

Thinking in Constellations

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*Walter Benjamin
in the Humanities*

Edited by

Nassima Sahraoui and Caroline Sauter

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Thinking in Constellations: Walter Benjamin in the Humanities

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Throughout this volume, all quotations from Walter Benjamin's work in German are taken from Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972-1991), and will be abbreviated as GS.

Existing translations of Walter Benjamin's works into English are mostly taken from Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland et al., 4 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2003), abbreviated as SW, unless explicitly stated otherwise. Modifications or re-translations are clearly indicated.

Translations from Benjamin's *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* into English are taken from Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, translated by John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998), abbreviated as *Origin*, unless explicitly stated otherwise. Modifications or re-translations are clearly indicated.

Translations from Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk* into English are taken from Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), abbreviated as AP. Modifications or re-translations are clearly indicated.

For all other translations of Walter Benjamin's work into English, full references are given in the endnotes.

INTRODUCTION

THINKING IN CONSTELLATIONS: WALTER BENJAMIN IN THE HUMANITIES

NASSIMA SAHRAOUI, CAROLINE SAUTER

This state of unrest refers to the demand on the researcher to abandon the tranquil contemplative attitude toward the subject in order to become conscious of the critical constellation in which precisely this fragment of the past finds itself in exactly this presence.
Benjamin, “Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian”

Beunruhigung über die Zumutung an den Forschenden, die gelassene, kontemplative Haltung dem Gegenstand gegenüber aufzugeben, um der kritischen Konstellation sich bewußt zu werden, in der gerade dieses Fragment der Vergangenheit mit gerade dieser Gegenwart sich befindet.
Benjamin, “Eduard Fuchs, der Sammler und der Historiker”

The concept of constellation is a prominent figure which is used in a variety of fields and contexts within the Humanities today. In fact, it has become seemingly fashionable to speak of a constellation of concepts, events, ideas, or any other kind of material, as manifested in the many recent publications featuring the term “constellation” in their title.¹ In its common usage, “constellation” usually defines a configuration of phenomena under specific spatial and temporal circumstances. In more concrete terms it is, of course, the formation of stars into a “star-image”, or *Sternbild*, as the 20th century German-Jewish philosopher, art critic, and literary and cultural theorist Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) would have it.

There is a notable, constant, and indeed programmatic reference to constellations, stars, and astrology throughout Benjamin’s oeuvre: from the earliest to the latest writings, the repeated mentioning of stellar constellations in key texts of Benjamin’s—such as, for instance, *Doctrine of the Similar* and *On the Mimetic Faculty*, his essay on Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*, the *Epistemo-Critical Prologue* to his *Trauerspiel* book, the so-called *Baudelaire Book*, or the *Arcades Project*—relates two essential

aspects of Benjamin's work to the notion of constellation: his poetics of reading and writing, and his philosophical method. In both instances, the constellation is an instantaneous, relational figure of epistemological, historico-political, and literary objects. Just like a constellation in astronomy, however, this figure is defined by the relation of the individual objects to each other and to the viewer; and it can be grasped only instantaneously and only from a specific viewer's standpoint. And just as the ever-changing stars of a stellar constellation never stand still, the movement of reading or writing—or, for that matter, thinking—never becomes fixated; rather, reading and writing as well as thinking are constantly in movement. Thinking in constellations therefore expresses Benjamin's method in general: it poses and answers the question of how to adequately approach epistemological, phenomenological, and literary problemata *with* and *against* its respective tradition.

"Ideas are eternal constellations," Benjamin famously writes in the *Epistemo-Critical Prologue* to his study on the German baroque mourning-play; and he continues: "by virtue of the elements being gathered as points in such constellations, phenomena are subdivided and saved at the same time."² Benjamin's attempt at "saving the phenomena" from any "contemplative attitude," and his endeavour to set them into a "critical constellation," which he later frames in his essay on the German art collector and historian Eduard Fuchs that we opened our introduction with,³ alludes to and stands in line with a grand astronomical and philosophical search: namely, the centuries-long quest for explaining the irregular movements of the stars, and the subsequent dispute about how to "save the phenomena". How is it possible, astronomers and philosophers alike asked time and time again, that the stars—being perfect formations from the gods' or God's hands—do not circle the cosmological firmament in perfect and regular trajectories?⁴ With all sorts of scientific, astronomic, and esoteric methods, the Ancients tried to attribute these irregularities to the distorted perception of man, rather than to the dynamics of nature itself. It was only with the beginning of the revolutionary renewals in modern science that the stars were not seen as divine entities anymore. Only then was it possible to relate man's perception to the things, and to develop methods and concepts that could be verified in reality. The things, therefore, were turned into objects of man's perception and man's thinking, and not least, the language of man, that Walter Benjamin so famously engages with in his 1916 essay *On Language as Such and on the Language of Man*.

In another passage from the *Epistemo-Critical Prologue*, Benjamin draws an analogy between ideas and constellations, and between things

and stars: “Ideas are related to things like constellations are to stars.”⁵ Here, he not only inverts Plato’s doctrine of forms, according to which ideas or forms are archetypes or pre-images, and thus the only everlasting and true realities, whereas things are only their mere likeness, but moreover, he goes beyond the concrete philosophical, and also beyond the common understanding of constellation. As the contributions in this volume elucidate, a constellation, for Benjamin, is not only a fixed concept, and it is not only a metaphor, or a manner of speaking, nor is it just a random motif among others. Rather, it is—perhaps quite idiosyncratically—his name for a specific movement of thought and a specific method of (non-)presentation that challenges the very assumptions and conventions of reading, writing and thinking that the Humanities are based on—most clearly, of course, the conventions of progress, progression, and linearity. Benjamin’s constellations are therefore best understood as crystallised “thought-images” that defer rigorous conventions, and lead us to a critical standpoint, allowing us to transcend the borders of reading and writing, and not least of thinking, thus creating an essential and indeed programmatic openness.

