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Benjamin's Shock and Image: Critical Responses to Hyperaesthetic Culture

By *Erika Kerruish*

Hyperaesthetic culture entices individuals by appealing to their senses. It pipes music into our shopping spaces, shapes the sleek feel of iPods and the clean smell of washing powders, and designs the ever-growing experience economy of travel and video games, theme parks and tourism packages, all of which aim to engage and satisfy the senses. Tactile packaging, the trademarking of sounds, colours and smells, and synesthetic marketing are all used to create this sensory regime of the desirable and the pleasurable. David Howes writes that hyperaesthetic culture engages “as many senses as possible in its drive for product differentiation and the distraction/seduction of the consumer... multiplying the sensory channels through which the ‘buy me!’ message is communicated” (288). There is a serious question about whether all this sensory manipulation is undesirable. But in answering it we must avoid returning to any body-denying asceticism that suppresses the sensory practices of the self. Effective criticisms of hyperaesthetic culture need to be situated within that culture. They also require deciding where in such a manipulative environment the space for critical thought lies.

Walter Benjamin's writings are especially useful here because they explain why some sensory regimes are problematic and suggest ways in which critical thought can proceed when the experience of the self is so closely bound to the environment. Continuing a form of cultural criticism found in Nietzsche, one which censures sensory regimes that manipulate, shock and intoxicate, Benjamin describes processes of sensation, memory and thought that clarify why certain sensory regimes are detrimental to people. Benjamin, who is interested in how the “Absolute” is manifest in experience, extends the Romantic notion that the source of reflection is located in the medium of art. Accordingly, critical thought is embedded in technologically specific mediums of experience, and critical terms and tools belong to the sensory environment they examine. Benjamin's work is especially relevant to conceiving of critical responses to hyperaesthetic practices because it considers the implications of technologically mediated sensation for critical thought.

Benjamin's reflections on shock explore the intimate relationship between sensation, memory and thought. Following Sigmund Freud, he thinks of consciousness as combatting

shocking experiences by registering them and preventing the experience from implanting itself in the unconscious as a memory (“Some Motifs” 316-18). In the modern environment physical and psychic shock are the norm, and the individual is unable to shield herself from the day-to-day violence and quantity of surrounding stimuli. Modernity radically reorders perception in its production of relentless stimuli. The noise and business of the modern city is one source of shock and, in an aesthetic context, the cinema is another. The intensity and pace of stimuli in these environments overwhelm the individual, who does not have the capacity to relate sense experiences to each other or consider their meaning for itself. The body and mind protect the self by shutting down the senses and blocking the connections between sensory experience and past memories. This occurs most straightforwardly, as Susan Buck-Morss points out, through the desensitising use of drugs in the nineteenth century for recreational and medicinal purposes (18-21). But in Benjamin’s writing such anaesthetisation is also caused by dulling sensation through trained responses, like the repetitive movements of factory and office workers who perform actions without experiencing them (“Some Motifs” 327-29). The phantasmagorias of commodities in arcades, panoramas, shopping malls and world fairs numb by flooding the senses with pleasure, intoxicating viewers and distracting them from reality (“Paris, the Capital” 32-38). Such anaesthetisation enables, in Buck-Morss’s words, “a tripartite splitting of experience into agency (the operating surgeon), the object as hyle (the docile body of the patient), and the observer (who perceives and acknowledges the accomplished result)” (30). This splitting results in self-alienation, a misrecognition that allows the masses to both observe and operate on themselves without pain or objection (38). In this way, bombardment by sense experiences makes people susceptible to political manipulations such as fascism, and undermines their ability to determine their own wellbeing.

