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# *Open Histories of Time*

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*Starting with the question concerning the discursive formation of architectural history, this essay explores the role of time as the agent of critical historiography. I will make an attempt to underline the ways in which architectural history differs from the traditions of art history. Even though the discourse of art history has transformed during the last three decades, its traditional influence on architectural historiography has not yet diminished. I will also discuss the particulars of what might be called the subject matter of architectural history, and its capacity to problematize the autonomy of text, that is, the historiographic narrative. This second point is important because the theme of autonomy was celebrated through a synchronic understanding of time popularized by both structuralism and post-structuralism, to mention two discourses that were influential in the battle over history that took place during the 1960s. Thirdly, fundamental to any argument addressing the historicity of architectural history is the issue of periodization, the discussion of which involves the following: under what circumstances throughout modernity is it possible to establish a point as the beginning of a style, later to be replaced by another one? What most contemporary “isms” in architecture accomplish is to put a linear succession in order. What periodization does is to distinguish a before and an after, if only to avoid the risk of repetition, transformation, or even permutation. In investigating these three ideas the intention is not to formulate a new methodological approach to architectural history. The aim is rather to map the scope of criticality emerging out of the very historicity of architecture’s rapport with capitalism.*



Only the angel can present us with all the past in a single instant.

The angel confuses past and present; for him all events are simultaneous.

Only an angel can simultaneously see all layers that make up reality, recoding its transparent imprints.<sup>1</sup>

1. Carles Muro, "Note su alcuni disegni di Alvaro Siza," *Casabella* 763 (February 2008): 6-7.

Can architecture re-present its time? Is architecture's association with the politics of a state due to the particular articulation of its architectonics, modern or otherwise? This question concerns patronage on the one hand, and design strategies on the other.<sup>2</sup> Albert Speer and Giuseppe Terragni's buildings, for example, are occasionally associated with the fascist states of their respective countries. Is this association because of the two architects' close rapport with the Nazi regime?<sup>3</sup> The question can be expanded to ask: if particular representation and embellishment of architectonic elements exceeds the expected conventions, including conventions of scale and detailing, does this facilitate a supportive rapport between architecture and the institutions of power? If so, how convincing is it to associate Greek democracy with the architectonics of the Parthenon, a building that codified the classical orders? This analogy is of interest because the classical language of architecture has been used in monuments celebrating both democratic and totalitarian states. Compared with literature and music, I am convinced that architecture is unable to fully express the moral dimensions of its age.

2. Jean-Louis Cohen, "Scholarship or Politics? Architectural History and the Risks of Autonomy," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 67, no. 3 (September 2003), 325.

3. On this subject, see David Rifkind, *The Battle of Modernism: Quadrante and the Politization of Architectural Discourse in Fascist Italy* (Vicenza: Centro Internazionale di Studi di Architettura Andrea Palladio, 2012).

In this paper I will make use of Walter Benjamin's discourse on time and history, and attempt to recode the present state of critical historiography. The idea of critical draws from an historiographic vision that is centered on a semi-autonomous understanding of architecture. What this means is that, in the era of capitalism, architecture is both a creative activity and a commodity. This dual character of architecture in modern times is problematised by technique. Whereas architectural history could—following art history—narrate formal and stylistic transformations, critical historiography invests in the intersection between history and ontology.<sup>4</sup>

4. Antonio Negri, *Art and Multitude* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).

Writing in the 1930s, the German novelist Hermann Broch observed that the nineteenth century style-time discourse was exclusive enough to popularize the style debate only among specialists, ignoring the broader public. He wrote, the "obvious expression of the age is far more visible in machine technology or

5. Hermann Broch, *Geist und Zeitgeist: The Spirit in an Unspiritual Age* (New York: Counterpoint, 2002), 4.

sports events than in urban architecture or works of art.”<sup>5</sup> Much has been written about the subject of art and technology and their complex relationship. And yet, the early modernists’ fascination with technology was such that they went so far as to coin *machine* as the genesis of a third architectural type after the eighteenth-century codification of *hut* and *tent* as the two major typologies. However, following Broch we should ask, what should have been the ethics of architecture during the rise of Nazi Germany, or in the present situation where the aesthetic of spectacle permeates contemporary civic architecture? Putting aside the issue of autonomy, we can agree with Broch that whenever architecture tries to represent the culture of its time it ends in kitsch. In what ways, then, could today’s architecture engage with its time and yet resist becoming part of the current culture of spectacle?

