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In Response to Heidegger’s Plea: Alētheia and the Open Space for Thinking and Freedom Through Art

Louise Carrie Wales

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IN RESPONSE TO HEIDEGGER’S PLEA:
ALÊTHEIA AND THE OPEN SPACE FOR THINKING AND FREEDOM THROUGH ART

Louise Carrie Wales

Submitted to the faculty of
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17 July 2018
… poetically man dwells on this earth.
Friedrich Hölderlin

Ô mon corps, fait toujours de moi [une femme] qui s'interroge.
Frantz Fanon

To Chloë:

Thank you for always keeping me humble.
I love you more than you can ever know.
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There are many thanks to give. So many, in fact, that I fear a significant and influential someone will be overlooked. That said, I must begin by thanking Dr. Christopher Yates whose patient and detailed guidance have made this entire process enjoyable. I can confidently say that this project would not exist without his tutelage and time. Seriously. Chris has been kind, gentle, thorough (o.m.g. so fabulously thorough) and his turn around time on drafts is proof the man never sleeps. Ever. He also has a gentle humility that make him an invaluable mentor, particularly when ideas are challenging and clarity is not easily won. I am also grateful to my other committee members, Simonetta Moro and Drew Dalton, whose care and support I appreciate immensely. Then, of course, there is the inimitable and ever-supportive Dr. George Smith without whom I would not have joined the IDSVA family in the first place. As all of us here know, George has a contagious love for philosophy, art and his growing Becoming Community. His teaching is motivating and engaging. It’s also downright fun. Who can forget ‘a tergo’ or his impassioned descriptions of Degas’ Keyhole Nudes. The Venus of Urbino is forever etched in my mind as are the colorful descriptions of Titian’s greater impact on trans-historical narratives. To Amy Curtis, Howard Caygill, Paul Armstrong, Ted Coons, David Driskell … thank you for your constant inspiration.

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Most importantly, I am and always will be grateful to my daughter Chloë whose cheerleading and enthusiasm for this project has helped me stay focused. With love, always.
This dissertation is a response to Martin Heidegger’s call to action asserted at the conclusion of his oft-cited essay, “The Question Concerning Technology,” in which he offers the realm of art as the mainspring for our emancipation from the grip of technological enframing. The following chapters investigate artists Martha Rosler, Christian Boltanski, Krzysztof Wodiczko and finally, collaborators Noor Mirza and Brad Butler, whose artworks offer a counterbalance to the erosion of the human capacity for thought as a particular feature of our Being, or Dasein, as proposed by Heidegger. Their shared characteristic lies in truth’s manifestation within artworks as happenings or events rather than a quest for fixed certainty or correspondence. Through their work, the artists catalyze a reckoning, compelling the viewer to question and reflect on his intersubjective ethical responsibility for the other. The common thread connecting them is a powerful shifting of thought — in a distinctly revelatory acting upon the viewer’s awareness. I will argue that, as technological aesthetic narratives are increasingly sophisticated and nuanced, politically conscious artists such as these become better able to harness their potential voices in deeply critical ways allowing the inter-subjective ethos of care to manifest and thrive in dialogic expressions of truth.
Furthermore, they begin to formulate a way of considering and using technology that not only resists *enframing* by interrogating the very essence of our relationship with it, but also functions as a way of engaging with the question of *Being* itself (which encompasses Heidegger’s fundamental project). In the end, this dissertation will demonstrate that Being comes to itself in the site of exchange as his/her awareness of responsibility grows and thought is returned to its poetical dwelling. In these times of narrowed perspectives and technological addiction qua enframing, Heidegger’s call to action and the works responding to it must be brought to the fore and celebrated.
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INTRODUCTION:

“The meditative man is to experience the untrembling heart of unconcealment.”

Martin Heidegger

§ I.1: A CALL TO ACTION

This dissertation concerns the human capacity for thinking—both in its relationship to what Martin Heidegger terms Dasein and, ultimately, in light of our primordial intersubjective ethical disposition. Furthermore, it addresses human access to truth through the realm of art—a truth that is multiple and fluid rather than objectivist and correspondent. It is, more directly, an inter-textual response to Martin Heidegger’s call to action asserted at the conclusion of his oft-cited essay, “The Question Concerning Technology,” in which he offers the realm of art as the mainspring for our emancipation from the grip of technological enframing. Inspired by Friedrich Hölderlin’s poem, Patmos, Heidegger writes,

Because the essence of technology is nothing technological, essential reflection upon technology and decisive confrontation with it must happen in a realm that is, on the one hand, akin to the essence of technology and, on the other, fundamentally different from it.

Such a realm is art. But certainly only if reflection upon art, for its part, does not shut its eyes to the constellation of truth, concerning which we are questioning. (Krell 340 emphasis mine)

Heidegger leaves us with these thoughts after having detailed the ultimate reduction of human beings to standing reserve, or, perhaps more significantly, the reduction of human
creativity (in technē) to modes of challenging-forth. In other words, working from the language of Karl Marx, he asserts an essential self-alienation arising from our relationship with technology. Furthermore, he establishes that this relational imprisonment assails Dasein’s ability to exercise its most profound capacity within the unfettered open space of thinking. The greatest peril, in his estimation, lies in a false sense of wellbeing that prompts us to overlook the danger, hence his notice of the ‘absence of emergency’—a condition of Being Santiago Zabala expands upon in his recent volume *Why Only Art Can Save Us*. It is, consequently, in decisive confrontation that we must actively seek emancipation within the same realm as that which imperils us. Thus, if our approach to artworks remains open to the *alētheiac* multiplicity inherent within them, we might reconnect with Dasein’s fundamental capacity for questioning, thereby accessing the constellation of truth so important to Being.

Already, Heidegger’s thoughts present us with perplexing language in need of elucidation. To be clear, the enframing upon which Heidegger focuses asserts a fundamental crisis of Being. Heidegger’s plea reflects the preoccupations of much of his later writings wherein *poēsis qua art* is designated as Dasein’s most fundamental disposition. However, Dasein must wrest itself free from subjectivity understood definitionally as an *object* given in its full *presence*, a liberating action that parallels and informs his temporal understanding of truth. Furthermore, it addresses, broadly speaking, the abandonment of Being, a *forgottenness* that results in living *in-authentically*, thereby failing to fulfill Dasein’s creative potential. Heidegger holds responsible, in part, the calculative thinking of metaphysics and its unrelenting need for certainty. Technological enframing is, in large part, the consequence of metaphysical ordering and a long-standing tradition of objectifying thought. At the risk of over-simplifying a nuanced position, Heidegger breaks from habits of thought that assume an
explanatory power over objects (including, here, Nature as a whole) and that presume to offer the fullness of their objecthood to our explanatory power and pragmatism. Moreover, with the rise of the Enlightenment into the Modern age of history, he objects to the fixity of totalizing structures in both thought and social-political agendas (think, for example, of technocracy). Simon Glendinning explains such objectionable ordering as that which “discloses everything everywhere as measurable, calculable and orderable (under orders or at our command), as what Heidegger comes to call a ‘standing reserve’” (Gaut and Lopes 108).

Rather than an objectivist approach, Heidegger proposes, quite radically, that Being comes into presence ‘from out of itself,’ in a self-revealing reminiscent of pre-Socratic thought. He acknowledges, however, that this self-revealing contains a simultaneous concealment, a characteristic that maintains a certain mystery or reticence on the part of Being. It is not surprising, given this foundational premise, that Being in general and the being of Dasein, for Heidegger, dwells poetically in this world, revealing and concealing itself most authentically through its creative expression.

Heidegger’s decisive confrontation seems paradoxical, leaving the reader to wonder how freedom might come to light as a possibility of being, bearing in mind the absence of individualist subjectivity? What is this freedom? Most importantly, it is something we cannot possess as though it were our tool. Instead, freedom precedes us: we are a property of freedom, though we must act free in our life of Care. The first grounding of freedom is the self-revealing of Being. Thus, freedom is Ontological, rather than individualist. In light of such conceptual framing, one must therefore ask if it is even possible to move Heidegger’s ideas from the abstract non-objectifying into the practical or actionable, finding traces of a response to his plea within contemporary art practice? Moreover, how might we supplement
Heidegger’s re-thinking of the aesthetic project in light of his ominous diagnosis and warning as concerns our relationship with technology? In an effort to answer these questions, the following chapters investigate specific artworks by artists Martha Rosler, Christian Boltanski, Krzysztof Wodiczko and finally, collaborators Noor Mirza and Brad Butler, whose creations offer a counterbalance to the erosion of the human capacity for thought as a particular feature of our Being, or Dasein and Mitsein (being-with), as proposed by Heidegger. Their shared characteristics lie in truth’s manifestation within artworks as happenings or events rather than a quest for fixed certainty or correspondence. The artists considered herewith catalyze a reckoning, compelling the viewer to question and reflect on his position in relation to the work and those in his midst. The common thread connecting them is a powerful shifting of thought — in a distinctly revelatory acting upon the viewer’s awareness. In other words, the artworks manifest a questioning disposition—one that is vital to our access into the ‘constellation of truth’ so central to Dasein.

More specifically, this investigation will demonstrate the ways that technē and poēsis intersect within the selected artworks, thereby animating the viewer’s capacity for reflection and thought. The marriage of the two nurtures the much-needed resistance to enframing while astounding (Heidegger’s term) the viewer into a contemplative state. As a result, what is unique to the artists, and the realm of art more generally, is the capacity for countering enframing, something I will establish is best done with a focus on ethico-political structures. We find, in this counter-intuitive move, that the saving power resides within the danger and the seeds for a response to Heidegger’s call to action emerges from within technē. Each of the chosen artists has undertaken thoughtful critiques of personal, contemporary or historical issues by means of material processes including light, time-based interventions,
space, carefully chosen artifacts and documents. Mnemonic triggers and associations are deployed in varying arrangements making deliberate use of the mediums of photography, film and installation. Current scholarship surrounding each artist has examined their significance primarily through analyses that focus on each artwork and its exhibition as existing independently from others.¹ The questions I will be asking, however, are based upon analyzing them in ascending chronological order while addressing the statements made by Heidegger (et al) with regards to reclaiming creative freedom through the provocation of thought. As we have begun to see above, Heidegger explains, “We must think alētheia, unconcealment, as the clearing that first grants Being and thinking and their presencing to and for each other” (Krell 445). This primary granting would itself be a pre-individualist act of ontological freedom. It follows that the proper practice of concrete human emancipation has this modality as its foundation. It is therefore the artist’s task to offer the space of clearing, enlisting the viewer’s active participation therein. This strategy does not aim to anchor each artist in a particular style or visual language. Instead, it is to recognize an evolving attitude toward truth as a multiple unfolding event — a form of unconcealment or revealing through which Being is returned to itself to dwell poetically in the world.

The chronological presentation of the artworks will expose an ongoing preoccupation with the ways technological expression, along with careful use and manipulation of both objects and archives, join in service of hermeneutic explorations of human existence through art. I will argue that, as technological aesthetic narratives are increasingly sophisticated and nuanced, politically conscious artists such as these become better able to harness their potential voices in deeply critical ways that allow the inter-subjective ethos of care to grow and thrive in dialogic expressions of truth. Furthermore,
the artists begin to formulate a way of considering and using technology that not only resists enframing by interrogating the very essence of our relationship with it, but also functions as a means of engaging with the question of Being itself (which encompasses Heidegger’s fundamental project). There is a democratization of access via mechanical distribution—something only made available in the relatively recent past, leveling the field for interaction with the artworks through their production and site-specific locales. While this negates the idea of a singular, settled authenticity of the work of art, artists now have the capacity to exceed mere representation, creating instead, more penetrating content that is able to affect our being and challenge the general submission of the mind to technology.

How, though, do we experience the primacy of freedom through the realm of art? Given this brief overview of Heidegger’s position with regards to creative thinking and dwelling, how must we best approach the present analysis? The varied artists’ projects need to be considered through the particular philosophical ideas appropriate to them. While Heidegger’s call to action forms the through-line that anchors the question of emancipation within the realm of art, his ideas alone fail to provide a satisfactory response and so require supplementation from other notable thinkers who extend them further. As we consider thinking as an ethical act, we must turn, for example, to Hannah Arendt, his former pupil. Arendt’s sustained study of the human condition and political theory concretized a number of Heidegger’s core ideas into more practical terms. Arendt brought to life some of the underpinnings of thinking and action, sensitively scripting the ways these must be nurtured in order to craft lasting global collaboration and, ultimately, peace. She injects the aesthetic project with cultural consequence, interpreting artworks as ‘thought things’ and carriers of meaning in their own right. We must also include Walter Benjamin’s voice, a longtime friend.
of Arendt’s, who did not survive Fascism to see the celebration of his own writing, though his ideas, much like those expressed by Arendt, had a clear foothold in history. Benjamin responded in real time to the events surrounding (and ultimately, overwhelming) him. His politicization of art as a response to fascist tendencies accentuates the importance of intention with a focus on the greater societal good. We must consider Arendt and Benjamin’s ideas in order to both ground Heidegger’s more abstract thinking and, also, to answer the question of enframing through both political and historical terms. While Heidegger’s call to action lays the foundation work for the overall dissertation, the subsequent layers afforded by Arendt, Benjamin and the other thinkers are indispensable to any advancement of my argument.

As we analyze the artworks, there are four foundational concerns we must foreground. The first addresses the temporal and contextual nature of being and examines the ways technological progress and historical events intersect. In other words, we must address the ways each artist belongs to a particular epoch and, as such, is shaped by environmental forces in play, whether past or present, particularly in light of their ethico-political concerns. These extrinsic influences might include acts of war, mass migrations or the Shoah, to name only a few. To best understand this relationship between artists and events, we will enlist thinkers Peter Sloterdijk, Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Susan Sontag, Jean Baudrillard and, of course, Benjamin and Arendt. We will define how Sloterdijk explains modernity in terms of atmo-terrorism, a conditioning force in play since the Germans introduced chemical warfare during WWI. Said, Spivak and Bhabha offer insights into the effects of colonialism and prolonged external domination. Sontag describes the relationship between events and the ubiquity of images. In addition, we will consider Karl
Marx’s economic ideas, particularly his thoughts on alienation, as we establish Heidegger’s call to action as an ethical demand.

The second thematic undercurrent questions artworks as sites of exchange in which complex intersubjective dynamics are set into motion. It is within this exchange that meaning is imparted and structures of enframing can be challenged. For clarity, we turn to Benjamin’s essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” which plays a critical role in this investigation as it explores the implications of reproducibility as a factor in disseminating meaning and prompting action. Reproducibility is of particular interest as the notion of aura is erased in the present list of artists’ works. Aura is replaced by multiplicity and an access to the open dimension of questioning, though we will discover this alteration carries with it some costs. In addition, there is an often-overlooked ambiguity that rests in Benjamin’s understanding of distraction—on the one hand, a thoughtless space from which the viewer absorbs the work of art (most notably film) and on the other, a space holding the potential for political agitation and progress. To understand the layers of thought underpinning this transference, we must turn to Roland Barthes on reading an artwork’s signification, Marianne Hirsch on post-memory, Baudrillard on our virtual world, and Michel Foucault on archives, fearless speech and structures of power. While each of these philosophers adds a different dimension to the notion of exchange, their ideas speak to the individual artworks and will most definitely expand our understanding.

A third, and resulting, layer analyzes the way each artist speaks to Heidegger’s call to action, positioning artworks as alethēiac spaces of truth, or happenings in which unconcealment of being is possible. What is it that translates an artwork into such an event of truth, a happening? Moreover, how can we experience the artwork as the site of
intersubjective exchange? There are a number of important thinkers who elucidate these questions including Miguel de Beistegui, Hans Georg Gadamer, Howard Caygill, J.F. Martel, Santiago Zabala and Gianni Vattimo. Each of these philosophers and theorists add much needed dimension and depth to Heidegger’s thoughts such that we might better understand the nuances of it in relation to contemporary quotidian experience. de Beistegui’s lucid accounting in *The New Heidegger* underscores the radical nature of Heidegger’s writing in a way that is relatable and functional, using stories to underpin his interpretations. Specifically, de Besteigui sheds light on nuanced concepts through the equally subtle intimate narrative of his own life. Gadamer, in turn, brings our focus to the hermeneutic methods of questioning and the role art plays in our lives. Caygill, Martel, Zabala and Vattimo advance theories that elucidate artworks as sites of exchange and happenings of truth, particularly extending the issue of resistance (in relation to enframing structures) into the domain of pluralistic intersubjectivity. The dialog that forms between their own expressed ideas is invaluable to the exploration of the artists in question.

The fourth fundamental thematic lens looks at the intersubjective ethical responsibility implied in Heidegger’s plea, a point that may not sit well with all who are informed about Heidegger’s life and personal choices. That said, in order to understand the importance of his call to action, we must enlist thinkers such as Emmanuel Lévinas, Paul Ricoeur, Arendt and George Smith, each of whom explores our responsibility for the other in a broadly expressed ethos of care. Gadamer’s *The Relevance of the Beautiful* speaks to the inherent power and responsibility of the work of art as a vehicle for imparting meaning and altering perception. Time, narrative and the implied ethical responsibility for the other will also be traced and examined primarily through the lens of Ricoeur’s *Reflections on a New*
Ethos for Europe and Oneself as Another, and Arendt’s Banality of Evil, The Human Condition, Responsibility and Judgment and “Thinking and Moral Considerations: a lecture.”

In addition, Lévinas’ Totality and Infinity, Entre Nous and their conceptions of the intersubjective primacy of the face will lend depth to the ethical dimension of the present work. I will also look at a post-Heideggerian idea of truth as variable and ever-changing, divorcing us and art from objective or fixed ideas to which we cling so dearly. Because the works in question include documents and archives, Derrida’s Archive Fever is noteworthy and will enhance the conversation, as well as Michel Foucault’s explorations of truth in The Order of Things and Fearless Speech.

While the thoughts of each aforementioned thinker are not limited to any one thematic stream, each one has further shaped this project and has directed the ways the texts converse with one another from chapter to chapter. Additional resources will include history texts relevant to the artworks in question, articles addressing our current geo-political condition, and a number of critiques, reviews and other printed matter. While the list of thinkers under consideration may appear quite long, each artwork requires a different set of lenses through which it can be best understood, thereby demanding additional texts, particularly as technologies progressed and their effects transformed their perception and reception.

The question that needs to be posed in a careful way, of course, is how? How does Heidegger’s call to action happen within the realm of art? In what is perhaps a forecast of what is to follow, while speaking of Heidegger’s essay, “The Origins of the Work of Art,” Gianni Vattimo identifies an important shift within the moment of exchange between an artwork and its percipient. He states, “This is […] the Stoss (shock) of the artwork: in
encountering a great artwork, the world I was accustomed to seeing becomes strange, is put into crisis in its totality, because the work proposes a new general reorganization of the world, a new historical epoch” (70). The reconfiguration of the percipient’s perspective is critical to the fostering of thought. If poetry qua art is lauded as the place in which imagination and expression dwell, the artists under consideration are able to harness the abstract potential of technological expression in a way that offers the viewer an opening in which translation and relation occur. We find, in these artists’ works, a counter to enframing, positive sequel to Heidegger’s fearful predictions, and, as such, a model for thinking that holds the keys to our freedom. What becomes most apparent is the shift from monological versions of truth to the polyphonic or dialogical perspectives. As we trace the arc of progress in the visual grammar deployed to make meaning, we will note an increasing awareness of intersubjectivity and the need to accept what Arendt calls the “fact of human plurality” along with a deliberate reciprocity between artist and percipient. In light of these thoughts, it would be an error for artists to hold a strict view of their own, or their works’, autonomy. Instead, the artwork and its experience become a site of exchange that as Heidegger observes ‘[gives] thought and thinking to us.’

Before turning to a survey of the forthcoming chapters, it must be noted that the ideas presented herewith are deeply motivated by a personal concern with regards to the impact technology continues to have on creative thought—most notably, its documented costs to one’s development of critical thinking and intersubjective relationships. These are not the concerns of a luddite—quite the contrary. Unlike Heidegger’s inclination toward retreating to his hut the Black Forest, I am well acquainted with the devices and tools at our twenty-first century disposal and, therefore, keenly aware of their usefulness and potential for good. That
said, the epoch into which I was born has been indelibly marked by the constant possibility of nuclear annihilation—an issue still permeating the geo-political landscape today. With this blend of experiences in mind, the current volumes of information regarding technology’s impact on the human mind are endless and alarming. Diminishing attentions spans, increased anxiety and depression, the fundamental inability to synthesize information are but a few of the issues under scrutiny. Sherry Turkle wrote *Alone Together*, Adam Alter, *Irresistible*, Nicholas Carr, in turn, penned *The Shallows*, and the list goes on. To note one example, Alter opens his prologue by exposing the fact that “the people producing tech products were following the cardinal rule of drug dealing: never get high on your own supply” (2). He follows, “these entrepreneurs recognize that the tools they promote—engineered to be irresistible—will ensnare users indiscriminately,” exposing an ongoing willingness on the part of big tech companies to jeopardize the consumer while safeguarding themselves (4). To this point, in his book *Reclaiming Art in the Age of Artifice*, J.F. Martel explains,

> It is not the technology that adapts to our needs and desires but our needs and desires that must conform to the technology. In the digital age, spectacle morphs into something more invasive than a show to be attended in bovine passivity. Loyal to the emergent aesthetic ideals of ‘interactivity’ and ‘immersion,’ we have become active participants in our own entrancement. We have gone from the spectacular to the spectral. (140).

Our wholesale adaptation to the demands of technology, whether on a micro or macro level, is alarming to say the least. How does one ever hope to overcome such pervasive distractions? Are we even cognizant enough to initiate such an overcoming? Jocelyn K. Glei’s book, *Manage Your Day to Day*, concludes that creativity requires a kind of meditative silence. This belief echoes Heidegger’s assertion: “The quiet heart of the clearing is the place of stillness from which alone the possibility of the belonging together of Being
and thinking, that is, presence and apprehending, can arise at all” (Krell 445). The clearing (Lichtung) becomes central to Heidegger’s later essays on thinking. He concludes that the presencing of thought is invited to appear through a quiet space of openness. As we will see, the sentiment is further reinforced in his essay “What Calls for Thinking” in which he states, “The question What calls for thinking? asks for what wants to be thought about in the preeminent sense: it does not just give us something to think about, nor only itself, but it first gives thought and thinking to us, it entrusts thought to us as our essential destiny, and thus first joins and appropriates us to thought” (Krell 391). Thought then precedes us (as language and freedom do also) and is returned to us as a characteristic of our essential destiny. It enters the meditative mind in its most open state, thereby returning us to our questioning dispositions in Dasein. While the astute investigations found in recent volumes regarding technology’s impact fall outside the scope of this study, their collective messages resonate deeply and, to a great extent, have fueled the present work. It is important to introduce, if briefly, how Heidegger’s warning about the reduction of human beings to standing reserves anticipates the underlying themes of much of the aforementioned literature — albeit indirectly.

Heidegger states, “Our answer to the question as to what the most thought-provoking thing might be is the assertion: most thought-provoking for our thought-provoking time is that we are still not thinking” (Krell 381). We are not thinking. These words have repeatedly struck me as prescient today in light of the digital dissemination of false statements and information, increasingly dividing large populations in a would-be nationalist furor. In response, I am drawing from a reading of Heidegger’s ideas and positioning his plea as an ethical demand — something he may well have resisted for the risk of falling into
normative structures. And yet, as one reads his thoughts, it is difficult to view them in any other way. He urgently explains,

The essential unfolding of technology threatens revealing, threatens it with the possibility that all revealing will be consumed in ordering and that everything will present itself only in the unconcealment of standing-reserve. Human activity can never directly counter this danger. Human achievement alone can never banish it. But human reflection can ponder the fact that all saving power must be of a higher essence than what is endangered, though at the same time kindred to it. (Krell 339)

Heidegger reframes a Marxist paradigm, ascribing the notion of standing reserve to human beings under technology’s sway, thereby shifting Marx’s focus from capital to human potential. Human beings are reduced to a standing-reserve. In short, he who challenges-forth (instead of engaging with Poëisis) becomes, in turn, challenged-forth by the enframing he unleashes and serves. Enframing conscripts the enframers. The remedy for such a reduction, beyond activity and achievement, is reflection upon the higher essence of Dasein’s birthright of creative thought and praxis. But, as we have begun to ask, can artists still produce meaningful responses in the post-Heideggerian age of technological enframing?

Again, the questions that follow address how this meaning might manifest and, as Heidegger indicates, can possibly reveal authentic truth as an ethical emancipatory path to freedom. Finally, as we come to see truth as an ever-becoming event, we ask: can artists ever hope to offer lasting solutions to our pervasive crisis of enframing?

While Heidegger’s essays have been the subject of extensive study, a clear examination of this particular call to action through contemporary artistic production remains elusive. Moreover, the call to action as an ethical demand has been scarce, though with notable exceptions in the writings of Charles Bambach and Miguel de Beistegui. We must therefore ask what makes this interpretation fundamental to understanding the “Question
Concerning Technology?” As we will see in Chapter 1, the introduction of an ethics to his plea also is absolutely warranted in light of the subscript embedded in his demand for our salvation through the arts. It can be said that, within this imperative, lies an implied responsibility for the other – a being-toward, or a Mitsein that would mean a being-with the other, suggesting the presence of an ethical charge – though others, including Emmanuel Lévinas, criticize Heidegger for not reaching far enough. As noted, ascribing an ethical character to Heidegger’s thought is not without challenges. Bambach lays bare some of these difficulties in his volume, Thinking the Poetic Measure of Justice, in which he explains: “This reluctance to confront the underlying resonance between justice and ethics is hardly fortuitous […] since it bespeaks an even deeper reticence on Heidegger’s part to proffer any plan or order for directing human action or behavior” (107). Indeed, the whole notion of an ethics, in Heidegger’s view, would put into crisis the temporal, fluid nature of Being, becoming simply another form of enframing. Instead, as Bambach clarifies, Heidegger’s project is “an ethics of being—in both senses of the genitive … thus [becoming] an ethics not of a ‘substance,’ but of a calling to the task of dwelling in the openness of the event of being, an event that appropriates us through its claim (Anspruch)” (11). Thus, as we approach Heidegger’s Technology essay as an ethical plea, we must position its motivation as a call to ‘dwell in the happenings of truth’ that is the work of art.

We will discover that each of our artists has carefully balanced the numerous properties of technology with the primacy of technē and, in so doing, have successfully achieved the lofty position Heidegger afforded to poetry qua art. Visual language holds the potential for a more universal understanding to come forth, and meaning is imparted with an economy of means. If poetry, per Heidegger, is a place wherein abstract ideas dwell,
allowing, through a suspension of time and space and a bridging of historical time, it thereby becomes the *piety of thinking* he so valued. Arendt writes, “Poetry, whose material is language, is perhaps the most human and least worldly of the arts, the one in which the end product remains closest to the thought that inspired it” (HC 169). Certainly, Heidegger concurs with Arendt’s position. Bambach quotes him: “[I]n such an age … what is necessary is that there be poets/thinkers who ‘reach into the abyss,’ since the turn away from the abyss is possible only if the abyssal as such is first ‘experienced and endured’” (Heidegger quoted in Bambach 189). It follows, as we move through our post-human condition, that reflective thinking accesses and lays bare the essence of morality. That said, perhaps the most profound challenge to my reading of Heidegger’s position as ethicist is Lévinas’ objection to his lack of consideration of the other, something Lévinas held as primary to philosophy. While we will question the translation of his ideas on *Mitsein* to intersubjectivity and dialogic truths, Lévinas’ writing on the face of the other becomes a critical extension of intersubjective ethics. Indeed, particularly as regards the work of Boltanski and Wodiczko, the face of the other is the source of our call to thinking and action within the installations. As we further analyze the artworks as sites of exchange, we must reconfigure our bearing so as to experience the infinite call to ethical responsibility as it issues from the other.

Heidegger’s life-long ontological investigation and his process of interrogating our relationship with ourselves in the context of our world merged with my own fascination with our *innate* capacity for creative expression — in its freest unfettered state. Moreover, building from past studies in human ideation and the creative process, I found that Heidegger’s urgent plea prompted a careful reconsideration of art’s potential as a truly
emancipatory force—literally returning our being to its authentic disposition. However, the ambiguity of his ideas compelled me to move from the abstract to the practical within the realm of contemporary art — particularly in the face of our current technological zeitgeist.

Given the rapid ascent of digital technologies and their corollary addictive properties, I wondered, while reading Heidegger, how he could have anticipated such a drastic, destructive enframing? Undoubtedly, the technological advances of the mid-twentieth century endangered our very existence, yet his questions are even more fundamental. They boil down to our primordial capacity for questioning and the open space for truth and thought to manifest — without which we cease to exist authentically. In the prologue to *The Human Condition*, Arendt writes, “[I]t could be that we, who are earth-bound creatures and have begun to act as though we were dwellers of the universe, will forever be unable to understand, that is, to think and speak about the things which nevertheless we are able to do” (HC 3). It may also be said, in relation to such a premise, that without the capacity to question and think, solutions to such global threats will be, at best, elusive. In Heidegger’s estimation (and again, influenced by Hölderlin), *we cease to dwell poetically*. This cessation, for Heidegger, endangers us to our core. But what does Heidegger mean exactly when pointing us toward the open space of truth (*Lichtung*)? Furthermore, is it compulsory that Heidegger’s open space manifest in all artworks, regardless of their ultimate purpose? If so, what does it bring to artistic production if such a disposition is mandated? Is it simply a matter of intention, an ascription only made to those artists who express what Walter Benjamin would term the ‘correct tendency’? What would have to be sacrificed from the normative habits of today’s art market? In short, must every artist become Heideggerian?
§ 1.2: A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

To best answer these questions, I submit that we need to revisit Heidegger’s plea from an intertextual standpoint, involving specifically his hermeneutic investigations of Dasein’s creative capacities, while simultaneously analyzing the artworks that generate a response to his thoughts. To this end, Chapter 1 begins with an examination of Heidegger’s “Question Concerning Technology,” including an elucidation of some of Heidegger’s more perplexing terminology. I will position the essay as an ethical call to action in light of the stated need for emancipation from technological enframing. In order to support this case, more established ethical theories will be unpacked, including the ideas of Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, Arendt and Lévinas. The overarching aim is to lay groundwork for subsequent chapters, while clarifying some of the more ambiguous concepts under consideration. The terms Dasein, enframing (ge-stell), alētheia, poēsis, technē and dwelling will be defined in relation to Dasein’s primordial creative impulse. Furthermore, we will investigate the meaning of Heidegger’s notions of Mitsein, Solicitude, Gelassenheit, (as an opposition to the aforementioned metaphysics of presence and its correlative in objectivizing reason) and Care as expressions of his ethical worries. Finally, chapter 1 will also acknowledge the challenges one faces when positioning Heidegger’s work as a call to action of any kind, given his own choices as a member of the Nazi Party and subsequent apparent lack of contrition. What becomes most important, and perhaps overrides his personal actions, is to understand the concern Heidegger expresses through “The Question Concerning Technology” and its implications for the survival of that which makes us human—our capacity for questioning and thought.
From this point of departure, *Chapter 2* brings our focus to the writing of Walter Benjamin, specifically his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” The purpose of this focus is to understand how meaning is imparted in reproduced artworks. Benjamin’s writing shifts from the abstract to the practical while reiterating an ethico-political call to action most deliberately expressed in his essay’s epilogue. I will argue that Benjamin advances art as a political vehicle while simultaneously acknowledging its potentially damaging side-effects. His work illustrates the historical nature of events and the importance of context when considering ideas. Through the lens of his writing, we will look briefly at artworks by Charlotte Salomon, Henryk Ross, John Heartfield and Hannah Hoch in order to understand the power of ubiquitous imagery and the potential alteration of meaning as expressed in politically motivated artworks. In addition, we will note the shift in perception with the advent of photography and film. As we begin to look for material manifestations of Heidegger’s ideas, Walter Benjamin’s notion of art’s loss of its *aura* and the reproduction’s ultimate perpetuation of *distraction*—both its negative and positive manifestations—in the technological age, will become especially salient.

Carrying forward Benjamin’s notion of “Author as Producer” (as detailed in his essay bearing the same name), *Chapter 3* examines the work of Martha Rosler whose career has focused on questioning power structures demanding that we think through any preconceived ideas regarding social exchange. Her political orientation allows for an application of theory to her artworks, while noting the liberation of thought Rosler manifests. I will argue that Rosler is able, through the use of mechanically produced imagery and staged installations, to cut through cultural inertia and prompt action. Her work embodies Benjamin’s emphasis on the correct tendency as the premise for emancipation. This chapter also seeks to demonstrate
the ways reproductions can function as *thought-things*, to use Arendt’s term, through their familiarity and re-presentation. Rosler’s ethico-political artistic activism fully implicates and activates the viewer as a participant in the exchange of meaning, drawing out the notion of community and intersubjective responsibility. She therefore offers a freedom that is not fundamentally individualistic. Her installation work and use of personal effects overlaps with the works of both Boltanski and Wodiczko, whose explorations of memory and trauma are explored in *Chapter 4*. Moreover, we also note in both chapters the use of *archives*, a locus of selected *remains* as described by Jacques Derrida. This layering creates a rich intersection at which the reproduced image acts as an *aide-mémoire* able to elicit powerful responses from its audience. All three artists, Rosler, Boltanski and Wodiczko, implicate the viewer within the exchange, either as translator or witness. The performative nature of the installations challenges enframing and creates the open space for thinking and reflection to occur.

To what end to these various inter-subjective experiences lead us? *Chapter 4* will assert that a more fundamental *alētheiac* truth is more readily accessed through constructed narratives and fictional elements. It will also reveal the ways technology can instigate thought provoking intersubjective dialogues, deepening our bonds to the lives of others. Our investigation will extend the archive and note memory as embodiments of narrative (both historical and personal). Memory will also be noted and analyzed as an access to collective truths. It is interesting to note how Heidegger positions memory as a “gathering of thought upon what everywhere demands to be thought about first of all” (Krell 376). He elaborates further:

Memory is the gathering of recollection, thinking back. It safely keeps and keeps concealed within it that to which at any given time thought must
first be given in everything that essentially unfolds, appealing to us as what has being and has been in being. Memory, Mother of the Muses—the thinking back to what is to be thought—is the source and ground of poesy. This is why poesy is the water that at times flows backward toward the source, toward thinking as a thinking back, a recollection. (Krell 376)

We must equate poesy to Heidegger’s realm of art with the capacity of a backwards flow to its own source. Thus, artworks have the capacity to tune into and ‘attune’ the mind, to recall memory and to forge an intersubjective disposition. Grasping the nature of memory and post-memory is necessary as one experiences the therapeutic and cathartic impact Boltanski and Wodiczko’s multi-layered works.

Finally, Chapter 5 reaches the apex of current technological capabilities as experienced in Noor Mirza and Brad Butler’s 17-minute video essay, The UnreliableNarrator—a powerful encapsulation of history, memory, and current events as seen through the horrors of the Mumbai terror attacks of 26 November 2008. A careful reading of the video essay is needed in order to fully experience the opening of our intersubjective ethical disposition within the polyphonic happening of truth. As perhaps the most multi-layered and dialogic of the artworks considered herewith, Mirza and Butler’s video essay exposes the sediments of history as it manifests in current acts of global terror. The narrative, while embedded in advanced technological systems of information and surveillance, puts enframing into crisis by undermining discourse and altering the viewer’s biases, whether embedded in history or a result of cultural memory. The seamless jointure of archive, CCTV footage, news reels and Bollywood re-enactments creates a profoundly disquieting truth, laying bare the effects of centuries of dominance and political oppression. The common thread binding each of the artists under consideration resides in the dialogic access to truth as event and in the resulting provocation of thought born in one’s active participation within
multiple planes of experience. Finally, in direct response to Heidegger’s call to action spelled out at the end of the “Question Concerning Technology,” each artist, in concert with thinkers like Arendt, Lévinas and Ricoeur, for whom the importance of inter-subjective consideration and dialogic relation is paramount, the post-human ethical position is brought to light.

§ 1.3: LOOKING AHEAD

Important questions and challenges remain. To what end does such an aesthetic investigation lead? What does it matter that, for Dasein, thought arises in silence, or that critical contemplation through the language of art might set us free to creatively think our way out of enframing qua alienation? Who or what exactly needs to be freed? Perhaps more fundamentally, what is truly at stake? In response, Heidegger asks the following:

But what help is it to us to look into the constellation of truth? We look into the danger and see the growth of the saving power.

Through this we are not yet saved. But we are thereupon summoned to hope in the growing light of the saving power. How can this happen? Here and now and in little things, that we may foster the saving power in its increase. This includes holding always before our eyes the extreme danger. (Krell 338)

Within Heidegger’s warning we apprehend a glimmer of hope, found in the ‘here and now and in little things, that we may foster the saving power in its increase.’ There is a suggestion of awareness and living in the present authentically—both of which would allow for the slow growth of a reversal to the danger. As though nurturing an a priori disposition in its infant state, Heidegger proposes a mood of Care, fundamental to Dasein’s survival. He states, “The meditative man is to experience the untrembling heart of unconcealment” (Krell 444), thereby restoring Dasein’s returning of thought to itself. It
seems antithetical to suggest that the use and dissemination of mechanically reproduced images and artworks might have the necessary disruptive power for opening space for thinking and Being to emerge. The authentic singularity of art is supplanted by a multiplicity of images, putting in crisis the thing in itself and our experience of a work of art as the locus of truth. To this point, Heidegger rejects the proposition that the thingly character of an artwork carries its import. Instead, he suggests an artwork precedes its objecthood and opens up a world — giving itself to thinking as an antidote to enframing. Simon Glendinning explains, “As such a happening of truth, the essence of art, like the essence of modern technology, is an event of unconcealment: the opening up of a world” (Glendinning, § 5). Heidegger’s position that it is within the realm of art that we reinstate Dasein’s full potential makes clear the notion that art, as creative outside force, is able, through its contemplation of our enframing, to manifest a reversal by means through the clearing of alêtheia.

While it is sure that Heidegger affords art the potential to open thinking, the idea that this would occur through the technologically driven artwork remains potentially problematic; yet this is exactly the manner in which art allows a dwelling to occur. It is in the re-presentation of a reproduced image, whether still or moving, that interrupts the viewer’s expectations — essentially astounding him out of complacency. In David Krell’s introduction to Heidegger’s essay The Essence of Truth, he states:

To let unconcealment show itself: this is perhaps the most succinct formulation of the task of Heidegger’s thinking. At the heart of the task stands the question of freedom, a freedom that refers us back to the discussion of Dasein as transcendence. However, “freedom” and “transcendence” no longer mean what traditional morals and metaphysics take them to mean. Both refer to the mystery of the openness or “clearing” (Lichtung) of Being, ‘the clearing that shelters.’ Finally, the task requires
that we think historically. The word Wesen ("essence") in the title of the essay is to be thought historically as an "essential unfolding." (113)

“The mystery of the openness or clearing” resides at the heart of the matter. In the case of each of the chosen artists, the use of technology leads to the mystery of openness that is \( \text{alētheia} \), raising the content to a form of poetic expression, allowing abstract ideas to flow, thereby shifting human consciousness. In some ways, the artists are able to recover the \( \text{aura} \) of a true \( \text{technē} \) in their works – not in terms of reinstating a work’s traditional sense as a directive or ritual for ascertaining truth, yet still regaining the mystery inherent within a work that would be original (or, in Heidegger’s sense, ‘originary’) despite its technological origins.

Having laid out the path ahead, a significant obstacle remains. We must still answer the larger questions of what \( \text{Being} \) is at risk and why \( \text{Freedom} \)? Christopher Yates refers to this as the problem of humanism and it is one with which we must reckon. Simply put, if our concern is about \( \text{emancipation} \), then what ontology of subjectivity (and freedom therein) is being assumed? After all, Heidegger and the post-structuralists sought to destroy traditional liberal enlightenment individualism, so what is this \( \text{person} \) and \( \text{community} \) that is needing to be emancipated? What is at stake is our ability to dwell creatively, to be in the world as we are, practicing our questioning nature within quotidian experience. Just as Heidegger would resist the normative characteristics embedded within traditional conceptions of ethics, so, too, would he balk at the notion of a fixed self. Heidegger proposes to resolve the problem of fixity within subjectivity by negating our presumptions to think and act on the basis of individualist autonomy. I propose that, in order to overcome this problem, \( \text{Dasein} \) comes to be in the experiential intersubjective exchange at the site of the artwork, and it is within this exchange that we recover “here and now and in the little things” a measure of our authentic disposition. Thus, as we have begun to unpack notions of freedom as non-objectivist and
unfettered by the calculative thinking of the past, we must also establish the nature of Dasein as a radical departure from Cartesian certainty. We must keep our attention on what is truly at risk. To advance Arendt’s understanding that “The immediate source of the artwork is the human capacity for thought” (HC 168), we must also understand Dasein’s authentic disposition within creative interrogation and thinking while considering emancipation from enframing as the pre-individualist act of ontological freedom.

The interpretation of poetry qua art as a place of dwelling offers a space of redemption from the collective forfeiture of Dasein. The need to address this topic stems from the profound loss of being and the catastrophic risk that Heidegger expresses—concerns that are manifesting in all manner of digital addictions and attention disorders. In his essay “On the Essence of Truth,” Heidegger explains, “to let be—that is, to let beings be as the beings which they are—means to engage oneself with the open region and its openness into which every being comes to stand, bringing that openness, as it were, along with itself” (Krell 125). With this, Heidegger reintroduces his use of the Greek word alētheia in order to underscore its significance as un-concealment or disclosing of truth. Only by means of access to this place of openness, through the portal of alētheia, can we hope to know truth’s essence. It is also noteworthy that in its original interpretations, alētheia sheds light upon its subject, offering illumination and perhaps, loosely, clarification.

In sum, the artists presented in this dissertation will show the power and potential of artworks to awaken us. Their impact is visceral and timeless. The memory they engage is collective and very much an active force of reckoning, connecting individuals with their intersubjective responsibility. The artworks in question are as temporal as being. None is created to last indefinitely within the walls of traditionally conceived art museums. Traces of
the artworks are carried forward through videos and online accounts, making it imperative that we be physically within the installations—in its immediate proximity—if one is to take in the full measure of its potential. That said, it is still possible, in the post-digital realm, to experience some part of the intended meaning and take away a measure of its significance.

We will conclude with lingering concerns. How far can ethico-political artists go in opening their audience to thinking and action? Have the artists considered herewith resolved the challenges of the ontology of selfhood in relation to our experience of the work of art? In light of the underpinning motivation of this dissertation, and the culminating ideas as seen in the artwork of Noor Mirza and Brad Butler, this dissertation concludes with Arendt’s understanding of plurality and self-understanding, a moral compass born from having to live with oneself. Arendt explains: “The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and probability … The new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle” (HC 178). It is within the juxtaposition of forceful thought, philosophical inquiry and artistic expression that we recover our natural agency to be free, authentically living our Dasein. The result is a releasing of predispositions and discourse in favor of an intersubjective ethos of care and responsibility, thus undermining the very possibility of enframing.
CHAPTER 1:

HEIDEGGER’S ARTICULATION OF CARE IN “THE QUESTION CONCERNING TECHNOLOGY”

In what follows we shall be questioning concerning technology. Questioning builds a way. We would be advised, therefore, above all to pay heed to the way, and not to fix our attention on isolated sentences and topics. The way is one of thinking. All ways of thinking, more or less perceptibly, lead through language in a manner that is extraordinary. We shall be questioning concerning technology, and in so doing we should like to prepare a free relationship to it. The relationship will be free if it opens our human existence to the essence of technology. When we can respond to this essence, we shall be able to experience the technological within its own bounds.

