Isn’t it an affront to Goethe to make a film of *Faust*, and isn’t there a world of difference between the poem *Faust* and the film *Faust*? Yes, certainly. But, again, isn’t there a whole world of difference between a bad film of *Faust* and a good one?

Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project* (N1a, 4)

Whilst the importance of Goethe’s thought in the early work of Walter Benjamin has been acknowledged, less attention has been paid to the Goethean references that resurface in his final essays, specifically the Faustian motifs of the last theses *On the Concept of History*. Drawing on the cinematic afterlife of Goethe’s *Faust*, this article utilizes Benjamin’s own pragmatic conception of history to argue that its importance for Benjamin resides in the articulation of a cinematic ontology that comes increasingly to underpin his own mature philosophy.

**Literary-historical pragmatism**

The emergence of the modern academic discipline of ‘literary studies’ in the eighteenth century did not arise out of the older theological and philosophical tradition of ‘history’ and for this reason it lacks an adequate conception of history. This omission rendered it amenable to the integration of the positivist approach of the natural sciences, especially under the influence of neo-Kantianism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As a result of this integration, a dual epistemology tended to emerge, promoting a regulative metaphysics of historical progress (produced through the ‘values’ of Kant’s transcendental idealism and coded, via the Enlightenment, into contemporary conceptions of modernity) which is tied to an empirical realist attention to the correctness of past historical ‘facts’ whose meaning is construed as something constituted and completed.

Benjamin’s philosophically informed theory of literary criticism is directed against both aspects of this inadequate conception of history. As an alternative, he proposes that it begin from ‘a dignified, serious and ambitious conception of history (pragmatic history, in short), guided by the kind of ‘pedagogical task’ envisaged by the historian Georg Gottfried Gervinus.1 Gervinus condemned the ‘usual, spiritless Faktensammler, who merely puts things together like a chronicler’, on the quasi-Nietzschean grounds that all ‘the forces of mankind concentrate on action’ and the ‘active life … is the focus of all history’.2 According to what Gervinus called his ‘literary-historical pragmatism’, the task of the true historian is to guide and instruct, through the construction of historical examples that compel to action.

Benjamin adopts, whilst critically reworking, Gervinus’s pragmatic description of the historian as a prophet in relation to Schlegel’s dictum that the historian must be a ‘backward-looking prophet’: ‘What is at stake is not to portray literary works in the context of their age, but to represent the age that perceives them – our age – in the age during which they arose.’3 This corresponds to the ‘Copernican turn’ in historical perception theorized in the notes for Benjamin’s unfinished *Arcades Project*, which displaces the value assigned to the ‘what has been’ of the past as the fixed and stable point of perception (analogous to Copernicus’s displacement of the Earth as the fixed and stable point for astronomical perception). For in historical perception – according to the pragmatic definition of perception (*Wahrnehmung*) proffered in a fragment from 1917 – ‘the useful (the good) is true [Wahr].’

Yet, in accordance with Benjamin’s critique of bourgeois socio-economic order, the ‘useful’ cannot be reduced to the political demands of the immediate present. Gervinus’s understanding of ‘active life’ must therefore be coupled to a semiotic consideration of the production of significance, since action by itself is not significant. As Peter Osborne has argued in the context of the American semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce’s metaphysical pragmatism, Benjamin’s conception of
historical representation is conjoined with a commitment to a speculative metaphysical realism, one that continues to insist on the possibility of significance (beyond mere ‘function’) by referring to the standpoint of history as a totalized whole. This is not the temporal ‘end’ of history, however, but an eternity immanent to and constitutive of each moment. A specific historical relationship between the past and present (and thus the present and the future) results from this position, one that is related to the visualization of that which has been obscured by the existing order of knowledge. In this sense Benjamin’s version represents a radical and critical expansion of the conflated temporal horizon of existing pragmatism, concerning itself with the past in order to redeem for a different future that which is threatened with oblivion in the present. This radically expands and complicates the pragmatic conception of use, since its subject is no longer an empirical individual or particular society, but historical.

This criticism is exemplified in Benjamin’s essay on Goethe’s novel The Elective Affinities, whose pedagogical function is defined as grasping ‘the meaning of Goethe’s life for the most specific and profound tasks of modern life’, as ‘symbols of specific yet also future life and suffering’. An indication of what this might mean is provided in the entry on Goethe for the Great Soviet Encyclopaedia, in which Benjamin claims the poet was the cultural representative of the ascent of the German bourgeoisie whilst also being its greatest critic: he ‘founded a great literature among’ the bourgeoisie, but ‘he did so with face averted’ and his ‘whole work abounds in reservations about them’. If these reservations were realized in the attempt to reclaim Goethe as the spiritual leader of a nationalistic and elitist ‘secret Germany’ by Friedrich Gundolf and others in Stefan George’s literary circle, Benjamin’s Deutsche Menschen – a pseudonymously published collection of letters taken from the age of German Classicism – subversively insists on revealing the lineaments of a different ‘secret Germany’, one whose fundamental humanism had been shrouded by ‘raucous and brutal forces that have prevented it from playing an effective role in public life’. Goethe therefore gave ‘the contents that fulfilled him the form which has enabled them to resist their dissolution at the hands of the bourgeoisie – a resistance made possible because they remained without effect and not because they could be deformed or trivialized’. This description emphasizes Benjamin’s insistence on the literary afterlife of works, encapsulated in his formulation of artistic ‘greatness’ as that which remains historical without a causal effect in history.

Consequently, Goethe’s mature literary works – beginning with The Elective Affinities (1809), but continuing in From My Life: Truth and Poetry (1811–30) and the West–Easterly Divan (1819), and culminating in the second part of Faust (1832) – are testament to the aged Goethe’s attempt to expunge all traces of aestheticism and sentimentalism from his writing. Whilst Benjamin’s essay on The Elective Affinities opens an account of this period of Goethe’s life, there is no comparable critique of its culmination in Faust 2. In what follows, I want to demonstrate the importance that Goethe’s thought holds for Benjamin’s philosophy and in particular emphasize the Faustian motifs of his final theses On the Concept of History, before commenting on the ‘greatness’ of Faust 2 in accordance with the pragmatic conception of history introduced above.

