Film Sense, Eisenstein presents a revision of montage practices and forms by discussing montage practice using examples from films, literature, and poetry. See Sergei Eisenstein, The Film Sense, ed., tr. Jay Leyda (London: Faber, 1986).

74 Lev Kuleshov, ‘The Principles of Montage’, in Kuleshov on Film: Writings of Lev Kuleshov, ed., tr. Ronald Levaco (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 184. Analysing American cinema and its ideological underpinning, he argues that, ‘The dramatic line of energy of the competition, the action and victory of those found the strength in American films (to achieve their ends), created the rapid American montage of incidents’. By ‘[directing] energy to competitiveness, to enterprise’, montage creates a “consoling” bourgeois morality’ by distracting and weakening the awakening class consciousness of the audience.


76 Ibid.


78 Ibid. 49.

79 Ibid. 37.

80 Ibid. 45.

Forrest, ‘Experimental Set-ups’, 206.

82 Eisenstein, The Film Form, 34.


84 Benjamin, ‘What is Epic Theatre’, 149.


87 Benjamin, ‘What is Epic Theatre’, 147.


91 Caygill, Walter Benjamin, 115.

92 Ibid. 115.


94 Ibid. 233.
The relationship between Benjamin’s methodology and a materialist practice with reference to tactility and the image is the subject of Chapter 4 of this thesis. Andrew Benjamin and Charles Rice (eds.), *Walter Benjamin and the Architecture of Modernity* (Melbourne: re-press, 2010), 4.


Ibid.


Ibid. 221.

Tiedemann, ‘Dialectics at a Standstill’, 941.

Max et al., *Walter Benjamin’s Archive*, 2.

Ibid. 4.


This collection became the Munich Kunstkammer.


Quiccheberg furthered Giulio Camillo’s concept of ‘theatre of memory’ discussed in his 1550s *L’Idea del Theatro*.

Although connections can be derived from considering their histories, Wunderkammer cannot be simply regarded as the precursor of the museum.

This is not unlike the jumble encountered by Ellison’s ‘invisible man’.

The use of ‘interactive’ drawers in displaying objects in contemporary museum display provides an example.

I am using the term assemblage in its most common sense that is a collection of objects as in a collage.


Bennet borrows the term ‘assemblage’ from Delueze and Guattari. She uses it in references to their writings.

Bennet, *Vibrant Matter*, xiii


Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 246


Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, ‘Joseph Cornell’s Exploration: Art on File’ in *Joseph Cornell/ Marcel Duchamp ... in Resonance*, Menil Collection (Germany: Cantz, 1999), 222.


Ibid. 96.

Ibid. 455.

Joseph Cornell, Diary entry of June 3, 1947 in *Caws, Joseph Cornell’s Theatre of the Mind*, 144.

Joseph Cornell, Diary entry of February 15, 1956 in *Caws, Joseph Cornell’s Theatre of the Mind*, 198.

Joseph Cornell, Diary entry of March 29, 1962 in *Caws, Joseph Cornell’s Theatre of the Mind*, 293.


*Caws, Joseph Cornell’s Theatre of the Mind*, 50–2.


These discarded objects included things bought in second-hand stores. Cornell did on some occasions collected actual rubbish. His diary entry talks of finding a hairpin in the streets, which he used for the ‘Jennifer Jones’ box. The unexhibited work, *The Duchamp Dossier*, contained notes, correspondences, receipts, and such related to his dealings with Duchamp when working on his ‘green boxes’. Torn up notes and rubbish were collected from the bin in Duchamp’s apartment.

This can be extended with the concept of releasing latent meanings of the artefacts through collection. Specifically, Benjamin praised the Surrealists for illuminating reality by ‘perceiv[ing] in the revolutionary energies that appear in the “outmoded”’. See Walter Benjamin, ‘Surrealism’, 229.


*Caws, Joseph Cornell’s Theatre of the Mind*, 186.


There are a number of versions of this text.

These implicit references can also be located in Edgar Allan Poe’s 1835 Southern Literary Messenger and Michel Fokine’s ballet Cléopatre. The work was also presented as a concise printed version of the work as a seven-page publication in View magazine including text, images, and collages from the collection. See Walden, *Joseph Cornell*, 128.


Ibid. 222.

Ibid. 225.

His ‘book objects’ present an instinctive and reflexive interaction with the content by inserting, cutting out, drawing, and pasting, producing ‘an extensive array of collages, inserts, inked designs, cut outs, overlays and sequential effects’. His interests in films
take on the forms of filmic or multiple sequential images in his shadow boxes, such as *Object (Hotel Theatricals by the Grandson of Monsieur Phot Sunday Afternoons)* (1940), film scenarios, for instance *Monsieur Phot (Seen through the Stereoscope)* (1936), and film works like *Rose Hobart* (1936), *The Midnight Party* (1940s-68), and *Nymphlight* (1957). The open and pluralistic quality of his works places emphasis on the role of exploration.

He also called his box constructions ‘pocket museums’.


Ibid. 231.


Ibid. 233.

Ibid. 233.

Bennett, ‘Powers of Hoard’.

Ibid. 277.


Kastner, ‘“Everything right”, 46–7.

Ibid. 150.

Ibid. 150.

Ibid. 146.


Ibid. 16.

Ibid. 65.

Colleen J. Sheehy (ed.), *Cabinet of Curiosities: Mark Dion and the University as Installation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006)

Corrin, *Mark Dion*, 75.

Stafford explores the magical quality of ‘crystalline machines’ in ‘Devices of Wonder’.


*Collectors*, the television series produced by the Australia Broadcast Corporation (ABC TV) aired from 2005 to 2011, included a weekly segment titled ‘Mystery Object’. An obscured historical object (from museum and private collections) was presented to the public as well as the panel hosts to guess its function. Physical observation and interaction with the object (if permissible) is almost always the first response. See *Collectors*, ABC Television, 2005–2011 [television programme].

This long-term research venture resulted in a proposed exhibition outline, mock-ups for printed sets of post-cards, and a number of versions of websites and CD-roms.

See the City of Perth Council’s current projects for the concepts engaged in redevelopment of various parts of the city. For example, see City of Perth, ‘Forrest Place Redevelopment’, *City of Perth* [webpage], (2012)

174 For example, it is not a three-dimensional rendition of the city nor does it offer ‘virtual tour’ type navigation.

175 When the newly furbished square opened in 2003 the statue was placed in close to its original location.

176 The heritage-listed Railway Hotel was demolished by the owner overnight without council approval. Medina Executive Barrack Plaza was built in 2006 on the vacant block where the original demolished building was located.

177 Benjamin, The Arcades Project, 377.
Plate 2.1. Top to bottom:
Engraving from Ferrante Imperto, *Dell’Historia Naturale*, 1599.
Plate 2.2. Top to bottom: Left to right:

Joseph Cornell, *Cabinet of Natural Philosophy (Object)*, 1936–40. Box assemblage.
Joseph Cornell, *Untitled (Sand Box)*, c. 1944. Box assemblage.
Plate 2.3. Top to bottom.
Joseph Cornell, Untitled (Pharmacy), 1943. Box assemblage.


Plate 2.6. Top to bottom.
Plate 2.7.
Plate 2.8. Top to bottom.
Plate 2.9. Top to bottom.


Mixed media installation.

Plate 2.11.
Sarah Walko, *this is the kind of book, rare in our arid age, which takes root in the heart and grows there for a lifetime*, 2011. Assemblage.


Plate 2.13. Top to bottom.
CHAPTER 3

Contingent assemblies

Extending the previous chapter’s investigation into the practice of montage in the arrangement of physical objects in *Wunderkammern* and collection-based installation works, this chapter focuses on the materials of history and methods of assembly. Specifically, I approach Walter Benjamin’s montage method by examining his historical materialism embedded in the *Arcades Project* and articulated in his “Theses of the Philosophy of History”.¹ What is this ‘quasi-magical cognitive attitude toward historical matter [that] remained basic to Benjamin’s understanding of materialism’?² What are the materials of history? What are the ways in which these materials can be assembled? I argue that Benjamin’s historical materialism is distinct from that of Marx. In particular the use of *Denkbilder* (thought-images) in bringing materials together through montage is central to this difference. I suggest that a new materialist perspective has the potential to extend Benjamin’s materialism. Manuel De Landa’s *A Thousand Years of Non-Linear History* provides a contemporary example of a new materialism that dissolves the notion of progress by asserting the contingency of history in materialist terms.³ Building on these two materialisms that allow historical narratives to emerge, film form is taken as an analogue of history. Specifically, Stella Bruzzi’s objections against Hayden White’s belief that history without cogency and internal cohesion can amount to nothing but lists, annuals, chronicles and meaningless information is premised on this analogous relationship.⁴ Bruzzi’s argument opens up the discussion on alternative assembly methods of narratives. In this context, we examine the compilation films of Emile de Antonioni, Kevin Rafferty and Erik Gandini, and the works of Chris Marker and Patrick Keiller. Benjamin’s *Denkbilder* presents a framework for looking at construction methods that assemble material fragments into constellations. In speculating on a Benjaminian materialism, my intention is to extend his methodology into art practice.

3.1 Materials

Drawing on materials from *Konvolut N*, Benjamin articulates his thoughts on history and historiography in relation to his concept of *Geschichtsphilosophie* in the twenty short theses published posthumously as ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’. The ambition of the incomplete *Arcades Project* is apparent here. He attacks historicism’s notion of progress
and linear approach to history. His meditation on historical materialism is comparatively more complex. In considering the theses one must take into account the political situation at the time: the Moscow Trials of 1936 and 1937 called into question the integrity of the Stalinist communist regime; the signing of the Treaty of Non-Aggression between Germany and the Soviet Union in August 1939 (with its secret protocol of dividing central Europe) propelled the continent into war; Germany’s invasion of Poland in September 1939 which was followed by the Soviet Red Army attack in Finland in November, and the Battle of France in May 1940 which ended with the fall of Paris in June. Faced with imminent danger at close proximity Benjamin was at last forced to leave for New York. The theses were written in spring of that fateful year, shortly before he took his passage out of France. Tiedemann writes, ‘Indeed the theses are predicated on a political situation that had to seem increasingly hopeless; yet the arrival at a political alternative is demonstrably Benjamin’s hidden intent in the theses’. This final work, Tiedemann argues, was Benjamin’s attempt to find a way out from Soviet communism’s complicity with fascism. For him, the problem lies in how history is conceived: ‘One reason why fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm’. Tiedemann writes: ‘Benjamin turns away from the politicians who have “betrayed” the cause of this struggle and historical materialism in the process. In doing so, he immediately begins to develop the conception of an alternate political praxis, which would be suited to the pursuit of the cause of historical materialism’. Benjamin is concerned with historical materialism in the way it had been practised (by materialist historians ‘schooled in Marx’) rather than the method in and of itself. Rather than rejecting historical materialism Benjamin’s theses present a prescription for the historian charged with the tasks of ‘brush[ing] history against the grain’ and ‘blast[ing] open the continuum of history’. The texts warn the historian against historicism’s ‘homogenous, empty time’, the spectacle of ‘cultural treasures’, the seductive ‘once upon a time’, and the temptation of ‘telling [a] sequence of events like beads of a rosary’. The historian is invested with the hopes of establishing ‘a conception of the present as the “time of the now” which is shot through the chips of Messianic time’.

To sketch out Benjamin’s materialism it is necessary to consider his own position in relation to Marxism and Marxist historical materialism. Susan Buck-Morss notes that Benjamin was skeptical of political parties whatever their persuasion. It is clear that
while Benjamin declared his allegiance to Marxian causes, his commitment to Marxism itself was tentative. Tiedemann claims that ‘at least until 1933 [Benjamin’s] interest in Marxist theory was strikingly low by comparison’ and even as late as at the completion of the 1935 exposé he had read little Marx. It was upon Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s insistence (after the submission of his first draft) that Benjamin began to engage with Marx’s conception of the Capital in dealing with nineteenth-century capitalism in the Passagen-Werk. His decision to tackle Marxist theory was based on a perceived need to defend his project from orthodox Marxists. However, his philosophical historical thoughts are not entirely incompatible with Marxism. Buck-Morss writes:

[What made Communism potentially more suited than theology for the task as Benjamin already understood it was that rather than turning its back on the realities of the present, Communism made precisely these its home, affirming the potential of present industrialism while criticizing its capitalist form, and thus grounding utopian thinking in actual historical conditions.]

In drawing out parallels between Benjamin’s thinking with Marxist theory, Tiedemann shows Benjamin’s materialism was formulated through an oblique critique of Marxism: ‘He sees Marx as a precedent, to be sure, but does not ignore the fact that there are essential differences’. In the theses Benjamin presents certain views from a Marxian orientation; for example, he aligns class struggle with the historical materialist’s task. However, he also criticises the Social Democrats (‘the official custodians of a Marxism that had degenerated into a science of legitimation for the policies of Stalin’) for defusing the working class’s revolutionary forces by propagating conformism, corrupting the concept of labour, and perpetuating the notion of progress. Marx’s concept of history, with its inherent implication of progress and Messianic time, is not absolved from this last charge. Specifically Tiedemann argues that in the theses by ‘translating back into the language of theology that which Marx “had secularized”’—which Benjamin thought was “as it should be”, Benjamin is able to bring out in historical materialism what Marxist theory cannot. What kind of ‘services’ does philosophy need to ‘enlist’ from theology in enacting Benjamin’s historical materialism? The theses borrow from theology not only its terminology but also its imagery. The role theology plays in Benjamin’s Geschichtsphilosophie is further examined in the last chapter. Now I turn to the frequently quoted ninth thesis. Here, theological concepts are used to create the image: the angel of history, in the form of a Denkbild.
The ninth thesis has the tripartite structure that extends sixteenth-century Baroque emblems: Gerhard Scholem’s poem is the *inscriptio* (motto or title), Paul Klee’s painting *Angelus Novus* is the *pictura* (icon or image), and Benjamin’s description of a scene of catastrophe is the *subscriptio* (epigram or related thought). While the sixteenth-century device reveals truth as divine revelation, Benjamin’s thought-images offer profane illumination. The truth Benjamin presents here is a view of history. History is a growing pile of debris—a wreckage hurled at the feet of an angel; his open wings are caught in a storm blown from paradise; he is being propelled to the future with his back turned. But whose view is it? Instead of explicating the narrated image, Benjamin’s epigraph enshrouds it even further by wrapping the original image within another. Tiedemann writes:

> The image in the ninth thesis is an allegory of history as natural history; but the angel is a part of this image. He stands for the ‘true’ historian, the historical ‘materialist’ who has stripped himself of all illusions about human history. In order to use the ‘weak messianic power’ bestowed on us ‘like every generation that preceded us’ (694), we must perceive history as historical materialists—not in Marx’s sense but in the sense of Benjamin’s ninth thesis: History as the catastrophic pile of debris that continually ‘grows skyward’.

There are two views of the debris: ‘a chain of events’ and ‘a single catastrophe’; the former illusory, the latter ‘the true picture of the past [that] flits by’. Making use of the ambiguity inherent in images is significant in Benjamin’s historical materialism. Karoline Kirst writes:

> [T]he reader will not find an immediate meaning in the *Denkbild*. All the reader may come up with is the description of his own reflective process. The *Denkbild* does not contain any one thought-product, or intentioned meaning, clothed in an image, but intends to lead to careful contemplation of the world.

In contrast to the instructive intention of Baroque emblems (and the emblematists’ play with *bilderrätsel*, or rebus) that produces easily decipherable puzzles, Benjamin’s *Denkbilder* are ‘multidimensional’, ‘[temporally] multi-directional’ and ‘[radiate] at several direction at once’. Kirst asserts that ‘The *Denkbild* gains importance as a historiographic narrative form in Benjamin’s works’. The emblematic *Denkbilder* of *One Way Street* were intensified, incorporating his materialist physiognomics, in the *Arcades Project*. I argue that there is a shift from emblematics afforded by *images* to allegorical
qualities offered by *things* in this transposition. Material objects assume a greater role in the intensified *Denkbilder* marking its decisive divergence from Marxist historical materialism.

Benjamin’s attitude to material objects is congruent with his re-casting of Kantian philosophy to expand the scope of human experience in a world where ‘The objects were “mute”. But their expressive […] potential became legible to the attentive philosopher who “named” them […]’.

As both Tiedemann and Buck-Morss note, ‘Marxism had no comparable theory of the language of objects’. Benjamin is interested in the surface of fetishism, the appearance of objects, and their ‘immediate presence’. Where Marx sees materials as objective, reified products of labour, Benjamin sees materials’ transfiguration into cultural products as phantasmagoric. Where Marx deduces abstract relations from objects, Benjamin speculates on the concrete appearances and surfaces of these materials. Tiedemann writes, ‘[Marx] identifies the fetish character of the commodity through the fact that the futures of man’s labor appear to him as what they are: “as material relations between persons and social relations between things”’. For Benjamin, however, material objects are not mere symbols of these relationships, but ‘things in themselves’ that are autonomous. In the seventh thesis, Benjamin warns the materialist historian against the transmogrification of material objects into cultural ‘treasures’:

> Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment.

Cultural treasures are fetish objects with which the ruling classes fabricate their cultural history, with which historicism erects its historical narratives. The task of the true historian is to dismantle the phantasmagoria by releasing the ‘thingliness’ of these objects. Benjamin performs this rescue through allegorical forms in his *Denkbilder*, bringing focus to the debris of nineteenth-century high capitalism as fetishised commodities flaunted behind the dusty panes of Parisian arcades. Kirst writes:

> The commodity—comb, buttons, prosthesis, revolver, prostitute—loses its magic power over the viewer in Benjamin’s detached representation and, as its banal bareness allows insight into the unconsciousness of the historical subject, it is raised for once to the state of signification. ‘Einfühlung in die Ware’ [empathy with goods]
Benjamin’s materialism differs from Marxist historical materialism in the treatment of objects as the materials of history. Through the configurations of the thought-image these materials acquire the capacity to bring about dialectics at a standstill. Kirst argues that Benjamin’s development of the more ambitious ‘dense and very fragile constellation[s]’ in ‘Pariser Passagen II’ pushes the Denkbild form to breaking point; what Benjamin achieves in One Way Street ultimately fails in the Arcades Project. We examine Kirst’s argument and Benjamin’s Denkbild in more depth in the next chapter. In what follows, I focus my attention on alternative ways of constructing history within the framework set out by Benjamin’s materialism. I incorporate De Landa’s A Thousand Years of Non-Linear History in speculating on Benjamin’s historiography from a different perspective. De Landa’s ‘philosophical meditation on […] historical processes’ through materials is not only congruent with Benjamin’s Geschichtsphilosophie, but more significantly presents new conceptual tools for thinking about Benjamin’s project and extending his materialism. The construction process of De Landa’s historical narratives also provides ways of conceiving the relationship between fragments and whole, offering a useful context for considering the assembly methods of narratives in film.

3.2 Emergence

Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history, but no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the ‘time of the now’, which is shot through with chips of Messianic time.

De Landa begins A Thousand Years of Non-Linear History by declaring his project as primarily a philosophical task rather than a historical one. Its main historical philosophical thesis asserts that ‘all structures that surround us and form our reality […] are the products of specific historical processes.’ This goal is wholly in sympathy with
Benjamin’s philosophical-history project. In this respect De Landa’s historical narratives enact Benjamin’s instructions to the historical materialist in thoroughly dispensing with ‘telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary [and instead, grasping] the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one’.40 However, De Landa’s goal is not one of revolution; rather it is to arrive at an understanding of the world’s processes that can affect real change.41

The term ‘Non-linear’ in the book’s title is deliberately two-fold. First, it is a negation of ‘linear’, and secondly, it refers to dynamic non-linear systems that describe common phenomena ranging from weather systems, water turbulence, population growth, to stock market behaviours. De Landa’s integration of scientific thinking into the practice of history makes available new conceptual tools in social explanation and historical analysis.42 In particular, he applies the sciences of complex systems to dissolve the notion of progress. Speaking of thermodynamics and Darwinian evolution theory, he writes:

[T]he classical version of these two theories incorporated a rather weak notion of history into their conceptual machinery: both classical thermodynamics and Darwinism admitted only one possible historical outcome, the reaching of thermal equilibrium or of the fittest design. In both cases, once this point was reached, historical processes ceased to count. In a sense, optimal design or optimal distribution of energy represented the end of history for these theories.43

Importantly for De Landa’s argument it has been demonstrated in science that these models only describe closed linear systems, where the total energy is conserved; however, closed linear systems are rare. The majority of material processes in existence are dynamic and non-linear. Instead of reaching an equilibrium these processes are shaped by attractors as they undergo phase transitions, bifurcate, or settle within stable states. Even when these systems settle within stable states, they remain open to external influences, and minor fluctuations can bring about completely different futures. In a physical reality where dynamic complex systems are the norm, to speak of achieving an end-point such as an equilibrium or fittest design through progressive states is therefore meaningless. In this frame of reference, the notion of progress in history simply dissolves.
Working with the observable principle of non-linear systems, De Landa presents three historical narratives spanning roughly from 1000 to 2000 A.D. Rather than the spoils of victors, each historical narrative is constructed using basic components found in the sciences: cells, molecules, muscles, minerals, rocks, lava, and in the studies of the humanities: human artefacts, food crops, building techniques, words, and so on. Within each narrative, fragments coalesce around the chosen material. He writes:

In the nonlinear spirit of this book, these three worlds (geological, biological, and linguistic) will not be viewed as the progressively more sophisticated stages of an evolution that culminates in humanity as its crowning achievement [...] Far from advancing in stages of increased perfection, these successive emergences were—and will be treated here as—mere accumulations of different types of materials, accumulations in each successive layer does not form a new world closed in on itself but, on the contrary, results in the coexistences and interaction of different kinds.44

The emphasis on material processes over material objects in De Landa’s philosophical investigation calls for a different type of materialism from Benjamin’s. Unlike Marxist historical materialism that takes social relationships that result from the production and exchange of material goods as its heart, De Landa’s neo-materialism takes matter and energy as its basis. His neo-materialism is founded on what he calls Gilles Deleuze’s new materialist philosophy, a framework that grants autonomy to the material world independent of human minds.45 He argues that this Deleuzian materialism rejects an idealist position; it declares that both our affect on the world and the world’s affect on us are real. It may be recalled that the question of experience is also central to Benjamin’s philosophy. Howard Caygill argues that from his early works (from 1914) ‘Benjamin distanced himself from the tradition of academic neo-Kantianism in which he was trained’46 and this position remains fundamental to all his subsequent scholarship. Buck-Morss writes, ‘The young Benjamin believed in the possibility of metaphysical knowledge of the object world […] and held that (against the basic tenet of idealism) it would not end up showing him his own reflection’.47 Benjamin, however, never entirely rejected Kantian philosophy but instead re-casted ‘Kant’s transcendental concept of experience into a speculative one’.48 Caygill writes:

Benjamin questions not only the structure of Kant’s concept of experience, but also its basic assumption that (a) there is a distinction between the subject and the object of experience and (b) that there can be no experience of the absolute.
Benjamin’s re-casting of Kant’s concept of experience challenged not only the norms of Kant exegesis, but more significantly the very self-definition of philosophy. His extension of the bounds of experience to include ‘sooth-saying from coffee grounds’ threatened to dissolve the bounds of sense that were so carefully demarcated by Kant and policed by his philosophical heirs.

For De Landa, however, a Kantian position is untenable. Like Henri Bergson, Gilbert Ryle, and Gilles Deleuze (in collaboration with Félix Guattari), De Landa works from an empiricist position that stems from the philosophical canon of David Hume. Eighteenth-century contemporaries Emmanuel Kant and David Hume each proposed a radically different theory of perception (or experience). For Kant the ego or the self is defined conceptually. To understand our experience of the world Kant asserts that we must have structures such as concepts or language to facilitate our perception. A subject perceives objects (and achieves understanding) through their classification as members of a general category in his or her mind. In Humian philosophy, our understanding is given structure not by classification (language or concepts) but by habit and routine practices (or actions). For Kant it is the systematicity of language that gives structure to experience. For Hume, it is habit that stabilises our experience. In De Landa’s terms experience is a ‘crystallisation of intensities’; it is historical and contingent. Systematicity of raw intensities is achieved through the methodological and repetitive nature of routines. Direct experience has nothing to do with language. Knowledge is experience. A Humian world that places importance on objecthood and materialism is the foundation of De Landa’s historical narratives.