—Martin Heidegger, The Question Concerning Technology

§1.1: INTRODUCTION

Heidegger opens his essay entitled “The Question Concerning Technology” with an important statement: “In what follows we shall be questioning . . . questioning builds a way” and this way is “one of thinking” (Krell 311, emphasis mine). From this position, he sets forth the aim of his enterprise: to assure our “free relationship” to the essence of technology thereby returning us to an open region of truth needed for our very survival. It is important to recognize in his careful choice of words a distinct focus, one which endeavors to guide us back to our authentic selves as demanded by Dasein. For Heidegger, our being-in-the-world
allows *Dasein* to live out its ongoing interrogation of the meaning of Being. Despite Heidegger’s expressed resistance to any fixed claims or moral underpinnings, these introductory reflections suggest a deeply felt concern for the preservation of that which he believes will allow us to know truth in any meaningful way. From a place of questioning, through a *piety of thought*, Heidegger seeks to ensure our ultimate freedom by means of its capacity for opening us to *truth*—a truth that is challenged by the societal forces that *enframe* us, robbing us of our innate capacities. Furthermore, the particular freedom Heidegger suggests demands us to remain open, in a disposition he calls *Gelassenheit*. It is a challenge that proposes to eradicate the underlying problems born in our disposition toward merging with others or, in Friedrich Nietzsche’s parlance, adhering to the herd, for to practice freedom in the relationship to truth consists in thinking and questioning, particularly as a matter of rivaling enframing through an encounter with the creativity of *poēisis*.

These are certainly lofty goals, asserted at the beginning of an oft-read and still profoundly prescient essay. His intentions establish the measure of what is to come for us as his readers. Questioning and thinking are fundamental to Dasein, which, for Heidegger, is defined by our interrogation of our very relationship to being—an interrogation we implicitly already live, yet one needing to be practiced more overtly. He concerns himself with its existential structures, or otherwise stated, the structures of our ‘hermeneutic’ (as contrasted with ‘objectifying’) relationship to the immanent plane of life, including its projects, objects, and completeness. In short, if we question and think, remaining in the open region contemplative *Gelassenheit*, we are nurturing that which is essential to us and forges a space for freedom.
The present chapter offers an examination of Heidegger’s “Question Concerning Technology” that focuses on how the essay is built firmly upon an ethical foundation, of which the explicit imperative is a call to return home to our authentic selves lest we remain imprisoned by our relationship to technology. His ethics is reflected in our existence as an ongoing process delimited only by our finitude. It must be made amply clear that Heidegger is not implicating technology per se, as we understand the term today. Rather, his writing aims to expose the illusion of control we believe ourselves to have vis à vis our relationship to the broader concrete lived experience. Miguel de Beistegui, in his book The New Heidegger, explains, “With the technological world view, man moves further and further away from his own essence, to which, from the very start, Heidegger was concerned to reawaken us” (110). This essence is not a metaphysical nor supersensible one, but one that is manifested in ordinary quotidian existence. As such, our ethical role is to return to the finite essence of Dasein. Ultimately, Heidegger’s ethics of thinking leads to an ethics of action and is extended further in Hannah Arendt’s project. To this end, the importance of Heidegger’s opening thoughts cannot be overstated. He prepares his reader for what he hopes will be a transforming revelation that we, as a species, are on a calamitous path of self-destruction. As de Beistegui further explains, “Far more extraordinary is our inability to take its full measure, to understand fully and reflect upon the ‘attack’ with technological means that is organized on the life and nature of man. In comparison, Heidegger [stated], ‘the explosion of the hydrogen bomb means little’ (107). For those who have grown up in the shadows of nuclear proliferation, such a statement is startling.

Our exploration will shed light on Heidegger’s concern for our being-in-the-world as an ongoing ontological process in balance and simultaneity with a cultural diagnosis. The
two, while distinct in nature, can co-exist and promote other thinking. Moreover, this balancing addresses the ethical undercurrent as a call for thinking and action in light of what Heidegger calls *Gestell* or enframing. It would be a mistake to perceive Heidegger setting forth normative rules to which we must adhere. Mandating behavior undermines the very essence of an ethics and would unsettle Heidegger’s understanding that there is no permanent essence nor code to which we can hold fast. And, yet, an intersubjective responsibility lingers. Heidegger’s ideas point us to another way of existing that he subsequently connects with meditative or non-objective thinking—a modality strongly suggestive of Arendt’s later writing and ethics of thinking. Not only are we fully responsible for actualizing ourselves through our temporal lives, we must also become aware of the virtue inherent in fully expressing the essence of Dasein. This disposition relates dynamically to the property or substance of freedom, noting all the while the nature of ‘possibility’ or ‘becoming’ in Dasein’s being-in-the-world.

Heidegger’s consideration of the “Question Concerning Technology” is broad in its reach, returning us to Aristotle while simultaneously forecasting the slippage of meaning in post-modern culture. My study of his ethical plea will be expressed in three parts. The first addresses both the methodology and terminology fundamental to Heidegger’s unique philosophical perspective. Understanding Heidegger’s radical departure from the norms of philosophical inquiry will help lay the foundation for later chapters, making accessible the terminology deployed to describe the necessity for our disentanglement via the art’s ‘saving power.’ The second focus explores ethics as a long-standing philosophical tradition and will consider specifically the writings of Aristotle, John Stuart Mill, Immanuel Kant, Emmanuel Lévinas and Hannah Arendt. This brief overview is intended to shed light on some of the
touchstones in philosophical ethics that resonate within the currents in Heidegger’s writing as distinct from purely technological concerns, though these touchstones are not repeated per se. These ideas are presented in Appendix A and distilled herewith in order to keep a focus on the immediate task at hand. Moreover, as we examine artworks in forthcoming chapters, the conversation will draw connections from the “Question Concerning Technology” to more recent ethical considerations, including those of Paul Ricoeur, Jean-François Lyotard and others whose works carry traces of Heidegger’s ideas. Finally, I will utilize contemporary scholarship by (namely) Charles Bambach and Miguel de Beistegui to assist in interpreting Heidegger’s ideas within our current human condition. In sum, the combination of a genealogy of ethics and more recent philosophical thought will assist in carrying Heidegger’s ethics forward, exposing the steady continuum of our need for self-understanding and care while also undertaking a close reading of the Technology essay and its nuanced implications.

§1.2: HEIDEGGER’S THEMES + UNDERCURRENTS

To begin, it is important to note the methodology Heidegger chose as a philosopher. His phenomenological hermeneutics of fundamental ontology allowed him to radically challenge the long-standing metaphysical structures of thinking upon which modern philosophical movements were built. Heidegger believed the Cartesian interpretation of a divided man was a grave error, noting that we cannot help but be-in-the-world and in an interpretive relationship with all we encounter. His ontological vision was of a whole and dynamic being whose entity was always already in relation to the world. He explains, “[T]he expression ‘phenomenology’ signifies primarily a concept of method. It does not characterize the what of the objects of philosophical research in terms of their content, but the how of
such research” (BT 26). His use of the word ‘research’ is noteworthy as a reflection of his phenomenological approach. It accentuates the interpretive nature of hermeneutics and the possibility for openness as fluid truths emerge. Following Edmund Husserl, he continues, “The term ‘phenomenology’ expresses a maxim that can be formulated: ‘To the things themselves!’” (BT §28, 26). Conceptualizing the Greek origins of the term, he identifies the root of phenomenon as ‘showing itself’, “thus φαίνεσυαι means: what shows itself, the self-showing, the manifest” (BT §28, 27). He continues by describing the ‘coming to presence’ that ultimately establishes his notion of truth as alētheia, something we positioned in the Introduction and will explore in more detail throughout this project. Heidegger follows up on the ‘self-showing’ by exposing the nuances of Greek language with respect to differences in root meanings. He shows us, in the very way he approaches language, the hermeneutic methodology at work, notably its interpretive nature and disclosive capabilities.

The second underlying word related to the method of phenomenology is logos, λόγος. Its original translation is ‘discourse,’ a conduit by which knowledge might be shared. Discourse points to an open exchange of ideas that, by default, implicates thinking. It is a term Heidegger believes gathered divergent meanings after Plato and Aristotle, thereby complicating our understanding of its initial intent. He states, “The later history of the word λόγος, and especially the manifold and arbitrary interpretations of subsequent philosophy, constantly conceal the authentic meaning of discourse—which is manifest enough” (BT §32, 30). If we combine the terms, the word phenomenology implies a revelation of discourse and ongoing interrogation of that which, quite simply and entirely, is.

Heidegger shifts phenomenology to its ontological space in which hermeneutic investigation fosters disclosure. He elaborates,
Ontology and phenomenology are not two different disciplines which among others belong to philosophy. Both terms characterize philosophy itself, its object and procedure. Philosophy is universal phenomenological ontology, taking its departure from the hermeneutic of Dasein, which, as an analysis of existence [Existenz], has fastened the end of the guideline of all philosophical inquiry at the point from which it arises and to which it returns. (BT §7, 36)

If we come to understand phenomenology as self-showing through discourse, its methodology gives us license to pursue and investigate more open-ended questions without requiring any purported assignment of fixed ontological or epistemic ‘facts’ or final, definitive answers. Phenomenology maintains the fluidity of our living structures and permits the openness Heidegger believed so important to our nature. His method of ‘fundamental ontology’ (§40, 182-183), in turn, consists in a kind of recalibration of our default thinking that, in a way, prepares for the ethical component underpinning the Technology essay.

This ontological exploration of the structures of Dasein yields a new approach to our being. It acknowledges the existential structures that drive us in our interactions. Throughout the first half of Being and Time, Heidegger’s investigation of these ‘existentials’ exposes the nature of our existence:

Anxiety reveals in Dasein its being toward its ownmost potentiality of being, that is being free for the freedom of choosing and grasping itself. Anxiety brings Dasein before its being free for . . . (propensio in), the authenticity of its being as possibility which it always already is. But, at the same time, it is this being to which Dasein as being-in-the-world is entrusted. (BT §40,182)

Anxiety, for Heidegger, is an ‘attunement’—a mode of knowing quite distinct from objectivist or subject/object modes. It is a motivating force driving much of our momentum in being-toward-death, defining us as finite beings. de Bestegui explains,
Step by step, little by little, Heidegger introduces his reader to the reality of nothingness, which he locates in the state of mind or, better said perhaps, the ‘mood’ or ‘attunement’ (*Stimmung*) we call anxiety. Unlike fear, which is always fear of something, anxiety is the feeling generated by the experience of the withdrawal and the vanishing of all things. (10)

Anxiety manifests itself within the abyss created by notions of emptiness and void. It is within this open region that we might best come to encounter ourselves—this is the crux of what evades us in our currently enframed state. Accordingly, we will examine how Heidegger exposes the freedom Dasein needs to live authentically with its inherent anxiety and underlying ‘potentiality.’ The bracketing of certainty, of correspondence and fixity, fosters a constant and pressing concern leading to the possibility for living fully and authentically. This shift in our understanding truly requires a recalibration of thinking in relation to being and its inter-connectedness to the world.

Several key Heideggerian terms must be established. The proposed definitions are distillations from a variety of essays, most notably “The Origins of the Work of Art” (1936), “On the Essence of Truth” (1943), “Poetically Man Dwells” (1951), and “The Question Concerning Technology” (1949-53). In all cases, I am maintaining the hermeneutic premise that their meaning is fluid and opens itself to the reader in context with the topic at hand, in much the way that truth, for Heidegger, is an ebbing and flowing of concealment and revelation. The first of these terms is Dasein, a word to which Heidegger attributed enormous value in relation to the manner in which human beings *dwell* in the world. In German, *Da* indicates a ‘here’ or ‘there’ while *Sein* is the infinitive of the verb ‘to be’.² Combining the two gives us, literally, ‘being there’. Perhaps in its simplest undertones, it speaks of a mindfulness stated in contemporary parlance as *be present, here and now*, invoking not a
particular place as much as a state of being or involvement. It reflects Heidegger’s essential preoccupation with our being-in-the-world and the infinite relationships beings have with the all-encompassing nature of our surroundings. He makes an important distinction that moves away from the idea of subjectivity as previously understood: “Dasein is an entity which, in its very Being, comports itself understandingly towards that Being” (BT §12, 53). Our interrogative/hermeneutic nature is not simply a ‘property’ or ‘predicate’ of us but fully embodies how and who we are. He continues, “Mineness belongs to any existent Dasein, and belongs to it as the condition which makes authenticity and inauthenticity possible” (BT §12, 53). In other words, Dasein thinks reflectively about its life and purpose, and yet human beings have a tendency to conceal it in a way that results in what he will call ‘forgottenness.’

In order to authentically fulfill its role, Dasein must be open to its purpose in much the way Aristotle would suggest being our best self. Heidegger explains, “If Dasein discovers the world in its own way \([eigens]\) and brings it close, if it discloses to itself its own authentic Being, then this discovery of the ‘world’ and this disclosure of Dasein are always accompanied by a clearing-away of concealments and obscurities, as a breaking up of the disguises with which Dasein bars its own way” (BT §27, 125). de Beistegui elaborates:

> In being resolved, existence liberates itself from its own entrapment in the absorbed life of everydayness. It frees itself for itself, as this ability to be (or disclose) being. It turns itself into an ‘I’ or a \(proper\) self. As such, being resolved amounts to ‘liberating the humanity in man, to liberating the humanity of man, that is, the essence of man, to letting the Dasein in him become essential.’ (49)

Thus, there is a recognition that Dasein, in order to live life fully, must struggle in self-reflection, aware of the temporal nature of being. Heidegger ultimately seeks to unconceal
this intrinsic mode of our being in order to reinstate the fundamental practice of *Care* (BT §42, §57 and §65).

Further terms used to describe our condition are *Care, Thrown-ness, fallenness, authenticity* and, as we have begun to see, *being-in-the-world*—nominatives denoting the living structures of our being at work in each moment of existence. Each of these descriptions opens us to understanding our intricate interconnections, not only with the objects in our lives but also amidst other human beings—our family, culture, historical moment, etc. One might here in such terms an echo of Kant’s attention to the *a priori* structures of consciousness, however with Heidegger the terms name the facets of our dynamic ontic-ontological situation ‘in-the-world,’ as opposed to alleged universal faculties of consciousness. The difference between a ‘transcendental’ study and a ‘fundamental ontology’ is also evident in Heidegger’s attention to Dasein’s intrinsic ‘relational’ dynamics. His analysis of components within our ‘being-with’ (our *Mitsein*, and later, *Miteinandersein*) suggests an intersubjective situation of responsibility in our comportment to others. One is tempted to hear in this an echo of Aristotle’s observation: “No one would choose to live without friends, even if he had all the other goods” (EN 141), and “the highest form of justice seems to be a matter of friendship” (EN 142); we will return to this association when we later discuss *Miteinandersein*, together with the critical engagements of Arendt and Lévinas. For the moment, we turn to a related and foundational definition—his understanding of Care or *Sorge*.

Care, for Heidegger, is inextricably bound in our lives as temporal, mood-affected beings. His nuanced understanding of Care sheds light on the ways in which we interact with our surroundings and those in them. Care bridges the past and the future, exposing the ways
in which our anxiety functions in relation to the inevitability of time. It heralds an existential point of view from which beings must generate their own selves – as ongoing ‘possibilities’ – and, in so doing, experience the anxiety that is provoked by such a responsibility. This need for choice motivates a darker manifestation of surrender of self-care to *theyness* in which we abandon our own thinking and allow others to act on our behalf. Care accompanies our intrinsic structures as an entity of *lived possibility*. Thus, it needs to be purposefully practiced as the guiding mode of our being-in-the-world, not simply an extension of it. Heidegger illustrates the infinite potentialities of Care in the following passage:

\[
Dasein's \text{ facticity is such that its Being-in-the-world has always dispersed itself or even split itself up into definite ways of Being-in. The multiplicity of these is indicated by the following examples: having to do with something, producing something, attending to something and looking after it, making use of something, giving something up and letting it go, undertaking, accomplishing, evincing, interrogating, considering, discussing, determining. (Krell 222)}
\]

All of these various concerns place us in relationship either with others or the equipment that describes our functioning. The implication of Care is that we take ownership of these engagements. While the various states of being as described by Care are not laden with moral values, remaining instead observations of our comportment, there lingers, particularly in solicitude (see §26 & §27 from *Being and Time*), a concern and responsibility for the other. We will consider how Lévinas’ conception of the *face of the other* flags shortcomings in Heideggerian Care, but for now note that a structure of interdependency is here at work in the way the self-relation happens as a self-other and self-world relation.

The inherent responsibility that accompanies self-care strongly forecasts the Existentialist movement that would espouse ultimate responsibility for our earthbound lives.
Michael Inwood explains, “Authenticity favors helping others to stand on their own two feet over reducing them to dependency” (36). This intersubjectivity is illustrated in *Being and Time* wherein Heidegger states, “The expression *care for self* by analogy with concern [for equipment, etc.] and solicitude [for others] would be a tautology” (qtd. in Inwood 36; BT 193). Inwood examines this notion of care and solicitude further, “In *Being and Time*, Sorge seems to pertain to Dasein’s direction of its own life or ‘being’ with Heidegger later insisting that it is ‘solely “for the sake of beyng”, not the beyng of man, but the beyng of beings as a whole’” (37). For our present purposes, Heidegger’s explicit intention to address humanity as a whole returns us to the ethical undercurrent that is scaffolding his thoughts.

The notion of *solicitude* bridges to another term deployed in Heidegger’s writing, one we have noted as *Mitsein* or, in translation, ‘being-with.’ Its other incarnation is *mitdasein*, underscoring its immediate relationship with Dasein (BT 113–130). Heidegger explains, “Others are, rather, those from whom one mostly does *not* distinguish oneself, those among whom one also is” (BT 115). He continues by stating, “Being-in is *being-with [Mitsein]* others. The innerworldly being-in-itself of others is *Dasein-with [Mitdasein]*” (BT 115). With this qualification, we can move from *care* to the understanding of our inextricable existence amidst other beings, where humans find and establish structures of conduct in order for such coexistence to be tenable. Our interactions underscore our relational disposition. In many ways, we fight an ever-present anxiety by seeking the security available to us through the presence of the *other*. It must be stressed that we are by default *always already* in the midst of the *other*. We cannot experience life in a vacuum nor can we contemplate ourselves in total isolation. Although Heidegger does not go so far as Lévinas in highlighting the foundational ethical grounding of the intersubjective self, he does emphasize the
interdependency and influence we experience in everyday living and the formation of many of our guiding principles or ethical codes.

Here an important tension emerges: the need to remain functionally autonomous while co-existing. This is an expression of care in relation to those who surround us; we keep intact our expression and other thinking while conducting ourselves among them. Heidegger is not suggesting that we isolate ourselves, as he clearly understands that Mitsein demands we work out our connectedness within our temporal life context. Incorporating this idea in association with Heidegger’s later thought, Charles Bambach explains this communion through the poetry of Hölderlin:

To dwell poetically upon the earth (PF 788-89), to find therein one’s genuine home, Hölderlin intimates, means to recognize the other as essential to self-identity. The alterity of the foreign brings us back to ourselves if we are able to undertake the difficult journey of exploration outward in a spirit of openness toward the “distance” and “difference” of that which is fremd, strange or foreign. (55)

The ‘difficult journey’ epitomizes the struggle we must overcome: that of maintaining our ‘selves’ in the presence of the other. In addition, the need to practice our relations in an authentic way demands an awareness of its attributes. Heidegger presents this challenge in terms of theyness (das Man). Accepting our position in relation to our fellow beings implies knowing how to keep the agency of our thoughts intact despite the desire to merge. We have a duty, per Heidegger, to practice self-care, including the valuing of our capacity for contemplation so reminiscent of Aristotelian virtue. This practice becomes increasingly important as we move into the essence of technology and confront the nature of its enframing. If we pay no heed to our inclination to merge with others, to the surrender of ourselves to Nietzsche’s herd, we risk traveling through our finite existence in a
forgottenness that sustains inauthenticity. Speaking to the manifestation of this tension in era, Heidegger observes:

Since the subject is conceived shorn as it were of this Sein-bei. . ., a fragmentary subject, the question about being-with-each-other [Miteinandersein] and its essence also takes a wrong turn. Since both subjects are undetermined, a more elaborate arrangement must as it were be found than the nature of the case requires. The underdetermination of subjectivity causes an overdetermination of the relation between subjects. (Inwood 31)

At issue is the challenge of navigating the intersubjectivity of the self (Dasein) without fragmenting one’s self or other selves. Mitsein conveys how our co-existence is an inevitable aspect of our being and, therefore, affects our manner of living to a significant extent, but authenticity (and its functioning autonomy) demands a cautious awareness of these dynamics. While endeavoring to practice ‘care’ and ‘solicitude,’ we must bear in mind that “Others are not to be conceived as alien beings from whom one distinguishes oneself: the others are rather those from whom one mostly does not distinguish oneself, among whom one is too” (BT 118). The same dynamic processes apply to the event of truth in our everyday interactions and their disclosure to awareness. To the notion of truth as a multifaceted and fluid event, Heidegger introduces his reader to alētheia (see, namely, §44 of Being and Time and “On the Essence of Truth”).

Alētheia, a transliteration of the Greek term ἀλήθεια, is a significant aspect of Heidegger’s thinking on art and truth. It is widely understood and advanced in Greek thought as an illumination or revealing. de Beistegui explains that it is rooted in the Greek word Aletheuein, or “operations of truth of which the human soul is capable” (108). Alētheia initiates a process, situating truth as an ongoing event and setting forth an ever-becoming
revelation. Something thereby discloses itself to us and subsequently withdraws. Heidegger states, “The Greeks have the word *alētheia* for revealing. The Romans translate this with *veritas*. We say *truth* and usually understand it as correctness of representation” (Krell 318). We must hear the final comment as a critique; to Heidegger’s mind, our understanding of truth as something fixed cannot correspond with the essence of truth as an ongoing series of revelations. In the *Technology* essay he observes,

> The correct always fixes upon something pertinent in whatever is under consideration. However, in order to be correct, this fixing by no means needs to uncover the thing in question in its essence. Only at the point where such an uncovering happens does the true propriate. For that reason the merely correct is not yet the true. Only the true brings us into a free relationship with that which concern us from its essence. (Krell 313)

We recognize in these thoughts a condemnation of calculable truth in favor of that which brings us to a ‘free relationship’ from its ‘essence.’ In its disclosing, *alētheia* offers freedom, and this signification relates likewise to ‘essence’ as that which unfolds and reveals itself. It exceeds the notion of correspondence in its originary nature. David Krell expresses this unfolding succinctly in his preface to Heidegger’s essay “On the Essence of Truth:”

> To *let* unconcealment *show itself*: this is perhaps the most succinct formulation of the task of Heidegger’s thinking. At the heart of the task stands the question of *freedom* . . . a freedom that refers us back to the discussion of *Dasein* as *transcendence*. However, ‘freedom’ and ‘transcendence’ no longer mean what traditional morals and metaphysics take them to mean. Both refer to the openness or ‘clearing’ (*Lichtung*) of Being, ‘the clearing that shelters.’ (113)

Krell underscores the shift Heidegger is making in his understanding of Essence—away from metaphysical notions of fixity and correspondence to a more fluid medium of openness and shelter while maintaining its strength and potential. “On the Essence of Truth” provides
the groundwork for our understanding of the later “Question Concerning Technology” and clarifies Heidegger’s position vis à vis unconcealment and truth as \textit{alētheia}. Once again, Heidegger shifts \textit{essence} from that which is fixed to a finite and ongoing event. It retains its particular characteristics yet flows unbounded with the course of history, specifically, the dynamism within the history of Being. Further, the connections that Heidegger makes between \textit{alētheia} as a revelation and art making will shed light on further discussions of the operation of works of art in contemporary culture. (This relationship will be especially clear as we discuss Karen Mirza and Brad Butler’s work \textit{The Unreliable Narrator}.)

Where does Heidegger’s vocabulary lead us? Ultimately, his terminology highlights the narrative quality of human existence and points us to an essential authentic presence (or \textit{presencing}) for whose care we are acutely responsible. Attention to the ongoing moment brings us to the next important notion—\textit{Gelassenheit} which, as noted previously, is translated as a release or letting be: “The word \textit{Gelassenheit} [. . .] has a long history in German thought. It was coined by Meister Eckhart in the thirteenth century and subsequently used by a number of other mystics, theologians, and philosophers” (CPC xi). Earlier interpretations, including the later Protestant Reformation, were laden with religious undertones and translated the term as a \textit{yielding to God}, whereas Heidegger re-appropriates the term without the religious connotations. He continues,

I have followed the established consensus in translating this term as releasement. However, it should be kept in mind that the traditional and still commonly used German word conveys a sense of calm composure, especially and originally that which accompanies an existential or religious experience of letting-go, being-let, and letting-be. (CPC xi)
There is a clearly Eastern undertone suggesting a philosophy of openness. Such receptiveness echoes the meditative or non-objectifying thought described in the essay “What Calls for Thinking.” Gelassenheit works in tandem with alētheia as a potentially freeing space for contemplation and is “the spirit of disponibilité [availability] before What-Is’ which permits us simply to let things be in whatever may be their uncertainty and their mystery” (Scott xiii). This last statement highlights how Heidegger offers his readers none of the epistemic structure or security we crave. We will soon see that this implacable need brings us into an illusory relationship with technology from which we must free ourselves and highlights the enframing nature of theyness, as previously discussed.

Further parallels emerge: Alētheia is a mode of unconcealedness, Gelassenheit is a letting be, and now technē offers another way of bringing us nearer to the essence of Dasein while also accessing truth. As seen through an Aristotelian lens, technē is among the modalities of understanding available to the human soul. de Beistegui explains that “through technē . . . man discloses something, brings it into presence. Specifically, man discloses it through a process of production and manipulation” (108). This bringing into presence parallels Heidegger’s inclusion of Aristotle’s Four Causes in the context of the “Question Concerning Technology.” For Aristotle, the causes offer a basis for explaining change in our world, thus demonstrating both process and event concretely. Although operating within a different metaphysical and epistemic framework, what is remarkably similar to Heidegger’s hermeneutics is the interpretive nature of Aristotle’s presentation. Rather than offering fixed definitions of how the material or natural worlds come to be, Aristotle focuses on explaining movement as an ongoing exchange. Technē is the intersection of the causes in the act of bringing something into presence. Similarly, Heidegger states, “Technology is a mode of
revealing. Technology comes to presence in the realm where revealing and *unconcealment* take place, where *alētheia*, truth, happens” (Krell 319). This happening of truth and openness are directly correspondent to Dasein’s modes of thinking and being as dispositions and practices. In addition, it is reflective of truth in art as a reveling, thus closely linking to the dispositions represented by Dasein. *Technē*, after all, enables our modes of creation and expression. Heidegger further explains, “*Technē* belongs to bringing-forth, to *poiēsis*; it is something poetic” (Krell 318). This positioning is crucial to our understanding of the cure from enframing qua alienation—*poēsis* as the necessary salvation of Dasein. What *technē* and *poēsis* share is an access to truth as *alētheia* or as ‘modes of revealing’ (Krell 319). Heidegger explains that, in its essence, “technology is a mode of revealing. Technology comes to presence in the realm where revealing and *unconcealment* take place, where *alētheia*, truth, happens” (Krell 319). But how can Heidegger’s concerns impact us today? The critical piece in understanding our current predicament in relation to technology is to recognize the shift from an act of revelation to what he calls a challenging-forth—a reappropriation of resources as standing reserves. Current technologies and our relationships therewith are deeply corrupted versions of *technē*, reducing us to far less than our potentiality would properly allow.

What can we surmise from our analysis of methods and terms thus far? Through Heidegger’s lens, we come to know ourselves as questioning beings, embedded in our world, inextricably bound to those around us. Adding the movement of time and the anxiety inherent in *being-toward-death*, truth as disclosed through our daily practices manifests itself as an ebbing and flowing event with a derivative of implicit change. This disposition requires new understandings to emerge from continued practice of *other thinking*. Counter to this
potentiality, Heidegger warns that the supreme danger lies in *Gestell* and the manner in which it disables *Gelassenheit* and blocks our path to *alētheia*. This circumstance—in which we experience an imprisonment of thinking—is pervasive and has reached an acute stage of evolution in today’s digital society. In a troubling deployment of ‘care,’ we are living out the ways *Gestell* deeply affects the condition of our culture as a whole. Speaking of his own era, Heidegger observes:

> Everywhere we remain unfree and chained to technology, whether we passionately affirm or deny it. But we are delivered over to it in the worst possible way when we regard it as something neutral; for this conception of it, to which today we particularly like to pay homage, makes us utterly blind to the essence of technology. (Krell 311-312)

The blindness to the danger is symptomatic of both its power and its essence. We carry forth our traditional conceptions of technology without questioning its meaning. Our surrender to its forces, while believing in its neutrality, is our most profound error. We become embedded in a technological apparatus reminiscent of Structuralism’s version of the problematics of *Theyness* and *Mitsein*. Embodied within the *Gestell* problem is the notion that it artificially delimits the Clearing that our Care helps us to be and upon which events of Truth depend.

Ultimately, Heidegger asserts that our salvation resides within (as we have begun to see) *poēsis*, another living structure of our being that engenders *other thinking* or meditative, open interpretation of ideas. The relationship of open thinking to Care should also be noted as the latter demands an opening for self-reflection and resoluteness. Heidegger clarifies, “Poetry does not fly above and surmount the earth in order to escape it and hover over it. Poetry is what first brings man onto the earth, making him belong to it, and thus brings him into dwelling” (PLT 216). Heidegger continues by quoting Hölderlin: “*Full of merit, yet...*
"poetically, man / Dwells on this earth.” Heidegger understands poēsis as a bringing forth and partners it with alētheia and technē to demonstrate their proximity while examining their essences: “Not only handicraft manufacture, not only artistic and poetical bringing into appearance and concrete imagery, is a bringing-forth, poiēsis” (Krell 317). Heidegger returns us to Plato and observes, “Every occasion for whatever passes beyond the nonpresent and goes forward into presencing is poiēsis, bringing forth [Her-vor-bringen]” (Krell 317). In addition, Poēsis implicates Aristotle’s Four Causes while also allowing us to dwell in meditative thinking. Poēsis manifests a questioning disposition and builds its potentiality. It is the embodiment of our freedom and holds the key to our creative liberation from Gestell.

§1.3: ETHICAL FOUNDATIONS IN THE “QUESTION CONCERNING TECHNOLOGY”

It is tempting to read Heidegger’s Technology essay as a singular study of the ontic conditions that have befallen Dasein’s existential modes of being-in-the-world amid the upsurge of industry and bureaucracy in the mid-twentieth century. Certainly, the matter of technē is at the center of his study, and if we read carefully we will hear a related elaboration of the inauthenticity problem – one I believe to be charged with an ethical undercurrent that accentuates the call to responsibility previously evoked under the names of Mitsein, care and solicitude. But to hear this we need to first account for how Heidegger’s thought is uniquely situated in relationship to other watershed discourses in the tradition of moral philosophy. Otherwise our ability to fully appreciate the ethical ethos of his case concerning technological enframing and the emancipatory potential of artistic poēsis is hindered from the start. I have undertaken this preparatory work in Appendix A: “A Genealogy of Ethics on the Threshold of Heidegger’s “The Question Concerning Technology,” to which I refer the reader. Here is a brief summary of the genealogy’s main concerns.
The first point of reference is the Aristotelian conception of an association between virtue and the contemplative life, particularly as his departure from the Platonic appeal to the form of the good, self-control, and harmony in the soul and city enables him to elaborate an ethics of ‘excellence’ and ‘happiness,’ or Eudaimonia, grounded and realized on the immanent plane of human existence. The specific nature of Eudaimonia as an ‘activity’ as opposed to ‘essence’ is constituted as something beyond mere pleasure, tethered holistically to the good of the community, and dependent upon a praxis of ‘friendship.’ Though Heidegger does not fully subscribe to these discrete terms, there are Aristotelian resonances in his overarching departure from categorical essences and formal truths, his framing conception of our existential Care-structure, the problem of Theyness and Gestell within the dynamics of Mitsein, and the charge to live a life of thinking/questioning rooted in contemplative and aesthetic modes of bringing-forth.

The second touchstone is Immanuel Kant’s stress upon realizing – through the proper coordination of will and reason – the practice of duty and the good will through the self-assigned force of the Categorical Imperative. Insofar as human reason is, he holds, constituted by a practical (as ‘moral’) and not simply epistemic course, living a life of subjective duty requires that the will seek goodness on the individual plane and a ‘kingdom of ends’ on the social level of our shared humanity. Importantly, Kant does not secure these possibilities on the basis of religious or metaphysical dogma, but deduces them from the inherent potential of reason alone; but this elision at the same time involves him in a formalist stratagem that proceeds to the intersubjective by way of the subjective and its universally a priori faculties. Heidegger’s diagnosis of technological enframing and call to emancipation will bear traces of this concern to temper desire and to seek the dignity
ascribed to the kingdom of ends, but his conceptions of thinking, praxis, dwelling, and making will reveal how a hermeneutic view of being-in-the-world yields a different species of moral formation and an imperative poēisis that the Categorical imperative could not imagine.

Third, there is John Stuart Mill’s philosophy of Utilitarianism and its appeal to a moral calculus of coordinating the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Mill advances a case for converting the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain into a resource and rubric for realizing personal and social morality. Though Heidegger could conceivably accommodate the spirit of intersubjective responsibility and the psychological insight regarding pleasure/pain into his analytic of Dasein’s Care-structure, the clinical nature of the happiness principle and the lack of self-criticism in the apparatus of utility would appear to be a better resource for the ‘theyness’ of technological enframing than for its overcoming. And though Heidegger might countenance Mill’s resistance to transcendent norms and/or the pure agency of reason, his critique of what is termed ‘challenging-forth’ and its commensurate ‘standing reserve’ seems more closely aligned with Karl Marx’s conception of alienation within utilitarian capitalism. The course of poēisis, moreover, will highlight a feature of human praxis irreducible to the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain.

Fourth, what one finds in the philosophy of Hannah Arendt is a stress on the way an ethics of thinking and acting can, in concert, displace the oppressively enframing momentum of totalitarian power, the ‘banality of evil,’ and the corruptions of the ontological birthrights that are human thought and freedom. Selectively drawing together insights from Aristotle, Kant, Marx, and Heidegger (among others), her concretization of the vocation of mind and action within the harrowing drift of our political Mitsein leverages a call to moral self-
regulation, self-reflection, honest culpability, and collective responsibility that is meant to intervene in specific iterations of Heideggerian theyness, forgottenness, and the modern Gestell. Her conception of ethical practice serves, as we will see, not only to elucidate the intertextual situation between Heidegger’s ethical itinerary and that of his forebears, but also to nuance the terms on which we may see Heidegger’s emancipatory plea answered in the arts.

Finally, although famously one of Heidegger’s most pointed critics, Emmanuel Lévinas helps train our attention on the ethical undercurrent of Heidegger’s Technology essay by virtue of his phenomenological radicalization of ontological hermeneutics – notably, his contention that it is through one’s encounter with the Face of the Other that subjectivity is brought forth along a compass of infinite moral responsibility. This constitutive ‘asymmetrical’ relationship is, like Arendt’s notion of human singularity, a point marking the birth of justice on the plane of intersubjective becoming. The Lévinasian case is in many ways an extension of the existential elements of care and solicitude that color Heidegger’s diagnosis of technological challenging-forth. Responsibility, not consciousness, is the ordering principle of self and society. Uniqueness, not reason or the happiness principle, is the distinguishing feature of the self. And intentionality, not judgment or enlightenment, is the hermeneutic leaning through which the essence of meaning is found and made. Lévinas does unsettle the security of Heidegger’s sometimes Dasein-centric ontological formula, but his thought shows a deepening of the Mitsein motif and, by extension, a revealing activation of the Gelassenheit operation within the scope of technē’s appropriate bringing-forth.

Taken together, these points of reference improve our position as we turn in earnest to Heidegger’s discourse in the Technology essay. They flag for us how, as items of response
and also anticipation, points of ethics are interwoven with matters of ontology, critical philosophy, political thought, and phenomenology. And they help attune us to how Heidegger’s emerging case for an aesthetic intervention in the technological *theyness* of the twentieth century is certainly singular in its surface terrain but is at the same time quietly and steadily engaged with the *topos* of what must properly be called moral concerns.

Where and how, then, is the fundamentally ethical tenor of Heidegger’s “The Question Concerning Technology”? Through his hermeneutic investigation of *Gestell* and the ever-devolving marriage we have with technology, he notes: “So long as we do not allow ourselves to go into these questions, causality, and with it, instrumentality, and with this the accepted definitions of technology, remain obscure and groundless” (Krell 314). Thus, it will not be in deploying ethical philosophies—which, though well intentioned, are in and of themselves ‘instrumental’ via normative systems—that we will become inherently free. Instead, and per Heidegger, we must move beyond such restrictive norms. By this, Heidegger opens us to an awareness of the dangers presented by enframing in contradistinction to the openness and freedom afforded by access to truth revealed through *alētheia*. This calls forward definitions detailed in section 1.2, in which we saw the threat of *Gestell* expressed in different ways. Ultimately, our *forgottenness* in relation to being-in-the-world leads us to self-betrayal and inauthenticity. Heidegger’s aim is to liberate us in order that we may encounter ourselves fully, while also remaining open, in a poetic way, to the unconcealment of truth. Rather than offer a normative ethics, Heidegger points us toward what he considers our ‘home’ — to live out the essence of Dasein to dwell authentically in the world. Recall Bambach’s statement quoted previously, in which “dwelling poetically on the earth is equated to finding one’s genuine home” (55). Care becomes the ongoing responsibility with
regards to Dasein even as experience and being change within each historical epoch. In addition, our disposition toward Gelassenheit and Clearing provide the space for authenticity to emerge. Heidegger’s worry is an ontological one vis à vis Being and its inherently social modalities.

What we must tease out as we shift to an examination of ethics in the *Technology* essay begins with recognizing the explicit warning Heidegger issues. He opens his questioning from the source of our paralysis, identifying enframing as the supreme danger, as previously noted. This exposure of our dangerous denial of ourselves and of our complicit acceptance of a condition that hobbles our fundamental capacities shapes much of his argument for our emancipation. Heidegger is offering a means of attaining an authentic self in relation to our world in which care is concretized as an active letting be or Gelassenheit.\(^3\) This opening cedes control and fosters a creative qua artistic space in which meaning can reveal itself. The challenge, as diagnosed by Heidegger, is the frantic need for structure and certainty that induces us toward calculative thinking and measure. He states, “[T]he will to mastery becomes all the more urgent the more technology threatens to slip from human control” (Krell 313). He is suggesting that the less we believe we can order our world, the more tightly we endeavor to systematize it. The tighter grip, in turn, accentuates the vortex that keeps us hobbled. The warning magnifies enframing’s incapacitating force and implies that even well-intended codes of moral conduct can exacerbate the problem.

A proficient student of Aristotle and admirer of the holistic approach to life espoused by ancient Greek thought, Heidegger understands Dasein as indivisible from the world. He borrows from the Greeks the notion that achievement is “the highest possibility of existence, the mode of being in which a person satisfies to the highest degree the proper human
potentiality for being, in which a person genuinely is” (Basic Concepts of Ancient Philosophy 230). In order to achieve our potentiality, however, we must understand where we are within the relational nature of our being and disentangle ourselves from the structures of thinking that have led us to be enframed. We must also detach from established mores, which no longer relate to our real plight. Much like Aristotle on Vice and Virtue, the key to our ultimate freedom lies in how we might actively shape our character through responsibility and self-care.

While Heidegger’s philosophical undertones are not ethical systems as traditionally conceived, he does address the choices we have as human beings in light of care and safeguarding of the essence of our being. He shifts our attention from normative structures to an ontological concern, thereby introducing a new platform from which to preserve the potential for freedom and truth. He warns,

Today there is a growing danger that the scientific-technological manner of thinking will spread to all realms of life. And this magnifies the deceptive appearance that makes all thinking and speaking seem objectifying. The thesis that asserts this dogmatically and without foundation promotes and supports for its part a portentious tendency: to represent everything henceforth only technologically-scientifically as an object of possible control and manipulation. (Pathmarks 60)

The limits imposed upon our thinking blind us to the transformation Being has suffered, as we become mere standing reserves to the advancing technological means of production. Freedom and truth, both important conditions mentioned in the opening remarks of the Technology essay (and whose fundamental meaning has shifted since Kant and Mill; see Appendix A) are only attainable by means of our awakening, contemplation and letting go of the impulse toward fixity. The constant regulation and domination of our environment and
production condemns us to more of the same. Freedom and truth imply a liberation and, as Heidegger seems to believe, are a saving benefit to all of humanity, not simply those capable of thinking freedom. For Heidegger, non-objectifying thinking is a meditative thinking, the kind that leaves us open to disclosure in the open space of truth. Meditative thinking, as such, is a way of being and an ethics of thinking per se. If that is the case then, despite the desperate condition that the essence of technology has created, salvation is possible.

Heidegger, recall, concludes the Technology essay by stating, “The closer we come to the danger, the more brightly do the ways into the saving power begin to shine and the more questioning we become. For questioning is the piety of thought” (Krell 341). This conclusion discloses his ethical plea in explicit terms: he seeks us to rescue Being from its ongoing imprisonment and suggests a path forward that mirrors an Aristotelian holistic existence required to achieve a flourishing soul, while avoiding its rootedness in Eudaimonia (see Appendix A). The ontological concern is a formulation of care for the other and a prescription that we be the best that we can be, particularly if the awakening shakes us out of our stupor and allows our salvation to manifest. Much the way Aristotle believes our best selves are inextricably intertwined with the overall wellbeing of civilization, Heidegger sets forth the salvation of the whole by means of personal self-care and authenticity.

