

The Mourning Play (*Trauerspiel*) of Shimon Attie

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Shimon Attie's images of the Scheunenviertel (1991-93) district of Berlin are suspended by the palimpsestic associations established between the fixated dead of the past and their ghostly appearance in the now instant; images that contain as part of that palimpsest a collective cultural knowledge or reserve of the impending obliteration of community (both the Jewish and non-Jewish citizens of Berlin) by mass-produced death. In this article, the images are theorized both as a memorial activity and an index or habitation for history. This objective is achieved by responding to a series of propositions arising from Walter Benjamin's text "On the Concept of History".

Spectral in their appearance, Shimon Attie's artwork *The Writing on the Wall* consists of images of Berlin's Jewish inhabitants (*Ostjuden*) photographed in the 1920s and 1930s, which, translated into photographic transparencies, are then superimposed upon the architectural features of the Scheunenviertel district of Berlin as it appears between 1991 and 1993.¹ Wherever possible, Attie attempts to project these archival images onto the exact locations where the photographs were taken originally, referencing in the process the associations attached to the disembodied fingers of a human hand in the book of Daniel ("MENE, MENE, TEKEL and PARSIN"),² whilst also reanimating fragments of a lost world on the very site of its own annihilation. Thus, Attie summons up the ghosts of an ancient tradition as well as those of a contemporary historical catastrophe.

An understanding of history is held or embodied within these sites of memory and its specific characteristics are activated as something becomes present in its passing away. Such an understanding imagines history as a form of afterlife, an afterlife (or after-image) "whose pulses can still be felt in the present" (Benjamin 1979, p. 252). By rephotographing the projections and the architec-

1. Also known as *Finstere Medine*, Yiddish for "dark district". *The Writing on the Wall* was part of a larger European project, *Sites Unseen*, representing a series of installations conducted between 1991 and 1996 in Berlin, Dresden, Copenhagen, Amsterdam, Cologne and Cracow.

2. This is interpreted as: MENE, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; TEKEL, you have been weighed on the scales and found wanting; PARSIN, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians (*The Holy Bible*, New Revised Standard Version, 1989).

tural and urban space of the Scheunenviertel, Attie makes layered images, palimpsestic representations that carry forward this afterlife as critique. This layering, this folding of time and historical context, images an Orphic space that becomes both a site of memorial and an uneasy grave for the living dead. Within this layering or condensation of past and present, time is no longer understood exclusively as continuous and linear, but rather as convoluted and spatial (an imagistic space). When one considers these images, and the insistent remonstrations of the dead, the words of Walter Benjamin come to mind:

the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search the picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back may discover it. (Benjamin 2000, p. 510)

It is the task of this article to bring to the surface this spot or trace of contingency that links the past with the future present (the future's presence) in images from *The Writing on the Wall*.

According to Attie:

The concept for the project developed over the first few months after my arrival in the city. I began doing my research in a number of archives, poring over historical photographs of Jewish street life in Berlin during the 1920s and 30s. All the while I continued to make forays through the city, seeking out traces of a former Jewish presence. Both of these searches converged in Berlin's Scheunenviertel neighbourhood near Alexanderplatz, in what was East Berlin. In the early part of this century, the Scheunenviertel had been the quarter of the Jewish working class. (The quarter's name derives from the barns, *Scheune*, built in many backyards during the 18th and 19th centuries to house the farm animals brought by people coming from the country.) The area teemed with Ostjuden, Russian and Polish Jewish immigrants who had come from the East to settle in Berlin in the early part of the 20th century. The Scheunenviertel was also a neighbourhood of ill repute, where prostitutes and black marketers plied their trades openly. (Today, 60 years later, the Oranienburger Strasse, on the district's periphery, has become the area's new "strip".) Because of this dubious reputation, the Yiddish speaking Jews of Berlin dubbed the neighbourhood the *finstere medine*, Yiddish for "dark district". (Attie *et al.* 1994, p. 10)