Before delving into the methodologies of De Landa’s new materialism, it is necessary to first introduce De Landa’s reasoning styles and his ontology (both developed from the works of Deleuze and Guattari). De Landa argues that these explanatory strategies are used not only to represent reality but, more importantly, to intervene in reality, providing a foundation for a materialist ontology. Specifically, De Landa asks: what kind of entities are valid for explanations in the social realm and historical narratives? These modes of thinking offer alternative ways of conceiving material reality where the whole is replaced by the assemblage, essences are replaced by processes, progress is replaced by intensive differences, enabling meditation on features of material reality such as emergence and affect.
The three underlying styles of reasoning are population thinking, intensive thinking, and topological thinking. First, population thinking brings together Darwinian evolution theory and Mendel’s study on inheritable characteristics; it focuses on ecological relationships such as competition, cooperation, and predator-prey interaction. In contrast to Aristotelian essentialism which identifies species through sameness shared by individuals within a group (common essence), population thinking puts emphasis on variations and differences that result in ‘reproduction isolation’, where a species emerges from heterogeneity-producing processes such as genetic mutation and environmental adaptation. In an Aristotelian approach, a species is eternal; within population thinking, a species is a singular individual—a unique historical entity produced by historical processes. In the former, characteristics of a species are necessary; in the latter these are contingent. Second, intensive thinking focuses on intensive properties of objects and systems. Extensive properties of physical entities such as length, area, volume, and weight, can be represented graphically by static lines and clearly divisible areas. Intensive properties such as temperature, pressure, and speed, are indivisible and can be visualised as dynamic changing areas, as on a meteorological map. Intensive thinking stems from thermal dynamics: the study of dynamic systems, such as the circulation of energy or atmospheric processes. In the way that a difference in temperatures produces heat flow or pressure differences create wind, and intensive differences within these systems contain energy that fuel processes and entities. These processes are characterised by phase transitions when states of entities spontaneously transform. Intensive thinking replaces the notion of progress with intensive differences as the driving force within a system. For De Landa intensive differences are productive and their generative processes are informative of how entities and systems behave in the material world. Lastly, topological thinking, with its basis in topology (a mathematic invention for the qualitative study of transformation processes), provides a way for conceiving virtual possibilities. Instead of global reference points mapped onto Euclidean metric spaces using Cartesian coordinates, data is mapped onto non-metric, topological spaces, with each point plotted in relation to its neighbours against its rate of change. Topological geometry can have infinite dimensions. Phase space diagrams of complex systems, for example, are created in this non-metric space, where all possible states of a system can be delineated. In this sense, topological maps describe spaces of possibilities where all potential states of entities—virtualities (or un-actualised possibilities) exist in an actual space.
Population thinking defines entities as singular, unique, and contingent, produced by historical processes. Intensive thinking identifies differences as the driving force of these productive processes. Topological thinking allows the possibilities of these processes to be made perceptible. In this materialist ontology an individual entity is made out of parts; its properties emerge from the interaction between these parts. An entity therefore can neither be reduced to its constituent parts nor can it be considered a totality. Abstract entities such as the State, the Market, and Western society are reified generalities and are not valid in De Landa’s ontology. Instead, he argues, to find explanations in the social realm an analyst needs to consider these processes. Interactions between smaller individuals give rise to larger entities in a process known as emergence; at the same time these emergent properties also react back on the community by enabling them or constraining them in a process known as affect. This analytical strategy is Deleuzian assemblage theory. When an analysis assumes existence of an abstract entity such as the state it fails to find a valid explanation that can bring about real change. When a monolithic entity is replaced by an assemblage of individuals, however, concrete entities and their affect can be examined. In this way, assemblage theory makes visible the complexities that exist within the ecology of organisations, their action and reaction to one another, taking into account their relationships.

In A Thousand Years of Non-Linear History, De Landa employs this bottom-up analytical approach to capture historical processes. Using geology as its departure point the first narrative takes minerals: mud, rocks, stones that create dwellings, and their mineralisation into human settlements, villages, towns, and cities, as the materials of history. He traces the crystallisation of these mineral components into larger structures through a thousand years of human history by examining dynamic intertwined webs of economic processes. The geological terms used may appear metaphorical, but De Landa insists they are in fact literal. He does so by drawing out the affinities between the generative structures in human societies (and biology) and geological processes. In particular the formation of co-existing meshworks and hierarchies within structures of nonlinear dynamic systems is a feature shared amongst these complex processes, albeit at different scales. In the same way Deleuze and Guattari use their ‘engineering diagrams’ to speculate on mechanisms, De Landa uses the behaviour of complex
systems to model historical processes. His modelling aims to capture truth by providing an explanation in concrete historical terms. His analysis transverses all levels of materials in a flat ontology. In the geological narrative, the economic (social and political) dominance of western European and north American nations at the end of the third millennium (despite the early technological advances made by empires such as China and Islam) is explained not as inevitable progress or the final victory of West over East. Instead, the present state is historically contingent, resulting from the mixtures of heterogeneity and homogeneity formed within economic and urban development. The formation of villages, towns, and cities, growth of their self-organised economies (markets), rise of hierarchical structures and their centralised administration of surplus, evolution of anti-markets, appearance of global exchange of matter (goods, money) through a network of maritime cities, consolidation of nation-states in the establishment of land-locked capital cities, mushrooming of industrial towns, rapid urbanisation directed by the intensification of energy flow, proliferation of industrial hinterlands driven by the intensification of information flow, routinisation of production and organisation inherited from military institutions, resilience of economies of agglomeration, are all nodes and possible states within a commingling of dynamic nonlinear systems. Here, properties emerge from self-organised meshworks and exert pressure on top-down structures; these, in turn, affect their subsidiary networks by constraining or enabling them. In this way De Landa’s account shows that the dominance of anti-markets (or capitalism) is far from a pre-planned, goal-driven, entity or force, but a process that has evolved into an autocatalytic, self-sustaining loop. He summarises:

Human history is a narrative of contingencies, not necessities, or missed opportunities to follow different routes of development, not of a unilinear succession of ways to convert energy, matter and information into cultural products. If command structures end up prevailing over self-organized ones, this itself will be a contingent historical fact in need of explanation in concrete historical terms.

De Landa creates historical narratives from the raw materials of matter and energy by capturing the interaction between parts (specifically, emergence and affect) within the framework of Deleuzian assemblage theory. Rather than affirming the historical necessity of the present state De Landa’s explanations show the contingencies of historical processes in concrete terms. By focusing on the relationship between materials and narratives, his materialism presents alternative assembly methods of history.
3.3 Compiling

The first stage in this undertaking will be to carry over the principle of montage into history. That is, to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event. And, therefore, to break with vulgar historical naturalism. To grasp the construction of history as such. In the structure of commentary.64

In this section I examine how Benjamin’s principle of montage can be conceived if carried over to film practice. In doing so, I present narrative construction methods that may ‘grasp the construction of history’ in film-making. My focus remains on assembly methods that are congruent with Benjamin’s historical materialism and De Landa’s neo-materialist practice, ones that draw fragments together into constellations without a totalising frame. Benjamin’s reference to montage intentionally connects this practice to filmic montage, particularly in the production of shock. Comparably, Bruzzi analogises the assembly of film narrative to that of history in her book New Documentary.65 She challenges documentary film’s evolutionary theory in conventional scholarship formalised in Bill Nichols’ genealogy of non-fiction films where he divides documentary film practice into the four evolutionary modes. Nichols’ family-tree structure assumes a progressive development from primitive to complex presentation of truths, presuming the ultimate aim of documentary is to close the gap between reality and representation. Throughout the book Bruzzi argues for the validity of different assembly methods in both film and history that lie outside these existing conventions. She counters Hayden White’s assertion that ‘To be historical, an event must be more than a singular occurrence, a unique happening. It receives its definition from its contribution to the development of a plot’.66 Bruzzi writes:

Hayden White’s assumption [is] that history, in order to be meaningful, must be cogent and complete. In making a distinction between history and more rudimentary information-structuring forms such as annals and chronicles, White presumes that narrative is needed not only to give the events structure beyond the chronological (that is, to transform them into history), but to give them meaning, which ‘they do not possess as mere sequence’ (White 1987: 5). In White’s estimation, the annals and the chronicle are merely components of a sophisticated history, insufficient in themselves.67
White proposes that without an existing overarching structure disparate events amount to nothing but lists, annals, chronicles, or worse, meaningless information. Contrary to this conception of narrative construction Bruzzi argues that the material processes of filmmaking possess their own properties, internal structures and coherence, which in turn generate their own narratives. Compilation film form is one such practice that manifests the materiality of filmmaking in consonance with Benjamin’s and De Landa’s methods in constructing history.

Compilation films are composed entirely with archival and found footage with no voice-over narration or additional footage. Narratives emerge from the editing process. Esfir Shub and Dziga Vertov pioneered this form of filmmaking in the 1920s in concert with their dialectic conception of montage. Critics of compilation films attack these works for lacking in objective truthfulness, as their very construction is open to manipulation. Bruzzi retorts by arguing that all filmed materials, however unmodified, require contexts for interpretation. A principal figure in compilation film practice Emile de Antonio, whose works include *Point of Order* (1963), *The Year of the Pig* (1969), *Millhouse: a White Comedy* (1971), and *Mr Hoover and I* (1989), is an exponent of ‘bias and of the foregrounding of opinion’ in filmmaking. Examining controversies in modern American political history through recordings of court hearings, press conferences, public speeches, reportage, and interviews, de Antonio’s political views explicitly guide his editing process. Filmmakers such as de Antonio and Shub ‘do not believe that the marked clarity of their own political position will stand in the way of [the] audience formulating their own opinions’. Significantly de Antonio makes a distinction between honesty and objectivity—a distinction that, Bruzzi sees, squarely names ‘the problem of equating the image ostensibly without bias with the truth’ in established criticism of documentary practice. Compilation films are unequivocally constructed and shaped by the filmmakers’ subjectivity; their functioning requires the audience to be aware of the works as interpretive meta-frameworks rather than as literal portrayals of events. In the selection and re-presentation of materials compilation films establish new constellations of meanings from chards of historical ruins on the filmmaker’s own terms. This re-contextualisation of materials is, in fact, key in the compilation process. Bruzzi writes that these filmmakers:

\[
\text{do not condemn the unnarrativised event as indecipherable until it has been positioned within a developmental structure, rather they posit that}
\]
there is a fruitful dialogue to be had between original newsreel, home movie footage and the like and the critical eye of the filmmaker (and the implied new audience).  

She identifies two stages in which filmmakers work with the accumulated cultural materials, ‘collation and discovery’ and ‘assimilation and analysis’. These transformative steps give rise to multiple co-existing dialectical relationships generated from a number of processes including the (re)viewing of old materials in the present and the juxtapositions of (formally unrelated) elements. Bruzzi connects the first aspect with the methodology of Benjamin’s materialist history, where meanings embodied in the existing footage are superimposed on the new context of its reuse. The Atomic Café (1982) by Kevin Rafferty, Jayne Loader, and Pierce Rafferty provides an example. Composed of propaganda materials, public awareness campaigns, atom bomb-testing footage, staged recordings of events, and newsreels, the film re-tells a socio-cultural history of the United States during the height of the Cold War by re-presenting past fragments in the present. Viewing official films such as the ‘Duck and Cover’ drills in hindsight projects an at once laughable and chilling picture of the Cold War and its propaganda. When placed in contexts radically different from their original intended purposes the materials’ properties are stretched and reshaped, creating meanings absent in the original through deliberate juxtapositions.  

While the work may still refer to history as a string of events, the assumed linearity is fragmented and made discontinuous by the assembly of materials. Here, montage is not simply the act of editing together materials, but more importantly, the layering of timelines that compels the audience to look at past events anew and ponder the present reality in light of its reassessment. Filmic montage that combines ‘monstrous incongruities’ into coherent narratives is contrasted with the practice that aims to achieve complexities over congruence. Kevin Rafferty and Frank Keraudren’s The Last Cigarette (1997) provides an example. The film deliberately exploits disjunctures between the narratives presented by cigarette advertisements, anti-smoking campaigns, Hollywood films, and the 1994 Congressional ‘Hearing on the Regulation of Tobacco Products’ in the United States. Unlike The Atomic Café, The Last Cigarette does not pursue an argument. Rather, it explores the social, cultural, economic and political dimensions of smoking. The notorious health risks of tobacco are deliberately juxtaposed with the allure of smoking as stylised in classic Hollywood films. The calculated dialogues between the congressmen and cigarette companies’ executives are presented uncut, incorporating
uncomfortably long takes, awkward exchanges, and strained silences that clearly reveal the conceit of the executives barely concealed by their professed honesty, and the animosity of the congressmen, who felt justified by their own righteousness. This War on Smoking (a battle between abstract entities) is opened up for questioning. Assemblages within The Last Cigarette can be as much patchworks of inconsistencies, ambiguities, and contradictions as they are of coherent thoughts. In this way, compilation films exercise Benjamin’s methodology in assembling ‘large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components’ and ‘discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event’.  

Erik Gandini’s Surplus (2003) extends the compilation film form by expanding spaces for contemplation through its lyrical structure and formal play. One crucial difference between Surplus and the compilation films discussed is the integration of purpose-shot scenes with found footage. Employing the cinematic language of music video, advertising, and propaganda, which Gandini executes with creativity and precision, Surplus explores the global politics of material consumption. Growing up in Silvio Berlusconi’s Italy, where media monopoly creates an oppressive cultural landscape, Gandini says, ‘consumer mentality entered my life through beautiful images of joy about consumption. I really wanted to do a film with the same aesthetics [as that] of an advert. But saying something completely different’. Founded on this duality, the film avoids a naïve rejection of consumerist society as typically found in the abstract polarised politics between the right (capitalism) and left (communism). Rather, it traces the circulation of materials from production, consumption, depletion, to waste, in the runaway autocatalytic loop of consumerism. It explores the system’s obscene excess, the aspirations it inspires, the unremitting production it demands, the routinisation of life it dictates, its manufacture of waste, its fierce oppositions, and its romantic alternatives. Music and audio provide the generative temporal structure that opens up spaces for meditation.

The film begins with the 2001 G8 summit in Genoa. Televised images of the congregating world leaders from the eight wealthiest nations are intercut with footage of the gathering protestors and police in the streets of Genoa. On the audio track, Fidel Castro’s condemnation of consumerism as a destructive force of nature, community, and humanity is accompanied by Gotan Project’s Tríptico on the soundtrack. Castro’s
rhythmic denouncement of the globalised capitalist system as unfair, wasteful, and brutal sets a steady pace for the scene. As the protestors grow in numbers, the riot police’s march quickens, the camera becomes erratic, the shots grow shorter, and the noise of imminent clash bleeds through the audio. The beat of the music speeds up, Castro’s speech is drowned out by the sound of the riot. The scene climaxes with the clashing of the protestors and the police, and trails off with sights of wilful destruction of cars, shops, and properties.

The opening scene introduces the controversial thesis proposed by activist and philosopher John Zerzan that ‘property damage’ is the only effective means to dismantle consumerism. The film continues to present tales of desire, wealth, labour, routinisation, ideology, control, violence, pleasure and melancholia. Tania, a young Cuban woman, finds herself compulsively eating Big Macs while ‘hopping channels’ with a remote control on her first trip abroad. In a world where ‘they have so much of everything’, Tania says she felt hungry all the time (despite gaining weight). Svante (Tidholm) falls into melancholia after having made his fortune in the ‘IT boom’. With his surplus of money and time he feels ‘just empty’ and wishes to ‘fill myself with something’. These human tales are woven in with landscapes of absurd opulence: a glamorous auto show staged for the newly wealthy in Shanghai, the manufacturing of highly-priced customisable life-size sex dolls in California; of routinisation: assembly-line production of goods, systematic transportation of people, workplace calisthenics preformed by factory workers, demonstration of OHS ergonomic exercises for office workers (Plate 3.1); of waste: vast mountains of rubbish, panoramic views of rubber tyres, barely equipped scrap workers salvaging metal in the Alang ship junkyard in India; of idealism and ideologies: Castro’s address to a sea of his supporters in perfect formation, George W. Bush’s emphatic speech about his new ethics, Zerzan’s ‘return to Eden’ scenario depicted in an ironically romantic scene of primitivism.

This circulation of materials in Surplus is mesmerising. Gandini and his two cinematographers collected ‘beautiful images of over-consumption’ from the United States, China, Cuba, India, Italy, Canada, and Sweden over a number of years. The flawlessly exposed super-16 footages are married with televised news, highly compressed web videos, archival 16mm film, advertising clips, and videos of various resolutions and formats, resulting in a rich tapestry of textures. The materiality of the
media provides the only index to what the viewer sees. The deliberate non-identification of places or times in the film accentuates the non-place quality of urban landscape (Plate 3.2). There is no clue to the location as the camera ‘cruises’ the newly built highways of Shanghai, which can equally be Hong Kong, Tokyo, Seoul, or elsewhere. This absence of geographic or national distinctions conjures a fluid space of a global command-supply chain that, in Gandini’s words, projects ‘the feeling […] of being in a hyper consuming planet.’ Surplus portrays the spatial order of supermodernity. Ordinary and familiar places are made strange: cities glow eerily against a black sky, high-rises and building sites sprout from the surrounding smog, industrial landscapes are deserted, the stock market is empty save for a few workers asleep at their stations. The composition of shots is calculated to show everyday scenes in a subtly different light. Using the techniques of advertising, the camera frames spaces beautifully as if they were exotic holiday locations. Instead of pristine nature, we see a lone excavator working a colossal rubbish heap against the tranquil background of a wind farm. The wasteland of Alang, where ill-equipped workers chip away at huge discarded tankers, is rendered like an allegorical painting (Plate 3.3). The light is golden, the pile of junk is monumental, the young men with their toil are the heroes. In a car park outside a shopping centre, the camera glides repeatedly alongside a stack of moving shopping carts in slow-motion, turning a banal scene into one of grace and elegance (Plate 3.3). Repetition, reiteration, variations, and decelerated action create a hypnotic and entrancing world of things.

If these images are the pictura element of Denkbilder, the inscriptio are the spoken words, and the subscriptio rests in gaps created by the editing process. Composer and percussionist Johan Söderberg is the film’s editor (and also responsible for its music compositions). He applies techniques of music arrangement to the editing of the visual materials. In some scenes, music sets the pacing for the images; at other times, the edited visual sequence generates the rhythm. This generative temporal structure creates lyrical flows of images and words. The repetitive action in factory work is spliced with the regularity of machinery and experts’ commentaries on economic trends. Their chime of ‘1%’ becomes the base rhythm for the sequence—repetitive action is set to the techno beat of global economic growth. Interviews and speeches of Bush, Bill Gates, Steve Ballmer, Zerzan, and Kalle Lasn amongst others, are broken down, cut up, and repeated to form choral mottos throughout the film. Amongst Söderberg’s editing techniques is his ‘Read My Lips’ treatment that creates montages where political figures,
In Gandini’s words, ‘say the things that they would never say and that everybody knows are more true than the things they usually say’. In the ‘G8 shop’ sequence, Kalle Lasn’s interview, which begins with ‘I think young people today has no hope’, is delivered by leaders of the G8 nations through ‘lip-syncing’. The leaders take turn to enunciate Lasn’s words that are directed against the mechanisms they support. As the ‘manipulation […] in Surplus [is] not a hidden agenda but [is] very open’, these sequences make no pretension to present factual truth. The film simply throws up contradictions that require further thoughts.

In another sequence, Bush’s speech, ‘We cannot let the terrorists achieve the objectives of frightening our nation to the point that we don’t do business… that people don’t shop…’, is intercut with Zerzan’s objection that ‘We’re terrorised into being consumers’, punctuated by Castro’s ominous warning against ‘impossible consumption’, and underscored by Tosca’s Orozco. This complex inscriptio is juxtaposed with dynamic pictura elements: speeding cars on three-lane highways, pedestrians hurried across zebra crossings, goods on display, crushed aluminium cans compacted into cubic units, an urban square at lunch hour, empty trading halls, anonymous skyscrapers, Indian scrap workers dismantling and hoarding metal pieces, farm workers slashing back crops, stacks of runaway shopping trolleys, all displaying the geometrical conflicts and directional tension found in the films of Eisenstein and Vertov. The sequence ends with a mid-shot of a scrap worker against the ruins of industry. The footage loops for 15 seconds during which he stares into the camera. In this brief reprieve, Gandini presents us with his subscriptio. We look back at the worker with the fragments of speeches echoing in our heads. Reflecting on what has been said, we hear Zerzan faintly repeating: ‘the will to consume terrorises you’.

Steve Ballmer’s evangelical performance at the Microsoft Developers Conference where he declared, ‘I love this company’, similarly becomes an incantation. The four words are recited one at a time, concluding with a frenzied ‘Yeah!’. Variations of the phrase and exclamation are arranged into a catchy phrase. It accompanies the sequence of office workers’ ergonomic stretches and factory workers’ group exercises. Castro is also seen to utter Ballmer’s motto at his address to the Cuban people. This magical spell binds Ballmer, Castro, and the workers to their respective companies, the hierarchical structures they constitute. Is this love an emergent property arisen from the congregation? Or is the
requirement of this love an enabling or constraining affect exerted by the company onto its employees? This rapturous sequence takes us to the commencement ceremony of the New York Stock Exchange. The wooden mallet is raised, just as it falls the scene cuts to a familiar motif of the rusty make-shift chisel at the Alang salvage yard. The heavy hammer hits the chisel, resounding with a loud clang. These complex montages bring together contexts and specific acts or events that are dialectically opposed. However, the film does not operate on dialectical argumentation, it does not weigh up arguments with counter-arguments. Instead, it opens up spaces for reflection through assembling disparate images, words, and sound within generative temporal structures. It moves beyond the realm of abstract entities and argument by transversing the different levels of material circulation. In doing so, the film expands the discourse of globalised capitalist economy beyond moralistic and didactic condemnation.

Compilation films make use of existing documents and found footage as their materials. Rather than deriving identifications from their relationship with an overarching plot, meanings emerge from the juxtaposition between singular and unique entities of history. At the same time, these emergent meanings provide a re-contextualisation for their interpretation. Logical, consistent, and coherent narratives are not an imperative of the compilation film form; instead, its assembly structure incorporates ambiguities, incongruities, and contradictions into its complexity.

3.4 Essaying

[A]n object of history cannot be targeted at all within the continuous elapse of history. And so, from time immemorial, historical narration has simply picked out an object from this continuous succession. But it has done so without foundation, as an expedient; and its first thought was then always to reinsert the object into the continuum, which it would create anew through empathy. Materialist historiography does not choose its objects arbitrarily. It does not fasten on them but rather springs them loose from the order of succession. Its provisions are more extensive, its occurrences more essential.

Here, Benjamin argues that continuity in conventional historical narration is a contingency. To be effectual, materialist historiography must break with this conventional but arbitrary insistence on the continuum. Quoting Benjamin, Tiedemann writes: ‘The “commonly accepted” historiography “ignores the places where tradition
breaks off. These are its rough edges and points that could offer a handhold to those who would like to get beyond it”.  

In this last section, we continue to explore assembly methods that draw productively upon these discontinuities. Ambiguities and gaps are the ‘rough edges and points’ that allow us to grasp history. In contrast, in order to achieve certainty in coherent narratives ambiguities are eliminated and gaps bridged; in so doing emergent meanings become fixed. Analogously, Bruzzi argues against narrative closure as a necessary part of documentary film practice. She claims that there is a prevalent tendency in film theory and scholarship to regard the existence of internal coherence as evident of ‘a desire for certainty or the desire for narrative closure’. She criticises this perceived need in direct cinema ‘to give coherence and logic to the potentially incoherent and illogical material’. She cites Brian Winston’s imposition of a temporal narrative logic (which he terms ‘chrono-logic’) onto early twentieth-century modernist city films as a reductive attempt to bring closure to what he regards as ‘actuality’s biggest narrative problem’. She writes: ‘The city films cited by Winston possess a central location—the city—and frequently abide by a diurnal structure. The action therein contained, however, is almost invariably non-narrative […] image association and not causal logic often determines the order of shots’. In arguing against White’s requirement for historical narratives and Winston’s ‘enthusiasm for completeness and linearity’, Bruzzi seeks to reclaim non-causal associative logic as effectual subversion of narrative closure. Specifically, she identifies the ‘focused chain’ as an effective structural device where events revolve loosely around a theme or centre. The diaristic format and the ‘prioritisation of […] the incomplete’ in journey films construct non-narrative chains that deem an underlying predetermined continuum unnecessary. She contends that the lack of completeness opens up possibilities for filmmaking and the film viewing experience.

De Landa’s narration of historical events resonates with Bruzzi’s focused chain. As an actualisation of Benjamin’s materialist historiography, entities in De Landa’s account spring ‘loose from the order of succession’ established by historicism. This methodology of working with incomplete fragments and associative logic evoke two literary forms: the essay form pioneered by sixteenth-century French writer Michel de Montaigne in his Essais (Essays), and the Japanese technique of zuihitsu (or following the brush) developed in tenth-century women’s diaristic writings, most notably Sei Shonogon’s The Pillow Book. De Montaigne’s work points to the origin of the French
word *essayer* meaning ‘to attempt’, ‘to try’. These essays are attempts to crystallise his thoughts through exploring experiences rather than abstract argumentation. His examination of concrete details in life is ponderous and speculative, putting ideas on trial through actions. *Zuihitsu* responds to everyday events with contemplation in the form of short prose. Compared with essaying *zuihitsu* is more passive, more fragmentary, or perhaps more poetic, producing meandering journeys through tenuously connected images. Both are congruent with Bruzzi’s focused chain in their aggregation of materials into sequences or journeys with no closure. Bearing these two non-causal structures in mind, I now turn to analyse two major works of this type: Chris Marker’s *Sans Soleil* (1983) and Patrick Keiller’s *London* (1994).