6. The problematic of the implied “closure” is discussed in my *The Mental Life of the Architectural Historian* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011).

In *The Mental Life of the Architectural Historian* (2011), I posited the idea that the early modernist historian’s response to the questions raised above was either focused on “periodization” (Pevsner), or the *Zeitgeist* (Giedion). In two different ways, these historians promoted a concept of period-style that was not open to change.<sup>6</sup> Central to these historiographies were the transformations taking place in architecture’s rapport with technology. Putting aside its aesthetic significance for modernism, the *machine* in the age of digital reproduction offers neither a typological precedent for architecture, nor an image to be emulated by architecture. Technology has today conquered the cultural realm, including those areas closely related to the production of art and architecture. We are witnessing a situation where technology has deconstructed the modernist notion of painting, and has been infused into the design and production processes of architecture. This development demands reformulating architectural historiography.

7. See Anthony Grafton, *What Was History? The Art of History in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). I want to thank Andrew Leach for bringing this book to my attention.

In the first part of this essay I will discuss the historicity of the concept of time in reference to two images: Anton Raphael Mengs’s *The Triumph of History Over Time* (1772), and Cesar Ripa’s *History* (1600). I will then take up Walter Benjamin’s reading of Paul Klee’s painting *Angelus Novus*. Whereas Ripa’s woodcut foregrounds a concept of historicism centered on geography and chronology,<sup>7</sup> Mengs’s painting draws on the Enlightenment’s discourse on history. I discuss these three postcards as independent tableaux to demonstrate, among other things, Walter Benjamin’s particular take on the history of historical criticism. In my concluding remarks, I will attempt to set



up the thematic of a critical discourse on time and architecture. A significant implication of this critical inquiry is its capacity to disqualify art history categories such as period-style, and the modernist aesthetic valorization of the *Zeitgeist*.

## Postcard I

In 1593, Ripa published a manual in Rome called *Iconologia*, listing classical and baroque symbolism alphabetically. The first edition of the manuscript appeared without illustrations.<sup>8</sup> By the second edition (1603), the book's seven hundred categories of personification demonstrated the complete array of allegories formative of the art of the seventeenth century. Prescriptive as it was, the book carefully outlined the decorum of image in reference to its use rather than its meaning.

In Ripa's engraving, *history* and *time* are presented in allegorical terms. Depicted in the figure of a woman,<sup>9</sup> *history's* earthliness is suggested in the way that her foot rests on a square-shaped rock. Following ancient practice, *time* is represented in the figure of Saturn, a man with wings, equipped for flight. The positioning of these two mythological figures is the telling story of the ongoing dialogical rapport between *time* and *history*. Facing forward, and shown in seated position, *time* chews stones, a symbolic reference to his son Jupiter. Although he is motionless and his wings are at rest, the figure of *time* looks ready to take off at any moment. Full of life and movement, robed in white fabric, the figure of *history* writes in an open book supported by the winged figure of *time*. A few scholars have interpreted the gender difference as the desire "to free *Historia*, history personified as a young woman, from the dread knife of Old Man Time . . . [This] has become a rescue fantasy."<sup>10</sup>

Does Ripa's composition imply dependency or cooperation between the two mythological figures? Either way, with her head turned down looking at the square stone, the figure of *history* keeps writing. This allegorical reference to stone as an object (material) suggests that *fact*, if not *truth*, is what the historian should be searching for.<sup>11</sup> Her gesture also suggests that *time* is bound to *place*, at least for now and at the dawn of the Enlightenment. Furthermore, the idea of place, symbolically represented by the ruins of a wall and a tree in the background, is used to complement the standstill state of *time* and *history*.

8. Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia* (London, 1709).

9. In most allegorical drawings accompanying Renaissance treatises, the figures of theory and history are presented as maids. See Marco Frascari, "Maidens 'Theory' and 'Practice' at the Sides of Lady Architecture," *Assemblage* 7 (October 1988), 16.

10. Ann Curthoys & John Docker, "Time Eternity, Truth, and Death: History as Allegory," *Humanities Research* 1 (1999): 5-26.

11. The question concerning the credibility of history was topical for both groups supporting either "moderns" or "ancients." See Grafton, *What Was History?* 248-49.

12. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. J. Osborne (London: Verso, 1997), 169.