Attie's photographs are suspended by the palimpsestic associations established between the fixated dead of the past and their ghostly appearance in the now instant — images that contain as part of that palimpsest a collective cultural knowledge or reserve of the impending obliteration of community (the Jewish and non-Jewish citizens of Berlin) by mass-produced death. How are these images (these aesthetic reanimations) to be configured in relation to memory and memorialization, to history and the photographic? In the following discussion, the Scheunenviertel photographs are theorized both as a memorial activity and an index or "habitation" for history. This objective is achieved by responding to a series of propositions posed by Walter Benjamin in his text "On the Concept

of History” (Benjamin 2002, N1a, 3), but in order to address these ideas sufficiently, we also need to trace, however partially, something of the theoretical and historical background to Benjamin’s understanding of the “image” as it intersects with history, the photographic, and contemporary art practice.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, a number of writers engaging with European post-structuralism and its implications for visual representation alighted on the significance of Walter Benjamin’s 1936 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (Benjamin 1999, pp. 211-244). What made Benjamin’s ideas so interesting to these visual theorists was his focus on photography as an art of mechanical reproduction (not art, but technology), representing the “first image of the encounter between the person and the machine” (Leslie 2000, p. 48), and hence valorizing it as a fitting medium for a “postmodern” culture and sensibility. According to Benjamin, what had replaced the “aura” of originality in works of art (their unique existence in time and space) was the plethora of manufactured images in the world initiated by the invention of the camera and the photographic process. This idea of loss (sacrifice or destruction) was taken forward by writers such as Rosalind Krauss, Annette Michelson, Hal Foster, Douglas Crimp and Craig Owens, who began to re-theorize the photographic, and through that process, subvert dominant modernist notions of originality, fixed subjective identity and aesthetic stability based on form. Critical focus was thus shifted away from the analysis of canonical masterworks towards the structures and operation of modernism itself; that is, from establishing certain homologous divisions within traditional culture to an interdisciplinary examination of the dynamics of its “representations”, a highly influential example being the collection of essays in Rosalind Krauss’s *The Originality of the Avant-Garde* (1985).

Further to this “expanded field” of critical inquiry, in an emblematic essay “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism Part 2”, Craig Owens (1980) uses Benjamin’s theorizing of allegory to distinguish between the “deconstructive impulse” characteristic of postmodern art and the

self-critical tendency of modernism ... When the postmodernist work speaks of itself, it is no longer to proclaim its autonomy, its self-sufficiency, its transcendence, rather, it is to narrate its own contingency, insufficiency, lack of transcendence ... [its] thrust is aimed ... against the symbolic, totalizing impulse which characterizes modernist art. (Owens 1980, pp. 79-80)

Here, the binary term of the *symbol* is Benjamin’s notion of *allegory*, as developed in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (Benjamin 1977). One trope can be interpreted as modernist, the other as postmodernist: “Allegorical imagery is appropriated imagery ... [the allegorist] adds another meaning to the image ... allegory occurs whenever one text is doubled by another ... [that is] *read through* another ... [the] paradigm for the allegorical work is thus palimpsest” (Owens 1980, pp. 79-80). This understanding and recuperation of Benjamin’s work on allegory had significant consequences for the art and criticism of the late 1970s and early 1980s, for example, in the artwork of Sherrie Levine, Cindy Sherman,

Robert Morris, Gordon Matta-Clark and Robert Smithson, and continues to have ramifications in contemporary practice.