This constellatory poetics of transience, of openness and non-linearity, can be discerned throughout Benjamin’s entire work, and it is as much a part of his aesthetics as it is a part of his philosophy of history and of his theory of the narrative.⁶ In this vein, constellations challenge the very self-conception of the text-based disciplines in the humanities: Benjamin’s notorious demand for “brushing history against the grain” in the seventh of his theses on the *Concept of History*⁷ indeed implies a practice of reading, writing and thinking that does not necessarily favour the established notion of linearity. Nor does it favour the notion of processuality or chronology of history as such. Rather, it promotes the deferral, disfigurement, and disruption of any linear thinking “ad infinitum,” as Benjamin writes in the famous Convoluted N on epistemology of the *Arcades Project*, “until the entire past is brought into the present in a historical apocatastasis.”⁸

Therefore, Benjamin’s use of constellation as a method or as an “epistemological principle”⁹ is in no way meant metaphorically. Rather, constellation *is* Benjamin’s method of reading, writing and philosophising. It is true that Benjamin “pioneered modes of critical reading,”¹⁰ such as the constellation, in which past and present intersect and in which a new, critical insight emerges in a momentary instance. This critical insight, for Benjamin, means to “grasp the constellation”—an instantaneous act that has tremendous consequences for our perception of time: it leads to a “justification” and “foundation” of our concept of the present as now-time (*Jetztzeit*).¹¹ It is, therefore, an insight that exceeds and supplements the

concept of constellation, by working through it, to paraphrase Adorno's famous postulate in his *Negative Dialectics*.¹² In this sense, tracing constellations in and with Walter Benjamin is in itself both a historical task, and a critical endeavour.

Benjamin's insistence on not "keeping step" with the rhythm of the present and the contemporary, and his move to disfigure it, and hence to form new "critical constellations" whenever possible, becomes in this volume the point of departure for discussing a topic more than relevant to the current state of the Humanities. The following contributions trace critical and constellatory thinking, reading, and writing, in linking Benjamin's philosophical, cultural, and literary observations to the reflections of other prominent thinkers, such as Theodor W. Adorno, Sigmund Freud, or Gottfried E. Leibniz, as well as writers or poets, such as W. G. Sebald, Franz Kafka, or Carlos Martínez Rivas. Thus, they cover wide-ranging, diverse fields of knowledge—for instance, quantum physics, postcolonial studies, natural philosophy, psychoanalysis, Marxism, film theory, and the arts—, hence taking a decidedly interdisciplinary point of view. And all contributions—in one way or another—provide us with enlightening insights into the manifold possibilities of becoming aware of the "critical constellations" in Benjamin's work and beyond, insofar as they themselves operate according to a constellatory logic.

Finally, thinking *in* constellations with Walter Benjamin consists in "collecting and juxtaposing apparently disparate ideas and concepts for the purpose of mutual illumination."¹³ Hence, thinking (in) constellations, in the last instance, might lead us towards a new, critical, understanding of the task of the Humanities today.

The Starry Skies of Philosophy: Physics and Psychoanalysis

The two contributions in the opening section both operate in-between academic disciplines in order to clarify Benjamin's use of both the concept and the *praxis* of constellation. In so doing, both papers become a sort of constellation both in themselves and with each other, revealing surprising insights into the nature of textual reading in Benjamin, and its relation to other fields of knowledge, such as philosophy, physics or psychoanalysis.

ERIC KLIGERMAN focuses on a specific constellation between literature, natural science, and philosophy of history: his paper examines how Benjamin's philosophy of history turns to the concepts of quantum thought. Benjamin finds in the quantum an epistemic model that challenges classical concepts of time, space, and causality associated with

Newtonian physics, which also influenced Kantian philosophy. By developing the undercurrents that Benjamin discerns between quantum physics and Kafka, Kligerman reveals how quantum thought provides Benjamin with the necessary elements to reconceptualise such classical concepts of time, space, and causality that have governed the writing of history, focusing on Benjamin's analysis of the Kafkan figure "Odradek."

ADAM LIPSZYC discusses Benjamin in constellation with Freudian psychoanalysis: he brings together Benjamin's ideas of constellation and name on the one hand, and Freud's ideas concerning the text of the dream and the nature of the drive on the other. He argues that if Freud's theory of the drive and of dreams is coupled with Benjamin's theory of constellation and the name, then the Benjaminian name can be understood as the locus of desire appearing as the navel of the dream decomposed into a constellation in the process of critical reading.

A Firmament of Ideas: Language and Perception

The *Epistemo-Critical Prologue* to Benjamin's *Habilitation* thesis on the German baroque mourning play, the so-called *Trauerspiel* book, is the point of departure for the two papers in this section dealing with the specifically philosophical implications of Benjamin's notion of constellation in his thinking on language and perception. Both papers in this section therefore focus on Benjamin's doctrine of ideas and its relation to constellations.

