

ESTHER LESLIE

*Wheels, Suitcases, Angels: Kurt Schwitters  
and Walter Benjamin*

*Tearing*

Sometime in the 1940s Kurt Schwitters wrote a story titled “The Man in the Machine.”<sup>1</sup> It recounted an incident during his internment in Norway in May 1940, after three years of exile existence there. We shall assume that the I of the story is Schwitters himself, as at least elements of the details in the tale tally with his own biography. The story begins with a description of the state of affairs in Norway, whose southern part was occupied by the Germans. The Northerly town of Narvik had fallen under German control too. In the nearby municipality of Harstad, Polish, English, French and Norwegian troops were stationed, and Schwitters describes strangely painted war ships in the harbour, spreading their thick smoke across a once pretty town. When the sirens blared, the populace stayed on the streets to watch the aerial fights or the angry exchange of munitions between ships and fighter planes. Schwitters then tells of a German fish agent who left the port town of Narvik, when the Nazi Germans captured it, in April 1940, and settled in private quarters in Harstad, dragging his many suitcases behind him. When the English forces requisitioned houses for troops, two Norwegian women helped the fish agent to find accommodation in the town. He was friendly and quiet, but he was also proven to be a Nazi German spy, aided by his Norwegian friends. His secret was discovered eventually and he was taken south to prison in Kabelvåg. There the spy was detained with German refugees and Norwegian Nazi sympathisers. Among their number belonged one of his Norwegian helpers, with whom he had fallen in love.

Just around the time of the spy’s arrest, Schwitters arrived in Harstad with six other refugees and was housed in barracks. He was not imprisoned, but he and the other Germans had to behave carefully. The local populace were suspicious

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<sup>1</sup> Kurt Schwitters, *Die literarischen Werke: Prosa 1931-1948* (Cologne: Dumont, 1998), 260-265.

of all Germans and wondered about the activities they might undertake in a divided Norway, especially since the apparently ordinary German fish agent had turned out to be an enemy agent. In time, as the extent of the fish agent's espionage was discovered, he was placed in solitary confinement, and separated from his girlfriend. Schwitters and friends were by then living in a tourist hotel in Sortland and were treated well by the local people. Moving and being moved from place to place, and circumstance to circumstance, around a territory surrounded by sea, Schwitters might well have felt like a piece of flotsam or jetsam. Schwitters reflects on the ups and downs of exile – the dangers of escape, especially in wartime across seas, the mistrust of the host population, countered by the moments of joy when a sympathetic citizenry offers food and clothing or waves at the boats as the escapees bob along to a new life. In the hotel in Sortland the refugees almost forgot that they were refugees. A week of joy ended when some Norwegian refugees arrived from occupied Narvik, angered by the Nazi Germans' cruel treatment of them, as they had been forced to undertake hard labour.<sup>2</sup> Schwitters and friends were moved in a matter of moments from the pleasant hotel and taken to Kabelsvåg, to the town of the prison which held the fish agent. Schwitters and friends were holed up in a school for housekeepers and mechanics. At first they were not held behind wire, but rather had to stay inside of a line marked on the ground, behind which stood six soldiers from the Home Guard. A wire mesh fence soon appeared. To Schwitters's delight, there was a carpentry workshop there. There was plenty of wood and tools. And there was a circular saw, whose blade span swiftly. Schwitters tested the machine by cutting wood for burning. It did not cut cleanly but it chomped its way speedily through the wood. "Maschine bleibt eben Maschine," notes Schwitters—"A machine is always simply a machine."

One day thirteen internees from the prison were moved to the school, including the fish agent. His fellow inmates shunned him, and so he lived largely split from the group. He spoke few words anyway. One of his only sentences was: "It is very beautiful here." He lived alongside the internees quietly and neatly. He lined his ten or so suitcases up near his bed, notes Schwitters, like soldiers. One morning he and Schwitters exchanged a few words in the early morning.

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<sup>2</sup> Theodor Broch, the Mayor of Narvik published an account of the battles over Narvik in *Life* Magazine on 16 December 1940, providing rich details.

Schwitters went to the workshop to work on an abstract sculpture. Another carpenter was at work on the circular saw. The German spy stood behind Schwitters and watched him at work. “If I may ask, what exactly are you doing there?” he inquired politely. “I am making an abstract composition, what in Germany gets called degenerate art,” was the response. “I see,” he said. Schwitters returned to his work. Suddenly he felt something odd, a pressure and a deathly silence. He turned around to find the German spy convulsing, clutching the machine, leant back, blood spurting from his head in a high arc. Schwitters prised him from the machine, lay him down, and left him to seek help, while a puddle of blood seeped around him. No doctor would help him and Schwitters, sickened, went to his room, washed his hands and wiped the drops of blood from his suit. The police came and photographed the corpse from every angle. In the dormitory the ten soldier-like suitcases stood still in their rows. Schwitters was told to remain silent on the matter.

The story is gruesome. It is a few pages of rather sober, possibly autobiographical description.<sup>3</sup> It condenses general themes of the unevennesses of exile, the sudden wrenching from one existence to another, the arbitrary collations of people, extreme dramas in times of extremity. And there is something specific here. Schwitters evokes the politics of art, simply in the line he utters to the German spy before the spy kills himself. It is a line that tears one German from another. It is a line that marks the separation of one set of practices and ideological beliefs from another. The activity of art has become insistently, manifestly political for Schwitters and for the Nazis, and in this politicisation of the aesthetic, German is split from German. Perhaps the spy’s response—“*verstehe*,” “I see”—indicates an epiphanic recognition of this splitting. Wood is split, as is this workshop too, for it is a place of utilitarian making and of art making. Schwitters is in the workshop engaged in that with which he has long been engaged—making art. This activity, in his particular modern idiom, is considered deformed, and is condemned, vilified and banned in the artist’s homeland. There were several works by Schwitters included in the infamous

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<sup>3</sup> In Broch’s *Life Magazine* account, some corroboration of at least parts of the event is found: He refers to “a German fishing agent named Koehln, who had been sending secret radio messages from a small cottage outside of Narvik. When Koehln heard that we were also about to arrest his Norwegian girl, he committed suicide by placing his head beneath a whirling buzz saw in a local lumber mill.”

touring exhibition of “Entartete Kunst,” “Degenerate Art,” which opened in 1937, the year that Schwitters left for Norway. Special reference was made to Schwitters’s work in the hectoring exhibition catalogue.<sup>4</sup> He was mentioned, along with fellow abstractionists Jean Metzinger and Johannes Molzahn, in a section titled “Sheer Insanity.” This section described “the largest room in the exhibition,” which “contains a cross-section of the abortions produced by all the ‘isms’ thought up, promoted and peddled over the years by Flechtheim, Wollheim and their coh(en)orts.” The fuming art appreciator closes with this sentiment: “we can only choke back our fury that so decent a people as the Germans could ever have been so foully abused.”<sup>5</sup> A cross-section of art movements is presented by the National Socialist art commentator in order to bisect the German public. There are those who cleave to it still, and there are the right-thinkers, who will join in its ridicule.