In addition, Benjamin's theorizing of the collective dreams of capitalism, along with the proposition that such dreams are captured or frozen within obsolete objects and architectural forms, has made him a highly significant voice for those writers and artists interested in architecture, history and memory. In Benjamin's work on the "obsolete", patterns of the new and the primordial confront each other in a refiguration of Proust's appreciation of time; as Benjamin writes: "The eternity which Proust opens to view is convoluted time, not boundless time, where memory and aging confront one another" (Benjamin 1999, p. 206). This is expressed, most famously perhaps, in Zola's 1873 description of Les Halles in *The Belly of Paris* (Zola 1996), in which Baltard's iron pavilions take on both primordial and futuristic manifestations (as do the Arcades in the work of Walter Benjamin). And the resulting space of alterity, this declassification of fixed meaning in temporal structures, can be understood to inscribe a site's mythology as a mixture of ambivalence and desire, mourning and recollection, presence and absence, thus creating a palimpsest of significations and identities. Here a comparison can be drawn to Henri Lefebvre's understanding of art in relation to urban space:

To put art at the service of the urban does not mean to prettify urban spaces with works of art. This parody of the possible is a caricature. Rather, this means that time-spaces become works of art ... Art brings cases and examples of appropriate "topics": temporal qualities inscribed in space. (Lefebvre 2000, p. 173)

Perhaps the most significant contribution to this aspect of the literature is Susan Buck-Morss's remarkable refiguration of Benjamin's unfinished notes for the Arcades Project, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (1991). Such critical interventions have made Benjamin's work crucial to interdisciplinary fields that engage with the states of consciousness signified by modernity and postmodernity. These manifestations of Benjamin's theory have a distinct resonance for the following discussions of the Scheunenviertel images.

Walter Benjamin writes that:

If one looks upon history as a text, then what is valuable in it [*dann gilt von ihr*] is what a recent author says of literary texts: the past has left in them images which can be compared to those held fast (or captured) by a light sensitive plate. Only the future has developers at its disposal which are strong enough to allow the image to come to light in all its detail. (Benjamin 2000, p. 405)

This is a fragment of writing from Benjamin's posthumous text "On the Concept of History"; a fragment entitled "The Dialectical Image". The comparison "what a recent author says" is borrowed from André Monglond's introduction to his *French Preromanticism (Le Preromantisme français, 1930)* when he speaks of the ability of a text to present a meaning unimaginable at the time of its writing. Monglond "compares this effect to the photographic plate from which the image

may be developed at a later time” (Ferris 2005, p. 19). How can this notion of an unimaginable meaning caught in photography’s glass of time – to be released at a later historical moment – be configured rhetorically in relation to the aims of the present discussion? Further, Benjamin tells us that:

It is ... of decisive importance that a new partition be applied to the initially excluded, negative component so that, by displacement of the angle of vision [but not of the critical], a positive element emerges anew in it too – something different from what was previously signified. And so on, ad infinitum, until the entire past is brought into the present. (Benjamin 2002, p. 459)

What significance can we attach to Benjamin’s references to “developers”, the “negative component” and the “positive element” in relation to Attie’s images?

The application of the language of photography as outlined by Benjamin is coincident not only with his belief that the image must be understood as historical, but also with a more “radical proposition that history be conceived of as imagistic” (Cadava 1992, p. 103). Reception only occurs when, like the photographic surface, the historical subject receives this flash – of historical circumstance – by recognizing and reading what is received as (dialectical) image. Thus, history, in the sense of either things as they are or things as they have been, can only be understood with and as image. The movement of history, therefore, is in correspondence with what happens during the photographic moment as its image comes into existence. Benjamin’s fifth thesis (of “On the Concept of History”), for example, considers the possibility of seizing the image of the past from and within the present – the black-and-white historical fragment brought into relation with the images of Berlin in 1991 – proposing that an accurate understanding of history intends the present (Ferris 2005, p. 23), “[f]or it is an irretrievable image of the past that threatens to disappear with every present that does not recognize itself as intended in it” (Benjamin 1999, p. 225). The image of the past – and of the irretrievable nature of the present it intends – may be “fleeting” and “flashing”, but it is also susceptible to being captured, in this case by the original photographic negative and Attie’s layered images, even if what is seized is merely the instant of its disappearance.