In Marker’s film, Sandor Krasna, a cameraman, writes to his friend, the unnamed narrator, of his observations, contemplations, and reflections of Japan, Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde Islands, Isle de France, Bijagós Islands, Francisco, Paris, Hong Kong, the Sahel, and Iceland. *Sans Soleil* journeys through the cultural, social, political, and historical landscapes of these locations. It maps the complex geographies emerged from cultural materials: the ferry from Hokkaido, the local markets of Bissau, the dismantled statue in Cape Verde, the dock at Pidjiguity, televised images, the treasures of the Vatican, the *take no ko* at Yoyogi Park, the *maneki neko* at Gotokuji Shrine, the stray dogs on Sal, the Icelandic volcano eruption, and other impermanent things. On one level, it reinterprets history through personal experiences; on another, personal recollections are shaped by remembrance of historical events. However, no autobiographical details, no definitive explanatory accounts, no chronology, no geography determines these narratives. The silent 16mm film snippets, shot on a Beaulieu, are threaded together by musings, speculations and remembrance, narrated over a complex score of sounds recorded on a non-synchronised portable tape deck, and music created on an electronic synthesiser. This filmic *zuihitsu* meditates on small individual moments via technological mediation; combinatorially, images, words, sounds, and texts form *Denkbilder* that critically pursue fleeting thoughts that spring from these encounters. At times, they collapse into a flashing image, a moment of recognition, then quickly dissolve back into the river of images and texts. *Sans Soleil* presents its own version of historiography that declares, ‘We don’t remember, we re-write memory as much as history is re-written’.
The title sequence is followed by shots of idle passengers travelling from Hokkaido to Honshu by ferry (Plate 3.4). Caught in temporal suspension on this long haul trip, they chat, read, and sleep. The scene reminds Krasna ‘of a past or future war: night trains, air raids, fallout shelters, small fragments of war enshrined in everyday life’. Visual fragments in the film move fluidly, unconstrained by the arrow of time. Sleeping faces on the ferry echo those in a later scene of crowded train carriages in Tokyo where the cameraman is brought into close proximity with passengers, whose gestures and faces he studies (Plate 3.4). The montage sequence begins with footage of fast receding train tracks intercut with the opening of the animated series *Galaxy Express 999* (1977-87). There is no narration, we are presented with jump cuts of faces; some look back, some stare fixedly off screen. The sounds of speeding trains reverberate faintly. As the passengers close their eyes and sleep, scenes from broadcast television and their soundtracks creep in. ‘The train inhabited by sleeping people puts together all the fragments of dreams, makes a single film of them—the ultimate film’. The simple montage of animated characters, revenging ghosts, fighting ninjas, sexual foreplays and sleeping faces suggests the act of collective dreaming. They dream not of utopia but of banal televised images.

The diametric opposite of this dreaming is the conscious act of seeing. In *Sans Soleil*, we observe people observing things: visitors to the Treasures of the Vatican exhibition, shoppers in front of a John F. Kennedy automaton, subjects of cameras (Plate 3.5). Marker captures these looks of conscious looking. On the Cape Verdes Islands we encounter inhabitants who unreservedly look back at the camera-eye. Krasna muses, ‘Frankly, have you heard anything stupider than to say to people, as they do in film schools, not to look at the camera?’ In Praia, the cameraman roams the streets with his Beaulieu and encounters a problem of ‘how to film the lady of Bissau?’. We see mid-shots of women, some with their backs turned, others glancing while pretending not to look, still others simply staring back. Krasna writes:

> It was in the marketplaces of Bissau and Cape-Verde that I could once again stare at them again with equality. I see her. She saw me. She knows that I see her. She drops me her glance, but just at an angle that it was still possible to act though it was not addressed to me. And at the end, the real glance—straight forward that lasted a twenty-fourth of a second, the length of a film frame.
Conscious looking is mediated by film images. Marker speaks of his fascination with not only what he sees but with why he sees what he sees. In catching the eye of the observed Krasna finds the faces that witness the passing of time. In the ceremony for the repose of the soul of the broken doll, the Buddhist monks’ ritualistic gestures are intercut with devotees in the act of praying (Plate 3.5). The narrator relates Krasna’s thoughts on humans’ relationship with inanimate things. On the subject of animism, the screen briefly cuts to an African festivity, a carnival of animals encountered earlier in the film. Outside the Japanese temple, the broken dolls are transferred to a pit as the congregation solemnly looks on. Paper wrapping is lit and the dolls are set alight. The camera focuses on a single doll. Its straight black hair frames its uncannily human expression. Flames lick fiercely, smoke envelops the doll (Plate 3.6). The sound of Buddhist chants grows louder. A man with thick-rimmed glasses and a head bandage looks on, a young woman whose fringe casts a heavy shadow over her eyes looks on, another woman with a face strikingly similar to the doll’s looks on (Plate 3.6). Krasna writes, ‘I looked at the participants, I think the people who saw the Kamikaze pilots had the same look on their faces’.106 This intent expression is worn by the witness of history. By incorporating archival footage into the work: rocket launches, shooting of a giraffe, the guerrilla wars of Bissau, and the last rites of kamikaze pilots, the audience too witnesses history. The act of witnessing is an act of conscious looking, which Barbara Stafford compares with the act of praying—when one pays attention to a presence other than oneself.107 This image of praying is a motif in the film and, like technology and animals, mediates between past and future worlds.108

Death constitutes another motif in the film: death of things, death of animals, death of people. Death inscribes a partition in the journey of life and marks the irreversibility of time. Rituals mediate this irrevocable passing of time: a couple submitting the name of their missing cat to the Shinto kami sama (gods), the purification ceremony in Okinawa, the seijin no bi (coming of age) for young women, and Donda yaki—the burning of New Year’s ornaments. For Krasna, it is the Donda yaki in its destruction of things ‘ennobled by a ceremony’ that solves the enigma of the Icelandic children footage. The film opens with this image: against rich green hills, three children are huddled together smiling as if transfixed by the camera (Plate 3.6). For Krasna this is ‘the image of happiness’. He finds it impossible to insert the brief footage into any continuum of images, so he brackets it with black film leader. At the end of the film its isolation is dissolved by the
realisation that the Icelandic village was destroyed by a volcanic eruption. The image is made meaningful by its destruction. ‘It’s not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation’. This is a moment of recognition. In the same way the scene of the 1980 military promotion ceremony at Cassaque unfolds as the narrator speaks of its future when ‘Luis Cabral, the president will be in prison, and the weeping man he has just decorated, major Nino, will have taken power’. The constellation illuminates ‘a pit of post-victory bitterness, and that Nino’s tears did not express an ex-warrior’s emotion, but the wounded pride of a hero who felt he had not been raised high enough above the others’. Can the ‘web of time’ be mended? Can the unjust suffering of the indigenous Okinawans be healed by the prayers of the Noro? Can the inexplicable act of Kamikaze pilots be exonerated by Ryoji Uebra’s last letter? Can the betrayal of revolutionary struggle be forgiven through remembering? These questions resonate with Benjamin’s writings on incompleteness: ‘history is not only a science, but equally a form of remembrance. What has been “established” by science can be modified in remembrance. Remembrance can make the incomplete (happiness) complete, and render the complete (suffering) incomplete’.

In _Sans Soleil_, rituals perform the intermediary rites to the understanding of history. In Krasna’s proposed science fiction film named after Modest Mussorgsky’s composition _Sunless_, the protagonist moves fluidly in time just as Krasna’s images do. He comes from a future where total recall is possible, but in losing the power of forgetting he also loses the meaning of history. Marker suggests that filmmaking, like remembrance and history, is the practice of pattern recognition in a manner similar to Sei Shônagon’s lists. Lists pluck out ‘small individual moments’ from the ‘elapse of history’ and ‘by learning to draw a sort of melancholy comfort from the contemplation of the tiniest things this small group of idlers left a mark on Japanese sensibility much deeper than the mediocre thundering of the politicians’. For indeed, ‘materialist historiography does not choose its objects arbitrarily. It does not fasten on them but rather springs them loose from the order of succession’. _Sans Soleil_ is a careful orchestration of forms, rhythms, tempos, and cycles of these ‘small individual moments’. The Kennedy automaton cuts perfectly to the gesticulation of the nationalist leader, the Narita protests recall the exasperating utopian ideals of the 1960s. The intensities of the images evoke the absence of synchronous audio. Spoken words, music tracks, and ambient sound recordings
interweave time, place, and memory. Repetition, permutation, and variation generated by the editing process fold these multiplying patterns of images and thoughts that revolve around the concepts of history and memory into configurations.

In its zuihitsu structure, Sans Soleil’s 100 minutes of thoughts and images illuminate magical culture through rituals, material culture through the impermanence of things, and technological culture through the imaging apparatus. These complex chains stretch Denkbilder over the duration of the film, placing inscriptio, pictura, and subscriptio at great distances from each other, intertwining and intersecting multiple strands. The history of Kamikaze is disaggregated into a word, footage, and a letter. These elements were distanced by filmic time as well as the technological removal of traces in the archival footage. By passing through the Spectron video synthesiser, images of war planes, military inspections, and the pilots are reduced to outlines and contoured surfaces. The final words of a Kamikaze pilot are read out over these abstract shapes. We recall those faces that bear witness to the burning of the dolls.

In contrast to Sans Soleil’s zuihitsu structure, Patrick Keiller’s London extends de Montaigne’s essay form. The Narrator and his friend Robinson (neither of whom we see) make three expeditions on foot around London as homage to English Romanticism (whose preferred mode of travel is walking). The Romantics consider the physical act conducive to thinking and its speed suitable for communion with the surrounds. The film is edited to this steady walking pace with moderately long takes. The city is filmed entirely on a locked tripod. Movement is solely provided by actions that occur within the frame. In this way, we view London’s built environments: architecture, building sites, boarded up terrace houses, suburbs, lanes, streets, roads, motorways, roundabouts, squares, gardens, fields, markets, supermarkets, shopping malls, railway stations, bridges, river banks, cricket grounds, golf courses, statues, monuments, gates, bridges, pubs, corner shops, commons, and undeveloped land. These unremarkable landscapes are framed with great deliberations, creating compositions reminiscent of Romantic paintings. Our encounters are rhythmically interrupted by black frames and intertitles, and further mediated by narration, ambient sound, and music. Sometimes images illustrate the spoken words, or they suggest what is unsaid; at other times, images are complemented by location sound recordings, or the audio suggests what is outside the frame; more often, what is seen, what is heard, and what is thought diverge. The
Victorian masonry of the Vauxhall Park gatepost Robinson supposedly listens to is seen with the sounds of children playing, birds, and sirens. When the Narrator speaks of Robinson's failure to 'contact anyone who can help him' find out whether Arthur Conan Doyle lived in Clapham, we see a shop signed 'Spiritualist'. A quotation from de Montaigne is coupled with painted words that advertise a 'Montaigne School of English'. Silent footage of John Major's re-election speech is juxtaposed with a list of sufferings Robinson predicts would befall him under his government. The narration pauses periodically to contemplate messages on billboards, urban landscapes, open spaces, and flowing water; in these interludes, images of London permeate.

Like Sans Soleil, the journeys in London are highly complex. The Narrator and Robinson’s three major expeditions to the south, north-east and north-west, and their movements within the city provide a geographically accurate map, visually marked by architecture, roads, green spaces, the river, and pub signs. The calendar of annual public events, such as Trooping the Colour in June, the Notting Hill carnival in August, Guy Fawkes night in October, and Remembrance Day in November, and the total lunar eclipse in December, charts the period between the dates 11 January 1992 and 9 December 1992, shown on two intertitles. Political events of 1992 provide finer subdivisions: presentation of budget and announcement of the election date in March, polling day and John Major’s re-election in April, the unveiling of a controversial statue by the Queen Mother in May, the European monetary crisis in September, pit closure and the miner union’s protest in October, and so on. This almanac is further punctuated by IRA bomb attacks. Interwoven into these contemporary timelines are the history of Britain and stories of literary figures from the eighteenth to early twentieth centuries. The geography of the city is mapped through these temporalities. A walk in the city is a walk through history.

The film opens with the Tower Bridge. It cuts to the film title, the Narrator announces, ‘It is the journey to the end of the world’. We are subsequently introduced to his former lover, Robinson, his work, his way of living, his interest in a group of French poets who found themselves in London at different points in time, and his project. The pair begins their first expedition at the central data point of London, the equestrian statue of Charles I in Charing Cross, on 30 January, the exact three hundred and forty-third anniversary of the king’s execution in 1649. The close up of the statue cuts to a wide
shot revealing Trafalgar Square in the background. Robinson professes remnants of the
failed English revolution are all around. Described as the last intellectual to re-claim
the city, Robinson travels through time to locate sites of lost memory and history in
order to solve this ‘problem of London’. The Narrator is not optimistic about his
friend’s project:

I was beginning to understand Robinson’s method, which seems to be
based on that English culture has been irretrievably diverted by the
English reaction to the French Revolution. His interests in Sterne and
the other English writers of the eighteenth century and in the French
poets who followed Baudelaire was an attempt to rebuild the city [in]
which he found himself as if the nineteenth century had never
happened. Of course, he is bound to fail.

English Romanticism underlies this walking expedition in its sensibility as well as its
itinerary. Beginning with a visit to Horace Walpole’s Strawberry Hill House on a March
day, and having met two Peruvian musicians near Raynor Gardens, Robinson and the
Narrator travel north through Twickenham to Richmond Hill. After surveying the valley
from Joshua Reynolds’ house there, they head away from the river at Isleworth
bypassing Syon Park to Kew. Their journey is visualised through a series of postcard-
images of monuments, structures, and bridges along the route (Plate 3.7). They meet the
river again at Mortlake and fall asleep at the water’s edge. The intertitle ‘UTOPIA’
flashes up, and we consider the narrator’s (or Robinson’s) convoluted description of a
utopian society ‘in the nostalgia of the electronic age’ as we watch debris floating along
with the river current. The screen cuts to black. The expedition ends in Hammersmith.
As they rested outside the house of William Morris, the Narrator says, ‘We remembered
what we used to think of as the future: sophisticated engineering, low consumption,
renewable energy, public transport. But just now, London is all waste, without a future;
its public spaces either void or the stage-set for nineteenth century reactions, endlessly
re-enacted for television’. The screen cuts to one second of black before returning to
views of the river and a rumination on the transportation of refuse on the Thames. This
is followed by a visual poem of London bridges edited to the reading of Arthur
Rimbaud’s Les Ponts (The Bridges). These short scenes form loose Denkbilder with an
inscriptio of ‘Utopia’ and various pictura of waste. They bear the subscriptio of a wish image
of an utopian society, an imagined future, and a lamented present. Elements of
Romanticism’s resistance to industrial modernisation underlie these thoughts. A
contested place where conflicts are staged through history, the constant tension in
London is amplified by the contrast between the quietude of the scenes and the turbulence of histories, between movement and stillness, between journey and stasis. By imagining a present as if the nineteenth century never existed, Robinson can only see mournful desolation and the squandered excess of the present.

If *Sans Soleil* is redolent of Sei Shōnagon’s *zuihitsu*, then Keiller’s work espouses the techniques and styles of Laurence Sterne. The Narrator notes: ‘Robinson credits Sterne with the discovery of the cinema in his description of duration as the succession of ideas which follow and succeed each other in our minds like the images on the inside of the lantern turned around by the heat of a candle’. Sterne took inspiration from de Montaigne’s *Essais* and made digression the central device of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentlemen*. In the novel, constant asides and detours take readers through unexpected routes away from the supposed main story. Like de Montaigne and Tristram Shandy, the Narrator’s and Robinson’s perambulations are impelled by unexpected events (IRA bombings), chance encounters, and other distractions. This flânerie is the medium of experience in the city. It speaks to Benjamin’s concept of distraction as an alternate mode of perception through the city’s architecture. In a summer month following the election, the pair goes on their second expedition beginning at the Stockwell Garage. They follow the Northern Line to Oval, where they rest outside a derelict hospital. They pass post-war social housing developments in Elephant and Castle, and converse with one of their last residents. They arrive at London Bridge Railway Station in the evening rush hour and, crossing the Thames the following morning, they reach the City of London. Rimbaud’s *Ville or City* is recited to images of commuters crossing the bridge; the Narrator defines the ancient city’s boundary via its contemporary statistics, operations, and governance. The pair make diversions: to marvel at the London Stone on Cannon Street, to view the bas relief on Christopher Wren’s *Monument to the Fire of London*, to wander amongst half-built high-rises in the financial and banking district of Bishopsgate. Heading northeast through Shoreditch, they pause at Boundary Estate, built by the London County Council in the 1890s. Resuming their journey on Kingsland Road the next day, they visit John Evelyn’s cabinet of curiosities at Geffrye Museum before continuing onto Stoke Newington. On Church Street, Robinson’s quest to find Manor School, attended by Edgar Allan Poe, is met with a devastating discovery that it longer exists. Instead he finds Daniel Defoe’s residence stands opposite.
Robinson considers himself a materialist and believes that historical events can be revealed through their molecular structures. This second expedition is a walk through these molecular structures of historical events in modern architecture (Plate 3.8). Beginning with the image of red double-decker buses parked under the magnificent gothic roof structure of the 1952 Stockwell Garage, designed and built using reinforced concrete (instead of steel due to a post-war shortage), Robinson directs our attention to a fence built using air raid shelter stretchers, and the design of Routemaster buses based on light-weight aluminium aircraft technologies developed during the Second World War. The derelict arts and craft Edwardian Grade II listed Belgrave Hospital for Children,123 the ‘temporary’ pre-fabricated council housing,124 and the 1959 Alexander Fleming House designed by Ernő Goldfinger using modernist principles, saved from demolition125, all speak to the ingenuity of modernist designs and their ‘good intentions’. Boundary Estate, a visionary council-housing scheme that replaced the Old Nichol slum in London’s East End, represents a ‘fragment of a golden age, a utopia’ for Robinson.126 While he contemplates the triumph of egalitarianism in Arnold Circus, Keiller shows us the mansions through the broad tree-lined streets in the golden light of an afternoon. In this idyllic neighbourhood a boy on a bicycle is playing with a young girl in a dress and pinafore. This long-take frames an image of 1900 firmly in the present (signalled by the modern vehicles in the background). Architecture is the site where different temporalities converge in material forms. The London Stone, witness to the city’s ancient foundation, is now encased behind a metal grill within a building; Wren’s monument, witness to the rebuilding of the city, is flanked by other tall buildings; the modern high-rises of Bishopsgate, witness to a growing prosperity, now paused for a possible economic slump. In this way, architecture encapsulates history, embodying pasts and presents in material form.

Just as the Romantics permit themselves to be affected by their walking experiences, Robinson’s outlook shifts after a chance encounter inspires him to reclaim the city through ‘the conviviality of café life’ in the suburbs. In autumn, the pair sets out on their third expedition to North West London, tracing the river Brent, in search of this modernity (Plate 3.9).127 They begin at Brent Park, Neasden. After visiting the cafés of Tesco and Ikea (denoted by their giant names viewed from the motorway), Robinson finds Ealing Road in Wembley (whose ethnic diversity is captured in a shot of a bustling
street) more conducive for work. Travelling along the Northern Circular they reach Hanger Lane, where they move west following the river to Perivale. They trail the watercourse leaving the road, passing open spaces and golf courses. Looping around southwards, they pass Boston Manor reaching Brentford basin where they run into the two Peruvian musicians they met on their first expedition. After the expedition visiting Southall on a colleague’s invitation to attend Diwali, Robinson finds interests in the surrounding landscapes of Heathrow Airport. In the end he does not find the ‘vital and new artistic and literary activities’ emerging from London’s outer suburbs, its open fields, or its airport city. He concludes, ‘The true identity of London is in its absence […] As a city it no longer exists. In this alone, it is truly modern. London was the first metropolis to disappear’.

Yet Keiller, like Robinson, rescues London from its disappearance through its material history. Instead of disappearance, Keiller shows us London as a city of fragments whose experiences are captured in a series of Denkbild postcards created using a collection of curios: facts, fiction, memories, histories, images, sounds, and thoughts.

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We begin this chapter by exploring the materials of history in Benjamin’s Geschichtsphilosophie. The significance Benjamin places on images and objects marks an important divergence from Marx’s historical materialism. De Landa’s neo-materialism provides a productive path for extending Benjamin’s historical materialist practice. In particular, building on contemporary scientific understanding of complex systems that describe the majority of processes in the material world, De Landa’s concept of history assumes no end point, no equilibrium, no fittest design. In this framework, the notion of progress is meaningless. The construction of three parallel historical accounts in A Thousand Years of Non-Linear History shows how history can be constructed from ‘small individual moments’ with matter and energy as materials. Here, De Landa asserts history is ‘a narrative of contingencies, not necessities’. Bruzzi’s analogous approach to film and history in the construction of narratives allows us to explore assembly methods of contingent narratives in film practice. The compilation films of Rafferty and Keraudren, and the work of Gandini are woven using disparate materials selected from a range of recorded media that generate discontinuities and complexities. The journeys undertaken in Sans Soleil and London neither have nor require endings (narrative closure). Consonant
with Benjamin’s historical materialism, and De Landa’s philosophical-historical project, these film works, in Tiedemann’s words, ‘liquidate “the epic moment” of history and “construct” it as the discontinuum which it always has been’. This discontinuum harbours an openness that allows the past to collide with the present, forming constellations.

Kirst writes: ‘History, in Benjamin’s eyes, assumes the aspect of a kaleidoscope. He perceives it as infinite, ever changing constellations of past and present moments. The attempt to write “history” down will fail if it does not reflect this kaleidoscopic, evanescent character directly’. Imagery in Benjamin’s Denkbilder precisely captures this kaleidoscopic evanescence of history by drawing on gaps and caesura. The notion of incompleteness in Benjamin’s works and his Denkbilder serve as the departure point for the next chapter.

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6 The Treaty of Non-Aggression between Germany and the Soviet Union is also known as the Stalin-Hitler Pact.
8 Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, 249
9 Tiedemann, ‘Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?’, 91–2.
11 Ibid. 254.
12 Ibid. 255.
13 I use the term Marxian here to describe a general orientation that aligns with Marxism rather than one that is directly derived from Marxist theory.
14 Tiedemann, ‘Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?’, 87.
15 Up to that point, Benjamin’s historical materialism was largely interpreted through Georg Lukács’s History and Class Consciousness.
17 Tiedemann, ‘Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?’, 93–4.
18 Ibid. 91.
19 Ibid. 83. Tiedemann’s argument cites a number of reasons for Benjamin’s use of theological language, including a deliberate obscuring of references to destructive powers of the oppressed in relation to political reality for fear of being misconstrued as advocating for anarchism. Interestingly, this strategy contrasts Buck-Morss’s description of a younger Benjamin’s thoughts in the preceding quote.
20 Tiedemann answers this question in his essay. He argues that Benjamin’s intention to bring theology together with philosophy was to create a political praxis. Theology is to lend philosophy its power and its concepts; in doing so, this is to restore a certain destructive force to political action.
21 Tiedemann maintains, however, that while on the whole, the theses reconcile Benjamin’s own theological tenet with his philosophy by arguing that historical materialism must align itself with theology, the ninth thesis remains a secular emblem.
22 Karoline Kirst argues that his *Denkbilder* differ from those of his contemporaries, such as Theodor Adorno and Siegfried Kracauer, in that Benjamin’s thought-images do not have ‘formal structures of narrativization’. See Karoline Kirst, ‘Walter Benjamin’s “Denkbild”: Emblematic Historiography of the Recent Past’, *Monatshefte*, 86/4 (1994), 514-24.
23 Paul Stephens and Robert Hardwick Weston contend that the *Denkbild* form collapses the *pictura* and the *subscriptio*. See Paul Stephens and Robert Hardwick Weston, ‘Free Time: Overwork as an Ontological Condition’, *Social Text*, 26/1 (2008), 137–164.
24 Tiedemann, ‘Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?’, 76.
25 This ‘true picture’ is rendered in the fifth thesis as the dialectical image: ‘The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again’. See Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, 247.
26 Kirst, ‘Walter Benjamin’s “Denkbild”’, 515.
27 Ibid. 517.
28 Ibid. 519.
30 Ibid. 13.
31 Tiedemann suggests that Benjamin’s formulation of materialism in particular, shows his misunderstanding of Marx’s theory; or perhaps Benjamin simply misinterprets Marx’s writings for his own ends. See Tiedemann, ‘Dialectics at a Standstill’, 939.
32 Tiedemann, ‘Dialectics at a Standstill’, 939.
34 Kirst, ‘Walter Benjamin’s “Denkbild”’, 520. In this quote, Kirst refers Benjamin’s ‘Pariser Passagen II’.
35 Ibid. 520.
37 Ibid. 21.
41 De Landa’s analysis is not entirely incongruent with Marxist theory on capital and, to an extent, it does build on some of the same materials. However, Marx’s account of
exchange relationship is too simplified, narrow, and ‘goal-driven’ when compared to the analytical method practised by De Landa.