Referring to Ripa's use of lexicon, Walter Benjamin wrote that allegorical expression was born out of the combination of history and nature.<sup>12</sup> Ripa's woodcut also suggests that *time* will eventually depart when *history* is finished with her story. In this departure, both the *time* past and *place* will be left behind. The future, that which lies ahead, will belong to space, and will give rise to another round of re-writing of time past. Thus the arrival of Modernity, and Giedion's attempt to tie together the historiography of *Space, Time, and Architecture* (1941).

## Postcard II

Mengs was born in 1728 at Ústí nad Labem (German: *Aussig*) in Bohemia. An early exponent of neoclassicism, he produced a few impressive classical and religious scenes. An accomplished portrait painter, he also wrote some theoretical work, mostly influenced by Johann Joachim Winckelmann.<sup>13</sup> In addition to a portrait painting of Winckelmann, the historian's influence can also be detected in Mengs's painting entitled *Allegory of History* (1772). Along with the two main figures depicted in Ripa's woodcut, the space of Mengs' painting is occupied by the following figures: the Janus; a Genius carrying manuscripts; and the Fame who hovers above all attendants. Oblivious to the Genius's position, *history* keeps writing in an open book, again supported by the wings of *time*. In addition to the number of figures depicted, what makes Mengs' painting different from Ripa's woodcut is the position and direction of *history's* head. While writing, she stares at the female figure of Janus, the god of beginning, who can both remember the past and foresee the future. It seems that Janus is inspirational as far as what *history* should take note of. Unlike Ripa's illustration, in Mengs's painting *history's* foot is not resting on the square-shaped stone. Here the stone is left aside, pushed to the forefront of the painting and closer to the spectator. Its visibility is further underlined by the Genius, whose gaze is turned on it. However, while the position and orientation of the figure of Fame also direct the spectator's attention to the stone, the overall organization of Mengs's painting is taken over by a diagonal axis which points towards an open door; the presence of this door is further emphasized by the right arm of Janus, and the direction in which the Genius's gesture is moving. Similar to Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656), the door in Mengs's painting reveals the subject of history, but instead of the King in Velázquez's work, Mengs's

13. Josephine L. Allen, "Johann Joachim Winckelmann Classicist," *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 7-8 (April 1949): 228-38.



draws the spectator's attention to the Museo Clementino where the Vatican *Ariadne* is prominent. Among other things in the museum, the Janus's hand points at the sculpture of the Sleeping Ariadne, long called Cleopatra. This composition reminds the historian of the significance of the classical tradition as the source of an enlightened historiography. Thus, the subject matter of historiography turned away from facts to classical history.

Before attending to Walter Benjamin's reading of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, I wish to make additional observations, and to plot the historiographic implications of the two images considered above. Prior to the Enlightenment and an historicism that was centered on geography and chronology, we can claim that monuments did not testify to the historicity of time. They were rather seen as the work of an artistic genius. In addition, and because of the values attributed to the Orders, monuments were differentiated from ordinary buildings. From the Enlightenment and the advent of scientific fact-finding emerged the need to differentiate the historiography of both social events and natural catastrophe from the work of art. Even though monuments were seen as the work of the past, their very ruination was taken as a sign of progress, time in motion. Winckelmann wrote that art history "should establish the facts, as far as possible, through study of the monuments of antiquity that remain to us." He continued that art historians, "not having studied their material sufficiently, have been only able to provide us with common-places. There are few writers who have known how to make us understand the very essence of Art."<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, in modern times, monuments were not merely valued for their beauty; rather, they were considered as artworks capable of representing the socio-political and aesthetic values of their time. One way to reactivate historical events and make them visible was through memory and narratives, including travel diaries. By contrast, buildings live past their inception time, and bear witness to the past. Stepping out of time proper, monuments are abused to endorse the victors of barbaric wars carried out in the name of progress. Monuments also disclose the aesthetic state of the artistry of the work. Still, the style debate did not concern itself with the relationship between Palladio's villas, for example, and the historicity of the Italian Renaissance, and the political structure of Renaissance patronage. More appealing for art history were questions such as: how does a work re-present the spirit of the time; and, how and why does it attain its status as "art," surpassing its own historicity.

14. Quoted in Anthony Vidler "The 'Art' of History: Monumental Aesthetics from Winckelmann to Quatremière de Quincy," *Oppositions* 25 (Fall 1982), 53. Also see Alex Potts's introduction to Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *History of the Art of Antiquity*, trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2006), 1-53.