Attie’s images speak of this freezing and of mortification. Although what Attie’s photographs photograph is no longer present or living, the fleeting layers of time’s passing, its “having-been-there” (Cadava 1992, p. 91), have adhered to their signifying structure. The photograph is thus an uneasy grave, a small funerary monument for history’s portrayed and lost; those pictured in *The Writing on the Wall* are apparitions, beings of the air (*Luftmenschen*), representatives of the living dead. But each photograph manages to tell us something of their history – a history of the absent present, the annihilated – and it does so because it is that which remains as an after-image of what has passed into history. Attie’s images (akin to the “angel of history”, the *Angelus Novus* – see Benjamin 1999, p. 249) trace fragments of the lived experience of the Jewish citizens of the Scheunenviertel as an aesthetic form mediated by memory, bereavement and mourning. And this loss or bereavement acknowledges what is

revealed in any photograph: the return of the departed from an Orphic space. In this way, by tracing something of the temporalities of lived experience, the literarization of the conditions of life, the living social conflict within which we are all positioned, the photographs provide a reserve, index or “habitation” for the political significance of history. Benjamin exhibits this insight in his discussion of the early photographic portraits of David Octavius Hill:

All of the possibilities of this portrait art arise because the contact between actuality and photography has not yet occurred. Many of Hill’s portraits originated in the Edinburgh Greyfriars cemetery – nothing is more characteristic of this early period, except maybe the way the models were at home there. And indeed this cemetery, according to one of Hill’s pictures, is itself like an interior, a separate closed-off space where the gravestones propped against gable walls rise from the grass, hollowed out like a chimney, with inscriptions inside instead of tongues of flames. (Benjamin 1979, pp. 244-245)

For Benjamin, Hill’s Edinburgh portraits offer this literarization; we live as if we were always in a cemetery, and “we live in this deadly way among and as inscriptions”. The portraits bear witness to the recognition that we are most ourselves, most “at home”, when we remember the inevitability of our own death (Cadava 1992, p. 90). We come to our own subjectivity through these photographs (this imaging of the object of angst), through these memories of mourning. Similarly, we come to ourselves in the portraits of the lost in the *Writing on the Wall* as they inscribe the processes of memorialization with regard to the position of the past *vis-à-vis* the present and future:

Attie’s photographs succeed in encapsulating the memorial activity as a powerful linking mechanism that does not attach one element to the other but in so doing also recasts the past as we remember it and reshapes the present as we know it. (Wolff-Bernstein 2000, p. 349)

Moreover, one might suggest that these photographs – like Hill’s Edinburgh portraits – retreat or fold in upon themselves as they withdraw into a space in which they might defer their own decay; they move into an interior that represents the closed space of its own writing: the process of mortification. “The photograph dies in the photograph” because only in this way can it be “the uncanny tomb of our memory” (Cadava 1992, p. 90). But this is an Orphic space and therefore subject to the processes of resurrection: something becomes present in its passing away.

Further to the notion of literarization, in “A Small History of Photography”, Benjamin explains how photography is moving out of the “realm of aesthetics to social function” (Benjamin 1979, p. 252). He describes a certain excess quantity in photography that is absent from other art forms; a residue of “non-art” (of technology and history) that moves outside of the represented image and puts forward something “new and strange” (Benjamin 1979, p. 242). In order to generate these qualities, photography brings together two contingent realities in an “elective affinity”. On the one hand, there is the real that has become