In his story, Schwitters is in a workshop with machines and he is making art. Schwitters had long enjoyed machines. He had been happy to be among them in the First World War, when he was sent to a machine factory, instead of the front, in order to deploy his skills as a technical draftsman. Of this period he later wrote: “In the war I discovered my love for the wheel and recognized that machines are abstractions of the human spirit.”<sup>6</sup> The machine can be loved, like a person can be loved. The machine is, in a sense, born of the human spirit, that is to say, it emerges out of human intelligence, rather than representing the opposite, inhuman, non-spiritual principle, as some might argue. And yet it remains a machine. *Maschine bleibt eben Maschine.*

In “The Man in the Machine,” Schwitters is in a joinery, using machines. He holds a special regard for the great machine that is a wheel-shaped saw. He uses machines to make art, itself another abstraction of the human spirit. “A machine is always simply a machine.” It can be used to make art, even to make

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<sup>4</sup> The catalogue is reprinted in facsimile in Stephanie Barron’s *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Abrams, Los Angeles/New York, 1991.

<sup>5</sup> See Barron, *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (Los Angeles/New York: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Abrams, 1991), 380.

<sup>6</sup> Dorothea Dietrich, *The Collages of Kurt Schwitters* (Cambridge Cambridge University Press, 1993), 86.

degenerate art, or it can be used to kill. The machine is indifferent. When the German spy ran against the indifferent machine, which would chop its way through flesh as through wood, was he giving himself up to it? Was he making through himself the split that had split his country, and that he, as spy, had fostered, from abroad, through his espionage and which had brought about his splitting from the group of German refugees? The machine splits what is put before it. Indifference is itself indifferent, as concept, in that it might be a sign of a lack of interest, of not caring, or, it might mean something quite different, almost an opposite sense. The German word “Gleichgültig” makes it clearer than the English equivalent. *Gleichgültig* signifies a sense of equivalence, of non-hierarchical thinking. The machine’s indifference to whether it cuts a person or wood reinforces a fundamental axiom of Schwitters’s procedures. Any element of existence—might be shredded, torn apart, and, in having such action done to it, be redeployed. *Merz*, the core of his artistic practice and philosophy, is a fragment torn from *Kommerz*, notes Schwitters in 1927. The word *Merz* appeared on a shredded advertisement for the Kommerz und Privatbank.<sup>7</sup> Some splits harm, while others propose new configurations (and here the echo of “Schmerz,” pain should be heard in the word, as should too “ausmerzen,” to eliminate or annul). Some tears are mistakes, just as the body ripped on the saw is a mistake. But the paper or wood ripped by the artist is not. Or if it is a mistake, then it is the right type of mistake. As Schwitters put it in “My Art and My Life,” a late statement on his output:

This medium called you yourself will tell you to take absolutely the wrong material. That is very good, because only the wrong material used in the wrong way, will give the right picture, when you look at it from the right angle. Or the wrong angle.<sup>8</sup>

But it always remains a picture and one looked at, from an angle, by a viewer. Schwitters holds onto the sense of a realm of representation, of art, or, in his terminology, *Merz*. This realm is not the same as life or commerce, and therefore

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<sup>7</sup> Schwitters’s explanation is in an autobiographical text in an issue of *Merz*. See Kurt Schwitters, *Merz*, no. 20 (1927): 99-100. See Kurt Schwitters, *Die literarischen Werke: Manifeste und kritische Prosa* (Cologne: Dumont, 1998), 252.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 387.

it should not be confused with reality, as is all too easy to do when an artist—or a filmmaker or a photographer—fictionalises in a realistic mode. This is why Schwitters insists on abstraction, on composition, on the tonal qualities of his materials and not their literal meanings. A cheese wrapper or a bus ticket is not representing itself in the image. It is abstracted from itself. This is art or Merz as transformation. It is in itself a dramatisation of transformation. Slicing wrappers and tickets generates new and expanded values, if just for art. But slicing bodies does not.

### *Angels*

Angels are angels and aeroplanes are aeroplanes, though both have wings. Angels are abstractions and aeroplanes are machines, but both occupy the skies, or heavens. Schwitters tells tales of angels, such as one from the 1940s titled “What is Happiness.”<sup>9</sup> Angels, who are in fact the souls of good people, promenade in Heaven, like little white aeroplanes, dashing from flower to flower, their only aim to find and to spread happiness. One day a hopeful angel sets off to find out where happiness exists on Earth, as one of the other angels claims it does not exist there at all. The hopeful angel finds a world war in process. While it throws flowers onto the Earth, aeroplanes—which the angel believes to be motorised angels—throw down high explosive bombs and firebombs and then open fire on the hopeful angel. The only happiness the hopeful angel finds is the happiness of wounded soldiers in greeting death and, therefore, an exit from the human hell. The hopeful angel finds mass graves and burning hospitals, destroyed churches, hundreds of thousands of corpses, tanks on their way to destroy more bodies and soldiers who were “slaves to the idea” of a Fatherland. The angel tries to march with the soldiers but cannot keep up their regimented pace and disciplined self-negation. He lifts himself above the ranks, only to be bawled at by the commanding officers, which sets off a chain of abusive reaction down the ranks, resulting in the punishment of all the soldiers. “Happiness is certainly not to be found here,” observes the angel. Soldiers and angels are two opposite principles, like commerce and Merz. Yet, like Merz inside and ripped from *Kommerz*, soldiers and angels might be facets of the one thing, the human, just as technology splits itself into good machines

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<sup>9</sup> Kurt Schwitters, *Die literarischen Werke: Prosa 1931-1948* (Cologne: Dumont, 1998), 266-8.

and bad machines, machines that produce and machines that destroy, machines that make art and machines that kill men.

If word is of angels, especially German ones, then Walter Benjamin's angel—which is as much Paul Klee's—is likely soon to make an appearance. Paul Klee drew many angels, especially in the last two years of his life, which ended, like Benjamin's in 1940. They were described as forgetful, still female, ugly, poor, dubious, incomplete, child eaters, militant or birdlike. They might be strange hybrids of humans and machines. Sometimes they resembled aeroplanes, and, in their contortedness and entanglements, sometimes harked back to the crashed aeroplanes that it was Klee's job to photograph in the First World War.<sup>10</sup>

One of Benjamin's last pieces of writing, from 1939 or 1940, is called "On the Concept of History." In it he draws a word-picture based on one of Klee's early angel sketches, *Angelus Novus*, from 1920. Benjamin acquired the watercolour in 1921. The new angel, affixed above Benjamin's desk wherever he lived, fluttered through his life. It provided the name for a critical journal he wished to found. He wrote about it as example of the childlike but critical aesthetic at the core of the modernism he prized. The image is an emblem of an impulse to repair the damage wrought by history, by machine and men. Rubbish and rubble is what modernity's drive to reinvent and progress leaves behind. Here is the passage:

There is a painting by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile

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<sup>10</sup> For more on Klee and the angel/aeroplane theme, see O.K. Werckmeister, *The Making of Paul Klee's Career, 1911-1920*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1984, esp. pp. 100-5; 143-6; 237-42.

of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is *this* storm.<sup>11</sup>

The angel has perspective. From above he sees one massive terrible event, all interlinked, where we on the ground experience only nasty irrational event after nasty event. The storm that blows the angel away from this mounting wreckage and into the future is named by Benjamin the storm of progress. It is only so-called progress, or progress of all that is inhuman and deadly. It is a progress of the worst parts. The angel stares at the skyward-growing junk pile of debris, dreadful historical events, wasted lives, futile objects. It wants to “pick up the pieces.” The angel wants to gather up the refuse and the rubble, but the angel’s stance—his eyes are staring, his mouth is open—is one of impotence. Touch, intervention into the catastrophic unfurling is what he cannot achieve. Collecting the rubbish together, repairing it all, might—if it were to be achieved (and this is the rub) be the act that could re-foot everything, bring the dead back to life and allow a new beginning.