In the *Prologue*, Benjamin argues that ideas are to phenomena as constellations are to stars, or that ideas represent the phenomena by determining the nexus of their relations. PAULA SCHWEBEL's contribution aims to give a decidedly philosophical interpretation of those contentions in Benjamin's figure of the constellation. She argues that Benjamin's analogy draws on a Leibnizian notion of expression, and she elucidates the connections between Benjamin's "monadic" theory of ideas and the implicit "expressionism" underlying his notion of constellations. More specifically, she understands Benjamin's ideas not as Platonic or Kantian, but rather as Leibnizian monads, and hence, she argues for a Leibnizian interpretation of the constellation as an idea's phenomenal expression, in Leibniz's sense of this term.

In the *Prologue*, Benjamin also posits that ideas are essentially linguistic in nature. TOM VANDEPUTTE's text departs from the Benjaminian contention of the linguistic nature of ideas, which he understands as a challenge to philosophers to read texts properly in order to represent their ideas, and he then traces a theory of reading in Benjamin's early writings

on language until the *Trauerspiel* book. Benjamin himself connects the element of language, such as the word, with astronomical images, such as the sun, and Vandeputte underlines in his close reading how *Deutung* and *Bedeutbarkeit* form a theory of interpretation that resembles Benjamin's constellatory notion of the idea in the *Prologue*.

Capitalism's Mourning Play and the Rags of History

For Benjamin, historical action takes place in the form of a constellation. Since historical time, for Benjamin, is not conceived of in a linear fashion, but in the constellation of things past and present, the fleeting moments of this constellation reveal, in an instant of insight, a momentary call to historical (and political) action. The two papers in the third section address the question of historical time inherent in Benjamin's notion of constellation from the point of view of his later writings, mostly the *Arcades Project*, and the so-called Baudelaire book, revealing a specific poetics prevalent in Benjamin's writings.

Departing from the (Kantian) notion of "historical signs" and the notions of legibility and signification connected with it, YANIK AVILA's paper goes back to a well-known note in the *Arcades Project* about the structure of dialectical images, where the "death of intention" coincides with real historical time, indicating a focal point within the problematic of natural history. Drawing upon Benjamin's elaboration of this problematic, Adorno in his essay *The Idea of Natural History* points out that the dialectical interlacing of the philosophical concepts of nature and history in Benjamin's thought is to be conceived of not as a "synthesis of natural and historical methods but rather as a change of perspective." Avila's paper examines the poetological consequences of this "change of perspective". Coming from a Marxian perspective, he concentrates specifically on the context of Benjamin's constellation of baroque allegory with the modern commodity structure, and insists on the connection between allegory and *praxis*, in "making history".

The Marxian context, and especially Marx's notion of the *Lumpenproletariat*, is equally decisive for SAEIN PARK's contribution. Departing from a critique of the prevalent notion of "collective identity" in the Humanities today, she constellates collecting-related terms in the *Epistemo-Critical Prologue* from the early 1920s with Benjamin's depictions of 19th century rag collectors in the *Arcades* and the Baudelaire material from the late 1930s. Her contribution therefore is a constellation in a two-fold sense: for one, she reads two work phases of Benjamin's together (and together with Marx), in order to enhance their mutual

enlightenment, and on the other hand, she is concerned with the notion of constellation as a mode of collecting and collectivity, and their surprising connection with agriculture. Her constellatory approach demonstrates how Benjamin's constellation of archival material, comments and fragments surrounding the figure of the rag collector constitute a poetics that potentially critiques political-philosophical theories of collectivity, as prevalent in contemporary discourse.

Directing Constellations: Film and Art

Thinking (in) constellations with Walter Benjamin also implies to take his analyses of mass media and the modern urban landscape of his lifetime seriously. Elements of mass culture, such as movies or panoramas, form the primal scene of constellatory practices in Benjamin's oeuvre. This is what the two contributions in the fourth section demonstrate.

BENJAMIN BREWER argues for an understanding of the constellation in Benjamin as a "distracted image:" an image in which each point of the constellation, including the one from which one is attempting to view the constellation, is scattered and dispersed. Following Benjamin's considerations in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* and related texts, Brewer traces the connection between the decline of the aura, distraction and experience in Benjamin's writings on film and other mass cultural phenomena, and concludes with an analysis of historical time and critical action: if the constellation—as demonstrated in his analysis of movies—is always a bringing-together, a standing-in a particular historical moment, then it is only on the basis of this scattering that the task of Benjamin's historical materialist—the recognition and reading of such constellations—is made urgent or even necessary.

CARLO SALZANI's paper examines a concrete example of Benjamin's readings of contemporary mass culture: namely, his preoccupation with Mickey Mouse, the controversial American cartoon mouse hero, in the 1930s. It is little known that Benjamin collected newspaper clippings about Disney and Mickey Mouse throughout the 1930s, that demonstrate his careful attention towards the mass cultural phenomena of his lifetime. Within the context of capitalist modernity, Benjamin's writings on Mickey Mouse reveal what Salzani calls a "posthuman constellation," namely a form of imagination that does not rest on experience alone, and a form of being in which clear-cut demarcations, such as the human-animal divide, are loosened.

Reading (in) Constellations

The fifth and final section of this volume focuses on the aspect of reading in Benjamin's notion of constellation, which has become apparent as the red thread running through the different academic disciplines that are concerned with Benjamin's notion of constellation. However, reading is here understood in a more Benjaminian sense: as reading images as well as texts.