historical after the moment of its reading, and on the other hand, the real (or moment) in which the photograph still exists on the basis of an intervention in reality (*Wirklichkeit*) in the form of a “tiny flash of coincidence”; thus, historical “time can be understood to resonate in the space between the image and viewer” (Leslie 2000, pp. 48-49). In other words, the photographic moment elicits a historically-charged perception; a mode of perception that is dependent on traces of historical meaning in the image and the passage of time, which position the viewer – the human subject – within history. The key element here is the connectivity between the moment caught on plate (celluloid, the digital surface) and the moment of the perceiver (the now): this “here and now” collides with the “then” of the photograph, the depiction of the real pasts and “long forgotten” minutes (Benjamin 1979, p. 243); the future of the image’s subject frozen in the lost-forever moment of the past and the viewer’s standpoint in the present (Leslie 2000, pp. 49-50). As a result of this temporal configuration, the viewer retrospectively scours the photograph for the history that will happen. The photograph is thus a place to locate the *Tatort* (Benjamin 1979, p. 256); a “place of action” where historical processes have actually come into effect.

As well as being history (Benjamin) and fetish (Metz), photography is also a mode of bereavement (Barthes), memorial and mourning. What structures the relationship between the photographic image and any particular referent, between the photograph and photographed, is the very absence of relation; what Benjamin calls “a salutary estrangement between man and his surroundings” (Benjamin 1979, p. 251). As a consequence, Benjamin writes that: “it would be a misreading of the incunabula of photography to emphasize their artistic perfection” (Benjamin 1979, p. 251). Rather than reproducing the detail of a certain faith in the mimetic capacity of photography, the photographic event reproduces, according to its “own faithful and rigorous *rigor mortis* manner” (Cadava 1992, p. 90), the posthumous character of our lived experience, the excess, the empty lattice: loss or sacrifice is its presiding metaphor. The home of the photographed is always the cemetery (Cadava 1992, p. 89): the cemetery of the ruins of the Scheunenviertel, of Berlin, of the death camps; all the resting places of the dispossessed and obliterated of history.

In speaking of his short-lived interventions (indeed “salutary interventions” [*rettenden Einfall*])³, Attie relates that what passers-by – some of the first beholders of the project – experienced, “first and foremost, was an aesthetic response. People would walk by and see something beautiful – maybe hauntingly beautiful, but beautiful ... Then the content would sink in, and that would be a different matter” (Attie, in Ollman 2000, pp. 59, 84). The aesthetic articulations of the objects and the configurations of space, along with presentations of documentary evidence in the form of archival images of the district and its inhabitants, encourage imagination and recollection on behalf of the viewer. This

3. These projections are short-term urban interventions, appearing only for a night or two. The black-and-white projected images appeared as after-images of the area’s history.

process involves both *Beschriftung* (the response of “a different matter”, a type of political engagement making the photograph the site of contradiction between word and image) (Benjamin 1979, p. 256) and what might be understood as *Eingedenken* (the “aesthetic response”, an empathic, formal engagement with aesthetic elements).⁴ What is the significance of this dual response in relation to Attie’s memorial process?

Perhaps the flaw within all monuments and memorials is their contingency. They depend “for [their] signification on the political, historical and aesthetic realities” contemporaneous within their construction and reception; they are, therefore, prone to a certain provisionality that, in turn, produces limited temporal signification (Young 2003, p. 62). The implication here is that a material artefact located within a particular temporal and spatial context functions as a carrier of memory in such a way that it becomes an agent of forgetfulness rather than of remembrance. As Michel de Certeau (1984, p. 108) notes, the most salient characteristic of memory is its fluidity, which, in turn, makes it non-locative. It follows, then, that once meaning’s fluidity is compromised by an attachment to specific objects or locations, it becomes finite and therefore prone to a certain decay or erosion in signification; it becomes open to the processes of forgetting. Attie’s images resist this contingency and “bear witness” to historical events through the fluidity of their temporal structure (“temporal qualities inscribed in space”). They eschew any fixity and facticity of their signification despite their apparent fidelity to site-specificity; therefore, Attie’s formal strategies of layering, and its associated palimpsest, induce significant cognitive ambiguities that forestall closure of meaning and initiate the processes of remembering and secular redemption.