15. Robin Middleton, "Introduction," in Julien David Le Roy, *The Ruins of the Most Beautiful Monuments of Greece*, trans. David Britt (Santa Monica: Getty Research Institute, 2004), 83.

16. Karen Lang, *Chaos and Cosmos: On the Image in Aesthetics and Art History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 7.

17. Michael W. Jennings, ed., *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 1938-1940 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 2003), 389-400.

The humanist conviction in the perfection of the past recovered its ethos in two opposing trends. On the one hand, we have Julien-David Le Roy's collected drawings of the Parthenon, published under the telling title of *Les Ruins de plans beaux monuments de la Grèce* (1758), where the ruinization of monuments set the stage for much of the Kantian aesthetics of sublime and picturesque. Le Roy's analysis of ruins conflated historical observations with theory. Time, for example, was seen "as part of a progress towards perfection."<sup>15</sup> Ruins were thus approached as a means for understanding the grandeur, order, and aesthetics of Greek architecture. Nevertheless, it is striking to note that, even though "ruins were immensely popular at the end of the eighteenth century," Kant never discussed "the aesthetic experience of ruins in his *Critique of Judgment*, especially since ruins would seem obvious catalysts" for his idea of sublime.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, we have Winckelmann's historicization of Greek art as the expression of Greek culture in its totality. It was left to Piranesi to make a bricolage of Le Roy's vision of ruin with Winckelmann's tendency for totalization. Piranesi's *Il Campo Marzio* revealed a project that would be picked up by artists and architects whenever *progress* had to depart and leave the existing wreckage behind. These observations are of further interest to us in relation to Diderot's division of human knowledge into the three areas of "reason," "memory," and "imagination," and how these concepts informed Ripa's woodcut and Mengs' painting. I will go further and associate the wreckage of progress with the square-shaped stone noted in the same two postcards.

### Postcard III

It is beyond the scope of this essay to present a comprehensive reading of Walter Benjamin's text entitled "On the Philosophy of History."<sup>17</sup> Revisiting his seminal essay, however, I will attempt to map the architectonic implications of the idea of ruin and ruination in late capitalism. Central to the objectives of my discussion is the notion of time. The temporality implied in history demands distinguishing the ruins of the past from the wreckage left by the storm of progress. Whereas the aestheticization of ruins of the past is part of humanity's awareness of the concept of history, in late capitalism, buildings immediately fall into the ruins of forgetfulness. What this means is that the image-oriented spectacle permeating contemporary everyday life does two dialectically related things. Firstly, it turns architecture into a *parergon* supplementing the





wreckage of capitalism. Secondly, having lost much of its symbolic and functional purpose, contemporary architecture relinquishes its umbilical cord with the Humanist totalization of themes such as monument, ruin, and ornament.

Written in the late 1930s, Benjamin's text is a montage of fragments, each addressing issues central to his concept of history. It unpacks strategies that are central to a materialist approach to historiography. Relevant to my argument here are concepts such as *image*, *progress*, and *time*. While these concepts are reiterated in each fragment of Benjamin's text, their iconological connotation can best be pursued in fragment IX. This fragment starts with Gerhard Scholem's poem entitled *Greetings from the Angelus*, which was composed for Benjamin's twenty-ninth birthday. The poem was inspired by Klee's *Angelus Novus*, a version of which Scholem had hanging in his Munich apartment. It reads:

*My wing is ready for flight  
I would like to turn back.  
If I stayed everliving time,  
I'd still have little luck.*

This is how Benjamin pictured the angel of history: eyes wide open and wings spread, his face turned to the past where "*we* [my italic] perceive a chain of events," and the angel "sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage." Benjamin continued: "The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise." The storm propels the angel forward into the future, to which the angel's back is turned. For Benjamin, "this storm is what we call progress."<sup>18</sup> Benjamin's reading of the *Angelus Novus* suggests that once the storm of progress is associated with the myth of "paradise," the task of the historian is to de-construct the "chain of events" and to uncover the catastrophe.

It is important here to make a distinction between natural catastrophe—floods and earthquakes—and historical catastrophe. The temporality implied in history demands distinguishing the ruins of the past from the wreckage left by the storm of progress. The ruin is not just the effects of time. It involves the decay of material, and also an appreciation of aesthetics that are bound up with the transitoriness essential to Modernity.<sup>19</sup> It is nothing new to say that material decays, but in modernity things become outmoded even before their material disintegrates. In modernity, *time* is experienced in the absence of a unity that would set

18. I am paraphrasing Walter Benjamin's remarks mainly because Benjamin refers to the angel as a male. For the history and a comprehensive account of Benjamin's "thesis on history," see O. K. Werckmeister, "Walter Benjamin's Angel of History, or the Transfiguration of the Revolutionary into the Historian," *Critical Review* 22, no. 2 (Winter 1996): 239-67. See also Benjamin's "Thesis on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1969), 253-64.