42 It is interesting to note that at the time of Benjamin’s writings, the physical sciences were also undergoing revolutionary changes in the conception of the universe. In particular, the development of quantum mechanics (quantum theory or quantum physics) in describing the physical reality of atoms and subatomic objects greatly changed the way the universe (from a microscopic to a macroscopic scale) is perceived. Andrew Crumey connects Benjamin’s engagement with Louis Auguste Blanqui’s *L’Eternité par les astres* (1873) and his prescient articulation of the concept of the multiverse with Benjamin’s understanding of the phantasmagoria of history. See Andrew Crumey, ‘Quantum Suicide: Walter Benjamin and the Multiverse’, *Andrew Crumey [Webpage]* (11 Jun. 2010) <http://www.crumey.toucansurf.com/quantum_suicide.html>, accessed 13 Jun. 2012.


44 Ibid. 21.


49 Ibid. 2.


51 De Landa describes this as ‘the subject emerges from the crystallisation in the field of raw intensities’.

52 De Landa is particularly critical of the twentieth-century neo-Kantian position that argues for concept-based or language-bound subjectivity. He discusses the ‘Thesis of the Linguisticity of Experience’ as an influential example. Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist, took a Kantian model of experience into the field of linguistics where he developed a system composed of ‘signifiers’ and ‘signifieds’ (that gave rise to the field of Semiotics). In this framework, the experience of the world is mediated by language and human concepts. Meanings are taken to have an arbitrary association to words. De Landa argues that this distancing concept of experience has led to reductionism and relativism. See De Landa, *Deleuze and the New Materialism*.

53 Gilbert Ryle’s definition of two types of knowledge are first, ‘knowing that’, and secondly, ‘knowing how’. ‘Knowing that’ is used in a declarative sentence or statement. It is either true or false. This refers to knowledge of facts, for example. ‘Knowing how’ is often used with a verb; it entails an action or skills, such as knowing how to swim, or knowing how to ride a bicycle. ‘Knowing how’ is embodied knowledge, acquired through physical experience and learning by practice. The question of subjectivity then can be phrased as: Is perception primarily a matter of ‘knowing that’ (factual) or ‘knowing how’ (experiential)?

54 A species’ extinction is an irreversible historical event.

55 The spontaneous crystallisation of water at 0°C and vapourisation at 100°C provide the most obvious examples.
Developed by Carl Friedrich Gauss, Bernhard Riemann, and Henri Poincaré, amongst others in the early twentieth century, originally to study objects deformation. This differential geometry provides Albert Einstein with the basis to develop his General Theory of Relativity in which he dispenses with Newtonian absolute space. Physical realities are actual; physical possibilities that are not actualised are virtual; both realities are real. An example would be when water is at room temperature; liquid is the actual state of the material. Water as a solid or as a gas is its other states. At room temperature these other states are virtual, but nonetheless real. ‘Evil’ is a primary example of a general category that is irrelevant in a materialist ontology as materialism excludes what is regarded as transcendental.

As frequently occurred in the Marxist revolution, the regard of topping the state as the successful goal of revolution, revolutionaries paid little thought to the complexities in implementing policies in a post-revolutionary government, and as a result this leads to failure on social and economic fronts. De Landa argues that it is the inability to effectively implement policies that leads to the failure to bring about real change. He cites post-revolutionary Cuba as an example. For example, a typical democratic governmental structure may include an executive body, a legislative body, and a judicial body. Each has its own jurisdiction, role, and agenda. For instance, there may be an area not covered by any of their jurisdiction, there may be conflation of roles, or conflicts may arise from the different agendas, and so on.

Specifically, Bruzzi refers to Bill Nichol's ‘family tree’. See Bruzzi, *New Documentary*.
Specifically, Shub works with Eisenstein’s ‘montage of attraction’ while Vertov develops his own conception of the practice.
Ibid. 24.
Ibid. 25.
Without making the audience aware of their construction, the films simply would not sustain. Works that play with this ambiguity include ‘mockumentary’ films.
Ibid. 23.
Bruzzi outlines two conventional uses of archival footage in historical documentaries. One convention is to concretise accounts by providing ‘iconic’ images that may be representative of certain eras or events (creating and affirming collective memories or imagination of history). A second use of archives treats footage as generic representation. Images that are placed alongside narration to illustrate the events recounted are only loosely connected or unconnected to the actual events. These visual materials are non-specific and meanings are conveyed through audio to incorporate the images into the story. Audiences simply make their own connections (between the audio and visual). Bruzzi describes these usages as ‘figurative’ in that they are illustrative in nature. They do not challenge any assumptions or present any arguments against the historical events.
Original purposes, such as documentation, information dissemination, communication, and persuasion.


Erik Gandini (dir.), *Surplus: Terrorized into Being Consumers* (Atmo, 2003).

Responding to Lars Von Trier’s ‘Documentary Manifesto’ and its stress on presenting truth objectively through stripping down filmmaking apparatus to a bare minimal, Gandini writes a ‘Surplus Manifesto’ in jest: ‘Don’t try to be too realistic or neutral. Cameras, microphones and editing suites are extraordinary tools not only to reproduce how reality is but to visualize how reality feels […] Don’t reduce yourself and your creativity to those of a surveillance camera’. See ATMO, ‘Surplus: Terrorized into being a consumers’, ATMO [webpage], (2000-2010) <http://www.atmo.ze>, accessed 22 Jun. 2005.

According to De Landa’s historical account, the appearance of surplus in early agricultural society is one of the initial instigators of market economy.

Gandini does not simply exalt consumerism’s apparent opponent: Castro’s Cuba, rather he approaches the society with caution. Tania’s story puts into question Castro’s belief of Cuba’s ‘democracy’ and Cubans’ absolute rejection of consumerism. Tania’s experience simply illustrates that the allure of consumerism and the power of desire can, and do, cross political and ideological lines. Is Cuba’s anti-consumerist policy and its advertising-free strategy a workable solution? The film proposes that life here may be free from consumerists’ concerns, but there is no escape from the omnipresent militarism that dominates the country. The government fills the space of advertising with its own slogans and propaganda. Although somewhat sympathetic to an alternative to consumerism, Gandini also equates an unquestioning (and unquestionable) mentality of this society with a mindlessness produced by consumerism. The film ends with the question: is a new world really possible?


Tiedemann, ‘Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?’, 92.


Bruzzi mentions Winston’s citing of Roland Barthes’ call for completeness in literature. The argument of incompleteness in literary form is not without controversy.


*Zuihitsu* is often translated as ‘miscellaneous essays’, a term which more scholars argue is inaccurate or insufficient. Detailed discussion of *zuihitsu* and the almanac form are the focus of the next chapter.

Chris Marker (dir.), *Sans Soleil* (Argos, 1983.)
Patrick Keiller (dir.), *London* (BFI, 1994).

Ibid., *Sans Soleil*.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.


Stafford defines this state of attention as ‘a prayer which slips into life without interrupting it’. See Stafford, ‘Wondering, Calculating Assessing the Era of Targeted or Veering Attention System’.

Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Walter Benjamin, Letter of March 16, 1937 to Max Horkheimer quoted in Tiedemann, ‘Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?’, 78.

Ibid.


Music in the film includes Beethoven’s *String Quartet No 15*, Brahms’ *Alto Rhapsody*, *The Lone Ranger*, and *El Negro Jose*.

I use a capitalised ‘Narrator’ as it appears in the credit.

The trooping of the colours is later revealed by the Narrator as originating from the exile of Charles II.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (London: Ann Ward, Dodsley, Becket & De Hondt, 1759-1767). Michael Winterbottom’s *Tristram Shandy: A Cock and Bull Story* presents a wonderful adaptation of Sterne’s novel, transposing a central theme or narrative from the original novel into a modern day film set. Like the novel, we are constantly distracted from following both the eighteenth-century story and the progress of the film’s making to other conversations, discussions, or events. See Michael Winterbottom (dir.), *Tristram Shandy: A Cock and Bull Story* (BBC Films, 2005).

That is the life of Tristram Shandy, which is never entirely or satisfactorily told in the novel.

Opened in 1926, funding cuts in the 1980s forced its closure in 1985. The empty building became the site of the Belgrave Homeless Project in 1989. The condition of the occupation deteriorated. After a murder in 1991, the place was evicted and has since been converted into apartments, called Belgrave Hall. At the time of filming, Keiller would probably have known the eventual fate of the building. See David Clement-Davies, ‘The price of poshness: The gentrification of Cl’m continues apace’, *The Independent*, 9 Aug. 1994, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/the-price-of-

124 Marshall Gardens was a group of housing made using houses pre-fabricated in Canada. It was near the Heygate Estate, another post-war housing estate, now facing demolition.

125 This has also been subsequently re-developed or converted into residential apartments in 1997, now called Metro Central Heights.

126 Keiller, London.

127 The café is significant as one of the first sites where modernity can be visualised as explored by Baudelaire. The expedition outside the city may also recall Henry Thoreau’s experiment in Walden.

128 London.

129 Tiedemann, ‘Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?’, 92.

130 Kirst, ‘Walter Benjamin’s “Denkbild”’, 518.
Plate 3.1.

Plate 3.2.

Plate 3.3.
Plate 3.4.
Plate 3.5.

Plate 3.6.
Plate 3.7.
Plate 3.8.
CHAPTER 4

Fragments

This final chapter brings together explorations of Walter Benjamin’s allegorical forms, montage principles, and assembly methods to extend a Benjaminian materialism into art practice, and specifically in his use of material fragments. I begin by looking at the different notions of incompleteness in Benjamin’s authorship with reference to the Kabbalah, Marx’s commodity fetishism, and his own immanent but finite critique. Within this notion of incompleteness is an unresolved tension between atemporality and history signalled in the first chapter. With this in mind, I investigate the transformation of the emblematic Denkbilder of One Way Street into the dense and fragile allegorical constellations of Das Passagen-Werk. Benjamin persisted with loose fragments in a deliberate absence of narrative framework against the insistent urging of Theodor Adorno to give form by providing theoretical mediation. The Adorno-Benjamin debate highlights what is at stake in Benjamin’s methodology. I propose that recognising the affective capacity of visual images, the autonomy of material objects, and the aesthetic function of the Arcades Project offers possibilities beyond the ‘dialectic without argumentation’ question. I present two possibilities: first, extending the textual Denkbilder through a re-introduction of the visual image invested with object materiality, and secondly, the adoption of zuihitsu as a disembedded schema for loose fragments to form multiple narratives. The proposed materialist Denkbild is speculated through examining the practice of Tacita Dean, and Esther Leslie’s exposition on the relation between craft, materials, and technology in Benjamin’s writings. The photobooks of Rinko Kawauchi and the multiscreen installations of Hiraki Sawa are analysed for their ‘technological organisation’ of everyday fragments as Denkbild-zuihitsu—thought-images that coalesce into constellations through the physical experience of objects. My argument concludes with proposing the almanac as a viable medium for the practice of fragmentation. By examining my own work, the almanac projects, I look at how materialist Denkbild and Denkbild-zuihitsu may manifest within kaleidoscopic and evanescent historical narratives. Rather than a critique of the work, this discussion focuses on methodology. In particular, I examine how Benjamin’s refusal to employ narratives as frameworks for his allegorical constellations is responded to by the almanac projects’ inclusion of multiplying narratives emerging from the interactions between fragments.
4.1 Incompleteness

In closing the previous chapter I suggested that incompleteness offers an openness that allows the past to be experienced in the present in a meaningful way. In this section I explore three aspects of incompleteness in Benjamin’s philosophy of fragmentation: the Kabbalist notion of ‘making whole’, Marx’s concept of ‘corruption of being’ and Benjamin’s own immanent but finite critique. A key reference to the concept of incompleteness is found in Benjamin’s article, ‘Eduard Fuchs, Collector, Historian’, where he argues against the reification of history and culture in the formulation of ‘cultural history’.1 He writes:

If the concept of culture is problematic for historical materialism, it cannot conceive of the disintegration of culture into goods which become objects of possession for mankind. The work of the past remains uncompleted for historical materialism. It perceives no epoch in which the completed past could even in part drop conveniently, thing-like, into mankind’s lap.2

Max Horkheimer raises his reservation about this notion of incompleteness in a letter to Benjamin.3 Rolf Tiedemann points out that their correspondence highlights Benjamin’s thinking in relation to his historiography, and suggests perhaps this was ‘the first time [Benjamin had] become aware of the explosiveness for historical materialism which lay in the concept of the incompleteness of the past’.4 Tiedemann identifies two principal charges Horkheimer laid against Benjamin’s claim: first, of idealism, and secondly, of theology, neither of which Benjamin counters in his reply.5 Tiedemann maintains that the first charge would have been rejected absolutely while the second would not have been denied. The notion of theology is touched upon in the previous chapter’s discussion in relation to ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’. Benjamin rephrased his initial response to Horkheimer’s letter in Konvolut N:

The corrective of this line of thinking may be found in the consideration that history is not simply a science but also and not least a form of remembrance <Eingedenken>. What science has ‘determined’, remembrance can modify. Such mindfulness can make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and the complete (suffering) into something incomplete. That is theology; but in remembrance we have an experience that forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally atheological, little as it may be granted us to try to write it with immediately theological concepts.6
The function of rituals as a medium for understanding history through remembrance is also obliquely explored in the analysis of Chris Marker’s *Sans Soleil*. In the context of the theses Tiedemann argues that incompleteness of history serves as a means for Benjamin to reconnect history with theology. His analysis explains Benjamin’s cryptic use of theological terms found in the theses, actively and covertly aligning theology as a motivating force that lends history its potentially explosive political dimension. Incompleteness is conceived as two images in the ninth thesis: ‘make whole’ and ‘smashed’. The first is traceable to Benjamin’s work on the Baroque and, as Scholem suggests, theologically to the Kabbalah; the latter points to Marx’s commodity fetishism which connects with Benjamin’s rejection of cultural reification in the Fuchs essay. In the third part of *The Dialectic of Seeing* Susan Buck-Morss presents a speculative account of an embedded Kabbalist approach in Benjamin’s thinking, particularly in the conception of *Geschichtsphilosophie*. Acknowledging Benjamin’s own claim of ignorance in the Kabbalah and the indirectness of his knowledge (gained from his study of the German Romantics), she identifies key aspects that had filtered through into his philosophy. Three structural parallels are particularly significant: the conception of redemption in relation to Messianism, the interpretation of past texts through present contexts, and materialist practice.

Mediaeval Kabbalist teachings were recast by the sixteenth-century Jewish mystic Isaac Luria into the doctrines that formed the basis of the modern Kabbalah. The Lurianic Kabbalah presents ‘an alternative to the philosophical antinomies of not only Baroque Christian theology, but also subjective idealism, its secular, Enlightenment form’. Kabbalist Messianism functions on a temporality that contrasts with that of Christianity. The first chapter of this thesis explores the conditions of modernity and supermodernity as concomitant to a temporality shaped by Christian theology where time is incomplete in an eternal messianic delay. In conceiving redemption as public, communal and, most importantly, a historical event that occurs in this world (and not a transcendental one) the Kabbalist Messianism suggests time can be transformed by humans as ‘historical agents’. Specifically, *Tikkun Olam* (mending the world, or healing and restoring the world) as articulated in the Lurianic mythological system speaks of the task of rectification after *Shevira* (shattering of the ‘sephirot vessels’): to recover the divine sparks residing in the scattered broken fragments throughout the material world. In this paradigm humans choose with their free will to undertake the task of ‘making whole
what was smashed’, a responsibility they share with God. In redeeming the sparks of holiness concealed within material nature Tikkun helps usher in the Messianic Age. This completion of time is not a return to paradise but rather a transformation of the world anew. This Messianic task is clearly analogous to the task Benjamin assigns to the materialist historian—the angel of history—whose task it is to ‘make whole what was smashed’, that is to redeem the practice of history. For both the practitioners of Tikkun Olam and historical materialism, the path to redemption is anchored firmly in the material world. It will be recalled that Benjamin concludes in his Trauerspiel study that when faced with the multiplicities of signs inhabiting nature that gave rise to a ‘referential arbitrariness, which seemed to negate the very claim of a “meaningful” nature, Baroque allegoricists abandoned nature for the transcendental realm’. In contrast, the Kabbalists must reconcile with material nature in order to complete their task. Tikkun Olam is a practice in cognition: to perceive and to recognise through naming the divine immanence in the material world. It is a task Benjamin transposes to the historical materialist in the naming of the profane embodied in the material objects of new nature.

In Benjamin’s image of ‘what was smashed’, Tiedemann identifies in Marxist terms ‘the corruption of the “Being of things” into an illusory counterparts’, that is the process of reification in commodity fetishism. In a way this image extends Benjamin’s declaration that ‘the work of the past is incomplete’ in the Fuchs essay. Benjamin qualifies: ‘The concept of culture, as the substantive concept of creations which are considered independent, of not from the production process in which they originate, then from a production process in which they continue to survive, carries a fetishistic trait. Culture appears in a reified form’. In the seventh thesis on the philosophy of history, Benjamin warns against perceiving ‘the past’ as ‘thing-like’ in the form of ‘cultural treasures’ whose origins the historical materialist ‘cannot contemplate without horror’. Instead a historical object must be ‘blasted out of the continuum of historical succession’ and ‘torn from its contexts’. The placement of objects in the present creates a ‘constellation saturated with tensions—[w]here the dialectical image appears’. This gives access to truth immanent in the objects, albeit momentarily. The Kabbalist practice of interpreting sacred texts with reference to the present underlies this approach. Buck-Morss writes:
As mysticism, Kabbalah reads [the sacred texts] for hidden meanings that could not have been known at the time of their writing, rejecting the historicist approach of interpreting texts in terms of authorial intent. Unconcerned with recapturing original meanings or with extrinsic concerns of historical accuracy, these mystics took delight in invention, often interpreting passages in a manner as remote as possible from that which Rabbinical philosophy had come to accept as correct. Their concern for tradition is in the interest of its transformation rather than preservation. They interpret the texts in order to illuminate their own era, in order to discover within it clues of the coming Messianic Age.

A homologous mode of interpretation is found in Benjamin’s speculative concept of criticism, which extends the immanent critique developed by the German Romantics. Immanent critique discovers the criteria of judgement in the process of criticism through which both the work and critical thoughts are transformed. Benjamin’s speculative but finite critique consolidates his re-casting of the Kantian concept of experience and incorporates a temporal complexity within art criticism. It provides an alternative to the two established, diametrically opposed options proposed by Friedrich Schlegel and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. The former argues that in completing an artwork through critique all possibilities are transformed into timeless necessities; for the latter, the work simply decays through time into ruins with its possibilities dissolved into contingencies. Extending Schlegel’s framework Benjamin argues that it is the form of a work (its medium of expression and what is expressed) that is incomplete. The task of the critic is to supplement the work of art with contingencies and unactualised possibilities by placing it ‘with regard to the totality of actual and possible works’. Howard Caygill explains:

The task of immanent critique is to unfold the formal possibilities inherent in a work of art, supplementing what was achieved in the actual work ‘afflicted with a moment of chance’ with other possible works that together constitute what Benjamin describes as the speculative ‘idea of art’. The work as this particular work of art is afflicted with the chance circumstances of its birth—its heritage—but is also open to the infinite chance of its future—its critical posterity.

Benjamin’s speculative critique affirms a work of art as an instance of historical contingencies and as such remains open to unactualised possibilities. The task of the critic therefore is to complete the work of art by speculating on ‘the infinite chance of its future’. This form of critique, however, risks resuming the ‘endless task of transformation’.

Caygill suggests that the ‘desire to terminate the endless task of
criticism by resorting to an “idea” or “truth” which becomes its atemporal, ideal telos’ is apparent throughout Benjamin’s work as a ‘tension between a finite but speculative concept of criticism and one which dogmatically seeks timeless truth’. This manifests as the tension between symbols and allegories whose distinction lies precisely in their temporality. Buck-Morss writes:

In allegory, history appears as nature in decay or ruins and the temporal mode is one of retrospective contemplation; but time enters the symbol as an instantaneous present—‘the mystical Nu’—in which the empirical and the transcendent appear momentarily fused within a fleeting, natural form. Organic nature that is ‘fluid and changing’ is the stuff of symbol, whereas in allegory, time finds expression in nature mortified, not ‘in bud and bloom, but in the overripeness and decay of her creations’.

The Kabbalists avoid the ‘allegorical network’ that entraps the Baroque allegorists in ‘veritable eruptions of images, embodied in the mass of metaphor’ by discovering a symbol that offers ‘a reflection of true transcendence [that] “signifies” nothing and communicates nothing which is perceived in the time of Nu (mystical now)’. Like the Baroque allegorists the Kabbalists see nature as imperfect and broken, but instead of mourning for the loss of perfection, they meditate on the broken things of this world in order to discover the divine sparks hidden within. In doing so they gain access to a fleeting image of truth in ‘an instantaneous present’. In the new nature of modernity all that remains is fragmentary and incomplete. Benjamin hopes to gain access to the same ‘mystical now’ through allegories by meditating on the debris of industrial culture materialistically. The past as expressed in these material objects collides with the present through montage, bringing about the dialectical image. This fleeting image flashes up and divulges unactualised possibilities. This is the task of Benjamin’s materialist historian, one that is to be conceived as a political act. This is also the task of Benjamin’s art critic, who is charged with completing the work of art. Moreover, this is the task Benjamin undertakes in the Arcades Project.

The tension between atemporality and historical contingencies, however, remains unresolved in Benjamin’s works. In particular, it is exacerbated when the emblematic Denkbild form of One Way Street is transformed into an allegorical one in the Arcades Project. I explore this tension by considering Karoline Kirst’s supposition that ‘Benjamin reaches the limit of the historiographical potential of the emblematic Denkbild’ in
In doing so, I speculate on the unactualised possibilities of thought-images and propose an extension of Denkbilder to include object forms and their material presence through visual means.

4.2 Haptic perception

In ‘Walter Benjamin’s “Denkbild”: Emblematic Historiography of the Recent Past’, Kirst provides an extensive mapping of Benjamin’s Denkbild in relation to the Baroque emblem and his modern historiography. She argues that the tripartite structure of inscriptio (motto), pictura (image), and subscriptio (related thought) of Benjamin’s Denkbilder is greatly ‘foreshortened’ in ‘Pariser Passagen II’. They incorporate multiple historical moments within the image and in ‘achieving such a high degree of multidimensional signification and “Gleichzeitigkeit” […] the reader is left unaware of the secret historiographic insight’. In Thought-image: Frankfurt School Writers’ Reflections from Damaged Life, Gerhard Richter contends that in transposing the literary form of the Denkbild in One Way Street to the dialectical image as a philosophical device in the Arcades Project, the task becomes finding the ‘right distance’ (rechten Abstand) and ‘proper perspective’ (richtigen Blickwinkel) for cognition (Erkenntnis). While Richter does not reach the same conclusion as Kirst, he indicates this radical adjustment does entail its own ‘c(o)urse’. He writes, ‘in his welcoming of aberrations (Abweichungen) not merely as a threat to legibility but also as a constitutive moment of the methodological principle […] the results of the attempt to find the right Abstand and Blickwinkel may be as unpredictable as the sea itself’. To make sense of this transposition from emblems to allegories we contrast the capacities of texts, images and objects in Benjamin’s materialism. The Adorno-Benjamin debate highlights what is at stake in this transposition. Specifically in response to the limits of Benjamin’s Denkbild as put forward by Kirst, I ask: can the pictura element of a Denkbild expand visually to absorb the material presence of objects into the image and, by doing so, overcome its limits? I answer this question as guided by Esther Leslie’s exploration of Benjamin’s materialism and the works of Tacita Dean.