As Lutz Koepnick points out (72), Benjamin is continuing a Nietzschean mode of cultural criticism that focusses on sensory manipulation (a mode particularly well suited to analysing hyperaesthetic culture). Political differences aside (Nietzsche thought that the socialist ideal was “nothing but a clumsy misunderstanding of [the] Christian moral ideal” (*Will to Power* 340)), Benjamin’s ideas about how people become anaesthetised resemble Nietzsche’s understanding of how various forms of narcoticisation distract the individual from his or her embodied interests. For Nietzsche, this involves the deadening of pain “by means of affects” (*Genealogy* 127), mechanical activity and small pleasures (134-35), as well as phantasmagorical experiences such as Wagner’s operas, all of which leave a person weaker than before. [1] For both Nietzsche and Benjamin, numbing the self through sensation disguises the fact that it is acting and being treated in ways that are harmful and not in its material interests. For Nietzsche this harm consists of Christian morality’s repression of people’s embodied interests so that they might attain salvation in another world. For Benjamin the harm comes from the manipulation of workers and consumers in the interests of fascism and modern capitalism.

Despite these similarities, Benjamin’s writings differ from Nietzsche’s views in important ways, particularly in his understandings of memory and resistant practice. For Benjamin, shock and anaesthetisation disrupt memory, but a particular kind of memory that corresponds with a particular kind of experience. He distinguishes between *remembrance* and

conscious remembering, two incompatible processes. If a perception is consciously experienced (*erlebnis*) and remembered then it is not experienced unconsciously (*erfahrung*) and is prevented from sinking into the recesses of memory to form rich associations and meanings for the self. These associations and meanings form the basis of involuntary memory (memories triggered by sensations of objects) and auratic experience (to simplify, the experience, specific to modernity, of temporal distance in the spatial closeness of an object) (“Some Motifs” 338). Unconscious experience (*erfahrung*) can only be consciously experienced in remembrance.

This relationship between memory and sensation differs greatly to that outlined by Nietzsche in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, in which the manipulation of sensation by Christian asceticism results in a particular kind of subjectivity. In this precursor to Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, Nietzsche considers how the manipulation of unpleasurable sensations – the “*mnemotechniques*” of pain – organises the multiplicity of the body into a unified causal self (57-65). Put simply, the threat of physical punishment if a debt is not repaid induces the self to develop a keen memory and a protracted will, and to see itself as responsible for the action of paying back the debt. This memory organises diverse bodily phenomena by distinguishing between the self’s chance and essential qualities, projecting the body into the future via the fiction of the singular self (58). In this way, a causal interpretation of the self and its experience is internalised to form the dominant mode of consciousness.

Nietzsche, then, writes about the generation of a linear memory formed by ascetic Christianity’s manipulation of sensation. This memory, which develops with the idea that an underlying self is responsible for its actions, becomes crucial in modern society. On the other hand, Benjamin’s idea of remembrance works in a very different way. It proceeds non-linearly and unconsciously, embedding the self’s consciousness in objects and places rather than structuring it as an inner sense. Nevertheless this non-linear understanding of memory is just as relevant to understanding modern subjectivity, and even more so to understanding modern (and, I suggest, postmodern) sense experience. This is because it ties the individual’s memory to her historically specific sensory environment, rather than simply the experiences of pleasure and pain.

The individual’s perception and recollection of objects and places are strikingly important in Benjamin’s writings on memory. For Benjamin, involuntary memories are triggered by the sensation of objects, and the “aura” is the sensation of an object unique to a specific time. Wandering through the city, the nineteenth-century *flâneur* activates these forms of experience based on buried, unconscious memories in a “purposeless purposeful drifting into the past which turns the city into a “mnemotechnic device” (Hansen, “Benjamin, Cinema” 194). The city is to be read, its concentrated meaning overlapping the past and present and, importantly, individual and collective history. Here we see time translated into space, a focal theme for Benjamin who, in *A Berlin Chronicle*, expresses his long-term interest in “setting out the sphere of life – bios – graphically on a map” (596). Recollecting “lived Berlin,” he is “talking of a space, of moments and discontinuities” that are “the form” that “months and years ... have at the moment of commemoration” (612). Inquiring into the self’s relationship to the interior and exterior spaces it inhabits leads Benjamin to

think of memory as externalised and spatialised in the objects and places of the city that trigger auratic reflection and involuntary memories. The prominence he grants to objects and place emphasises how individual experience is layered within collective experience.