But how do questioning and thinking relate to freedom? Heidegger builds his case for our freedom by directing his reader step by step toward an awakening. To be clear, this freedom is not a freedom from, not even from moral constraints. It is a freedom for letting-be (Gelassenheit) and bringing-forth. He begins by simply questioning, because, to reiterate, questioning builds a way. He puts into action his hermeneutic methodology as a means of describing the process of unconcealment. The way, he hopes, will assure a free relationship
to the essence of technology, thereby liberating Dasein from its grip. The words are carefully chosen. *Questioning* demands *thinking*; *thinking* offers a path to what is *true* through *language* and ultimately sheds light on our dire condition. We already know that the true is not a correspondent fact or calculable outcome. Rather, it is that which has access to the essence of Being in its mystery and clearing. Arendt describes thinking as “a means to examine and to question; it always involves that shattering of idols of which Nietzsche was so fond” (RJ 103). Daring to shatter idols and thus departing from the accepted norms and the well-established patterns of habitual conduct, is often, if not always, an uncomfortable endeavor. Heidegger expresses the immense threat we face in the following significant passage:

Yet when destining reigns in the mode of *enframing*, it is the supreme danger. This danger attests itself to us in two ways. As soon as what is unconcealed no longer concerns man even as object, but exclusively as standing reserve, and man in the midst of objectlessness is nothing but the orderer of the standing-reserve, then he comes to the very brink of a precipitous fall; that is, he comes to the point where he himself will have to be taken as standing reserve. Meanwhile, man, precisely as the one so threatened, exalts himself and postures as lord of the earth. In this way the illusion comes to prevail that everything man encounters exists only insofar as it is his construct. This illusion gives rise in turn to one final delusion: it seems as though man everywhere and always encounters only himself. . . . In truth, however, precisely nowhere does man today any longer encounter himself, i.e., his essence. (Krell 332)

This passage makes several references clear. Marx’s understanding of *standing reserve* is deployed in relation to man’s ultimate freedom. The traces of Aristotle’s expectation of virtue as an act of self-actualization is negated by a blind participation in the environmental
forces of technology, dragging its participants thoughtlessly into its current. There is the
suggestion that calculability and mechanized systems are largely responsible for the arresting
of thought and imprisonment of minds. Mill’s utilitarian premise of the greatest happiness for
the greatest number may well be responsible for the forgottenness of Dasein and its
constituent dispositions (see Appendix A).\textsuperscript{4} Heidegger, then, implicates every participant for
his inability to exercise all that is born in him—his capacity for openness and unconcealment.
And, yet, in the face of such a grave danger, Heidegger offers a glimmer of hope by
suggesting that our salvation exists alongside the essence of technology in a realm much like
itself, the realm of art.

Heidegger draws his inspiration from the poet Hölderlin,

\begin{quote}
\textit{Near and}
\textit{Hard to grasp, the god.}
\textit{Yet where the danger lies,}
\textit{Grows that which saves.}\textsuperscript{5}
\end{quote}

Heidegger elaborates, “[B]ecause the essence of technology is nothing technological,
essential reflection upon technology and decisive confrontation with it must happen in a
realm that is, on the one hand akin to the essence of technology and, on the other,
fundamentally different from it. Such a realm is art” (Krell 340). Of course, this beg\ an
important question: In what way is the realm of art so immensely potent as to reverse the
‘supreme danger’ befallen us? Furthermore, how might this interconnection between
technology and art manifest our freedom? That the essence of technology is akin to its
counterpart is an interesting suggestion. If we consider the meaning imparted to \textit{technē,}
\textit{alētheia} and \textit{poēsis}, we note their parallel functions in moving an event of truth forward into
unconcealment, effectively making their manner of operation similar. This glimmer of light
at the end of a damning cultural critique reminds us once again of Heidegger’s concern for
the restitution of both *Mitsein* and Dasein and, in the wake of this, the emancipation of our civilization. He echoes Aristotle’s notion that virtue is achieved by means of self-directed action and inner harmony resulting in the overall good of the collective—though Heidegger carefully avoids prescriptive rules (see Appendix A).

Let us take a moment to unpack these thoughts further. Heidegger begins by bringing our attention to the supreme danger originating his ethical plea. As we know, he believes the threat in question dwarfs the possibility of nuclear annihilation. In other words, if we remain unaware and blind to the circumstances we have created, we will no longer ‘encounter ourselves’ which, as he indicates, imperils existence itself. This is reminiscent of Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave*, in which the unenlightened masses live existences of delusion, content to remain in the dark in a world of self-deception—though Heidegger turns to *Gelassenheit* and *alētheia* for the possibility of transient illuminations, maintaining that these modalities are dynamic, ongoing events. This notion is distinct from Plato’s understanding of Essences and the realm of Forms. In Heidegger’s narrative, human beings become entrenched in the reductive system of production. Man ‘comes to the very brink of a precipitous fall’ quite the same way the men in Plato’s cave are duped by their insufficient understanding. We risk condemning ourselves in this thoughtless state, no longer able to liberate our thinking and potential to know freedom.

The malady that Heidegger has diagnosed is the result of long-standing traditions of calculation and measure that have created the false premises on which we have constructed our perceptions: “Meanwhile man, precisely as the one so threatened, exalts himself and postures as lord of the earth” (Krell 332). We believe that we control the world around us, along with all of its mechanized systems. Heidegger points out the dichotomy that results
from such a practice by asking, “what does it mean to objectify? To make an object of something, to posit it as object and represent it only as such” (Pathmarks 57). He is flagging the ongoing problem of subject/object thinking and its related modes of social organization. The split born of this attitude is counter to Dasein in its totality as always embedded in the context of the world swept up by the movement of time.

The delusion is two-pronged: it first involves our blind subscription to technological means, thereby becoming a blind participant in our own servitude. It then reappears in our mistaken belief that we are in control of our world when, in fact, we have been appropriated within technology’s apparatus. We become standing reserve, delivering goods and outcomes as appendages in a greater mechanical system of ordering and production. The craftsman, such as the silversmith described in his exploration of Aristotle’s Four Causes, was a gatherer, creating the chalice by orchestrating its coming into presence (Krell 315).

Heidegger is careful to bring our focus to the mystery inherent in the gathering up of the causes in their indivisible totality of being, acknowledging the original impulse that brought forth the chalice. In contrast, the logger’s work subsists as merely a material means for the lumber yard to fulfill its orders. The logger has lost his connection with the earth and is therefore alienated from himself. Marx similarly asserted that factory-style production and labor moved the worker away from his essential role as a maker. Heidegger writes,

The forester who measures the felled timber in the woods and who to all appearances walks the forest path in the same way his grandfather did is today ordered by the industry that produces commercial woods, whether he knows it or not. He is made subordinate to the orderability of cellulose, which for its part is challenged forth by the need for paper, which is then delivered to newspapers and illustrated magazines. The latter, in their turn, set public opinion to swallowing what is printed,
so that a set configuration of opinion becomes available on demand. (Krell 323)

In short, the forester is a mere cog in the wheels of technology and commerce, unable to step out of his entrapment and lacks the awareness that he is caught there in the first place. He is brought into the greater equation and, wearing blinders, participates in the systematic loss of his innate disposition. As noted within Appendix A, this theory aligns with Marx’s understanding of how alienation leads to a fundamental malaise and dissatisfaction with one’s diminished role within the structures of society. In Marx’s *immiseration theory*, the proletariat inevitably succumbs to the forces of capitalism, which have deliberately cut him from his essence. Marx explains,

> Within the capitalist system all methods for raising the social productivity of labour are put into effect at the cost of the individual worker [. . . .] All means for the development of production undergo a dialectical inversion so that they become a means of domination and exploitation of the producers; they distort the worker into a fragment of a man, they degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, they destroy the actual content of his labour by turning it into a torment, they alienate from him the intellectual potentialities of the labour process [. . .], they transform his life into working-time, and his wife and child beneath the wheels of the juggernaut of capital. But all methods of the production of surplus-value are at the same time methods of accumulation, and every extension of accumulation becomes, conversely, a means for the development of these methods. It follows therefore that in proportion as capital accumulates, the situation of the worker, be his payment high or low, *must grow worse*. (Kapital 799)

Marx is describing the reductive force capital exercises over the worker. He makes clear the exacerbation of socio-economic divisions that result from the practices imposed by the bourgeois class. In all of this, we see traces of Heidegger’s enframing and the reductive forces technology exerts upon man.
Moving from the time of Marx’s writing to today’s globalized and automated manufacturing systems, the worker now is radically distanced from his work, replaced altogether, obsolete. It could be said that we are thereby bound more tightly with the essence of technology and have become increasingly enframed. It could also be said that Mill’s premise of the greatest happiness, in so far as it removes human beings from their natural inclination to be productive, falls apart in practice. The farther we remove ourselves from what is our essential disposition, the deeper into alienation we fall. Enframing determines our contemporary condition. The world is rapidly moving away from what Heidegger considered the essence of Dasein, thereby reducing human beings to mere means of production and surplus. What is then decimated by enframing is much like a Greek *polis* or the relational possibilities therein (which Heidegger will subsequently replace with *Dwelling*). Thus, as concerns the lived social conditions for the possibility of ethics—in this case of *Gelassenheit* and everything having to do with the ‘open’—is polluted and concealed.

As evidence of this *concealment*, Heidegger’s ideas are evident throughout our current climate. In a *New York Times* editorial, “Trumpism After Trump,” written during the debacle of the 2016 elections, Roger Cohen wrote,

I was talking the other day with a Silicon Valley venture capitalist who said to me with a kind of deadpan resignation: “You know we are designing a world that is not fit for people.” Perhaps that admission comes closest to capturing the disquiet and dread on which Trump has thrived, along with other demagogues in Europe. (Cohen)

In much the same manner by which the bourgeois class drove industry forward, there is a powerful driving pride in the *disruption factor*, when designers of today’s economies produce cost-saving mechanisms that push costs down and render humans obsolete. These
disruptive technologies are ones that shift paradigms and alter behaviors as a result of “advancements,” such as artificial intelligence and automated processes. They are the same forces shifting man away from his essence. Adding to this, in *The Inhuman*, Jean-François Lyotard observes, “Not to be contemplative is a sort of implicit commandment, contemplation is perceived as a devalorized passivity” (118). The days of Aristotle’s virtue in contemplation appear to be long over.

Another important part of Heidegger’s passage regarding the logger is the sheer grandiosity of our belief in total control and our need to achieve a sense of permanence. It is a reflection of the erroneous positioning of human beings above all else when, in Heidegger’s view, all participants in the world community exist together, interdependently. This perspective harks back to the corruptive force of *theyness* and the loss of independent thinking so important to Dasein’s expression. Our inherent grandiosity speaks to the illusion of man’s centrality in the greater schema of life. It also reveals the insufficiency of prior ethical structures in holding up against enframing, making Heidegger’s modes of resistance all the more imminent and necessary. He explains, “[T]hus it might be that our unpoe tic dwelling, its incapacity to take the measure, derives from a curious excess of frantic measuring and calculating” (PLT 226). This is perhaps where man has forgotten *Being* the most.

The need for objectification, for fixed truths and calculations, has transformed the very manner in which we encounter our world and ourselves, as well as traditional notions of *Duty*, *Happiness* and the *Greatest Good*. We have forgotten the mystery of Dasein and no longer seek a virtuous life of contemplation. For Heidegger, it is the absence or *forgottenness* of *poēsis* that we must urgently redress, properly speaking, a negative version of
concealment distinct from that found in the ebb and flow of truth. He clarifies, “But human reflection can ponder the fact that all saving power must be of a higher essence than what is endangered, though at the same time kindred to it” (Krell 339). There is an ongoing concern for the authenticity of the expression of Being to break us free from the banality fostered in theyness, a corruption we have already seen can lead to manifestations of unimaginable evil. Heidegger’s articulation of his worry originates in Being and Time and continues well into his later writing.

This worry begs an important question, one that challenges the essence of truth as an unfolding event: how can we salvage both Mitsein and Dasein through art if there are no permanent or concrete actions? In short, how can we ultimately measure the good if we possess no permanent essence? It seems we must continually struggle to join the flow of living and resist the desire to drop anchor into permanence. To this point, Heidegger quotes Nietzsche from The Will to Power, “The means of expression in language cannot be used to express becoming; to posit continually a more crude world of what is permanent, of things etc. [i.e. of objects] is part of our irredeemable need for preservation” (qtd. in Pathmarks 57, Will to Power, aphorism no. 715). Once again, we encounter the mechanics that have us tightening our grip rather than letting be. In this case, we have the struggle against death and impermanence.

Art as salvation is a place of opening and truth, or alētheia. In the essay “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger discusses the mystery that unfolds each time we experience a significant work. He asks,

What happens here? What is at work in the work? Van Gogh’s painting is the disclosure of what the equipment, the pair of peasant shoes, is in truth. This being emerges into the unconcealment of its Being. The Greeks called the
unconcealment of beings *alētheia*. We say ‘*truth*’ and think little enough in using this world. (Krell 161)

*Alētheia* as the *unconcealment* of beings becomes possible through the work of art and the *true* emerges as a result. This enables *freedom*, allowing an open relationship with technology that is presently unavailable to us. The caveat remains that it is up to the individual to actively engage and question through language. According to Heidegger,

Truth establishes itself as strife within a being that is to be brought forth only in such a way that the strife opens up in this being; that is, this being is itself brought into the rift. The rift is the drawing together into a unity, of sketch and basic design, breach and outline. Truth establishes itself in a being in such a way, indeed, that this being itself takes possession of the open region of truth. (Krell 188)

Truth is an actively sought event discoverable through contemplation. If we recall, “All ways of thinking, more or less perceptibly, lead through language in a manner that is extraordinary” (Krell 311). Language is the essence of *poēsis*, and, as such, originates the happening of truth. We must keep Heidegger’s understanding of the possibility of freedom in language and *poēsis* foregrounded as we continue with this chapter’s work while asking where Heidegger’s suggestions will lead?

The good, the virtue of thinking, the open region of *truth* and potentiality opens us to what Heidegger believes will save us. It becomes clear in much of his later work that nowhere is this more accessible than through poetic expression. He details these ideas in later essays, especially in “Poetry, Language and Thought,” moving forward his notion that the realm of art is our saving grace. Poetry is the essence of all art making. As we previously noted, *poēsis* encompasses the arts in its overarching capacity for revelation. Both poetry and art offer a moving window into truth as an ongoing ontological event. Heidegger
explains, “The Poet calls, in the sights of the sky, that which in its very self-disclosure causes the appearance of that which conceals itself, and indeed as that which conceals itself. In the familiar appearances, the poet calls the alien as that to which the invisible imparts itself in order to remain what it is—unknown” (PLT 223). Heidegger contemplates poetry as Clearing, and then places it in terms of Dwelling, where the standing reserve is returned to a letting-be or standing-open. Poēsis thus becomes a rooting practice, in addition to events of Care and Truth. Poetry enables an access to abstract, mysterious spaces in which we occasion the essence of truth only if we allow ourselves to release objectifying thinking in favor of the meditative. Heidegger elaborates, “Poetic thinking is being in the presence of . . . and for the god. Presence means: simple willingness that wills nothing, counts on no successful outcome. Being in the presence of . . . purely letting the god’s presence be said” (Pathmarks 61). Willing nothing (either in coercive or autonomous ways) and accepting the mystery of Being demand that we relinquish objectifying thought and the actions that happen on this basis. Presence confronts us with the void of existence and the incessant movement toward death that ultimately delimits us. Allowing presence to simply ‘be’ is a struggle between the temporality of our being and Dasein’s ever-becoming nature rubbing against the locking mechanisms in technology, which pretend to offer certitude.

To reiterate, Poēsis, for Heidegger, embodies art and rivals the challenging-forth seen in the essence of modern technology. He finds within its qualities the potential for disclosure of truth. It is through this orientation toward art that Heidegger makes a subtle gesture away from more normative ethics. He expresses this repositioning most directly in the “Origin of the Work of Art:”

Truth, as the clearing and concealing of beings, happens in being composed. All art, as the letting happen of the advent of
the truth of beings, is as such, in essence, poetry. The essence of art, on which both the artwork and the artist depend, is the setting-itself-into-work of truth. It is due to art’s poetic essence that, in the midst of beings, art breaks open an open place, in whose openness everything is other than usual. (Krell 197)

The ‘other than usual’ brings us back to ‘other thinking’ that unleashes Dasein’s potential. In the poetic, man finds his freedom of thought and expression. If the realm of salvation is art, it goes without saying that this realm is of the poetic. What then happens if we dare to relinquish our grip on certainty? Would this allow an immediate movement toward full immersion in our potentiality, finding the measure of ourselves in abstract regions of meditative thought? Perhaps more broadly, how are we to understand a move from the technological landscape to the poetic one while setting it forth to operate on an ethical path? Certainly, turning from normative structures to poetic expression would foster a freedom of mind and an open contemplation of the true.

Heidegger further clarifies his ideas on how thought may come into presence in a discussion regarding the essence of a Greek temple:

It is the temple-work that first joins together and simultaneously gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline obtain the form of destiny for human being. . . . The temple first gives to things their look and to humanity their outlook on themselves. (PLT 42–3)

While perhaps only fleetingly, art offers human beings a glimpse of themselves, a way of knowing that stands in contrast to calculation and predictability. As with the temple in Heidegger’s discussion, we encounter the entirety of our being in the work’s countenance.

Van Gogh’s Peasant Shoes, by the same token, are the constellation of existence as lived by
their owner. This knowledge demands an openness and mental freedom, resulting in the
*letting be* that is *Gelassenheit*. Art, poetry, and the truth they unveil to us, promote a dwelling
in the world fundamental to *Dasein*.

In a short book entitled *Reclaiming Art in the Age of Artifice*, J.F. Martel underscores
Heidegger’s ideas on our experience of an artwork. He states:

> Far from distracting us from the strange and uncanny in life,
> the astonishment evoked by great artistic works puts them
> square in our sights. The work demands that we feel and think
> the mystery of our passage through this body, on this earth, in
> this universe” [...] We realize afterward that the world is not
> what we thought it was: something hidden, impossible to
> communicate though clearly expressed in the work has risen
> into the light of awareness, and the share of the Real to which
> we are privy is proportionately expanded. (17)

The world is therefore interpreted through the eyes of the artist and poet, often lending clarity
to an otherwise dimmed view. As Bambach reiterates, “Always the poet lies in the middle,
the hermeneutic mediator who strives to interpret the overarching scheme of divine order for
a humanity that has forgotten how to read the signs of the times” (28). And, indeed, we have
become inured to enframing as an existential threat, choosing to disregard the signs Bambach
so accurately mentions: “The poet, then, as the prophet who makes known to other members
of the community that which is hidden, stands in the middle, or at the threshold, of darkness
and light” (Bambach 28). Here, the poet carries the very seeds of counter-bracketing. He
helps to *enframe* the *enframing* and thereby deconstruct and subvert it. In the end, through
listening, questioning and dwelling in the open region of thought, we come to recognize
technology’s grasp. In subsequent chapters, other more contemporary thinkers will continue
to sound this alarm—all of whom see the crisis of Dasein as being far from resolved.
If, as a representation of our current situation, we shift the ‘essence’ of technology and its consequence of enframing to a new ideological premise, Martel observes a profound resistance to change as a result. He explains, “The more ideologically entrenched a society, the more it perceives the New as a threat. Since society requires ideology to maintain itself, and since prophecy consists precisely in the dissolution of ideology in its every form, the best a prophet can hope for is a tenuous and ultimately doomed alliance with the status quo” (110). Arendt might also suggest that defying what is accepted by those around us, rejecting the manifestation of theyness, creates the conditions needed for evil to exist. It is seen in an entrenchment into what is already in place without consideration of what simply is needed.

Yet, even in such terrain, ‘other thinking’ can be birthed through individual expression. Arendt explains this fragile and timely process of germination:

> Totalitarian domination, like tyranny, bears the germs of its own destruction . . . . Its danger is that it threatens to ravage the world as we know it—a world which everywhere seems to have come to an end—before a new beginning rising from this end has had time to assert itself. (OoT 616)

It is to the new beginning that we must train our outlook while seeking out the virtuous life embodied in contemplation and ‘other thinking.’ The care that Heidegger assigns to Dasein extends to a care of self and other. It is thus together, collectively, that we must act to enable salvation to come forth. To this point, Martel states,

> Either we submit ourselves fully to the leveling process and become standing reserve, or we seize the situation and its inherent potential as an opportunity to actualize our fundamental essence, which lies in poiēsis or creation. So the fight for the emancipation of humanity must go beyond a purely practical quest for justice, peace, equality, and ecological responsibility. A deeper struggle must take place
against spectrality itself, that is, against the motive force of the
contemporary social order. (148)

These words echo Heidegger’s understanding of enframing and the grave danger it poses for
Dasein. It emphasizes the fundamental nature of the diagnosis—that we are hobbled so long
as we cannot open ourselves to the question of our relationship with technology. Martel
continues, “Only the imaginal mind can lead us out of the maze, with art providing the
symbols that mark the way to the elusive essence that truly defines us” (153). Spectrality
itself embodies the disappearance of affect and disconnection from authentic care so
worrying to Heidegger.

Perhaps, as Martel later wonders, “[W]e are in need of a new faith” (154). This faith
would not necessarily play out within religious thought, though there is some indirect
reference to this prospect. Interestingly, Heidegger refers to God in his writing about
Hölderlin’s poetry but not in his other investigations. He explores the boundaries separating
God and the human in the expression of our virtue. He does this by means of an analysis of
specific verses of poetry, asserting in Bambach’s words that “the poet must always know
how to honor the boundaries between speaking in the name of a god and striving to become
as a god, between interpreting god’s will and imposing his own will” (Bambach 28). In
“Poetry, Language and Thought,” Heidegger pays close attention to the notion of kindness in
Hölderlin’s late poetry work:

. . . As long as Kindness,
   The Pure, still stays with his heart, man
   Not unhappily measures himself
   Against the Godhead . . . . (verses 26-29)

Heidegger briefly explicates Hölderlin’s choice of words: “Kindness—what is it? A harmless
word, but described by Hölderlin with the capitalized epithet the Pure. Kindness—this word,
if we take it literally, is Hölderlin’s magnificent translation for the Greek word charis. In his Ajax, Sophocles says of charis (verse 522): *For Kindness it is, that ever calls forth kindness*” (PLT 226). This inclusion of kindness is surprising. Kindness as a virtue by which we measure ourselves against the ‘godhead’ is even more so. Perhaps it is better understood through Heidegger’s position on Care which, for him, is not explicitly measured in our generosity of spirit, as kindness might suggest, but in our self-care and authentic dwelling during this temporal life. In addition, Sophocles’ sentiment that kindness forever calls forth kindness suggests a longing for a better world in which care forecasts compassion. Heidegger continues,

> As long as this arrival of kindness endures, so long does man succeed in measuring himself not unhappily against the godhead. When this measuring appropriately comes to light, man creates poetry from the very nature of the poetic. When the poetic appropriately comes to light, then man dwells humanly on this earth and then—as Hölderlin says in his last poem—‘the life of man’ is a ‘dwelling life.’ (PLT 227)

Heidegger is, once again, implicating our *dwelling* in our authentic involvement necessary for being-in-the-world to actualize Dasein. Martel, quoting Leonard Cohen, explains, “A heart that catches rain is one that has regained the ability to connect with this world that the haze of artifice separates us from” (148). This openness implies an awakening—perhaps the same awakening Heidegger would have us experience through a close reading of the “Question Concerning Technology” but that he himself was unable to achieve.

**§1.4: THINKING VS. ACTION + HEIDEGGER’S INVOLVEMENT WITH NAZISM**

We have worked through the ways Heidegger’s ideas present a dynamic opening for an ethical disposition to emerge and develop. We have traced his preoccupation with the dire
implications of human beings as standing reserves, having forgone their essential creative potential in Dasein. With the Technology essay placing us on alert and demanding both thought and action, it would seem Heidegger might also live by the very disposition he describes as fundamental to our being. Ironically, Heidegger’s thoughts on kindness, as detailed above, in which he espouses a compassionate demeanor, belies his life’s reality. In light of my argument for Heidegger’s ethical undertones begging a conscious retrieval of ourselves vis à vis enframing, it bears noting some of what is most controversial about his conduct. I am, of course, referring to his participation as a member of the National Socialist Party. We must treat this well-known obstacle openly and recognize it as the abhorrent behavior that it is, and yet also maintain that it does not, properly speaking, devalue his ideas.

According to contemporary writer, David Brooks, “Moral communities are fragile things, hard to build and easy to destroy. . . . When we think about very large communities such as nations, the challenge is extraordinary and the threat of moral entropy is intense” (Brooks). This sentiment has perhaps never been more accurate than in post WWI Germany when a young Adolf Hitler overtook the stage, inculcating large numbers of the citizenry into his master plan known as the Final Solution. The socioeconomic climate was ripe for his message to take root, and what ensued continues to shock us to this day. Arendt was able to clarify with the hindsight the historical circumstances that made such a sinister, shameful epoch possible. She explains,

> The masses’ escape from reality is a verdict against the world in which they are forced to live and in which they cannot exist, since coincidence has become its supreme master and human beings need the constant transformation of chaotic and accidental conditions into a man-made pattern of relative consistency… Totalitarian propaganda can outrageously insult
common sense only where common sense has lost its validity.
(OoT 463)

Technology played a large part in Hitler’s program; it was deployed in every conceivable way to mobilize and educate the populous. The insult to common sense to which Arendt so insightfully refers lingers in all post-WWII historical considerations, leaving one asking: How could this have happened? Another valid question to ask oneself is whether Heidegger’s active participation as a member of the National Socialist Party discredits his expression of concern for the expression of our highest selves?

To answer this concern we must first return to Heidegger’s fascination with the perceived integrity of ancient Greek civilizations as it may assist our understanding of his mindset. He demonstrated, through both his writing and teaching, a level of respect for Greek thought and the essential purity it embodies. Taking our brief exploration of Aristotle into account (see Appendix A), it becomes obvious that a life of contemplation is greatly valued, and this foundational principle is advanced in Heidegger’s meditative thinking, and further translated into an ontological necessity of Dasein. Heidegger wistfully speaks of Greek civilization through his discussion of art:

What was art—perhaps only for that brief but magnificent age?
Why did art bear the modest name technē? Because it was a revealing that brought forth and made present, and therefore belonged within poēsis. It was finally that revealing which holds complete sway in all the fine arts, in poetry, and in everything poetical that obtained poēsis as its proper name.
(Krell 339)

His point of view is inspired by a balance of technē and poēsis as agents of truth and ongoing revelation. I bring this to bear at this stage in relation to Heidegger’s membership and his missteps during the Nazi dominance of Germany. His mere participation is
antithetical to an ethical philosophy. Certainly, anyone setting forth such an argument would have a valid case. Heidegger utterly failed to achieve the ethics of action that Arendt so valued and from which societies benefit. Peter Gordon, in a review of the *Black Notebooks*, writes, “An elegant defense . . . was developed by Hannah Arendt, his erstwhile student, whose essay ‘Martin Heidegger at Eighty’ compared Heidegger to Thales, the ancient philosopher who grew so absorbed in contemplating the heavens that he stumbled into the well at his feet” (Gordon).  

It is hard to reconcile Heidegger *the thinker* and Heidegger *the man*, whose actions so severely contradicted his preoccupation with the essence of that which allows us wholeness and freedom. *Gelassenheit* as a letting be can hardly be equated with Hitler’s Final Solution. As we have discussed, Heidegger’s ethical plea demands that we return to art as a means of recuperating *all* of humanity, not at the exclusion of entire races or populations. He set forth a program of meditative thinking that opens us to the essential characteristics of our Being, not in order that we annihilate millions of undesirable *others*. Rather, he would espouse a redress of our relationship to technology in order that we might understand who we truly are. And yet, there is ample written material, largely found in Heidegger’s recently published *Black Notebooks*, that belies this passionate demand to honor that which lies at the essence of our being, implicating dispositions of ‘care’ for self and the other. Heidegger appears to have succumbed to an ideological enframing that fully escaped his own self-reflective thinking. Gordon surmises, “In his zeal to prosecute a war on the critical intellect he ignored all of the differences that matter to us as inhabitants of a common world, and he ended in a place of abstraction no less fantastical than the enemy he wished to defeat” (“Heidegger in Black”).
That said, the fact that Heidegger’s personal choices undermine any sign of ethical conduct ought not tarnish his philosophy. On the contrary, his fall from grace highlights the importance of these ideas even more by underscoring the subversive force *enframing* exerts on all human beings. To this point, Martel describes the internal dichotomy between personal conduct and higher expression in outlining the case for Flaubert and Dostoyevsky as artists. He explains, “If people still read these two authors today, it is because their work exceeds their finite perspectives—infinitely” (Martel 119). In a review of the *Black Notebooks* entitled “The King is Dead,” Gregory Fried writes,

> One reason to take the Notebooks seriously, therefore, is to understand how a figure who inspired such a wide following could have held such views — and what this might mean for his legacy. This is a question of intellectual history and influence. While it is important, there remains an even deeper one: whether there is anything left for us to think about in reading Heidegger; whether in the Notebooks or the rest of a body of work that will amount to over 100 volumes, there was something other than Nazism and anti-Semitism at work. (Fried 2)

It seems plausible that Heidegger had a mistaken judgment that National Socialism might return Germany to the supposed integrity embodied in ancient Greek civilizations and their philosophical practices. Recall Plato’s determination that an aristocracy carries a stronger chance of being just than a democracy, a notion that Heidegger seemed to support in some of his writings. His overwhelming belief in the potential of the German people to carry forth the deliberate reversal of 2,500 years of metaphysics is further elaborated by Fried:

> The Notebooks demonstrate how ardently, even desperately, he hoped for “an other inception,” especially during those early years of the 1930s, when he had thought that National Socialism might be the catalyst for a “crossing-over” to a new history. “What will come, knows no one,” he wrote; no one
knows, because it will not be “the” other inception, or even “another” . . . inception, as if it were a definite cyclical occurrence, but rather an entirely “other” inception that cannot be predicted or measured by the standards of the first one. All he knows is that it will require the complete transformation of what it means to be human, away from the self-deifying subjectivism of modernity. (Fried 4)

Beyond this seemingly obsessive preoccupation with reinstating the Greeks’ past glories through German philosophical expression, Heidegger sought to explain himself to those closest to him. There exist letters exchanged with both Karl Jaspers and Hannah Arendt that hint at Heidegger’s private views vis à vis his position as a member of the Nazi party. In a 2009 issue of Existenz, Babette Babich summarizes Heidegger’s position as stated to Jaspers with the following synopsis:

Heidegger [. . .] emphasize[d] Nietzsche's epistemology, parsing Nietzsche's will to power, contra Nazi readings, as the metaphysical culmination of the domination of the West by scientism and technologism. It is in this sense that Heidegger argues that German Nazism is “in essence” the same as Soviet Bolshevism and American capitalism. (Existenz)

In sum, according to Jaspers and Babich, Heidegger determined his teaching of Nietzsche to have been a point of resistance in the face of Nazism. Babich quotes a letter written to Jaspers in which Heidegger laments, “I was then struck all the harder by what was undertaken against me in 1945-48 and, actually, to this hour” (Biemel HJC 189). Babich adds, “In correspondence with Jaspers, again, Heidegger invokes his Nietzsche courses, noting that he had, at times, a Nazi spy in his lectures” (2). This is an argument Heidegger asserted on multiple occasions. He wrote, “I do not write this in order to claim that I accomplished anything although everyone who could hear clearly in the years 1935-1944 could have known that, at this university, no one dared to do what I did” (Existenz).
discussion, which Jaspers undertook over the course of several communications, led to what he believed was an apology, as Babich details. She quotes, “In that letter of March 5, 1950, Heidegger relates his ‘shame’ and impotence or sense of ‘powerlessness’ and ‘failure’ (HJC 185; qtd. in Existenz) at ‘having here and there, directly and indirectly, contributed’ to the ‘viciousness’ of Nazism, and of the ‘persecution of Jews’” (HJC 187-9; qtd. in Existenz).

Heidegger’s defense to Arendt expressed a different mood and concern. The tone of his letter, written during the winter of 1932–1933, is irritable and defensive. Arendt’s questioning touched a nerve. He begins, “[T]he rumors that are upsetting you are slanders that are perfect matches for other experiences I have endured over the last few years” (Letters 52). He then proceeds to list the many Jews with whom he has customarily worked in his capacity of professor and university official:

The man who comes anyway and urgently wants to write a dissertation is a Jew. The man who comes to see me every month to report on a large work in progress (neither a dissertation nor a habilitation project) is also a Jew. The man who sent me a substantial text for urgent reading a few weeks ago is a Jew. (Letters 52)

The letter continues in this manner, maintaining in its short and definitive tenor that Heidegger did not view himself as discriminating against anyone, least of all Arendt herself. He closes “and above all it cannot touch my relationship to you” (Letters 53). There is an arrogance implicit in Heidegger’s writing and refusal to express any contrition publicly. Certainly, an admission of the error of his ways would have done much to restore the faith of his readers. Yet, the very same sense of importance that permitted him to save his notebooks for later publication and consumption is evidence of a confidence in his beliefs and their longstanding importance within their historical context. His dichotomous life, demonstrated
in the schism between thought and action, is an illustration of the nature of our will and its potentially problematic and unwieldy nature. Our will often disrupts the path to moral correctness, even in a world where normative structures are shifting. While Heidegger’s ideas are most certainly influenced by the resonant voices of ethical philosophies, he seemed able to compartmentalize personal codes of conduct, believing himself perhaps beyond reproach for his choices. In any case, his choices and views, however misguided, do not, in my estimation, diminish the importance of his ideas, nor do they negate the dire warning issued in “The Question Concerning Technology.”

§1.5: SUMMARY + CONCLUSION

It is my hope, as we look back at this chapter’s epigraph, reading once again Heidegger’s intentions of bringing us into the light of truth in relation to the essence of technology, that we will better understand “The Question Concerning Technology” as an ethical project aimed at saving humankind from the potentially irretrievable loss of Dasein by means of our creative potential through the realm of art. As we have noted, the danger Heidegger exposes persists and has worsened in recent times, reaching an acute stage as digital technologies rapidly accelerate and propagate online addictions and a broad shallowing of thought. If we do not heed the call to action expressed in the Technology essay, we risk losing the most fundamental of our dispositions and, ultimately, our freedom.

The ongoing worry of enframing has been present in ethical thought in a myriad of ways. We have noted the correlations of Heidegger’s ideas to the broader ethical tradition—including Aristotle, Kant and Arendt’s works—while also noting the deviations in language and expression (see Appendix A). The mixture of Aristotelian virtue born in a contemplative
life with the singularity of responsibility and *Care*, along with the letting be or *Gelassenheit* that situated truth as an event in *alētheia*, has the potential to lead us to a place of ultimate freedom. There is a resonance that carries forward past systems without embedding directly within them. Arendt would express this in the responsibility we have toward choice and action, asserting thinking and action as separate yet intertwined events of grave consequence. This ultimate existential crisis confronts us today. The essence of technology, and its concomitant condition of enframing, endure, leaving human beings as *standing reserves* rather than singular creators as *Dasein* should demand.

The structures that create *enframing* require conscious questioning and open examination in order that we come to see them for what they are: imprisoning forces hobbling creative thought. Heidegger’s pointed directive emerges later in the works of many postmodern thinkers, including Theodor Adorno, Giorgio Agamben and Jean-François Lyotard, whose ideas will be explored in the forthcoming chapters. As we will demonstrate, the realm of art, with its other-thinking and boundary-breaking potential, continues to be the region capable of opening us to truth and freedom. Artists must be seen as agents of Heidegger’s authentic disposition and structures of care, and art itself as the solution vital to dismantling enframing as an entrenched human condition.
CHAPTER 2:

WALTER BENJAMIN AND THE DISRUPTIVE REPRODUCTION

Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence.

— Walter Benjamin, IL 220

Thus, their [artworks’] durability is of a higher order than that which all things need in order to exist at all; it can attain permanence throughout the ages. In this permanence, the very stability of the human artifice, which, being inhabited and used by mortals, can never be absolute, achieves a representation of its own. Nowhere else does the sheer durability of the world of things appear in such purity and clarity, nowhere else therefore does this thing-world reveal itself so spectacularly as the non-mortal home for mortal beings.

— Hannah Arendt, HC 168

§2.1: INTRODUCTION

As we have seen in Chapter One, in “The Question Concerning Technology,” Heidegger demands that we seek emancipation through the realm of art. But at the heart of this call is a paradox. Heidegger emphasizes a saving power similar to that described by Hölderlin:

Yet where the danger lies,  
Grows that which saves.
These words place the realm of art in the same fundamental space as the Modern essence of technology, which tends to cripple our Dasein. Heidegger envisions the space of enframing transforming into one of poēsis—as a clearing (Lichtung). But how can that which expresses the most authentic characteristics of our creative Being exist on the same plane as that which hobbles it? In responding to this question, we must study the material correlations and differences between machinery and art along with a number of concrete issues pertaining to their exchange. To this end, we turn to critical theory, incorporating not only its theoretical content but also its methodologies, particularly those offered by Walter Benjamin, Karl Marx and Hannah Arendt. Ultimately, the task at hand requires us to look at ways mechanically manufactured artworks manifest our freedom in both thought and action. The task also demands we take a closer look at the intimate relationship between society and art, or the substructures that animate a shift in the superstructures. Furthermore, it necessitates a look at new perceptual experiences in light of advancing technologies and their structural-cultural configurations, and an investigation of the negative and positive effects of resulting shifts in apperception.

Heidegger’s fundamental conception of alētheia will remain a framing consideration for this shift of attention – where alētheia is understood as an event of unconcealment ascertained within and as the clearing, through which Dasein experiences freedom in both thoughts and actions. The point is sharply reiterated in Heidegger’s late essay “The End of Philosophy and the Task for Thinking.” Quoting Parmenides, Heidegger elaborates upon the primacy of alētheia as generative of truth:

... but you should learn all:
The untrembling heart of unconcealment, well rounded,
And also the opinions of mortals
Who lack the ability to trust what is unconcealed. (Krell 444)
Heidegger explains: “We must think *alētheia*, unconcealment, as the clearing that first grants Being and thinking and their presencing to and for each other” (Krell 445). The clearing is thus a meditative space of granting and presencing. Heidegger ends the essay by asking, “But where does the clearing come from and how is it given? What speaks in the ‘there is / it gives?’” (Krell 449). The answer, as we have seen, lies in the restoration of this marriage of *technē* and *poiēsis*, with a focus on praxis as action (or interaction). Ultimately, the gathering of the essence of truth with the essence of creating should yield emancipation and freedom.

Walter Benjamin wrote specifically about this material and praxis-oriented relationship between artworks and technology in his well-known essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (hereafter referred to as the *Artwork* essay), in which he addresses the impact of technology’s reproductive advances on the work of art and its percipient. It is important to note that, while this is Benjamin’s most widely read essay, much of its original intent has been lost to an overall editing of its message prior to publication in 1936. Howard Caygill and Esther Leslie both discuss the extent to which Benjamin’s essay was altered by his colleagues at the Frankfurt School and its original editor. Its final form does not fully reflect the political undercurrents Benjamin had originally included, thereby making the fullness of the essay’s meaning difficult to capture. According to Leslie, “Benjamin argued that all the omissions, forced upon the text by the executive at the *Institut der Sozialforschung*, had rendered the text incomprehensible” (131). Add to these omissions an inclination to straddle different sentiments regarding technological advances—most notably in “The Storyteller” and “Unpacking My Library”—and Benjamin’s intended message becomes somewhat obtuse. That said, the strong inclination toward freedom through the revolutionary potential and democratization of the reproduction is most pronounced and
clear. While this chapter’s content will focus on the theories underlying Benjamin’s essay and the theoretical responses thereto, its broader aim is to lay the groundwork for our subsequent analyses of artworks, particularly as related to technological mediums and the ways meaning is imparted and created.

Benjamin’s Artwork essay precedes Heidegger’s “Question Concerning Technology” by more than a decade. While it ultimately differs in both its underlying premises and proposed solutions, it shares the fundamental preoccupation with emancipation and freedom and accentuates the matter in the direction of concrete sociopolitical circumstances. Benjamin’s concern to transfer freedom from its conceptual basis to praxis animates the ethical basis for creativity and artistic production. In its broadest terms, the essay proposes a move from the space of alienation to one of (political) resistance and (human) renewal. Benjamin describes his intentions: “The concepts which are introduced into the theory of art in what follows differ from the more familiar terms in that they are completely useless for the purposes of Fascism. They are, on the other hand, useful for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art” (IL 281). Benjamin thereby prescribes a different kind of freedom through reproducibility—one that relieves us, art’s perciipients, from the shadows of elitist bourgeois tendencies.

This shift from Heidegger’s abstract understanding of technology’s effects to Benjamin’s more concrete concerns moves our focus from ontological implications to more measurable social structures brought about by capitalism, and a Marxist view of fascism with a more hopeful perspective on the ways the ‘saving power’ can originate from within the core of larger technological forces. Intertextually speaking, one might equate this move as a deeper concretization of the ontological-ontic focal phenomenon in Heidegger. Benjamin
analyses the practical matters of human experience and ultimately endeavors to give substance to the ways freedom is manifested. Furthermore, while I am not suggesting a concurrence between Benjamin and Heidegger, it can also be said that the former is exploring praxis as an adjunct to poēsis, thereby recognizing their interdependency and the plurality of truth possible through their balance.

Working with Benjamin’s seminal essay, this chapter will explore the boundaries between loss and preservation, alienation and durability, along with the shifts in reception and perception as they correspond to enframing as a reductive force. While it may be true that Benjamin recognized and touted the revolutionary power of the reproduction and its many ancillary manifestations, I will argue that he simultaneously notes its detrimental effects on human perception and thought, revealing a sharp shift in the way artworks are received and apprehended. There is an underlying cautionary tale: while the reproduction offers a democratization of art and information, it can have a correlative, unintended effect of arresting thinking and conscious, meditative contemplation. This particular disintegration aligns with the phenomenon Heidegger terms forgottenness, resulting in the masses’ unsuspecting entrapment within the very mechanisms that create enframing (alienation). In addition, the reproduction signals a potential loss of authenticity as we distance ourselves from original works and might, as a result, forego the experience of art and truth as an ongoing, reflective event. Benjamin’s commitment to technological progress is, at times, hesitant, as we will see in our examination of the “Storyteller,” “Unpacking My Library” and the Artwork essay. I will argue that his underlying caution, though apt, still reveals a measure of naïveté regarding technology’s impact on human thought and glosses over its more nefarious effects. That said, this mindful attention to the dangers abiding in what is otherwise
hopeful is reflected not only in the language he chooses to diagnose and define the loss of aura but also in his extension of Marx’s understanding of alienation as a detriment to the foundation and nature of our humanity. Likewise, despite his reliance on Marx’s ideas, Benjamin falls short in making the desired connection between distraction and Marx’s concept of leisure wherein contemplation and creative thought are offered as counterpoints to labor. The result is that Benjamin has a tendency to overlook the ill effects of mechanically reproduced artworks in deference to historical advancements and democratization of access.

These nuanced ideas regarding tensions between reproduction, thought, and the enduring cultural characteristics of artworks will be explored in tandem with the writing of Karl Marx, Theodor Adorno, Howard Caygill, Hannah Arendt and Jean Baudrillard. We will analyze the artwork as both a manifestation and provocation of thinking in terms of Arendt’s notion of art objects as thought-things. Arendt carefully demonstrates the importance of thought as the source of action and ethical conduct. To this point, it bears noting the connection between Marx’s notion of leisure and the premise of Heidegger’s essay “What Calls for Thinking”—both celebrate the power of contemplation and anticipate Arendt’s theory of action as the continuation of individual thought. Viewed through this lens, subjectivity for Arendt translates to a mixture of Dasein’s fundamental disposition with human agency and citizenship. These connections underscore the porous nature of Benjamin’s writing, making the identification of clear, linear ideas challenging to say the least. Arendt’s voice carries forward distinct aspects of Marx, Benjamin and Heidegger, adding her unique understanding of art’s importance to the historic narrative. Arendt further provides a way to overcome distraction through thinking as an ethical practice. At the end of this chapter, we will turn to artists whose works embody the marriage of technology and
artistic expression, providing avenues for the re-emergence of an ethics of thinking and action.