Readers will recall that One Way Street and On the Origins of German Mourning Plays were published in the same year. Although diametrically opposed in styles and approaches, a clear thread runs through these two major works connecting the explorations of
allegorical practice in *Trauerspiel* to the transformation of the Baroque emblem as the *Denkbild* in *One Way Street*. Benjamin’s habilitation thesis uses his speculative but finite critique to identify the principal forms of mourning plays, and in the same instance asserts the significance of allegorical practice in the discontinuous reality of emerging modernity. *One Way Street* enacts a speculative practice on modern experience through the *Denkbild* form whose *inscriptio*, *pictura*, and *subscriptio* revolve around images of material reality: ‘Filling station’, ‘Breakfast room’, ‘Gloves’, ‘Standard Clock’, and so on. Buck-Morss writes,

> The *Trauerspiel* study attempts to ‘redeem’ allegory theoretically. *One Way Street* does this practically, and transforms the meaning of redemption in the process. Not the allegorical object […], but the allegorical practice is redeemed. […] It is not the desire to rehabilitate an arcane dramatic genre that motivates Benjamin, but the desire to make allegory actual. The allegorical mode allows Benjamin to make visibly palpable the experience of a world in fragments, in which the passing of time means not progress but disintegration.29

Aside from the many historical contingencies that contributed to the incompleteness of *Passagen-Werk*, Benjamin’s tendency to draw on antinomies and antithetical matters both enabled and threatened the project. Early sketches for the *Arcades Project* date back to a year prior to *One Way Street*’s publication when Benjamin planned for a ‘fiendish intensification’ of ‘profane motifs’ shared with the former collection of *Denkbilder*.30 Part of this intensification suggests a move from perceiving a subjective life-world through self-contained emblems to a presentation of an object-filled world as inhabited by extensive allegories. Emblems are imagistic, they are capable of transforming objects into images. Objects remain in allegories but are stripped bare, alluding to presence through absence. In his *Trauerspiel* study, Benjamin identifies the impoverishing quality of allegories in the way ‘the concept strips the object of the immediacy of lived experience in order that it may elevate it to an object of special significance, one that "partakes of the genuine unity of truth"’.31 In Baroque allegories, nature is stripped of its liveliness, and in its place is its decay. Through its debasement, nature is consecrated. For Benjamin, allegories are borne out of crisis; they are capable of ‘registering the dissolution of stable, hierarchised, meaningful existence’.32 In the poetry of Baudelaire, the fragmented temporal experience of the nineteenth century, convoluted and folded into overlapping cycles of production, destruction, obsolesce, and decay, can only be approached through the ‘allegorical way of seeing’. While emblematists lead readers
through disconnections to a possible synthesis, allegories present impoverished and
estranged objects. By intensifying the ‘profane motifs’ found in the emblematic
*Denkbilder*, Benjamin did indeed need to be fiendish. Adorno, who coined the term
*Denkbild*, praised Benjamin’s emblem-like textual images in *One Way Street*. He argues
that the grounds to ‘artificially exclude’ reflection and give over ‘the physiognomy of
things […] to the flash’ is ‘not because Benjamin the philosopher despised reason but
rather because it was only through this kind of asceticism that he hoped to restore
thought itself at a time when the world was preparing to expel thought from human
beings’.

However, this ‘asceticism’ in Benjamin’s later projects was unsustainable for Adorno. In
response to Benjamin’s Baudelaire and *Passagen-Werk* drafts, Adorno insistently urged
for the adoption of theory to mediate the fragmented motifs. Buck-Morss encapsulates
this disagreement in a question: is dialectics possible without argumentation? Karen
Feldman argues that Adorno’s criticism of Benjamin’s historical materialism as ‘not
dialectical enough’ has a chiastic relationship with the same criticism he has of
Benjamin’s discussion of art in the ‘Work of Art in the Epoch of Technical
Reproducibility’ essay. The precise point of disagreement lies in the autonomy Benjamin
attributes to the dialectical image, which Adorno deems the sole property of art. I
suggest that the autonomy attributed to the dialectic image comes directly from the
historical materials and objects that produce it. In the context of Kabbalist hermeneutic
practice the autonomy of things can be interpreted in concert with Benjamin’s ‘quasi-
magical cognitive attitude’ to material objects. Like the Kabbalists’ meditation on the
physical world to recover divine sparks hidden within shattered fragments, Benjamin’s
approach endows material objects with a magical quality, or an alterity. For Benjamin,
physical objects are speculative in nature. In her essay ‘Traces of Craft’ Leslie writes,
‘Benjamin’s understanding of objects—craft objects, mass-reproduced objects—
includes essentially an understanding of experiences to be had with objects, and
memories evoked by objects or encoded in objects—memories of objects in all possible
sense’. Rather than treating objects as representation these objects embody knowledge
and experience through *haptic perception*. For Benjamin, ‘[t]o touch is to know the
world’—that is experience.
In *One Way Street*, Benjamin confronts the multiplicity of modern experience through the *Denkbild* form, where the image plays a central but covert part. Kirst writes, ‘Instead of clarifying a thought by means of an image in linear fashion, or vice versa, the *Denkbild* presents an image as an integral albeit not immediately recognizable part of the thought’.39 Benjamin’s literary *Denkbild* alters the Baroque emblem’s tripartite structure by transforming the visual *pictura* into a textual image. Paul Stephens and Robert Hardwick Weston explain:

> The *inscriptio* is generally preserved in the form of the italicized title, while the *pictura*, corresponding to the *Denkbild*’s anchor in subjective experience, is collapsed into the *subscriptio*, making the visual imago a component of the exegetical text that traditionally explained it. On the level of content and style, the collapsing of *pictura* into *subscriptio* aims to forge a mental image through persuasive vividness, or anazographesis.40

Anazographesis41, a practice of evoking emotional impulse through imaging (perceived or imagined), is apposite for framing the complex relationship between word and image within Benjamin’s speculative philosophy. Caygill argues that this relationship is critical to Benjamin’s authorship and one that defines and is defined by his concept of experience. He writes:

> Benjamin’s philosophy of the image is best understood through an examination of its place within the speculative philosophy of experience. Just as the critique of the word was transformed by the speculative concept of experience, so too was the critique of the image. The analysis of the image within a philosophy of speculative experience had considerable implications for the critique of the experience of images in the guise of art criticism and of art history. Benjamin argued that images should be understood as a technology for organising experience, and that visual art was a way of speculating upon the limits of experience from within. However, the technological organisation of experience through the image did not necessarily agree with the political organisation of experience through the word.42

This speculation on the relationship between art and technology in the contexts of modern experience is found in ‘The Work of Art in the Epoch of Technical Reproducibility’ (cited hereafter as ‘The Work of Art’).43 The essay tells a story of change. It is not a gloomy tale that yearns for the past, but rather it is a positive proposal to rescue *Erfahrung* from becoming *Erlebnis* through new forms of art in the technological present. Leslie defines Benjamin’s *Erfahrung* in terms of craft: hands-on know-how, practical knowledge learnt through the hands, wisdom born of experience. In the industrial age, *Erfahrung* is undermined by the automaticity of machines,
standardised by the uniformity of mass-produced products, and endangered by the shock of modernity. Erlebnis, the merely lived-through experiences, is generated by the subjugation of the human body to the unvarying rhythm of machines. Technologies made the hand redundant, the haptic is severed from the other senses. Benjamin proposes a return to the haptic, not by harking back to pre-industrial craft objects, but by developing a new art form that is capable of transposing the quality of tactile experience to the present through technology. In the essay, he begins by tracing the transformation of Handwerk (artisan labour) into Kunstwerk (artwork), as Leslie notes, ‘from craft to art, from unauthored object to authored valuable’. She writes, ‘But Benjamin's essay also scents possibilities for a post-bourgeois object, a non-auratic multiple, prefigured in photography and film. This technical multiple does not squash out authentic experience but translates it into object-forms and forms of experience appropriate for a modern age’. This ‘post-bourgeois object’ and ‘non-auratic multiple’ is arrived at by transforming Kunstwerk into Kraftwerk, where Erfahrung can be restored through technology. The meaning of the German word Kraft is power. This power lies in the tactility of Handwerk that has its analogue in storytelling. Benjamin regards the textual practice of storytelling (and the writing of history) as a form of weaving. By transposing the physicality of storytelling: collectivity, proximity, slowness of time, to modern experience, Erfahrung can be restored. As Leslie explains:

The physico-spatial ‘bringing closer’ of new cultural forms allowed by mass reproduction provides a ‘re-modelling’ of pre-industrial folkloric relations of space. Crucial to the earlier epic tradition is a reliance on the propinquity of a collective of listeners. Industrial capitalist relations corrode the oral communicability of experience, but technical reproduction reimburses that change, instituting new potential for a familiarity between receivers and producers, once more in the form of collective experience: through mediated mass-produced things. Space is recovered technically.

In ‘The Work of Art’ essay, Benjamin discusses film as a new form of mass art that has the potential to become a Kraftwerk. As examined in Chapter 2, modern architecture with its immersion of the human body that allows space to be intuited corporeally in a distracted mode of perception is the premium example of such power. Kraftwerk has a one-to-one direct physical relationship between actuality as experienced and physical materials—an indexicality that also defines analogue technologies. Chemical-based film and photography enact a one-to-one mapping of actuality (light) onto physical materials (silver compounds). Leslie further writes, ‘The photographic object brings objects closer
for inspection, providing an imprint of traces of the world. It reveals traces (Spuren), not of the potter’s handprint, but of the objective modern world. This imprint is not a reflection but a trace, an analogue that in mapping the world leaves behind the textures of the technology that produced it. Contemporary artist Tacita Dean argues that artistic medium that bears such a relationship provides us with a direct experience of the world. She writes of her practice:

Analogue, it seems, is a description—a description, in fact of all things I hold dear. It is a word that means proportion and likeness, and is according to one explanation, a representation of an object that resembles the original; not a transcription or a translation but an equivalent in a parallel form: continuously variable, measurable and material. Everything we can quantify physically is analogue: length, width, voltage and pressure. Telephones are analogue; the hands of watches that turn with the rotation of the earth are analogue; writing is analogue; drawing is analogue. Even crossing out is analogue. Thinking too becomes analogue when it is materialised into a concrete form [...] It is as if my frame of mind is analogue when I draw: my unconscious reverie made manifest as an impression on a surface.

Analogue mapping provides a closeness by translating tactility analogously through technology. In Dean’s film works Prisoner Pair (2008) and Michael Hamburger (2007), she tells stories of the lost craft of growing pears inside bottles (to make eau de vie or schnapps), of cultivating varieties of apples made rare by commercialisation, and of writing poetry. Erfahrung is embedded in the Handwerk: pears in bottles, apples in taxonomic groupings, paper in reams and stacks, delineated on analogue film. Stories, memories, and histories are told through these objects. In Prisoner Pair, the light reflects off the thin speckled skin of the growing pear, gathers through the camera lens, registers onto the photosensitive chemical emulsion as a golden pale green fruit (Plate 4.1). Mottled rich dark dirt dried onto to the curved surface of the transparent bottle contrasts the glassy reflections of the sky and land beyond. Like an imperfect reflection, this mysterious object has a companion, making an imprisoned pair. Light changes in time creating a moving painting. Dean describes her image:

Cheek by cheek, and rump to croup, the prisoners transformed. They became their inner world, a landscape of microscopic detail and activity. And as the sun sunk low, the Alsatian inverted its backdrop into a Caspar David synthesis of interior beauty, like a bid for nationhood, before darkness came and turned them ordinary.
We see this assemblage of objects up close, magnified by the camera lens. The light source from the film projector lamp condenses into a narrow beam, feeds through a small gate that is interrupted by a three-blade shutter with precision; it passes through the chemical emulsion fixed on transparent celluloid as sequential images with each held in place for a twenty-fourth of a second; focused by a pair of lenses these images are enlarged and projected onto a modest frameless screen suspended in space (Plate 4.1). The audience encounters the analogue of the Handwerk as illuminated images floating in a darkened space, quiet but for the regular purring of the film projector. An encounter with Michael Hamburger is similarly filmic. The mellow and green Suffolk orchard that begins the twenty-eight-minute film loop spans the length of the room (Plate 4.2). The audience inhabits a physical space that is precisely analogous to the aspect ratio of the anamorphic 16mm images. The portrait of Michael Hamburger is painted on the landscape orientation of the widescreen format. In the work the presence of his voice is contrasted with the scantness of his image. We meet the German-born British poet and translator through things. We see his life work scattered throughout his house: piles of paper stacked up to the height of a grown adult weighed heavily on the floor, hard-cover books lining the walls, a fallen-over heap of letters accumulated delicately on a desk, adjacent is a collection of spectacle cases at different stages of use and decay, apples of varied shapes, sizes, and colours neatly arranged for inspection (Plate 4.2). Lived experience, Erfahrung, is embodied in these objects. In the process of making the work, apples emerged as the central object of Hamburger’s Erfahrung. Dean explains, ‘When I filmed him I filmed quite a lot and I talked to him about Sebald and all sorts of other things but in the end I made my film just about apples. It was in cutting the film that I realized it was the most important thing and through apples he talked about everything else as a metaphor’.51 In the film, we see clusters of green apples hanging heavily from bent long branches, we see ripe apples loosely gathered amongst the long grass, we see apples sorted on a wooden bench, each with its individual expression of colours and markings. These images are not representations of apples, but analogues of apples. The materiality of objects is incorporated into the image through the technological medium of film—analogues of experience on photosensitive chemical emulsion. Apples become allegorical through the words of poetry. Hamburger ends the poem For Ted Hughes, written on the day of his friend’s death in 1998:

Uneaten this day of his death
In either light the dark Devonshire apples like
That from seed I raised on a harsher coast
In remembrance of him and his garden.
Difference filled out the trees,
Hardened, mellowed the fruit to outlast our days.\textsuperscript{52}

The Devonshire apples growing in Hamburger’s Suffolk garden were raised from the pips given to him by Ted Hughes. These apples, which outlive the friends, connected the two.\textsuperscript{53} They become the allegorical object of friendship through Hamburger’s arrangement of words. Like the carefully chosen historical objects in Wong Kar-wai’s films, Dean’s analogues of the apples become allegorical through situating their material appearance within the proper context. These filmic allegorical objects are not estranged, atemporal symbols, but are grounded materialistically and historically through the words of the poet. Here, the \textit{rechte Abstand} and \textit{richtige Blickwinkel} are achieved.

In Dean’s films experiences are teased out from everyday sensory encounters by training the technological eye to pay close attention to material existence. These ordinary experiences are translated analogously, twisted into strands, woven in edits through the medium of film. She explores film as a physical medium in \textit{Kodak} (2006) and \textit{Film} (2011). The earlier work documents the production operation in the soon-to-be defunct Kodak factory in Chalon-sur-Saône in France. The camera explores the large echoing spaces, the pristine specialised machinery, and the strange industrial equipment as it follows the film celluloid threading it way through the facility.\textsuperscript{54} Dean’s more recent work is a large-scale projection situated inside the imposing interior of Turbine Hall in London. Dwarfed by both the architecture and monumental film image (re-photographed to include sprocket holes), the audience wanders into the space of this vertical cinema, seeing analogues of the world magnified and up close. The materiality of film as a technological medium is accentuated by Dean’s use of travel mats and hand-colouring. In advocating for film to remain a viable technological platform for expression, the artist argues that the analogue is an important medium through which to know the world. She writes of the digital medium: ‘For me, it just does not have the means to create poetry; it neither breathes nor wobbles, but tidies up our society, correcting it and then leaves no trace. I wonder if this is because it is not born of the physical world, but is impenetrable and intangible’.\textsuperscript{55} For Dean, losing the analogue medium means losing a tactile way of knowing the world. Dean’s works articulate Benjamin’s concept of \textit{Kraftwerk} in returning \textit{[t]actility, closeness, indexicality, at...}
handness’ to experience through her engagement with analogue film technology. Moreover, her films demonstrate the transformative relationship between art, technology, and experience.56

In pushing the potential of this transformative relationship, Benjamin scarifies Adorno’s autonomy of art. In rescuing Erfahrung, he trades in the values of authenticity for authentic experience. The autonomy of objects prevails in this exchange and remains intrinsic to human experience. Leslie concludes:

Crafted objects, specifically the pot, provide a model of authentic experience, the experience of a person imprinted on to the objects that he or she brings into being, and tapestry offers a model of authentic memory, the weave of past and present experience and utopian possibility. In the case of the modern mass reproduced object, however, despite new conditions of production, such intimacy and imaginative investment in objects may still be possible.57

Actualising this possibility redeems these mass reproduced objects. In their redemption ‘Benjamin’s materialism of objects solicits a liberation of objects from the fetishizing snares and deadening repetition of capitalism, but he wishes to salvage the power of enchantment for the purposes of social metamorphosis […]’—the aim of Passagen-Werk.58 However, Adorno objected to Benjamin’s methodology; he writes: ‘In so far as the use-value of things perishes from them, the alienated things are hollowed out and thereby come to acquire encoded meanings. Subjectivity appropriates these meanings by introducing intentional experiences of desire and anxiety into them… Dialectic images are constellations between alienated things and injected meanings’.59

Adorno sees Benjamin’s objects in the Arcades Project as allegories that are estranged and stripped bare, and as such require ‘injected meanings’ to function in a dialectic. For Adorno, Benjamin’s dialectical image is not just ‘not dialectical enough’, it is not dialectical at all. For Benjamin, these ‘alienated things’ are not emptied and ‘hollowed out’, but autonomous materials that bear the traces of the hands, the technologies, and the world that produced them. It is crucial that they are presented as they are, without ‘subjectivity’ and ‘injected meanings’ in his Denkbilder. However, by collapsing the pictura into the subscriptio his ‘fiendish intensification’ leaves the thought-images ‘radically foreshortened’. Dean’s film works show that it is possible to expand thought-images visually to encapsulate the material presence of objects into the image and, in doing so,
overcome the limits of Benjamin’s purely textual form. In this configuration, words still have the capacity to establish the right distance and perspective for the Denkbilder to function. In *Michael Hamburger*, the crafted words of the poet provide the proper context that activates the allegorical capacity of objects.

### 4.3 Secret affinities

To further render the concept of a materialist visual *Denkbild* in pursuing the question of non-integrative framework, I look at the works of two artists, Rinko Kawauchi and Hiraki Sawa. The seriality of their image works provides models of framework for fragmentary forms. In particular, this examination brings out the affinities between *Denkbilder* as crystallisation of ideas and *zuihitsu* as non-integrative structures that assemble fragments into constellations. I look at how individual components in Kawauchi’s photobooks and Sawa’s multiscreen installations function within larger but non-integrative narrative frameworks while maintaining their autonomy. Specifically, I investigate how literary and poetic organisation of *zuihitsu* allows the proper distance and perspective to be established in creating an allegorical space. This analysis provides the groundwork for the subsequent section where I explore the almanac as a *Denkbild-zuihitsu* medium that captures the kaleidoscopic and evanescent narratives of everyday life.

In 2001, Rinko Kawauchi published her photographs as three books: *Utatane*, *Hanabe*, and *Hanako.* These works establish a distinct set of characteristics that Kawauchi continues to develop in her practice. The subject matter is invariably everyday life which she captures using a *Rolleiflex* medium format film camera. Thoughtful framing within the square format is married with a deliberate casualness reminiscent of snap-shots. Her composition explicitly presents a cropped window to the world where the view is incomplete in space as well as time, leaving viewers to imagine what lies outside the frame and the moment of the shutter’s release. Kawauchi varies the viewing angles with each subject: a close-up of a dead bee lying upturned on a wooden surface against defocused foreground and background (in a shallow depth of field), a brilliant lone firework unfolds high in the distant red sky filled with smoke, a small child crawling on the ground in mid-distance illuminated by the camera’s flash and enveloped by the night view of a neighbourhood park, looking down at a mottled grey pigeon lying on speckled
grey paving stone with its eyes tightly shut, a splotch of bright red seeping from its head. Some photographs are consciously underexposed, while others incorporate the blur of motion (captured with a slow shutter speed); some accentuate the uneven illumination of an electronic flash, while others leave central subjects out-of-focus against sharp backgrounds. In this way, Kawauchi utilises the full scope of photographic film as a physical material, which she extends to other film formats, such as 35mm and large formats, as well as digital imaging. In her works, she critically harnesses the stillness of the photographic image to accentuate the fleetingness of material life, capturing soap bubbles, party-poppers, boiling water, ice, wind, waves, rain, rainbow, light. By extension, her works unreservedly gesture towards the transiency of life. In Kawauchi’s practice, this articulation of the central thematic is tied to the printed book.

Although Kawauchi’s works have been increasingly exhibited in conventional gallery spaces, her photographs are still predominately published as photobooks (and recently as an online Tumblr blog). When examining her practice, the significance of the monograph comes to the fore in three interrelated ways. First, the photobook is an alternate exhibition platform for photographers. Secondly, the printed book occupies an important place in Japanese culture and the marketplace, which entails an idiosyncratic relationship between makers and readers. The photobook enjoys prominence as a cultural product in Japan. Thirdly, Kawauchi’s works are developed in concert with the physicality of the book form in how images are presented, perceived, and experienced. In interviews, Kawauchi often cites the reason for publishing her photographs as books as one of necessity, with photobooks serving as an alternative to installed exhibitions. Yet she chooses to continue working in this tradition after gaining gallery representation, preferring the more personal and intimate qualities the medium affords. Caygill writes of Benjamin’s thought in ‘The Work of Art’ essay that effective new forms of art have replaced ‘the opposition of form and content by the concepts of organisation and “technique”’. Art is the technical organisation of experience. This is inherent in Kawauchi’s photo-books, specifically in the context of modern zuihitsu. Analysing her works within this framework helps draw out what is immanent in her images. More importantly, it illuminates how a central thematic draws together fragmented images into constellations within a legible and accessible form of the book in general, and the amorphous form of zuihitsu in particular.
An extensive exploration of *zuihitsu* and its historical development is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, a brief diversion into this literary mode is necessary for our purpose. Rachel DiNitto’s ‘Return of the “Zuihitsu”: Print Culture, Modern Life, and Heterogeneous Narrative in Prewar Japan’ provides a peripient account for this contextualisation. DiNitto’s argument is prefaced by the indefinable nature of *zuihitsu* as a ‘catch-all genre composed of fragmentary and heterogeneous writing’ within Japanese literary scholarship. In Linda Chance’s *Formless in Form: Kenkō, ‘Tsurezuregusa’ and the Rhetoric of Japanese Fragmentary Prose*, she describes *zuihitsu* as ‘an omnibus that asks not to be looked at too closely’. DiNitto tackles this elusiveness by examining the boundaries delineated by the production and consumption of *kindai zuihitsu* in Japan from the 1920s to 1930s. She notes: ‘modern *zuihitsu* were clearly a product of the prewar literary and cultural field located at the nexus of print capitalism, literary capital, and everyday consumer culture’. Within this nexus was a growing urban middle-class readership confronted by the uncertainties and anxieties of modern life. Amongst the many social, cultural, economic and technological contributing factors is a desire for a modern narrative. The literary market moved rapidly to capitalise on this growing demand. DiNitto offers *Bungei shinjū*, the successful literary magazine founded by Kichiku Kan with a distinct category for *zuihitsu* writings, as a primary example of how this new readership was catered for:

As *Bungei shinjū*’s advertising copy stated, the magazine was not traditional Japanese tea and sweets, but Western ‘coffee’ (*kōhi*), ‘black tea’ (*kōcha*), and ‘dessert’ (*desūto*). The journal was read by the new, urban flaneur. It was ‘a magazine for the intellectual strolling through the city’. [...] They reassured readers that the books could be read ‘30 minutes a day before bedtime, or while traveling to or from work, or in other leisure moments’; and that cultural benefits could be reaped ‘in pleasant moments of spare time’.

*Bungei shinjū* supplied a self-portrait for the new middle-brow reader whose defining feature is a cultured mediation of modern life. The materiality of modern life is made legible by the first-person perspective, short length and intimate accessibility of *zuihitsu*. *Kindai zuihitsu* came to denote writings that capture the impressions and experiences of modernity through observation, contemplation, and reflection on the details of everyday life. Chiba Kameo’s definition of the popular form from the 1920s reflects this positive outlook:
zuihitsu - a kaleidoscopic bursting with multicolored light. The phrasing is short. But the sense is deep. The author reveals himself with overwhelming closeness. It’s alive … The language shocks like the whack of a steel rod or the chill of icy water. The reader is forced into new and unknown worlds.77

Literary debates raged on in this period arguing for and against the fragmentary nature of zuihitsu. In his 1936 article 'Literature as a Mode of Thinking', Tosaka Jun argues that non-personal forms of zuihitsu can serve to extend the critical dimension in essays and criticism.78 DiNitto writes:

Tosaka argues that these new genres are capable of dealing with the fragmentary nature of reality in ways that pure literature cannot because of the limitations imposed by structure. He makes connections between the fragmentary nature of the world and the language used to describe it.79

Both the fragmentary form and thought-building capacity traverse zuihitsu and Denkbilder. Stephen and Weston’s description of the Denkbild can apply to Tosaka’s zuihitsu: ‘This element of everyday experience is central both to the Denkbild form and to denkb(u)ilding as discursive practice. As a mode of writing, to denkbild is to build up thought, to construct [bilden] thought, criticism, from the images of everyday life’.80

Not only do Kawauchi’s photographs offer viewers thought-images of everyday life, her books speak intimately to an audience through the accessible form of the printed book. Her photobooks extend zuihitsu in a variant that explores the Japanese worldview of life—transiency or mujō—serially in pictorial images.81 Ambiguities inherent in images allow her to pursue multiple facets of an idea simultaneously through juxtapositions, oppositions, and dialectics. Life is inferred by death, strength is defined by fragility, presence is implied by absence. The book form offers a template for experiencing the images physically. It presents fragments with a cohesive structure without imposing a pre-determined form. The cover image of Utatane features a medium format photograph of a metal teaspoon loaded with cooked translucent rice grains, the thumb and fingers holding the spoon from the right can just be seen, only a shallow plane of the photograph is in focus, the background consists of soft shapes of blue, white, and beige; below the title reads Utatane with the smaller subtitle above which reads, ‘shindeshima tainkoto’. Opening the book, the title Utatane again appears in smaller black font on a white page. Turning overleaf a blank page on the left faces a single image on the right. It
is a photograph of two black butterflies in mid-flight against a barely coloured sky (Plate 4.3). The bottom quarter of the image is occupied by green shrubbery. The smallness of the insects within the frame beckons a closer examination; without a definitive scale of reference they could easily be mistaken for a pair of doves. Turning the page reveals two facing images: the top part of a wine glass with ice-blocks suspended in a liquid, a film of condensation coating the glass. On its right is a photograph of a young boy taken from a low viewpoint (Plate 4.3). His face turns away from the camera towards a large pink marbled balloon above. His hands are open and raised, having just released the balloon or ready to capture it. The flash floods the scene with uneven illumination showing the underside of a roof structure. Attentive inspection reveals a large square clock suspended on the roof, one that is typically installed at railway stations, suggesting that the action took place on a train platform. Overleaf is a mauve night sky, bracketed by a partial view of a house on the left and power lines run on its right, falling rain tracing perspective lines that emanate from a bright street lamp at the top. On the facing page are six mice busily rummaging in a glass tank lined with wood shaving (Plate 4.3). One mouse, sharply in focus, stands on its hind legs and reaches up. Its triangular face turns up with its nose forming a pinnacle, pointing in the same direction as the falling rain. Kawauchi chooses to present her photographs uniformly through her books, almost always in pairs, positioning each image in the exact same position on each page. In ignoring spatial scales and references, this uniformity accentuates the play with visual geometry.