Would the angel like to rest awhile, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. If so, there must yet be a dialectical twist, for the old order—the one that makes war and exploitation possible—needs obliterating. Perhaps Schwitters’s rescue of debris and rubbish is such an angelic act of making whole the ruins, confined to the realm of art and abstraction, of course. Something complete—art—is made of the ruins, and yet that it is made of the ruins works back on the shattered whole, and asserts a new ground for art, or anti-art, or art on completely new terms, with new values, or better, not the old ones, which are tied up with monetary ones. As he put it in 1930, in a short autobiographical piece, “it is possible to scream using rubbish and that I did, by gluing and nailing it together.”<sup>12</sup> For something called peace had won again and Schwitters wanted war, though not the wrong sort of war, over things to which he was “indifferent,” but the right one. He was, he notes, “an artist of the storm,” a reference to Berlin’s Expressionist art movement, organised around Der Sturm gallery and Herwarth Walden’s expressionist journal, in which Schwitters published poems (335). These things over which wars were fought and towards which he felt

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<sup>11</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4: 1938-1940, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2003, pp. 392-3.

<sup>12</sup> Schwitters, *Manifeste und kritische Prosa*, 335.



indifferent became indifferent, lost, shattered in the course of history, according to Schwitters. It becomes a pile of rubbish. “Everything had broken down in any case and new things had to be made out of the shards” (335). The world is smashed up in war and technological expansion, and so Schwitters uses the debris to make art for this ruined world. This at least proposes possibilities, if not solutions. Something is constructed out of destruction, but the twist is that it too destroys art as it is known, or at least, overturns, or, perhaps, more subtly, expands the nature of what can be.

### *Cuts and Cameras*

Kurt Schwitters and Walter Benjamin shared the same slice of time and history and were both compelled into exile. Both grappled with the exhortations of modernity, which meant recognition of the simultaneously liberating and destructive sides of mass, urban culture, including its detritus, and the simultaneously constructive and destructive aspects of mass urban culture’s enabler, industrial technology. Machinery can be used to ill or good ends. Art too, and both these men wrote on the melding of art and politics in the bad way (in Nazism) and the good way (in Dada, for example). Schwitters wrote an essay in 1937, titled “Die Blechpalme,” the tin palm (358-60). “Blech” is also a word for rubbish, a pun John Heartfield plays with in a throwaway magazine montage from July 1932: “Hitler swallows gold and spouts tin/nonsense.” “The Tin Palm” is about incongruity in art, in good ways and poor ways. Schwitters describes the tasteless type, a tourist, who travels to Norway to be photographed with icebergs, even though the tourist has no relationship to icebergs. The tourist spoils nature with his arrogance and assumptions. Dadaism, on the other hand, made many efforts to dramatise—for purposes of enlightenment—the collision of two things that, with the best will in the world, do not fit together. For example, the infamous dada concert featuring a sewing machine and a typewriter, first demonstrated in 1916 by George Grosz and Walter Mehring at the Cabaret Voltaire.<sup>13</sup> The same man who is outraged by the incongruity, the betrayal of genuine music, demonstrated in such a concert cannot recognise his own complicity in what Schwitters terms “mendacity” or the factitiousness of fine art in the photograph of Mr Meier and the iceberg. Meier is stupid. Dada is not

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<sup>13</sup> For a description, see Peter Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 145.

stupid—it is simply imitating such an average audience member’s stupidity, states Schwitters.<sup>14</sup> “Tin palm” is the name Schwitters gives this stupidity. The tin palm is an abstraction that is dragged into a photographer’s studio in order to enliven the scene. It does not belong there. Walter Benjamin reports likewise on such effects, describing incidents at the photographer’s studio where his child self was dressed as an Alpine wanderer in front of a painted backdrop of the Tyrol or clothed as a neat little sailor, engulfed by studio props and fixed in a stiff pose.<sup>15</sup> He might also have mentioned one of himself dressed as a soldier, when he was five, in 1897. It found a grim echo in the constructed actuality of John Heartfield’s very first photomontage from 1924, “After 10 Years: Fathers and Sons,” in which child soldiers parade before Field Marshal Hindenburg, Chancellor of the Weimar Republic, under the skeletons of their fathers, slain in the First World War: these boy soldiers will experience the same fate as their fathers in the coming war. Photomontage is revealed truth. The studio photographs disguise or warp it.

The photographs of incongruity are staged in studios that are described by Benjamin as torture chambers. In autobiographical reflections in 1933 Benjamin described the photographic studio as a hybrid of boudoir and torture chamber.<sup>16</sup> In a reflection on a photograph of Kafka as a child, Benjamin notes that the draperies, palm trees and easels are reminiscent of the torture chamber and the throne room.<sup>17</sup> Children and cameras alike are abused. Schwitters’s example of an abuse of photography—as well as its subject—concerns a Laplandish family displaced to the South of Norway to live in a tent, in order that they might be photographed arm in arm with the Mr. Meiers of the world, who can then boast to their friends about how deeply they have explored and experienced the world. Schwitters notes that

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<sup>14</sup> Schwitters, *Manifeste und kritische Prosa*, 359.

<sup>15</sup> Photographs matching these descriptions can be seen in Bernd Witte’s biography of Benjamin (Reinbek/Hamburg: RoRoRo, 1990), in the *Marbacher Magazin* no.55 edition on Walter Benjamin (1990), and in Werner Fuld’s *Walter Benjamin; Zwischen den Stuhlen* (Reinbek/Hamburg: RoRoRo, 1990). Benjamin’s childhood photographs are also alluded to in the autobiographical pieces in *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert*.

<sup>16</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 132.

<sup>17</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Little History of Photography,” *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings, Volume 2, 1927-1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 515. See also Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings: 1931-34*, 800.

one might as well erect tin palms in the Northern snows, which would be the wrong type of incongruity.