The shock of modern life disrupts and radicalises this process and, in so doing, further exteriorises the inner experience of the subject. Thought no longer emerges from reflection on experience, but instead arises more immediately from perception. So immediately, in fact, that perceptions come to seize the subject's thought, as most strikingly formulated in an aesthetic context when Benjamin cites Georges Duhamel's comment that in the cinema he "can no longer think what I want to think" because "my thoughts have been replaced by moving images" ("Work of Art: Third" 267). This disruption of space for critical reflection is most apparent in advertising, which "abolishes the space where contemplation moved and all but hits us between the eyes," for criticism requires "correct distancing" ("One Way Street" 476). The stimuli of the modern environment are so overwhelming they not only disrupt the ability of the self to relate perceptions to each other, but potentially force their own predetermined meanings on the self.

Although overwhelming sense experience disrupts the processing of experience and contemplation, Benjamin's work on visual culture shows how a mode of sense experience also holds the possibility of revolution and critique. While there are different means by which one might pursue this question, I do so here through the notion of the dialectical image. The idea of the dialectical image articulates how one mode of perception – vision – enables a certain mode of cognition. This relationship between a mode of perception and cognition ties thought to perceptual modes and the technologies that modify them. Following Buck-Morss (like so many others), I will consider the dialectical image as a visual image (*bild*), without concern for whether this image is represented in words or in pictures.

[2]

The dialectical image does not avoid the shock of the modern environment, but rather mimics its interruptive and disruptive style. It is an instance of recognition of revolutionary meaning. Shock provokes recognition, marking first appearances of that which is unknown. Later these recognitions become dulled by familiarity and habit. The shock of the dialectical image is that of a static image of the past flaring up in the present, it is "an image that emerges suddenly, in a flash. What has been is to be held fast – as an image flashing up in the now" (*Arcades* 473). This flash of the "image of the past" (390) referred to in *On the Concept of History* (although Benjamin does not there use the term dialectical image) reconfigures the complex temporal relationships of auratic experience and involuntary memory in which relationships of memory and history become spatialised in the sensory experience of objects and places. The dialectical image further elaborates how time crystallises in a static visual moment in its montage-like practice that explodes the past out of its context. *The Arcades Project* carefully amasses quotations in a literary montage that disassociates historical texts from their contexts, explicitly stating in its file on "On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress" that its "theory connects most closely with that of montage" (67).

More specifically, the dialectical image represents contradictory ideas that cohere in the form of historical images. In Buck-Morss's words, "the cognitive experience provided by the dialectical image was one of historical time as well as (or by means of) extension into space. The meanings of these images cannot be determined abstractly, but only fixed in the context of a particular historical image" (220), associated with a particular time and its sensory regime. The image itself is ambiguous because ambiguity, writes Benjamin, "is the appearance of dialectical images, the law of dialectics at a standstill," but this ambiguity can be interpreted according to two diametrical directions ("Paris the Capital" 40). Moreover, the directions in which the historical image is interpreted are determined by the present and the terms available for its representation in the present. There is thus a generative tension between the content of the past and what that past means for the present. This is a third interpretation, "the now of a particular recognizability" (*Arcades* 462-63), "an irretrievable image of the past which threatens to disappear in any present that does not recognize itself as intended in that image" ("Concept of History" 391).

That the image itself binds ideas together renders the need for the ideas in it to be related through causality or resolution unnecessary. Consequently, the image does not present a continuous relationship between the past it manifests and the present, which allows it to shake off temporal continuity in its translation of the past into a static picture. In this way it recalls the interruption of linear time found in auratic experience and involuntary memory. This is perfectly apt because "continuity in the presentation of history is unattainable" (*Arcades* 470) and "while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent" (462). This means of representing the past shatters the interpretation of history as progress (historicism). It works against the linear development of humanity's self-actualisation whereby each new present betters its past in a "progression through a homogeneous, empty time" ("Concept of History" 395). The shock of the dialectical image disrupts temporal continuity, providing a moment of interruption in which the past is liberated from inevitably leading to the present.