These carefully orchestrated juxtapositions recall Eisenstein’s conflicts of form. Kawauchi’s use of material contrasts in the pairing creates tension: a few strands of nylon threads holding together the integrity of a soccer net, a glistening soap bubble hovering in mid-air; a flawlessly round watermelon cracked to reveal a hint of its red flesh, a hand cradling a delicate porcelain doll’s head (Plate 4.4). At other times, the coupling is harmonious: a bright luminous line (an after-effect of viewing the train platform’s lights from a fast moving train) matches the soft continuous cumulus stratus cloud on the next page (Plate 4.4). Sometimes the pairing suggests action: the stick held by a man practising drumming parallels an old woman’s bamboo crochet needle; sometimes stillness: a golden swarm of Christmas fairy lights adorning an exterior echoes the sparkling light reflections on rippling water in the facing image (Plate 4.4). Thoughts spring from their conversations. As zuihitsu, these compositions call for
attentive looking at the details of the everyday. These image-objects render the appearances of things in a way that exposes their alterity: a spherical white balloon the string of which is caught in a pine tree; hanging against the black sky it stands in for autumn moon. Objects are familiar but strange: swarming carps with their mouths open, bright orange yolks sit on masses of egg whites fried on a black iron hotplate, severed cables, a huddle of rabbits, air bubbles in boiling water, a length of cotton stretched taut. Their contrasts further bring forth their material otherness—existence that is beyond the confines of human subjectivity.

In addition to montage’s capacity to create dialectical relationships through juxtaposition, the unidirectional and non-linear experience of the book form offers an open-endedness through endlessly open narratives. Viewers access images randomly or of their own choosing by leafing through the pages, pausing at selected photographs for a duration determined by them. Unlike the larger exhibition format, the physical form of a book (with careful orchestration of photographs) deepens the one-to-one intimacy with the viewer in this act of reading. When these photographs are considered as Denkbilder, thought arises precisely in performing this sequencing. Here, inscriptio condenses into the singular book title: Utatane, meaning nap (or catnap), Hanabe, fireworks, and Hanako, flowers. Instead of the pictura collapsing in the subscriptio, the objects in the pictura constitute the first note that begins the composition: a crying newborn, children skipping rope in the wind, feet on sand, newly hatched sea turtles making their way to the sea. The non-textual subscriptio resides within the subtle contexts of the pictorial element: its framing, viewing angle, focus planes, background, light, colour, movement, juxtapositions, and sequencing. As visual zuihitsu, the compositions speak of mujō through thoughts that spring out from each encounter with things of the material world. In these in-between spaces, ordinary objects become allegories of mujō.

This analytical framework of Denkbild-zuihitsu also presents an expository way to explore the works of Hiraki Sawa. A Japanese born artist, who lives and works in London, Sawa produces moving image works (animation and video composites) that depict fantastical dream-like scenes set in ordinary domestic interiors and enigmatically sparse landscapes. Since 2004 he moved from single-channel video format to multiscreen video installations. He tackles moments of everyday life somewhat differently from Kawauchi. While Kawauchi’s works capture material fragments from the external world,
Sawa’s views are born out of an inner reality (imagined or remembered) made concrete as moving fragments. Yet their works are wholly congruent in the rendering of time through an attentiveness to the physicality of everyday life. In his early single-channel works such as *Dwelling* (2002), *Migration* (2003), and *Eight Minutes* (2005), Sawa deliberately emphasised the ‘low-tech’ quality of his collages. In the black and white video footage of *Dwelling*, animation of miniature planes taking off, flying, and landing are composited onto static scenes of the various rooms in his London flat: an unmade bed built atop shelvings of vinyl records, a dining table for two, the bathroom sink, the kitchen counter with a large window overlooking the street, the corridor (Plate 4.5).

While taking great care with the shadows, perspective, and movement of these imaginary objects, he does not hide their artifice. The soundtrack enhances the artificial presence of the multiplying aircrafts by intensifying the low reverberation of plane engines that pervades the whole scene. In *Migration*, there are miniature animated figures from Muybridge’s chronophotography: humans, horses, birds, elephants, and camels meander through the same living spaces. The recognisability of the figures and their slightly awkward movement (caused by their low temporal resolution) similarly leave the seams of the construction highly visible. The works do not pretend to be real nor are they illusory; rather, their ontological status as imagined is critical. The ambiguities within these imagined scenes: a bedroom floor or a landing strip, a bath or an ocean, a modest living quarter or a vast landscape, provide a source of pleasure. The gaps between images and possible meanings are amplified by the materiality of their constructs and the textures of objects. In Sawa’s works objects live lives of their own.

Sawa’s works give prominence to material objects and space. When confronted by the unfamiliar landscape of central Australia in creating the commissioned work *O* (2009), he translated his physical experience of the vast and (to him) alien landscape of Australia’s interior into multiple vignettes. The work is composed of three eight-minute video projections, ten eight-minute videos, and a five-channel soundscape composed by Dale Berning (Plate 4.6). Each of these audiovisual fragments further disperses as they are installed in the exhibition space. The three large projections depict views of the sparse geological landforms of the Northern Territory, birds flying in search of water, and interiors of an ornate derelict house. Each engages with a distinct time scale: the erosion of land, the cycles of living, and the gradual entropy of human artefacts. The grandeur of the geologically ancient land contrasts with the slowed-down
tracking footage of flying flocks, while images (and imaginings) of nature seep into the
colourful interior of an abandoned house in France: cockatoos in flight, the night moon,
and trees, animating the once inhabited dwelling and traces of deterioration. These
video projections are shown on three large tilted floor-standing screens forming a rough
arch. A lamp hangs at the back of each screen scaffold, dimly illuminating the darkened
space. Each of the ten small LCD screens, mounted on the wall around the room, is
dedicated to a spinning object: a top, a milk bottle, a handbell, an enamel water jug, tea
cups, mug, rings, light globe, accompanied by compositions made from the noises made
by their rotations. The five-channel sound piece is delivered through five spinning
speakers installed on column plinths encircling the exhibition space. These fragments
form circular paths, inviting viewers to move around and through the synchronised
loops. Disparate elements are drawn together into constellations through their physical
installation. Sawa reflects on the forms that transmit narratives through generations. He
explores the circularity of history and time through the circle (o) allegorically.

When interpreting Sawa’s moving images as Denkbilder, the inscriptio condenses into the
works’ titles; the vignettes are the picture; the subscriptio resides within the meta-
framework of construction. Like Kawauchi’s use of the book form, Sawa’s use of space
is critical to the emergence of the subscriptio. His spaces speak of interstitiality or in-
between-ness in relocation, migration, dream, memory, and imagination. He explores
these fragmented spaces through attentiveness to everyday materiality in concert with a
zuihitsu approach. Traces and objects of this everyday actuality are animated in Sawa’s
moving images, creating meandering open narrative loops. These extended Denkbilder
expand the distance between each element that is collapsed in the integration of picture
into subscriptio in Benjamin’s modern emblems and condensed in his foreshortened
allegorical constructions. Within Sawa’s video works, gaps are left open in the
composites of unlikely objects and spaces as well as in the physical arrangement of the
images. Within the Denkbild-zuihitsu framework, artworks are constellations that emerge
from contingent assemblies of autonomous fragments. In Sawa’s and Kawauchi’s
works, while the artists determine how images (and sounds) converse in time (through
editing and sequencing) and in space (through installation and layout), the experience of
the audience completes the process of bringing fragments together in order to make
sense of them. When elements within the constellations are placed at the right distance,
the emergence of allegories is once again possible.
In Benjamin’s practice of montage, images assume autonomy. I argue that this autonomy is in part transposed from the material presence of the objects that constitute the image. Where Adorno sees ‘alienated things’, Benjamin sees autonomous objects. In their works Kawauchi and Sawa invest their subject experiences in visual images the interactions of which with each other suggest tentative narrative elements. The titles of the works name the concepts that lend coherence to these fragments. Related thoughts and expositions spring from their assemblies, sequences, arrangements, and installations. Constellations of these thoughts are constructed within the disembedded framework of zuihitsu, which in turn provides common grounds to converse with the audience. Emergence of meanings and narratives between fragments within an artwork or between the work and the audience completes the work of art. My concern thus is not one of form and content, but rather of organisation and techniques, capable of creating a non-integrative framework that allows secret affinities amongst fragments and with the audience to emerge without ideological integration.

### 4.4 Autonomy/ Praxis II

A fragment in Konvolut N notes, ‘History decays into images, not into stories’. Lloyd Spencer explains that Benjamin rejects narratives as frameworks for his allegorical Denkbilder ‘because Benjamin sees the evocation of that “framework” of meaning for allegory […] is itself symptomatic of significant loss of a sense of genuine, immediately accessible, imminent meaning’. Spencer then asks ‘whether Benjamin’s refusal of the organizing, hierarchizing gesture of a theory as such meant that he too worked on in “unremitting expectation of a miracle” a miracle which would provide the cohesion which his “perspectival” studies lacked’. Feldman argues that by resisting theoretical mediation and narrativity as frameworks for a non-integrative and non-narrative materialist historiography, Benjamin’s rationale is to safeguard them from ideological appropriation. She suggests, on one hand, the extensive theorisation the Arcades Projects requires is indicative of the need for interpretative frameworks while, on the other, an underestimation of the aesthetic function of Passagen-Werk on Adorno’s part could have led him to overlook the latent autonomy of the dialectical image.
Using three of my artworks, collectively called the almanac projects, I tackle the two questions raised in this chapter: first, on the possibility of extending the limits of Benjamin’s Denkbild form materialistically, and secondly, on the possibility of a disembedded schema that provides an enabling structure for fragments. Rather than a critique of the artworks, this analysis focuses on the almanac as a non-ideological and non-integrative structure for housing autonomous fragments. As a perceptual tool that critically builds upon the connection between material and experience, the almanac is capable of generating a plurality of narratives on different scales. This perspective is informed by Jane Bennett’s vital materialism, whose approach, like a Benjaminian and Kabbalist meditative treatment of objects, refuses to reduce things to thoughts. As in Chapter three’s analysis of De Landa’s philosophical history project, Bennett’s materialism here extends Benjamin’s philosophic framework. Kirst concludes that Benjamin’s experiments in stretching the Denkbild form achieve ‘such a high degree of multidimensional signification and “Gleichzeitigkeit,”’ that often the reader is left unaware of the secret historiographic insight. 92 I argue that this Gleichzeitigkeit, produced by the simultaneous overlaying of historical moments within the non-integrative but narrative framework of an almanac, has the potential to restore the visibility and legibility of such insights. The almanac form does so by making perceptible enmeshed networks embedded within material reality. The almanac projects affirm the autonomy of objects while allowing a profusion of subjective and historical narratives to emerge from their interactions.

An almanac is an ancient tool, a scientific instrument for mapping experiences of the physical environments and organising them into familiar and predictable patterns, making sense of past, present, and future. It provides a grounded engagement with the material world through an adoption of a structure based on observations. The Chinese Almanac uses the movement of astronomical bodies and constellations for the purpose of time-reckoning. 93 Embedded in the imperial calendar (皇曆), an important official publication, the Chinese lunisolar calendar or agricultural calendar (農曆) advises suitable activities for the emperor and all his subjects. 94 For ‘the son of heaven’ it provided a divination reference to all things between heaven and earth. For the agrarian subjects it was an essential ‘to-do’ list for planting, harvesting, and other related tasks. Still in use today, the Chinese Almanac divides each solar year (歳) into twenty-four
solar terms (節氣) as determined by the sun’s positions on the ecliptic. Each solar term lasts fifteen days and marks a significant point in the season, imminent weather occurrences, or significant agricultural events as observed in ancient China. Their notations connect astronomic and atmospheric conditions, such as rain water (雨水), summer solstice (夏至), limit of heat (處暑), or major snow (大雪) directly to agricultural activities, animal behaviours, and plant growth cycles. Each solar term is subdivided into three pentads (候 or five-day periods), totalling seventy-two. These subdivisions make further note of occurrences such as when ‘wild geese arrive’ (鴻雁來), ‘chrysanthemums tinge yellow’ (菊有黃華), and ‘earthworms form knots’ (蚯蚓結). The almanac pays close attention to the world of matter. Like agricultural activities that physically engage with soil, topographies, daylight hours, weather conditions, insect reproduction cycles, migratory bird patterns and so on, experiences of cyclical time is marked by a direct and active interaction with material constituents. This calendar was adopted in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, where the solar terms remain unchanged but the pentads were modified in accordance with local observations and conditions.

My almanac projects consist of three works: the Autumn Almanac of Tokyo (2008), the Seasonal Almanac of Austinmer (2009) and the Illustrated Almanac of the Illawarra and Beyond (2011–2012) (Appendix). The earliest work was created during my Australia Council Tokyo studio residency that took place between 5 September and 4 December 2008. All projects adopt the Chinese Almanac as a structuring device to affiliate each day with reference to seasonal occurrences. Both the Autumn Almanac and the Seasonal Almanac consist of daily online postcards for the durations of the projects while one entry of the Illustrated Almanac corresponds to one pentad and seventy-two were posted over one calendar year (from Spring 2011 to Spring 2012). The first almanac project addresses both the Chinese solar terms and Japanese pentads, while the subsequent projects use solar terms and pentads adjusted for the southern hemisphere. Each post in these almanacs is composed of an image, created using selected materials gathered on the day or pentad: photographs, ephemerals, audio recordings, or video footage, and a textual exposition that drew upon things, objects, characters, experiences, questions, and thoughts encountered in the period. The Autumn Almanac was conceived as a tool to make sense of the encounter with Tokyo beyond the stereotypical imaginings of the city.
The combined use of visual images and texts renders actual experiences and explores the gaps that arise between the generalised perception of seasons and their materialistic manifestations in contemporary Japan. The subsequent projects similarly tackled the problematic of experience and representation.

By adopting the Chinese Almanac as a structure for discursive entries, the almanac projects pay attention to the ‘plurality of agencies’ in everyday encounters and their *zuihitsu* approach provides opportunities to bring out narratives immanent within these experiences. In this context, *zuihitsu* that focuses on the interaction with seasons and surrounds through observation of objects in time, place, and transition is exemplified by Sei Shōnagon’s *The Pillow Book* and women’s diaristic tradition of tenth-century Japan. Shōnagon’s work is speculated to have been conceived as lists of seasonally and aesthetically appropriate objects to be used in poetic compositions. Their eventual compilation came to epitomise pre-modern *zuihitsu*. By layering the Chinese Almanac with the modern Japanese *sekki* (節氣) the ninety entries of *Autumn Almanac* extend ancient categories of things to include objects like daikon, freezing rain, typhoons, *kotatsu* (a type of heater), water pipes, *utagoe kissa* (singing cafes), trains, *omurisu* (rice omelette), postcards, laundry, haircuts, junk stores, art, architecture, and so on. Like Shōnagon’s lists of poetic objects that situate her readers in specific places and times, things in the *Autumn Almanac* anchor the experience of contemporary Tokyo firmly to the tangible materials of everyday life.

Within this *zuihitsu* construction each entry can be considered as a materialist *Denkbild*. In a brief entry in the *Seasonal Almanac*, the *inscriptio* reads: ‘Start of Autumn: cold cicadas chirp’, ‘February 15th, 2009’. The *picture* shows a pair of dampened shoes in the bottom left-hand corner standing on an assortment of black pebbles; on the speckled ground are rocks, shell fragments, remnants of blue bottles (jellyfish), strands of seaweed, flotsam and jetsam; the shoes point towards the centre of the image where a dead fish lies. The *subscriptio* speaks of the experience of walking on the beach, the observation of rain, previous high tide, washed-up strap weeds and blue bottles. The diaristic form of an almanac is conducive to a transference of actual experience into speculative thoughts for both writers and readers. These thoughts remain *unsaid* and subjective. In this entry, they suggest memories or imaginings of an Australian seaside, the weather of New...
South Wales’ South Coast in February, or ocean temperatures that encourage the dominance of jellyfish species. Furthermore, the materiality of objects as depicted within the image recall unsaid sensations: the crunchiness of pebbles, the discomfort of wearing wet shoes, the texture of dead fish, the ‘popping’ of blue bottles’ swim bladders underfoot. Instead of the ‘collapsing of pictura into subscriptio’, the pictura returns to a visual form and stands apart from the textual inscriptio and subscriptio. On this open yet concrete platform, the pictura brings out the alterity of things visually through anazographesis.

In a post from the Autumn Almanac, the inscriptio reads: 'Shuubun: Beetles wall up their burrows/Adzuki beans ripen, October 1st, 2008'. The pictura shows a large body of fast-flowing water; it is night time, the water is dark and reflects surrounding coloured lights. The subscriptio presents a simple scenario in suburban Tokyo as tropical cyclones dissipated, and an unexpected encounter with an urban animal species—tanuki (Nyctereutes procyonoides viverrinus). Many thoughts emerge from this assemblage that are unsaid. Non-human animals lose their habitats to the encroaching suburban development and seek refuge in the human-made environment. During the Autumnal Equinox in October, cyclones still pass through Japan, bringing with them heavy rainfall. Densely built areas need carefully planned drainage to channel storm water quickly and effectively. The Kandagawa provides the main waterway to take the rainwater out to Tokyo Bay. The tripartite fragment teases out the interconnectedness of the weather system, geography, and urban environments through physical things: Cyclones 0815 and 0817, neighbouring China, the Kandagawa, the neighbourhoods of Takadanobaba and Shima-Ochiai, rainfall, drains, busy roads, railway, and tanuki. The gushing water in the visual pictura occupies a central node in this enmeshed network of things. Its pictorial qualities: blackness, glassy surface, patterns of undulations, silence, enhance the materiality of things and suggest their agency without naming it. Within the image, to quote Bennett, ‘objects appeared as things, that is, as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics’. The pictura provides an other path for thinking about temporal contexts framed by the inscriptio and the subject’s experiences described in the subscriptio.

In one of the last entries in the Autumn Almanac under the inscriptio of ‘Shousetsu: Heaven’s essence rises, earth’s essence sinks/ North wind, freezing rain’ dated
‘December 1st, 2008,’ the *pictura* presents an impressive pile of junk that fills the entire frame, lit by a strangely warm yellow-green glow. The *subscriptio* describes a pleasant expedition to visit a new acquaintance in the *Akikawa* valley of Tokyo’s far west. The written text describes what one may imagine to be typical of modern Japanese architecture and design: clever house renovation, stylish Japanese-Italian restaurant by the river, new *onsen* facilities, sharply contrasting the disorderly orderliness of the pile in the image. In the last paragraph, the reader discovers that the astounding pile is, in fact, the goods of a second-hand store run by a Korean migrant. The photographic image captures each and every object in sharp focus: in the bottom left-hand corner the bronze-colour folding chair casually leans on the pile, congregating nearby like stacks of kindling are neatly folded clear plastic umbrellas with curved white handles, a round white tub wrapped in plastic sits prominently at the bottom centre of the frame, to its right is an orange enamel cook pot, above is a pale blue rectangular waste paper basket, to its left are an old-fashioned cypress and copper water bucket and its smaller counterpart for rice; the right of the image is populated by video tape decks, discs players, fax machines, and drawers of different types, the flat rectangular shapes cascade into a deep valley where a flattened white sports shoe with missing laces sits at its base.

In the image, the objects emanate an innocence; in retaining their pristine appearances, their functions are clearly discernible. These photographed objects are no longer desirable commodities nor are they refuse; they sit somewhere in between, perhaps as desirable refuse. This clarity of the image captures the materiality of the junk pile.

The visual image in the almanac entries extends the contemplative process and draws out *what is unsaid* in the textual image. Specifically, the *pictura* transposes the materiality of objects into visual form, bringing out the alterity of things. Levi Bryant speculates on the relationship between artwork and material objects:

> [T]he work of art allows us to encounter even the familiar things of our everyday life in their independent thingliness, seeing them, perhaps for the very first time […] art seems to carry the capacity to break with meaning, to bring the alterity and thingliness of things to the fore, to allow us to see them both from their point of view and independent of our own meanings and intentions.109

The ambiguities and uncertainties within the image in the almanac project allow the ‘alterity and thingliness of things’ to proliferate as individual narratives. These narratives may illuminate the ‘profane existence’ of everyday experience and allude to an
‘enigmatic form of something [that is] beyond [their] existence’. The autonomy of objects is affirmed aesthetically in the materialist Denkbild.

Both De Landa’s and Bennett’s materialisms consider autonomous objects as the basis of meshworks and assemblages. Bennett advocates for a vital materialism that argues for the autonomy of objects by questioning the divide between non-living and living things. Her vital materialism differs from traditional forms of vitalism in that she sees matter’s self-organising capacity as a vibrant force inherent in all material forms. In seeing the alterity of things and acknowledging the agency in non-living matter, vital materialism recognises the autonomy in material objects. This position challenges the subjective appropriation of ‘alienated things’, even if they have seemingly been ‘hollowed out’ of human-endowed meanings (through the perishing of their use-values). De Landa’s and Bennett’s materialist approaches add a further dimension to the relationship between ‘experience and the material presence of aesthetic objects’ in Benjamin’s ‘prolegomena to a materialist physiognomics’ discussed in previous chapters.

The almanac projects make manifest experience as an aesthetic act of perception through the material presence of things. In contrast to weather data-driven artworks, such as Tim Knowles’ Windwalk (2008) and Cam and Yvette Merton’s The Little Optimum (2003) that feed real-time weather data into the works and affect the artist’s or audience’s immediate experience, the almanac projects’ encounter with materiality is less direct. Rather, the engagement with experiences is historical and contingent. The ‘riverwalk’ entries in the Autumn Almanac provide examples. These posts narrate journeys that followed different river courses in Tokyo. The expeditions were essays to understand the metropolis through its geographic environments and physical history. The descriptions tease out the active members of a community (as expressed in Aldo Leopold’s land ethics), actants in an assemblage (Bennett’s terms borrowed from Bruno Latour, Deleuze and Guattari) or entities in a meshwork (in Da Landa’s words). The entry on 18 September 2008 during ‘Hakuro: Swallows leave/ Lycoris bloom’ speaks of an encounter with the Tokyo river system:

Walking along the Tamagawa Josui (Tamagawa channel) in Mitaka […] I came across stands of the Lycoris radiata cited by the modern almanac. They are indeed in bloom. The blooming Higanbana […] signals the presence of autumn.
Along the Tamagawa towards Musashi-Sakai, we also came across what seemed to be a market garden. The main crop in season is winter melon. The vine has already started to die back and the ripe melons were perfectly formed waiting patiently to be harvested. An unattended counter outside the garden listed the vegetables for sale […]

The Tamagawa is a natural river that was once a source of fresh water for Edo/Tokyo. In the 17th century major work was undertaken to create artificial canals to feed water from the river to the wells in Edo. It is not surprising to learn that the needs of the growing population of Edo […] had impacted both the natural river systems and artificial canals. Apparently, in 1984 the Bureau of Waterworks Tokyo introduced recycled water into the dried up system. More recently we can see works have been done to try to rehabilitate the water channels and associated ecosystem.

This entry brings forth a number of participating actants in an assemblage: the Tamagawa, the suburb of Mitaka, the flower Lycoris radiata, the season of autumn, a harvest of winter melons, an unattended counter, the seventh-century Japanese capital Edo, the Bureau of Waterworks Tokyo, and so on. These entities move fluidly between the nested and overlapping frameworks of meteorology, urban development, horticulture, and history. This encounter enacts Bennett’s ‘theory of distributive agency’ in that it ‘does not posit a subject as the root cause of an effect. There are instead always a swarm of vitalities at play’.