**Faustian motifs in On the Concept of History**

The influence of Goethe’s epistemology can be traced across Benjamin’s writings, notably in the afterword to his early essay on Early German Romanticism, the prologue to the Origin of German Mourning-Plays, and in the notes for the unfinished Arcades Project. The last sought to grasp the ascent and decline of the Paris arcades as a ‘primal history’ of modernity itself, according to a Goethean conception of the arcade’s concrete historical forms as primal phenomena (Urphänomen) which render perceptible their immanent economic forces. Benjamin claims that he transposes Goethe’s concept of truth from the domain of nature to that of history, in line with a materialist version of the theory of original phenomenon (Ursprungspähäne) delineated in his own prologue to the Origin of German Mourning-Plays. The prologue insists that the concept of Ursprung must be distinguished from any neo-Kantian formulation as the logical ground of experience, on the basis of a historicico-phenomenal notion of the Ideal, such that ‘Ideas … are the Faustian Mothers’ and truth is ‘visualized in the circling dance of represented Ideas [vergegenwärtigt im Reigen der dargestellten Ideen]’. As Philip Brewster and Carl Howard Buchner have pointed out, this image of the Mothers entails the ‘Symbolist assertion of the expressive function of language as representation and its constituent idea of construction’: ‘in the words of the Symbolist Paul Valéry … language does not walk to a goal, it only dances.’

This Faustian imagery resurfaces in Benjamin’s final essays, On Some Motifs in Baudelaire and the theses
On the Concept of History. The former rejects Proust’s and Bergson’s claim to actualize a true experience of the past via the mémoire involontaire or the durée of pure memory. In accordance with his emphasis on the aesthetic construction of truth, Benjamin claims that it is not in the contemplative ease of Bergson’s durée that the true significance of modern experience becomes apparent, but in what he identifies as the poet Paul Valéry’s struggle to represent such an experience. Where Bergson and Proust seek to actualize the past in the present, ‘Bergson sees within reach what Valéry’s better, Goethean understanding visualizes as the “here” in which the inadequate becomes perceptible’ (das ‘hier’ in dem das Unzulängliche Ereignis wird).

Benjamin’s reference is to the refrain of the Chorus Mysticus at the conclusion of Goethe’s Faust 2, but the mention of Valéry in this 1939 essay suggests a familiarity with the French poet’s intention to begin work on a ‘third’ version of the play, published as Mon Faust in 1941. Kurt Weinberg has suggested that the resistance of Valéry’s protagonist to the temptations of the second Fay (Memory) in Mon Faust reflects a rejection of Proust’s and Bergson’s promised experience of the past as one of mere semblance, arguing that this Faust is imbued with his author’s wisdom that ‘to live is to lack something at every moment’. Benjamin’s deployment of the Chorus Mysticus against Proustian and Bergsonian actualization suggests a similar understanding of the conclusion of Goethe’s Faust 2. At the conclusion of the play, Faust’s incessant striving is subverted into an experience of fulfilment, itself saturated with impossibility and incompleteness: a completion only possible in Faust’s death (as István Mészáros notes, Faust’s mistaken enthusiasm for the noise of his own gravediggers is an ironic wish fulfilment: the ‘actual realization of the great Faustian dream’). Valéry’s return to these themes at the end of the 1930s may account for the resurfacing of these Faustian motifs in Benjamin’s last essay, On the Concept of History.

Faust’s original deal with Mephistopheles – ‘If I should ever say to any moment [Augenblicke]: / But stay! – you are so beautiful [Verweile doch! Du bist so schön] / then you may lay your fetters on me, / then I will gladly die!’ – is premised on the possibility of a moment blissful enough to satiate worldly striving. In what has been described as a ‘melancholy version of the Faustian ‘But Stay!’ in thesis IX of Benjamin’s On the Concept of History, it is the Angel of History who ‘would like to stay [verweilen]’, not because the moment is so beautiful but because he is transfixed by the unfolding catastrophe. Furthermore, what prevents the angel from lingering before the catastrophe is not an inner striving but an external force, one that drives (treibt) him away. This force is what we mistakenly call ‘progress’, but what is really a storm that is blowing from Paradise.

One way to read this paradisiacal storm is as an allegory of the messianically destructive potential of Benjamin’s concept of ‘Now-Time’ (Jetztzeit). Thesis IX represents the snapshot or freeze-frame of an ephemeral moment, in which history is being blown apart. It is only the angel’s momentary struggle that reveals the force of now-time to us, who are caught in the process of destruction, but because of this recognition a new conception of history becomes apparent. Faust’s pact with the devil was that if Mephistopheles showed him a moment so beautiful his striving would cease and he would choose to stay, then he would perish: ‘the clock may stop, its hands fall still, / And time for me is finished!’ For Benjamin, in contrast, history is so catastrophic that the angel would willingly stay and perish, but he is being driven ever onwards by what we regard as progress. Our pact with the angel, then, would be to save history itself, by stopping the clocks and bringing time to a standstill. Indeed, thesis X goes on to present the theses themselves as meditations designed to strengthen our resolve to turn away from the stratagems of the world (der Welt und ihrem Treiben); to liberate the ‘political Worldling/Worldchild [Weltkind]’ from our spurious faith in progress.