JAVIER PADILLA's contribution opens up a constellation towards the post-colonial discourse on art: Padilla attempts to inscribe Benjamin's theories of modernity in the *Arcades Project* into the accelerated processes of modernisation which took place in the "Third World" during the last decades of the 20th century. By reading photographs by Susan Meiselas and Alberto Trobat, and the poetry of the Nicaraguan poet Carlos Martínez Rivas in constellation with Benjamin and Baudelaire, his essay works through the logic of temporal and spatial superimposition, and elaborates a poetics of exclusion as a tentative discourse on the utopian potential of the photographic image. He argues that as poets, Baudelaire and Martínez Rivas foreground this process of social and poetic superimposition, and produce lyrical traces which recycle and re-inscribe—however tenuously—the gaze of the excluded.

Along the lines of including the excluded, NIKOLAI PREUSCHOFF's paper follows one of the most important, but yet not entirely researched constellations in German post-war literature: W. G. Sebald's reading of the works of Walter Benjamin. Like Benjamin, Sebald connects past and present, documentary and fiction, and different genres and media, like photography and film, in his prose fiction. Preuschoff analyses this interrelation of those two relations as a constellation in itself. Specifically, he demonstrates how Benjamin's unorthodox, poetic form of philosophising, and his "thinking in extremes," is most significant for Sebald's prose and poetry, resulting in a writing style that Preuschoff calls "writing *with* Walter Benjamin."

*

We have chosen to combine the contributions in such a way that they themselves would function as a constellation and reveal new insights by looking at things from a different angle. Thus, we hope, the various contributions demonstrate how the critical potential of constellation can provide a way of thinking, reading, and writing in many fields and disciplines within the Humanities today.

The idea and the initial impulse for this collection of essays on Walter Benjamin goes back to a seminar at the American Comparative Literature Association's Annual Meeting at the University of Toronto in 2013 where we co-chaired a seminar called *Benjamin's Constellations*. The lively discussions and the illuminating convergences—as well as the striking differences—between each of the very divergent interdisciplinary presentations gave rise to the idea of publishing its proceedings. However, as constellations do, things changed—and therefore, some of the papers presented in this volume were actually talks at the 2013 ACLA seminar, while other contributions were added at a later point to form a new constellatory setting. We would like to thank all authors of our volume for their wonderful and thought-provoking contributions.

Nassima Sahraoui, Caroline Sauter
May 2018

Notes

¹ For examples from Walter Benjamin studies, see, for instance, Graeme Gilloch's *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), James McFarland's *Constellation: Friedrich Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin in the Now-Time of History* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012); or Angeliki Spiropoulou's *Virginia Woolf, Modernity, and History: Constellations with Walter Benjamin* (Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), as well as, among others, Carla Milani Dimiã, "Women as Constellation in Walter Benjamin's Aesthetics," *Estetyka y Krytyka* 41:2 (2016): 119-134; Jack Wong, "Remapping the Constellation of Walter Benjamin's Allegorical Method," *American, British and Canadian Studies* 25:1 (2015): 37-59; Bettine Menke, "Ornament, Constellation, Flurries," in *Benjamin's Ghosts: Interventions in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*, edited by Gerhard Richter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 260-276; or Carlo Salzani, *Constellations of Reading. Walter Benjamin in Figures of Actuality* (Oxford/New York: Peter Lang 2008)

² Benjamin, *Origin*, 34; cp. Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, GS I.1, 215.

³ "This state of unrest refers to the demand on the researcher to abandon the tranquil contemplative attitude toward the subject in order to become conscious of the critical constellation in which precisely this fragment of the past finds itself in exactly this presence." (Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian," SW 3, 262) Cf. Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs, der Sammler und der Historiker," GS II.2, 467-468.

⁴ An overview about very old discussion about how to "save the phenomena"—a *terminus technicus* in epistemology and the histories of philosophy and sciences for the Greek σώζειν τὰ φαινόμενα—can be found in Pierre Hadot's study *The Veil*

of Isis: An Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature, translated by Michael Chase (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2002), 162-165.

⁵ Benjamin, *Origin*, 34; cp. *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, GS I.1, 214.

⁶ For the aesthetic aspect, see Dimiã, "Women as Constellation," 131f.; and for the aspect of philosophy of history, see McFarland, *Constellation: Friedrich Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin*, 4f.; Spiropoulou, *Constellations with Walter Benjamin*, esp. 8f.

⁷ See Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," SW 4, 392.

⁸ Benjamin, *AP*, 459; cp. Benjamin, *Passagen-Werk*, GS V.1 (N1a, 3).

⁹ Dimiã, "Women as Constellation," 120.

¹⁰ Gilloch, *Critical Constellations*, 6.

¹¹ Benjamin, "Addendum to *On the Concept of History*," GS I.2, 704; SW 4, 397.

¹² Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, translated by E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge 1973), 13-15.

¹³ Gilloch, *Critical Constellations*, 235.