Photography, a technology of documentation, is, in these examples, used to lie and support stupidity. Another piece by Schwitters from 1937, a little note, complains about a singer who acts as a Chinese man in a film. “With remorseless clarity,” he writes, “the photography showed that he was not Chinese.”<sup>18</sup> “I asked myself,” he concludes, “why he didn’t actually play that what he actually is, rather than what he was absolutely not.” Photographic arts have the capacity to expose fictitiousness, which means they are better suited to exploring actuality, a position not unlike Walter Benjamin’s position in the same period. It is not that film and photography should be naïve, reflecting vehicles of the real, rather these technological media should understand themselves as media of representation, as part of the image world, but this particular image world is one that deals with the real in image form. In his essay written in various versions between 1935 and 1939, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility,” Benjamin relates this sentiment in relation to acts of slicing, ripping, tearing and cutting, which of course, were procedures familiar to Schwitters in his capacity as montagist.<sup>19</sup>

Benjamin contrasts the faith healer, or magician, who cures through the laying on of hands to the surgeon who intervenes in the body, augmented by machinery such as scalpel and forceps. The magician touches and yet separates his or her self from the patient through the assertion of authority. The surgeon reduces any distance, entering into the patient’s body and reasserting distance in the cautious way that her or she moves amongst the organs. The magician is distant from reality. The surgeon operates on it. Benjamin extends the association. The painter, he says, is like a magician or faith healer, glossing over a surface. The camera operator is like a surgeon who cuts in to the web of reality, “penetrates deeply into its tissue.”<sup>20</sup> The camera lens and the processes of editing or printing up offer themselves up for a segmenting of reality. The natural appearance of everyday life is sliced up, and

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<sup>18</sup> Schwitters, *Manifeste und kritische Prosa*, 360.

<sup>19</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 19-55.

<sup>20</sup> Benjamin, *Work of Art*, 35.

thereby disallows any tendency of film to glide across the mirror-surface of reality in pure reflection. Reality as mediated in film is slashed by the surgeon-cinematographer, and then stitched together again in more or less visible sutures. Such cutting in, unlike the circular saw, at least when used as a tool of suicide, is designed to open up, in order then to splice together again, to allow healing. The image is “piecemeal, its manifold parts being assembled according to a new law” (35). Such an image is appropriate, for the public deserves or demands something resulting from the “most intensive interpenetration of reality with equipment.” Film and photography might not do this, might just re-affirm the surface of reality but their very nature, their very technology cries out to be deployed in montage form. What value film without montage? What point to film without slow-motion or speed-up or photography without super-enlargement of scale? The image of reality, as it might be represented in film and photography, is a mediated image that has been subjected to analysis, works with incongruities, distortion, destruction, construction, reconstructions.

The image of reality that Benjamin’s film and photography is to convey may be an image, but it is an image with depth, or a penetrated reality, not a surface. It can be cut into. It is montaged, a term that is imported from the world of engineering and architecture. Schwitters studied architecture briefly, in 1918-1919. It presented itself, in this period, as a prime realm for utopian exploration and new world imagining, if not building, through, for example, the ambitious and more or less fantastical theories and practice of Bruno Taut’s crystal chain or Paul Scheerbart’s glass architecture theory, amongst others.<sup>21</sup> Or indeed Taut’s proposal in 1914, in *Der Sturm*, that the Gothic cathedral represented the unification of the arts.<sup>22</sup> This idea was echoed by Gropius in the postwar period, in his position as director of the revolutionary artists’ union, the *Arbeitsrat für Kunst*. Architectural experiment, like montage, allowed revised possibilities of inhabiting space, of interacting socially and of experiencing beauty. However, in 1923, Schwitters,

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<sup>21</sup> See, for example, tracts by Scheerbart and Taut, *Glass Architecture and Alpine Architecture*, which appear in English in one book, edited by Dennis Sharp (New York/Washington: Praeger Publishers, 1972). Also see “Glas Bau,” *Die Bauzeitung*, 1926, reprinted in Walter Gropius, *Ausgewählte Schriften*, vol 3, eds. H. Probst and C. Schädlich (Berlin: Ernst & Sohn, 1988), 103-6, where Walter Gropius observes, in 1926, the glass architecture that was a poetic utopia becomes reality unconstrained.

<sup>22</sup> Bruno Taut, “Eine Notwendigkeit,” *Der Sturm* 4, no. 196-7 (February 1914): 174-5.

proclaims: “MERZ will nicht bauen, MERZ will umbauen”—“Merz doesn’t want to build, MERZ wants to rebuild.”<sup>23</sup> For Schwitters, architecture is the ultimate artwork, because it combines all the arts. To that extent, it is like Merz, which is “the general artwork.” Schwitters is disappointed with the ways in which most architecture turns out in practice. It is unconcerned with the ways in which a person might change the room by his or her presence. Merz, in contrast, is able to incorporate such contingencies, which for Schwitters are questions of balance or “Gleichgewicht” and which might be solved mechanically by automatic realignments within the space or the triggering of different lighting (135). For Benjamin, likewise, all the arts culminate in architecture. The modern work of art, such as is film and photography, finds its template in architecture, which is the construction of penetrable spaces experienced through both optical perception and tactile reception.<sup>24</sup> The tactility of architecture or film is aligned to its capacity to be “used,” entered into. This, in turn, is seen to generate a casual perception, an evocation of habit, which is met by a fragmented, distracted subjectivity. It also brings forth a viewing, using body that is exposed to the effects of environment, which, in relation to architecture, is reminiscent of Schwitters’s sensitivity to the liaison of person and space. In film, tactility is exemplified as a barrage of shocks, shifts of scale, lighting, space, times, communicating otherwise often familiar settings.

Schwitters indicates that his first foray into Merz architecture was the piece “Haus Merz,” made in 1920 of found objects. It was not, as a reviewer at the time noted, a place of use as such. Rather it appeared as a spiritual conception, a strange Gothic cathedral, an absolute artwork, an absolute architecture, whose inner space was filled with machine wheels.<sup>25</sup> With its architectural, tactile, built referents, the montaged work reinvented everything: the space in which the artwork exists, the materials of which it might be made, the relationships between the various modes of art, the relationship of parts within the artwork and the relationship between viewer and artist.

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<sup>23</sup> Schwitters, *Manifeste und kritische Prosa*, 134.

<sup>24</sup> Benjamin, *Work of Art*, 40.

<sup>25</sup> Schwitters, *Manifeste und kritische Prosa*, 79. The review was by Christoph Spengemann, “Merz—die offizielle Kunst,” *Der Zweemann*, no. 8, 9,10 (June-August 1920): 41.

Walter Benjamin monitored an epochal shift in art-audience relations brought about by machines, or technological forms of reproducibility. Cultural artefacts met the viewer halfway, metaphorically and actually. Artworks exited from darkened niches of cathedrals, visible only to the eyes of the few, and they left the gallery to enter other realms, public and domestic. Released from the captivity of singular time and space, some sort of experience of artworks, previously available only to those who could travel to the place of deposit or those who owned the singular work, might now be had by all—in copy form. In reproduced form, artworks come to the viewer in postcards and photographs. As such they could be grasped in the viewer's hand, held, twisted, entered into in a new way. As film, the pacey and choppy rhythms and milieu that they depict are familiar to viewers from their everyday technologised and city lives and so can be easily grasped. In 1927, in a defence of Sergei Eisenstein's film *Battleship Potemkin*, as well as the American funnies, Benjamin wrote :

We may truly say that with film a new realm of consciousness comes into being. To put it in a nutshell, film is the prism in which the spaces of the immediate environment—the spaces in which people live, pursue their avocations, and enjoy their leisure—are laid open before their eyes in a comprehensible, meaningful, and passionate way. In themselves, these offices, furnished rooms, saloons, big-city streets, stations, and factories are ugly, incomprehensible, and hopelessly sad. Or rather they were, and seemed to be, until the advent of film. The cinema then exploded this entire prison-world with the dynamite of its fractions of a second, so that now we can take extended journeys of adventure between their widely scattered ruins.<sup>26</sup>

The world is “laid open,” in order to be entered, and viewers come away with an enhanced knowledge of the structure of actuality through exposure to the film's super-perceptive and analytical eye, as well as the barrage of editing techniques that pick apart the spaces of film. Cinema detonates a “prison-world.” Audiences penetrate the secrets contained even in very ordinary reality, once it has been fractured into shards, amidst which audiences drift and saunter for a while.