The term Weltkind first appears in Goethe’s autobiographical poem ‘Dinner at Coblenz’, as a description of the poet grounded between the Spirit and the Fire of the religious and the Enlightenment prophets (mit Geist- und Feuerschritten, / Prophete rechts, Prophete links / das Weltkind in der Mitten), and similarly returns in the Classical Walpurgis Night of Faust to denounce those pious hypocrites who consort with the devil at the witch’s altar. In Benjamin’s allusion, it functions partly to denounce the shared progressivism of both capitalist and vulgar Marxist conceptions of history. According to the ‘pragmatic conception of history’ that replaces it, the historian (including the literary historian) must turn away from the politics of the present and make a leap into the past similar to that of the revolutionary, in order to liberate the forces unleashed by the suffering and oppression of previous generations. This leap should take place not in the current political arena where the ruling class gives the commands, but in the ‘open sky’ (freien Himmel) of history, in which ‘what has been’, by dint of a ‘secret index’ (heimlichen Index) that refers to redemption, ‘strives [strebts] to turn … towards that sun which is rising’.


In his discussion of Weltkind in the book Fire Alarm, Michael Löwy quickly excavates Benjamin’s ‘somewhat odd expression’ from its Goethean context and associates it with Benjamin’s own French translation, les enfants du siècle, which he glosses as Benjamin’s own generation. But in identifying the subject of the theses with a specific epoch, he fails to make the connection between this historical Weltkind and Benjamin’s ‘revolutionary’ method in The Arcades Project. For ‘every epoch has a side turned towards dreams, the child’s side’, Benjamin insists, and here the economic conditions of life find collective expression. If it falls to the child to ‘recognize the new’ and to assimilate these images for humanity by bringing them into symbolic space, then this collective, revolutionary task falls to the historical Worldchild. Benjamin’s translation, which presumably borrows from Musset’s autobiographical La confession d’un enfant du siècle (1836), juxtaposes the experiences of his own generation as the children of twentieth-century Berlin (summarized in the title of his autobiography, A Berlin Childhood around 1900) with the generation of bohemians and the utopian socialists born at the beginning of the nineteenth century in Paris and explored in the Arcades Project. This collectivizes his metaphysical concept of ‘youth’ from his early political writings on the Youth Movement: the pedagogic aspect of Benjamin’s ‘experiment’ in The Arcades Project is ‘To educate the image-making medium within us’, symbolizing the newness of the nineteenth century by visualizing the Paris Arcades from the (massively foreshortened) perspective of the twentieth century.

Benjamin’s obscure example of such a ‘secret index’ in history – ‘Don’t the women we court have sisters they no longer recognize?’ – requires similar clarification. If we take seriously his claim, made in the essay ‘Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian’, that ‘the beginnings of any consideration of history worthy of being called dialectical’ reside in a ‘characteristically veiled’ comment made by Goethe (‘Everything that has had a great effect can really no longer be judged’), we can recognize this as a reference to what Benjamin calls the aporetic element of semblance operating in the beautiful in relation to history. ‘Insofar as art aims at the beautiful and, on however a modest scale, ‘reproduces it’, Benjamin argues, ‘it retrieves it (as Faust does Helen) out of the depths of time’, and it is this conjuration which makes our ‘delight in the beautiful unquenchable’. Benjamin compares its effects to ‘the image of the primeval world … veiled by the tears of nostalgia’ and illustrates this with a line from Goethe’s 1776 poem, ‘Why Do You Give Us Penetrating Glances’: ‘Ah, you were in times now past my sister or my wife.’ Goethe’s poem speculates that the bond that exists between two lovers in the present expresses some original, past relationship. The theses On the Concept of History generalizes this notion, in accordance with Benjamin’s reformulation of the concept of Ursprung, into one of ‘a secret agreement between past generations and the present one’ in relation to a messianic redemption of history.

Here the eternity which enfolds the narrative of Goethe’s drama (the Prologue in Heaven, the heavenly ascension of Margaret at the end of Faust (‘Lost! Saved!’), and the deus ex machina which concludes Faust 2) provides the transcendental frame for that other (messianic) catastrophe which constantly threatens to engulf history. If each moment is found to bear the imprint of this incompleteness, each might therefore hold this redemptive hope: ‘To grasp the eternity of historical events is really to appreciate the eternity of their transience.’ Although Michael Löwy acknowledges the Goethean motifs of Benjamin’s text, his description of the theses as ‘essentially a wager, in the Pascalian sense, on the possibility of a struggle for emancipation’ should – in this context – be reconceived not as a Pascalian wager but rather as a Faustian pact.

Conjuration and phantasmagoria

Whilst the importance of Goethe’s Faust 2 for Benjamin’s thought is made evident by the references and allusions scattered across his work, the rest of this article concentrates on what might be said to constitute the ‘greatness’ of the work from the perspective of a Benjaminian literary-historical pragmatism. This would, first and foremost, have to be distinguished from any approach to the work that sought to grasp its ‘eternal’ significance. Indeed, just as Benjamin’s essay on The Elective Affinities develops its own ‘humanist’ critique of the work against the backdrop of a mythical interpretation that feeds into the cultic conception of the artist as the spiritual voice of the people prevalent in Gundolf, so his critical remarks on the archetypal aesthetic theory of C.G. Jung suggest the mythological reading of Faust 2 against which any critical reading must first differentiate itself.

In the 1931 essay ‘On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry’, Jung is concerned with how an unfashionable poet is rediscovered when ‘something new’ is found within the work which ‘was always present … but was hidden in a symbol, and only a renewal of the spirit of the time permits us to read its meaning’. For Jung, the great artist unconsciously
activates an archetypal image from the collective unconscious, elaborating and shaping this primordial language into the ‘language of the present’ by ‘conjuring up the forms in which the age is most lacking’. In this way, the artist compensates for the inadequacy and one-sidedness of the present.39

The hero’s descent to the Mothers in Act II of Goethe’s Faust 2 provides something akin to the archetypal ‘scene’ of Jung’s modern analytical psychology, in contrast to what he regarded as the exclusively repressive (and essentially neurotic) model of the psyche contained in Freud’s classical Oedipus myth. The unconscious creativity of psychic introversion represents ‘that “other” drive (Goethe)’, missed by Freud, ‘which signifies spiritual life’.40 Faust’s descent to the Mothers (as an archetypal symbol of spiritual rebirth) and his retrieval of the magical tripod result in the creative conjuration of the spirits of Helen and Paris, symbolizing the need for a nostalgic retrieval of the mythical – the Eternal Feminine – to compensate for the one-sidedness of modernity’s materialism, masculinity and restless novelty.