As readers follow the list of things embedded in the description, different types of interactions can be examined on different spatial and temporal scales (‘zooming’ in and out) ‘without ontological hierarchy’: stands of Higanbana on the riverbank, the market garden, the modified river course, the history of Tokyo… Bennett writes, ‘The task becomes to identify the contours of the swarm and the kind of relations that obtain between its bits’. In doing so, the relationships between the parts within a system are brought into focus, allowing us to experience the present state of this meshwork Tamagawa as a set of historical contingencies rather than as the result of historical necessities (such as the inevitability of human progress). By acknowledging the autonomous status of each entity, the narratives of each member of the community are made palpable through their material presence, suggesting unactualised future possibilities of this meshwork.

Another entry during ‘Kanro: Chrysanthemums tinge yellow/ducks migrate’ on 20 October 2008 draws up an extended list of things that speaks of different experiences and possibilities of the Kandagawa.
The intersection between Otakibashi (bridge) and Waseda Dori (avenue) separates Takadanobaba from Kita-Shinjuku (North Shinjuku). The Kandagawa also separates Shinjuku-ku (ward) to the east from Nakano-ku (ward) to the West.

Between Otakibashi and Kireibashi at the top-end of Kita-Shinjuku, the ‘riverwalk’ is designed for the pleasure of pedestrians (it is closed to traffic – even to cyclists). Here, people walk their dogs, jog, exercise, meander, and enjoy the greenery, the artificial stream, and abundant public seating. We saw two old ladies discussing how their plants were doing in their gardens, a young school girl stopped and said hello to them before going next door to visit her grandmother.

Near Kashiwabashi, I spotted an early reddish maple and opposite was a grumpy-looking mermaid statue outside a small villa.

Just beyond Daidobashi, around 8 very old ladies were sitting in a close row in the sun, tended by their carers. They were chatting and watching the birds. They said hello as we walked by.

We crossed Ome Kaido (road) and Yodobashi, which separate Kita-Shinjuku from Shinjuku. The vista had now completely changed to an urban one. The river continues to divide Nakano-ku from Shinjuku-ku. We saw some ducks on the river. A man was strolling along the river with his wife. He stopped next to me and said something about ‘Kamo’ (duck). Then he asked in English, ‘You call them “ducks” in English?’ We said yes. ‘There are many kinds, you know’. I asked him what kinds those were. He said that they were from Russia. ‘They migrate,’ I said, then asked, ‘in autumn?’ He checked with his wife then answered, ‘About 2 months ago’. I asked him whether he studied birds. He chuckled a little and said, ‘No, I study human beings’. Then he and his wife said good-bye and left us.

Just about 50 metres beyond, a group of street cats were waiting to be fed.

We turned left at Aiwaibashi into Shinjuku.

The experience of this October day is framed within the meta-framework of autumn during the solar term ‘Cold Dew’ when the sun is at 195º on the ecliptic, when in ancient China ‘chrysanthemums tinged yellow’ and in modern Japan ‘ducks migrate’. It is materialistically rendered through a series of chance encounters with an array of objects: greenery, public seating, an artificial stream, exercising dogs, jogging pedestrians, a maple tree whose leaves were beginning to turn red, a grumpy-looking mermaid statue overlooking the path, the sun in which the eight old ladies basked in, recently migrated Russian ducks, and the man who studied humans. The course of the
Kandagawa from Takadanobaba to Shinjuku provides a physical structure that brings together this list of disparate things. Each of these separate entities is an autonomous agent that offers its own histories and futures to be imagined. Narratives proliferate from this assemblage of vitalities that speak of the everyday in suburban Tokyo.

Within the almanac projects the Chinese Almanac supplies a number of overlaying narratives that refer to the interactions between the sun and the earth (expressed as solar positions on the ecliptic, seasons, solar terms, and pentads). In addition to these, by reversing the solar terms and pentads calculated for the northern hemisphere mid-latitudes to the southern hemisphere’s readings, the Seasonal Almanac and the Illustrated Almanac create multidimensional layerings with overlapping geographies and intersecting timelines. Within this structure, the almanacs bring together a wide range of ecological and anthropogenic events, observations of phenological occurrences, weather statistics, astronomical information into expositions that speculate and reflect on experiences over specific durations. Multiple entries in each almanac and across the projects draw out enmeshed networks of autonomous objects embedded within material reality. The ‘technological organisation’ of an almanac encourages secret affinities between material objects, between the readers and the work, to emerge. These secret affinities are woven into a profusion of subjective and historical narratives within the Denkbiild-zuhibitsu framework. Andrew Benjamin and Charles Rice argue that Benjamin’s materialist aesthetics:

necessitates the interconnection between a historically orientated conception of experience and the material presence of aesthetic objects. To assert the importance of material presence is to insist on techniques and practices that are operative within and also essential to the way art works, and thus also to the way art is experienced.¹¹⁶

The almanac as a technological organisation of experiences activates Benjamin’s materialist aesthetics through the techniques of a participatory model where the audience become producers. The almanac projects enact a speculative model of critique where the audience completes the artworks. The Illustrated Almanac invited subscribers to contribute by commenting, ‘tweeting’, or posting entries that form an important aspect of the online work. The open structure of the almanac is enhanced by the technological medium of online blogs where narratives and fragments are stored, categorised, and retrieved dynamically. The searchable and database-driven blog
platform allows content to be grouped and displayed as requested by the reader or participant. Entries can be sorted by seasons, months, locations, subjects, authors, tags, and keywords. Selecting ‘Summer’ listed under ‘Observations’ in the Illustrated Almanac presents readers with eighteen posts that span from 11 November 2011 to 3 February 2012. The ‘Observations’ in ‘Coledale 34°17’S 150°57’E’ offers ten entries posted by Michele Elliot, a participant in the project, while ‘Canberra 35°18’S 149°07’E’ offers three short stories contributed by Louise Curham. These groupings disaggregate into stand-alone entries, events, or stories as easily as they assemble into temporary constellations, achieving a degree of Gleichzeitigkeit without sacrificing visibility or legibility.

* 

In drawing my exploration of Benjamin’s allegorical forms, montage principles, and assembly methods to a close, I extend a Benjaminian materialism into art practice by focusing on the role of material fragments. I begin by considering the role of fragments in relation to Benjamin’s concept of incompleteness. Guided by Leslie’s exposition on Benjamin’s concept of Kraftwerk, I examine the image in Dean’s films as materialist Denkbild that has the potential to provide access to what is immanent within material experience through visual means. I analyse the capability of zuibitsu frameworks in Kawauchi’s and Sawa’s works in ‘dealing with the fragmentary nature of reality’.

The denkbild-zuibitsu form ‘construct[s] […] thought, criticism, from the images of everyday life’. In terms of both organisational structure and techniques of production, the almanac as a medium presents a viable disembedded schema that enables fragments to exist as vibrant autonomous entities in non-integrative constellations. Far from imposing a fixed structure that dictates the experience of our environments, an almanac gives shapes to these experiences through our interaction with material reality and the multiplicity of narratives that emerge from these interactions. My online almanacs function like curiosity cabinets that identify the enmeshed networks of things in each encounter, naming the different things that shape an experience at each point in time. This open structure makes perceptible secret affinities that emerge from subjective everyday experiences. Each almanac presents autonomous ‘alienated things’ in their alterity with agency in a flat ontology: it ‘zooms out’ to bring into view the nested and overlapping frameworks of large-scale global systems; it ‘zooms in’ to focus on the
arrays of interconnected things at play: living, non-living, and somewhere in between. The *Gleichzeitigkeit* or simultaneity produced by the overlaying of spatiality and temporality, allows for the multiplying narratives to emerge from coalescence of fragments, but unlike Benjamin’s allegorical *Denkbilder*, they retain their visibility and legibility. This *Gleichzeitigkeit* allows space for objects without subsuming parts into an ideological framework or compromising the disruptive potential of individual entities.

To both Benjamin and Adorno, the value of autonomy lies in the potential to disrupt ideology. Feldman writes of the chiastic relationship between Adorno’s concept of art and Benjamin’s dialectic image:

On one hand, Adorno worries that Benjamin gives over the artwork to ideological narratives. On the other hand, Adorno is concerned that Benjamin’s historical materialism refuses historical narrative, which is precisely where Benjamin locates ideology. Indeed the disruptive potential that Adorno grants the artwork with respect to social and political ideology thus corresponds to the disruptive potential that Benjamin ascribes to his historical materialism with respect to historicist ideology.¹¹⁹

If we consider the aesthetic values of *Passagen-Werk* and regard the project as a *Kraftwerk*—a technological organisation of experiences—we may conclude that the autonomy of ‘alienated things’ and the narratives of ‘injected meanings’ need not be mutually exclusive. Within the context of non-integrative *zuibitsu* frameworks and materialist *Denkbilder*, Adorno’s assertion that ‘Dialectic images are constellations between alienated things and injected meanings’ can be recast in a way that is congruent with Benjamin’s non-integrative materialist historiography.¹²⁰

In the next section I conclude this dissertation by tackling some questions concerning Benjamin’s materialism and its aesthetics still further. In particular, I consider his philosophy of fragmentation in relation to Quentin Meillassoux’s speculative materialism. I return to the question that begins this study: what strategies can art develop from Benjamin’s practice of allegory and montage that makes our world perceptible? What are some of the tactics that can effectively ‘describe and explain the world in which we live’?¹²¹

6 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 471
8 Sherival also recalls the image of ‘what has been smashed’.
10 Benjamin, ‘Eduard Fuchs: Collector and Historian’, 36.
13 Ibid. 476.
14 Ibid. 475.
18 Ibid. 45.
19 Ibid. 47.
20 Ibid. 35.
27 Ibid. 67.
28 Ibid. 67. ‘Abweichungen’ can also translate to ‘deviations’.
33 Leads to further contradictions or antithesis.

35 Adorno’s objection to Benjamin’s proposed ‘literary montage’ to be utilised in the Arcades Project is discussed in the second chapter.


39 Kirst, ‘Walter Benjamin’s “Denkbild”’, 515.


41 Anazographesis is discussed in relation to the writings of Posidonius and Chrysippus. ‘Emotional impulse’ is also described as affective movement, a non-rational response.


43 Discussions on aura may be debatable (and this possibly points directly at the differences between Adorno and Benjamin on the autonomy of art, but it also distracts from Benjamin’s main point). Autonomy or authenticity? Benjamin’s wishful thinking of the destruction or displacement of the original is therefore authenticity.


45 Ibid.

46 The English derivative, craft, only retains the connotation of power in words such as ‘witchcraft’.


48 Ibid. 9.


50 Tacita Dean and Juliana Engberg, Tacita Dean (Australian Centre for Contemporary Art: Melbourne, 2009), 34.


52 Michael Hamburger, For Ted Hughes, October 29, 1998 quoted in Dean and Engberg, Tacita Dean, 30.

53 Michael Hamburger died shortly after the completion of Dean’s film in 2007.

54 In the film, brown paper was used to run through the equipment for testing. This allowed Dean to photograph the operation in full light, which would normally expose the film in production.


56 It is interesting to note that while Benjamin advocates film as the new form of art for the modern age, Dean is defending the medium from obsolescence when digital media is pushed to become a homogenous and mediated way of sensing the world. Would Benjamin have also rejected the film medium today in favour of the newer digital
medium? My guess is that he would see the potential of the new medium but would have also objected to the homogenisation of a machine language.

58 Ibid. 11.
62 Kawauchi, *Rinko Diary is a tumblelog*.
64 In particular, the emphasis on the documentary function of photography in post-war Japan led to the development of the photobook as a media platform. Photographers would often regard the photograph itself as a means to achieve the printed image in the published form. See Ryūichi Kaneko and Ivan Vartanian, Japanese Photobooks of the 1960s and ‘70s (New York: Aperture Foundation Books, 2009).
65 Her view is that the opportunities to show photographic works were limited until recently, due to the scarcity of galleries and their reluctance to exhibit photographic works. For example see Miwa Kojima, ‘Interview: Rinko Kawauchi—Capturing moments in a constant present’, M-KOS [blog] (24 Oct. 2011) <http://www.mkos.net/archives/6726>, accessed 21 Nov. 2012.
66 Caygill, Walter Benjamin, 75.
67 Modern zuihitsu proliferation in the interwar Japanese literary market.
68 The term, zuihitsu, written in Kanji (随筆) has its roots in the Chinese, sui po, rendered in the same characters. The most notably Chinese work is Hung Mai’s late 13th century, Jung-chai sui-pi. However, beyond the borrowing of the term, the Chinese texts appear to bear little significance in the development of zuihitsu in Japan. The literary debate surrounding zuihitsu or zatsu as a fragmentary method—a viable way forward for modern Japanese literature—raged in the 1920s, and is principally argued by the well-known writer, Akutagawa Ryunosuke. Interestingly, DiNitto writes: ‘For Akutagawa, modernism represented “the disintegration of the novel into heterogeneous fragments of other genres.” Zuihitsu offered some of these heterogeneous, fragmentary possibilities’. This debate is beyond the scope of this chapter. See Rachel DiNitto, ‘Return of the “Zuihitsu”: Print Culture, Modern Life, and Heterogeneous Narrative in Prewar Japan’, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 64/ 2 (2004), 251-290. It is also interesting to note the oft-attributed historical route of zuihitsu to women’s diary writing seems to be completely dominated by male writers in this period.
69 Ibid. 251–290.
70 Ibid. 251.
72 This historical window in late Taishō and early Shōwa, between the Kanto earthquake of 1923 and the onset of World War II, saw rapid changes in Japanese society; from re-
building from the aftermath of the earthquake, the project of nation building continued from the Meiji restoration and expansion of militarism that would intensified in Shōwa.

73 DiNitto, ‘Return of the “Zuihitsu”’, 252.

74 DiNitto’s argument largely focuses on the modern form of narrative rather than narratives of modernity, although this is also addressed.


76 DiNitto’s essay presents an extensive account of the complexities of kindai zuihitsu, which I cannot include here in any depth. She draws on the original publication formats (specifically their table of contents), their marketing strategies, and readership survey at the time. The comparative study of other terms, bibun (belle lettres), and shaseibun (sketches, literally, ‘writing still life’), provides some insights into the board range of literature that came under the zuihitsu title. As well, the argument against and for this fragmentary form (using the term, zatsu) further delineates this complex landscape. It is also important to note that there was a conscious and deliberate separation between kindai zuihitsu and pre-modern zuihitsu such as Sei Shōnogon’s The Pillow Book and Kenkō’s Essays in Idleness. There is no clear reference in the Kanji to Chinese literature. The outlook is decidedly westwards, opening up to influences from European literature.

77 Quoted in DiNitto, ‘Return of the “Zuihitsu”’, 288.

78 DiNitto goes on to contrast Tosaka’s argument with that of Miki Kiyoshi, whose views on literature were more pessimistic about the state of literature at the time. In the face of growing censorship and intensifying militarism in 1930s Imperial Japan, Kiyoshi feared that zuihitsu merely provided an inconsequential and escapist mode of distraction and the writings that came under zuihitsu were indicative of ‘the suppression of the critical mind’, and no longer rose from thought. Considering Tosaka published his article one year prior to Japan’s invasion of China, his views seemed wildly optimistic. The rise of ultranationalism and totalitarianism in the early Shōwa period saw a complete suppression of ideologies and expressions not approved by the state.


81 There is a clear and conscious separation between kindai zuihitsu (pre-war Japanese zuihitsu in the confrontation of modern life) and its predecessor—pre-modern zuihitsu in works, such as Kenkō’s Essays in Idleness and Shōnogon’s The Pillow Book. See DiNitto’s discussion on the pre-modern forms.

82 For example, see Sergei EInsenstein’s discussions on filmic montage’s relationship with different graphic forms including Japanese calligraphy in Film Form: Essays in Film Theory, ed., tr. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1949).

83 The experience is most notably different from conventional filmic presentation edited to a defined time-code. That is: the audience watches the work from a beginning to an end.

84 This is a common characteristic utilised by photo books. See Gerry Badger, ‘Introduction, The Photobook: Between the Novel and Film’.

85 In some exhibition of his works, such as Six Good Reasons to Stay Home curated by Kelly Gellatly at the National Gallery of Victoria, his early single-channel works, displayed on LCD screens were installed in the space like an installation.

86 Sawa speaks of how he extends his working processes of collecting, manipulating, and collaging materials when working with sculptural forms into working with the video

87 This work was commissioned by the Gallery of Modern Art Brisbane in Queensland for the *Asia Pacific Triennial 6*.


90 Ibid. 76.

91 Indeed, readers who labour to decipher Benjamin’s riddles, do so with supplemented theories and historical narratives external to these texts.

92 Kirst, ‘Walter Benjamin’s “Denkbild”’, 521.

93 Time-reckoning in ancient and imperial China was of great import socially and politically. In particular, calendric calculations for each lunar year (年 nián) are complex as durations as well as the number of months change from one year to the next. Although a solar year (歳 suì), the duration between two successive vernal equinoxes, remains on the same, solar terms and pentads need to be aligned to different dates for each lunar year.

94 I make a distinction between huánglì (黃曆) ‘yellow calendar’. The Yellow Calendar was said to have been written by or in the times of the mythical Yellow Emperor and there is evidence that dates it to around 4000 BC. The Yellow Calendar is one of a number of calendars devised in ancient China. In comparison, the imperial calendar is a newer form of official time-reckoning issued by the centralised imperial government through different dynasties in imperial China. The very similar pronunciation of the two terms has blurred their distinct histories and both seem to be attributed as the predecessor of the now common 通勝 túngshèng (in Mandarin) or tung sing (in Cantonese).

95 In other words, it is a solar calendar that reckons the seasons astronomically.

96 Nineteen of the 24 solar terms last 15 days while the remaining 5 lasts 16 days, giving a total of 365 days in one solar year. Likewise, some pentads last 6 instead of 5 days.

97 As opposed to suì (solar year), which is defined as the period between two consecutive vernal equinoxes, a lunar year is (年 nián), defined as the period between two consecutive lunar new year days. The solar-based calculations reckon seasons astronomically; that is, seasons are defined by apparent positions of the sun on the ecliptic rather than meteorologically by average air temperatures.

98 The project title of the *Autumn Almanac of Tokyo* in Japanese is 東京の秋の生活暦. Both the *Seasonal Almanac* and the *Illustrated Almanac* have Chinese titles, which are 季節年鑑 and 插圖年鑑 respectively.

99 Australia Council for the Arts is Australia’s principal arts funding body is financed by the federal government.

100 Liza Dalby, *East Wind Melts the Ice* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2007).


The almanac projects also take cues from Liza Dalby’s *East Wind Melts the Ice* in her deliberate layering of the Chinese Almanac with the two Japanese versions and her own experience of the seasons in Berkeley on the Sonoma coast of California. She takes the first pentad of the solar year, ‘East Wind Melts Ice’ as the title of her memoirs. The book also begins with this pentad.

Stephens and Weston, ‘Free Time: Overwork as an Ontological Condition’, 139.

The *inscription* translates as follows: ‘*Shuubun*’ means Autumnal equinox. ‘Beetles wall up their burrows’ is from the Chinese Almanac and ‘Adzuki beans ripen’ is from the modern Japanese almanac).

The common name of *tanuki* in English is Japanese raccoon dog.


Levi Bryant, ‘Wilderness Ontology’, 26

Tiedemann, ‘Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?’, 80.


*Hakuro* (白露) translates to ‘White Dew’.


*Kanro* (寒露) translates to ‘Cold Dew’.


Plate 4.1. Top to bottom.
Plate 4.2.
Plate 4.3.
Plate 4.4.
Plate 4.6.
Hiraki Sawa, O, 2010. Multi-channel video and 5-channel sound installation.
CONCLUSION

Art practice

To great writers, finished works weigh more lightly than those fragments on which they work throughout their lives. For only the more feeble and distracted take an inimitable pleasure in closure, feeling that their lives have thereby been given back to them. For the genius, each caesura, and the heavy blows of fate, fall like gentle sleep itself into his workshop labor. Around it he draws a charmed circle of fragments.¹

In ‘The Portrait of Walter Benjamin’ published in the 1967 collection of essays Prisms, Theodor Adorno describes Benjamin’s philosophy as one of ‘fragmentation’, which ‘remained itself fragmentary’.² Adorno attributes the reason for this approach to the necessity of allowing ‘the medium of thought [to] remain an open question’.³ A Benjaminian approach is one that produces constellations of thoughts from useful parts gleaned from seemingly irreconcilable practices. The structure of his materialism is built on his re-casting of the Kantian notion of experience and his studies on German Romanticism and Baroque Trauerspiele. His materialist historiography draws simultaneously from the Kabbalistic meditation on the material world and commodity fetishism as formulated in Marxist historical materialism. The fragmentary nature of his philosophy is both a consequence of and a precondition to the tensions created by such diametrically opposed elements.⁴ By discovering the affined concepts drawn from divergent fields, it is possible to see the experimentation and radical inventiveness of his fragmentary methods not as accidental, but as justified and necessary.

Andrew Benjamin and Charles Rice suggest that what underlies the fragmentary aspect of Benjamin’s materialist aesthetics is the experience of modernity. They write, ‘Modernity necessitates forms of interruption. Benjamin will refer to these interruptions in a number of ways. One of the most emphatic occurs in the use of the term “caesura”’.⁵ This pause or gap directly correlates with the arrest of the flow of thought: standstil in his dialectics.⁶ For Benjamin fragments as decayed images and impoverished objects have the potential to disrupt, interrupt, and subvert through disunity and incongruence, allowing ‘the medium of thought’ to remain open.
I now return to the question that opens this study: what strategies can art develop from Benjamin’s practice of allegory and montage that make our world perceptible? Throughout this study, I extend various experimental strands of Benjamin’s methods into art practice and a fragmentary material aesthetics emerges as key. Benjamin’s emblematic Denkbilder, Michel de Montaigne’s essays, and the modern zuihitsu are examples of fragmentary literary forms that respond to the caesural nature of modernity. Immanent in this fragmentary condition is the possibility of inducing dialectics at a standstill. For Benjamin, the Proustian moment of involuntary remembrance is the image of awakening. Marcel Proust sees our encounters with artworks as capable of triggering small quiet epiphanies. In an unpublished essay on the transformative experience of art, Proust tells a story of a bourgeois young man who harbours a disdain for the domesticity of ordinary life. Chancing upon the works of Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin on a visit to the art gallery, the young man’s eyes are opened to the beauty embodied in the objects and materials of everyday life. Proust concludes, ‘the great painters initiate us into a knowledge and love of the external world [...] they are the ones “by whom our eyes are opened”, opened that is, on the world [...] I try to show its influence on our life, the charm and wisdom with which it coats our most modest moments by initiating in the life of still life’. In Recherché Proust evokes a similar visual vitality of existing paintings through words in ‘actual ekphrasis’: ‘the term of classical rhetoric for [the] pairing of words and pictures’. Eric Karpeles notes, ‘There was Chardin and his subtle transcendence of the mundane: Proust’s transformative icons, a madeleine and a paving stone, are direct literary corollaries of the humble objects found in Chardin’s still lifes’. In a similar way, this thesis approaches aesthetics of fragments and their experience through the material presence of objects. Compilation films, essay films, photobooks, sculptures, installations, and online almanacs are the contingent constellations of these everyday fragments examined.

This engagement with material objects is theoretically framed by contemporary materialisms. In particular, Manuel De Landa’s neo-materialism provides a parallel that extends Benjamin’s historical materialism concretely through analyses of matter and energy. His neo-materialism asserts that ‘all objective entities are products of historical processes’ and as such are singular and unique, their present states are contingent while their future states exist as unactualised or virtual possibilities. The concept of history as contingent is significant in Benjamin’s historiography; it eliminates determinism and
with it the notion of progress. Within De Landa’s analyses ‘mechanisms are largely causal, but they do not necessarily involve linear causality’. The deployment of David Hume’s critique of causality is shared by other contemporary philosophical arguments emerged from the ‘speculative turn’. Most pertinent to this thesis is Quentin Meillassoux’s speculative materialism. It presents a rigorous ontological recasting that has a potential to bring to the fore object-oriented and speculative techniques inherent in Benjamin’s materialism and historiography. More generally, by arguing for the existence of the ‘thing-in-itself’ and that it can be known, speculative materialism re-activates and reinvigorates the practice of materialism. Fully extending Benjamin’s philosophy through speculative materialism is beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile noting the possibilities of such an extension by situating these philosophical thoughts in relation to Benjamin’s thinking.

Meillassoux consolidates the speculative materialist position by radicalising a weak correlationism, defined by Kant’s transcendental philosophy that the thing-in-itself exists, we can think it, but we can never know it. In the same instance, he argues against a strong correlationism that holds that the thing-in-itself cannot be imagined or known. Correlationism, a term coined by Meillassoux, is broadly given to mean:

[E]very philosophy that maintains the impossibility of acceding through thought to a being independent of thoughts. We never, according to this type of philosophy, have access to any intended thing […] that is not always-already correlated to an act of thinking […] Consequently, correlationism posits, against all materialism, that thought cannot escape from itself so as to accede to a world not yet affected by the modes of apprehension of our subjectivity.