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<sup>26</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Response to Oscar A. H. Schmitz,” in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 1931-34, 17

Merz, much like film in Benjamin's estimation, works with shards and fragments. It picks up the debris of city streets. It gathers up the strewn litter on a beach or path. It snatches up the ephemera of advertising and commercial art, of reproduced artworks and sweet wrappers and children's playthings. It cobbles it together. Schwitters deployed Merz techniques first, after the First World War, as a mode of making in a world where so much had been shattered by bombs. Schwitters made singular artworks, to be sure. But he made them often out of materials that found their origin in the world of mass reproduction. It could be said that his montages reflect in another way or through other media on the constitution of the work of art in the age of technological reproducibility. Schwitters dismisses the reflected image, the mirror painting, as "literary" not "painterly," and it attempts to do in images that which would be better described in words. Painterliness is better found in abstracted patterns and subtleties of tone and colour. It is a matter of nothing other than colour and surface, as he writes in 1940.<sup>27</sup> Any sort of representation is an unnecessary "literary load." Indeed Schwitters notes that even when representing nature: "The artwork is not a repetition of nature, neither literally nor in appearance, but rather a new entity, which is independent from the nature that is represented" (376). Schwitters calls the outcome "an expression of nature," an articulation in another material, laboured on by the artist and formed in an alien material. Acknowledging this transformation of a stimulus into the material and signature of the artist, Schwitters advocates pure painting. Something impure but socially relevant, on the other hand, is the painterly practice of Dadaism. Dadaism and Surrealism too are montaged forms, mixtures of literature and painting. Merz is perhaps as pure as a dada practice might be: In the fracturing into shards of wrappers, cogs, tickets, textured surfaces and objects such as feathers or netting or buttons, all the mass-reproduced and found materials that have been torn out of context, new meanings are won of them, including meanings that are purely aesthetic, to do with composition and rhythm, surface and line, qualities in which viewers might saunter and wander a while.

### *Suitcases*

Sauntering and wandering amidst ruins was a mode of perception in the art world. It became a mode of life in the world that Schwitters and Benjamin

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<sup>27</sup> Schwitters, *Manifeste und kritische Prosa*, 372.

inhabited. Both were dislodged from Germany, under more or less dangerous circumstances. It was not the case that either was especially committed to their land of origin. Benjamin was an enthusiastic traveller and he effectively abandoned Germany in 1927, living from then on in France, Ibiza, Denmark, Italy, Moscow and elsewhere. With his precarious mode of employment as a freelance writer, he was always searching for the cheapest place to exist and read and write. In 1932, in a diary entry written in Juan-Les-Pins, he wrote of how his first wish was for “distant and, above all, long journeys,” a wish he recognised just in the moment of it being granted.<sup>28</sup> He recounts an episode from 1924, in order to illustrate how deeply he held the desire to undertake journeys, or rather, to flee a Germany that had experienced hard years of war, the privations of defeat and a runaway inflation. He had saved enough money to spend some time with friends in Capri. A few days before he was due to travel, he noticed the headline of the evening edition of the newspaper being sold at the corner of Friedrichstraße and Unter den Linden: “Ban on Foreign Travel.” In a few days only those who could deposit a sum tenfold what Benjamin had would be allowed to leave the country. Benjamin packed immediately and rushed to Italy. Only once he was far away from Berlin did he discover that his panicked packing had left behind everything he needed and included a hundred superfluous items. But even this was not enough to convince him that the journey into the distance was not worthwhile. Some five or six weeks later he truly realised how powerful the decision to travel was. He had spent all of his money and seriously considered living in one of the large caves in order to be able to stay on in Capri. He recognised he would endure any deprivation not to have to return to Berlin (470-1).

The next entry in the diary turned the theme of lack into an affirmative modernist gesture. There is a mess aesthetic of modernism, one that collects all the rubbish and debris and fragments, whether or not it wishes to make them whole, renovate them or simply re-circulate them. There is also its other side, the throwing out, the ripping apart, the stripping down. This is the side that is turned towards clearing the boards. In this diary entry, and in its form as an article titled “Experience and Poverty” [1933], written for a magazine published in Prague in Benjamin’s first exile year in Paris, Benjamin compares the sleek, stripped

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<sup>28</sup> Benjamin, *Selected Writings, 1931-1934*, 470.



rooms of the bauhaus to the stuffy, cluttered bourgeois interiors of the 1880s. These rooms heaved with ornaments and antimacassars, monogrammed cushions and upholstery, and seemed to exude an atmosphere of “coziness.” This is only a seeming. Benjamin notes that all of this clutter is traces of the owner’s possession of the space, traces of the habits of the inhabitant. It shrieks out to any incomer “you have no business here” (472). Instead Scheerbart’s glass and bauhaus steel make it impossible to leave traces, eschew the marks of possession and the formation of habits (732). Brecht’s 1926 *Reader for City-dwellers* coined the phrase “Erase the Traces.” Likewise Benjamin implored “erase the traces” in February 1933’s “Live Without Traces,” a tiny fragment presenting a horror-vision of the cluttered bourgeois parlour, which detailed the new potential lives to be led within shiny, translucent steel and glass (701). An aesthetics of re-beginning is emergent. Benjamin counsels that the poverty of experience—evident to him since the shock and horrors of mechanized warfare and hyperinflation—be recognised so to begin again, through what he calls a “new positive concept of barbarism” (732). Experience itself has been shattered by existence, as he writes in “Experience and Poverty,” as well as later in “The Storyteller” from 1936: “for never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly: strategic experience has been contravened by positional warfare, economic experience, by the inflation, physical experience, by hunger, mechanical warfare, moral experiences, by the ruling powers” (732).<sup>29</sup> In contrast:

Holding onto things has become the monopoly of a few powerful people who, God knows, are no more human than the many; for the most part they are more barbaric, but not in the good way. Everyone else has to adapt - beginning anew and with few resources. (732)

Artists should not disregard or lament experience’s impoverishment, but communicate it, precisely by imitating the technology that engenders alienation. “Experience and Poverty” applauds those who do this, integrating in formal ways capitalism’s alienating “barbarism.” These are “constructors” who clear the decks, who go back to the drawing table, in order to begin again: the Cubists following the example of mathematicians and developing stereometric forms, Brecht with his social-political dramaturgy of alienation, Adolf Loos with his glassy unornamented

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<sup>29</sup> See also Benjamin, *Selected Writings: 1935-1938*, 144.

buildings, and Paul Scheerbart with his utopian fantasies which envisage how telescopes and aeroplanes and space rockets transform people, in order that they may live mass and public lives inside glass houses. Also honoured is Paul Klee who derives his aesthetic from the work of engineers. His figures, notes Benjamin, “designed on the drawing board,” like a car, and, “just like any good car, whose every part, even the bodywork, obeys above all the needs of the engine,” they obey “the laws of their interior” (733). Klee’s figures are like cars. They have something mechanical about them—even as angels—and possess interiors rather than inwardness, or souls. Such figures fitted well as the new tenants of the stripped down rooms, which were no more than bare lodgings, which discouraged habits. Unfilled rooms, often modifiable in a flash, were the apt dwellings of the new times (732).<sup>30</sup> Reduced versions of these—that is ones whose starkness was not necessarily by design - had been Benjamin’s habitat for some time. These were homes for people who might need to leave suddenly in the dead of night.