In the *Writing on the Wall*, this is achieved as Attie employs a visual rhetoric of absence and transformation; these strategies of representation provide various historical indications that engage the beholder’s imaginative function (*Beschriftung* and *Eingedenken*) in relation to time, history and memory/memorialization. As Pierre Nora writes:

it is this very push and pull that produces *lieux mémoire* [sites of memory] – moments of history torn away from the movement of history, then returned; no longer quite life, not yet death, like shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded. (Nora 1989, p. 12)

Attie’s layered memorials point not just towards a singular contingent event (for example, the destruction of the Scheunenviertel community or Berlin itself), but also towards the realm of knowledge that encodes and decodes the ongoing event as multiple and plural catastrophes: “The *truth* of a given circumstance is a function of the constellation of the true *being* of all other circumstances” (Benjamin 1979, p. 276). The catastrophe that is history corresponds to the insistence on a progressive history (the ever always the same within the new).

4. This is an understanding that demands the empathic engagement of an informed beholder in the contemplation of both formal and documentary signification.

"That things just go on," Benjamin tells us, and have gone on this way, this is the catastrophe – "Catastrophe is not what threatens to occur at any given moment but what is given at any given moment" (Benjamin 1985, p. 50). And the head to which history comes during the time of the catastrophe of this catastrophe is, as he writes in his *Trauerspiel*, "a death's head" (Benjamin 1977, p. 166). It is the deadly head of Medusa. For Benjamin, "there can be no history without the Medusa effect; without the capacity to arrest or immobilize historical movement" (Cadava 1992, p. 99); to isolate – as does the eerie, ghostlike projected historical fragment (the "negative") – the detail of an event from the continuum of history. The archival lens (or oculus, the initiator of the historical fragment) carries the Medusa's gaze that stalls history for a moment in the arena of possibility and conjecture. Its subsequent projection into another temporal location short-circuits, and thereby suspends, the temporal continuity between a past and a present. Attie's layered images become *lieux mémoire*, constellations of the then and the now, their meaning comprised of a multidimensional temporal fabric, which mirrors the structure of history: "the relation of the Then and the Now is dialectical; is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. Only dialectical images are genuine images" (Benjamin 2002, p. 462). The palimpsest in these works takes on the character of a permeable boundary between temporalities, forms or tropes. The images are not only allegorical (appropriated images) in terms of their semantic structure, but also symbolically redemptive. The spatial-temporal layering is an eddy in the stream of becoming, something that is both in and out of time but open to its effects, "its histories still alive and vivid in the present" (Benjamin 1999, pp. 252-253). The layered photographs offer a multiplicity of significations that facilitate a "bearing witness" to the events which are the artwork's subject. Remembrance is thus maintained by continuous irresolution.

Benjamin's "On the Concept of History" is oriented towards both the past (history and remembrance) and the present (redemptive action). Its second thesis introduces "the simultaneously theological and secular concept of *Erlösung*" (redemption). Benjamin first locates this idea in relation to the individual, where personal happiness acts to inspire the redemption of the individual's own past: that is, the fulfilment of "what might have been". This "happiness" (*Glück*) implies reparation for the despair and desolation of the past (Ferris 2005, p. 19). Benjamin then proceeds to develop this understanding of redemption towards a collective reparation within history; this is a historical redemption as a remembrance of the victims of the past through historical awareness (Löwy 2005, p. 32). As Horkheimer writes:

What has happened to human beings who have fallen no future can repair. They will never be called to be made happy for all eternity ... Amid this immense indifference, human consciousness alone can become the site where injustice can be abolished, the only agency that does not give in to it ... historiography is the only court of appeal that present humanity, itself transient, can offer to the protests which come from the past. (Horkheimer, in Löwy 2005, p. 31)

Thus, the relationship between present and past is not a unilateral one: “in a dialectical process the present illuminates the past and the illuminated past becomes a force in the present” (Löwy 2005, p. 39).