I

THE STARRY SKIES OF PHILOSOPHY: PHYSICS AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

FROM KANT'S STARRY SKIES TO KAFKA'S ODRADEK: WALTER BENJAMIN AND THE QUANTUM OF HISTORY

ERIC KLIGERMAN

In his pithy description of the trajectory of modern physics, Niels Bohr, one of the fathers of quantum thought, employs the structure of a Talmudic parable to convey its various stages of development:

A young rabbinical student went to hear three lectures by a famous rabbi. Afterwards he told his friends: The first talk was brilliant, clear and simple. I understood every word. The second was even better, deep and subtle. I didn't understand much, but the rabbi understood all of it. The third was by far the finest, a great and unforgettable experience. I understood nothing and the rabbi didn't understand much either.¹

Moving in his analogy from Newtonian physics to Einstein's relativity theory, Bohr ends with the mystifying thoughts of quantum physics. Despite being an unforgettable experience, the student fails to grasp the counter-intuitive ideas behind the quantum realm. While Bohr strove to find the proper language to articulate the meaning behind its enigmas, Albert Einstein repeatedly scoffed at what he derided as an incomplete field. Comparing quantum mechanics to Talmudic thought, yet in a pejorative manner, Einstein critiqued Bohr's atomic theory, and described Bohr as a "Talmudic philosopher who doesn't give a hoot for reality."² Einstein wrote many terse statements repudiating the apparent success of quantum physics, most famously arguing, "God does not play dice." According to Einstein, physics "should represent a reality in time and space, free from spooky action at a distance."³ With this three-pronged critique of the quantum—a Talmudic-like dice game with spooky results—Einstein rejects how quantum physics subverts an objective image within the quantum system through the dismissal of the fundamental laws of time, space and causality.

Similar to how both physicists use Talmudic analogies to approach quantum thought's mysterious concepts, Walter Benjamin also forms a link between the Talmud and quantum physics by expounding on how

these paths cross in Franz Kafka's literary universe. In the following study, I examine some of the fundamental concepts of quantum physics in relation to Benjamin's philosophy of history and his analyses of Kafka, which he was developing alongside one another throughout the 1930s. First, I explore how Benjamin, during the outbreak of the First World War, focuses on the limits of Newtonian physics in his critique of Kant's model of experience. The classical structures of time and space, upon which Kant develops his epistemic model, undergo radical transformations in light of the discoveries of modern physics and the war's violent shocks.

Afterwards, I show how Benjamin's "Copernican turn of remembrance" eclipses the narrative of historical progress that had been inscribed upon the Enlightenment's constellations.⁴ Benjamin both includes and dismantles Kant's astral metaphor regarding "*the starry skies above and the moral law inside me.*"⁵ Kant's turn to the cosmos figures prominently throughout his writings and materialises in his earliest work on cosmogony through his critiques of epistemology, ethics and aesthetics. Ultimately, these stars—signifying rationality, morality and the sublime—appear in his later writings; astral imagery adorns Kant's narrative linking reason and progress in his philosophy of history.

Benjamin, Kant and Quantum Thought

Challenging Kant as the touchstone to studies on reason, Benjamin shatters Kant's totem-like status by turning to Kafka. Abandoning the sublime heights of Kant's heliotropes, Benjamin supplants these stars with the disfigured and hybrid creatures that inhabit Kafka's literature, such as Gregor Samsa, the Hunter Gracchus, Red Peter and, central to my analysis, Odradek. In turn, Benjamin associates these figures with a quantum strangeness. Benjamin finds in Kafka's poetics an epistemology that challenges the concepts of time, space and causality associated with Newtonian physics, which had governed Kant's notions of reason and historical progress. As Benjamin rejects the pre-determined conception of how history progresses toward a rational future, he replaces 19th century paradigms of history with models based on discontinuity and catastrophe.

I propose to read Benjamin as a quantum physicist of history, who employs Kafka's parables as ready-made thought experiments that help him illumine a theory of history that responds to modernity's shocks.⁶ Challenging the prevalent narratives of 19th century historiography that purport to show how Western culture's trajectory is marked by progress, Benjamin departs from Kant's moral law as the cornerstone to historical progress and declares that Kafka is the new "Categorical Imperative."⁷

Benjamin's use of the following phrases and motifs in his *Arcades Project* and Kafka study—"the past casts a light," "flashing up," "blasting out of continuity," "interference," "ultraviolet light," "atomic fission," "superposition," "incomprehension," "complementarity," and the image of a sealed box that produces a mixture of states—resonate with imagery from quantum physics. In the interplay between quantum thought and Kafka's literature, Benjamin sketches the template to his philosophy of history, which displaces not only positivistic historicism and classical determinism, but also the metaphoric implications behind Kant's stars that point to the moral law, sublimity and historical progress.

Just as the modern physicist attempts to re-think the fundamental laws of physics in relation to discoveries within the microcosmic world, Benjamin challenges his readership to re-conceptualise the task of the historian in light of the catastrophic disruptions of the early 20th century associated with the First World War, technological changes, the modern cityscape and fascism's growing terror. Like our encounter with the quantum's unfathomable world, modernity's shocks impact our ability to articulate and comprehend these moments of historical disruption. Since the classical modes of understanding and representation provide insufficient recourse to our engagement with the past's relation to the present, Benjamin gleans within the quantum sphere the necessary elements to reconceptualise the classical structures of time, space and causality that had governed the 19th century historiographic model.