Schwitters was compelled into exile in January 1937. He was displaced from a very local existence in Hanover. Like Benjamin, it is not the case that he was ejected from a land that he cared for passionately, and certainly not in that moment. Indeed already in 1924 Schwitters published a statement against “National Feelings” in *Der Sturm*. National sentiment, he notes, is “a more or less coincidental or conscious community of people,” amongst whom are found more differences than between a German individual and one of another nationality.<sup>31</sup> Later, in the 1940s, when Schwitters was invited to join the German Kulturbund of exiled artists in England, he declined with the observation that he was not a German artist in any meaningful sense but rather he was a general or universal one.<sup>32</sup> He still stood, then, presumably, at the end of his life, by his statement from 1924 that called for “supranationality” and, somewhat ironically put, the right to love and defend whatever he chooses, including his side of the street, defended with a gun against the enemies who live

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<sup>30</sup> See also the discussions with Brecht on Benjamin’s “favourite topic” of dwelling, Benjamin, *Selected Writings 1931-1934*, 479-80.

<sup>31</sup> Kurt Schwitters. “Nationalitätsgefühl,” in *Das Literarische Werk*, vol. 5, ed. Friedhelm Lach (Cologne: DuMont Buchverlag, 1981), 196-198. Originally printed in *Der Sturm*, XV, Monatsbericht (August 1924): 3-4.

<sup>32</sup> Schwitters, “[Sie sandten mir eine Aufforderung],” *Das Literarische Werk*, vol. 5, 384.

across the road.<sup>33</sup> Ironic it was, but perhaps, if Schwitters saw no reason to love his country or even his hometown especially more than any other, he was devoted to the most local of local things, his house, his Merzbau, which by the time of his departure was comprised of eight Merzed rooms of his home. This was an environment built of memories and personal associations, riddled with grottoes, niches, facets and caves, crammed with souvenirs and relics in glassy corridors. It must have been as hard to leave as the cave that Benjamin built for himself, a cave of writings and ideas. Benjamin built his cave in Paris. In fact it was a study of cave-like interiors, the arcades of Paris. The arcades were passages through blocks of buildings, lined with shops and other businesses. Montaged iron and glass constructions gave shelter to hectic juxtapositions of shop-signs, window displays of merchandise and mannequins, illuminations and reflective glass panes. Montage construction treats its material elements as contrasting segments that must be bolted together for maximum impact. In architecture this might lead to a dramatic exoskeleton, a whole building built up from small parts whose connectedness is on display, as it was in the arcades. In textual form – in Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* - this means fragments, insights, prompt swings in thought, the establishment of relationships between disparate objects. For the *Arcades Project* Walter Benjamin organised the thousands of transcribed quotations and notes into files, called *Konvolute*. He developed a symbol-system of cross-references. The files comprised a vast array of interlinked scraps, which Benjamin added to and investigated from 1927 until the time he was prised out of his Parisian cave. His friend Gretel Karplus-Adorno once joked that Benjamin inhabited the “cavelike depths” of the *Arcades Project* and did not want to complete it “because you feared having to leave what you built.”<sup>34</sup>

Schwitters was at home in his self-made environment of the Merzbau. Benjamin was at home in his Parisian confection, whose past, present and future he tracked. Why should either of them leave? Because they had to. And when Schwitters arrived in Norway, he set about making his second Merzbau, “Das Haus am Bakken,” a new lodging for the dislodged. He wrote in 1938 about how

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<sup>33</sup> Schwitters, “Nationalitätsgefühl,” 198.

<sup>34</sup> Qtd. by Theodor Adorno, Nov. 10 1938, in *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910-1940*, eds. Gershom Scholem and T.W. Adorno (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 583.

he intended to make it dismantable and transportable.<sup>35</sup> That is, it should be a dwelling for one who might need to move it all very suddenly to who knows where. Like scraps in a collage or a montage the Merzbau is stuck down in an available or possible place. Haus am Bakken had no building permit and so, to obscure it, the building was covered with camouflage and pine needles. Unfortunately it was made too much under the eyes of the police—in view of the Lysaker police station—for comfort. But these exile homes were not homes built for comfort.

### *Rations*

While each left behind the homeland without sentiment, both Benjamin and Schwitters experienced difficulties in exile. Benjamin's correspondence bears witness to the privations of his existence, his reliance on handouts and making do. Schwitters's diaries and stories monitor the extreme ups and downs of displacement. For both, living out of suitcases works its way into their creative practice. It is as if what began as a sober recognition of the cultural needs of a technological, mass-produced age—the tactile aesthetic, montage, recycling of extant materials, expansion of the vocabulary of art—becomes an aesthetic of necessity, a suitcase aesthetic for those deprived, displaced, dislodged. Benjamin certainly had a commitment to scraps, his own and others. Indeed, he seems to have a peculiar awareness of the doubled meaning of scrap as noun and verb, and similarly in German the noun *Zettel* and the verb form *verzetteln*. To scrap or *verzetteln* is to fritter away, to dissipate—this Benjamin knew about as there were many projects of his that remained unfinished, not least because of displacement and exile. His work, his possessions, his thoughts were, as he said, “scrapped,” “hacked up,” “lost,” or “dispersed,” as the German word *verzetteln* suggests. His plaguing by scraps is a handicap or impediment, which prevents him from working on something new, completing something essential. In January 1934, when he sent the manuscript of his memoirs, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, to Hermann Hesse, he bemoaned that fact that, on account of his distance from Germany, and the impotence that that implied, he was exposed to an editorial process that “did not accommodate” the manuscript “under its title or author, but rather printed it in scraps as individual contributions to the newspaper

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<sup>35</sup> Kurt Schwitters, “Bogen 1 für mein neues Atelier,” in *Das Literarische Werk*, vol. 5, 365.

supplements.”<sup>36</sup> While in Sweden, in July 1934, staying at Brecht’s exile home, he scraped together some money—“the last of my funds”—to recombine, at least in part, his library, which was split between his abandoned Paris lodgings and Brecht’s house in Svendborg. This he did “so as not to lose hold of my library by virtue of its being spread [*Verzettelung*] throughout Europe.”<sup>37</sup> This left him without funds and dependent on the generosity of Brecht. Scraps, scrapping, part of a mode of scraping by and thereby scrapping wishes, plans and hope.