The dialectical image, then, is a cognition provoked by an image in which ideas cohere not through their resolution or causality, but through the static structure of the image, that is, through a spatial, pictorial medium. Historically specific images are represented or cited in a new historical context, manifesting a pattern of ideas that intersect at the point of that image. The set of ideas that provides a critical perspective on one's present time cannot be separated from the historically specific structure of the image. For Benjamin, critical terms – and even more importantly the relationships between those terms – are found in the images of the commodity culture of the nineteenth century and in the terms of the twentieth century. These images display the wishes of the collective unconscious, the dreams of a group asleep under capitalism. As Miriam Hansen writes, "as mythical images, the phantasmagorias of modernity were by definition ambiguous, promising a classless society while perpetuating the very opposite; yet as dream images they could be read and transformed into historical images, into strategies of waking up" ("Benjamin, Cinema" 191-93). The arcades themselves, through which the "dreaming collective ... communes

with its own insides” (*Arcades* 389), are an example of this, pointing both towards an ideology of consumption and a futuristic utopia of a new world of glass and steel. Returning to these phantasmagorical images and reading them as dialectical images is a return to the past that releases it from inevitably leading to the present (its future); thus opening up another future.

For Benjamin, a dynamic between the sensory environments of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries generates room for the critical analysis of modernity. Nineteenth century commodity culture provides the image-content whose meanings are transformed by the present terms according to which they are understood. Moreover, the suddenness of shock is reiterated in how the image of the past presents itself. Although his discussion of shock is intimately related to Nietzsche’s explanation of how overwhelming sensory experiences act as a narcotic, Benjamin’s account of how critical thought can proceed amongst such overstimulation is very different and better equipped for today’s hyperaesthetic environment.

We can see how Benjamin’s account is better able to address modern sensory experience by contrasting it with Nietzsche’s valorisation of solitude. Solitude is a central theme of *Zarathustra* and *Ecce Homo* and it enables critical reflection. Nietzsche describes the solitude he sought in the Swiss and Northern Italian alps as allowing a “return to myself” (*Ecce Homo* 233). Solitude combats the noise and pace of modern life by not only sheltering the body from others, but also from the clamour of the modern sensorium and the routine and competition of urban life. Solitude is a state of bodily isolation distinguishable from introspective consciousness and is characterised by “a tremendous and proud self-possession” rather than the possession of true, reflective self-knowledge (*Beyond* 214). The solitary body differs from self-reflective consciousness in that it primarily allows the body to sense itself – to assess the quality and valence of its affects and sensations – rather than think about itself. For Nietzsche it enables a kind of controlled encounter with others through the practices of reading and writing, which allow the subject to question the terms by which it understands its inner life.^[3] The subject is able to recognise the contingency of the prevailing words, ideas and emotions by which it understands its experience because meaning is not forced upon the subject by the clutter and pace of sensation. This allows for a questioning of the terms and ideas by which the subject’s experience is shaped and understood.

In celebrating solitude in this way, Nietzsche maintains that the natural alpine environment is preferable to the city. Yet, this means of criticising a hyperaesthetic culture is limited by its retreat from the uproar of modern technological society. Although his philosophy deeply challenges ideas of naturalness applied to the human organism, it does not present an equal skepticism of the natural environment, partly because his concern with the mutability of humans sees it as occurring in response to different natural environments. Adrian del Caro points out that Nietzsche “needs nature to remain intact, to retain its obstacles (at least from the human perspective), to keep its naturalness” (114). My point here is that Nietzsche thought there was a set of natural sensory experiences uninflected by culture that escaped the sensory regime of one’s time, be it urban clamour or Christian

asceticism. He does not clearly extend his criticisms of naturalness, which he makes so well about the body and subjectivity, to certain natural sensory environments. His recourse to nature distracts him from substantially engaging with the way in which technology modifies sense experience in late nineteenth century Europe, and this overly restricts the critical options he can offer people living in twenty-first century hyperaesthetic culture. Writing before the emergence of cinema, widespread sound recording or mass-market photography, it was perhaps easy for a thinker like Nietzsche to overlook the importance and implications of the intensification of these new technologies. The sensory impact of modernity he noted largely took the form of urban noise and crowding. The aesthetic practice he thinks will combat this sensory regime is a retreat from the modern world rather than an engagement with it.