§2.2: BUILDING ON MARXIST FOUNDATIONS

Benjamin opens the *Artwork* essay with a brief yet important reference to Marx’s prognosis of *immiseration*—a societal condition directly resulting from modes of production and their alienating force upon man’s essence. This reference assumes knowledge of Marx’s foundational ideas, particularly with respect to human nature and the historical dialectic that moves revolutionary ideas forward. Benjamin lauds Marx’s assertion concerning the coming end of capitalism through the inevitable leveling of societal structures: “He went back to the basic conditions underlying capitalist production and through his presentation showed what could be expected of capitalism in the future” (IL 217). What impresses Benjamin is Marx’s ability to forecast the movement of history and its socioeconomic manifestations through his application of the historical dialectic. This historical qua material exchange is summarized in the following statement:

Communism … is the genuine resolution of the antagonism between man and nature and between man and man; it is the true resolution of the conflict between existence and essence, objectification and self-affirmation, freedom and necessity, individual and species. It is the riddle of history solved and knows itself as this solution. (McLellan 89)

Each binary represents a dialectical struggle native to history’s path toward freedom. Marx and Benjamin seek the materialization of this freedom as a resistance to economic class domination and control. The *immiseration* point thus indicates that Benjamin is centering his inquiry on the Marxist conversation between modes of production and changes in culture and its particularly imperiled moment of historical intersection.
Several Marxian tenets are especially formative for Benjamin and thus crucial to our reading of him. First, Marx’s perspective on the fundamental significance of human creativity must be acknowledged as we come to understand that the loss of this characteristic due to industrialization is, in large part, the cause of man’s alienation from himself. In his book *The Structure of Marx’s World View*, John McMurtry summarizes Marx’s long-term attention to the need for creativity:

This need is suggested one way or another from Marx’s earliest to his latest writings. Hence we find such phrases as man’s “need for his own realization” (EPM 112) or “need for universality” (PoP 125) scattered throughout his work; and similarly, statements indicating that men are driven to liberate themselves from oppressive social conditions by a “definite need” to achieve the freedom for material self-realization (GID 331). When this emancipated social situation is secured, [Marx] makes clear on several occasions, then creative work will be allowed its proper status as “life’s prime want” (GP 17), and the untrammeled realization of “what lies within” will incite men as “an end in itself” (Pre-C 85). (32)

Over time, Marx makes direct allusions to the species character earning human beings the title of *Homo Faber*. His insistence on the ‘need’ to create—and the capacity for the human mind to conceive ideas and then realize them—is of paramount importance to our understanding of Benjamin’s ideas.

A second tenet is the difference between the substructure and superstructures caught in the tension of transformation. The base, or substructure, is the web of working relationships—those that determine basic survival or fulfill human needs. In its simplest terms, the base is comprised of the labor relationships that exist between the capitalist and his workers, the specializations of skills, and the other *forces of production*. Benjamin is interested in the correlation of progressive socio-political change moving from the
substructure through the superstructure—a transformation resulting from emerging
technologies and contextual forces. The shift first occurs within the base, or substructure, as
embodied in the means of production and technological advances. These changes eventually
disrupt and shift the superstructure, namely culture, politics and the realm of art. But
Benjamin notes a delay as the superstructure struggles to align itself with the preceding
contextual changes. Entering this moment of alignment, the reproduction becomes an
instrument of revolution, a tool facilitating a more egalitarian exchange. He underscores the
dialectical relationship exerted by these changes: “The transformation of the superstructure,
which takes place far more slowly than that of the substructure, has taken more than half a
century to manifest in all areas of culture the change in the conditions of production” (IL
218). In other words, a delayed manifestation of change infiltrates culture (and man’s species
essence) over a period of time as its impact manifests upward into the superstructure (i.e.
institutions, purveyors of knowledge, politics, etc.). Thus, the mechanical nature of
technological progress alters not only what human beings creatively produce but also how
the products of such creative manufacture are apprehended.

For Marx, the historically changing substructure in the period of industrialization
negatively affects human nature. Marx states, “At a certain stage of their development, the
material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of
production, or—what is but a legal expression of the same thing—with property relations
within which they have been at work hitherto. From forms of development of the productive
forces these relations turn into their fetters” (McLellan 389). We must not overlook the fact
that this conflict on the plane of production is, for Marx, right away a problem on the plane
of human nature’s creative vocation. There is a forced transference of change imposed on
man’s nature from the very devices he creates in the service of technological progress; the point recalls Heidegger’s understanding of enframing as the greatest threat to our humanity. McMurtry explains: “In other words, the economic laws of capitalism entail, for Marx, the systemic de-humanization of society’s process of production and circulation” (91). The manifestation of change within the nature of human beings indicates an alterable core, profoundly affected by broader extrinsic events. The tension between finitude and change as reflected in this dialectical exchange is instructive. While Heidegger will propose that essences are finite and ever changing, actively participating in the project of existence, Benjamin might suggest that change occurs upward in a one-way relationship from the substructure. While the momentum of history is the critical force altering culture, it demands a constant alteration in apperceptive faculties.

An important third tenet is found within this conception of the interplay of sub- and superstructure: Marx avers that our very freedom relies on an authentic, unburdened connection to our inherent nature. He asserts that “[t]he whole character of a species—its species character—is contained in the character of its life-activity; and free, conscious activity is man’s species character. Life itself appears only as a means to life” (EPM 75). The existence of a free, conscious activity inherent to man’s nature is paramount and reflects Marx’s belief in freedom as our creative state. He continues, “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness” (McLellan 389). It is therefore within socio-economic relationships that man’s estrangement from himself is born. Marx states,

We must bear in mind the above-stated proposition that man’s relation to himself only becomes objective and real for him through his relation to the other man. Thus, if the product of his labour, his labour objectified, is for him an alien, hostile,
powerful object independent of him, then his position toward it is such that someone else is master of this object, someone who is alien, hostile, powerful and independent of him. If his own activity is to him an unfree activity, then he is treating it as activity performed in the service, under the dominion, the coercion and the yoke of another man. (EPM 79)

Marx invokes Hegel’s master/slave dialectic in his assessment of man’s objectification and what he determines as an unfree activity under the yoke of another man. The alienation of his own labor is an estrangement from one’s species character as creator, and the continued abstraction of value accelerates this alienation. This allusion to objectification forms a strong (albeit indirect) connection with Heidegger’s notion of our alienation from Dasein—specifically, as we noted in chapter one, within the enframed they-structure of our worldhood. Since the relations of production comprising the substructure can be human or technological, there is also an important connection to how, for Heidegger, the reversal of our relationship with technology cripples the existential Care-structure of Dasein’s being-in-the-world (cf. Being and Time).

Within these matters of alienation and species character stands Marx’s observation of a similar reversal in relation to the essence of being. For him, it is this very conscious life-activity that determines the essence of man. He explains, “Only because of that is his activity a free activity. Estranged labor reverses this relationship, so that it is just because man is a conscious being that he makes his life-activity, his essential being, a mere means to his existence” (EPM 75). The reversal is one that impedes freedom, shifting homo faber to a condition of enslavement. The base modes of production to which Marx refers are those established and accelerated by the Industrial Revolution; assembly line manufacturing and the separation of man from his own labor and production has an ultimately reductive impact. Marx’s underlying concern regards the impact such mechanized production has on the
productive nature of human beings—the need to imagine and create. In his essay “On James Mill,” Marx states, “[I]t is evident that economics establishes an alienated form of social intercourse as the essential, original and natural form” (McLellan 116). Cecilia Sjöholm echoes this sentiment in her book *Doing Aesthetics with Arendt*: “When machines take over the task of making objects, the human body becomes instrumentalized” (39). The mindlessness and numbing impact of detached work defies the core needs and drives expressed in man’s creative impulses.

A fourth and related tenet issues from within this intersection of freedom, essence, and the problematic production-creativity relationship. For Marx, freedom would be a state of unfettered creative thought and labor. He values the open space for contemplation and its expression in our ‘projective consciousness,’ predicting, in notable ways, how for Heidegger thinking is the authentic hermeneutic disposition of our being. McMurtry points out “To call something ‘inhuman’ presumes, of necessity, an idea of what is ‘human,’ and this move is evident in Marx’s tendency to employ such terms whenever he sees external circumstances as having robbed men of the exercise of their creative intelligence” (31). In much the way Heidegger warns of the ‘life struggle’ brought about with enframing, Marx exposes the profound dangers created in our denial of human essence. Marx further explains,

> The more the worker exerts himself, the more powerful becomes the alien, objective world which he fashions against himself, the poorer he and his inner world become, the less there is that belongs to him. . . . The worker puts his life into the object and this means it no longer belongs to him but to the object. . . . The externalization of the worker in his project means not only that his work becomes an object, an external existence, but also that it exists outside him, independently, alien, an autonomous power, opposed to him. The life he has given to the object confronts him as hostile and alien. (McLellan 78-79)
Given Marx’s understanding of human creative potential, the labor of the worker is entitled to creativity and artistry. It is the loss of this intrinsic connection that alienates species-character from product and corrupts one’s ability to remain authentic.

We must not overlook the positive anticipation here stowed within Marx’s critical diagnosis of the guiding sub- and superstructure relationship, one that in turn anticipates any parallels we may posit between Heidegger and Benjamin. In the third volume of *Das Kapital*, Marx expands upon the necessity of creative potential as the primary vehicle to freedom. Departing from an elaboration of ‘necessities’ or ‘wants’, Marx states, “Beyond it begins that development of human energy as an end in itself, the true realm of freedom, which, however, can blossom forth only with this realm of necessity as its basis” (quoted in McMurty 227). The world in which man is removed from himself and coerced into a life at the whim and service of another affects the superstructure—the institutions, political structures, laws and codes that determine social hierarchies and class positions. These are the webs of relationships that Heidegger will call ‘Worldhood’ – the frameworks and social interactions in which Dasein goes about its existence. Whereas for Heidegger we lose our particular agency under the influence of our relationship with technology, Marx diagnoses this loss in our material, working life. In the same way technology authors human agency, we see the hijacking of agency in relations of labor and production. If we are to draw out this analogy further, it could be said that Heidegger’s *Earth and World* dialectic is akin to the interaction between sub and superstructures. For Marx, Benjamin and later Heidegger, the superstructure falls into enframing—no longer free to transact meaning through its open framework of exchange. Marx’s understanding of man’s creative potential anticipates Heidegger’s *poēsis*, albeit indirectly, with a particular emphasis on concretizing human imagination. Alienation,
however, severely impedes this potential and shares the forgottenness that befalls beings in relation to Dasein. One can imagine Marx and Benjamin agreeing with Heidegger but asking: how has capitalism, as the wellspring of alienation and forgottenness, affected this structural imprisonment of our creative force? Marx observes that “[m]oney is the universal, self-constituted value of all things. Hence it has robbed the whole world, the human world as well as nature, of its proper value. Money, as a mode of abstraction away from labor power, is the alienated essence of man’s labour and life, and this alien essence dominates him as he worships it” (McLellan 60). For Marx, our species character resides in our personal production and social exchange. We see again an understanding of authenticity relying on being ‘true to our fundamental nature’ in the way we conduct ourselves within larger society.

As evidenced in the Artwork essay, Benjamin’s own integration of diagnostic critique and positive anticipation broadens our understanding of alienation with respect to artistic production and, in turn, envisions specified modes of subverting such ‘forgottenness.’ Here our analysis can begin to pass more explicitly from the identification of Marxian tenets to Benjamin’s distinct deployment of them; the interplay of sub- and superstructure is particularly important to bear in mind. Most notably, he extends to the traditional reception of artworks the same ill effects that Marx ascribes to currency as a means of social exchange. Embedded in this exchange are oppressive values brought upon the lower classes by those in power. Benjamin’s adherence to Marx’s revolution is driven by an ardent belief in the ultimate leveling of economic inequities and an overcoming of alienation. The freedom from fascist tendencies (namely National Socialism) is, in essence, an emancipation from tradition—or from the limiting and exclusive domain of art as a reflection of the high culture superstructure. And yet, whereas Benjamin aspires to the positive movement forward toward
such a liberation, it comes at the potential cost of further alienation of the artist from his work. This matter is often a source of confusion for Benjamin’s readers. To be clear, the tension lies in the disconnect between estrangement and social transformations only accessible through technology’s revolutionary potential. With respect to estrangement within film, Benjamin quotes Pirandello,

> What matters is that the part is acted not for an audience but for a mechanical contrivance—in the case of the sound film, for two of them. “The film actor,” wrote Pirandello, “feels as if in exile—exiled not only from the stage but also from himself. With a vague sense of discomfort he feels inexplicable emptiness: his body loses its corporeality, it evaporates, it is deprived of reality, life, voice, and the noises caused by his moving about, in order to be changed into a mute image, flickering an instant on the screen, then vanishing into silence. . . . The projector will play with his shadow before the public, and he himself must be content to play before the camera.’” (IL 229)

This passage acknowledges a distancing from human presence and active contribution to productive work—in this case, the making of the film. The actor is alienated from himself as he is removed from his social, intersubjective role. Benjamin continues: “[F]or the first time—and this is the effect of the film—man has to operate with his whole living person yet foregoing its aura. For aura is tied to presence; there can be no replica of it” (IL 229). Much the same way Marx believed our conditions of labor reduces us to an objectified status, the film actor is relegated to a distanced place in which he feels a disconnection from his humanity.

If we recognize that, deep down, our relationship to meaning occurs through our collaboration with objects through daily interactions, we can see how the removal of such a web of exchanges reduces our human agency to an enframed state; the advance on the score of creative potential harbors a risk Marx may not have anticipated, even as his ideas inform
Benjamin’s ability to flag the predicament. Benjamin observes that, in the making of a film, the actor “has as little contact with it as any article made in a factory. This may contribute to that oppression, that new anxiety which, according to Pirandello, grips the actor before the camera” (IL 231). A contradiction emerges: while Benjamin asserts the value of rejecting past tradition and practice, he recognizes the ill-effects imposed on the artist or stage actor who no longer ‘feels’ a connection with his craft. This distinction forms a significant portion of his caution—the alienation of man from himself that occurs in the relationship to technology (and as a result of the exchange of money)—and connects with Marx’s understanding of alienation as a primary cause of immiseration. But does Benjamin maintain his caution and see it through, or does he stow this concern within an abiding confidence in Marx’s revolutionary humanism? The matter is difficult to decide but can be elaborated through a study of Benjamin’s treatment of authenticity.

Authenticity is at once a leading theme for our overall project as well as a discrete matter in Benjamin. As we have seen, it is a key word that recalls ideas expressed in the second half of Heidegger’s Being and Time in relationship to the ‘care’ of Dasein. Again, our forgottenness has led us to dwell inauthentically, overlooking the practice of Sorge, or self-care. While authenticity literally means an adherence to facts or truth, it has been ascribed, in Heidegger’s work, a broader, more abstract significance that calls us to dwell authentically in the world. In Benjamin’s writing, however, authenticity leans toward notions of originality, uniqueness and a particular attributable historical moment. For Benjamin, what is unique therefore equates with the authentic. The extent to which he is being critical or merely descriptive is a tension that parallels that which we saw above in relation to art’s technological emancipation and the seemingly unfinished caution regarding further alienation.
(as specified in the case of film). It bears noting that the theme of authenticity is somewhat precarious as it might be taken to imply an anthropocentric subjectivism lingering in Heidegger. We can trace, however, the ways Benjamin is able to subvert this challenge by means of Marx’s class issues as intersubjective. Ultimately both Heidegger and Benjamin’s understanding of authenticity offer emancipation through truth, though the paths taken to achieve this end diverge.

In chapter 1, we came to understand truth as an event through our interpretation of *alētheia*, moving in and out of concealment. Authenticity, understood as originary, is also subject to the slippage in meaning that our understanding of truth might undergo. Benjamin’s use of the term denotes an object property more than an existential state of being, but he is at the same time reluctant to accredit the signification in full. Benjamin states, “The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity” (IL 220). Howard Caygill explains: “The authentic element of a work is not reproducible, but the loss of the non-reproducible may be offset by the gains of reproduction. Indeed, the concept ‘authenticity’, [Benjamin] suggests in a footnote, is itself of dubious authenticity” (WB 101). While working between human characteristics and those of the artwork, Caygill demonstrates the fluid nature of such attributions and acknowledges the shifting meaning at the core of the issue. The issue matters for our larger concern with the question of whether dwelling authentically might thwart alienation qua enframing, and it matters specifically in this instance for our understanding of how Benjamin regards the tension within art’s emancipatory promise. If authenticity embodies a disposition from which we might experience our freedom, how might mechanically reproduced artworks enhance or detract
from this potential? And, at the same time, can we use the term to imply a positive aim while also remaining mindful of how it signifies a shifting phenomenon in relation to artworks?

A photograph, for example, may be subject to a valuation of its authenticity. While the medium falls into the arena of reproducibility, it is also widely said to capture ‘truth’ in a mechanistic, factual way. And, yet, the medium of photography is as capable of deception as any other—perhaps even more so due to the public’s expectation of its veracity. While the original work, in Benjamin’s parlance, is that which is auratic, some photographs might also lay claim to this peculiar presence as it relates to a percipient. What we find, then, is a somewhat complicated connection between authenticity and Benjamin’s positioning of aura, the term he introduced in his Little History of Photography, written in 1931. In this short text, Benjamin describes aura as “[a] strange weave of space and time: the unique semblance of distance, no matter how close the object may be” (SW, vol. 2, part 2, 518). His brief description seems to express a favorable stance with regards to the power of the photograph and its ability to encapsulate a moment in history regardless of the position from which it is viewed. But the proximity between aura and deception parallels the aforementioned tension between emancipation and distraction in the case of cinematic art.

Howard Caygill clarifies this notion by adding, “[T]his particular weave is monumental, conjoining ‘uniqueness and duration’. . . . Yet the monumental condition of the auratic work of art is deceptive since every work of art undergoes change as a condition of its existence” (94). One of the changes that Caygill’s comment underscores is the mere alteration of purpose from cult to exhibition as our perception of works of art adjusts to new circumstances. With regards to the cultic or auratic value of artworks, John Russon writes, “Artworks in this context are inherently singular items, inseparable from their spatial and
temporal environments, that facilitate the opening of the perspective of the individuals engaging them onto a shared world” (Costello and Carlson 6). The shift in modernity is underpinned by a shift in the manner of reception—one that, per Benjamin, denies our collective enjoyment and appreciation. For Benjamin, this ‘shared experience’ is far more important than the singular, exalted appreciation of a work of art. Not only does photography challenge aura in its existence as a multiple, it offers the possibility of broad public access, thereby magnifying its social import. In this case we may say that the shift from artistic authenticity on the basis of aura to positive singularity on the basis of shared experience is a loss on one hand (a loss levied by modernity’s forces of alienation) but is on balance a gain for authenticity understood as an emancipated intersubjective being-in-the-world. But for the ‘gain’ to in fact be good news we must recognize and come to terms with a mixed field of shifts in the specific terrain of perceptual experience.

Departing from the photograph and returning to the substructure, we can see how changes in technological reproductions ultimately impact the way such objects are perceived. Caygill quotes Benjamin: “Within broad historical epochs the mode of sense perception (die Art und Weise ihrer Sinneswahrnehmung) [in the first version ihre Wahrnehmung, ‘perception’] changes with the overall mode of being in the world (Daseinweise) of the historical collective” (1939a, 224;104). The point reminds us of the constant Marxist undercurrent carried forth with history’s unending momentum. It also points to the unraveling of communal, public absorption of artworks. As Russon explains, “Thinking … or worshipping, in the case of the ritual participant, is not a matter of retreating into a private, inner space, but is a matter of being drawn outside oneself into a shared reality” (Costello and Carlson 8). The important connection, as we will see, is that historical narrative
manifests itself in our art objects and, ultimately, within culture, underscoring again the transfer of change from the base to the superstructure as defined by Marx. The manifestation of democratization and truth as embodied in photographs illustrates how the shift challenges past notions of singularity while holding on to a work’s identity as an object. The shift from aura-based authenticity to perceptual experience in the mode of shared reality, though unhinging one paradigm of cultic individual transformation, nevertheless prepares the way for a social-political praxis of freedom by means of an aesthetic interruption in the modern sub- and superstructure dynamic. Benjamin opts to work positively with the shift and, in turn, invest in the benefits that may come even as new cycles of alienation in aesthetic experience may well arise.

As we continue to trace the evolution of artworks in light of technological advances, noting the dissolution of cult-value qua aura, it is important to acknowledge some of the history of reproductions. Here we see how a specific a shift occurs in our understanding of the original or authentic. The opposite of an authentic work, as Benjamin explains, is a ‘forgery,’ as would be the case if a work is either manually or technologically reproduced. This is not a new practice, as demonstrated by Benjamin’s references to Greek stamped coins among numerous other historical examples. Benjamin does observe, however, that new methods of replication are constantly under development and such methods are accelerating access to images. This developmental focus suggests that he is not concerned so much with the evaluative criteria suggested in the binary of original-forgery. He states: “Around 1900 technical reproduction had reached a standard that not only permitted it to reproduce all transmitted works of art and thus to cause the most profound change in their impact upon the public; it also had captured a place of its own among the artistic processes” (IL 220). This
place within artistic practice is of great interest as reproductions create new forms of expression based on their transformation as embodiments of modernity. Concurrently, sophisticated methods were developed for verification of a work’s integrity as an object from the past—methods that have been used frequently to authenticate the origins in question.

The financial value of a singular work is predicated upon its authorship and position within the historical continuum of artistic production. Benjamin goes further and asserts, “The uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being embedded in the fabric of tradition” (IL 223). This point will be of paramount importance as we explore the fabric of cultural objects as transhistorical carriers of meaning; Benjamin is shifting the meaning of ‘value’ from a strictly financial designation, just as he has traced the shift in the meaning of authenticity from a strictly auratic designation. It is by means of a reproduction that we achieve a democratization of art, extending its presence to an individual’s and community’s particular space or place, thereby reactivating its presence in a new light. He states, “And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object produced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind” (IL 221). This obverse is the requisite for forward momentum, since without the shattering of past structures, there can be no progress in the emancipation of all men. So then, in a certain sense ‘authenticity’ underlies aura while aura connects with traditions that are imbued with cult rituals. In another sense, ‘authenticity’ conceived as shared experience and aesthetic reactivation sheds the weight of past practices with respect to artworks, making these both collective and democratic. Traditions infer rigid power structures and can therefore enable or reflect fascist tendencies, preventing the political expression needed to level society as
demanded by Marx’s prognosis of revolution as an equalizing force. It is as though Benjamin beholds his own historical moment as one in which, owing to the collapse of aura, cultic value may either be replaced by a broader emancipatory aesthetic availability or else reasserted in the ‘forgery’ of mounting totalitarianism.

Freedom, for Benjamin, thus arrives only by means of an eradication of long-held traditions—much the way revolution brings about class reorganization for Marx. With this condition, a paradox emerges: we must negotiate the loss of aura—or the object’s intrinsic value resulting from its unique position in history—with the new function of the reproduction as a level ground on which artistic creation can reach the masses in a collectivist way. Thus, the saving power emerges from within the danger. One might say Benjamin is rehabilitating poēsis from not just technē’s challenging-forth, but further in relation to reforming the sub and super-structures of society. All the while, the Marxist perspective on alienation and its counterpart in revolution informs this transference. Benjamin explains the value of such an undressing of art. In a critique, he suggests, “The peeling away of the object’s shell, the destruction of the aura, is the signature of a perception whose sense for the sameness of things has grown to the point where even the singular, the unique, is divested of its uniqueness—by means of its reproduction” (SW, vol. 2, part 2, 591). In other words, he seeks to accomplish what Adorno praised as “the liquidation of bourgeois tendencies from the work of art” (Aesthetics and Politics 120-126). To disrobe an artwork’s uniqueness (but not, that is, its effective singularity) is to alter the basis for its inherent import. The class infused paradigm would shift with the liberation from embedded significance. What is at issue is not the value of the original artwork as a testament to history but rather its corrupted value as an object of status—its function as a self-aggrandizing tool for elitism and class
divisions. The accepted traditions (superstructures) are, for Benjamin, unable to recognize the self-serving ideological frames through which artworks are valued and apprehended. If we return to the dialectic formed between the base and superstructures, it seems Benjamin holds industrialization and capitalism responsible for the misplaced value attributed to artworks; they have become ‘cultic’ on the terms set by capitalist ritual. The situation, extended to Heidegger’s terms, is one that in which the value of art needs to be understood through a new configuration of poiēsis and praxis.

As we can now clearly see, traces of Marx’s thoughts underpin the Artwork essay. The momentum of the Industrial Age has a double edge: it raises difficult class hierarchies (manifesting in alienation and inauthenticity), and it deeply alters the essence of the artwork itself. The ruling classes (the bourgeoisie, the political leaders, or members of an aristocratic elite) use high culture as a symbol of status and position, profoundly corrupting any aesthetic value or purpose the work might otherwise have. These tendencies fail to honor the better possibilities inherent in mechanical reproduction’s post-auratic milieu. Given the misappropriation of art’s fundamental (though not altogether unproblematic) purpose as a manifestation of our best selves, exploring ways to emancipate from these restrictions has merit. The revolution toward which culture is moving will, in Benjamin’s estimation, offer emancipation from the bonds of capitalist enframing qua alienation. Though tempered to some degree, he believes that reproductions, in particular film (an issue we return to later in this chapter), can act as agents advancing this dialectic toward a more even social environment. Despite the merit of these ideas, Marx’s celebration of the creative imagination of homo faber returns to pose a challenge to the reproduction as a tool of freedom. The
contradiction presented between Marx’s celebration of man’s creative impulse and Benjamin’s celebration of the reproduction needs further analysis.

§2.3: CULT VALUE VERSUS DURABILITY: SHIFTING THE PATH TO FREEDOM

How, specifically, does the artwork fit into the shifting superstructure and all that these modern pressures imply? To answer this question, we need to understand in full measure how Benjamin applies the historical dialectic and its expression within the reproduction as a means of emancipation from oppressive forces. If, per Benjamin, an artwork’s capacity to generate freedom is its ultimate purpose, ascribing to the reproduction this powerful revolutionary potential is a tall order indeed. Where in the last section we established a conceptual map for Benjamin’s configuration and deployment of Marxian critique, the goal of this section is to explore in a more evaluative way Benjamin’s claims with regards to the reproduced artwork as an instrument of modernity. We will also examine in more detail a central tension underpinning the Artwork essay, the negotiation between the loss of an original and the gain of mass consumption; we will further expose an ambivalence that makes a definitive reading difficult. Recall that, as though prefacing the ethical undertones in Heidegger’s Technology essay, Benjamin asserts that the reproduction, including photography and film, serve to eliminate control from dominant social structures. By looking at the available forms such as photography and film, he sought to trace the changes such mediums created in both culture and its mass reception, while simultaneously endorsing the loss of cult value or capitalist tendencies. Several thinkers would contest Benjamin’s largely positive prognosis of mechanical reproductions—Adorno and Arendt among them. Though the philosophies are highly compatible in their accounts of mass
culture and freedom, there are tensions around the matters of (a) ‘originality’ in the mechanical paradigm, and (b) human creativity itself as a revolutionary act. As we have begun to see, and will now investigate more pointedly, Benjamin places his emphasis on the reception of artworks as a factor of our experience, rather than overtly acknowledging the act of making as a necessary condition of our authentic human expression.

To achieve these goals, we return to Marx’s influential undercurrents and how the breadth of his estimation of *man as maker* has a rhizomatic effect, spreading forward into many subsequent aesthetic considerations. To prepare to return to Benjamin we must elucidate how, as is well known, the artwork and man’s inclination toward its creation has a long-standing history of ‘interconnected aesthetic effects’ (as Adorno states)—one that reflects a certain endurance and intrinsic historical value. As a baseline, there is the constant human drive toward creative manufacture. The balance of praxis and *poēsis* liberate both the maker and percipient. As McMurtry rightly summarizes, Marx’s view of human nature demands that we ‘make artworks’ as a manifestation of our best and freest selves: “Marx construes the nature of man as characterized not only by an essential capacity to construct a project and erect it in reality, but by a corresponding, essential need to do so.” Creative realization and self-realization go hand in hand, but of course the ‘essential need’ requires an emancipated social-political context – one that in fact will “‘be worthy of human nature’ (CIII 821)” (31-32). Building on his previously noted ‘species character’ point, the principle of *man as maker* is, for Marx, fundamental to how authentic expression can and must become a way to secure freedom. At issue is the relation between making and nature: “Labour is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and
nature” (*Kapital* 283). He continues, “He sets in motion the natural forces which belong to
his own body, his arms, legs, head and hands, in order to appropriate the materials of nature
in a form adapted to his own needs” (*Kapital* 283). This need is embedded in the millennia of
artworks available to us, many of which testify to the past and the enduring drive human
beings have to make such objects. Additionally, they serve to concretize imagined ideas and
thoughts. If that is the case, then it would seem problematic for critical theory to stress our
experience of art so much that the side of its making is overlooked. Marx calls human beings
and social systems to recognize their species character – creativity – without which we are
reduced to becoming objects ourselves—enframed, inauthentic and estranged. The failure to
recognize and preserve the agency of species character is like the failure, on Heidegger’s
terms, of preserving the character of dwelling creatively and freely in language. Alienation in
relation to capitalist production, and alienation in relation to reductive modes of thinking and
challenging-forth, alike evidence a betrayal of essential creative action. What is curious, and
often overlooked, is that Benjamin appears to take for granted the value of human creative
impulses, placing more emphasis on the revolutionary nature of modern reproductions over
Marx’s significant support of an integrated man as *homo faber*. This blind spot reflects a
concentrated preoccupation with what technology has to offer with respect to mass
consumption and entertainment, and understandably so in light of Benjamin’s sense of
political urgency. But the failure to explicitly address and invest in the principle of creative
species character means that a valuable resource is overlooked. Moreover, and importantly,
the blind spot actually leaves Benjamin in a position of being less discerning about the
potentially reductive nature of mechanical practices.
With this tension in mind let us return in greater detail to Benjamin’s case. We recall that the first of his foci, historical progression, is based upon a Neo-Marxist historical materialism. As Adorno observes, he wants to bring our attention to the “liquidation of art of its Bourgeois tendencies” (Taylor 121) and call for political agency in the manufacture of art that is able to withstand the forces of fascism. This is a sentiment echoed “The Author as Producer,” where he ascribes a radical responsibility to creators as proponents of political change. With technological advances and embedded structural norms, authors and artists have a duty to challenge and disrupt. Caygill explains, “It can serve here to anticipate the often-overlooked point that for Benjamin the ‘fate of art’ is symptomatic of a fundamental change in the structure of experience which may be traced back to broader political and technical developments” (WB 98). Caygill points to the dialectical relationship between technology and its impact, noting the time stamp of Benjamin’s work. He notes the subtle layers to which Benjamin refers—the ongoing exchange between base and superstructure, as previously discussed. Given the pervasive mood of fascism overtaking Europe at the time of his writing, it is not surprising to see a focus on art in the mode of experience as a purveyor of freedom. The call to freedom through the politicization of art becomes the essential authentic gesture, overriding the Marxian stress on one’s need for creative expression. Benjamin states, “[I]t would therefore be wrong to underestimate the value of such theses as a weapon,” (IL 218) referring to the relationship of art for the masses and the available means of reproduction. The forward momentum offers a release from “outmoded concepts such as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery—concepts whose uncontrolled (and at present almost uncontrollable) application would lead to a processing of data in the Fascist sense” (IL 218). Benjamin notes the seemingly irrepressible function art has within
hierarchical social structures. Though art has fallen prey to delinquent structures that only appreciate works as carriers of exchange value and as status symbols, in order for the artwork to provide the ‘liquidation of bourgeois tendencies,’ it must be, first and foremost, emancipated of its traditional position. Benjamin’s first premise is therefore political in nature, asserting that new art forms can hold powerful sway over the masses.

But it is difficult to imagine the reproduction as an intermediary to freedom, and Benjamin is careful to note certain losses in the forward momentum created by reproducibility; the placement within historical time is among these diminished characteristics. He states, “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence” (IL 220). But there is an ambivalence inscribed in this idea, one (as we have begun to see) regarding the absence of aura and the need to reconcile ourselves with the current technological conditions responsible for this loss.

Benjamin explores the shifts establishing an artwork’s purpose, moving from the ‘elk portrayed by the man of the stone age’ through the renaissance Madonna to current practices espousing ‘art for art’s sake’ and the related exhibition value and market transactions. He notes the alteration of purpose from magic and ritual, through cult and mystification, to a space of exhibition value and monetary status. He explains, “With the different methods of technical reproduction of a work of art, its fitness for exhibition increased to such an extent that the quantitative shift between its two poles turned into a qualitative transformation of its nature” (IL 225). Again, we see his preoccupation with history’s impact on art’s ongoing narrative. His words describe the shift from unique objects and their effect to multiples,
noting the ‘qualitative transformation’ such a move creates. With an eye on mitigating the
difficult loss of its aura, Benjamin looks forward to the best and highest purpose for the new:
resistance and overcoming of fascist domination while preserving and enacting the positive
opportunities this loss creates. But how can such positive faith in progress align with such a
pointed critique of art’s increasingly transactional character? The question returns us to
Benjamin’s account of a work’s own historicity.

Building on his notion of aura from prior writings, notably his *Short History of
Photography* published in 1931, Benjamin distinguishes the original from its reproduction by
diagnosing its greatest loss in the face of reproducibility—its unique position in time and
place. It may at first seem as though such loss is met with regret. He states, “One might
subsume the eliminated element in the term ‘aura’ and go on to say: that which withers in the
age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art” (IL 221). This is perhaps the
idea most often associated with the *Artwork* essay, and while it provides the ground for
declaring autonomous art an ‘object of the past,’ it also indicates a particular zeitgeist.
Caygill reminds us that “Benjamin insists that the ‘decay of aura’ is symptomatic of broader
cultural change, stating plainly (but vainly) that: ‘This is a symptomatic process whose
significance points beyond the realm of art’” (103). Historical change is a matter of course
for Benjamin’s Marxism; it bears evaluation but also bears the promise of progress. If we
recall that his broader concern lies with envisioning the freedom from oppressive structures,
we understand his willingness to invest in how the loss of aura (or cult-value) is important in
as much as it emphasizes the forward movement of technological practices in art making.

But how does this forward momentum manifest its emancipatory potential? In the
notes to the *Artwork* essay, Benjamin explains the intersection of circumstances leading to
dialectical change in technological forms of expression. He cites three particular advances in technological devices. First, we see the constant push toward newer developments. In other words, “technology works toward a certain form of art” (IL 249). Second, he notes how “traditional art forms in certain phases of their development strenuously work toward effects which later are effortlessly attained by the new ones” (IL 249). Finally, the less dramatic, slower advent of receptivity to new cultural norms appears within culture. This receptivity benefits progress by its acceptance and assimilation of change. He mentions the *Kaiserpanorama* as a precursor to motion pictures and details how Thomas Edison implemented this apparatus before projection was known (IL 250). With each new era, emerging technologies pressed forward the vocabulary at our disposal. In other words, for Benjamin, each era’s new developments lead to constant transitions in the way we absorb images and will continue to change with historical progress. He states, “One of the foremost tasks of art has always been the creation of a demand which could be fully satisfied only later. The history of every art form shows critical epochs in which a certain art form aspires to effects which could be fully obtained with a changed technical standard, that is to say, in a new art form” (237). The very basis of progress, even within the arena of artistic language, benefits from technological advances. Benjamin admires this momentum, noting its inevitability and asserting its profound influence. Moreover, he lauds the reproduction’s reach and influence: “One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence” (221). The multiple nature of technologically reproduced art democratizes access and evens out the field for its appreciation. Yet, as Arendt will show, this democratization comes at a significant price. On
one hand Benjamin does seem aware of this risk. Despite his arguments against tradition and its class-based structures, he, too, celebrates cultural artifacts. In his essay “Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting,” he describes, in minute detail, each volume’s significance, not only as a carrier of history and knowledge, but as an embodiment of the memory of its acquisition. His evident reverence of each book in his vast personal collection underscores his attachment to the value of art objects, whether they be paintings or collectible manuscripts. Where, then, does Benjamin find cause for celebration when faced with the eradication of an original artwork’s singular uniqueness?

Again, he jettisons concerns about the degradation of artworks, consents to endorse the necessary loss of aura, and wagers on the progress promised by increased access and changing apperception. Arendt seems to interrupt this move by elaborating on Benjamin’s own critique of the transactional shift in artistic value. She explains, “When books or pictures in reproduction are thrown on the market cheaply and attain huge sales, this does not affect the nature of the objects in question. But their nature is affected when these objects themselves are changed—rewritten, condensed, digested, reduced to kitsch in reproduction, or in preparation for the movies” (Arendt, PF 207). This phenomenon heralds the difficulty of maintaining the integrity of artworks, while making them palatable for mass consumption. It also marks the difference between creations that endure and those which are consumed either for entertainment or social exchange value. Likewise, for Adorno, the maintenance of autonomous artworks is necessary for the preservation of culture (as opposed to merely the ‘abolition of fear’), which, for him, is the true purpose of the revolutionary spirit. We have to be careful not to simply “escape the old taboos by entering into new ones—‘tests’, so to speak” (Taylor 120). He continues with a defense of an intellectual class:
It is not bourgeois idealism if, in full knowledge and without mental prohibitions, we maintain our solidarity with the proletariat instead of making of our own necessity a virtue of the proletariat, as we are always tempted to do—the proletariat which itself experiences the same necessity and needs us for knowledge as much as we need the proletariat to make the revolution. (Harrison and Wood 529)

In other words, the bourgeois class, or its cultural elite, serve a function in the education of the proletariat as much as the latter supports the efforts to liquidate fascist tendencies. For Adorno, the synergistic relationship between the two is essential, although necessitating the preservation of an elitist class.

In any case, the essence qua aura of the artwork is lost when abridged and degraded. Benjamin clearly acknowledges that the artwork loses its aura and mystical value. Furthermore, the reproduction and its ancillary iterations also offer ideological propaganda a wider reach, thus potentially transforming localized networks into larger, more insidious campaigns. Certainly, Adolf Hitler’s media blitz (orchestrated by his minister of propaganda, Josef Goebbels) used all available forms of technological reproduction to assail mass society with their ideological message—a message of which Benjamin was acutely aware and addresses directly in the Artwork essay’s epilogue. It goes without saying that democratization of information is not always aimed at the greater revolutionary good, certainly not the emancipation of thought that Benjamin would necessitate. In fact, its aim, under many circumstances, seems directed at those whose ability to process information and contemplate its significance is severely underdeveloped. The reproduction and its vast reach have the capacity to alter and control beliefs, undermining any revolutionary potential it may have otherwise had. Benjamin does not appear to see this tension through.
In contrast to Benjamin’s understanding of the dialectic, Hitler declared, “Art can in no way be a fashion” (Harrison and Wood 440). Instead, Hitler proposed art should mirror the integrity of the German people, foregoing all other modern movements as degenerate and impure. He vehemently opposes any creation of modern artworks and asserts, “I want to forbid these pitiful misfortunes who quite obviously suffer from an eye disease, to try vehemently to foist these products of their misinterpretation upon the age we live in, or even to wish to present them as ‘Art.’” (Harrison and Wood 441). The cleansing in question denies the historical movements of the modern age and refutes, irrevocably and based on ideological intent, any notion that broader technological and mechanistic shifts affect the way cultural objects are produced. It bears noting at this stage that Hitler’s purification campaign relied heavily on posters, flyers and other mechanically reproduced artifacts. This rampant use of the reproduction in its every form begs an important question of Benjamin’s argument: What is to become of the mechanically produced artwork when appropriated into fascist aims? Furthermore, what is the risk to our ability to discern emancipation from enframing? Add to this basic human need Arendt’s understanding of art as the carrier of our thoughts—thought-things in her parlance—and the risk of losing these characteristics to the copy becomes acutely significant. She explains, “From this viewpoint, the things of the world have the function of stabilizing human life, and their objectivity lies in the fact that—in contradiction to the Heraclitean saying that the same man can never enter the same stream—men, their ever-changing nature notwithstanding, can retrieve their sameness, that is, their identity, by being related to the same chair and the same table” (HC 137). Without reclaiming the ground of aura per se, Arendt celebrates the artwork’s durability in the face of time and this very endurance embodies humanity’s collective identity. As though responding to Benjamin’s
celebration of tradition’s defeat, she states, “Even if the historical origin of art were of an exclusively religious or mythological character, the fact is that art has survived gloriously its severance from religion, magic, and myth” (HC 167).

The point returns us to aforementioned Marxian stress on how such identity is emblematic of man as maker – creativity as species character. And for Heidegger, man as maker is the vehicle that might negotiate our enframed condition through art’s ability to astound us back into a meditative openness of thought. Arendt sees artworks as the potential to carry forward human thought itself, manifested in the products of our making. Again, we need to hear this point as an interruption in Benjamin’s quick and seemingly categorical pivot from ‘loss’ to ‘hope.’ The durability of artworks, for Arendt, can secure our place in history concretely. She explains,

Thus, their durability is of a higher order than that which all things need in order to exist at all; it can attain permanence throughout the ages. In this permanence, the very stability of the human artifice, which, being inhabited and used by mortals, can never be absolute, achieves a representation of its own. Nowhere else does the sheer durability of the world of things appear in such purity and clarity, nowhere else therefore does this thing-world reveal itself so spectacularly as the non-mortal home for mortal beings. (HC 168)

This notion of durability highlights the gap in Benjamin’s celebration of aura’s demise, as well as one consequence of his failure to take up the *homo faber* principle. Just as Benjamin appreciates and, in fact, treasures his book collection for its enduring value, Arendt demonstrates the importance of art’s embodiment of thinking and history. The first sentiment is actually a personal instance of knowing the second. But the point is not to assume durability, or a revolutionary aesthetic, depends on an either/or view of aura. The aura paradigm can of course amount to an illusion of durability. As Caygill explains: “The aural
work of art which pretends to be immune to the passage of time is in truth only a particular way of negotiating finitude, that is, by denying it” (WB 94). Durability, by contrast, embraces finitude but transfigures the world into a site of dwelling and thinking. In fact, we could say that durability names a situation in which what art works ‘make’ is, more than just objects, a recovery of the impetus from which they ‘spring’: creative, contemplative thought. For Arendt, “The immediate source of the art work is the human capacity for thought” (HC 168). We are reminded of Marx and the notion of freedom as a condition of open, unfettered thought and Heidegger’s “What Calls for Thinking,” celebrating the meditative contemplation connecting us to authentic existence. While Arendt is not a Marxist per se, she certainly carries traces of Marx’s assertion of our species character within homo faber and the necessity of leisure as unfettered time for contemplation and creative thought. Consider again how, for Marx, our species-character is expressed in the objects of our making. He asserts, “Yet the productive life is the life of the species. It is life-engendering life. The whole character of a species—its species character—is contained in the character of its life-activity; and free, conscious activity is man’s species character. Life itself appears only as a means to life” (EPM 75).