In particular, Benjamin gravitates to the critiques of language and modes of representation that are central to quantum thought. The following passage from the physicist Leopold Infeld conveys how the inscrutable nature behind the quantum world is linked to the linguistic restrictions that anchored the debates surrounding quantum phenomena:

But what is light really? Is it a wave or a shower of photons? There seems no likelihood for forming a consistent description of the phenomena of light by a choice of only one of the two languages [...]. We have two contradictory pictures of reality; separately neither of them fully explains the phenomena of light, but together they do.⁸

While we can switch back and forth between the two perspectives of whether light is a wave or particle, we cannot simultaneously occupy these two viewpoints. Nonetheless, light *is* both a wave and particle. In contradistinction to Newtonian physics, an objective description of subatomic phenomena is incompatible within the quantum realm: our depiction of reality wavers between two possible modes of representation. Such concepts as space-time location (the particle's position) and energy-

momentum (the particle's trajectory), key elements in the unified picture from classical physics, cannot be synthesised simultaneously into a clear picture in quantum mechanics.

"When it comes to atoms," Bohr writes, "the language that must be used is the language of poetry [...]. Everything we call real is made of things that cannot be regarded as real."⁹ In order to find an adequate form of expression for the quantum, Bohr suggests that we turn to fields outside of science to see how such thinkers as Buddha and Laotse engaged with epistemic quandaries pertaining to reality. Moving away from the language of physics, Bohr's words approach mysticism as he describes how,

[w]e must in fact turn to quite other branches of science, such as psychology, or even to that kind of epistemological problems with which already thinkers like Buddha and Laotse have been confronted [...]. Everything we call real is made of things that cannot be regarded as real.¹⁰

Bohr's references to Talmudic thought and Eastern philosophy are reminiscent of how Benjamin interprets Kafka's *Great Wall of China*, where he describes the meeting in "the field of force between Torah and Tao." Comparing the interplay between Jewish and Eastern thoughts in Kafka's literature to atomic phenomena (*Kräftefeld*), Benjamin juxtaposes *Das Talmuddorf* to Laotse.¹¹

After examining his letter exchange with Gershom Scholem from June 11, 1938, where Benjamin conjoins quantum physics and Kafka's literature by invoking Werner Heisenberg's uncertainty principle and Bohr's complementarity theory, my analysis of Benjamin, Kafka and modern physics will centre on one of Kafka's most quantum-like figures, Odradek, whom Kafka describes in *Die Sorge des Hausvaters (Cares of a Family Man)* as a "star-like spool of thread."¹² In his notes to the 1935 exposé on the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin includes Odradek under the title of the "dialectical schemata" for his study of history.¹³ If, as I suggest, Odradek both invokes quantum behaviour and is a template for Benjamin's historical method, then I will demonstrate how Benjamin's model of history bears the hallmarks of quantum physics.¹⁴ Attempting to formulate a new methodology for the study of history that rejects both a deterministic representation of events and narratives of progress, Benjamin finds the necessary elements in the crossing of Kafka and quantum thought to rethink such classical notions as the structure of time, space, experience and causality that governed the writing of history throughout the 19th century.

Kant and The Ethical Side of History

As the First World War was decimating Europe, Benjamin rebuffed Kant's conception of history in a 1917 letter to Gershom Scholem, claiming that it failed to disclose, "the ethical side of history."¹⁵ In *On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy* (1918), Benjamin postpones his analysis of the relation between Kant and history. Instead, he centres his critique on Kant's notion of experience by probing how Kantian epistemology relied on the tenets of classical physics. Before he can dismantle Kant's conceptualisation of history, Benjamin explores the components behind the evolving concept of experience within the context of modern science.

In his re-evaluation of Kant's notions of empirical reality and experience, Benjamin focuses on Kant's reliance on Newtonian physics:

Kant wanted to take the principles of experience from the sciences, especially mathematical physics, and yet from the very beginning, and even in the *Critique of Reason*, experience itself and unto itself was never identical with the object realm of that science [...]. The very fact that Kant was able to commence his immense work under *the constellation of the Enlightenment* indicates that his work was undertaken on the basis of an experience virtually reduced to a nadir, to a minimum of significance.¹⁶

According to Kant, whenever an event is observed in time and space, we can intuit that it originates from a preceding event. But while the law of causality along with the notions of time and space are the cornerstones to both classical physics and Kantian metaphysics, these *a priori* concepts of supposed absolute truths collapse in relation to modern physics. By critiquing the Newtonian facets behind Kant's idea of experience, Benjamin's aim is not to dismiss categorically a scientific conception of the world. Rather, wishing to show that our perspective of modern experience is incomplete, Benjamin tries to re-configure an understanding of time and space so that he can access these new experiences within modernity. Abandoning the rigidity of Kant's spatial-temporal categories, Benjamin writes, "[i]t is a question of finding, on the basis of Kantian typology this future metaphysics, *this higher experience*."¹⁷ Benjamin describes how Kant's idea of experience is a nadir, for it is fixed to the Enlightenment's epistemic principles, specifically Newton's categories of space and time, which preclude for Benjamin not just theological and mystical experiences, but also the shocks associated with war, the modern cityscape and technology.