Retreating into any “natural” sensory environment is not an option for Benjamin. This is not only because of the ubiquity of technology, but because he does not subscribe to an opposition between technology and nature: “There is no more insipid and shabby antithesis,” he writes in *The Arcades Project*, than that “between the symbol-space of nature and that of technology.” (390). Drawing on the Hegelian-Marxist idea of second nature, he does not consider technology as necessarily a dominance or mastery of nature, but as “interplay between nature and humanity” (“Work of Art: Second” 107). It is this interplay, especially its reorganisation of human perception through cinema and photography that interests him. As Miriam Hansen emphasises, “there is no way he would conceive of a restoration of the instinctual power of the senses and their integrity that would not take into account the extent to which technology has already become part of the human bodily sensorium” (*Cinema* 146). Refusing an opposition between nature and technology allows Benjamin to develop a critical response suitable for engaging with the technology-saturated twenty-first century, one that is not the isolated practice of an individual distanced from shared sensory experience, but one that addresses the collective, embodied and situated experience of technology.

Benjamin’s understanding of critical thought within hyperaesthetic culture is based on the experience of discontinuity in which the past is encountered in a present moment. His radical challenge to the distinction between inner and outer sense spills out the interior life of the self, transposing its inner sense of time into historical, technologically specific space. He circumvents inner life to look directly at the sensory environment in which the subject is formed and which provokes the subject’s thought. Indeed, this muted, highly mediated subjectivity is the object of Theodor Adorno’s concerns about the dialectical image and the limited role it ascribes to theoretical interpretation, for he sees “that the total elimination of theory only comes at the cost of the total or near-total elimination of the subject” (Pensky 228). Regardless of this dispute, Benjamin and his focus on the technology that produces places and things provides a means by which the sensory regime of an era becomes a vital part of its own critical analysis.

In turning out the inner life of the subject onto the external world, Benjamin offers valuable insights into how resistant practices and critical thought work in a hyperaesthetic culture. For example, Howes writes of “sensitive-training,” which is the cultivation of

alternative sensory regimes that resist hyperaesthetic culture and the global commodification of the senses. For Howes, these practices involve a training of the senses that resists their use by others as an avenue through which to sell goods. An example is how collecting artefacts associated with the ex-German Democratic Republic (*Ostalgie*) works as a resistant practice. The historical objects that “serve as the starting point of ... journeys into the past” and also “signify a group identity for their former consumers” (Blum 231) are necessarily seen in a contemporary terms. They are thus able to form the basis of a new critical interpretation of the present and new possibilities of community. The sensory experience of these objects holds together a group of ideas particular to the ways in which this time views that past and is able to provide terms of critical thought. As Martin Blum states, “these products have been reinterpreted with new meanings ... and have thus become sites of resistance against the multiple discourses of Western-style consumerism” (231). Reading them dialectically, one tension lying in these objects and their images is that between the way they display the desire for and existence of a non-consumerist capitalist society (however corrupted it was) and the forgetting or denial of that history in the embracing of the (supposedly inevitable) consumer culture of the present. What collectively desired values did these objects represent even as they failed to fulfil them, and what do these desires mean now? Another tension is that between their striking manifestation of how people place value in products for reasons other than the standard desirability of global consumer products, and today’s global marketing rhetoric of taste, quality and lifestyle that promises a mythic reunion with an idealised identity. In Benjamin’s terms, the interpretation of an image of the past generates a third, new interpretation – a contingent future – out of that image.