The point must not be lost when the issue of aura’s eclipse governs the scene of how we think about aesthetic possibilities. Nor should we think that what enables ‘permanence’ and what is ‘life-engendering’ – art-works, thought-works, species-work – is invulnerable. It would seem, from Marx’s position and Arendt’s assessment, that the loss of durability would be overwhelmingly detrimental to our ongoing self-understanding as a species. By extension, the whole enterprise of durability needs to be rendered on the basis of poiēsis as praxis, as Heidegger would assert. Arendt observes: “The objective status of the cultural world, which,
insofar as it contains tangible things—books and paintings, statues, buildings and music—comprehends and gives testimony to, the entire recorded past of countries, nations and ultimately mankind” (MDT 202). She is not saying durability depends on, or happens as, ‘aura.’ She is observing that we know our collective histories through the objects that remain in museums, public spaces and other cultural institutions. Art holds value as an inscription in the ‘built’ facets of a culture’s creative engagement with its historical moment, and as an ongoing ‘work’ of thinking. Martel’s account adds an accent to this sense of value: “The work of art is perpetually new; it demands reinterpretation with each era, each generation, each peripient. Great works of art are like inexhaustible springs originating from a place beyond our ‘little world of man.’ They reconnect us with a reality too vast for the rational mind to comprehend” (Martel 130). Ceding this point does not require a reclaiming of aura. Our collective devotion to the preservation and presentation of works testifies to our desire for a perpetual return and appreciation of such thought-things. If Benjamin’s foundation is indeed Marx’s determined emancipation through revolutionary means, and if reproduction promises a means to do so, how is such a breach with human nature fulfilling this role?

What I am suggesting is that Arendt’s philosophy of aesthetic praxis can and should be inserted into the space of the Benjaminian ambivalence (in the sense of an oversight, a hesitation) regarding the embrace of post-aura aesthetic reproduction and the neglect of the ‘making’ side of our species character). We can see this point if we turn for a moment to a different discourse and a specific example of the artistic drive at work in a revolutionary way. As though illustrating Marx’s understanding of human creative nature and Arendt’s celebration of durability, Jacqueline Rose explores artistic drive and production in the face of profound adversity – one that is not specifically a matter of class alienation but of the
enframing’s presence in a culture’s ‘unconscious’ forces of alienation, in what Jacques Lacan referred to as the ‘symbolic realm’ of ‘language’ in a given socio-historical moment. In her book *Women in Dark Times*, Rose writes about Jewish artist Charlotte Salomon, offering a spectacular example of the human drive toward the manufacture of artistic narrative created under the most oppressive of historical circumstances. Salomon’s journey and artistic expression occurred during the World War II and serve as witness to the incredible endurance of the human spirit. Rose appreciates her as “first and foremost a painter” who, in her works, “makes [a] major bid for freedom” (77). Rose continues, “[P]ainting brings Salomon to the brink of conscious and unconscious life” (78). Her work flows as might a stream of consciousness, representing dream-like expressions of her plight. This associative imagery is the representation of freedom of thought, the singular human condition irreducible by fascism, the remaining shard of independence in a world otherwise under political control. Rose explains, “As if strangely, the fascist injunction against independent critical thought leads thought, in defiance, to its deepest and most complex reckoning with itself (thinking as ‘another mode of moving in the world in freedom’ in Hannah Arendt’s phrase)” (79). The point echoes what Benjamin may have wanted of art but is not foremost coupled to mechanical reproduction as its means.

What remains of Salomon’s work is preserved in the Netherlands, kept in carefully climate-controlled conditions to mitigate its fragility and impermanence (see figure 2.1). Almost as a metaphor for the life Salomon lost, the work is testimony to not only her personal experience (some of it devastating in its content), but her ultimate demise; the works show ‘durability’ in this way. Writing for the *New Yorker*, Toni Bentley describes the objects:
Many of Salomon’s early images contain multiple scenes on a page, like a comic book or a movie storyboard—Salomon was well versed in the Weimar Republic’s cinema—depicting sequential actions with an off-kilter wit. In the later paintings, one can see the shift in Salomon’s work from the petite, jaunty, and joyful, as the images become sparser, darker, bolder, the style more modern and urgent; the early detail gives way to depth as innocence turns to truth. (“The Obsessive Art and Great Confession of Charlotte Salomon”)
The objects that remain reveal aspects of her personal life and the greater collective struggle of her time. There is no pretension to the cultic assurances of aura, but neither is there an abstraction away from the identity of the maker (of Salomon’s species charter at work); it does not denounce the potential of reproducibility, but it does in its own uniqueness advance the kind of emancipatory course one would expect Benjamin to endorse. Her praxis of resistance is made through a personal engagement with her own family’s complex relationships and the mark these made. These objects are, in turn, paramount to our apprehending of the past and the responsibilities to the past; their emancipatory affect is wrought by way of taking on the personalized workings of tradition rather than simply looking beyond tradition to the future. Salomon’s practice work carried her through the ‘darkest of times’ while fulfilling her purpose, both intrinsic and extrinsic. She certainly challenged the odds of deprivation and social alienation while continuing to produce powerfully prescient artworks. In her own writing, Salomon credits her production with her having maintained her sanity in the face of such adversity. It is within the flow of a meditative practice that Salomon found some measure of freedom and peace.

Could Benjamin’s position appreciate this phenomenon? Despite such examples of freedom found in individual artistic expression, he argues for mass liberation through the reproduction’s democratized ubiquity. His focus is on the medium and mobilization character of art’s expressive operation but neglects the emancipatory operations (and the support these could bring to his case) already and enduring in play in the character of homo faber. His views could be clarified, and his cause could be helped, by drawing in these further points from Marx and Arendt. That said, what Marx, Benjamin, and Arendt would still have to answer to is the way the material dialect has, in more recent times, seen new mechanizing
technologies that in effect coerce revolutionary expression and species character into further modes of alienation. Benjamin himself knew that then current available systems of production would cede to even faster ones in a seemingly endless cycle of invention. And Marx likewise saw how, with new technologies, we manufacture new needs and these needs move us increasingly away from our species character. Arendt’s case for the durability of aesthetic thought-things was, in one sense, a way to traverse these challenges. But the recent and contemporary materialization of our social consciousness and unconsciousness is a scene in which what Jean Baudrillard terms the hyperreality of a simulacrum world conscripts the very instruments of aesthetic emancipation into a new species of anesthetization. The techno-aesthetic catalyst for social emancipation may well be, but the terms of the historical moment seem to have redoubled the problematic manner in which perceptual experience is curated by the ascending ‘aura’ of our consumer-media worldhood. One wonders what thoughts Benjamin would have had in response to today’s digital advances and their profound impact on every facet of human existence and culture. As we continue to move through Benjamin’s ideas and their roots in Marx’s foretelling of the proletariat revolution, we need to navigate his limitations in relation to man as maker and art objects as thought-things while at the same time affirming his own case for art’s saving power.

§2.4: FILM AS DISTRACTION OF THE MASSES AS DISTINCT FROM MARXIST LEISURE

The work we have undertaken thus far has highlighted the urgency with which Benjamin welcomed new means of disseminating ideas. His determination to neutralize traditions of control and subjugation is clear. Nonetheless, the difficult negotiation between the demise of cult value qua aura and the need for durable cultural works continues to linger
in the *Artwork* essay. His approach to the question of ‘distraction’ distills these tensions, for he regards it as both positive and negative and is not altogether clear or decisive on the difference. We have begun to see that he equates modernity’s zeitgeist most directly with the medium of film, while drawing connections (albeit indirectly) from its distracting influence through mass consumption to Marx’s offering of leisure as a locus for contemplation, thought and creative production. It is in this state of collective repose, taking in cinematic imagery, that Benjamin conceives of distraction as leisure—for him, a positive force benefitting the masses. In my estimation, Benjamin’s reading of distraction is a shortcoming diagnosed not only by Adorno and Arendt, but also one Marx would likely not support. Therefore, the purpose of this section is to detail this issue of distraction in relation to film with a focus on the contradictions Adorno identifies. Forming a clear understanding of new technological forms of expression and their impact on human perceptual faculties will help clarify their possible emancipatory characteristics. Not only will this additional investigation clarify the ambiguities of Benjamin’s writing, it will provide foundational material that will prove useful, particularly in chapter 5.

Returning to a close reading of the *Artwork* essay, we see a gap emerging between the promise of a Marxist version of leisure and the pitfalls of Benjamin’s understanding of distraction. Distraction (as a byproduct of cinema) has the potential to fall easily into a state of enframing and alienation rather than one of contemplation and meditative thought. Benjamin overlooks this possibility, though in his dramatic epilogue he acknowledges the potential for corruption. We will draw distinctions between the medium of film and an artwork’s capacity to foster thinking and contemplation as outlined previously. In order to best understand the tensions that haunt the artwork essay, I will rely on Adorno’s
contemporaneous critique, Arendt’s understanding of artworks as thought-objects and Caygill’s astute analysis detailed in his book *The Colour of Experience*.

How, for Benjamin, is film the aesthetic medium that simultaneously provides a platform for communal enjoyment while also producing fundamental changes in apperception? He equates film’s timely arrival with the need to confront and assess the ‘dangers threatening man’ and the pervasive nature of such states of oppression. He explains,

> The film is the art form that is in keeping with the increased threat to his life which modern man has to face. Man’s need to expose himself to shock effects is his adjustment to the dangers threatening him. The film corresponds to profound changes in the apperceptive apparatus—changes that are experienced on an individual scale by the man in the street in big-city traffic, on a historical scale by every present-day citizen. (IL 250)

Benjamin acknowledges the more global substructures driving change in the quotidian needs of present-day global human beings. The correspondence of changes both in technological advances and subsequently in the recipient of such apparatuses converge in the way film provides an emancipatory function. As we have seen, the price of freedom per this assessment is the liquidation of traditional values, particularly as they affect the artwork. History’s inevitable momentum makes this premise a default condition of technological progress, one with which we must reckon. Benjamin determines, “To demonstrate the identity of the artistic and scientific uses of photography which heretofore usually were separated will be one of the revolutionary functions of the film” (IL 236). This pragmatic merger between art and science moves the percipient closer to an unfolding of truth as an experienced event rather than a phenomenon delivered via tradition. The event of truth is presented by means of film’s surgical precision and ability to expose multiple perspectives simultaneously. Benjamin acknowledges the mind’s inability to keep pace with moving
images wherein the condition of viewing demands a suspension of contemplation. He quotes Duhamel’s protest: “I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images” (IL 238). But the condition has its reasons and, ultimately, its resources. Benjamin holds that “[t]he manner in which human sense perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well” (IL 222). In this case the circumstances are, to be sure, comprised increasingly by technological media; but this is a shift in quantity, not no much in kind. Says Caygill of Benjamin’s view, “In a sense, all experience for Benjamin is technological, since the term technology designates the artificial organization of perception; as such, experience changes with the development of technology” (96). The idea in this statement is deterministic yet at the same time informed by a mode of hope. It is not lost on Benjamin that the development of film is concurrent with atmospheric warfare, with openly practiced genocide and other world-threatening technological ‘advances.’ But as a marked extension of the circumstances of technological perception, cinema, for Benjamin, can be a particular place of catharsis, a safe environment in which human beings gather to process their lives. As Adorno is quick to determine, however, within the illusion of safety, the absent-minded absorption introduces a thoughtless state wherein the recipient is no longer applying critical analysis of the moving images washing over him.

Regardless, the bases for Benjamin’s optimism arise as he details the ways film penetrates consciousness through the lenses of contemplation and distraction. This separation increases the distance between film as a medium of distraction and the artwork as a form of contemplation. He begins by telling us, “The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses” (IL 237). Film acts upon us in abstract,
impactful ways, bringing us closer to the purity of our ideas. ‘Simultaneous collective experience’ lays the ground for a larger scale event—something that, in his estimation, paintings fail to do. Benjamin writes, “Painting simply is in no position to present an object for simultaneous collective experience, as it was possible for architecture at all times, for the epic poem in the past, and for the movie today” (IL 235). Arguably, these art forms’ intentions and functions are fundamentally different.

Arendt would certainly stress the discrepancy between thought-objects and the entertainment industry; she would ultimately decide they were incompatible. In contrast with Benjamin’s point, she assails consumer absorption of mass media over the thought-provoking artworks defining culture. In an effort to describe the dangers of blind consumption, Arendt asserts,

Mass society, on the contrary, wants not culture but entertainment, and the wares offered by the entertainment industry are indeed consumed by society just like any other consumer goods. The products needed for entertainment serve [. . .] to while away time, and the vacant time which is whiled away is not leisure time, strictly speaking—time, that is, in which we are free from all cares and activities necessitated by the life process and therefore free for the world and its culture—it is rather left-over time, which still is biological in nature, left over after labor and sleep have received their due. Vacant time which entertainment is supposed to fill is a hiatus in the biologically conditioned cycle of labor—in the ‘metabolism of man with nature,’ as Marx used to say. (PF 205)

Arendt raises an important distinction that does not seem fully apparent to Benjamin—the separation between distraction by entertainment and leisure as a space for thinking and contemplation. She connects more deeply with Marx’s leisure than Benjamin’s ideas do. If, as we noted previously, “the immediate source of the art work is the human capacity for thought,” (HC 168) it is this essential function of the human mind that suffers the greatest
loss. It would seem that Marx’s favor of leisure time creates the space for the activity of
thought to occur. Marx’s idea echoes Heidegger’s recommendation in “What Calls for
Thinking” to a letting be of free thought that in essence allows thoughts to manifest in
unfettered freedom. In addition, we see a parallel within Heidegger’s observation that art
‘astounds’ us, noted in the end of the “Question Concerning Technology.” Ultimately, there
is an important distinction between leisure time and left-over time. And, as we will see
shortly, I assert that this distinction separates contemplation (or meditative thought) from
absent-minded distraction.

Benjamin is loath to cede on this ground. Despite his acknowledgement of film as
potentially alienating in the Artwork essay’s epilogue, he describes film as a confluence of art
and science, defending its egalitarian effects:

Thus, for contemporary man the representation of reality by the
film is incomparably more significant than that of the painter,
since it offers, precisely because of the thoroughgoing
permeation of reality with mechanical equipment, an aspect of
reality which is free of all equipment. And that is what one is
entitled to ask from a work of art. (IL 234)

The political agency inherent in art, for Benjamin, necessitates its having a purpose bigger
than its merely autonomous existence. The effective origins of this purpose are found in the
dimension of vision—both sensory and metaphorical—and film thereby gives man access to
greater freedom of understanding. Benjamin explains, “By close-ups of the things around us,
by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring commonplace milieus under
the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension
of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of an
immense and unexpected field of action” (IL 236). The expansion of our perspective and the
enhancement of our ‘field of action’ support his understanding of film’s revolutionary
potential. He continues, “With close-ups, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject” (IL 236). The purpose and potential of film, therefore, is to make us ‘see’ more clearly the circumstances of our daily existence, thereby offering a larger perspective; film provides a place of communal reception and engenders an understanding of life’s smallest details unencumbered by aura.

As noted above, Benjamin makes another significant yet ambiguous assertion distinguishing between the film as a means of distraction and an autonomous artwork as a medium for contemplation. In this case he claims that distraction, a condition of mindlessness, is a positive state. He explains,

Distraction and concentration form polar opposites which may be stated as follows: A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it. He enters into this work of art the way legend tells of the Chinese painter when he viewed his finished painting. In contrast, the distracted mass absorbs the work of art. This is most obvious with regard to buildings. Architecture has always represented the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction. The laws of its reception are most instructive. (IL 239)

The analogy to architecture is important. In essence, we absorb how it means without having to objectify it as we experience it. We encounter the built environment as a de facto element of our existence, and as Heidegger would remind us, it is only if something in this relationship shifts that we take notice of its presence. According to Benjamin, we experience a reiteration of this by other means in film. Yes, what we can learn from the ways we ‘absorb’ architecture or film are indeed instructive. But do we not also absorb a training in passivity set by the terms of mass entertainment, and thus a loss of the provocation of
thinking necessary to achieve any meaningful iteration of freedom? The collective nature of film’s absorption by the masses can create a mindless experience wherein carefully choreographed messages are easily imparted. Even Benjamin acknowledges the somewhat ‘mindless’ nature of taking in a film when he describes the audience as ‘absent-minded’.

What are we to make of the following statement?

Reception in a state of distraction, which is increasing noticeably in all fields of art and is symptomatic of profound changes in apperception, find in the film its true means of exercise. The film with its shock effect meets this mode of reception halfway. The film makes the cult value recede into the background not only by putting the public in the position of the critic, but also by the fact that at the movies this position requires no attention. The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one. (emphasis added, IL 240-241)

Benjamin explicitly notes the viewer’s absorption of the film. In addition, he describes him as an ‘absent-minded’ percipient as he participates in mass consumption of entertainment.

Here Adorno asks whether we can have distraction in the positive light if it appears to abstract us so – for are we not after all moving from one taboo practice to another?

Adorno scolds Benjamin with regards to distracting the masses in the cinema. As opposed to a favorable view of mindless participation as a form of leisure, perhaps mistaking distraction for a Marxian understanding of freedom of mind, Adorno berates this phenomenon as simply another form of the same fascist subjugation:

The laughter of the audience at a cinema . . . is anything but good and revolutionary; instead, it is full of the worst bourgeois sadism. I very much doubt the expertise of the newspaper boys who discuss sports; and despite its shock-like seduction I do not find your theory of distraction convincing — if only for the simple reason that in a communist society work will be organized in such a way that people will no longer be so tired and so stultified that they need distraction. (Taylor 121)
Adorno recognizes the challenge of balancing mass entertainment with the necessity for knowledge and thought. Once again, he emphasizes the need for some measure of intellect to educate the proletariat. The power inherent in intelligence serves his emancipation every bit as much as the revolutionary impulse.

Let us consider for a moment how the absent-mindedness of cinema has fared more recently. Film feeds ideas—cut, spliced and readied for consumption by mass audiences—to its viewer. Says Martel, “In the resulting state of passive receptivity, we perceive these ideas as given when they are really oversimplifications of highly complex truths—as many realize when the spell eventually fizzles out” (29). Films, he continues, “furnish us with readymade opinions, judgments, and conclusions. The viewer’s sensibility, her distinctiveness as a singular consciousness, is brushed aside to make way for the abstract generalizations that the filmmakers have chosen to impart by aesthetic rather than discursive means” (29). One can imagine Adorno bristling at this loss of ‘thought.’ Likewise, Arendt’s broader complaint centers on the fact that the entertainment industry is not offering humanity any durable expression of our highest selves. Instead, she states,

The commodities the entertainment industry offers are not ‘things,’ cultural objects, whose excellence is measured by their ability to withstand the life process and become permanent appurtenances of the world, and they should not be judged according to these standards; nor are they values which exist to be used and exchanged; they are consumer goods, destined to be used up, just like any other consumer goods. (PF 206)

Arendt is correct not only in her assessment that the commodities of the entertainment industry are not ‘things’ per se, but also in her understanding of consumer goods as material for consumption. As we have seen in her notion of durability, she believes consumer goods operate as replacements for thought-things. All told, the promise of ‘distraction’ seems
increasingly unable to withstand the perils that attend it. Benjamin’s stress on ‘vision’ suffers a similar fate as it is subsumed within the course of consumerism’s broader saturation. In recognizing the reduction of human cultural production, it is significant that Benjamin quotes Paul Valéry early in the *Artwork* essay: “Just as water, gas, and electricity are brought into our houses from far off to satisfy our needs in response to minimal effort, so we shall be supplied with visual or auditory images, which will appear and disappear at a simple movement of the hand, hardly more than a sign” (219). Valéry’s words are prophetic. We are witness to the automation of even the simplest of tasks, ultimately rendering human production and participation obsolete. Technological advances serve to make humanity’s life seamless, but of course ‘absent’ the mind in a troubling way. Benjamin understands that progress sets the scene for new conduct, and yet he falls short of recognizing the perils which befall us as a result. Martel, faced with our current digital environment, explains, “It is not the technology that adapts to our needs and desires but our needs and desires that must conform to the technology” (139). Distraction, then, tends to hinder our fundamental capacity for thought — something that seems contrary to Benjamin’s vision of emancipation and freedom through mechanically reproduced artworks.

Admittedly we have an advantage over Benjamin since we have seen the broader course of film’s complicity with more strategic means of alienation. His view of distraction may have been plausible on the terms of his historical moment, but a problematic state of distraction magnifies as film and screen-based mediums emerge over the course of the 20th century. Perhaps we could say that Benjamin regards distraction as, in Heidegger’s terms, a ‘danger’ that also has seeds of a ‘saving’ power; but in this case Benjamin seems to start with the ‘saving’ character then try to accommodate the ‘danger’ therein. But it is the very
‘danger’ that, we must admit, is winning the contest for power today. “In the digital age,” says Martel, “spectacle morphs into something more invasive than a show to be attended in bovine passivity. Loyal to the emergent aesthetic ideals of ‘interactivity’ and ‘immersion,’ we have become active participants in our own entrancement. We have gone from the spectacular to the spectral” (Martel 140). Put in the terms we are using, advances in digital media show how ‘distraction’ has, in effect, lost its supposed emancipatory potential and morphed into a state of technological addiction and thoughtlessness that preys upon the vulnerabilities of, specifically, vision.

It should be evident that the critical evaluation of Benjamin’s position regarding film has begun to help us turn more toward a critical diagnosis of our contemporary scene, the failures of which stand out especially on account of their incongruence with what Benjamin hoped. We see that human agency is replaced and authored for us in a technological society. The superstructure falls into enframing — unable to recognize its predicament while harboring an illusion of control. The conditions determining the digital world are dictated by an ever-evolving infrastructure of machines, in which case distraction sinks into an ever-deeper reduction until the human capacity for thought is compromised altogether. It needs to be said that I am not accusing Benjamin of being naïve, full stop, nor at all faulting him for these developments; after all, the very ability to critique the contemporary scene owes much to criteria Benjamin nuanced, and shares his goal of emancipation. As for the critical exposition, we have traced the intended links between Benjamin’s understanding of distraction in cinema and its desired relationship to Marx’s notion of leisure as an indispensable, open space for contemplation and creative thought to emerge. The dangers of distraction lie in their very limitation of thinking and denial of artworks as durable thought-
things, per Arendt’s assessment. And as Adorno is careful to observe, we need artworks and
the contemplation they demand as provocations of intellectual inquiry and an understanding
of our cultural positions. In recognizing a connection between distraction and leisure and
acknowledging the limitations of the former, the shortfall of Benjamin’s interpretation
becomes clear: distraction as offered by mechanically reproduced artworks has the potential
for mass ‘numbing’ in the absent-minded absorption of such works. Benjamin is certainly
right that we need to be cautious in our strategies of resisting the fascist tendencies that hold
fast to ongoing destructive structures. And he is not altogether wrong in his view that film
(and the pictorial arts more broadly) can create a positive mass apperceptive experience. Yet,
in light of the way technological advance can so easily promote an aesthetics of
thoughtlessness, it will take a very careful *praxis* of *poiēsis* by artist-philosophers to assure
the authentic durability of art’s saving power.

§2.5: THE PERSISTENCE OF FASCIST TENDENCIES: *FIAT ARS, PEREAT MUNDUS*  

Having looked at Benjamin’s reliance on Marx along with the tensions forming
between durability, thought-things and the potential for distraction to fall into enframing, we
now return to the larger scope and the question of how an artwork might concretely manifest
freedom. The pervasive nature of technological enframing, as asserted by Heidegger, leaves
no one immune. What then are the concrete options available to us today in the face of such
challenges? Furthermore, what are the markers distinguishing contemplation and meditative
thought from distraction qua alienation? In the epilogue to the *Artwork* essay, Benjamin’s
ideas do take an abrupt turn, fully recognizing the perils preventing ultimate emancipation.  
He concludes with a disquieting proclamation: *All aestheticization on the part of fascism will*
terminate in war. This is an important acknowledgment, highlighting his acute awareness of the power of capitalist-technological structures.

Benjamin moved the conversation from an art-oriented aesthetic focus in relation to the emancipation project, to a violence-oriented aesthetic per the counter-emancipation reality. In describing violence’s hold on society, he states, “Only war makes it possible to mobilize all of today’s technical resources while maintaining the property system” (IL 241). The property system, as well as its many derivative effects on society, is protected at all costs under fascist tendencies—hence Benjamin’s wish to see its demise. The persistence of fascism, however, thwarts the reproduction as liberating force. Perhaps this inevitable outcome must serve as a warning should the total liquidation of traditional oppressive norms fail. Benjamin’s belief in the natural progression of history sheds light on a secondary aspect of this dialectic: If it is blocked by ‘unnatural’ forces, its outcome will be fundamentally corrupted. This section will analyze the epilogue’s intent with an eye on Benjamin’s proposed solution; the politicization of art as a means of emancipation and freedom. As we move through Benjamin’s turning point to his proposed solution, we will also look to artists whose works embody Marx’s human creative impulse and the making of durable, cultural objects. Ultimately, we will come to recognize Benjamin’s epilogue as his ultimate caution, his warning against blind adherence to dominating fascist structures.

Wary of an overly simplistic interpretation of Benjamin’s intentions, Caygill observes, “Benjamin’s argument is far more subtle and carefully developed than his concluding slogan suggests, and rests upon an alignment between fascist monumental self-presentation, aura and aestheticism” (93). Indeed, Benjamin determines, “The destructiveness of war furnishes proof that society has not been mature enough to incorporate technology as
its organ, that technology has not been sufficiently developed to cope with the elemental forces of society” (IL 242). This declaration is perhaps the most potent intersection with Heidegger’s enframing, and the illusion of control under which man lives out his existence. The lack of maturity leads to absence of understanding and it may also initiate the destructive cycle of forgottenness, as Heidegger would insist. The denial of insight drives societies to the brink of self-annihilation. Certainly, Benjamin’s warning acknowledges a fear of total destruction, as a fascist society will stop at nothing in order to glorify its own end. Although his awareness contradicts his faith in the emancipatory potential of technology, his point reminds the reader of the severity of the threat of total annihilation and confirms the underlying caution we have been tracking throughout this chapter.

Nowhere is man’s corrupt relationship with technology more evident than in global acts of war—or the ultimate aestheticization of human strife. This is a phenomenon we will see clearly in chapter 5 as we explore the work of Noor Mirza and Brad Butler. To Benjamin, the forecast is clear: “If the natural utilization of productive forces is impeded by the property system, the increase in technical devices, in speed, and in the sources of energy will press for an unnatural utilization, and this is found in war” (IL 242). The ideas he expresses recall those written by Ernst Jünger in *Total Mobilization*, in which the author unapologetically writes, “The process by which the growing conversion of life into energy, the increasingly fleeting content of all binding ties in deference to mobility, gives an ever-more radical character to the act of mobilisation.” He adds, “Following the wars of knights, kings, and citizens, we now have wars of workers” (128). There is no question Benjamin’s turn toward such matters of violence and war in his ‘Epilogue’ is laudable, even prophetic. But such a focus would seem to require him to revisit his other tenets regarding the constructive political
power of aesthetics. It is somewhat contradictory to assume that the reproduction, with film as its central revolutionary agent, can mitigate the progression of violence in its collaboration with aestheticization.

The issue of violence adds increasing weight to our concern that, as much as technological advances in the life of artworks afford a communal platform for appreciation, they offer an opposing and effective means of controlling mass consciousness and thought. Here again Benjamin could have followed the path of his own cautions more thoroughly, for though artistic reproductions have important agency, this agency can whither under the pressure of how enframing can outperform political art, subverting freedom in a more insidious and nuanced way. If one adds up the characteristics of alienation and distraction, along with the implosion of culture and traditions as described throughout this chapter, it becomes clear that this rootlessness has the power to cripple *homo faber*, reducing him, as Heidegger asserts, to mere standing reserve.

Returning to the matter of war, in her chapter entitled “The Work of Art in the Age of Unbearable Capitulation,” Esther Leslie explains, “In Nazi Germany technology is embraced in order to expand the productive base” (135). She continues, “War is a diversion, a means to quash the material reality of class struggle by summoning supra-class goals. It is the only way that people can be mobilized not as classes but as masses, and the only way the advance of modern *Technik* can be contained without endangering property relations” (135).

Underlying Benjamin’s work is the understanding that this ‘discrepant’ relationship has no other outlet than total destruction. He writes, “Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order” (IL 242). Benjamin suggests that society has created an exchange value for violence, which leads to an
accelerated avenue to our demise. Therefore, war, as a mobilizing force, gives meaning to existence, a meaning that destroys the life force of Dasein. We know that Benjamin thus calls for the politicization of art. His suggestion represents a need for releasing the hold capitalists have on the use and misuse of art, as well as the resistance to change exhibited in keeping art’s traditional categories intact. Leslie writes “The political evaluation of the relationship between classes and film cannot be possible before film has released itself from the chains of its capitalist exploitation” (136). In essence, we are caught in the fascist structures preventing the natural evolution of history and further alienating man from himself with the only solution being the provocation of thinking that artworks can enable. For Marx (and, as we will soon see, Baudrillard), technology creates unprecedented needs, in turn creating signs and status, thereby creating an infinite cycle of production and consumption that diverts human beings away from their ‘species character.’ The result is further alienation and the sensation of being ‘out of one’s own body,’ as with the actors performing for cameras, as posited by Pirandello. Despite the unassailable quality embodied in fascist means of expression, Benjamin embeds his hopes in the politicization of art.

How, then, might this type of artwork manifest? In its earliest forms, the reproduction democratized access, while also changing perceptive faculties. These initial changes occurred as the substructure provided increasing means of production. But if mechanically produced artworks failed to overcome fascist tendencies and the peril of self-annihilation during Benjamin’s life and time, what becomes of the reproduction as the historical dialectic, to which he subscribed so faithfully, continues its forward momentum?
§2.6: POLITICIZATION OF ART

The reproduction has matured. In a world oversaturated with images, media campaigns are taken for granted and absorbed, assuring a devastating ‘absentmindedness.’ We have shown that Benjamin’s project of emancipation is falling short of its revolutionary potential, while simultaneously recognizing the powerful impact reproductions have on their perciipients. As Arendt assessed, “They [have] lost the faculty which is originally peculiar to all cultural things, the faculty of arresting our attention and moving us” (PF 204). As we began to see in Rose’s account case of Charlotte Salomon’s work, we will now address the visual language of specific artworks in relation to the reproduction as a potential force of dialectical advance. We will look at the works of Hannah Höch and Henryk Ross whose creative wills underscore Marx’s and Arendt’s important ideas regarding man as maker and art’s cultural durability. The examination will show that the politicization of art, required for our emancipation per Benjamin, demands the reproduction be returned to its status of an original creative initiative, thereby manifesting a transformational return of its aura – an aura that need not be defined by the cultic paradigm. This return re-presents the artwork as a thought-thing or durable, cultural object by shifting its basis in consumption. In other words, we will look at the reproduction as a carrier of meaning in its own right—through its status and signification as a democratized consumable object, mindful of the effect it has when re-presented within an original creation.

But this very possibility requires us to also consider the contemporary form of a ‘dangerous power’ that makes such an adaptation of the reproduction paradigm so difficult and rare. Here we will examine what has become of the reproduction in today’s cultural
exchange with an eye on Baudrillard’s ideas regarding their consumption. Autonomous artworks, celebrated for their unique, cult value, are replicated and distributed as fetish objects, disposable mementos of a momentary glance. Baudrillard’s assessment of the sign value of objects—with their superficial class status—can be felt with each new manufactured consumer item. This phenomenon is seen in most cultural centers where iconic works are embedded in impermanent items created for amusement. Postcards, keychains, mugs and umbrellas are adorned with the most revered cultural icons, utterly removing the mystery, astonishment, and contemplation experienced in their immediate presence. Similarly, today’s reproductions advertise, convince, shape and manipulate their recipients in a constant effort to sway social conduct. The effect is not simply a shift of apperceptive apparatuses; reproductions and their messages have the power to alter fundamental collective behavior. We have noted, for example, the Nazi annexation of such methods in their campaigns to cleanse and control. Furthermore, we can acknowledge that the reproduction has rapidly evolved, and yet through the connotative value ascribed to the reproduction, artists are also able to shift meaning toward political aims by critiquing the fascist structures that cling to existing power norms. Benjamin’s point—that there is a revolutionary potential embedded in the signification of reproductions—holds but it needs a further amendment in terms of recognizing the use artists may make of all available materials and the manner in which such practices can adapt to the shifting base of production. To be more specific, Benjamin’s argument seems to overlook the foundational connection human beings have with art objects and the impulse for artists to deploy printed matter as an element of new artworks. As noted, to speak of the revolutionary capacity of the reproduction must not neglect the species character noted by Marx and Arendt, and the authentic drive to create that defines homo
While he recognizes the overwhelming power of fascist tendencies to restrict any
progress at the risk of total destruction, Benjamin omits this important human need. We do
well to remember what McMurtry points out about Marx’s understanding of human nature.
He states,

This special human capacity of ‘projective consciousness’
achieves its ‘truly human’ expression for Marx in the activity of
creative art. For it is in ‘composition’ that he sees the inventive
and implementive aspects of this natural capacity most freely and
integrally expressed (G 611). In such creative art (Marx’s
example is the ‘composition’ of the writer), both the project and
its execution are unconstrained by extrinsic dictate and united in
the same productive agent, unlike the ‘antagonistic’ and ‘unfree’
forms of almost all historical production. . . . For Marx, then,
*Man the Producer* is, in the end, *Man the Artist*. (McMurtry 26)

The capacity for free thinking in the act of creation, as realized specifically in a reclaiming of
human agency from *instrumentalist Techniks*, concretizes the necessary state of mind valued
by Arendt *et al*. As Sjöholm reiterates, artworks according to Arendt “condition the way in
which thought appears. [They] allows for thought to present itself. Artworks are the
‘worldliest of things.’” (38). Let us make this issue more materially specific. When printed
matter or film is embedded in the language of artmaking, the connotations of its previous
incarnation are carried forward. Pages from a newspaper, of which the primary function is to
be consumed and to inform, now create tonality and texture within visual compositions. Text
and photographs are merged, meaning is revised, and new artworks come into being. These
re-presentations of reproductions restore their status as thought-things per Arendt’s definition
and represent their capacity as carriers of meaning. Sjöholm explains,

*Works of art, like human labor and services, can be
commodified. But art cannot be degraded into its use-value only,
or reduced to nothing but a commodity. Indeed, a work of art
may well present more resilience against commodification than*
human labor; this is Arendt’s modernist idealization of art. An artwork is not simply a dead thing, or an object. It is a thought-thing, irreducible in terms of a dialectic duality between object and subject. Art cannot be exhausted in its objecthood, in relation to a subject. It belongs to the field of plurality, situated in a field of shared perspectives, usages, and impacts. The ontological conception of plurality, together with its phenomenological implications, serves to rethink political categories in aesthetic terms. The humanist focus on human agency and human actions is displaced and renegotiated toward phenomena, things and objects that condition the political. (33)

These words parallel Benjamin’s historical dialectic, though their intentions are quite different. For Arendt, artworks are breathing participants in history’s ongoing narrative, literally thought-things that carry ideas forward across generations in a ‘durable’ way.

As print circulated in the early part of the 20th century, artists seized upon the materials as enhancements to their artworks. Hannah Höch, a German born Dada artist known for originating photomontage, created numerous enduring artworks in protest of class corruption and social ills (figure 2.2). Printed matter was literally cut from its distribution and re-presented as an original work. By weaving in text and newspaper imagery, Höch produced and expanded visual vocabulary, harnessing the technological reproduction as a new communication medium. The photomontages served to elevate reproductions above the commonplace, returning them, once more, to the status of thought-things admired by Arendt. Höch’s work explored daring subject matter: gender power, androgyny and political corruption. She dove headlong into derogatory characterizations of those in power, both past and present, in addition to the elite who followed blindly in their tracks. Her 1919 work Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany summarizes her preoccupations well (figure 2.3). The title alone unleashes sarcasm and critique. The photomontage and collage of pasted papers with watercolor, which
measures 114 x 90 cm, is larger than most of her works; these dimensions help magnify its content.

Figure 2.2:
Hannah Höch
left: Equilibre
Photomontage on paper with painting
30.5x20.3cm / 1925
Artstor database: UCSD collection

right: Dada Dance
Collage work on paper
32x23cm / 1922
Artstor database: UCSD collection

Figure 2.3:
Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany
Collage work on paper
1919
Artstor database: UCSD collection
Höch’s message is multilayered and thought provoking. By cutting from press pages and fashion magazines, she assembles a web of interconnected relationships that illustrate the complexities and chaos of her time. The frame is swirling with dismembered and re-imagined bodies, machinery and text. While seemingly fragmented, the composition adheres to a particular logic that separates politicians from Dadaists and communists from Bourgeois. At the center of the bedlam, Höch has placed a small portrait of Käthe Kollwitz and given her the body of dancer Niddi Impekoven, creating a symbolic epicenter of feminine power. In addition, she has, in lieu of her signature, inserted a tiny image of herself in the lower right quadrant, which is pasted atop a map of Europe, indicating which countries had given women the right to vote. Indeed, Höch’s work is filled with references to marginalized female artists, male castration, political infantilism, and generally scathing assessments of men’s impulses. The title also underscores this message with its connotation of kitchen knives, implicating the power of the feminine once again.

Höch’s work is polyphonic, lending the viewer simultaneous perspectives while shedding a harsh light on governmental breakdown. Its modernity is undeniable in its use of reproduction, text and photomontage. That said, there are undeniable connections with the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Bruegel the Elder, in which quotidian existence is displayed in such ways as to emphasize organized chaos. Much like Bosch, Höch comments on rampant corruption, mocking those in power and deriding bourgeois sensibilities. Some of the most scathing juxtapositions include the head of General Hindenberg set on top of the body of exotic dancer Sent M’ahesa; Kaiser Wilhelm II’s moustache, which has been replaced with two men wrestling; and the head of critic Theodore Däubler attached to the body of an oversized baby. There are many other references, all of which are imbued with
sarcasm and reversals in power roles. Her own colleagues within the Dada movement do not escape her notice. Georg Grosz, John Heartfield and Raoul Hausmann are all depicted in compromised positions. Some—Karl Marx, Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxembourg—do merit elevated status. All representatives of the communist movement, they are depicted with some measure of integrity and honor. At the upper left, Einstein seems to look on, forlorn.¹⁷

Hoch’s oeuvre is an example of consumer goods overturned and given renewed status as politicized commentary with shock value. Their intrinsic power resides in interrupting the moment of problematic distraction in the face of reproduced imagery and compelling the viewer to think. We must not overlook the singular way in which Hoch’s work defies print as a purely consumable product. The work is a combination of disdain, satire and social commentary. Displayed at the first international Dada fair, its message was received by a like-minded audience and thus outlasted the treacherous political climate. Despite their inherent fragility (works on paper do not generally have the same longevity as paintings on canvas), many of Hoch’s works have survived the decades since their manufacture. As with other important autonomous artworks, they serve to illuminate the shadows of past thought.

Arendt presciently describes the enduring value of Hoch’s oeuvre: “It is as though worldly stability had become transparent in the permanence of art, so that a premonition of immortality, not the immortality of the soul or of life but of something immortal achieved by mortal hands, has become tangibly present, to shine and to be seen, to sound and to be heard, to speak and to be read” (HC 168). In other words, the magnitude of the work lies in its ability to transcend the commonplace, challenging absentminded distraction. Höch’s uses technologically-produced imagery, taking images with consumer value whose prevalence reduced any precious qualities and returning them to autonomy and originality of thought.
Such an aesthetic feat shows that originality can obtain on terms of deconstructive and reconstructive reproducibility; singular uniqueness need not be jettisoned with the historical overcoming of aura. Her artwork now claims a permanent place in the National Gallery of Berlin. Their placement validates Arendt’s understanding of durability wherein “[t]he man-made world of things, the human artifice erected by *homo faber*, becomes a home for mortal men, whose stability will endure and outlast the ever-changing movement of their lives and actions, only insomuch as it transcends both the sheer functionalism of things produced for consumption and the sheer utility of objects produced for use” (HC 173). The frenetic movement of the early twentieth century, particularly in the period between world wars, comes back into full view when confronted with Höch’s powerful artwork. While not reproduction in Benjamin’s strict application, nor an ‘original’ in the hierarchical sense of a cultic ritualistic aesthetic, it pushes beyond the mechanical by re-inserting the artist’s creative intervention; it literally becomes a thought thing, astounding us into reflection.

Other artists also turned to printed materials. Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque used newspaper text in their collage work, deconstructing meaning and adding dimension to their artworks. Matisse did much the same with his paper “cut-outs,” lending them a freshness and contemporaneity that broke with traditional expression. Print became a staple supply for creative expression in much the same way as paint, charcoal or marble. Similarly, photography was popular as a means of personal expression, both for its technical capacities and ubiquity. Photographic images began tapping into subconscious activity and surrealist concerns. Caygill reminds us, “Benjamin sees in photography the possibility of creating an openness to the future which he describes in terms of an ‘optical unconscious’, and in which ‘a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the
unconscious’ (Short History of Photography 243, WB 94). We recall that Benjamin’s understanding of film was that the power of the medium lies in the ‘surgical’ nature of cutting and representing scenes in intimate detail, achievable only through this careful editing process. However, as previously noted, the medium challenges the capacity for unfettered thought. But aesthetic advances have shown that, no longer a mere instrument of recorded fact, photographic images were transformed into singular artworks by Alfred Stieglitz and the Pictorialists, and concurrent modernists such as Dada artist Man Ray and others.

In addition, the simple mechanical reproduction of the surrounding physical world became a commonplace preoccupation of normal citizens. The medium achieved a level of ubiquity through inventions such as the Kodak Brownie and scores of other devices. Though I have been arguing for an extension beyond the compass of his aesthetic philosophy, Benjamin was right to recognize this urge to make images when he observed “the desire of contemporary masses to bring things ‘closer’ spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction” (IL 223). He continues,

No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the Here and Now, with which reality has so to speak seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future subsists so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it. (SW 510)

Indeed, Benjamin observes a human inclination to hold onto and preserve our experiences in the face of the fleeting nature of time. We look back at images as testimonies of our temporality. This need for preservation encapsulates photography’s fundamental essence. Captured images hold enormous sway, able to reassure their beholder of the permanence of
recorded moments. They bear witness to moments of great triumph and those of unthinkable tragedy. In the latter category are Henryk Ross’s images of the Lodz Ghetto, a recent exhibition entitled *Memory Unearthed*. His story is powerfully compelling. Ross survived the evacuation of Lodz. He straddled the delicate border between his official role as chosen propaganda photographer and his own choice to chronicle daily suffering inside the ghetto. The images that remain do so only as a result of his having buried them, believing in his immanent death. Of the 6,000 frames he captured, only half remain, bringing back to full view the horrors Jews endured during this period.