Benjamin’s practice of literary-historical pragmatism must be differentiated from Jung’s account on the basis of its concern with the temporality of the work’s afterlife, directed towards not that which is mythological about the present (the eternal truth of the psycho-spiritual conjuration of Helen) but that which is anachronistically modern about Goethe’s drama, and brought into dialectical conjunction with our own present. A starting point for such a conception of the work might be sought in Goethe’s correspondence. Writing to Wilhelm von Humboldt after the completion of the third Act in 1826, Goethe emphasizes its peculiar formal structure, citing this as the ‘most remarkable thing’ about a play he already considers ‘as strange and problematic a piece I have ever written’. Whilst the classical Aristotelian unities of place and action are ‘most punctiliously observed in the usual way’, the unity of time is subverted by being both radically elongated and subjected to a discontinuous rhythmic structure: it ‘embraces 3,000 years, from the collapse of Troy to the capture of Missolonghi’.41

Goethe’s confession to such formal peculiarity reflects what Benjamin, with reference to Konrat Ziegler’s 1919 study of Faust 2, calls the play’s fragile and arbitrary composition, which – particularly in the Helena Acts – deviates from the unity of Goethe’s overall plan.42 We should regard this formal deviation not as the effect of the author’s psychological ambivalence, but as the mark of a historical intrusion of our present into the structure of the artwork, rendering its classical form (specifically here the Aristotelian unities of action, place and time) unsustainable. This peculiarity becomes increasingly evident in relation to the afterlife of the work as it approaches our present day.

Goethe describes the peculiar and intrusive temporality of Act 3 as one in which times passes ‘as in a phantasmagoria’ (in one draft, Goethe subtitles the act ‘a Classico-Romantic Phantasmagoria’).43 Whilst by the mid-nineteenth century, the term ‘phantasmagoria’ had come to signify the dreamlike and illusory in general, and the supernatural in particular, Goethe’s use of the term places on emphasis on the fundamental disunity of time in relation to the unities of place and action, one that characterizes the rapid transition of scenes in the gothic phantasmagoria spectacles made famous in Paris by Étienne-Gaspard Robertson around the turn of the nineteenth century.44

Such phantasmagorical performances were enacted in late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Europe, relying upon a sophisticated deployment of the older magic lantern device, which projected the images from painted slides (although later using advances in photographic technology to project the performance of real, hidden actors) onto a secretly deployed gauze screen or literal smokescreen. The spectral effect was enhanced through technological and theatrical means (such as twin projection, the shortening and enlargement
of the image through the movement of the projector, the suggestion of movement through rapid juxtaposition of images, and the use of music and sound effects, stage setting, planted stooges, and atmospheric suggestion). The optical effects achieved by Robertson’s phantasmagoria are recounted in a scientific article of 1804, in a journal also discussed by Goethe in his Theory of Colours.55

Goethe’s awareness of these shows and their means of technological production is also demonstrated in a later discussion of the staging of Faust:

in a darkened theatre an illuminated head is projected from the rear upon a screen stretched across the background, first as a small image, then gradually increasing in size, so that it seems to be coming closer and closer. This artistic illusion was apparently conjured with a kind of Lanterna Magica. Could you please find out, as soon as possible, who constructs such an apparatus, how could WE obtain it, and what preparations must be made for it?56

Goethe’s drawings suggest that the ‘vision of Helen of Troy should also be patterned on optical illusions, with two-way mirrors and changing lighting bringing her image suddenly into focus in the glass’.57 Goethe was not only familiar with Robertson’s phantasmagoria when he came to write the second part of Faust, but, according to Albrecht Schöne, the whole ‘dumb-show of Paris and Helen’ represents ‘an illusionist spectacle devised by Mephistopheles with the help of a magic lantern that projects images onto a screen or smoke (or incense)’.58 Mephistopheles directs this performance from the prompter’s box, with the phantoms projected onto the ‘smoke-like haze’ which engulfs the stage within the stage.59

The problem that Jung therefore overlooks in his appropriation of Faust’s descent to the Mothers and the creative act of conjuration that follows is how the image of Helen is not produced directly and magically through the profundity of psychological symbolization, but is mediated via the technological reproduction and projection of the magic lantern and the other technical apparatus of the phantasmagoria show. Jung thus repeats Faust’s own misrecognition, for whereas as the spectators of the court express an ironic disappointment with these conjured phantoms (‘He might be a bit less stiff’, ‘Although I see her clearly, I’ll point out that there may be some doubt if she’s authentic’), Mephistopheles is continually forced to interject when Faust takes them for something real (‘Control yourself, and don’t forget your part’, ‘Don’t interfere in what the phantom’s doing’).60 Although the magic produced by the tripod Faust retrieves from the Mothers has been variously associated with necromantic ritual, artistic genius and female procreation, its theatrical necessity should be related instead to the need for the literal technological projection of the phantasmagorical performance that follows.61 Goethe’s letters both reveal and conceal the meaning of this scene: not long before his death, he refers to Faust 2 as ‘these jests which are meant to be serious’.62