This dominant mode of thinking claims we can know an object only if there is a corresponding human thought (such as a concept) and all we can know for certain is the existence of this correspondence, what Meillassoux calls the human-world correlate. Working to claim the existence of the thing-in-itself (outside this human-world correlate), Meillassoux inverses the weak correlationist argument from an idealist position into a materialist one by asserting the principle of facticity, and with it, the necessity of contingency. Building on Hume’s critique of causality, Meillassoux defines contingent to be ‘every entity, thing or event that I know is capable of not being, or could have not been, or could have been other’; while fact is ‘every type of entity whose being-other I can conceive of, but of which we do not know whether it could,
effectively, have been other than it is’.

17 The laws of nature are facts in a speculative materialist sense in that while their ‘being-other’ can be imagined, neither their necessity nor their contingency can be proven. Furthermore, Meillassoux rejects Leibniz’s Principle of Sufficient Reason and all its modalities, and in doing so he repudiates claims that ‘existent things have a necessary reason to be as they are rather than otherwise’.

18 By asserting the facticity of the human-world correlate as absolute (it is absolutely possible for the correlate to be other than it is, for instance its non-existence can be imagined even if there is no way of knowing), he shows the correlate itself is not a necessity, but a contingency. Speculative materialism holds that the thing-in-itself exists independent of thought and we can know it through speculations.

19 For Meillassoux, speculation is key to a philosophy as a method that predicates on experience. He writes:

Speculation assures all other disciplines of thought that they alone have the right to describe and to explain (in a non-necessarist form) the world in which we live. [...] If you want to know or to think what is, you must necessarily [...] do so by the way of a certain regime of experience: scientific experimentation (the sciences of nature), historical and sociological experience, but also literary and artistic experience, etc. And here, my role is to prevent a certain philosophical regime [metaphysics] from contesting the sovereignty of those ‘disciplines of experience’.

So, my materialism is neither dogmatic nor intrusive: it does not say what the ultimate elements of this world are, nor does it claim to demonstrate in general that there is necessarily what there is [...] On the contrary, it defends the exclusive right of experience to describe the inexhaustible intricacies of the real that make up our world.

20 Meillassoux’s speculative materialism provides a rich ground for recasting Benjaminian thinking that privileges experience. The ontological affirmation of the thing-in-itself and access to it through speculations mean acceding to material entities agency and affective capacity independent from human thought.

21 Levi Bryant describes this autonomy as the ‘alterity’ and ‘thingliness’ of things. In Jane Bennett’s vital materialism, this agency of living, non-living, and in-between matter is affective and calls for our attentiveness. Matter’s capacities for morphogenesis (demonstrable experientially in complexity sciences) form the basis of De Landa’s neo-materialist meta-analyses. These materialisms have the capacity to extend a Benjaminian materialism in ways that have not been exhausted within an idealist or correlationist framework. The re-casting of Benjamin’s historical materialism into a Benjaminian materialist aesthetics presents a productive area for future scholarship. This thesis lays the groundwork for such a
project by setting up a dialogical relationship between Benjamin’s methodologies and art
practice in four expositions.

The first two chapters of this dissertation delve into Benjamin’s two production cycles
that began with the *Trauerspiel* study and ended with *Das Passagen-Werk*. Focusing on
Benjamin’s allegorical practice, Chapter 1 explores allegorical forms in classical antiquity,
Baroque *Trauerspiel*, Charles Baudelaire’s poetry, and Wong Kar-wai’s film works in
relation to the transformation of temporal conceptions. The replacement of the cyclical
and fulfilled temporal order of Greek mythology by the incomplete and open-ended
Messianic time triggered a transmutation of allegorical practices. Compounded by a
fragmentation of experiences in nascent modernity, allegorical objects in Christian
cosmologies proliferated. Paralysed by an increasingly arbitrary, multiplicitous and
chaotic system, the Baroque allegoricists abandoned the possibility of meaning in mortal
life. Melancholy and mourning result from the eternal wait for transcendence.
Baudelaire revealed nineteenth-century modernity’s order of the new to be a hellish
repetition of always-the-same. In his poetry, commodity is the supreme allegorical
object capable of making manifest the modern condition. In supermodernity, the order
of the new is not only intensified but spatialised to encompass coexisting multiple and
iterative time lines in a global space. In his films, Wong expresses the temporal nature of
supermodernity through material objects. By re-investing history into the atemporal
symbols of Hong Kong, he transforms them into ruins. These allegorical objects open
up an extra-temporal dimension by inducing remembrance. These analyses of allegorical
practices in relation to specific temporal orders contextualise Benjamin’s project to
redeem allegorical practice in the early twentieth century. In *One Way Street* allegories of
the Baroque *Trauerspiel* were transformed into the emblematic *Denkbilder*; these, in turn,
were intensified in the *Arcades Project*, where montage provides the key to this process.

In Chapter 2, I examine Benjamin’s montage practice in relation to his intention to
redeem allegorical practice and his *Geschichtsphilosophie*. At the centre of this program is
the precipitation of the dialectical image as the moment of awakening. Benjamin’s
conception of montage is controversial and the *Arcades Project’s* incomplete state makes
it still more elusive. Rolf Tiedemann defends Benjamin’s method against Adorno’s
criticism of being insufficiently dialectical by drawing attention to the significance of
Benjamin’s materialist physiognomies. Susan Buck-Morss’s analysis of John Heartfield’s
photomontage work highlights the capacity of a materialist method. She reveals that the functioning of such a construction must render visible the gap between elements. Comparing filmic montage with Benjamin’s model further exposes the latter’s principles. While similarly sustained by the effect of shock, Benjamin’s montage does not result in the synthesis of fragments; rather, it relies on the dialectic to maintain gaps between parts. Speculating on the mechanism of a Benjaminian montage more incisively, I tease out relevant concepts embedded in his essays ‘What is Epic Theatre?’ and ‘The Work of Art in the Epoch of Technical Reproducibility’. Here I find the effect of estrangement, distraction, and tactility to be critical components of Benjamin’s method. This leads me to expand my framework to consider material objects as facilitators of the dialectical image. Tom Jacob’s use of the key scene in Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man in particular illustrates how physical objects can bring about the point of awakening. My exploration of Wunderkammer helps imagine what a montage of objects may look like. I extend this exploration by examining the works and practices of Joseph Cornell, Sarah Sze, Mark Dion, and Sarah Walko with reference to Bennett’s vitalist materialism. Analysing my own works The World of Things and Konvolut K from a methodological perspective draws out how montage of physical objects, images and their representation can function. The focus on material objects shows not what the Arcades Project might have looked like, but more significantly, some of its unactualised possibilities.

The third and fourth chapters test the limits of the speculations set out in the previous two chapters. In Chapter 3, I look at assembly methods of two narrative forms: materialist history and film. The significance Benjamin places on images and objects in his historical materialism marks an important divergence from that of Marx. Imagery in his Denkbilder captures the kaleidoscopic evanescence of history precisely by drawing on gaps and caesura of modern experience. De Landa’s new materialism provides a productive path for extending Benjamin’s historical materialist practice by providing an alternative framework within which to conceive and speak about the materials of history. Building on contemporary scientific understanding of complex systems, De Landa’s concept of history assumes no end point, no equilibrium, no fittest design, thus dissolving the notion of progress. Asserting that history is ‘a narrative of contingencies, not necessities’, his historical accounts demonstrate how a materialist history can be constructed. Bruzzi’s analogous approach to film and history in narrative construction
allows me to explore these contingencies through examining the assembly methods in
film practice. I analyse the approaches of Kevin Rafferty's compilations in their
(Benjaminian) use of caesura, of Eric Gandini’s Surplus in its (De Landian) historical and
social explanations built on the studies of materials, of Chris Marker’s and Patrick
Keiller’s essay film forms in their capturing of histories as incomplete. Consonant with
Benjamin's historical materialism, these works ‘liquidate “the epic moment” of history
and “construct” it as the discontinuum which it always has been’. Contingency,
caesura, and incompleteness are critical to materialist history’s capacity to bring about
the dialectical image.

Using Benjamin’s concept of incompleteness as a departure point, Chapter 4 explores
the functioning of fragments within contingent assemblies. The problem of the
foreshortened Denkbilder in Das Passagen-Werk’s ‘fiendish intensification’ of One Way
Street’s ‘profane motifs’ presents two questions: the significance of fragments and the
possibility of framework. Benjamin’s allusion to Kabbalist practice in his
Geschichtsphilosophie, and in particular the concept of Tikkum Olam, underlines the
importance of material fragments as a way of grasping the world. Esther Leslie’s
exposition on Benjamin’s concept of Kraftwerk highlights the significance Benjamin
places on tactility and how this sense can be transferred and transformed across
different technological media. I examine images in Tacita Dean’s films in this context as
materialist Denkbilder. These visual images incorporate the materiality of objects into
filmic experiences, re-introducing the visual into Benjamin’s textual Denkbild form. In
Dean’s works, these materialist Denkbilder have the capacity to transform into allegories
through the interaction between word, image and matter, facilitated by the technological
medium of film. Returning to the issue of autonomy in the Adorno-Benjamin debate, I
argue that to assert the autonomy of the dialectic image is to recognise that ‘alienated
things’ whose ‘use-values’ have been depleted retain within their material presence their
alterity, thingliness, agency, and capacities. This thinking reframes the Arcades Project, in
demanding a greater focus on the materiality of the collected artefacts (whether textual
or physical). This, in turn, allows us to conceive of how material fragments can function
in a dialectic without theoretical mediation as materialist thought-images. At the same
time, however, Adorno’s ‘injected meanings’ cannot be ignored. If the narratives that
emerge between fragments, between objects and the audience in encountering a work of
art are considered in the context of these ‘injected meanings’, then his assertion that
‘Dialectic images are constellations between alienated things and injected meanings’ describes a critical experience of art. I ask, is Benjamin’s rejection of frameworks too total? Is a non-integrative framework possible? I explore *zuibitsu* as such a framework that deals ‘with the fragmentary nature of reality’

I delve further into the possibility of a viable disembedded schema in analysing the organisational structures and techniques of production employed in my almanac projects. Informed by Bennett’s vital materialism, the almanac is analysed as an organisational technique that enables fragments to exist as vibrant autonomous entities in non-integrative constellations without compromising their disruptive potential or subsuming them into a single ideological framework. The open structure of the almanac form makes perceptible secret affinities that emerge from these constellations, allowing multiplying narratives to proliferate. Within such *Gleichzeitigkeit* spaces are opened up where the allegorical efficacy of objects is made visible. The different approaches examined in this dissertation extend Benjamin’s methodologies practically in the expression of material presence in the ‘techniques, practices and experiences’ of art.

A Benjaminian materialist aesthetics provides the language to think about my art practice, a practice that cannot be defined by technique-based medium boundaries and that is often described too generally (and unsatisfactorily) as experimental. A critical materialist aesthetics has the potential to make concrete this kind of experimental practice by delineating material processes that occur in the creation and reception of artworks. In contemporary art practice, examination of these material processes encompasses technological ones. Art here, as Benjamin theorised, is a technical organisation of experience. As Leslie suggests, the *Spuren* in *Kraftwerk* are not the handprints of the artisan, nor are they the unique signature of the artist. Rather, these traces bear the imprints of the ‘objective modern world’ transcribed through technological means. This transcription is approached through material presence. How is a work of art shaped physically and experientially by its technological engagement? How have the technologies employed changed in the process? In my own practice, the creation of
contingent assemblies using material fragments is grounded in this transformative relationship between art, technology and experience. Speculating on a fragmentary materialist practice in Benjaminian terms provides an avenue for developing a materialist aesthetics that can function as a meta-framework for the creation, experience, and theorisation of art.

Conventional scholarship favours completeness; however, the nature of practice is incomplete. I conclude by reconciling these antinomies momentarily in speculating on some future possibilities of this project. Specifically, I discuss the potential development of my practice built on this investigation in relation to two incomplete works. As indicated earlier, speculative materialism provides a philosophical framework for taking the exploration of aesthetics’ relationship with experience further. My exploration of Benjamin’s methodologies highlights the materiality of objects in the construction of allegories, and montage as contingent assemblies, framed by the conception of fragments, incompleteness, and non-integrative frameworks. I am interested in pursuing three interrelated questions that arise from these interstices: first, the relationship between word and image (and forms of expressions) in the materialist Denkbild and its capacity to create allegorical forms that make apparent different temporal and spatial orders. Secondly, how does Benjamin’s notion of Kraftwerk (explored in Leslie’s ‘Traces of Craft’) operate in the continuous technical re-organisation of experiences facilitated by contemporary proliferation of media forms. How do the senses of touch and proprioception function within the immaterial digital code? How does the attraction to materiality (Bennett’s ‘call of things’) manifest itself in contemporary consumerisms and the market economy? Is Kraftwerk capable of ‘reimbursing’ the change brought about by the technical organisation of digital technologies and ‘instituting new potential for a familiarity between receivers and producers, once more in the form of collective experience’? If so, what would this Kraftwerk look like? Thirdly, how may algorithms perform the role of a meta-structure in generating non-integrative frameworks? The expressions of non-computational algorithms as descriptors of procedural actions (rules and instructions) are rich in the works of Georges Perec, Peter Greenaway, and Hollis Frampton. In their works, algorithms generate structures that give rise to different permutations constructed using basic materials. This area of investigation was excluded from this thesis due to the constraint of time and scope, but the following discussion of two ongoing works sketch out the parameters for future research and practice.
Natural History Primer (2008–), my collaborative project with Redmond Bridgeman, currently exists in two configurations (Appendix). The work assumes the subtitle, ‘an A–Z Chronicle of Waychinicup National Park and Two Peoples Bay Nature Reserve; a presentation of the flora and fauna of the Great Southern region of Western Australia: Birds, Beasts, Fishes, Serpents, Insects, and Plants’, suggesting material collection from specific geographical regions. These materials include super-8 film, digital video footage, sound recordings and photographic stills. The fragmented nature of this project is similar to our previous collaboration Konvolut K (2007) discussed in Chapter 2, where the main challenge lies in finding effective frameworks to bring together masses of accumulated materials. Frampton’s Zorn’s Lemma (1977), a 60-minute film that makes use of set theory as its basis, provides a model in creating the present iterations.27 Specifically, his engagement with linguistic and abstract structures in the organisation of filmic materials is a major influence on Natural History Primer’s use of the English alphabet as its principal structuring device. The first iteration of the work makes explicit use of language by allocating one letter to one object captured in the footage (animal, plant, rocks, minerals, natural mechanism, geographic feature, or location) by labelling it using a scientific, common, or colloquial name. This mapping plays with the idea of knowing through naming when the act of naming itself is arbitrary. Each letter precedes a piece of silent footage (of an object), which is then followed by the word that denotes the object. This primer organises the fragments into a recognisable but unpredictable pattern that can be dis-aggregated into 26 separate segments. In the second iteration, objects are arranged in a similar sequence, but the absence of letters and words obscures the structuring device, and in doing so, the focus is brought back to the materials. The silence that accompanies these sketches (often shot as close-ups and extreme close-ups) draws attention to the materiality of the objects. In the linear sequence, an object is placed in relationship with another in a temporal diorama that is separated by a single transition. These transitions (such as wipes, flips, and focus shifts) are created using analogue animation. These visible seams of construction emphasise the ever-present frame, camera, and the human eye. The work calls for attentiveness to the materiality of objects through the filmic medium while at the same time acknowledging human presence in the community of things. Since the realisation of these two iterations a considerable amount of additional materials have been produced, including phot-etchings, intaglio prints, cyanotypes, large format photographs, animations, and physical
specimens. At present these materials remain fragmentary and await the development of a viable framework. Experimentation with algorithms that are sensitive to the materiality of these fragments has the potential to generate useful structures. In particular, with an emphasis placed on objects and their physical placement in space future iterations can include forms such as archival projects, collections, and Wunderkammern.

Created specifically to experiment with the methods explored in this thesis, *Coda: Zuihitsu in 30 Remoscopes* is a linear video work that follows a set of rules to generate *Denkbilder* within a *zuihitsu* format (Appendix). Two *Tumblr* blogs serve as initial aggregators that diary captured fragments: still photographs and one-minute videos (remoscopes) with accompanying captions or titles, from thirty consecutive days spent in Tokyo and Hong Kong. Like the almanac projects, each dated entry features a selected photograph or remoscope collected on the day. I am interested in the use of algorithms in producing a single iteration. Instead of using the alphabet, chronology provides the structure. The single-channel linear video aggregates thirty remoscopes chronologically, each beginning with a three-second title. As *zuihitsu*, these one-minute windows capture daily moments and call attention to both the ordinariness and significance of everyday experiences. Here, the visual images, audio tracks, and texts interact within a *Denkbild* scaffold. The titles of each segment function as the *inscriptio*, alluding to related thoughts (*subscriptio*) situated within the remoscope (*pictura*). The temporal structure (three-second text followed by one-minute video with synchronised audio recording) alone provides continuity. Gaps between these elements and between the thirty segments are deliberately left open, harbouring the potential to disrupt. Like Sei Shônagon’s lists of poetic images, *Coda* singles out things to be observed, experienced, and pondered. In this way, a list provides a simple type of algorithm that directs our attention, organises our observations, and catalogues our experiences according to different modes of thoughts. Just as *Sans Soleil* recalls Japan’s possible futures through synthesised images, and *London* remembers the city’s imagined pasts through contemporary observations, list-making in *Coda* is an act of pattern recognition that allows experiences to crystallise from a sea of contingencies. I aim to develop this structural experimentation in algorithmic list-making to create moving image works that tackle elusive experiences for conventional presentation formats such as film screenings and art exhibitions. As such, these future works intend to disrupt expectations of moving image forms and, by doing so, contribute to their transformation.
The creation of contingent assemblies from material fragments defines my art practice. This project makes it possible for me to consider a materialist art practice, where the making of lists, the formation of patterns, and the coalescence of diverse and disparate fragments into momentary constellations make palpable the invisible, the ephemeral, but nonetheless, the very real experiences of our world. Furthermore, this thesis’s engagement with art, history, and philosophy frames the problem of an ‘un-disciplinary’ practice—one that is analogous to Benjamin’s philosophy of fragmentation. Analyses of Benjamin’s methodologies, exploration of his thinking, and speculations on his materialisms help construct a language to discuss and converse about such a practice, one that aims to create works that allow ‘the medium of thought [to] remain an open question’.

1 Walter Benjamin, One Way Street, tr. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: Verso, 1992), 446.
3 Ibid. 239.
4 To claim his works to be solely of one tradition is to exclude key aspects from his scholarship. It is perhaps the marriage of the sacred and the profane that is so unacceptable for his friends and supporters; or perhaps it is the assemblage of antithetical concepts that makes his works so elusive and demanding. This fragmentation need not be construed as a precursor to a relativism that characterises postmodernist and post-structuralist thoughts. Buck-Morss defends this position in Chapter 7 of The Dialectic of Seeing. See Susan Buck-Morss, The Dialectic of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).

In Graham Harman’s words, “correlationism” means: philosophy trapped in a permanent meditation on the human-world correlate, trying to find the best model of the correlate: is it language, intentionality, embodiment, or some other form of correlation between human and world? An ‘absolutized’ opponent of correlationism is what he terms subjectivist metaphysics, which returns the ‘absolute’ as the correlate itself. Meillassoux also argues against this position. See Graham Harman, ‘Meillasoux’s Virtual Futures’, Continent 1.2 (2011), 79.


Ibid. 9.

Ibid. 14.

The actual argument is too complex to summarise here. There are a number of steps Meillassoux writes, ‘the correlation is not absolutely necessary, and its absence of an absolute necessity of correlation is accessible to thought - that one can justify it through an argument’. He shows the correlational facticity through our capability of imagining our own non-being, that is also the non-being of thought. He writes, ‘the possibility that we should cease to exist—this possibility is by definition independent of our thought, since it actualizes our non-being’. See Meillassoux, ‘Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition’, 8–10.

Ibid. 12.

Interestingly, by distinguishing materialism from realism, Meillassoux also claims the possibility of objects without subjects.


Instances of explicit exploration in art include the Situationist International, Fluxus, and Conceptual Art of the 1960s.

Hollis Frampton (dir.), Zorn’s Lemma (Criterion Collection, 1970).

‘Remoscopes’, also known as ‘Lumiere’s films’, are forms of videos that follow specific rules such as a 1-minute duration, shot with a stationary camera, with no editing, and so on. Remoscope is experimented with by artists and video makers internationally but is most notably promoted by a group known as remo. See remo, remo: record, expression and medium – organisation [webpage], (2008–2013) <http://www.remo.or.jp/ja/> , accessed 3 Mar. 2011.

In Chapter 4, I discuss briefly how searchable databases readily present re-iterative and varied combinations of the same materials.

APPENDIX

Artworks

http://www.jolaw.org/appendix

(Please refer to webpage for full listing and access to artworks)

The World of Things (2011)


Work details: Ten historical objects on loan from The Power Museum, Sydney, arranged in the exhibition space. The work is accompanied by a printed annotated map. Dimensions variable. 2011

*Top*: Ten objects on loan from the Power House Museum, Sydney.

*Bottom*: Printed two-sided annotated map (objects’ side), 420 x 297 mm.
*Left* Vitrines designs and plans for objects categorised into four groups. *Bottom* Four groups of objects displayed in four vitrines placed in exhibition space.
Top and middle: Exhibition views.
Bottom: Printed two-sided annotated map (artworks' side).
Konvolut K (2006)
<http://www.photonicsmedia.net/konvolutK/>
collaborative work by Jo Law and Redmond Bridgeman

Stills from entry sequence.
Top to bottom: Painted hoardings on William Street, Perth (during construction of Graham Farmer Freeway, or ‘Northbridge Tunnel’); housing development in Mandurah; painted hoardings on the corner of Hay and Barrack Streets, Perth (near Town Hall); construction hoardings on St. George’s Terrace near Milligan Street, Perth as featured in ‘Panorama’/ konvolut 6).
Left: Screen captures from various navigation levels in five sections.
Right: Photograph of Captain Stirling's statue on Barrack Street, Perth.
The Seasonal Almanac of Austinner (2009)  
<http://www.photonicsmedia.net/projects/seasonal>

Seasonal Almanac 季節年鑑

春
Spring
立春 Start of Spring
雨水 Rain Water
驚蟄 Awakening of Insects
春分 Vernal Equinox
清明 Clear and Bright
穀雨 Grain Rain

夏
Summer
立夏 Start of Summer
小滿 Grain Full
芒種 Grain in Ear
夏至 Summer Solstice
小暑 Minor Heat
大暑 Major Heat

秋
Autumn
立秋 Start of Autumn
處暑 Limit of Heat
白露 White Des
秋分 Autumnal Equinox
寒露 Cold Dew
霜降 Descent of Frost

冬
Winter
立冬 Start of Winter
小雪 Minor Snow
大雪 Major Snow
冬至 Winter Solstice
小寒 Minor Cold
大寒 Major Cold

Top: Four seasons and twenty-four solar terms described in the Chinese Almanac.
Bottom: Post of ‘Start of Autumn: cold cicadas chirps’, 15 February 2009  

<http://www.photonicsmedia.net/autumn/613>.
<http://www.photonicsmedia.net/autumn/240>.
JO LAW

INVITE YOU TO PARTICIPATE IN

OBSERVATIONS OF PHENOLOGICAL, ECOLOGICAL, AND ANTHROPOGENIC OCCURRENCES
WEATHER, STATISTICS, LUNAR PHASES, APPARENT SOLAR POSITIONS, BOTANICAL NOTES, FINDINGS, LISTS, CLASSIFICATIONS, SPECIMENS DRAWINGS, ILLUSTRATIONS, PHOTOGRAPHS, VIDEOS, INFORMATION, INTERPRETATION, AND SPECULATIONS FROM THE ILLAWARRA REGION OF AUSTRALIA AND AROUND THE WORLD

THE ILLUSTRATED ALMANAC OF THE ILLAWARRA AND BEYOND

INTERPRETATION OF PHENOLOGICAL EVENTS OVER 1 CALENDAR YEAR
from the First day of September, 2011
to the Thirty-first day of August, 2012

Participate in the Illustrated Almanac by visiting
http://almanac.photonicsmedia.net
Subscribe to a monthly or subscription email
become a contributor by emailing
Download your own Solar Term Calendar

Promotional flyer/ call for participants.
Top: Screen capture of the online almanac, ‘Summer’ <http://almanac.photonicsmedia.net>.
Bottom: Collage of posts from different months.
Natural History Primer (2007)  
<http://www.photonicsmedia.net/cabinet/1763>  
collaborative work by Jo Law and Redmond Bridgeman

*Left:* Alphabet titles from an earlier iteration of the project <http://www.photonicsmedia.net/algorithm/natural.html>.  
*Right:* Stills from the current iteration.
Coda: Zuihitsu in 30 Remoscopes (2013)
<http://vimeo.com/>
<http://jolawthk12.tumblr.com/>
< http://denkbild.tumblr.com/>

Top: Stills from Coda: Zuihitsu in 30 Remoscopes.

Middle: Tokyo --> Hong Kong: Zuihitsu in 30 days and 30 photographs, photo blog,

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