Here we can particularly consider how mechanical reproduction served two distinct needs: On the one hand, Ross’s work responded to the bureaucratic requirements of the oppressive fascist regime, while, on the other, it simultaneously defied such oppression in a political form of resistance. He states, “Having an official camera, I was able to capture all the tragic period in the Lodz Ghetto. I was anticipating the total destruction of Polish Jewry. . . . I did it knowing that if I were caught my family and I would be tortured and killed. . . . I wanted to leave an historical record of our martyrdom” (Ross, http://agolodzghetto.com). Ross made the choice to record his personal narrative in order for truth to survive. He knew his testimony through daily photographic capture would irrefutably bear witness to his experience and that of countless others living and dying at the hands of the Nazis.

The value of his testimony is limitless. Arendt expresses this social need as an intersubjective necessity: “Nobody, as Marx rightly insisted, seen ‘in his isolation produces values,’ and nobody, he could have added, in his isolation cares about them; things or ideas or moral ideals ‘become values only in their social relationships’” (HC 165). Through his active recording of life around him, Ross was able to survive when others perished. Today
the work, preserved and exhibited in art institutions, serves as a testament, keeps alive the reality the outside world wanted to ignore. The value now ascribed to these photographs demonstrates the enduring value manifested in such artworks and confirms what I have been saying about art’s dynamic originality and the creative drive of *homo faber* within the milieu of mechanical reproduction and within the violent historical moment Benjamin challenged. Lauren Hansen, in a review entitled “The Jewish Photographer who Bore Witness to the Unbearable,” writes, “By taking viewers through the early joviality of the Jewish police force to packed trains bound for Auschwitz, the show bears witness to the methodical erosion of humanity and the slow obliteration of life. The effect is profound” (“The Jewish Photographer who Bore Witness to the Unbearable” *The Week*). Ross’ ability to bridge two worlds, one propagandistic and the other truthful, lent him, for a time, the sense of purpose through making that imbues artworks with cultural significance. Here again we see how Arendtian aesthetics provide a necessary and warranted supplement to Benjamin’s. Arendt explains, “It is this durability which gives the things of the world their relative independence from men who produced and used them, their ‘objectivity’ which makes them withstand, ‘stand against’ and endure, at least for a time, the voracious needs and wants of their living makers and users” (HC 137). Thus, Ross’ remains, in the form of thousands of preserved negatives, stand against time and oppression, eventually rising to the surface as a more fundamentally honest appraisal of historical events. Arendt stresses the political value of his objects of resistance, highlighting the contribution these thought-things make to our understanding of ourselves, both culturally and collectively. Their very endurance is a political act of thinking against overwhelming inertia.
One particular image records the mass deportation of women and children to the camps, taken toward the end of the war in 1944 (figure 2.4). The negative bears the destructive marks of moisture and soil, but this damage magnifies the narrative, as though acting metaphorically. The men in the frame wear uniforms, while also bearing star-clad armbands defining them as Jews. The lives of each subject are immortalized in one final image and remain therein as haunting evidence of the many lives lost. The image literally stood against the grain and creates an enduring testimony to the past to which it bears witness.

Ross knew his work was significant, far more so than just a means for his immediate survival. He was compelled to record and bear witness, and he did so at great peril to himself.
and those around him. Marx understands this impulse, attributing to it the strength of all human creation: “But man in the working up of the objective world . . . duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually but also actively, in reality, and therefore contemplates himself in a world that he has created” (EPM 75-76; McMurtry 29). It is this ability to imagine, create and subsequently contemplate that offers fundamental, authentic human satisfaction. In a short yet powerful narrative titled *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl explained that even while living in concentration camps during the Holocaust, stripped of all artifice and surface construct, the essence and purpose of man survives in his experience and his *having been*. Freedom exists in the open space of one’s mind, the only unassailable refuge to which those who survive must cling. Holding fast to the accomplishments of the past, and their potential to define the intrinsic value of their life potential, those incarcerated in the camps could recall their purpose and worth. This *having been* could not be altered or stolen by any force. It was, and is, an indelible function of one’s being. While Ross understood the value of photographic images as a mode of witness to unbearable inhumanity, it is likely he would not have anticipated their eventual exhibition within the confines of an art institution more than seventy years later.

How do works such as those created by Höch and Ross connect with Benjamin’s hope for radical emancipation? In response, we must recall Arendt’s philosophy of *thought*, upon which we touched in the previous chapter, and her understanding of action as an ethical responsibility. The independence of thought demonstrated in Höch’s and Ross’s works illustrates a conscious reversal of the banality of evil and a defiance of fascist domination. Both artists dared to think beyond the structures confining them and risked mortal danger in so doing. As a result, the artworks they produced continue to arrest their viewers even
decades later as separate durable objects, fostering continued contemplation. The ultimate challenge in our age of mechanically reproduced images is distraction, the very phenomenon Benjamin broached as the absentminded state of reception induced by film (and, arguably, by screen-based media as a whole) but did not evaluate sufficiently.

The cautionary tale with which we opened this chapter is patently evident in our illusions of control and in the mindless way we interact with technologies in contemporary society. This reality harkens back to Benjamin’s darker conclusion; he prophetically calls out technology’s power and potentially nefarious force when it is used to coerce art into new politically auratic guises. No sooner had reproductions reached mass proportions, they were harnessed as a means of control and domination. Certainly, the Nazi media blitz is a stark example. In early 2017, the United Nations headquarters in New York City exhibited a wide variety of campaign materials deployed by Goebbels explicitly to orchestrate mass support for the anti-Semitic governmental mission. While their messages seem transparent to today’s audience, as a new visual form of coercion, their impact was immense. Suffice it to say that reproductions have the capacity to challenge such avenues or create them. The intent of the creator and the receiving mind of the percipient matters most. Arendt would certainly demand individual thought on both fronts.

§2.7: CONCLUSION

In a March 27, 2017 New York Times opinion piece, Costica Bradatan notes particular delusions under which we in the West have been operating; he reveals cultural assumptions and blind adherence to vague enlightenment premises. To this point, he quotes Dostoevsky:
'I, for example,' says the nameless narrator in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s ‘Notes From Underground (1864),’ ‘would not be the least bit surprised if suddenly, out of the blue, amid the universal future reasonableness, some gentleman of ignoble or, better, of retrograde and jeering physiognomy, should emerge, set his arms akimbo, and say to us all: ‘Well, gentlemen, why don’t we reduce all this reasonableness to dust with one good kick, for the sole purpose of sending all these logarithms to the devil and living once more according to our own stupid will!’ That would still be nothing, but what is offensive is that he’d be sure to find followers: that’s how man is arranged.’ (“Our Delight in Destruction”)

The non-reflecting being described in Dostoevsky’s text extends the capacity for Arendt’s banality of evil and repression of human agency. He is the figure capable of aestheticizing destruction, as Benjamin details in his epilogue. He denies the natural progression of history and its equalizing effects. Bradatan elaborates,

[W]e’ve come to assume that history is a progression toward more inclusion, mutual understanding and respect, tolerance and acceptance and that bigotry, xenophobia, intolerance and racism are doomed to disappear as a matter of historical necessity. For history, Hegel has taught us (and we’ve rarely challenged this teacher), is nothing but the gradual unfolding of rationality in the world. (“Our Delight in Destruction” (“Our Delight in Destruction”)

The blind adherence Bradatan is observing is the ultimate refusal of questioning and thought, which ultimately allow fascist positions to permeate the superstructure. As a student and follower of Marx, Benjamin subscribed to the same belief in history’s progressive forward momentum and in technology’s largely positive advances. As we have seen, however, both Marx and Benjamin inject their assessments of historical progress with explicit cautions, bringing them into line with Heidegger’s ethical undercurrents. The fault lines endanger the fundamental capacity for thinking that fosters freedom.
Despite the *Artwork* essay being relatively concise, it covers enormous ground, serving largely as a provocation rather than a conclusion of particular arguments.\textsuperscript{19} Though I have made a case for ways in which this provocation needs some amendment and correction, the balance of evaluation rests on a shared and compelling ground between the thinkers and ideas I have covered. Benjamin’s ideas help to illuminate the impact technological advances made on art in the early twentieth century, both in its creation and manufacture of meaning. These ideas anticipate points of connection and tension with Heidegger’s later assessment of our forgottenness and loss of Care (as previously discussed). Benjamin’s adherence to the historical dialectic mirrors a Marxist methodology and demands the natural progression of relations as established therein. As we have seen, the suppression of human essence as *homo faber*, per Marx, exacerbates alienation and deepens the malaise of the Industrial Age. Heidegger’s preoccupation is more ontological than political on the surface, but despite the difference in methodology and focus Heidegger’s understanding of forgottenness qua alienation leading to estrangement from Dasein mirrors Marx’s alienation of man from himself. The reduction of *homo faber* to standing reserve underscores the common ground shared by Marx, Benjamin and later Heidegger. Furthermore, for each of these thinkers the ultimate aspiration to freedom requires emancipation from a profoundly corrupted relationship with *Technik*, dispelling any illusion of control over it we may have.

Benjamin’s strongest language emerges in his epilogue, explicitly exposing that lack of maturity which would create an aestheticization of human destruction. His thought parallels Heidegger’s warning of certain annihilation should we blindly stay enframed by our relationship with technology (as expressed in *Gelassenheit*, where he states, “[T]he explosion of the hydrogen bomb means little” in comparison).\textsuperscript{20} Both Heidegger and Benjamin ask us
to think and look beyond the structures and back into the emancipatory wonder of art. Care
and other-thinking emerge as ethical obligations, foretelling once again Arendt’s philosophy
of thinking and action. I have specified these issues in terms of art’s visual and textual
materiality, but we do well to also, and relatedly, recall how Heidegger refers us to poetry as
the medium most capable of offering freedom. Arendt concurs, “Poetry, whose material is
language, is perhaps the most human and least worldly of the arts, the one in which the end
product remains closest to the thought that inspired it” (HC 169). Heidegger’s position is that
we live in language. The immediacy of poetry thereby captures human artistic essence.
Thought, lauded as our innate freedom, offers the capacity to act productively and for the
greater good. Leisure is offered as the space for thought and contemplation to emerge
whereas distraction merely provides absentminded conditions potentially that can open
individuals to mass thinking. A herd mentality leads to Arendt’s banality of evil, with its
concomitant absentminded state of distraction. As we move away from our essence, the
exchange value of violence is the unintended consequence of our lack of thought and
meditative thinking.

The inclusion of mechanically reproduced images in twentieth century art making
practice has continued to surge. The necessary loss of aura has been replaced, as Benjamin
noted so articulately, with ubiquity. The connotation of printed matter, and its representation
both in popular culture and within countless artworks, has radically altered the meaning
artists are able to communicate. In a steady progression, artists have incorporated and
returned the copy to a place of authentic originality, thus underscoring Marx’s understanding
of human beings as a species of creative makers. The four artists\textsuperscript{21} comprising this larger
study are no exception to this practice. Each made specific and deliberate use of the
reproduction for its connotative value and its sociopolitical commentary, while also extending what constitutes an artwork in current creative practice. As we will see in the coming chapters, works such as these provoke thought in the face of distraction and enframing thereby bringing Heidegger’s ethical plea to the fore. While fulfilling both the artistic impulse and a greater ethical intersubjective role, these artists actively demonstrate Arendt’s challenge to think independently. Their lens—of viewing our obligation as social beings—spurs us to face our collective responsibility for the preservation of hope and creative intention. Reflecting Benjamin’s notion of historical progress (though without the full scope of his teleological faith), the artists will be analyzed in ascending chronological order, so as to highlight the increasing sophistication of their use of technology. From simple collage to complex video edits, the progress of visual expression will be noted. Ultimately, the turn to art necessitated by alienation qua enframing, will expose the polyphonic event of truth as revealed in the creative realm.
It is impossible to glance through any newspaper, no matter what the day, the month or the year, without finding on every line the most frightful traces of human perversity . . . every newspaper, from the first line to the last, is nothing but a tissue of horrors. Wars, crimes, thefts, lecheries, tortures, the evil deeds of princes, of nations, of private individuals; an orgy of universal atrocity. And it is with this loathsome appetizer that civilized man daily washes down his morning repast.

Charles Baudelaire, *Intimate Journals*  

§ 3.1: INTRODUCTION

There is a prescience to Charles Baudelaire’s description of the relentless feed of news stories—the everyday *tissues of horror*. The ceaseless narrative fixes audience attention and shapes public conduct, altering our beliefs as we engage with the world around us. Forming part of a greater technological system, the omnipresent force of news cycles shapes, distorts and marks our existence. Baudelaire’s lament could easily have been written in response to the grip that the digital dissemination of information has on its recipients today, and the attendant fears about the deteriorating effect on the human condition. In a substantial way, the reproduced images of the news cycle reinforce narratives distributed by those in control of such information, as noted in Walter Benjamin’s epilogue to *Artwork* essay. In the worst of cases the spread of totalitarian ideas results in propagating negative tendencies: “Its
self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order” (IL 242). Baudelaire, much like Benjamin, recognized the effect of such a daily repast on man’s disposition and the profound disruption of any aspirations for community and intersubjective responsibility. As we advance with the ideas underpinning this project, Baudelaire’s words are especially noteworthy for they underscore the accelerating spread of information across digital apparatuses and the enframing nature of this calcified condition.

As discussed in the first two chapters, Martin Heidegger and Walter Benjamin expressed fundamental concerns for artistic human emancipation from technological enframing. Heidegger’s plea at the end of “The Question Concerning Technology” is an ethical one. By extending the ideas articulated by these two important thinkers into the conversations of Karl Marx and Hannah Arendt, with significant input from Theodor Adorno, Jean Baudrillard, Howard Caygill, and J.F. Martel, we have come to recognize the basic differences separating Heidegger from Benjamin, while simultaneously noting their commonalities, including their belief in the goals of ultimate freedom and emancipation as thinking individuals. The freedom in question, as specifically related to thinking and praxis, opens us to our “ownmost potential in Dasein,” reinforcing a receptive and questioning disposition. Looking in more detail to the realm of art so important to Heidegger’s proposed solution to our enframing and alienation, we will now focus our attention on specific artworks whose disruptive potential responds, in large measure, to the ethico-political demands of Heidegger, Benjamin and Arendt. The artworks in question will also support the increasing relevance of Adorno’s ongoing concerns regarding the decline of culture as necessitating durability, while simultaneously at risk of being co-opted into corrupt power
structures. Alienation, literally a negation of freedom, is increasingly operative in technological progress and deployed by the culture industry, thus complicating our ability to apprehend its nefarious effects. As we move forward, we will track the ways the warnings issued by both Heidegger and Benjamin are acted upon—providing a framework within which the artwork might articulate its response.

Our primary focus will be on the work of Brooklyn-based artist Martha Rosler and the distinct makeup of her commitment to awakening broader cultural reflection and assessing our guiding values as a society. Rosler’s career has spanned decades during which she has witnessed the repetitious rhythms of time and history; essentially, she has lived out Benjamin’s historical dialectic and informed the language and tenor of her epoch. As Rosler’s work has matured, her spirit of activism and the urgency of her messages have only grown. We will be discussing three particular bodies of work, notably her parallel series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home*, the first dating from 1972 and its sequel from 2004, as well as her *Garage Sale* series, which began in 1973 and culminated in its most recent twenty-first century iteration at MoMA in 2012, *Meta-Monumental Garage Sale*. The work of artists Hannah Höch and John Heartfield will also add to our ability to situate and properly interpret Rosler’s uniquely political and *poēsis*-laden aesthetic. I will structure our discussion by means of the following criteria. The first will consider immediate contextual forces shaping ideas and their relationship to other twentieth century events. Working from Benjamin’s notion of distraction and mass media, we will examine an artwork’s potential when reconfigured and reinterpreted from ubiquitous news imagery. The second will examine how meaning is imparted and questioned, foregrounding the visual currencies used to disseminate ideas for better or worse. Finally, we will ask if politicized art maintains its
status as a durable art object or carrier of cultural value by examining the artist’s role as an artist-producer. The combination of each line of thinking will enhance our reading of artistic practice and its emancipatory potential. Throughout, our inquiry will continue exploring what constitutes truth in an artwork and how might this truth offer clues to our ultimate emancipation qua thought.

I will argue that Rosler’s re-presentation of mechanically reproduced media imagery and her performative interrogation of social norms directly confront cultural inertia and engender critical introspection on the part of her audience—the kind of self-questioning that brings Dasein into authentic alignment with its capacity for thought. Rosler’s work in turn fulfills an ethical role, animating imagination and informing such thinking through the open space of technē (Gelanssenheit) that Heidegger favors. To support this case, I will analyze Rosler’s work through the lenses of Heidegger’s plea, Benjamin’s attention to authorship and the reproduced image, and Hannah Arendt’s insistence on the fundamentally ethical gesture of thinking. In addition, and to help meet the criteria noted above, we will intertextualize the issues with Susan Sontag’s commentary Regarding the Pain of Others; Roland Barthes’ insightful explication of myth, lexia, codes, and the reader; Adorno’s Culture Industry; and, Peter Sloterdijk’s understanding of Atmo-Terrorism. Throughout, we will account for the constitutive elements of Rosler’s constant preoccupation with intersubjectivity and the disruption of embedded discourse. The reader will note that I proceed by way of substantial conceptual and contextual work in order to argue that Rosler serves as a living embodiment of Benjamin’s “Author as Producer,” demonstrating works that show the kind of correct political tendency demanded in his Artwork essay. My organization is not so much ‘preparatory’ to a reading of the works as it is crucial to elaborating the artist-as-author side
of the author-producer dynamic. How then will we confirm Rosler as an ‘artist-producer’? We will see that she directly addresses the paradox underpinning Benjamin’s reflections on visual forms and she pushes beyond the boundaries of exhibition value and commodity fetish. These qualities, appreciated through our theorists’ ideas, confirms that Rosler’s works are emancipatory vehicles of thought that change culture’s problematic ‘tissues’ animate and materialize the philosophical ideas, and profoundly bring the viewer into the open space of questioning.

**conceptual terminology pertaining to rosler’s artistic production**

We will proceed by alternating between philosophical ideas and the application of these to our reading of Rosler’s artworks. The terms particular to this chapter address notions of authorship (and its conjoined reader, myth, codes, and lexia) and revisit aura and distraction in relation to Rosler’s work. We will also incorporate Heidegger’s understanding of *Mitsein*, or being-with, as it concerns our intersubjective being in the presence of others and our sense-making *in* the ‘world.’

*Mitsein* correspondingly alludes to Dasein’s “becoming what one can be in being free for ones ownmost possibilities (project)— an ‘accomplishment’ of ‘care,’” (BT §42 192). Further, we will draw connections between ideas expressed by Benjamin and Barthes with Adorno’s objection to the effects of the culture industry as a constant and alienating force manipulating human beings into a state of submission and thoughtlessness. I am aware that this kind of intertextualizing work on the side of thinkers, and in turn between their ideas and the properly aesthetic works of Rosler as an artist-philosopher, runs the risk of being simply ‘associative’, or even ‘forced.’ We will avoid such pitfalls by working carefully according to specific interpretive opportunities and
tensions while also testing our conclusions along the way.

As we learned in chapter 2, Benjamin’s careful study of the role of the reproduction reveals several persistent tensions. First, he expresses ambivalence about the aura of an original, the consequence of the unique presence of a work in relation to its cultish or authentic nature. A work’s aura lends gravitas, both in terms of its ascription to history and its bourgeois monetary value. Aura is essentially that which is not reproducible and, therefore, is endangered in the age of technological reproduction. On one level, Benjamin mourns the loss of the original and its inherent value as a unique object of reverence. On another, Benjamin celebrates the possibility for emancipation from the cultish ritual and bourgeois preoccupations associated with an object’s aura-centric aesthetic experience. Copies, therefore, devalue while simultaneously offering a more democratic access. On this score, we note that Rosler opted for lo-fi reproduction and distribution of her artworks. The implied loss of ‘gravitas’ is regained through her political practice and gesture, which, it can be argued, re-inscribes a measure of non-cultish or bourgeois aura in her output. Her work invites contemplation rather than distraction such that the viewer may turn inward in reflective questioning and outward in a disposition of social awareness and action, an aura of ‘predicament.’ These elements, per Benjamin’s assessment, are vulnerable in the reproduction. Yet, Rosler’s intention to prompt freedom of thought and critical analysis undermines one element of the premise inherent in the death of aura.

Incorporating a related lesson from chapter 2, we must analyze, along with Benjamin, the shift in our faculties of perception in light of technological progress. The viewer is moved from a state of contemplation in the face of the original, to an absorption by the reproduced work. This phenomenon reflects the warning issued by Heidegger with regards to enframing,
while also suggesting that the technologies offering new means of communicating are simultaneously altering our reception in ways that can enhance freedom. This tension centers on the qualitative nature of contemplation versus absorption: Does contemplation yield more productive thinking and action than its counterparts in absorption and distraction?

Benjamin’s observation that reproduced works, including motion pictures, alter the fundamental way the viewer perceives—moving him/her from contemplation as a thinking and reverent state to one of distraction—underscores a condition that has magnified as technologies have accelerated. This state of distraction is important to this study both in its positive and negative manifestations. As a third extension of issues developed in chapter 2, then, in Rosler’s work, distraction will be understood negatively in terms of the reduction of thinking. Distraction is a symptom of Adorno’s crippling culture industry, in which a mass pacification reduces human beings to a submissive, non-questioning state. Adorno’s chief protest lies in the fact that the totalitarian apparatus, theoretically feeding the impatient consumption of the masses, creates false needs while denying what is authentically human: the fundamental necessity of love, community, creativity and thought. In response to this ethos, the emancipatory capacity of aestheticized political activism is part and parcel of Rosler’s attempts to jolt her viewer out of a state of pacification and return him to a condition of engagement. In this way her work connects directly to Heidegger, Benjamin and Arendt’s insistence that thinking is a requisite foundation for action.

Approached through these three lenses, we will see how Rosler’s work addresses the political and ethical position of her viewer; it purposefully conflates disparate visual vocabularies into powerful indictments of our time. My subtle yet central argument on this score is that she both reinscribes the status of an original (though avoiding the cultish nature
of aura) while also deploying the imagery in service of social progress. Rosler follows Benjamin’s call to ‘[rescue]’ consumable artistic creations from their bourgeois ‘modishness’ and “[confer] upon [them] a revolutionary use value” (UB 95). In her own words she aims to rupture the “distancing effect” implied by “naturalism,” and advance, by contrast, an “emotional recognition” and “intellectual understanding” or how a work’s “systematic meaning” is tethered to common issues (Beshty 119). In other words, Rosler seeks to awaken. By interrupting the emotional identification human beings feel with any particular image or scene, she achieves a more critical, reflective response. To be ‘systematic’ in this way means making use of signs and myths. Rosler works in a language the viewer can recognize and interpret, a language speaking to and from one’s ontic and ontological position in the world. Much like Heidegger’s attention to the structural promise of being-with (Mitsein) as opposed to the pitfalls of ‘theyness,’ Rosler insists we recognize our relationships or involvements with others and seek a “clarification of vision [as] a first step toward reasonably and humanely changing the world” (Beshty 119). We need to carefully see how the broad scope of this ethical reconfiguration and ‘plea’ is secured through the details of her works. Particular gestures, such as that seen in her Bowery series, for example, call into question accepted practice and hold the art world accountable for its part in perpetuating discourse.

§ 3.2: CONTEXTUAL CONDITIONS SHAPING ROSLER’S IDEAS AND ARTWORKS

To understand Rosler’s work we must first examine the external forces informing its creation. We must highlight events and cultural developments that have shaped her approach, namely the global conflicts and ongoing technologically driven warfare that have permeated
modernity. In addition to an exploration of the decades preceding her career, our path will move through the zeitgeist of her generation into more current philosophical positions vis-à-vis ongoing events. The dialectical relationship between such epochs or, in Rosler’s words, the *historical transactions*, can be seen in the ideas she expresses. Rosler belongs to the era of ‘cultural heresies’ of the sixties and the ethical direction in her thoughts and actions derives from that era. A dedication to social justice and *enlightenment* (in Adorno’s sense) is unmistakable in her work. With the return to collage—a medium originating in the early twentieth century with artists such as John Heartfield and Hannah Höch as a form of social protest—Rosler rededicates herself to honoring the other; she transforms her artworks into historical thought-objects and purposeful political interventions (see Figures 3.1 and 3.2).

**Figure 3.1.** John Heartfield, *Adolf, the Superman, Swallows Gold and Spouts Tin*. 1932 Photomontage, / 1930 Artstor database: University of California, San Diego Collection

**Figure 3.2.** Hannah Höch, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany*. Photomontage, 114x90cm / 1919 Artstor database: Art History Survey Collection
Recall that Baudelaire’s epigraph laments the endless supply of horrific news with which beings begin their day. His words anticipate the immense destruction wrought over the twentieth century and its unforgiving displays of man’s inhumanity to man. Note that Rosler expresses a fascination with newspapers and magazines, describing, in her *Paris Photo* interview, the piles of publications padding her studio. This habit reflects her compulsive need to gather news and editorial images from which she sources her ideas. She feels the need “to constantly question our ability to become passive consumers of images rather than intelligent receivers and producers of images . . . to always look to the margins and see what is in the frame, as well as all that is outside and behind it” (Schwartz). She continues, “We need to know an image’s origins . . . we need to question in which discourse it was originally inserted and how it got into the discourse in which it is now inserted” (Schwartz). In short, context is important to an understanding of Rosler’s production and to undertaking an examination of her artworks as acts of political emancipation; here we may note how the same is true in its own way in the ideas expressed by Heidegger, Benjamin and Adorno with regards to our political and creative freedom.

The cultural critiques of twentieth century atrocities raised fundamental questions regarding the capacity for human beings to exercise any form of ethical conduct. The clashing of the Neo-Marxist ideas of thinkers such as Adorno, Barthes and Debord spread to students and workers, and the subsequent May 1968 demonstrations in both France and the United States. These protests left indelible marks on both nations—both in university and political life. In academia, a fundamental questioning of ethical responses to global wars and human conditions propelled a new wave of thinking with regards to cultural output. Adorno’s oft-cited commentary on poetry after Auschwitz is a case in point: “I have no wish to soften
the saying that to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (Harrison and Wood 779). Artists and writers simply lacked the language appropriate to the depth of horror the world had experienced. These factors prompted violent clashes between the younger generation and established forms of government. Images of the Vietnam war spread across the globe raising questions and prompting protests. And yet, as Rosler keenly knows, the progression of history demonstrates that human beings forget the lessons of the past. How is this possible amid the proliferation of visual and written evidence? In a letter penned to Artforum, artist Leon Golub writes,

> The anger and repugnance which may eventually force an American withdrawal from Vietnam might work with diminishing returns in future interventions. Those arts that began with the modernist dream of human freedom may find they serve technological masters and the American empire. Art will then serve the consumption habits of a triumphant managerial class, a cyberneticized elite civilization protected from the outside by the fantastic weapons and control agents of the future. Is this fantastic speculation? The final word will not be in for some time. (qtd. in Merjian 54)

His pessimistic undercurrent reflects Heidegger’s diagnosis of enframing and the inability to even recognize the cultural forces suppressing critical thought. Similarly, according to Sontag, “By presenting us with a limitless number of non-stop stories, the narratives that the media relate—the consumption of which has so dramatically cut into the time the educated public once devoted to reading—offer a lesson in amorality and detachment that is antithetical to the one embodied by the enterprise of the novel [or artwork]” (At the Same Time 225). Ironically, even as the volume of media depicts scenes of horror, culture is increasingly absorbed into a device-driven consumer system that dulls human sensibility. According to Sontag and Golub, we are numbed by the at-handness of an increasingly
technological environment and self-reflexive questioning grows difficult, scarce. Moreover, the daily distribution of digital images can embody an unsavory opportunism with regards to its subject matter—whether war victims or the disenfranchised at home. Echoing Arendt’s account of banality and Benjamin and Adorno’s accounts of ‘distraction’ and ‘culture industry,’ Sontag observes that “passivity dulls feeling” (102) – a kind of paralysis besets not just thinking, but also the kind of sensitivity that should otherwise sound a call to reflection.

These concerns are evident as Rosler’s work highlights the ubiquitous nature of photographs and makes a strong case against the unscrupulous nature of social documentation. She makes explicit the nature of her work as re-representation, urging her viewer to negotiate the impact of circulating imagery. Her work thus acts as an antidote to enframing by exposing the underlying discourses through simple acts of reconfiguration. What is often overlooked is how she shifts her intention from being audience-focused to being action-based in a way that ensures a level of critical analysis necessary for the individual thinking that would, in Heideggerian parlance, overcome an inauthentic thrownness. As established in chapter 1, there is a complexity inherent in this task as it asks that we simultaneously think and release our attachment with regard to our involvement with technologies. More than mere devices or media transmissions, at issue are ideological apparatuses that foster unimaginable behavior. Arendt faced this in the technē of National Socialism. In her essay, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” she explains:

Inability to think is not stupidity; it can be found in highly intelligent people, and wickedness is hardly its cause, if only because thoughtlessness as well as stupidity are much more frequent phenomena than wickedness. The trouble is precisely that no wicked heart, a relatively rare phenomena, is necessary to cause great evil. (RJ 164)

In this vein, the absence of thinking as a moral issue has the potential of becoming the root of
*great evil*, leaving anyone open to its fierce corruptive forces. By ‘stupidity,’ Arendt implies an inability to think for oneself – a dull passivity – that leaves one’s search for belonging vulnerable to the pull of authority. Indeed, Arendt attributes many of the great fascist crimes to a pervasive sense of loneliness, for which the cure is a polyphonic community structure in which individuals explore each other’s points of view and reach peaceful, intelligent consensus. The same is true of Rosler’s moment and indeed our own.

As an agent for change, Rosler consistently demonstrates her active thinking and participation in ethico-political circumstances. Despite heavy criticism, she chose to speak out against both the Vietnam and Iraq wars, repeating the first impulse decades later: “[W]ho is being stupid? It’s the country that’s doing exactly the same thing it was doing then.” Rosler continues, “It’s a quagmire. One we are stuck in forever without the possibility of winning … whatever winning might be” (Schwartz interview). And the ‘feeling’ of this quagmire – the very feeling that ought to inspire a thinking-morality – is far more intense than puzzlement, worry, or regret. It holds a terrific urgency of that kind that, as Roger Cohen explains in a 2015 *New York Times* editorial entitled “World War III,” has to deconstruct and mortify the blithe American naiveté that says “history will never repeat itself” because we can now enjoy “*life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness*” (Cohen 2015).

In her ‘quagmire,’ Rosler sounds a Benjaminian alarm that still pulses across contemporary events as we witness global atrocities in tandem with the apparent collective resignation that nothing can be done to thwart their advances. Sontag aptly remarks: “Wherever people feel safe . . . they will be indifferent” (100). But, as we have seen (chapter 1), the modern *essence* of technology operates paradoxically as a threat to illusions of safety and control, but then also strategically reinforces a technological faith that would deliver us
from danger. By reminding her viewer of the collective potential of demonstrations and group interactions, Rosler undermines isolation and creates an investigation in which the audience must participate actively. Her flyers, performances, and carefully crafted commentaries establish ground rules that demand engagement. By considering the challenges to such engagement we may appreciate the singular drive and effect of her work. Three overall matters show important points of connection between Rosler’s action-based aesthetic and recent cultural interventions on the side of theory.

The first is the mode of technological enframing at work in the way a paradigm of ‘terror’ blurs the warfare/non-warfare distinction. Her position vis-à-vis war is built upon her awareness of history’s tragic events and their profound implications to global populations. Rosler grew up in the shadows of chemical warfare and nuclear proliferation. In his insightful essay, *Terror from the Air*, Peter Sloterdijk attaches the beginning of modernity to one specific day, April 22, 1915, when chlorine gas was first used as a weapon—an act of power that removed the illusion of control we so desire. Sloterdijk demonstrates the insidious result of this fateful moment in technological “progress.” The notion of the enemy shifts, mirroring the absence of any particular author who might be held accountable. War and its *in-between* periods of non-war are now tainted with the implicit understanding that the very air we breathe has been turned against us (Sloterdijk 16). He explains,

Terrorism, from an environmental perspective, voids the distinction between violence against people and violence against things: it comprises a form of violence against the very human-ambient “things” without which people cannot remain people. By using violence against the very air that groups breathe, the human being’s immediate atmospheric envelope is transformed into something whose intactness or non-intactness is henceforth a question. (25)

Attacking the environment thus supplants direct assaults on the body. Terrorism is “a child of
modernity, insofar as its exact definition was forged only after the principle of attacking an organism’s, or a life form’s, environment and immune defenses was shown in its perfect technological explication” (29). His point addresses a shift in attitudes reflected in an uncertainty with regards to our relationship with the world in which we dwell. Rosler’s dedication to political action and anti-war demonstrations highlights her awareness of these underlying geo-political issues and her attention to possible solutions.

The shift in attitudes and the dedication to aesthetic political action are related to, second, the atmospheric phenomena of fear and silence, and in these the perils of a distraction that eclipses collective choice or awareness; breathing the ‘air’ of violence here links with losing the practice of ‘story.’ In his essay “The Storyteller,” Benjamin observed,

Never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body. (Illuminations 84)

Human beings are radically reduced in stature when confronted with the pervasive tools of war. Benjamin foregrounds the effects such warfare has on violence as perpetrated against culture, as well as on the production of meaning in art. With the incomprehension brought about by these new methods of annihilation, the ability to confront and express the modern narrative diminished. Storytelling was profoundly and irretrievably altered; man and reason were silenced by the confrontation with the incomprehensible. Benjamin asks: “Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience?” (Illuminations 84). Silence reveals how
humans were further alienated from the way their natural, authentic selves dwelled in oral traditions and the communal exchange of ideas. Experience grows less communicable as it grows more prone to annihilation. Sloterdijk traces the connection between the atmo-terrorism practiced during WWI and the gas chambers in which 6 million Jews were murdered; German scientific research leads to the use of hydrogen cyanide. He states, “It would be a matter of mere months before it became obvious that the atmotechnic form of organism extermination was also going to be applied to human matter” (36). The specter of terror transforms over time and undermines the more optimistic belief in a Hegelian ascension, through the strife of dialectical confrontation, to a world of unity and cohesion. Where story on the side of real people stands overwhelmed by catastrophe, a storied metanarrative of progress loses its viability. It would at first seem unlikely, even absurd, to believe that artistic production could face the catastrophic with a drive toward political collaboration and peace. In its own way Rosler’s art bore traces of Adorno’s collapse of faith in Hegelian humanism: “After the catastrophes that have happened, and in view of the catastrophes to come, it would be cynical to say that a plan for a better world is manifest in history and unites it” (ND, 320). In his Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning, Jay Winter observes that the extermination of European Jews was “an act with affinities to earlier mass atrocities, but which transcended them in method, character and scale. Both of these catastrophes raised the possibility that the limits of language had been reached; perhaps there was no way adequately to express the hideousness and scale of the cruelties of the 1939-1945 war” (Winter 43, my emphasis). It is into Adorno’s sense of the ‘catastrophic’ and Winter’s recognition of this unsteady ‘perhaps’ that what I have been calling Rosler’s action-oriented aesthetic enters as an enterprise in ‘saving’ amid the lingering ‘danger.’ As we have seen, not
only does the technology of war become woven into the very fabric of our existence – the air we breathe, water we drink, and narratives we seek – the media fascination with the imagery it generates is equally troubling. But Rosler resolves to chart a course out of political apathy. Her work offers a point of resistance within what Sontag identifies in terms of how, we scarcely question our state of being in the world, allowing the progressive grip of technology’s essence to encapsulate us.

To the atmospherics of terror and catastrophe in the air, fear, and silencing of a staggered social ‘reserve,’ we may add, third, the specific contextual matter of imagery and illusion. Notice that the atmospherics of technological enframing gain more and more aesthetic traction. As the action of trauma and silence rupture story, the action of media images and voyeurism rupture critical vision. Sontag asserts: “New demands are made on reality in the era of cameras. The real thing may not be fearsome enough, and therefore needs to be enhanced; or reenacted more convincingly” (63). Such an ‘enhancement’ would also intervene in how the numbing effect of Sloterdijk’s atmo-terrorism is accepted with a voyeuristic stance on paramount issues, a peeking through the keyhole at ubiquitous, traumatizing imagery. Human beings create illusions of control, of a superficial desire to know and to see, but lack the means for such knowing. Recalling the case of Winter’s ‘perhaps,’ Sontag rightly explains, “The nightmare of suicidally lethal military engagement from which the warring countries were unable to extricate themselves—above all, the daily slaughter in the trenches on the Western Front—seemed to many to have exceeded the capacity for words to describe” (25). From the abject characteristics of war, images seek to bear witness but their effect numbs one’s very ability to critically consider the events they
depict. Rosler’s work addresses this ubiquity particularly in its re-use of the reproduced materials targeted in these discussions.

But why choose the very medium that entraps us into thoughtlessness? How could the re-presentation and re-contextualization of numbing images astound us? The problem is one of pitting aesthetic action against a larger anesthetizing, aesthetic force. Consider first, with Roland Barthes, the sign-function of the image: “What the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially” (CL 3). Yet, in its frozen moment, a photograph provides pictorial evidence of an event’s having been. In relation to man’s insatiable need for such images and news, Benjamin explains that “the editorial offices have long ago learned to exploit the fact that nothing binds the reader to his newspaper so much as this impatience, which demands fresh nourishments every day; they exploit it by continually throwing open new columns for readers’ questions, opinions and protests” (UB 89). This produces the kind of news cycle Baudelaire so vehemently lamented and leaves its percipient stripped of the tools necessary for critical analysis. Consider, further, Adorno’s prophetic insight that “interested parties like to explain the culture industry in technological terms. Its millions of participants, they argue, demand reproduction processes which inevitably lead to the use of standard products to meet the same needs at countless locations” (95). He continues, “The standardized forms, it is claimed, were originally derived from the needs of the consumers: that is why they are accepted with so little resistance. In reality, a cycle of manipulation and retroactive need is unifying the system ever more tightly” (95). The substructure provides the means of anaesthetizing its recipients through a standardization of output and information. If this is true then Rosler’s decision to work with media is ambitious, to say the least. The sheer
uniformity and mass-production of film, radio and television stands together as a quelling force, distracting and entertaining large populations of citizens whose every thought is fed by a larger apparatus. With the availability and proliferation of reproductions, the notion of the authentic (in relation to perception) was and is put into crisis. On one hand, for Benjamin, “art will tackle the most difficult and most important [tasks] where it is able to mobilize the masses. It does so currently in film” (*The Work of Art and Other Writings* 40). But, as Benjamin explains, film creates a multilayered alteration of perception with rapid fire successions of images successfully distracting the viewer and reducing thought. The scale of the tension, and the stakes for art in navigating it, grows. Sontag observes, “[N]ewer technology provides a non-stop feed: as many images of disaster and atrocity as we can take time to look at …” (108). To speak of Rosler’s distinct choice for aesthetic action we must also be aware with Benjamin of how pain so often risks commodification in the way images stylize human suffering, making them palatable to the consumer. Regarding the distance created in photography, he explains, “What do we see? It has become more and more subtle, more and more modern, and the result is that it is not capable of photographing a tenement or a rubbish-heap without transfiguring it [. . .] in front of these, photography can only say, ‘How beautiful’” (UB 94-95). Benjamin critiques the whitewashing of human suffering and hardship; he laments the replacement of these states with images suitable for comfortable consumption. How, then, can we unseat the immunity we have collectively developed to all that these images infer and the distraction or thoughtlessness they invite and sustain?

Rosler herself struggles to answer these questions, though she clearly agrees with Benjamin’s position. In her series *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems* (figure 3.3), she purposefully omits the homeless men whom the work represents, thereby avoiding
the type of commodification objected to above. This body of work is as much about what is kept inside the picture frame as what is excluded. As a critique of photographic history, particularly the genre of social documentation described above, Rosler is able to sidestep the consumer impulse to which other photographers have fallen prey.

What this specific move achieves is evident, in part, in how it deconstructs what Sontag noted regarding how “the excruciations of war, thanks to television, have devolved into a nightly banality” (108). Her statement reflects the term ascribed to the conflict in

Figure 3.3: Martha Rosler, *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems.*
Vietnam as the first *living room war*, with images from afar filtered into American homes. The choice of the word ‘banality’ is striking, immediately bringing to mind Arendt’s understanding of the evil perpetrated during WWII and the ethical duty individuals have to *think* beyond mere concessions to voices of authority. Otherwise, Sontag continues, “we [lose] our capacity to react” (RPO 108). And “[t]elevision (with its illusion of immediacy) distances—immures us in our own indifference” (AST 224). Rosler’s affect in the above presents a discrete case of evoking and challenging ongoing modes indifference and blind adherence to what Arendt had identified as “the heedless recklessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of ‘truths’ which have become trivial or empty” (HC 5). The suggestion is that an aesthetic action may provoke, and may indeed already be, the ethical action inscribed in critical questioning and thought.

This point about the possibilities of an ethico-aesthetic action that could ‘think’ and ‘engage’ the increasingly aestheticized forces enframing our air, our stories, and our sight, marks the fulcrum from which Rosler’s political intention and artistic action must be understood. She asks: “How does one address these *banally* profound issues of everyday life, thereby revealing the public and political in the personal? It seems reasonable to me to use forms that suggest and refer to mass-cultural forms without simply mimicking them” (Beshty 118 emphasis mine). She speaks directly to Heidegger’s understanding that it is precisely within the *danger* that we will find the solutions to Dasein’s enframing. Rosler’s intervention in the problems that Sloterdijk, Benjamin, Adorno, Arendt, and Sontag have helped us elucidate is specifically borne out in her intervention in the conventional material of the photographic image. In choosing photomontage, Rosler connects to its rich history as a medium of political activism as embodied in Dada and Expressionism, notably in the
collages of Hannah Höch, John Heartfield, Raul Hausmann, et al. Her intervention literally reverses the inclination, noted by Benjamin, for images to make the plight of those in need consumable goods. In so doing, she challenges the separate categories of news and advertising lexicon, thus opening up new possibilities from within the predicaments described variously by Winter and Barthes. The results of such a poēisis recuperate meaning and refuel the elements of shock needed to elicit an awakening from the viewer, thereby interrupting the state of distraction with a space for the kind of reflection and thought that allowing the viewer to interpret the visible narrative.