A comparable concern with visual technology has been detected across Goethe’s writings, reflecting a conjunction of historical interests in the optical: in movement and aesthetics, in chemical and physical processes, in the chromatic, and in the technological apparatus of the theatre. Eric Hadley Denton has noted how Goethe’s ‘life-long’ interest in ‘bringing prints, reliefs, and mythological depictions to literary life’ is ‘closely related to his later interest in living tableaux’.53 The former is exemplified by Goethe’s interest in viewing statues such as the Laocoön by flickering torchlight, in order to emphasize the temporality of their implicit movement. In this way, Goethe wants ‘to cinematize’ sculpture, Peter Wollen claims, and his theory of the ‘fugitive moment’ possesses an accelerated temporality that intensifies ‘the effect of fugitive flickering, to anticipate a time when images would actually move’.54
Similarly, although others have discussed the influence of Goethe's *Theory of Colour* on the novel *The Elective Affinities*, along with the explicit fascination with chemical and physical processes, what has received less attention is how these interests combine in the work as a fascination with the imagistic, in what might be understood as the conceptual literary realization of the achievements of photographic and cinematographic technology. Goethe's mature interest in the production of *tableaux vivants* expresses a central aesthetic element of both photography and, to some extent, cinematography: the uncanny aspect of this 'capturing' and 'fixing' of time, to be discussed shortly. This uncanny aspect, which Goethe describes as resulting from 'presenting reality as image' (*die Wirklichkeit als Bild*), reflects the novel's own unsettling preoccupation with 'visualization', including the introduction of a camera obscura to trace pictures of the landscape by the visiting English gentleman. Hadley has also noted the inclusion of optical technology in Goethe's *Festival in Plundersweilern*, a presence, he argues, which permits us to recognize retrospectively the reformulation of eighteenth-century media as 'the pre-history of cinema' organized around the social institution of the marketplace.

It is important to note, however, that the phantom conjured in Act I is, as John Williams makes clear, not remotely the Helen of Act III's 'Classico-Romantic Phantasmagoria', singled out in Goethe's letter. Here, the phantom of Helen has become physically embodied and capable of moving and interacting authentically with the other characters. Williams argues that this difference is the result of Faust's 'experience, vicariously and at first hand, [of] the whole primitive pre-classical spectrum of archaic Greek religious myth, the pre-history of Helen herself, as it were'. In other words, it is the *phantasmagorical temporality* of Act III singled out by Goethe which differentiates the ontological status of Helen here. The second Helen is granted embodiment through the performance of her prehistory, the staged return to her Hellenic past, her flight into the future of Faust's baroque past, and their classico-romantic synthesis as Goethe's 'modern' future. This prehistory occurs *internal to the momentary present* that accompanies Faust's collapse at the end of the conjuration scene, splitting open and expanding the continuity between the end of Act I and the beginning of Act IV. In contrast to the hierarchical levels of meta-theatricality established in the first phantasmagoria scene, here the dreamlike semblance is immanent and inhabited, its phantasmagoric history is lived.

**Visualization**

I want to elucidate the significance of this phantasmagorical temporality, first in relation to what Benjamin elsewhere calls the literary technique of 'visualization' (*Vergegenwärtigung*), and then by returning to the specific visual ontology of photo- and cinematographic technology. In his notes for the theses On the Concept of History, Benjamin offers a dialectic of 'visualization' when he ridicules the historicist notion that 'the historian's task is to make the past “present”' (*das Vergangene zu „vergegenwärtigen*), but goes on to insist that someone 'who pokes about in the past as if rummaging in a storeroom of examples and analogies still has no inkling of how much in a given moment depends on its being made present' (*ihre Vergegenwärtigung*). Jung's aesthetic account of 'making present' amounts to a retrieval of the mythological conjuration of the 'eternal' past performed by Faust. Nonetheless, Benjamin's concept of history in its own way concerns itself with the task of rendering the truth of history perceptible.

In a series of reviews of the novels of the French writer Julien Green, Benjamin distinguishes Green's literary technique of visualization from the realism of naturalism, by referring to its 'magical side' as well as its 'temporal aspect'. By imagining people and the conditions of their existence 'in a way that they would never have appeared to a contemporary', Green represents a 'second present' which 'immortalizes what exists', a literary effect partly achieved through Green's stylized use of the simple past tense (*passé simple*). But this conjuration remains distanced from that of dreams by retaining a temporal reference to 'the here and now' as the 'seal of authenticity that clings to every vision'.

As a result of this double aspect, Green's characters and the conditions of their existence appear to 'stand in the twofold darkness of what has only just happened and the unthinkably remote past'. The effect, in novels such as *Mont-Cinère* and *Adrienne Mesurat*, is that of a 'primal history' of the recent past: what Benjamin calls a glimpse of 'pale and fleeting clearings in history' that occur 'only as the result of catastrophe'. What becomes apparent from Benjamin's discussion is the extent to which this reworking of the past necessarily implies a reworking of the present. It is, however, the present that becomes spectral, ghostly or de-substantialized as a result of this diachronic conjunction, and the past that, in contrast, endures as substantial, earthly and chthonic.

One way of understanding the effects of this 'visualization' is in relation to the specific ontology of the
cinematographic image. The chemical and optical process through which light from the object is imprinted on light-sensitive surfaces lends the photographic image the specific ontological form of participation in ‘the being of its referent’, a relationship that Peter Osborne and others have elaborated with reference to the philosophical pragmatist C.S. Peirce’s semiotic category of the indexical sign.66 Peirce’s index is a sign produced by the thing it represents (such as the marks of a fingerprint or the shadow cast by a sundial): an ontological relationship determined by the moment of exposure necessary for the photographic image.67 For Osborne, this constitutes the ‘magical’ or ‘theological’ aspect inherent to the ontology of the photographic image.68

According to Roland Barthes, the indexicality of the photograph effects a certain melancholic intimation of the temporal, elaborated by Ann Banfield in relation to linguistic tense:

Barthes’s effort is to find the linguistic form capable of recapturing a present in the past, a form that it turns out spoken language does not offer. This now in the past can be captured … by combining a past tense with a present time deitic: the photograph’s moment was now.69

Banfield’s comments permit the connection between Green’s literary ‘visualization’ and the ontology of the photographic to become clearer. Benjamin attributes a comparable effect to Green’s construction of a ‘second present’: the simple past tense immortalizes that which is represented in a remote past, whilst the deitic reference to the ‘here and now’ saturates the present with an ephemeral sense of its own passing away. In the Arcades Project, it is this recognition of a past moment’s ephemerality, its passing away in the present, that constitutes what Benjamin defines as the ‘now of legibility’ pertaining to the ‘historical index’ of the dialectical image.70 The critical construction of dialectical images is compared to the technique of montage in film, as a cut whose significance lies in the sudden juxtaposition of the past and the present. This stands in contrast to the minuscule and incremental changes between frames that are required when film seeks to reproduce real movement naturalistically. The indexical ontology of the photographic image is thus conjoined with a critical–temporal attention to the cinematic image in Benjamin’s mature epistemology.