This redemptive, or “utopian” quality in Attie’s work is directed towards what Benjamin designates “the perfect state of the world” with “the now of knowability” or manifest visibility – *das Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit* (Benjamin 1979, p. 276). Knowledge and image conjoin in this phrase, which is configured in relation to the dialectical image as “the now of recognizability” (Benjamin 2000, p. 608). Benjamin tells us that there is a closure between the inauthentic and the authentic, between facticity and metonymy, between the imperfect and the perfect; and this closure can be reconstituted via an aesthetics of memorial, where the lacking, “the failure of an event and its utopian possibilities (or transformations) are simultaneously symbolized at a site” (Lane 2005, p. 146) – in this case, the memorial site of Attie’s layered images. In his “Theory of Knowledge”, Benjamin moves towards the overcoming of any false disjunction between subject and object, and the “appearance of the knowing man”, but then he withdraws from this position, stepping back from the “perfect state of the world” (Benjamin 2000, pp. 276-277), which can only come into being with the messianic end of time. The compulsion towards repetition in Attie’s work mirrors this ambivalence, and references the creation and destruction cycles as memorialization (Lane 2005, pp. 146-147), mourning and recollection, ruin and integration, presence and absence, layer upon layer in convoluted time. This experience of our relation to memory, of our relation to the process of memorialization, of being and becoming, is not, according to Walter Benjamin, accidental: “In fact, nothing could be more characteristic. We appear to ourselves only in this allegory, even before the moment of our death” (Cadava 1992, p. 89). Subjects of photography, seized by the camera’s Medusa effect, we are mortified, cut out of the world and embalmed in the a-chronic; that is, we are objectified and imaged: “The procedure itself ... caused the models to live, not out of the instant, but into it; during the long exposure they developed, as it were, into the image” (Benjamin 1979, p. 245).

The photograph tells us that we are destined to die. One day we will no longer be here, or rather, we will only be here the way we have always been here, “as *images*” (Cadava 1992, p. 90). The photograph prefigures the death of the photographed. This is why what survives in a photograph is also the survival of the dead – “what departs, desists and withdraws” (Cadava 1992, p. 90). “Man withdraws from the photographic image,” Benjamin (1999, p. 226) writes in his artwork essay. The withdrawal is not an empirical withdrawal, but rather a withdrawal fundamental to the temporal structure of the photograph. In order for the photograph to be a photograph, it must become the tomb that writes our own death. We live in this deathly way “among and as inscriptions” (Cadava 1992, p. 90), consumed by time, by its tongues of flame. We can be compared to the characters of the *Trauerspiel*, who die because, as Benjamin says, “it is only thus, as corpses, that they can enter the homeland of allegory” (Benjamin 1977, p. 217).

Attie's projections "develop" the archival fragments that were held in the folds of time, suspended, as it were, in non-differentiation, the timelessness of forgetting, in contact with nothingness. These images can be assigned the metaphor of the "negative" in Attie's layering process; negative in the sense that they bring forth what could have not been seen at the time of their capture, their significance remaining hidden in the historical moment, suspended, as it were, in the optical unconscious of the society (the lived experience of dispossession and objectification) from which they ultimately derive – the significance unimaginable at the time of their writing. The "stronger developers" in this case refers to the perspective of history and memory, the horrifying physical catastrophe as well as the rhetoric of loss and mourning associated with Holocaust (Shoah) and post-Holocaust consciousness; this, and the technical process of projection within the remains of the physical fabric of history – its act of resemblance and reconstitution – being the "positive", the redemptive, this place wherein reality has seared the subject.

Attie's *Slide Projection of a Hebrew Bookstore*⁵ (*Almstadtstrasse 43/Frühere Grenadierstrasse 7*) illustrates this layering technique (see Figure 1) . What the beholder sees in this photograph is a building moving quietly towards dereliction (the Scheunenviertel was allowed to decay by the East German government, a



Figure 1 Shimon Attie, *Slide Projection of a Hebrew Bookstore* (*Almstadtstrasse 43/ Frühere Grenadierstrasse 7*). Reproduced by permission of the artist.