As we move into the specific details of her materially based practice, we need to appreciate how Rosler’s first interventions cut through a well-established repression of coded messages not only on the side of (a) the aestheticization of violence, but also (b) the pitfalls of shifting art-institutional practices and priorities. There were the contextual forces of an art world in flux, and thus the question of how to promote radical, indeed political, changes within forms of visual expression. A silence pervading creative expression after World War II constrained social and political activism. Significant content was seemingly banished from the museums and galleries and artists appeared to support a post-war cultural amnesia, focusing solely on materiality and form. There is ample evidence of the abolition of content from any discussion of Modernist art, shifting the focus instead on a Neo-Kantian preoccupation with the visible form and ostensibly atemporal experiences of originality. At the same time artists began to exploit the commercialization of the time period, as seen in Warhol’s Soup Cans, Lichtenstein’s comic strips and numerous other Pop Art examples. But Rosler disavows the Aestheticism of Modernism—especially its strict assertion of art’s autonomy—and the opportunism of Pop Art by vigorously affirming the role of art as
interpreter of the *zeitgeist*. Some counter-currents were emerging within the politics-art interchange. Rosler notes,

> After the cultural heresies of the sixties, the neutralist cultural monolith began to crumble, and art with a conscious political orientation could enter the breach. Theories of culture (as opposed to simple ideologies and journalistic promotion) that began to gain currency in that period have proved useful to the development of an informed art practice. (Beshty 61)

Concurrent with the intellectual and revolutionary climate of the sixties, Rosler originally chose to comment on our cultural blind spots, particularly regarding the Vietnam War, when she created her first series of collaged media images in *House Beautiful* to reveal the banality of the detached, consumerist life most Americans enjoyed from the safety of their homes. This preoccupation set the course for the way her action-oriented aesthetic would contest the myopic visions of a technological society. Rosler explains, “[T]here are fundamental theoretical issues that deserve airing before a mass audience; even to demonstrate how ideology is rooted in social relations is to advance a theory of culture” (Beshty 62). She clearly intended to start a counter-banality conversation—to stop her viewer in the normal course of life and force reflection about the war. “For Rosler, montage required a dialectical synthesis where new meaning could be produced—one imbued with a sharp political critique” (Zegher 80). She later repeated the impulse to create photomontage protests when the war in Iraq broke out in 2003—two years after 9/11. She believed the United States was perpetuating its past mistakes, involving troops in foreign conflicts based on misinformation and myth. Thus, in both cases of conflict Rosler broke from unthinking positions, interrupted the space of consumerist frivolity and created an indictment of the times.

We must not regard these choices as merely the output of a reactionary aesthetic. Her action shows traces of Benjamin’s account of the relationship between the terms *distraction*
and destruction, “as the subjective and objective sides, respectively, of one and the same process” (The Work of Art and Other Writings 56). Rosler felt this process to be the case in, for example, the way the Iraq War began on the manufactured premise of the existence of weapons of mass destruction, a presumed fact widely disseminated via news outlets and media platforms, underscoring the capacity and power to sway wide audiences. Benjamin’s dramatic epilogue anticipated this distracting/destructive misuse of information by describing the ultimate fascist aestheticization of mass destruction. The studied tenor of his warning echoes in the studied technique of Rosler’s work, engaging critically in the way shifts in the cultural substructure directly impact the superstructure’s cultural production. Rosler’s art self-consciously takes on the thoughtless acceptance of the information machine and its strategic preservation of structural norms. Within the dialectical struggle between emerging activist voices and adherents to the sameness manufactured in the media, Rosler found her artistic voice as an artist-activist committed to collective responsibility. We now move forward with a clearer picture of the ways images function as perpetrators of myth, and with an understanding of Rosler’s position as an ‘artist-author’ vis-à-vis the politics of her epoch and the choices she made.

§ 3.3: ROSLER AS ARTIST-PRODUCER + THE DECIPHERING OF MEANING IN REPRODUCTIONS

To effectively read Rosler’s artworks we need to consider how her aspirations to address cultural conditions and political entanglements stand with Benjamin’s notion of Author as Producer. We have already begun to see, in broad terms, a strident ‘tendency’ at work in her relation to the enframing atmospherics of her day. The details of her material production, as much as the arguments she voices, furnish such tendency in a way that absorbs
yet also empowers viewers. We have introduced how her *Bringing the War Home* series, for example, was accomplished through what may have seemed like crude appropriations of lo-fi publications. But why attempt an incisive message by what seems like a modest means? She explains: “[A]ll of my work is meant to look completely off so that you, as the viewer, could have your own point of view on what you were seeing rather than be impressed by any level of technical achievement” (*Rear Window*). She later elaborates: “I am a rationalist, and if you will, a Brechtian. I prefer to move back from excess expression in favor of a kind of quieter presentation” (*Schwartz interview*). These comments connect her directly with Benjamin’s assertion that in order for creative work to be relevant and of high quality, “it must be inserted into the context of living social relations” that are “determined by production relations” (UB 87). Rosler’s execution of this dual necessity in fact sense of necessity helps resolve Benjamin’s unsettled tension between aesthetic ‘distraction’ as a vulnerable absorption into the work and also a potentially powerful political device. Distraction’s positive character consists in how “a new kind of learning” results from a collision of “educational value and consumer value” (57). Rosler invests in this possibility without simply asserting it, for the works animate the need for thoughtful responses to the exchange between art and its percipient.

‘Tendency’ is also evident in her stylistic priorities. Rather than follow in the path of establishment artists and related styles of expression, she made a conscious choice to question her surroundings and demand of her audience both thought and active participation. Her work and the positions it sets forth straddle the contextual forces and the theory emerging from such an epoch. As Karen Moss summarizes in her essay “Matha Rosler’s Photomontages and Garage Sales,” her “modus operandi is both dialectical and interstitial:
she works between the actual and the metaphorical, or the real and the symbolic, and explores the spaces between private and public, personal and social, everyday life and the art world” (686). In this way her body of work calls to mind Benjamin’s politicization of art in the face of fascist norms and the matter of the ultimate aestheticization of destruction. In her own words, “[I] realized war was an exigent problem affecting my entire generation” and it would be irresponsible “to not comment” on such events (Rear Window). But art critic Jerry Salz interprets the work differently, descrying its arc as a shallow repetition of Rosler’s ‘glory days’:

Four decades later, Rosler turns out not to have changed the look of her own work at all. In “Great Power,” her current skin-deep effort at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, Rosler tries to turn back the clock to her glory days, essentially remaking the Vietnam series. Only now she’s inserting images of models into pictures of the Iraq War. Clearly, there are parallels between the two wars, and activist art is valid. But Rosler lapses into simplistic nostalgia and undermines her older work while basically making pretty war porn. The only thing her work says is that fashion designers and women who like to shop caused two wars. (“Welcome to the Sixties”)

If Saltz is right then the author-producer superlative would not fit. But Salz fails to understand the conceptual significance of using reproduced imagery and the gesture of redirecting meaning through repetition, and he overlooks the performative drive built into Rosler’s methods of distribution and its fundamentally democratic ethos. In response to Salz, Rosler points to the senseless repetition of unfounded conflicts that send young soldiers into wars without end. She asks, “[W]ho is stupid?” (Schwartz interview). She elaborates in a New York Times interview: “The downside was that people could say, ‘She’s revisiting something she did 30 years ago,’ . . . But I thought that actually was a plus, because I wanted to make the point that with all the differences, this is exactly the same scenario. We haven’t
advanced at all in the way we go to war” (“Glossy Idealism on the Front Lines”). What Rosler sought was “to crystalize popular sentiment” and “create more action against the war” through a thinly veiled propagandistic campaign (Schwartz). Such an author-producer ideal is applied practically in, for example, how she left her artworks unsigned and undated, vastly reducing the potential monetary value of ‘authorship’ then understood.

Benjamin’s aesthetic paradigm calls for the careful, self-aware coordination of an artist’s voice, position, and of course works. The coordination is particularly difficult when the aesthetic and political stakes are at a high cultural pitch. As the keynote speaker at the Creative Time Summit, Rosler acknowledged the ongoing “neo-liberal devastation” that has defined her life and career, while admitting her oeuvre is a directly related examination of the resulting class issues (Creative Time). The self-awareness shows discernment on two fronts and accords with how Benjamin envisions a radical, active spirit. He underscores the need for authors not only to have the potential for expressing the correct tendency (one in support of the proletariat) but to foster a deepened understanding of modern consciousness, recognizing all the while the impact of technological advances on society. The mission of the author/artist “is not to report but to fight; not to assume the spectator’s role but to intervene actively” (UB 88). The two-sided call to promote thinking and embody action comes, in an interesting way for Benjamin, from ideas connecting his Artwork and ‘Author as Producer’ texts. Both underscore Benjamin’s insistence on the struggle against corrupted power structures through literature and art. How does Rosler evidence a similar insistence? As noted, she lends a strong voice to this conversation in her avoidance of traditional exhibition strategies in favor of direct contact with her audience through lo-fi distribution and performative works. She critically subverts power structures and questions their role within cultural exchange, and she
positively maintains a strong sense of responsibility for the ways her artworks are received. She states: “I particularly think that producers need to be aware perhaps not in the moment of making, but certainly in the moment of distribution—of exhibition—of their work, of what is its consequence in exchange with the public, as we are agreeing . . . that it’s a transaction. There’s always a transaction” (Schwartz interview). This discernment regarding the ‘transactional’ nature of an aesthetic enterprise evidences her resolve to manage the coordination (of voice, position, and works) in a way that pushes the boundaries of creative purpose and expression.

But can such a practice satisfy the author-producer criteria in a way that embodies, in a more contemporary sense, an emancipation from enframing? For Benjamin, the “author as producer” stands within the modes of production of the epoch, working from within the tools of modernity driving progress. Again, we see a parallel with Heidegger’s concept that the saving power coexists within the dangers of alienation. In addition, the mode of production, the means of distribution and reproduction also democratize access to writing, offering the possibility for active participation in the creation of ideas. This specific connection to modes of production highlights an artist’s use of a particular medium as a means of reaching a broader audience. Until writing or creative output become fully accessible, the separation of the intellectual, cultured class remains embedded in bourgeois tendency. The stakes are great because the line between a propagandistic work devoid of quality or truthfulness and work that emerges from an authentic consideration of one’s place within the structures of society and production can be hard to navigate. For Benjamin, the writer literally joins rank with class struggle and must feel the struggle’s aims intrinsically. Rosler’s use of reproduction
further underscores Benjamin’s assertions as it foregrounds a democratized medium as a carrier of disruptive thought.

This progressive, technologically driven intention can be understood in a preparatory way through the photomontages of Höch, Heartfield, et al., whose creations Benjamin applauds for their resistance to fascist norms and their promotion of revolutionary engagement. The effect was achieved through a combination of word and image, using reproductions and re-presentation to awaken the viewer. This method works similarly to the surgical approach to film as a montage of clips and differing viewpoints. Rosler’s interest in this medium is well known, thus connecting to Benjamin’s vision of the author-producer not just in principle, but through a genealogy of practice. In a presentation at the European Graduate School, she explains:

The origins of photomontage as an aesthetic-political technique are not certain, but the Dadaists used it to disrupt the smooth, seamless surface of quotidian urban existence. Before them, Soviet constructivists used them to suggest the nearness of the just society and the complexity of social relations. Drawing in some respects upon their example, the German photomontagist John Heartfield still provides an unsurpassed example of political photomontage. In the 1930s, Heartfield, employing painstaking techniques and a sizable staff, produced photomontages with integral texts for the left-wing mass-circulation magazine *Arbeiter-Illustrierte Zeitung* (*Worker Illustrated Journal*), or AIZ. In every photomontage was the implicit message that photography alone cannot ‘tell the truth’ and also the reminder that fact itself is a social construction. This is not meant to deny that photographs provide some sort of evidence, only to suggest that the truth-value of photography is often overrated or mislocated. (Rosler, “Image Simulations, Computer Manipulations: Some Considerations”)

John Heartfield’s 1930 rotogravure titled *Those Who Read Bourgeois Newspapers Become Deaf and Dumb* illustrates Rosler’s point (figure 3.4). Created for the magazine AIZ (*Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung*, or *Workers Illustrated News*), it quite sparingly demonstrates the
potential effect of propagandist news. The figure in the frame is faceless, his features concealed by sheets of printed news. The less-than-subtle reference to the term ‘cabbage head’ infers that the news reduces its readers to stupidity. Heartfield used mechanically reproduced images and news, reconfigured in response to the context in which he worked. Like the mantle Rosler would pick up decades later, Heartfield uses his medium to expose disquieting truths. Hannah Höch delivers a similarly trenchant critique in her feminist-rooted political collage work, as seen previously in *Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany*, described in chapter 2 (Figure 2.2).

As artists of ‘tendency,’ both Heartfield and Höch stood by their political convictions and need to expose corruption. Their impact resonates when Benjamin quotes Lichtenberg:

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**Figure 3.4:**
John Heartfield
*Those Who Read Bourgeois Newspapers Become Blind and Deaf.*
Photomontage: 38.1x28cm / 1930
Arstor database: UCSD collection
“It is not what a man is convinced of that matters, but what his convictions make of him’’ (UB 98). In other words, “The best opinion is of no use if it does not make something useful of those who hold it” (UB 98). Thinking, therefore, serves little purpose if it fails to manifest action. This statement reflects Arendt’s ideas connecting thinking with action – the exchange between *vita contemplative* and *vita activa*, Similarly for Benjamin, “The writer can only prescribe such an attitude in the place where he is active—that is to say, in his writing” (UB 98). Rosler fulfills this creative political role. She shows that a stinging indictment of our culture and its myths can be conveyed by means of appropriation, re-presentation and a bare minimum of signs. In her own words, she sought to “[m]ake art about the commonplace, art that illuminates social life. I want to enlist art to question the *mythical* explanations of everyday life that take shape as an optimistic rationalism and to explore the relationships between individual consciousness, family life, and the culture of monopoly capitalism” (Rosler, EGS interview, emphasis added). Rosler’s intentions bind her to Benjamin’s characterization of an author with a correct tendency, and the way her work questions extrinsic forces lends it a sharp, political focus that marks the difference between merely supplying a production apparatus and fundamentally changing it.

There is a distinctly *ethical* directive and means at play in how Rosler’s work specifically applies these intentions. Her choice of the word ‘mythical’ (above) is significant and resonates with Barthes’ dissection of *myth*. Here the ethic of the aesthetic consists in how it *understands* what must be deconstructed. A system or society that is waging war, and therefore sending young men and women to the battlefields abroad, needs to be accountable for its widespread oblivion. In addition, the system must confront its constant consumption of imagery without giving thought to content. Here the ethic of the aesthetic in turn consists in
how it performs the deconstruction. Within both editions of *House Beautiful: Bringing the
War Home*, through the simple act of cutting and reconfiguring mass media images, Rosler
makes a statement that simultaneously illustrates the horrors of our foreign invasions while
turning the mirror toward her audience – the U.S. citizens whose superficial consumer lives
were largely unaffected by the carnage overseas. Her imagery consists of appropriated mass
media images—an incongruous combination of news photographs and lifestyle spreads—
blending the “glossy-aesthetic *Architectural Digest* interiors with war photography from *Life
Magazine* taken during the Vietnam War, pointing out the extreme discrepancy between
happy consumerist society and its ugly political side” (Rumas “Pull Up Those PIIGS”). The
simple yet powerful gesture accords with what Benjamin appreciated about the way
“montage interrupts the context into which it is inserted,” making its impact all the more
powerful (UB 99). For Rosler, social insertion in the mode of interruption not only to
implicates but also enlists the viewer as activist. She, like Hannah Höch, takes the very
images that saturate the social experience and reconfigures their context to critical effect.
One literally recognizes the source material, but then enters into startled self-reflection rather
than habitual absorption. The strategy at the same time deconstructs ‘myths’ on the side of
the art world. Her initial impulse to distribute these images as photocopies in publications
aimed at anti-war groups further undercuts the traditional value works have as art. Catherine
de Zegher explains:

> Of course, this perspective is fundamentally at odds with one of the art
world’s central myths, the axiom that rather than determining content, art
discourse is a secondary reading of the subject matter resident within the
work. Indeed, this level of importance attributed to discourse in the
construction of meaning has led her to see her art making as inextricably
linked to her activities as a writer, teacher, and public speaker. (Zegher
103)
Speaking at once to the broad terrain of social myths and back to the specific terrain of art-critical myths, Rosler’s production and exhibition choices support her desire to be ‘instrumental’ and remain on an ethical plane.

To ask about the works’ ethical character is also to inquire as to an awakening of thought assists in shifting an intersubjective responsibility. Such shifting must carefully navigate Benjamin’s understanding of the tension between distraction and destruction. Distraction, derived from the term Zerstreuung, can also mean entertainment, and Benjamin elsewhere states that “the work of art undertakes to produce entertainment in a responsible manner” (The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media, 57, emphasis added). The term exposes both sides of the potential outcome of mass-produced media. To hope for responsibility in the way new art forms are disseminated is to expect the kind of thinking demanded throughout Arendt’s writing; it is to presume the author has the ethical foundation needed to conduct herself in the interest of a larger population. This ethical foundation permeates the artworks of Heartfield, Höch and other artist-producers seeking to bring truth into light in a Heideggerian unconcealment or alētheia. So too Rosler says of her process:

There is another critical issue to consider: the choosing or seeking of an audience. I feel that the art world does not suffice, and I try to make my work accessible to as many people outside the art audience as I can effectively reach. Cultural products can never bring about substantive change in society, yet they are indispensable to any movement that is working to bring about such changes. The clarification of vision is a first step toward reasonably and humanely changing the world. (Rosler, DD 8)

Rosler reached her audience by means of “agit-prop, distributed to anti-war organizations and groups reproduced as Xerox copies.” She incorporated “no slogans” within the picture
frame — just images (Meister MoMA). She consciously sought to provoke shock and recognition in the viewer by means of “social judgments as abstract attachment of thought” (Meister).

As noted, repeating the series in 2004 put Rosler under fire in a world where originality and newness are celebrated. Yet, we were, as a nation, repeating similar offenses, and reasserting the content a generation later simply underscores this fact; aesthetic repetition is warranted where societal repetition shows a harrowing forgetfulness of the past. Showing and troubling this ongoing cycle, when well-executed, makes for a consistent statement and contribution to social activism. Rosler’s collages echo anti-war sentiments and the U.S. predilection for extending its reach beyond its appropriate scope. Her collages also highlight the consumeristic narcissism pervasive in our culture.

One might argue that I have been blurring the line between ‘author’ and ‘artist’ in order to align Rosler with Benjamin’s vision for the author-producer. That concern would show an overly narrow conception of what he means by ‘authorship.’ But the concern also gives us an opportunity to press now in more detail into how Rosler’s use of visual language models an artist-producer affect. We will first address the relationship between author qua artist and her audience in terms of how meaning is imparted with a focus on the reciprocity of the exchange. Rosler’s disavowal of modernist aestheticism remains important on this score, for it will enhance our understanding of the more structural elaboration of how images function. It is noteworthy that Both Benjamin and Barthes examine the functions of both author and reader within the interpretive process, though approaching the topic from vastly diverging angles.

Turning first to Benjamin’s conception of the functions of author and reader in the
interpretive process, it is helpful to draw on Angela Mitropoulos, who notes: “Few of those situated it as long ago as Walter Benjamin did, not only in relation to labor, but in terms of the changing economic patterns and technologies that served to redefine both authorship and labor and, for that matter, any distinctions between them. This, in brief, is Benjamin’s singular contribution to a discussion about authorship” (Mitropoulos). In other words, for Benjamin the author belongs to a specific class of avant-garde creators of meaning, while still permitting the reader of their works the open space for thinking and interpretation. While discussing the qualitative superiority of epic theatre, for example, he says, it “discovers [situations]. This discovery is accomplished by means of the interruption of sequences . . . . it arrests the action in its course, and thereby compels the listener to adopt an attitude vis-à-vis the process, the actor vis-à-vis his role” (UB 95). The interruption allows the interpretive faculty of the listener or reader to remain active and engaged; by means of a caesura, the listener’s attention is more acutely focused. The point recalls Heidegger’s attention to the phenomenon of *bringing-forth*—an ‘unconcealing of Dasein’s ownmost potentiality’ that enables creative capacities to subvert the prevailing modes of ‘challenging-forth’ that otherwise reduce being to a ‘standing reserve.’ A similar correlation is found in Benjamin’s demand that the author thinks: “You may have noticed that the reflections [. . .] make only one demand on the writer: the demand to think, to reflect upon his position in the production process” (UB 101). The demand calls for the ‘tendency’ we have discussed and accredited to Rosler. More than just ‘thinking’ on the level of intent, says Benjamin, “the right tendency must, of necessity, show every *quality* as well” (UB 86, emphasis added). Like Heidegger’s insistence on a careful *Gelassenheit* in *technē*, Benjamin’s position insists on an author’s responsibility for the other and an awareness of one’s aesthetic impact in the production of
meaning. But while he elaborates on the ideal role of an author-producer as one who advances class struggle, he does not detail the ways such momentum and progress can be achieved.

To complete the picture, we must turn to Barthes. The methods of imparting meaning are foregrounded in his analysis of the structures of language, both written and visual, which serve to drive underlying messages into the minds of their recipients. This second mechanism operates more structurally than Benjamin’s more politically motivated propositions. Moreover, Barthes stresses the role of the reader in the way narrative is translated. Each reader will approach a work of art or text with innate sets of codes and experiences. An understanding of the content will depend on the reader’s particular intellectual background or experience. In essence, the author becomes an obsolete concept for Barthes as meaning is altered with each individual reading of a text or image. Does this place our rendering of author-producer as artist-producer at cross-purposes? There remains important room for Benjamin’s author in this exchange. As though directly agreeing with Barthes’ position, Benjamin injects, “This apparatus will be the better, the more consumers it brings in contact with the production process—in short, the more readers or spectators it turns into collaborators” (UB 98). No longer passive recipients of externally imposed texts, the reader, in essence, joins the author as co-creator in a common struggle for emancipation. Rosler, as noted, insists on audience participation, making her viewer a collaborator. We do not need to jettison authorship altogether but do need to supplement Benjamin’s position with the way Barthes’ stress on how the reader enhances the work-character of the aesthetic experience in terms of activating a reflection on the ideological forces at play.

Still, we need to examine how Rosler will purposefully reverse the way in which myths
are apprehended, turning them on themselves and undermining their coercive power. *Myth*, for Barthes, is a secondary signification in which the sign is returned to the status of signifier. The meaning in myth is deliberately created in service of a broader, often negative, ideological function. Hence myth has the potential to repress interpretation and instead conceal meaning, keeping its motives and distortions undetected. For evidence, Barthes offers detailed analyses of a *Paris Match* cover (Figure 3.5) and an advertisement for *Panzani Pasta* (Figure 3.5) in both *Myth Today* and *Rhetoric of the Image*, both with content that reinforces political agendas. Barthes’ understanding of the function of *myth* stands as a caution for anyone confronted with widely disseminated imagery.6 In the case of the *Panzani Pasta* advertisement (a brand he considers quintessentially Italian), Barthes addresses the ways content is delivered to an audience (Barthes, IMT 32-52) (Figure 3.4).7 Here he finds modes of *anchorage* and *relay*, terms coined in response to the presence of text accompanying the advertisement. Text leads the reader to specific messages, leveraging the symbolic power of words and guiding the outcome of their relationship with image. This teaming extends the potential of visual syntax further. For Barthes, the content of an image – as it communicates meaning – can be dissected by means of its *codes* and *lexia*, or units of reading, and the layers of denotation and connotation therein. Multiple interpretations can in turn occur. Again, the viewer (as much a producer as a consumer) must have an active role in deciphering imagery.
The tools Barthes offers for decoding meaning are useful in today’s geopolitical climate with its myths that incentivize consumerism, and also help us appreciate the ability of artworks to operate as sites in which ‘readers’ can reconfigure those narratives that uphold and advertise institutions of power. For Rosler, the very presence of myth motivates her interventions in the grammar of imagery, once again revealing her role as author qua artist-producer. While Benjamin lays the emphasis on a work’s proper political tendency, Barthes ultimately attends to the vocabulary needed for deciphering images, sharing the task of understanding with the author himself. Both foci demand that aesthetic works require a depth of engagement and participation in order to convert a quotidian state of distraction into the action of ethical thinking.

Figures 3.4 + 3.5
The Panzani advertisement and Paris Match cover so critical to Barthes analysis. Artstor database: Getty Collection
§ 3.4: AN ETHICO-POLITICAL READING OF ROSLER’S VISUAL WORK

We have begun to consider how Rosler’s work finds its place within the overarching ethical response to Heidegger’s plea, providing an opening for thinking capable of producing self-reflection and inspiring fundamental change. In response to Benjamin’s concerns and in the absence of an original work with which to interact, the ultimate gesture of authenticity lies in the provocation of thought, stirring the viewer out of complacency and distraction and into the open region for free thought (*Gelassenheit*). Her action-oriented aesthetic functions instrumentally, solidifying her role as an artist-producer who concretizes the convergence of ethical obligation with emancipatory modes of *poēsis* and *alētheia*. Her work, properly understood, stresses the agency inherent in each of us as percipients of artworks. Two works in particular will help us better understand the systematic reversal of myth that Rosler achieves through her reconfigurations of media-produced compositions. Here we will look for her material configuration of three specific concerns detailed above: the persistent relationship between enframing qua alienation, the prevalence of myth and violence, and the systematic dumbing down of the viewer’s mind as a consequence of consumerism and rampant, technologically driven imagery. Doing so will help us further examine our investigation into art’s potential to draw us into authentic participation in the praxis of ‘saving’ powers.

The first artwork, *Balloons* (Figure 3.6), is from the initial series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* and dates back to 1972. The second artwork *Photo Op* (Figure 3.7) was created in response to the Iraq War begun in the spring of 2003 during the George W. Bush administration. The ability of both series to transcend their historicity is striking and establishes them as what Arendt would term durable thought-things. They overcome
Agamben’s concern that, paraphrasing Benjamin, “the historical index contained in the images of the past indicates that these images may achieve legibility only in a determined moment of their history” (WA 53-54). Forty years separate the two artistic gestures, and, in Rosler’s words, “the visual landscape in the magazines is somewhat different” (Rear Window interview). But while the magazines from which she appropriated her images show the imprint of a particular epoch, the power of the resulting message has not diminished.

Figure 3.6: Balloons, collage created in 1972 as part of the first House Beautiful Series in response to Vietnam.
The signs Rosler produced reside in the interstice separating time and place and, in so doing, create an enduring message. She describes both series as “collisions in space [and time] about the war” (Meister) and continues by explaining:

I began making agitational works ‘about’ the Vietnam War, collaging magazine images of the casualties and combatants of the war—usually by noted war photographers in mass market magazines—with magazine images that defined an idealized middle-class life at home. I was trying to show that the ‘here’ and the ‘there’ of our world picture, defined by our naturalized accounts as separate or even opposite, were one. (355)

This unification of our domestic world with the endless ‘tissues of horror’ documented by war photographers brings to bear intersubjective responsibility and the ethical position of an artist-producer. It is also important to understand that the mechanics operating within an
artwork facilitate an urgent disruption of norms. It is not enough to know Rosler’s work is revolutionary per Benjamin’s prescription; one must also understand how the work functions structurally.

Returning to Barthes’ ascription of interpretive power to the reader/viewer, I recognize that the lush interiors and Vera Wang fashions Rosler has chosen belong to the privileged ‘one percent’ or Western society. One must understand that she has purposefully chosen to include these in order to prompt in viewers a personal recognition of the objects and environments she is in the act of critically reconfiguring. Rosler’s structuring of meaning relies on these visual semiotic triggers, or connotative values, in Barthes’ parlance, in which case his unveiling of ideological codes (though since disputed by scholars) is still salient to this conversation. Because Rosler layers her images with disparate magazine spreads, ranging from fashion and home goods to photojournalistic depictions of war, the connotations are removed from their original mythological context and remixed. This affect recalls the previous definition of myth, in which the signified is returned to the status of sign, creating secondary layers of meaning. Our collective reading, therefore, depends on the audience’s visual literacy and the acuity of the artist in applying conventionally legible signs.

Not all content is universal, however, as Barthes elaborates in both Rhetoric of the Image and The Pleasure of the Text. He expands upon the artwork’s plurality of meaning that is dependent entirely on its reader’s background and emotional life, or his or her idiolect, and proposes that once a reading is made, the content is unpacked and interpreted by all that the viewer has lived and known. Images connect to intimate interior texts. Mimetic associations speak to a broader audience and meaning can be imparted if an artist consciously selects signs that can be similarly decoded by a larger population. As though illustrating Barthes’
analysis of structure, Rosler’s constructions affect a convergence of iconic imagery, mixed
together with a devastating plot twist, thereby turning the tables on both the media and the
complicit population at large. The content crosses the bounds of Marxism, Feminism and
notions of media and mass production.

*Balloons* illustrates of this blending of ideas (Figure 3.6). The image speaks to the
televised presence of war inside American homes. It blends the photojournalistic images of
the devastation of war that were published in *Life Magazine* with the self-indulgent home
décor found in the pages of *House Beautiful* or *Architectural Digest*. Rosler aimed to create
believable interior spaces in which two disparate scenes would collide, simultaneously
drawing the viewer in and striking him with an unexpected reflexive force. She referred to
these as *tableaux in stasis* (Meister). How does the strategy succeed? The composition is
divided by a sleek wall, delineating an affluent, modern architectural space. The left side of
the picture plane is bright, with floor to ceiling windows illuminating what can be interpreted
as a living room. The right side of the frame is darker, creating a more closed environment,
held between a dividing wall and the suggestion of another structural level. It is within this
darkened container that the narrative disjunction occurs. Rosler invites the viewer to become
an active participant in the unfolding scene, placing him at the top of the stairs, in close
proximity to two foreground figures, a visibly distraught Vietnamese woman carrying a
wounded or dying child in her arms. A strong story line is unfolding, laden with unsettling
and contradictory signs. All formal elements converge, shifting meaning and awakening
collective accountability within the work’s narrative.

Our position vis-à-vis the picture is crucial to its impact; we are, in effect, placed at the
top of the stairs, as though greeting intruders. In Rosler’s words, the viewer is caught
“identifying with while simultaneously refusing to” participate in the scene (Meister). The collision brings to bear our ethical position toward the other. Our internal dialogue might continue, “No that isn’t me, that is the other”—a response that allows for a separation from the content. And yet, the exchange begs the question: “Where do you stand in relationship to that which is depicted?” (Meister). There is an exchange happening between artist and viewer, in essence forcing an engaged reading, and it is within this insistent gesture that we see, once again, Rosler’s expression of author-producer. The encounter prompts us to consider our relationship—our Being-toward—that exists a priori to the contemplation of the work. The shared space created within the frame is crucial for us to feel the responsibility that befalls us. Rosler is “giving the viewer a place to stand” and compelling our instinctive response. She specifically invites the viewer to “stand in the work and have a point of view on it” (Schwartz interview). As a place of thought and action, the position is a subtle but powerful shift from what Heidegger termed the ‘standing reserve.’ From within this reconfigured space we are permitted to examine and question—in essence, deconstructing the operating myths enframing us and thus undermining distraction as a negative force.

The image contains details such as a well-appointed porch with a wicker swing chair, high ceilings and neatly arranged furnishings appropriate to the interior design aesthetic of the late sixties. In the far corner of the living room sits a deflated bouquet of balloons, indicating a celebration—perhaps a birthday party for a child. Rosler is consciously “judging social status through the various levels of appearance” (Meister). This ascription of meaning is derived from the connotative value of the piece that relies on the viewer’s internal language and experience. The reading forces an engagement, not because the denoted space is of particular interest, but rather through the jarring juxtaposition of the human figures in
the foreground whose mere presence forces a questioning. As Moss observes, the work is a “biting critique of domestic complacency, US militarism, and the inundation of violent imagery via television, film and print media during the Vietnam War era” (Moss 690). Rosler is making clear “social judgments” without attaching either text or slogan to the task. Her meaning is all the stronger for this omission. The woman placed in the foreground is foreign and positioned in such a way as to appear frantically climbing the stairs of this otherwise tranquil home. The power of this image is embodied in her facial expression, a fleeting moment captured in time, in a faraway land, as a war is waging. In the same manner as she allows us to read Benjamin with enhancements from Barthes’ conception of layered meanings, her work animates Sontag and Sloterdijk. The elements in this photomontage force an encounter with Sloterdijk’s atmo-terrorism; the child’s bodily wounds might be attributable to Agent Orange, an herbicide and defoliant used during the Vietnam War, which caused environmental destruction and severe health problems. As Sloterdijk astutely notes, “Terrorism, [ . . . ] comprises a form of violence against the very human-ambient ‘things’ without which people cannot remain people” (25) and transforms our “immediate atmospheric envelope” (25). Rosler’s tiny, scalded child, whose tensed body and elevated knee indicate extreme pain, encapsulates an entire history of chemical warfare. The image resonates with (and reinvigorates) the belief that children should never be the victims of war nor should our environment be transformed into a weapon of war. 10

Rosler succeeds in making visual deeply held convictions about the wars in Vietnam and Iraq, and our subsequent forays into Afghanistan. This is not a matter of polite inquiry, or what Barthes would call studium. The visual disconnect between all that occupies the frame speaks simply and articulately of an alarming and growing cultural narcissism. While
pointed and critical, these visual elements reveal a truth regarding the current human condition and the troubling emotional distance we afford ourselves from devastation overseas. The need for awakening underscores the dangers of enframing qua alienation and of the banal distraction that conceals it or copes with it. The visual language Rosler chooses is significant. Looking at this image, or assemblage of media imagery, the viewer can interpret it as a document, a statement of time and place, or an archive that challenges us to reconstruct the layers of our history. Rosler is curating the elements present in the tableau, thereby guiding the viewer’s response and allowing the interpreting faculties of her viewer full engagement in the ultimate production of meaning. Much the way Derrida acknowledges the absence that is felt in the archive, an absence experienced in omission, what the image frame contains simultaneously creates exclusion. The limits of both photography and media output are felt deeply. The images are cropped, cut, reassembled and purposefully blended to sharpen her message. The overlapping of disparate signs changes the point of view and points directly at us, the audience, highlighting the *detachment* that results from our consumption of both objects and media—something Benjamin, Adorno and Arendt would support. Rosler penetrates our perspectives by way of this contradiction. Moving forward to 2004, she finds the United States once again involved in foreign conflicts that are initiated under false pretexts with no endgame in sight. Rosler felt compelled to engage in another political critique, especially of the advance of distraction wrought by our addiction to technological devices and other superficial concerns.

We have seen that *Balloons* allows us to negotiate the multiple planes upon which Rosler operates. It provides evidence underscoring her visual strategy, creating a startling overturning of myth and returning to the reproduction its ability to prompt thought. Within
the frame one finds economic disparities and moments of dissonance, along with an alarming notation of ongoing acts of atmo-terrorism. Photo Op brings us closer to contemporary visual triggers and signs (Figure 3.7). A Barbie-like double of a model holds a cell phone in the air adoringly with a visibly animated expression. Her repetition underscores a world of simulacra in which the original is lost. It also speaks to the uniformity that permeates our society.

Rosler adds complexity to this scene by including the black-and-white image of a soldier’s face in each tiny cell phone screen, demonstrating the frivolous idolatry the woman exhibits toward the simulacra of men at war. Not only is the woman portrayed as shallow and self-absorbed, she is the one turning her back on the horrors unfolding in the imagery behind her. The message is brutally confrontational; women are represented as sexual, superficial beings, thoughtless and preoccupied with material consumerism—cell phones, shoes, handbags, makeup. There is certainly a reciprocity here between the kind of interiors
represented in the earlier work and the kind of image chosen for the women here; they are both of the ‘ideal’ kind, the aspirational (superficial), not exactly the ‘everyday’ in the sense of common lived experience. They represent what the media and marketers propose as desirable through the myths that they actively produce. Rosler’s choices are intentional and reveal Adorno’s culture industry at work.

Viewing Photo Op, we realize the children placed in the modernist chairs are dead, clearly resulting from the violence depicted in the background. Rosler is altering our notion of news images by overlapping disparate pieces of information in a way that makes us deeply uncomfortable. While soldiers are dying in aimless, unprovoked wars, young model-like Barbie-women adhere to simulacra. With dead children draped on modern, opulent furniture, she rubs our noses in the complacency that marks our culture. Rosler uses a constructed image that could not result in a more cutting, poignant document. The further we delve into the image the more horrific its content – children have been murdered and war continues in full swing. Danger looms large outside the vast, modern picture window, outside the so-called sanctuary of the American family home. The soldiers in the background bring the viewer back to the Barbie girls whose screens contain their images, as though cycling us from background to foreground, thereby magnifying the effect.

The double figure in the front right presumes a representation of reality. Rosler counts on our media exposure and understanding of the visual vocabulary she deploys to predict the viewer’s reactions, and in this way her work translates into “an emotional recognition coupled with a critical intellectual understanding of the systematic meaning of the work, its meaning in relation to common issues” (Beshty 119). The internal conflicts arise when we view fashion alongside war, children and death, home and explosions, consumerism and
violence, and so forth. In sum, she cleverly crafts complex collage scenes in which the viewer is complicit. Connotations morph and the message is transformed. The lexia of advertising photography set against the language deployed by news media creates a subset that evades the normal pitfalls of mythmaking. Rosler manipulates the ideological undertones of both genres of imagery.

We must not overlook the fact that the use of photographs is a symbolically potent choice. It builds on a relatively short yet intense period of production and a rapidly changing means of dissemination. The medium has also developed an enduring reputation as a device for truth-telling, recording indisputable material facts and safeguarding them as evidence of an event. Sontag describes the phenomenon of photography as compared to television:

Nonstop imagery (television, steaming video, movies) is our surround, but when it comes to remembering, the photograph has a deeper bite. Memory freeze-frames; its basic unit is the single image. In an era of information overload, the photograph provides a quick way of apprehending something and a compact form for memorizing it. (RPO 22)

Wars are documented, crime scenes recorded, and the tiny moments of human life are chronicled in an attempt to freeze and preserve time. But when a photojournalist alters an image, their credibility as a voice of truth is eroded, even if the alteration did not affect the material content of the moment in question. Nonetheless, photography is still accepted as a form of archival evidence—despite its long history as a manufacturer of myth. The photographer’s role is to wield his equipment and document what unfolds. Yet, what is recorded is but a tiny fractional moment, frozen, edited and quite narrow in its visual field of reference. Photographic imagery, by its very nature, cannot access truth as a multifaceted, unfolding event. As we have seen, artist John Heartfield agreed with this premise, building a career upon re-presenting truth by means of a caesura. The nature of truth alters with the re-
combination of elements. This is particularly applicable to images taken in times of war or strife. *Bringing the war home* by means of images safely disconnects the viewer from the unfolding horror. Salz implicated a frivolous fashion industry in the perpetuation of war. That said, it is in the deeper, cutting gestures of the work that Rosler shifts consciousness. By using disparate imagery and conjoining opposing narratives, she exaggerates the violence of our cultural blindness. Such aesthetic action returns us to the matter of how artworks manage to interrupt distraction and provoke thought.

In regards to photojournalistic shock imagery, Barthes writes,

[N]one of these photographs, all too skillful, touches us. This is because, as we look at them, we are in each case dispossessed of our judgment: someone has shuddered for us, reflected for us, judged for us; the photographer has left us nothing—except a simple right to intellectual acquiescence: we are linked to these images only by technical interest; over indicated by the artists himself, for us they have no history, we can no longer invent our own reception of this synthetic nourishment, already perfectly assimilated by its creator. (154)

Barthes is speaking of straight photography with its *direct* mechanical capture and *expectation of truth-telling*. For him, the photographer is processing the arrested moment and delivering it comfortably to the viewer. The creation of the image, in an event of violence, transforms and thus becomes a representation that distances the viewer from the encounter. Sontag likewise spoke of the connection between *safety* and *indifference*. Yet, Barthes, in *Camera Lucida*, describes how the photograph has the ability to conjure an emotional response, a *punctum*, unique to the interchange between an individual and his connection to a specific subject. He holds that “the photograph is literally an emanation of the *referent*,” or, perhaps better, a “*certificate of presence*” (Barthes, CL 80). In broader terms, the ordinary image, vernacular and void of pretense, is evidence that something occurred, a visual
validation that events were, on some level, real. And yet, reality may be nothing more than an illusion, created by the fluidity of memory and its connections to our intangible experiences. Images can thereby supersede reality and create an altered system of beliefs, bringing into view a new deciphering of the purposefully sequenced story. Another interesting deviation from the veracity of photographs is their equal capacity to create great fallacies. Certainly, this underlying premise — of the dubious nature of photographic images — goes hand in hand with their potential for political subversion, as Benjamin establishes in the epilogue to the “Work of Art” essay. It bears noting how Barthes sheds light on the mechanics of such potentiality as we examine the operation of Rosler’s works.

Another noteworthy layer to the operations embedded within photographs is the one that speaks directly to memory as a trigger for thought. Barthes’ own connection to snapshots of his mother recalls the way images create associations, stimulating emotions and tapping into feelings surrounding an event or person depicted. Marjorie Perloff expresses this well in relation to Barthes’ account of a childhood incident and his “assumption that the souvenir d’enfance has meaning; that memory can invoke the past, revive the fear, panic and sense of release the boy felt when his mother rescued him. However painful the memory the little filmic narrative implies, it relates past to present and creates Barthes’ sense of identity” (Rabaté 47). The phrase ‘filmic narrative’ speaks also of a photograph’s ability to play a scene for us over and over as we examine its contents. We may not even remember the event, but the image creates a sense of its flavor while reinforcing its having occurred. This mnemonic quality satisfies the need to resolve the substance of our present lives, bringing “our past into the present” (Rabaté 47). Certainly, the fact that a photograph fixes a moment in time offers us the privilege of holding onto it, whatever memory, or sense of security, it
conjures.

Materially, the disjunction between Rosler’s work and pure photographic representation creates an analytical problem. While the *House Beautiful* series is regularly categorized within the photographic medium, is it in fact ‘a photograph’? It poses the question concerning the appropriated and twice-removed imagery contained herein—once a photograph, then a magazine spread, then repurposed into a new ‘photography’ or photomontage. What is it then? Mass-produced and reincarnated, it becomes a technologically created artwork re-presented for consumption. Do we, as a society, see that the commentary is sharply turned on us, her audience, who so casually consume these media signs? Is the work turned on the media itself, the originary disseminator of destructive information?

In the works the lingering elements of the war imagery, layered with the visual language of interior design and fashion, alters the way images function both as triggers for our memory and as traces of evidence of what ‘has been.’ We witness, on the one hand, the vilification of an entire population while showing our soldiers’ suffering, and on the other, the ever present ‘life is good’ motto ingested by American audiences as we adore the latest consumer devices and fashion trends. The clashing myths are perplexing—thus attracting our focus and provoking thought. So then, Rosler challenges the veracity of the image while accessing a deeper layer of truth—one that challenges our thinking about our own relationship to all that unfolds out of our reach. We will see, in the coming chapters, how documents and archives can be blended in service of deeper meaning, transferring thinking from surface layers to a clearer understanding of reality. This move proves to be increasingly powerful as the culture industry tightens its grip on a citizenry unable to see the impact of
these effects. Understanding how to read Rosler’s work helps us dissect the ways she imparts meaning to her viewer. Noting the structural basis of such meaning, through Barthes’ notions of both denotation and connotation, underscores her value as artist-producer, furthering her ethical undertones.