And yet, there was a cheerful mode of scrapping. The scrap appeared suited to manage and deliver information and ideas. Benjamin collaged his thoughts when at the stage of composing an article or book. He wrote out ideas, and also copied out the thoughts of other authors. All this might be snipped out, stuck on new sheets of paper and arranged anew. He would dash thoughts down on any scrap of paper he could find. He carried notebooks with him to jot down flashes of ideas. There were many scraps of paper, such as sketches of essays jotted on the reverse side of library book return reminders or on café bills. There were little diagrams, his wind roses and co-ordinate planes, which plotted ideas in relation to each other. All this was stored in his archives. These archives were destined for dispersal too—and sometimes he forestalled that process by gifting his notebooks to friends, on the condition that he could recall them at any time.<sup>38</sup> He worked on a book that was never to be, a scrapped book that remains a scrapbook. The *Arcades* Project is a work composed almost entirely of quotations and devised such that the material within it remains mobile, its elements shiftable at will. His views, the judgments of others, opinion about prostitutes or bourgeois gentlemen, commercial art or fine art is all of equal value. Knowledge that is organised in slips and scraps knows no hierarchy.

In the mid-1920s Benjamin published a compilation of vignettes reflecting on modern urban life, titled *One Way Street*. Its subheadings were salvaged from

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<sup>36</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe, IV: 1938-1940*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2000), 334

<sup>37</sup> Benjamin, *Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, p. 450

<sup>38</sup> These practices are recounted in Walter Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin's Archive: Images, Texts, Signs*, eds. Ursula Marx, Gudrun Schwartz, Michael Schwartz, and Erdmut Wizisla, trans. Esther Leslie (London: Verso, 2007).

street signage and hoardings, and its jacket by Sasha Stone was an energetic, hectic urban array of street furniture, vehicles, crowds and advertisements. In its opening vignette, Benjamin insists that writing should “nurture the inconspicuous forms that better fit its influence in active communities than does the pretentious universal gesture of the book – in leaflets, brochures, articles and placards. Only this prompt language shows itself actively equal to the moment.”<sup>39</sup> Benjamin proposed the urgent communication of the telegram, postcard, leaflet or the economically articulate photomontage. And quotation was at the core of this. The languages around us are the vehicles of communication, but, after the crushing experience of war and capitalism, they need to be re-imbued with uncorrupted meaning. In a letter to his friend Gershom Scholem in August 1935, Benjamin revealed how he still set such redemptive quoting—a salvaging of scraps—at the heart of his method. He described his efforts, in his researches for the *Arcades* project, “to hold the image of history in the most unprepossessing fixations of being, so to speak, the scraps of being.”<sup>40</sup> This time the German word for scrap is “*Abfall*,” something that falls off, garbage, a clipping, torn-off, a thrown away piece of urban detritus.

Schwitters knew of scraps too, in many senses. Two Merzbaus were scrapped by circumstance, or at least “unfinished out of principle,” making them ultimately failed or incomplete works. Arguably, though, these were works, like Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* perhaps, that were made never to be finished, but rather were reasons for living. Scraps were also the matter of his collages and montages and these were captured and re-directed, in order to expand and extend the vocabularies of art. He discussed this re-usage many times, perhaps most pointedly in 1920, in an essay titled “Berliner BoersenKukukunst,” which mocks the art critic of a Berlin financial paper, “who does not have a clue about our times.” Schwitters insists he might even use the newspaper, the critic and some ladies’ pantaloons as the abstracted material of his art.<sup>41</sup> And he reiterated his practice in “The Aim of my Merz Art,” written in 1938. This was a period when the vocabularies of art were being decidedly truncated in his homeland, most

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<sup>39</sup> Walter Benjamin, “One-Way Street,” *Selected Writings, volume 1: 1913-1926* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 444.

<sup>40</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Briefe 2* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1978), 685.

<sup>41</sup> Schwitters, *Das Literarische Werk*, vol. 5, 51.

notoriously through the Degenerate Art touring exhibition. Schwitters states that “there does not appear to be a rule which prescribes that one can only make artworks from specific materials” and so rubbish from waste bins presented itself a fine enough material for the task of composition (365). Schwitters also treated his own work as scraps, as remouldable, odds and ends, recycling postcard versions of his own works, such as the more conventional *Still Life with Chalice* or *The Pleasure Gallows* or *Revolving*, as collages for friends, obliterated partially by purloined bucolic scenes or other scraps. He scrapped his own image in promotional postcards too, merging himself Merzstyle with his creation Anna Blume, or women’s ready-to-wear clothing or a wheel.

We are back to wheels, with which this essay began, and with which arguably the art of assemblage began, for the first found object sculpture is commonly seen as Duchamp’s “Bicycle Wheel” from 1913. Schwitters used wheels in his work again and again, for he loved wheels. There is the “Picture with the Turning Wheel,” from 1920. And “Arbeiterbild”: the photograph of it in the journal *Transition* shows a wheel, even if this later fell off or was recycled somewhere else. And, of course, “Anne Blume has wheels.”<sup>42</sup> The wheel turns. The wheel revolves. The wheel, in its act of revolution, might be a symbol of one. But revolutions are meant to change everything. The wheel at the start of this essay—the circular saw—did do something dramatic. It took a life in the most gruesome way. But it was not the type of revolution that Walter Benjamin and many others longed for: the one that heralds a universal liberation consequent on everything changing. There are revolutions that fail—like the German one of 1919, which maybe finds its way in some form into “Arbeiterbild” of 1919, with its red “worker” word, its reference to strikes, its smashed up machine-like form. Revolutions that fail, revolutions that fail to turn things over, simply spin on the spot, grinding things down, crushing, flattening out. Just such a “revolution,” which even called itself one, but was really, in all truthfulness, a mode of salvaging all that already existed in terms of the distribution of money and power, just such a revolution was made by the Nazis and it led to the expulsion from Germany into exile of Schwitters and Benjamin. As it called itself a revolution it had to borrow some of the trappings of the

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<sup>42</sup> Kurt Schwitters, *Das Literarische Werk*, vol. 1, Friedhelm Lach (ed.), (Cologne: DuMont Buchverlag, 1981), 150.

revolution whose activists and achievements it sought to obliterate. To this end it borrowed too—in gruesomely parodic form—some of the tactics of the avant garde and political vanguard that were its sworn enemies.<sup>43</sup> This doubling was grim, as grim as the work of the circular saw that day.

Schwitters and Benjamin had embraced modern impulses and insisted variously on an overwriting of the self, its supplementation or admixture by urban ephemera and prosthetic technologies. The self itself becomes the site of collage or montage in an age of mass humanity and the machinic. Schwitters had expressed as much in his “Theses on Typography” from *Merz*, 11, 1925. Thesis IX, in observing how an advertisement or poster should be constructed from existing “found” letters, notes how “Even impersonal type print is better than the individual writing of an artist.”<sup>44</sup> But still, while also occupying found forms, he insisted on the injunction never to repeat, to be new. Technology melded with imagination to express the modern. The National Socialist response to such a reinvention of the self through the embracing of an impersonalised, de-individualised aesthetic was a very different type of identity expunging. At the very least, the bauhaus aesthetic of minimal comfort and anti-plush became those homes that needed to be leavable, abandonable at any moment. By 1939, for example, Walter Benjamin’s tracks were quite covered. He relinquished any hold he still had on Berlin, flogging off in February the remaining items left behind: a few books, a rug, a desk. Simultaneously, the Gestapo began the process of revoking Benjamin’s citizenship – the process was completed on 25 March. The reason was likely to have been the publication of his “Letter from Paris,” in *Das Wort* in November 1936. “*Verwisch die Spuren!*,” “Erase the traces!,” that line from Brecht. Brecht’s poetic sentiment detailed the issue of autonomy at stake:

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<sup>43</sup> John Heartfield provides a succinct image of the dissimulation of the National Socialists as revolutionaries with a concern for the working class in his photomontage “Mimicry,” a response to the Nazi co-optation of May Day, which has the words: “When all attempts to convey National Socialist ideas to the working class failed, Goebbels had one last desperate idea: he persuaded the ‘Führer’ to wear a Karl Marx beard in the future when addressing workers.”