This attentiveness to the ‘magical’ and ‘temporal’ aspect of the photographic image should be understood as the culmination of Benjamin’s theological theory of signification, which incorporates his notion of perception. For Benjamin, all signification must be predicated on the ontological presence of that which he designates as the ‘name’: the linguistic essence of the signified which participates in the medium of its signification, and which therefore signifies the signifying capacity of the signified itself. The condition of possibility of signs being able to function as signifiers of things is that things must possess an original semiotic (or ‘linguistic’) being. According to Benjamin’s theology of language, this linguistic being is the divine Word, the material of all creation. Hence, Benjamin’s mature interest in photography and the imagistic in general is the culmination of his early language theory: all human words, and indeed all signification, are dependent on their indexical and imagistic foundation. Returning words to images represents the theological redemption of their pure aesthetic expression in the divine Word and their liberation from the intentionality of human concepts. ‘Naming’ consequently designates the paradigmatic philosophical activity of Benjamin’s ‘literary-historical’ theory of criticism, as most clearly expounded in the Origin of German Mourning-Plays, which names the baroque mourning-play (Trauerspiel) by differentiating it from classical tragedy.

In his early critique of Goethe’s concept of primal phenomena in his essay on Early German Romanticism, Benjamin insists that Goethe’s concept of ‘primal phenomena’ (Urphänomen) – a particular phenomenon that encapsulates the truth of the whole – must be distanced from the scientific intuition of nature and brought into the domain of art. This should be done in such a way that the primal phenomena are understood as residing ‘in that sphere of art where art is not creation but nature’.71 According to Benjamin, this suggests the ‘paradoxical resolution’ that Goethe’s ‘true, intuitable, Urphänomenal nature would become visible after the fashion of a likeness, not in the nature of the world but only in art, whereas in the nature of the world it would indeed be present but hidden (that is, overshadowed by what appears)’.

What is this ‘non-creational’ sphere of art in which a mimesis function (‘likeness’) permits ‘true nature’ to become visualized or experienced? As Benjamin makes increasingly clear in his later work, it is a kind of ‘scientific art’ brought about by the ontological possibilities of technological reproduction. Hence, in a review of Karl Blossfeldt’s 1928 book Primal Forms [Urformen] of Art: Photographic Plant-Images, Benjamin describes these photographs of magnified plant organs as visions in which ‘a geyser of new image-worlds hisses up at points in our existence where we would least have thought them imaginable’.72 Through the technological development of photography, the ‘inner image-imperatives’ (Bildnotwendigkeiten) of
nature are capable of being revealed, representing a 'truly new objectivity', one first anticipated by the 'fraternal great spirits – sun-soaked eyes, like those of Goethe and Herder'.

The link between these primal image-worlds and Goethe's scientific-aesthetic theory of primal phenomena is reiterated in Benjamin's *Short History of Photography* the following year. Discussing August Sanders's collection of social photography, *The Face of Our Times*, Benjamin describes Sanders's work as 'comparative photography', a reference to Goethe's description of his own morphological method as a 'comparative anatomy'.73 This technological visualization puts into practice (as a 'second nature') the construction of primal phenomena that underwrites the 'tender empiricism' of Goethe's scientific writing on biology, optics and colour, but which Goethe refuses in his confused conflation of the 'empirical nature' given to our sensual experiences and 'truth' immanent within it.

In his science, Goethe's refusal to utilize optical instruments in favour of an unmediated intuition of nature leads him into a classical pantheism associated with the 'daemonic'. Benjamin opposes this move, but suggests that the formal peculiarity of Goethe's later literary works expresses a struggle against this mythological conception of spiritual nature. Nonetheless, the point of Benjamin's claim about 'non-creative' (i.e. technologically mimetic) art concerns its capacity to express not empirical nature but the historical truth of nature. The photographic or cinematographic reproduction does not leave its subject unchanged: the past content it faithfully represents takes on a new aspect in this process, its photographic form entails it is experienced as the oldest – something 'primal' – whilst it simultaneously saturates the present of the viewer with a melancholic recognition of its own passing and mortality.

What is at stake for a Benjaminian understanding of the artistic struggle waged in Goethe's mature works – culminating in the phantasmagoric temporality of the Helena scene – is related to this cinematic ontology. The implications of this claim can be understood through a consideration of the cinematic afterlife of the *Faust* legend. In his excellent discussion of F.W. Murnau's film version of *Faust*, Matt Erlin argues that Mephisto's magic highlights his function as the film's 'cinematic principle' and that Faust's transaction with the devil therefore 'appears as a self-referential commentary on the way in which the film attempts to transform the Faust legend into cinematic material and thereby infuse it with new life'.74 Thus Murnau's deviations from the 'high culture' of Goethe's literary version can be read as his own Faustian pact with the cinematic devil in order to reach out to the masses: where in Goethe's text Faust's desire for his youth is a given, in Murnau's film this desire is elicited through 'an elaborate visual seduction', which – like the seductive power of cinema – threatens to restore vitality at the expense of all social concern.