Before returning to Benjamin's concluding thoughts in *On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy*, I will examine the significance of

his term “constellation of the Enlightenment” in relation to Kant. In an interesting turn of phrase Benjamin inverts the heights of the constellation—a term that will play a key role throughout his oeuvre—into a *Nullpunkt* (nadir).¹⁸ In his critiques of German Idealism, Benjamin references several times Kant’s emblematic starry skies. Within the context of German philosophy, there is perhaps no passage more renowned than the one that appears at the end of Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason*, where he writes: “Two things fill the heart with renewed and increasing awe and reverence the more often and the more steadily that they are meditated on: the starry skies above me and the moral law inside me.”¹⁹ Kant’s astral metaphor projects a scene of ethical transcendence that is situated not in the heavens above, but is located within the depths of the subject. As the expanse of nature threatens to annihilate the subject, she avoids a self-eradication by turning inward to the moral law and is thus elevated by the faculty of reason. In his *Critique of Judgment* Kant will name this caesura between the senses and the expanding imagination “the sublime.”²⁰ Although we cannot fully grasp the magnitude of the heavens through sensory apprehension, the fear of annihilation turns to pleasure as we behold the sublimity coming from within ourselves through our “supersensible vocation,” that is, from the moral law.²¹

Kant re-inscribes these stars and notion of progress in his concluding studies on the philosophy of history. Again, these stars shed light on how the unfolding of history is a narrative of progress that results in the subject’s moral transcendence. In *Is the Human Race Progressing?*, Kant asks if we could approach historical events as if they were constellations whose signs would augur a narrative of moral progress.²² Kant now locates the sublime affect of awe and wonder not within our disrupted experience with the stars, but within history, specifically the French Revolution. However, Kant is not interested in the event itself, but instead investigates the effects it has on those who witness the revolution from afar. Questioning whether one can locate a moral character of humanity by examining the reactions of spectators to paradigm shifts in history, Kant intuits a moral disposition in those who view the revolution from a distance. The historical witness is overcome with awe, enthusiasm and empathy as the revolution’s participants display their yearnings for freedom and desire to establish a new system of law. By studying the effects that the revolution had on its non-participants, Kant uncovers the very signs that predict a movement toward progress in his analysis of history.

Contrary to the promise inscribed in the Enlightenment’s cosmos, Benjamin juxtaposes his multiple references to Kant’s stars to the

disruption of experience in modernity, which has not led to an age of reason within history, but rather to catastrophic violence. At the end of *One-Way Street* (1927) and *Theories of German Fascism* (1930), Benjamin positions Kant's stars alongside the horrors of The First World War. In the final stop of *One-Way Street*, Benjamin concludes with his image of the planetarium (*Zum Planetarium*) in order to connote the supposed path of progress. Yet despite this closing image, Benjamin describes a world that has been disenchanted through scientific discoveries and political violence.

The planetarium's technological developments have not only demystified the heavens; the lost mystical encounter with the cosmos is also replaced with an extreme earthly violence that discloses the Enlightenment's illusion of progress. Benjamin warns us: "It is the dangerous error of modern men to regard this experience as unimportant and avoidable, and to consign it to the individual as the poetic rapture of starry nights."²³ In this oblique reference to Kant, modernity replaces the once mystical experience with the stars with a desire to master nature through technology. Unlike the ancient Greeks and Jews, who shared an intimate relation with the stars that he labels "a cosmic experience (*Erfahrung*)," Benjamin demarcates a schism between how the ancient and modern worlds encounter the cosmos.²⁴ While the relation of the ancients to the stars begins with an ecstatic union with the heavens, this experience fades in modernity. The ancient "*Lehre*" (doctrine)—Benjamin conjoins Hillel's Jewish doctrine with the Greeks—undergoes dissolution.²⁵ As the individual's abilities to measure and probe deeper into the mysteries of the heavens expand, the mystical and theological experiences diminish. The starry skies no longer compel the spectator to turn inward to the moral law, but instead Benjamin discerns our self-destructive drive to control the natural world through technology.

A few years later in his study on Ernst Jünger's literature, Benjamin develops his analysis of the evacuation of meaning behind Kant's stars in relation to the war. Benjamin writes:

As far as it was possible to look beyond the edge of the trench, the surroundings had become the terrain of German Idealism itself, every shell crater a problem, every wire entanglement an antinomy, every barb a definition, each explosion an axiom, and the sky overhead during the day was the cosmic inside of the steel helmet, at night the moral law above you.²⁶

As the Enlightenment's promises collapse on the battlefields, modern warfare converts the landscape into a metaphysical problem. Opening up a

new space of writing, Kant's stars are now violently carved into the landscape through technology's disastrous effects. In Benjamin's inverted reading of the interplay between heaven and earth, the battlefield becomes the new theoretical space of moral reflection; our contemplation of stars shifts to shell craters and explosions. Benjamin's Copernican turn reverses Kant's statement about the "starry skies above and the moral law within." No longer conjoined to this inward space of reason, but now observed in the skies etched with the synthetic stellar projections of artillery, the moral law is replaced by the sway that technological violence has over the human condition and earthly domain.

Keeping in mind Benjamin's references to doctrine (*Lehre*), Kantian thought and modern experience in the aftermath of the First World War, I now return to the end of *On the Programme to the Coming Philosophy*, where Benjamin concludes his analysis of a new metaphysics of experience by reflecting on the interplay between knowledge, language and doctrine. Benjamin insists that the new experience should be found,

[B]y relating knowledge to language [...] that all philosophical knowledge *has its unique expression in language* [...]. The demand upon the philosophy of the future can finally be put in these words: to create on the basis of the Kantian system a concept of knowledge to which a concept of experience corresponds, *of which the knowledge is the doctrine.*²⁷

Although he does not explicitly mention the war, Benjamin's struggles with how the concepts of experience and knowledge are radically altered in light of the shocks of modern warfare, which are surely influencing his thoughts on the transformation of representing experience.²⁸ Just as he reconfigures Kant's stars in the above passage, Benjamin also uses Kantian concepts (antinomy, axiom and moral law) to underscore how these very terms cannot withstand the seismic shifts of catastrophic history. The diminishing of experience and knowledge within modernity must correspond to a new doctrine of knowledge, one that is itself based on a unique model of signification. In his search for a new doctrine, we recall how the ancient doctrine attached to the stars dissolved in *Zum Planetarium*, where its loss was associated with Copernicus' discoveries, Kant's philosophy, and the effects of war and technology on experience. Our epistemic relation to how we experience a transforming reality necessitates a new form of representation.