19. For the concept of transitoriness in reference to fashion and "time" in Walter Benjamin's discourse on history, see Andrew Benjamin, "Being Roman Now: The Time of Fashion, a Commentary on 'Theses on the Philosophy of History,' XIV," *Thesis Eleven* 75, no. 1 (November 2003), 39-53.

the sub-text for the durability and meaningfulness assigned, or expected, from every action, including the production of architecture. In the first decades of the last century, for example, architecture still could play a crucial role in public housing and communities that were associated with the various institutions of modernity. By contrast, even with the best intentions architects today cannot escape the commodification of values and techniques that turns every edifice into a spectacular ornament. In late capitalism, one's relation to the past is subject to the temporality delivered by the storm of progress as it moves from one catastrophe to another.

These observations involve two sets of assumptions. Firstly, that progress is registered in an understanding of time that transforms one's experience of natural time. Progress progresses, but its flow does not suggest that history unfolds according to a pre-planned linear path. Secondly, that the juxtaposition of natural ruins and the ruins of modernity—the piled wreckage of the past—is essential for a cognitive mapping of the landscape of modernity where everything is short-lived and has to be handed to history. Harry Harootunian writes: “All production immediately falls into ruin, thereafter to be set in stone without revealing what it had once signified, since the inscriptions are illegible or written in the dead language.” He concludes: “Beneath the historical present, however, lie the specters, the phantoms, waiting to reappear and upset it.”<sup>20</sup> What does this statement, which draws from Benjamin's vision of history, mean for historiography?

20. Harry Harootunian, *History's Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Question of Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 19.

This question demands two considerations: firstly, to differentiate history from historiography; and secondly, to distinguish the specificity of architecture's relation to history from the temporality that orchestrates the present cycles of production and consumption. The difference between history and historiography is obvious; however, it needs to be reiterated here because of Benjamin's unique intellectual cause. As the title suggests, Werckmeister's essay “Walter Benjamin's Angel of History, or the Transfiguration of the Revolutionary into the Historian” is a detailed account of Benjamin's various re-writings of what would ultimately be formulated as the angel of history. The phrase “the transfiguration of the revolutionary into the historian” also prefigures the tale of Benjamin's intellectual life, which was closely connected to the broader praxis of the Left of the 1930s.

In the four available versions of Benjamin's text, the reader sees a modification at work, which intends to demonstrate, among other things, Benjamin's disappointment with the fate of “revolution”



during the 1930s. These versions also reveal a process of distillation, emptying the angel of all religious connotations except one: like a superman, the angel represents a gifted revolutionary figure who reads more into the rubble of progress than anybody else. Dismissing the idea of progress as the ultimate engine of political revolution, Benjamin turned the revolutionary and constructive aspects of Karl Marx's understanding of history into the act of historiography. He wrote that historicism prevails by "establishing a causal connection between various moments in history," perpetuating "the eternal image of the past." Materialistic historiography, by contrast, "is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well."<sup>21</sup> What does this arresting mean for architectural historiography?

Having suspended the linear view of history, and made a distinction between *history* as such and the history of the work of art, Benjamin "established the status of the work of art as that of a remnant, relic, or ruin left in the wake of the demise of transcendent meaning."<sup>22</sup> His work was an arrow to the heart of the classical and neoclassical intention to reconstruct a harmonious past. Thus emerged both a concept of history and a historiography (reconstruction) the principle of which, following Benjamin's notion of dialectical image, is based on the montage of fragments. To recall Manfredo Tafuri, Piranesi deconstructed the humanist discourse on *concinnitas* and *finitio*.<sup>23</sup> Piranesi's drawing, mentioned earlier, illustrates nothing but "a systematic criticism of the *concept of place*."<sup>24</sup> It inaugurates a project of *silence*, aspects of which were picked up by the historical avant-garde, and by postmodernists. Thus, and in consideration of contemporary architectural praxis, we have on the one hand a body of work that registers fragments of the past without opening a space onto the their aura (Peter Eisenman of the New York Five); on the other hand, we have fragments of the past put together harmoniously under the narcotic ether of phenomenology (Louis I. Kahn). Nurtured by two different theoretical paradigms, the difference between the work of these two architects involve the historicity of an era that has to face the demise of the project of the historical avant-garde.<sup>25</sup> No wonder monumentality emerged in the 1950s as an ideological paradigm to camouflage the wreckage left by the war, if only to remap territories that would soon be destroyed again in different historical circumstances.

21. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 262.

22. Beatrice Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 3.

23. See Manfredo Tafuri's seminal text, "The Wicked Architect": G. B. Piranesi, Heterotopia, and the Voyage," in *The Sphere and the Labyrinth: Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s*, trans. Pellegrino d'Acerno and Robert Connolly (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 25-54.

24. Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, 27.

25. On this *epistemic break*, see Peter Burger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. M. Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). In *Architecture's Desire: Reading the Late Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2010), K. Michael Hays presents a different trajectory for the avant-garde.

Thus, the reproduction—that is, the act of writing the history of history’s past—does not take place in a void: it rather unfolds within its own past. The question to ask, then, is what involved in this doubling, this *re-production*? In the first place, the now of the present is imbued with the past, meaning that the present is neither the continuation of the past nor separated from it. Secondly, the phrase *the now of the present* concerns an understanding of the past that is centred in modernity and the time needed to register the latter’s multifarious manifestations. In modernity the past of a phenomenon is recognized when a person comes to the recognition of his/her own presence as an autonomous entity, and yet dependent on the reproductive logic of capitalism. How then can it be possible to create an autonomous “history of architecture” without reference to other histories—social and political?<sup>26</sup> Critical to this quest are particular dates and points of departure, those qualifying the modernity of architecture.

26. I am paraphrasing Alberto Asor Rosa in “Manfredo Tafuri, or Humanism Revisited,” *Log 9* (Winter/Spring 2007), 34-35.

The narrativization of events imposes fullness on its subject matter, and pictures a common ground for otherwise disparate and incommensurable stories. Slavoj Žižek insists that “every version of historicism relies on a minimal ‘ahistorical’ formal framework defining the terrain within which the open and endless game of contingent inclusions/exclusions, substitutions, renegotiations, displacements, and so on, takes place.” To go beyond historicism and the claim made for “the end of history,” Žižek’s distinction between historicism and historicity is particularly useful. He writes, “*historicism* deals with the endless play of substitutions within the same fundamental field of (im)possibility, while *historicity* proper makes thematic different structural principles of this very (im)possibility.”<sup>27</sup> The term impossibility refers to what might be called the death knell of a society, calling into questions concepts such as “national identity” which still evoke illusions of a unity presumably operating in some time past. In an effort to capture the *Zeitgeist*, historicism dismisses the historical rupture induced by the project of modernity. It is the task of the historian to address and inflect the historiographic narrative with themes central to the developmental processes of capitalism as it moves from one system of spatial organization to another.

27. Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (London: Verso, 2000), 111.

Central to this scenario is the desire of capitalism to further minimize historical time, which as Harootunian writes has the effect of prolonging the scope of the “present as both eternal and natural.”<sup>28</sup> Harootunian’s observation is based on Marx’s

28. Harry Harootunian, “Disposable time,” *Radical Philosophy* 157 (September/October 2009): 47-50.



distinction between historical time and the temporal logic of capitalism. In Ripa's woodcut time and history are imbued with each other and are represented through symbolism traditionally used to express pre-modern existential life. As Marx claimed, throughout Modernity the logic of capitalism is aimed at annihilating history. Walter Benjamin's reading of Paul Klee's painting, then, seems essential for the formation of critical historiography. Benjamin wrote: "The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again."<sup>29</sup> He continued that when, in the words of Shakespeare's Hamlet, "the time is out of joint," then the present is saturated with the propelling wreckage of the *past*. In a standstill situation, the present merges with the past, and yet the distinction between the old and the new does not disappear. The redemptive power of the past rather shines out of the surface of the new. It is the task of the historian to capture the gaze of the image as printed on the surface of events. This task of the historian, I would posit, was dismissed during the formative years of the Enlightenment. Under the yoke of the literary debate between the ancients and the moderns, the past was judged according to the prospects already laid out by science. Critical historiography should balance the positivistic understanding of *time* with insights that are inspired by the objective and subjective conditions of the present time.

29. Walter Benjamin, "Thesis on the Philosophy of History," 255.