For Erlin, the lengthy interlude that follows this transformation in Murnau's film (in which Faust travels to Italy and, with the help of Mephisto, seduces the Duchess of Parma) 'signals Faust's [and Murnau's] separation from his literary origins, both as protagonist and as embodiment of a textual tradition'.75 This shift from the textual (high culture) to the cinematic (mass entertainment) is signified by Faust's conversion as an 'enthusiastic apostle of the visual', encapsulated by his seduction of the Duchess (using a glowing white orb) and the 'cinematic' framing of the final scene as a film within a film, under Mephisto's 'directorial' intervention. Although Erlin suggests this contrast between the textual and the visual is dialectically superseded in Murnau's concluding focus on Goethe's Gretchen story – such that the self-reflexive cinematic 'tricks' are now psychologized directly into the narrative of the film – this presumption of a positive negation of a negation ('the restoration of a cinematic neoclassicism') depends on a false dichotomy established on the basis of Murnau's 'visual/mass-entertainment' negation of Goethe's 'textual/high-cultural' tradition.76

This false negation obfuscates not merely the visual but the cinematic dimension of Goethe's production. Although the October 1926 première of Murnau's film version of *Faust* was a major cultural event, the French director Georges Méliès had produced four short films of the Faust legend in the space of seven years in the earliest days of film-making (*Faust and Marguerite* (1897 and 1904), * Damnation of Faust* (1898), *Faust in Hell* (1903)), and Paul Wegener's *Der Student Von Prag* (1913) was one of the first feature-length films of cinema.77 Early film-makers' frequent engagement with the Faust legend should be read not as the attempt to reintegrate the textual tradition in response to the artistic devaluation of film, but as the recognition that, especially in *Faust 2*, Goethe had already cinematized the textual tradition.

The 'phantasmagoria show' of Act I masters the situation by playfully ironizing this possibility, utilizing the baroque device of framing the *play within a play* in order to stage its own continuation, its own immortality. Far from 'suspending' the present or calling the reality of the position of the viewer into question, the hierarchical layering of this Romantic-reflective
structure has the effect of reaffirming the present reality of the detached viewer. Here, the Emperor's impossible demands for entertainment are met within the theatre by incorporating the emerging possibility of cinematic spectacle, as a 'possible theatre'. In contrast, the phantasmaria of Act III is literally unstageable. Here the cinematic is rendered *immanent* within the play, resulting in an 'impossible' work. As a piece of theatre, *Faust* 2 performs its own decline in relation to the advent of the cinematic spectacle. If the union of Helena's classicism and Faust's baroque in this phantasmaric reality produces, as Kurt Weinberg says, 'his phantasmaric son Euphorion', this should be grasped not - as Goethe misunderstood it - as Byronic romanticism ('the outer limits of Romantic *démasure*'), but as cinematic modernism. 78

With the decline of what Benjamin identifies as the 'auratic' (that uniqueness and presence of the here in the now of the present), classical theatre confronts its own passing away, but simultaneously Euphorion's flight enacts the birth of cinema as a shift into the light and magic of conjured semblance itself. The effect within Goethe's drama differs from the framed hierarchies of (Romantic) ironic reflection: its framelessness enfolds the refractive intrusion of historical time *into* the space of the present. The experiential effect is registered in a kind of 'catastrophic' clearing, which retrospectively projects the present into the past as its *fate*, whilst desubstantializing the present as one *surreal* possibility. *Our* history is the history of the cinematic; this insight occurs to us at the moment of the decline of cinema's existing narrative form, with the advent of the digital image and the new vistas demanded by digital, HD and 3D. 79 In this context, Goethe's phantasmaric visualization may be considered the primal history of cinema itself. The play dramatizes its own temporality in a phantasmaric procession of images conjured as a carnival of the allegorical, and prophesizes and dramatizes its own demise as a performance whose technical demands anticipate its true realization only in film. Its moment *was now*.

**Notes**

2. Benjamin, ‘Comments on Gundolf’s *Goethe*’, *SW*1, p. 98.

torical Review*, vol. 41, no. 1, February 1972, pp. 1–14.
5. Benjamin, ‘Perception is Reading’, *SW*1, p. 92.
19. Benjamin was in (at least indirect) contact with Valéry whilst living in Paris during the 1930s (see Letters to Werner Kraft (30 January 1936) and to Adrienne Monnier (29 April 1939 and 21 September 1939), in *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin: 1910–1940*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1994, pp. 520, 605, 614). The notes from Valéry’s *Cahiers* suggests he first conceived of the idea for *Mon Faust* during the mid-1920s, and in 1932 gave an address in honour of Goethe to the Sorbonne on the occasion of the centenary of the poet’s death. But it seems he did not begin major work on the project until 1940 (a first edition was published in 1941 and expanded in a posthumous 1945 edition). Benjamin’s reference to the poet’s Goethean understanding in the 1939 essay on Baudelaire therefore
suggests the possibility that work on Mon Faust may have begun in 1939.


23. Michael Löwy, Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin’s ‘On the Concept of History’, trans. Chris Turner, Verso, London and New York, 2005, p. 69. The resemblance to Faust’s pact is further emphasized if we compare the Angelus Novus of the theses with the Talmudic angles referred to in Benjamin’s 1922 announcement for a journal entitled Angelus Novus, who ‘are created in order to perish and vanish into the void, once they have sung their hymn in the presence of God’ (Benjamin, ‘Announcement of the Journal Angelus Novus’, SW1, p. 296). The open mouth of Klee’s Angelus Novus suggests that the Angel of History is about to break into a song of lament before perishing. The storm that blows from Paradise therefore drowns out the angel’s lament, but also prevents the ephemeral angel’s vanishing just long enough for him to become perceptible.

24. See my discussion of the theses On the Concept of History in relation to Benjamin’s early fragment on ‘The Meaning of Time in the Moral Universe’ in the coda to Chapter 3 of my Speculative Experience and History.