Benjamin locates his linguistic mode of expression for both this higher experience and ethical side of history in Kafka's parabolic language. If, as Bertrand Russell claims, Einstein's physics requires "a change in our imaginative picture of the world," Kafka's universe is a supplement to the

paradigm shifts unfolding within modernity.²⁹ The spatial-temporal shifts in modern physics find a correspondence in Kafka's poetics, and Benjamin writes in his notes, "*Kafkas Aufzeichnungen stehen zur geschichtlichen Erfahrung wie die nichteuklidische Geometrie zur empirischen.*"³⁰ ("Kafka's sketches adhere to the historical experience like non-Euclidean geometry adheres to the empirical.") As Newton's rigid model of the universe was being replaced with one that was elastic and subject to distortions of time and the curving of space, the reliance on Euclidean space begins to unravel within this new paradigm. Similar to how Einstein describes measuring rods contracting and clocks decelerating as we near light speed, Kafka dismisses Newton's picture of absolute time and space, and constructs a non-Euclidian poetics that re-configures the space-time relation. Challenging his readers to enter this new realm of signification, Kafka provides Benjamin with the very interplay between experience, language and doctrine that he sought in the conclusion of *On the Programme to the Coming Philosophy*.

Kafka's Quantum World

In 1938, as he was constructing a philosophy of history in his *Arcades Project*, Benjamin was also engaged in a letter exchange with Gershom Scholem on Kafka. Juxtaposing Kafka with allusions to classical and modern physics, Benjamin describes in his 11th June letter how Kafka's literature operates like the two points of an ellipse: the mystical experience from Jewish *kabbalah* is juxtaposed to the experience of the modern city-dweller.³¹ A correspondence opens up with Benjamin's visit to the planetarium in *One-Way Street*, where the loss of the mystical experience attributed to the ancients is replaced by the shocks of the modern metropolis and the battlefields of the First World War. With his clarification that "by the modern city dweller I also mean the modern physicist,"³² Benjamin discerns a parallel between the city's shocks and the new conceptual terrain of quantum physics. Echoing the philosophy of history that he was formulating in the *Arcades*, Benjamin describes how a new world of experience opens up in the shocks of the city, in theoretical physics and in military technology.³³

In addition to containing references to the classical laws of physics from Kepler and Newton as revealed in his use of such terms as "ellipse" and "foci," Benjamin also employs concepts from modern physics, including allusions to Einstein's relativity theory, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle and Bohr's concept of complementarity. In a fascinating part of the letter Benjamin includes a passage from the British astronomer Arthur

Eddington. Although the passage begins with images from cosmology, Eddington eventually moves into the microcosmic realm of the material world as he describes the nature of subatomic particles. Illustrating a scene filled with spatial anxiety attributed to the laws of classical physics, relativity theory and quantum mechanics, Eddington depicts how a physicist crosses a threshold into a room: "I am standing on the threshold about to enter a room. It is a complicated business."³⁴ He goes on to describe complex processes from classical and modern physics, including the speed of the earth's rotation around the sun and the atomic particles that comprise the floors we step across. In short, Eddington transforms the crossing of a doorway into a mystical experience.

Referring to Eddington's passage, Benjamin writes, "In all of literature I know no passage which has such a Kafka gesture."³⁵ In addition to employing such Kafkaesque imagery and themes as insects, law and faith, Benjamin is drawn to the space around which these elements converge: the anxiety of crossing a threshold. He hears in this fear-inducing excerpt on traversing the doorway—one that Eddington reduces to a microscopic world of flies—the key spatial trope from both Kafka's literature and Benjamin's *Arcades*.³⁶ We read: "The plank has no solidity of substance. To step on it is like stepping on a swarm of flies. Shall I not slip through? No, if I make the venture one of the flies hits me and gives a boost up again; I fall again and am knocked upwards by another fly; and so on."³⁷ As the world of atoms metamorphoses into something creaturely, Benjamin also discerns echoes with what unfolds in Kafka's parable *Before the Law*. Like the man from the country who is caught between the old world from where he travelled and the law's new *topos*, the physicist inhabits an anxiety-infused space between classical and modern laws of physics. Upon the threshold, we encounter limits to our understanding and ability to represent the new experience through ordinary discourse. Eddington turns to parabolic language to disclose the mystery behind nature's inscrutable laws.

The first implicit reference Benjamin employs from quantum physics occurs right after the conclusion of the Kafkaesque passage. Writing how he hears in each passage "this physical aporia [*physikalischen Aporie*] with sentences from Kafka's prose pieces,"³⁸ Benjamin describes how Eddington and Kafka's *Sätze* (meaning both formula and sentence) are the most "incomprehensible" (*unverständlichsten*). By placing in quotes "incomprehensible," Benjamin gestures to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, also known as *die Heisenbergsche Unschärferelation* and *die Unbestimmtheitsrelation*, which probes quantum thought's primary riddle: is light a wave or a shower of photons? Heisenberg describes the quantum