Sensory technologies have moved on since Benjamin’s time. The intensification of commercial appeals to the senses and the development of computer and digital technologies are generating new sensory regimes. Not only has visual culture thrived through computers, televisions and smart screen devices, but audio, tactile, taste and smell cultures, as well as multisensory and synesthetic interactions, are transforming with new technologies and practices. Yet Benjamin’s insight that film in 1930s Europe “demanded an understanding of the aesthetic that relates artistic technique to urban industrial technology and its impact on the conditions of perception, experience and agency” (Hansen, *Cinema* 78-79) still speaks to today’s hyperaesthetic culture. While the dialectical image’s location in visual culture apparently limits its use in this multisensory environment, the idea remains relevant as a model for a practice of thinking that is intimately bound to sensation and able to address its own technological revision. For one thing, by examining how one kind of sensory experience holds ideas together in a particular way through its specific kind of spatio-temporality, it allows for that kind of spatio-temporality to be used to interpret other modes of sensory experience. For example, the experience of *Ostalgie* involves senses other than vision such as taste and touch (the bitterness of Rondo coffee (246) and Ata washing powder’s propensity to become “rockhard” (241)), but the thought incited by those senses experiences can be conceived of according to the spatio-temporal structure of the dialectical image and the discontinuous relationship between the past and present by which it generates meaning. Likewise, the dialectical image can be used to analyse the use of auditory “images” from the past as may occur in practices such as sampling, so evaluating

and developing their capacity as resistant practices. The dialectical image also suggests that the temporal and spatial configurations of senses other than vision can give rise to specific modes of critical thought then able to be extended to other sensory modes and their technological modification. Recent research on the senses provides plenty of material with which to examine this question. Some examples include Michael Bull's work on car soundscapes as well as on "mobile media sound bubbles" and their "aural solipsism" (182), Anne Cranny-Francis's on the meanings associated with touch and its technologies, and Laura U. Marks's on the effects of including smell in aesthetics and cultural analysis.

Benjamin himself attended to auditory and olfactory experiences as well as visual ones. *The Arcades Project*, in which he discusses the dialectical image, gathers together literary images in the form of quotations that portray a variety of sensory modes alongside the visual. To select some arbitrary instances, Victor Hugo writes on the "cries and mutters" of Paris, Alfred Delvau notes that the Place Maubert "exhales an odor of iniquity ... which shocks the sense of smell" (521), and Marcel Proust evokes the tactility of fabric filled interiors with "adjustable curtains" and "sofa deep as tombs" (217). It is how the dialectical image configures the spatio-temporal and the cognition this engenders that is significant rather than its presentation in a pictorial medium. Other sensory modes can be read analogously to the dialectical image, and critical responses to the competitive sensory regime of today's hyperaesthetic culture found within it.

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Endnotes

1. Benjamin sees Wagner's "total art work" as a phantasmagoria that would "seal art off from the developments of technology," and "abstract from the social existence of human beings" (*Arcades* 11). It is "art at war with its own commodity character" (895). As noted earlier, in his later work Nietzsche views Wagner's work as degenerate and places it firmly in the category of intensification of experience that ultimately weakens the self. Interestingly, Benjamin seems to have regarded Nietzsche's own notion of eternal return as a kind of ultimate phantasmogoria of the universe – a cosmic phantasmogoria (*Arcades* 25, 340), a point that reflects Nietzsche's limited consideration of the historical and technological nature of humanity's material environment.
2. The notion of the dialectical image is not resolved in Benjamin or his commentator's

work. For example, Buck-Morss sees the dialectical image as taking different forms in different parts of Benjamin's work (*Dialectics of Seeing*) and Rolf Tiedermann questions the consistency of the notion (Benjamin *Arcades*) while Eli Friedlander develops a systematic account of the notion. Friedlander focuses on the singularity of the dialectical image and Anthony Auerbach emphasises that it is the form of presentation of a materialist history not a method. Friedlander further emphasises that the dialectical image is manifest in language, while Buck-Morss states that it can take the form of either pictures or language.

3. This focus on the solitary practice of reading and writing can be considered a replacement for Ancient Greek tragedy in the context of the decadence of the modern ethos. Nietzsche's esteem for the practice of Greek tragedy as an artform arises because he esteems the ancient Greek ethos into which it transforms the individual. Because of this value, it is acceptable for the individual to embrace immersion in the sensorium that generates identification with it. However he considers the modern ethos and its sensory practices to be nihilistic. In early works such as *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche praises Wagner's work and sees it as an antidote to European nihilism that offers a chance at the rebirth of German culture similar to that offered in the past by Greek tragedy. But by *The Case of Wagner* his music is seen as decadent and ill, a symptom of the nihilism of modernity and a "persuasion of sensuousness which in turn makes the spirit weary and worn-out" (183).

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