29. Löwy, Fire Alarm, p. 69.

30. Benjamin, The Arcades Project, K1, 1, emphasis added; K2, 5.


32. Benjamin, The Arcades Project, N1, 8, quoting Rudolf Borchardt.


39. Ibid., p. 82.


43. Goethe, ‘Second Sketch for the Announcement of the Helena’ (1826), in Faust, p. 523. ‘To be sure, it is of the essence of the time structure that it is not clearly differentiated, but that there is an intentional blending of times, a montage, a superimposing of two or more times in an iridescent shimmer of phantasmagoric effect’ (Harold Jantz, The Form of ‘Faust’: The Work of Art and Its Intrinsic Structures, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1978, p. 153).

44. It is this illusionary sense Marx ironically intends to evoke with his claim that all the political conditions of revolutionary France ‘have vanished like a phantasmagoria before the spell of a man whom even his enemies do not make out to be a sorcerer’ (Karl Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, International Publishers, New York, 1963, p. 20). Marx exemplifies this vanishing act with a maxim from Goethe’s Faust: ‘All that exists deserves to perish’.


49. Goethe, Faust 2, I. 6546, p. 186; see Flax, ‘Goethe’s Faust II and the Experimental Theatre of his Time’.


51. Ursula Reidel-Schrewe argues that ‘the key and the tripod are presented as ritual objects complementing each other and symbolizing the ultimate power of genius’. Ursula Reidel-Schrewe, ‘Key and Tripod in Mikhail Bulgakov’s Master and Margarita’, Neophilologus, vol. 79, no. 2, April, 1995, p. 273. John Aloysius McCarthy rejects this classical association and focuses on their sexual imagery: ‘Given the clearly phallic symbolism of the key that naturally seeks out the “right place,” the argument for viewing the burning tripod as the aroused female genitals is more compelling. The triangular form of the tripod supporting the flaming bowl is reminiscent of the triangular shape of the gateway to the female reproductive organs.’ John Aloysius McCarthy, Re-mapping Reality: Chaos and Creativity in Science and Literature, Rodopi, Amsterdam and New York, 2006, p. 210.

52. Goethe, Letter to Sulpiz Boisserée (dated 24 November 1831), Goethe echoes this phrase in a letter to Wilhelm von Humboldt (dated 17 March 1832, in Faust, p. 549), which speaks again of ‘these very serious jests’; quoted
in Weinberg, The Figure of Faust in Valéry and Goethe, p. 188 n22.


56. Goethe, Elective Affinities, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1971, pp. 191–202. In Elective Affinities, the architect constructs a tableau vivant by imposing the forms of painterly composition directly onto real life by using people and objects as his material. ‘It was at this moment that the picture [das Bild] appeared to have been held and fixed [festgehalten und erstarrt]’, Goethe writes of one of these staged constructions, and the effect of this ‘fixing’ on the participants (‘Physically bedazzled [geblendet], spiritually astonished [überrascht]’) mirrors the effect upon the spectators (the ‘disturbing factor being a sort of anxiety produced by the presence of real figures instead of painted ones’).


59. Anthony Phelan argues that ‘the return of some element of antiquity from the past and its reinstatement in the present … gives new meaning to the term representation, which is now a restoration to presence’, but one that simultaneously ‘destabilizes the personal identity of its central figure by insisting on her allusive character’ (Anthony Phelan, ‘The Classical and the Medieval in Faust II’, in Bishop, A Companion to Goethe’s Faust Parts I and II, p. 162).

60. Benjamin, ‘Paralipomena to ‘On the Concept of History’”, SW4, p. 405.


64. Ibid.


73. ‘So it was quite in order for an observer like Döblin to have hit on precisely the scientific aspects of this work, commenting: ‘Just as there is comparative anatomy … so this photographer is doing comparative photography’ (Benjamin, ‘Little History of Photography’, SW2, p. 520).


75. Ibid., pp. 165–6.

76. Ibid., pp. 166–70.

77. Ibid., p. 156. The pioneering film-maker George Méliès, who describes his first films as a ‘genre féerique et fantastamagorique’ (Margaret Cohen, Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1993, pp. 253–4) stands as the fantastical antithesis to the realist tendency in early cinema. Méliès, perhaps more than anyone, grasped the phantasmagorical themes in Goethe’s version of the legend.

78. Weinberg, The Figure of Faust in Valéry and Goethe, p. 160. David Cunningham has criticized recent theorizing of the ontology of the photographic image in relation to the avant-garde and in particular to Benjamin’s concept of the dialectical image for being overdetermined by the pictorial tradition of visual studies. Against this, Cunningham emphasizes an inherent transdisciplinarity by tracing the importance of post-romantic theories of the literary and poetic image for Benjamin and the avant-garde (see David Cunningham, ‘Photography and the Literary Conditions of Surrealism’, in David Cunningham, Andrew Fisher and Sas Mays, eds, Photography and Literature in the Twentieth Century, Cambridge Scholars Press, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2005). In this respect, Cunningham would argue that Goethe had already ‘textualized’ the cinematic tradition in advance, a view that is perhaps broadly consistent with Franco Moretti’s reading of Faust 2 as inaugurating the literary genre of the ‘modern epic’ (see Franco Moretti, Modern Epic: The World-System from Goethe to García Márquez, trans. Quintin Hoare, Verso, London and New York, 1996). Yet, I would argue, this transdisciplinary character is precisely what is at stake in visualizing Goethe’s nineteenth-century poem through the twentieth-century visual category of the cinematic, rather than through the lineage of romantic theories of the poetic image or the modern epic (which therefore reasserts the continuity of historicism).

79. The triumph of Russian director Alexander Sokurov’s 2011 reworking of Faust at the 68th Venice International Film Festival perhaps represents a moment of cinematic reflection on its own tradition, precisely at the point in which digital production and reproduction threaten it with obliteration.