5. The inscription *Sopher* in the window is more accurately translated as "Writer of holy books". *Tzizziot* probably means that the owner of the store also copied Torah scrolls.

neglect that produced an unintentional preservation of the district). The structure is located in a contemporary street⁶ and set in juxtaposition to a black-and-white pre-war Berlin archival image of a man looking at a display of Hebrew books (we can see the words *Tzizziot*, *Sopher*, *hebraische* and *Buchhandlung*), a display now replaced with a blank, unrevealing brick wall flanked by two white-painted windows. By projecting the latter image onto the former – the fixated dead of the past and their ghostly appearance in the now instant – Attie initializes a new temporal and historical configuration in which narratives and connections hitherto unthought of can be drawn together into a palimpsest, producing meanings unimaginable at the time of their writing. These superimpositions, or “insertions” as Attie puts it, do not encompass the whole building, but cast a faint, dematerialized shadow fragment over the present so that the spectator may be drawn into an intermediate field where s/he can exist and enter the worlds represented. According to Attie:

I began doing the slide projections in September of 1991 and continued intermittently, weather permitting, for one year. In creating the installations, I projected only a small portion or fragment of a much larger historical image onto a structure. I wanted the projections to serve as insertions into the visual field of the present. The projections would be on view for one or two evenings, visible to neighbourhood residents, street traffic, and passers-by. (Attie *et al.* 1994, p. 10)

The temporal structure generated by Attie’s work is comparable to the structure of time as theorized by Gilles Deleuze. This is a temporality wherein “things succeed one another in diverse times, but they are also simultaneous in the same time ... they subsist in an indeterminate time” (Deleuze 1997, p. 29), as they connect the moment of the archival fragment and the moment of its reconstitution; the moment of the “flash” that might be held fast. It is no longer a question of defining time by succession, “nor space by simultaneity, nor permanence by eternity ... Permanence, succession, and simultaneity are modes or relations of time” (Deleuze 1997, p. 29).

The topology produced by this layering or condensation of the past and present is “one wherein the picture plane and the ground plane of the contemplating observer move towards one another, a structure comparable to two sides of the envelope of a transparent sphere” (Sharn-Zisser 2006, p. 45): a configuration that elicits a palimpsest of times, significations and identities; a place of allegory and contingency where history resonates between the image and the viewer. Each of these sides acts as an axis, or perhaps a mirror. And it is between these two sides that the images of the lost of the Scheunenviertel appear like a hallucinatory effect or an uncanny quality of mirrors (comparable to death’s use of the mirror in *Orphée*).⁷ In this way, the images of the dead in Attie’s work pour

6. Signified by the prosaic detail of a car’s shimmering hood and windscreen in the foreground, which reflect the archival fragment.

7. *Orphée* (1950) is a film by Jean Cocteau. Orpheus, Heurtebise, Eurydice and the artist’s death (the Princess) enter the realm of the dead through a mirror; in the myth, photography and mnemonic and artistic processes become inexorably linked.

out from their Orphic realm to the space of the living and back: Eurydice is returned to the realm of shades. And it is here that a structural analogy can be made between Attie's images and Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, as analysed by Lacan in his thirteenth seminar (Sharn-Zisser 2006, p. 45). Velázquez's painting, Lacan suggests, is a form of still life (*memento mori*), in which the personages are fixated, mortified. This process of mortification is even more significant in Attie's photographic work. Not only are the personages fixed, but their fixed representation alludes to a historical event of mass dispossession and death (they are total images). Unlike *Las Meninas*, these images are a form of intercession; they act to redeem something of that past in order to highlight the tragedy of lost opportunity; "[t]hey represent a salutary intervention [*rettenden Einfall*] of humanity" (Benjamin 1979, p. 248).

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