<sup>44</sup> Schwitters, *Das Literarische Werk*, vol. 1, 192.



efface the traces, rather than have someone else efface them for you.<sup>45</sup> In his commentary on Brecht’s mid-1920s poem cycle “Reader for Those Who Live in Cities,” written over the autumn of 1938 and spring of 1939, Benjamin notes that the city in Brecht’s cycle is depicted as it is experienced by an émigré in a foreign country. Benjamin notes that the phrase “erase the traces” in the end seems to have been a furtive proposal of the strategy of crypto-emigration by Communist activists, who are thrust by Nazism into illegality. “‘Erase the traces’ A rule for those who are illegal.”<sup>46</sup> By then it had long been obvious to Benjamin and others that the powers that be were sweeping out Communist and Jewish “trash,” and whoever else might be deemed social refuse. One way or another, the encouraged or enforced expulsion became the literal expunging of some identities, and the hysterical reaffirmation of others.

Re-circulations: modernity’s proposal for communal living and creativity returns cynically as “Gleichschaltung,” a suffocatingly mass society. Modern promises of technological liberation turn into techno-enslavement in the camps. And the realms of art and politics collapse in the worst ways: aestheticised politics of charismatic dictatorship and the politicised aesthetics of propaganda art.

More grim re-circulations occurred at the exhibition of Degenerate Art, where numerous exhibits were jam-packed in a few faintly-lit small rooms, further cramped by partitions. In a seemingly homeopathic ingestion of dada’s own modes of display, banners, slogans and placards were affixed haphazardly to the walls. George Grosz’s phrase “Take dada seriously! It is worth it” was scribbled in a slapdash hand across a wall. So convinced were the curators that the artists’ sentiments would be condemned by their own words, they simply reproduced lines from manifestos. Quotations from discredited art critics were cited to ridicule what was viewed as pretentiousness. Captions blared out: “Crazy at any price,” “Even museum bigwigs called this ‘art of the German people’,” “The ideal—cretin and whore” or “Nature as seen by sick minds.” In orderly gothic German script, set

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<sup>45</sup> Frank Jellinek’s translation of Brecht’s poem, rendered as “Cover Your Tracks,” is in John Willett and Ralph Manheim, eds., *Bertolt Brecht; Poems 1913-1956* (London: Methuen, 1979), 131.

<sup>46</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4: 1938-1940 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, , 2003), 233.

squarely, were extracts from speeches by Hitler and Goebbels. The displays were a hodgepodge; indeed when Hitler and cronies visited on 16 July 1937, Schwitters's *Merzbild* was skewed even more, as a photograph shows, as if to imply that the crooked men who pass are all the more upright. The special, segregated status of art was denied these "degenerate" works, in a hollow repetition of dada's own anti-art gestures. Paintings were placed alongside medical photographs, sculptures jostled with ritual fetish objects. "Art" related to non-art, supposedly to the detriment of the former. Works were exhibited in relation to themes: barbarous methods of representation, religious works, works that preach political anarchy and social critique, anti-militarist art, art depicting prostitutes and immorality, expressionist primitivist art that eradicates every trace of racial consciousness by using Negro and Pacific art as a model, art in which the human figure is deformed or idiotic, the art of Jewish trash, the art of total madness (abstraction and constructivism). The Degenerate Art Exhibition was a lesson in conformism. Its hounding, defamatory and hectoring style assumed that those who stood before it assented to the general condemnation, or quickly understood themselves to be a part of the problem.

The dadaists Willi Baumeister and Hannah Höch visited several times to see what was loudly proclaimed to be the final display of their work. But Schwitters was gone from Germany by then, into his exile existence. Benjamin was traversing Europe too, seeking a place to stay for a minimum of money. He too went North, to stay with Brecht in 1938, a rare prising out of his Parisian cave. He stayed until he had no option but to dash South, as Paris fell to the Nazis. Internment—or worse—beckoned in 1940. Schwitters, landed in England in time, and there continued to write as he always had done. He wrote fairy tales of doom and utopia, as he always had done, which are ways of revolving, in thought, in imagination, the travails of exile. In 1940, Walter Benjamin, as Brecht put it, was "brought up against an impassable frontier"<sup>47</sup> between occupied France and Francoist Spain. He passed on in the only way he could, by suicide. Schwitters, at the end of his life, give a more hopeful sign in a little story from September 1946 titled "Der schnelle Graben," "the quick grave," named after a waterfall that connects the Leine and the Ihme rivers in his hometown of Hanover and acts as an overflow. He imagines, in this city he has not set eyes on

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<sup>47</sup> Bertolt Brecht: *Poems 1913-1956*, 363.

for some time, the direction of the water channel being reversed, “as a sign that after the last war everything might be different.”<sup>48</sup> Its unforeseen but happy side-effect is the chucking out of the water of all the people who have gone there to fling themselves to their deaths, for it is a notorious suicide spot. They spring back into life, happy to live again. Wiedergeburt—re-birth. Another chance. Until the channel is drained, as what turns into a circularity of jumpings in and flingings out occasions too much disruption. The waterfall’s reversal was, he says, a “triumph of technology.” It is, furthermore, the “suicide of suicide.”<sup>49</sup> Time is reversed, technology captured for liberation—against death. The wheel spins the other way. Another revolution, another Merzbau, is yet possible.

This interweaving of two creative lives has tried to suggest no more than the commonalities of experience of two men, angelic machines, revolutionaries more or less who, across the same slice of space-time, tried to fly or revolt or simply revolve through life and art. They are two men who embraced the possibilities offered by the modern era to go back to the beginning and thereby leap into the future, the very beginning of history, a new beginning, built on the shards of the old. They gathered up the rubbish. Some fragments, ruined bits and pieces—wheels, suitcases, angels—are torn and cut into this essay. An attempt has been made to re-assemble them, tokens of revolution, exploration and transcendence, into a whole, against the brokenness, exile and deathliness that they come to represent. They played their part as elements of an aesthetic of liberation. History’s failures condemn them too to the rubble of our past, as they still remain building blocks of a future yet to come.

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<sup>48</sup> Kurt Schwitters, *Die literarischen Werke: Prosa 1931-1948* (Cologne: Dumont, 1998), 271.

<sup>49</sup> In a letter to Christoph Spengemann, republished in Kurt Schwitters, *Die literarischen Werke: Prosa 1931-1948*, 330.