**Figure 3.8:** Martha Rosler, *Garage Sales Series*, (early iteration) at the *New Museum* in New York City.

### § 3.5: ROSLER’S GARAGE SALES: CLASS PERFORMANCE AND PARTICIPATION

Rosler’s resistance to well-established political structures heralds a new approach to imaginative artistic production and its function as a vehicle for ethical conduct. Her underlying intention aims for emancipation through social responsibility, a calling to *Mitsein* in its best possible manifestation in intersubjective accountability. We have begun to see how the works ‘transact’ meaning quietly, allowing the viewer the space to process Rosler’s
tendency, perhaps privately. How might Rosler motivate her audience further? What circumstances might she create in order to amplify her voice as artist-producer? Magnifying her message beyond photographic and media-based artworks, Rosler also engages her audience in a number of staged performances.

While performances mark much of her oeuvre, this tendency toward physical human interaction is particularly strong in her *Garage Sale Series*, which debuted in 1973 while Rosler was still in graduate school at the University of California San Diego (UCSD) (Figure 3.8). The series created a forum in which nuanced ideas of value, social exchange, personae, culture and rigid consumer ethos merged into a timely political critique, moving her intended conversation to an intersubjective plane. We will see how the *Garage Sale Series* is implicitly founded on the ideas of Marx, Adorno, Benjamin and Arendt, and reaffirms Rosler’s quest to awaken thought and steer participants toward greater freedom. Connections will be drawn to notions of consumerism, commodity fetishism and class divisions, along with a continued look at alienation qua enframing and the status anxiety driving human beings further from their authentic needs.

Upon arriving in a San Diego suburb in 1967, Rosler (a native New Yorker) puzzled over the community ritual of the garage sale (what she calls a ‘real American ritual’), wherein all personal artifacts are offered for monetary exchange. Her observation reconnects her with Adorno’s scorn for consumerism and its societal effects. In several conversations and interviews,\textsuperscript{11} she reflects on her discomfort having come from a city where old items are either donated to charity or left on the curb for collection in an invisible social exchange that leaves scant trace of an item’s provenance or evidence of the ‘ghosts of the people who had just used them.’ Rosler explains her fascination with this type of reveal as an “undesired tear
the fabric of secrecy” hitherto surrounding the private lives of individuals and families. She asks herself, “[W]hy there is no shame in putting out the things they no longer want?” as their owners then haggled over arbitrary values and participated in the drama of consumer exchange. Moreover there is the fact that garage sales are largely orchestrated by women who, at a time of relative domesticity, stepped into another more economic role, temporarily donning the mask of merchant. She describes the garage sales as the “liminal space in which the domestic enters the commercial” (Creative Time Summit) realm. Women’s identities and roles shifted dramatically.

The Garage Sales have been described alternatively as a “portrait of suburban life” or as an ‘old growth tree’ whose concentric rings lead inward toward its most intimate spaces. [FIGURE 3:9] And as we are beginning to see, the series embodies a contemporary response to Adorno’s critique of the culture industry. Rosler is enacting a type of suburban reproduction, flagging concerns about the very context in which it is taking place, and thereby awakening imagination and thought. Items were purposefully arranged and included such things as a car (“a sleek vintage diesel Mercedes-Benz station wagon,” MoMA), furniture, kitchen wares, clothing and framed ‘artworks’, to letters, scrapbooks and photos of past lovers. According to Lydia Goehr, “One worked through concentric rings of the artist’s soul. The innermost ring was pretty intimate. One could buy pieces of her underwear, and even—I think—photographs of her lovers” (Herwitz & Kelly 75-76). The most immediately desirable items were placed in the foreground, forcing participants to ‘dig deeper’ in order to ‘pull back the fabric of secrecy’ enshrouding more private moments.

The original event, comprised largely of Rosler’s gathered personal effects, took place in a university’s gallery; it drew sharp criticism from Herbert Marcuse and his followers,
most notably Sandy Dykstra. Their principal objection resided in the fact that the items lacked “a sufficiently transcendental aspect to count as art” (Dawsey 89, 155). Rosler’s personal belongings and memorabilia were deemed to be a mere ‘repetition of reality’ without the needed mediation to transform consumable objects into artworks. In a first-hand account of the exchange, Lydia Goehr recalls how Marcuse, “despised it, believing that it celebrated rather than criticized bourgeois values” (Herwitz and Kelly 75). The root question asks whether, in fact, the ‘work’ can be considered art at all, whether it deserves to belong in the hallowed halls of an exhibition space. In defense of her work, Rosler counters, “[T]he garage sales were part of that impulse to take the clothing of ‘just yesterday,’ with the ghosts of people still in them, and to denaturalize them in some way so that they told a social story rather than an individual [one]” (de Zegher, 47). Thus, the Garage Sales are an examination of broader social issues, including community rituals, class divisions, role play and the disposable nature of consumerism.

The shift to a polyphonic collaboration through Rosler’s Garage Sales Series is significant to this project’s original goals (as discussed in chapter 1): to examine the nature of ethics in Heidegger’s call to action and the solution to the perils of enframing crippling Dasein. Furthermore, in support of Benjamin’s quest for emancipation (as discussed in chapter 2), Rosler’s impulse succeeded in democratizing artworks to a far greater degree than mere reproductions by inviting members of the larger community to contribute items of their own, a trend that became especially pronounced in the MoMA sale held 40 years after the UCSD event. Recalling Barthes and Benjamin on the question of authorship, we see here how the author and reader’s roles are ultimately collaborative. The performances additionally share ownership with a wider, anonymous group, resulting in an inclusivity and political
agency that make of every participant, regardless of class, a revolutionary in the upper
echelons of the art world.

In an interview with James Eischen, Rosler points out, “we are back in a moment
where artists can more effectively take on politics or commerce” (Eischen). By combining
the actions of gathering, sorting, staging and inviting her audience into the narrative, Rosler
alters the fundamental tenets surrounding the constitution of an artwork and its standing
within culture. (Though these actions may seem commonplace to us within current art
practice, Rosler’s performance was shockingly new in 1973.) If confronted by the
performative nature of the *Garage Sales*, Benjamin would point toward historical movement
and the inevitability of change, namely “the idea that we are in the midst of a vast process in
which literary [qua art] forms are being melted down, a process in which many of the
contrasts in terms of which we have been accustomed to think may lose their relevance”
(AaP 89). At the same time, Rosler shows how new forms can solidify sound tendency by
way of the relation between production details and aesthetic affect.

Using the *Penny Saver* as the vehicle for communicating details regarding the events
guaranteed the audience would come predominantly from ordinary walks of life. This
particular use of lo-fi reproductions reinforces Benjamin’s understanding of its application
toward political ends, though in the case of the *Garage Sales Series* it only plays a limited
role in Rosler’s overall performance. The viewers and participants become members of both
the local communities for whom this is a common ritual and the ‘art world’ for whom this is
a novelty and source of perplexed curiosity. Karen Moss writes, “From their inception, the
garage sales have been inclusive, inviting participation by all, not just exclusive, art-aware
audiences, as they debunked the modernist ideology of aesthetic autonomy that artistic value
exists independently from social, economic, and political conditions” (717). This statement reaffirms the role of artist-producer.

Moreover, Rosler’s use of a dedicated art space shifted the consideration of what museums and galleries could potentially house, thereby becoming instrumental in moving art’s narrative into post-modernist ideas. Moss explains,

Early iterations of the sales challenged the boundaries of what could be considered art as they interrogated the value of art, art spaces, and art audiences. In their twenty-first-century versions, the garage sales cannot be extricated from a reality where the trustees of art institutions increasingly overlap with the boards of corporations and financial institutions, and where commerce is omnipresent in arts organizations with cafes, gift shops, and other revenue generators disrupting the aura of the clean, white cube and shrine for culture. (716)

It has become a sign of social achievement in twenty-first century parlance to hold a position on the board of any cultural institution, thus guiding its future and shaping its social conditions. The repetitive, serial nature of the events and the art world’s intriguing demand to repeat the gestures seem to result from an “increasing fascination with shopping,” as described by Rosler. She goes on to explain, “Shopping had seized the imagination of the art world who saw it move right into its center” (Creative Time Summit). Performing the act of exchange within art museums—wherein “the temple walls themselves are made of money” (Creative Time Summit), according to Rosler—highlights economic disparity and its resulting tensions. She adds, “This is part of the regularization of the art, and art-historical item as a commodity form. More broadly, galleries and curators have joined in a concentrated effort to sell social critique. Thus, critique has in many cases become a gesture perhaps more than serious criticism” (Eischen). She observed the division between ‘cash strapped families’ and the upper reaches of art was evident within some of the reactions from both the press and
active participants (*Creative Time Summit*). Notice how Rosler has, in a concrete way, interrupted the space of the ‘danger’ with a potentially ‘saving power.’

At the MoMA event, as with others prior, buyers could sit for a portrait with Rosler and their new-found treasures, memorializing the act of acquisition for future audiences and sales—a simple gesture connecting us back to the compulsion for photographic mementos. Unique to the MoMA event, however, was the creation of a newspaper, *The Garage Sale Standard*, which Rosler used to amplify her message via essays and critiques, all of which made explicit the underlying critiques embedded within the event. (Moss 716) (figure 3.10).

Moss explains,

> These copious texts and programs create a dialectic between the serious/theoretical and the humorous/satirical to reveal different and quite diffuse discourses about garage sales, making the project accessible to members of the public and scholars alike. Through them, Rosler reinforces the ‘high’ and ‘low’ dichotomy of the project and her desire to produce work for multiple publics, including global audiences. (716)
Another significant point of difference in the 2012 NYC event is the fact that MoMA problematized the interaction when introducing a steep entry fee to the project. The audience therefore changed and the performance was affected adversely for its exclusivity. For Rosler, this shifted the audience away from those whose lives the sales embody.

FIGURE 3.9
Martha Rosler
Garage Sales Series
MoMA, New York City.
All of Rosler’s efforts in the *Monumental Garage Sales* lead one to ask to what extent does the message she imparts force a reckoning with our underling beliefs and actions? Her message clearly insists upon addressing the enframing that underpins economic exchange. There is a mirroring of the greater effects of thoughtlessness, whether in the face of consumerist tendencies or contextual violence. Both force an encounter with enframing, though from different angles. For Rosler, the community ritual of garage sales activates questions of value systems and bears the imprints of Marx’s (and the Frankfurt School’s) underlying premise regarding commodities. This preoccupation suggests with Marx that, as she quotes in her speech, the “social character of people appeared to them as stamped upon the object or product of that labor,” thus underscoring the “value that converts every product into a social hieroglyphic” (*Kapital* 167) and the culture industry’s overall push toward the kind of homogeneity consumer fetishism affords. Rosler’s work echoes Marx’s belief that the value of such commodities is an arbitrary construction. In *Das Kapital* Marx expands upon the capricious nature of constructed value:

> By equating their different products to each other in exchange as values, they equate their different kinds of labour as human labour. They do this without being aware of it. Value, therefore, does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyphic. Later on, men try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of their own social product: for the characteristic which objects of utility have of being values is as much men’s social product as is their language. (*Kapital* 167)

Marx recognizes the arbitrary creation of an object’s social value as a consequence of its basis in social exchange. The attribution and acceptance of value is then masked and establishes as a cohesive system that persists without question. The social nature of production and exchange means people are categorized within structures beyond their
immediate control. These structures are the confines from which Benjamin asks the author-producer to seek emancipation from the fascist tendencies perpetuating oppression.

It is within the ethics of action in light of such relations that Rosler takes action. By implicating personal possessions, she reveals explicitly the consumer cycle created by material acquisitions, allowing each item to carry with it a history—the “ghosts of their recent lives.” As we have seen, consumers identify with objects of consumption to establish an inauthentic social persona. And, as we know, this repositioning of goods and their power to define one’s class serves to reinforce restrictive structural norms. As concerns our relationship with commodities, Marx elaborates,

The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men’s own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things. Hence it also reflects the social relation between objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers. (164-165)

In a related vein, Rosler explains that the garage sale work “examines the centrality of the commodity in everyday life” (Creative Time Summit). She questions the roles (or ‘character masks’) we bear in our social relations. Marx observes,

When we leave this sphere of simple circulation or the exchange of commodities, which provides the ‘free-trader vulgaris’ with his views, his concepts and the standard by which he judges the society of capital and wage-labour, a certain change takes place, or so it appears, in the physiognomy of our dramatis personae. He who was previously the money-owner now strides out in front as a capitalist; the possessor of labour-power follows as his worker. The one smirks self-importantly and is intent on business; the other is timid and holds back, like someone who has brought his own hide to market and now has nothing else to expect but—a tanning. (Kapital, vol. 1, 280)

Marx draws his analogy for the creation of personas from theatrical origins, noting changes
that occur in capitalist social exchange and going so far as to attribute shifts in personal characteristics to one’s social class. Just as Benjamin noted a shift in perception in light of mechanically reproduced artworks, Marx is noting a shift in self-perception as one internalizes societal roles.

This shift is implied in each of Rosler’s performative artworks. She is therefore investigating and revealing the commodity fetishism Marx had diagnosed over a century prior and, applying this to contemporary banality’s appropriation of enframing. Rosler states, “I was for a critique that was contiguous with the rest of life” and a “meditation on value, community and friendship” (CT). With her expression of Marx’s ideas concretized within her performative artwork, Rosler extends Heidegger’s understanding of our relationship with the object-world, adding to his thoughts a more disruptive qua revolutionary disposition. In an essay entitled “The Dialectics of Everyday Life: Martha Rosler and the Strategy of the Decoy,” Alexander Alberro explains: “Rosler saw her role as an artist as open, and she sought to produce works ‘able to move consciousness forward, or to move people forward . . . the idea of political action’” (de Zegher 85). The inclination to move ‘people forward,’ or to shed light where necessary, further cements her position as Benjamin’s artist-producer. In the garage sales, her questioning manifests in a succession of well-positioned messages—on tape, blackboards, and video screens. Alberro describes fragments of her strategy:

A tape recorder at mid-installation played a meditation in the first person about the suburbia-cash nexus. In its repeated use of the first-person pronoun “I,” the monologue evoked the notion of the construction of the self as a social actor and spoke of a social process in which economic relations substitute for human relations. (de Zegher 85).

Thus, Rosler creates her own version of a character mask, a persona or role play, whose work
it is to sell items purportedly belonging to her despite, the ‘variance in sizes and sheer quantity of objects.’

This side of her aesthetic action bears specific mention because, in addition to aligning her author-producer ‘tendency’ with the concerns of critical theory, it shows an embodiment of how Benjamin might have configured his authorship emphasis in fuller concert with what had otherwise, in the Reproduction essay, been a stress on ‘product’ at the expense of the possibilities inherent in the species character of man. Rosler initially adopted the role of ‘hippie, cash-strapped single mother,’ acting the part as she undertook the dispossession of her items. Silvia Eiblmayr writes, “Her strategy recalls Brecht’s (Marx influenced) suggestion for a dramaturgy of ‘realism’: ‘Creep inside your man and get comfortable there. . . . Try out his intestinal system and see what his heart can bear. . . . Eat with him, applaud his little thoughts, look outside through his eyes” (de Zegher 155). Physically inserting herself into the very act of exchange within an all-American community ritual embeds Rosler in the center of social structures. From within the very mechanisms of economic exchange, she is able to plant the seeds for revolutionary social change. During a garage sale, Alberro explains, “Typically, every family tries to encapsulate itself into an economic unit and reconvert its assets into cash, in order to be able to continue the cycle of consumption” (de Zegher 81). In essence, objects are sold so that newer ones can simply take their place in the home. Rosler’s ‘tendency’ tackles this cycle of consumption head on, and it confirms for us how the Marxian body of concerns can, in a contemporary context, link with the Heideggerian critique of modern technology’s enframing essence.

Still, we must further consider the motivations that inspire this attempt at a ‘saving power’ in and for man’s ‘species character’, as well as ask whether the intersubjective nature
of her artworks can indeed free us from the consumer industry’s powerful sway. What motivates her tendency in the works also presents their greatest obstacle, for Adorno would remind us that the superstructure’s creation of artificial wants renders leisure time toxic and (in a negative dialectics) perpetuates the culture industry and its need to foster a state of mindlessness among its recipients. The culture industry manufactures and ultimately sells a condition Alain de Botton calls ‘status anxiety,’ which creates increased alienation and a profound loss of authenticity. For Adorno, these effects leave us unable to cut through the jargon to more authentic needs. He states:

Every phenomenon is by now so thoroughly imprinted by the schema that nothing can occur that does not bear in advance the trace of the jargon, that is not seen at first glance to be approved. But the true masters, as both producers and reproducers, are those who speak the jargon with the same free-and-easy relish as if it were the language it has long since silenced. Such is the industry’s ideal of naturalness. It asserts itself more imperiously the more the perfected technology reduces the tension between the culture product and everyday existence. (Horkheimer and Adorno, DofE, 101)

For Adorno, there is underfoot a purposeful transformation of the culture industry, which does not differentiate between authenticity and the systematized dominance exerted by capitalist forces. The result is the sameness and uniformity that eradicates individual thinking and replaces human needs with manufactured consumer goods. Perhaps one is tempted to argue that MoMA’s profitable conscription of the Garage Sales confirms the point and reasserts the ‘dangerous’ power. But the fingerprints of negative dialectic do not belie the emancipatory power of Rosler’s aesthetic. Her work precisely shows the capacity of art to interrupt this state of affairs, prying us away from the cycle of alleged needs-wants-needs by way of materially embodying this cycle’s absurdity and distancing effect in her performative
‘character masks’ and sales events. Status ‘anxiety’ and systemic ‘naturalness’ are breached by an offering of the kind of critical examination asserted by Heidegger, Arendt, et al. Rosler’s work is evidence of this thought production and its political potential, particularly as the *Garage Sales* place our attention on the very site of exchange and its revealing characteristics. Indeed, we must view her work through this lens of a call-to-questioning/thinking lest we fail to understand her political and ethical motivations and their impact. Says Karen Moss, “Ultimately, the *Monumental Garage Sale* is a destabilized pseudo-portrait of suburban life and of the artist’s own subjectivity that also represents and creates metaphors for economic, social, and psychological conditions” (696). As we have seen, the sales become sites of social and economic exchange, bearing the traces of Marxist ideas and a Benjaminian hope for artists to balance quality and tendency as they reach outward in order to emancipate a lower-class citizenry.

Rosler thus turns institutions into sites of social critique, transforming the structures of cultural control into revolutionary centers for dialogic expression. She shifts cultural structures to atmospheric dispositions resembling, metaphorically speaking, Sloterdijk’s notion of ‘air.’ As such, one might say, she is assisting with their ethical rehabilitation by breathing the air of violence and consumerism, yet converting it to an atmosphere of freedom.

§ 3.6: CONCLUSION

This chapter has sought to illuminate the context, thematic practice, and the functions underpinning Rosler’s production. We explored the broader global climate surrounding her lifetime, including the generalized acceptance of *atmo-terrorism*, as Sloterdijk explained. We
then established Rosler as an artist-producer, in line with Benjamin’s elaboration of an author, who aims to advance revolutionary cause. We looked at the operations inherent in reproductions, noting the structures that impart meaning for the good and bad, then undertook a closer reading of Rosler’s collages in order to appreciate their full dialogic effect. Finally, we added the performativity of Rosler’s *Garage Sales series* to shed light on further ways she addresses current societal issues. A number of thematic movements have become visible as a result of this investigation, and we have seen how the concept of estrangement and commodity fetishism became central to Rosler’s life’s work. While speaking with Michael Rush in a *New York Times* interview, Rosler explained, “My art is a communicative act, a form of an utterance, a way to open conversation” (*NYT*). Perhaps conversation might appear, at first blush, to fall short of the revolutionary political aspirations Benjamin sets forth in the *Artwork* essay and “Author as Producer.” And yet, human conversation is a staple of any oral tradition; it renders thoughts concrete for social exchange. In Benjamin Buchloh’s words, Rosler’s work “was not didactic and impositional” but “dialogic and activating” (Moss 718). Political intercourse must begin, at its very inception, with opening discourse. Rosler provides us with ample opportunity to exchange ideas, adding the voices of her audiences to the conversation.

We have seen how Rosler carefully crafted composited scenes and performances in order to shift meaning and hold her viewer accountable for both self-reflection and critical awareness of his surrounding world. In her photomontages her boldest achievement rests in confronting us with the *other*, whose life is forever altered by atrocities to which we are only indirectly a witness. From this *other*, we are returned to ourselves—interrupted from our *distracted* and absorbed point of view. Sontag asks, “Who caused what the picture shows?
Who is responsible? Is it excusable? Was it inevitable? Is there some state of affairs, which we have accepted up to now, that ought to be challenged? All this, with the understanding that moral indignation, like compassion, cannot dictate a course of action” (RPO 117). Viewed in this light, Rosler’s photomontage work is, effectively, a redressing of myth. And yet, her work can only hope to motivate sustained action on the part of her viewer. Combing through the events and memories that have shaped each frame allows a more honest appraisal of their implications. Her subject matter sounds again for us the notion of being entangled in the world and its enframing myths and reaffirms that truth lies between what is known and what one brings to bear to any given situation. The artworks – as an aesthetics of action – thus enhance the philosophical ideas under consideration. In her performances, including the Garage Sales Series, Rosler participated in a new means of disseminating ideas, blurring the divisions between autonomous artworks and theatrical performances at a time when consideration for artworks remained relatively limited to Greenbergian preoccupation with form and material.

The introduction of a new platform from which artists can build ideas, implicating its audience as participants in the exchange, heralded a new form of installation art—a medium we will look at in more depth in the next chapter. While her work existed concurrently with other artists whose projects pushed the edges of performance, namely Joseph Beuys, Yves Klein, Carolee Schneemann, et al, the Garage Sales Series activated the audience in its engagement and political critique. Overall her work amplified the capacity for art to engender thought and action by forcing us to look upon ourselves, thus extending Benjamin’s implied provocation to self-examination despite his having fallen short of defining how such knowledge might be achieved. With Barthes in mind, we also saw how Rosler shows us how
artworks are able to maneuver multiple levels of meaning, from her role as author qua artist-producer, to imploding myths. She forces a profound questioning of one’s position vis-à-vis our experience, while simultaneously asserting a strong cultural critique.

I have not meant to suggest that Rosler’s efforts are a means for idealistically overturning the reality of technology’s hold on our being-in-the-world. But the profound ‘interruption’ levied by her aesthetic action highlights and equips the fundamental ability to think in the face of this presence. If we are to shift the course of our current climate, we must, in Heidegger’s words, “be ready to learn thinking” and “[w]e learn to think by giving heed to what there is to think about” (Krell 369-370). This is not to conceive of a world without technology. Rather, it is to think beyond the barriers that reduce human beings to standing reserves. In the blending of philosophical ideas and the production of work, Rosler embraces thinking as a moral, revolutionary praxis. As Sontag noted, “The nature of moral judgments depends on our capacity for paying attention—a capacity that, inevitably, has its limits but whose limits can be stretched” (AST 226). Rosler’s work offers a ‘stretching’ by virtue of being a visual illustration of Arendt’s thoughts regarding how evil operates in seemingly ordinary circumstances. In addition, Rosler clarifies the ambiguities of Benjamin’s exploration of the technologically driven work of art by demonstrating both the positive and negative implications of this medium. Somehow, despite the low-fi reproduction of the early series and its outlets, her work has retained the status of a work of art, displayed in collections around the world. She bridges the roles played by artists (in the traditional understanding of the term) and Benjamin’s concept of author-producer as a reflection of the tendency necessary to move ideas forward. In the collision of disparate imagery and the reconfiguration of ideological messages, she arrests our attention and fosters a deeply felt
experience. Heidegger tells us, “To experience something, whether a thing, a human, or a god, means that something befalls us, strikes us, comes over us, overwhelms and transforms us” (OWL 57). In transformation we are returned to thinking as a moral act, inspired by our creative imaginations and creative production. In such a scenario, Rosler’s work answers the call.
CHAPTER 4:

FASHIONING TRUTH FROM FICTION AND MEMORY:
THE ESSENCE OF TRUTH INTERPRETED THROUGH THE WORK OF BOLTANSKI + WODICZKO

What is philosophy if not a way of reflecting, not so much on what is true and what is false, as on our relationship to truth? . . . . The movement by which, not without effort and uncertainty, dreams and illusions, one detaches oneself from what is accepted as true and seeks other rules—that is philosophy.

MICHEL FOUCAULT

§ 4.1: INTRODUCTION

As we have seen, Martha Rosler’s work taps deeply into the collective lived experience of objects and significations. Not only does she insist on her viewer’s full engagement, but she re-presents objects of consumption and re-activates the cycle of signification such items embody. As Rosler explains, “The garage sales were part of that impulse to take the clothing of ‘just yesterday,’ with the ghosts of people still in them, and to denaturalize them in some way so that they told a social story rather than an individual [one]” (de Zegher 47). These ‘ghosts’ are critical to the alteration of meaning she seeks to create as a point of access to our collective understanding and memory. Her use of personal effects in her Garage Sales Series literally superimposes the past onto the present, creating a palimpsest, while the audience simultaneously adds its collective voice to the narrative. In addition, though not explicitly, her audience can glimpse moments of an autobiographical
tale meted out through small encounters with her intimate past. Rosler invites her audience to participate and contemplate without imposing herself in any way other than in the suggestion of a query; ‘dialogically rather than didactically.’ Clothing, objects, and collective participation manifest a powerful call to remember or contemplate conditions of existence. This particular intersubjective exchange, driven by the “ghosts of people” at its core, remains of paramount importance as we prepare for the work of the present chapter, in which notions of memory, interaction, finitude and truth will emerge.

Rosler’s work poses questions, however, that require us to clarify collective participation and the memories objects invoke. Both archives and sites must be carefully considered as mediums in which truth can be revealed. In addition, the democratization of artworks needs further explication as we seek to understand the potential for emancipation through the realm of art. Building from Rosler’s use of personal artifacts, we must ask to what extent does such a practice manifest an *alēthiac unconcealment*? In addition, we need to explore the ethical role of such an exchange. To this end, we must also investigate the ways memory participates in the creation of collective and collaborative truths.

This chapter is a meditation on the possibility for a manufactured, collective notion of truth, embodied in and communicated through disparate, unrelated objects, images, sites and signs. It will also afford a closer look at memory and narrative as necessary means of catharsis for the artist, the subject and the audience alike. We will do so by examining specific examples from two installation artists practicing today. We will begin with French artist Christian Boltanski, whose gatherings of disconnected artifacts and materials exemplify art’s ability to tap into our common consciousness and thereby create a holistic understanding of our relationship with truth, particularly that which resides within our inter-
subjective being. The second artist, Polish born Krzysztof Wodiczko, heightens inter-subjectivity and the polyphonic through carefully mediated architectural projections, literally igniting public spaces with memories and a call to awareness. As we will see in the latter portion of this chapter, Wodiczko’s interventions cut through layers of noise to deliver clear, honest appraisals of events and memories—a positive cathartic exercise that often shifts perspectives and engenders change. The thread that binds both artists is a mutual quest for truth through a probing of past and present, a probing that ushers their works into broader consciousness to reveal much about the human need to re-member and consider the past, near or distant—not to dwell in its murkiness, but rather to move forward somewhat altered by the exchange. Importantly, both artists’ works are embedded in advancing technologies, while simultaneously asking us to step back from the ‘challenging-forth’ and ‘enframing’ effects—in essence, revealing a Heideggerian salvation within the danger. Relatedly, both use technology to return Dasein to its questioning disposition, bringing about moments of truth in *alētheia*.

We will investigate how it is possible for an artist to access collective awareness and create a response from staged objects, images and public spaces, and speak to the essence of truth that is embedded within historical, collective memory. Through an analysis of both Boltanski and Wodiczko’s installations, this chapter will demonstrate that immanent truth is accessible on a deeper, Heideggerian level through a careful combination of archives and artifacts, despite the lack of strictly representational connection with material reality or correspondence theories of truth. Boltanski and Wodiczko, unburdened by the imperative of ‘fact,’ produce aesthetic events of *alētheia* that are accessible to their publics in a way that allows the work-character of the works to become more pure, essential and collective. The
works offer an opening that is uncontaminated, necessary and borne in shared historical and cultural experience. Boltanski’s management of truth is loose and interpretive, while Wodiczko works more closely from recall and perspective. Wodiczko, whose focus dwells in more recent political events, marks public spaces with the voices of victims, transcribing memories onto places of cultural significance and meaning.

In support of these claims, I will build on prior chapters while continuing to examine ideas from a small selection of philosophical writings. As a foundation, Martin Heidegger’s *On the Essence of Truth* and *Origins of the Work of Art*, most notably his hermeneutic exploration of the Greek term *alētheia* (as we saw in chapter 1) and, now more clearly, the relation of truth to *freedom*. These points of references will help us see a circular operation of ‘parts’ and ‘wholes’ within the elements of Boltanski and Wodiczko’s works. This operation is imparted through the artists’ complex installations in a way that accentuates how truth’s revelatory character involves a drawing out of oneself ‘beyond’ the self. As a reminder, Heidegger shifts away from both a correspondence model of ‘factual’ truth as well as a metaphysically ‘transcendent’ conception of the essence of truth and being; bracketing both, he moves to a more robust, unfolding finite disposition of truth and Dasein. The aesthetic event of such bracketing importantly involves, we will see, the pivotal way in which in the case of these works, time, narrative and the responsibility for the ‘other’ relate to collective memory as a unifying device. I will analyze the notion of *postmemory* as posited by Marianne Hirsch, noting the capacity for memory to bleed forward through time, producing a transhistorical narrative and shifting artistic production into a place where memory is both experiential and transferred. Memory takes on a fluid, permeable narrative quality that inspires interactions and thoughts. As with Rosler’s use of home goods as triggers for
personal stories to emerge, the intersubjective meaning of memories will play an important role in our interpretation of our remaining artists, both here and in chapter 5.

To link together and extend the *alēthiac* and the postmemory, we will consider the hermeneutic philosophy of Hans Georg Gadamer, who in *The Relevance of the Beautiful* speaks to the inherent power and responsibility of the work of art as a vehicle for imparting meaning and altering perception. Paul Ricoeur’s “Life in Quest of Narrative” and “A New Ethos for Europe,” and Emmanuel Lévinas’ *Totality and Infinity* and *Entre Nous* will help speak to the role of the *other* in artistic production. Michel Foucault’s *Archeology of Knowledge* and *Fearless Speech* will shed crucial light on the intrinsic power of both Wodiczko and Boltanski’s collected materials as archives of our past and thus carriers of meaning in their own right. Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever*, a text highlighting the slippage occurring in the very act of collecting documents for archival purposes, echoes Foucault’s preoccupations while looking at the interstice of absence. Additional voices such as Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, Marcel Proust, Sigmund Freud, John Sallis and others will further specify how history and memory operate as vehicles of truth and ongoing narrative. The sum of these ideas will reveal the complex and powerful experience of participating within both Boltanski and Wodiczko’s works and the meaning they evoke, while continuing to press forth Heidegger’s plea for an ethics of thinking through the realm of art.

§ 4.2: THE SPACE OF TRUTH AND MEMORY

First, we must define some key terms and the conceptual work they perform. The most significant of the concepts are: *essence, truth* and *alētheia*, the *collective, archive, memory* as well as *post-memory* (distinguishing between constructed histories and the
transference of the past, including encountered signs), and necessarily *intermedial* or *installation* art. The sharpened focus on memory fills in perceived gaps in Heidegger’s consideration of truth and underscores common experience as a motivator of ethical responsibility.

*A. The Work of Truth*

At the basis of our analysis is the idea of truth as originary—as an open, unfettered examination of what essence *is* in its mode of ever-unfolding. We broached this matter in chapter 1’s discussion of Heidegger’s *Technology* essay, citing his rejection of the notion of *essence* conceived as a given, fully present and objective thing, and his embrace of truth’s immanent becoming. We saw how this turn is found first on the level of our engagement with ontic entities. It bears repeating Heidegger’s notion, “[T]o let be—that is, to let beings be as the beings which they are—means to engage oneself with the open region and its openness into which every being comes to stand, bringing that openness, as it were, along with itself” (Krell 125). Similar language occurs in the “Origins of the Work of Art”: “The artwork opens up in its own way the Being of beings. This opening up, i.e., this disconcealing, i.e., the truth of beings, happens in the work. In the art work, the truth of what is has set itself to work. Art is truth setting itself to work” (Krell 261). The language is challenging, and we will shortly return to this important extension by which, according to John Sallis, “Heidegger marks a departure from the metaphysical thinking of the past, relegating it to the past, while advancing art’s future promise of un-concealment . . . of flourishing in its ability to reveal truth” (Sallis *Trans.* 156). The first point to note is that it is within the reveal—the unconcealment of truth—that its essence resides; truth’s essence is not
reducible to calculability and certitude. As well, truth moves with an adherence to ontological mysteries in the makeup of self and world, but not mysteries to be handled or resolved according to the long-standing dichotomy between the realms of the ‘sensible’ and ‘intelligible.’ Says Sallis:

> Truth and sense are precisely the terms that, in their metaphysical guise, could never quite be matched, and it is that impossibility that proved to constitute the limit of artistic presentation and that led Hegel—except in those remarkable moments of reversal—to declare the pastness of art. Undoing this bind requires the most radical rethinking of truth and sense, of the truth that obtains existence for itself in the artwork and of the sensible as it is there in the work. (Trans 171)

Before turning to the artistic opening, we need to appreciate this preparatory point about the ‘rethinking of truth and sense,’ for Boltanski as ‘artist-philosopher’ will enact the same ‘undoing.’ In a quasi-Nietzschean move, Heidegger’s unification of truth and sense combine the whole of life’s processes while pushing for full integration of sense and body, thought and environment, etc. However, Heidegger moves beyond Nietzsche’s focus on sense as superior to mind, asserting a more holistic belonging of all parts to a greater, unfinalizable, whole. Sallis explores this rift: “Such is, then, for Heidegger [. . .] the direction in which genuine overcoming of aesthetics would be required to move: it would be imperative to attend to the ascent beyond (outside) oneself, in contrast to a feeling turned back upon oneself, ordering and empowering oneself” (Trans 168). We must hear in this shift away from the strictly autonomous self of ‘consciousness’ to a greater composition of world and earth in which Beings dwell, and there from the epistemic to the aesthetic in a reconfigured way. A decisive implication of this connects matters of aesthetics, epistemology, ontology, and subjectivity: “Heidegger’s interpretation thus moves in a direction that would take the
beautiful to designate the way in which being as such shines forth in the midst of the sensible, the way in which it shines forth to us in our immersion in the sensible, bodily domain so as to draw us beyond (and beyond ourselves)” (168).

Notice how his shifts in aesthetic beauty and pleasure earmark the reconfiguration of subjectivity and truth. One specific implication is found in a written exchange with Rudolf Krämer-Badoni. Heidegger states: “The entire treatise [in the Origins of the Work of Art] opposes the interpretation of art in terms of ‘mere enjoyment of art’ [blosser Kunstgenuss]. Thus ‘beauty’ is not thought in terms of enjoyment [Gefallen], but rather as a way of shining. . . , i.e., of truth” (Heidegger qtd. in Sallis 163). The phenomenon of ‘shining’ is the artistic specification of the disclosedness side of alētheia. Heidegger is contradicting Kant’s stress on the delight (or pleasure) one feels through beauty in art and nature, and also bringing the aesthetic experience down from Hegel’s lofty understanding of Geist. The result is an alethiac ‘illumination’ – one we will see translated in something as discrete as Boltanski’s appropriation of bare bulbs to directly illuminate his subjects. But first, here we must be careful not to think alētheia as truth in any ‘absolute’ sense. Rather, as a ‘way’ and ‘event’, it points to the open space of questioning that allows a fluid encounter with truth as essence of Being; art – extracted from its consignment to the mere ‘sensible’ side of experience – materializes this operation while simultaneously catalyzing greater questioning. Thinking truth strictly on the basis of verifiable judgments, and thinking beauty on the basis of formal pleasure or the concretization of Spirit alike fail to honor the deeper makeup of essence; they enframe essence’s purity. When Heidegger says, “Truth signifies sheltering that clears [lichtendes Bergen] as the basic characteristic of Being . . . [T]he question of the essence of truth finds its answer in the proposition _the essence of truth is the truth of_
“essence” (Krell 137), he means that truth and essence are not definitional matters, nor pure ideas in the transcendent sense, but events of openness, exposure, and freedom. We need to be clear on this conceptual subtlety or else we will misunderstand how the reconfiguration of truth and subjectivity is, as our artists will show, an aesthetic phenomenon. Sallis explains:

Setting truth into the artwork, setting it to work in the work so that it happens there—and only in such a setting—as truth, will not be a matter of setting something intelligible into a work that, simply by virtue of its sensible character, cannot measure up to that truth. The truth that, in Hegel’s phrase, obtains existence for itself in the artwork, will be a truth that—to reverse what Hegel says of postclassical art—is so akin and friendly to sense as to be capable of being sensibly presented. (*Trans* 157).

We need to hear how this formulation of ‘setting truth to work in the work’ marks the convergence of the essence of truth with the materialization of a ‘beyond’ space in artworks. Heidegger indeed thinks this very convergence on aesthetic grounds. As the phenomenon of truth then shows itself to be irreducible to an intelligible-sensible binary, it also shows a ‘setting to work’ of a distinctly non-formalist illuminative (literally ‘light-laden’) opening, or *Lichtung*. The opening provides the space for thought. But we must not mistake the relationship between the open space of truth and the open work of art as a ‘full’ illumination or ‘finished’ *topos* of freedom. In a very late seminar of the 1960s Heidegger clarifies the relationship between *alētheia* and *Lichtung*:

What is cleared is the free, the open. At the same time, what is cleared is what conceals itself. We may not understand the clearing from out of light; rather, we must understand it from the Greeks. Light and fire can first find their place only in the clearing. In the essay, ‘On the Essence of Truth,’ where I speak of ‘freedom,’ I have the clearing in view [. . .] Our concern is to experience unconcealment as clearing. That is what is unthought in what is thought in the whole history of thought.” (*HS* 161-62)
The passage says two things that are important for our interpretation of artworks. First, the ‘clearing’ in the open space that is truth is not a light that the ‘light of reason’ explains, but an event of light and shadow. Second, though the event is ‘essential’ in the sense of being intrinsic to truth, we must still work to ‘experience’ it. Truth’s very nature is to advance and retreat, reveal and conceal, but the kind of ‘light’ that persists in this dynamic is real ‘in’ its finitude. In fact, the lighting-effect of alētheia is at once the experiential essence of truth and freedom alike. But again, and crucial to the setting-to-work that we want to understand and experience in Boltanski and Wodiczko’s works, the dynamics of the ‘open’ and the dynamics of ‘thinking’ are of the same character and event. Unconcealment is an event of ‘letting-be’ on the side of truth that asks for and equips a letting-be (in the sense of yielding) on the side of thinking. How ‘freedom’ operates in these dynamics must, therefore, be something that is before and beyond an individualistic property of sheer volition; to think freedom as ‘letting’ is, our artworks will show, a matter concretized in the way bringing-forth, as an aesthetic and collective practice, ruptures the enframing character of challenging-forth.

B. The Archive as Record of Common Experience

How do these conceptions of truth and freedom connect with our ethical responsibility? Heidegger is focused on the opening of a world and the being-with of human dwelling (see chapter 1’s discussion of Mitsein). But to more fully appreciate and approach the matter of ethical responsibility as something ‘set to work’ in our artworks we need to turn to Lévinas, who observes, for example, that “I cannot disentangle myself from society with the Other, even when I consider the Being of the existent he is” (Totality 47).
With this statement, the notion of community and collectivity are more sharply introduced into the conversation regarding essences. Community infers a shared history and place, a bonding among beings resulting from the interdependency of our temporal and finite existence. Ricoeur and Derrida, as we will see, nuance the dynamics of this shared experience and the consequences of our coexistence in texts such as “Life in the Quest of Narrative” and Of Hospitality. Furthermore, both Derrida and Foucault support the theme of ethical responsibility and provide a bridge to our issue of collective memory by addressing the archive as a collection of gathered evidence that connects past to present through its role in the re-presentation of history. Indeed, as Hirsch tells us, “Archival practices invariably rely on documents, objects, and images that survive the ravages of time and the destruction wrought by violent histories” (247). The archive, however, can only be fully understood through a historical perspective that binds us to a shared past and substantiates memory. As Foucault states, “[The archive] is the border of time that surrounds our presence, which overhangs it, and which indicates it in its otherness; it is that which, outside ourselves, delimits us” (130). Understood thus, archives form the parameters of our existence, re-presenting the past and shaping our identity. Foucault primarily critiqued archives as “a set of hegemonic rules that determine how a culture selects, orders, and preserves the past” (Hirsch 227). Art historian Hal Foster likewise speaks of “an archival impulse,” a practice particularly active during the 1990s, and describes its import in the art world. Foster asserts, “archival artists seek to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present. To this end they elaborate on the found image, object, and text, and favor the installation format as they do so” (4). Archives, thereby, become a medium of expression in and of themselves, deployed by artists and
philosophers as invitations to contemplation and interaction from the percipient. To think this possibility, we will need to see how Derrida approaches the interstitial space of absence, as represented by acts of omission occurring in the process of gathering documents and ephemera. The archive reveals editing decisions which alter future impressions of past events, and the very act of collecting information represents a defining feature underpinning the need to gather memories. His ideas touch on notions of power, selection, editing and control of documents, and he shows that the archive is also a record of its missing components — thus creating ghosts of the past in the fact of their omission. Archive, for Derrida, encompasses more than just a collection of documents. As with much of his other writing, the term is inclusive of a broader understanding, thus transforming it into “a psychic archive distinct from spontaneous memory” (Derrida AF 19). Indeed, absence, whether intentional or not, shifts remembrance and impacts future patterns of thought. This complicates how events are both understood and transmitted generationally, especially in remembrances of trauma or war. These phenomena of omission and transformation of course relate in broader terms to how shared consciousness is born in the way recollections of our histories move into our present. Here, with the help of Hans Georg Gadamer, we will see that collective memory and community literally bridge the past to the present and find (through this communion) their simultaneous manifestation in the festival, a “deliberate gathering that bonds humans through common purpose” (9).

The previous chapter showed how archives or reproduced images are reconfigured to access more essential truths. Rosler’s *House Beautiful* series is an illustration of this appropriation of archives as purveyors of thought. We will now see that Boltanski’s work is the “limit case” for any internalization of the past, or of traumatic events is the holocaust
with its magnitude and challenges to language. Recalling Adorno, “There can be no poetry after Auschwitz.” As noted in chapter 2, Henryk Ross’s buried photographic documentation of Lodz Ghetto has garnered recent attention and achieved museum status\textsuperscript{3} with multiple concurrent exhibitions that celebrate their importance as both artworks and durable carriers of the past. The ongoing preoccupation with images as evidence underscores both an appreciation of his efforts as a chronicler of the atrocities against the Jews and our need for verification.

\textit{C. Memory as Mediator of Common Experience}

A few further remarks need to be said about the concepts within the term ‘memory’ — the fluid and sensory activity of the mind that allows human beings to look back at events with selective attention to significant details and information. As stated above, archives help substantiate memory by keeping alive the sensory inscriptions of the past, regardless of how distant, as traces of \textit{what has been}. Sontag likewise addresses images as \textit{memento mori}—reflecting the attachment photographs have with memories, while also acknowledging the moment as a death. In many ways, memories define us, shaping our mind’s instrument of reflection and projection. Memoirs, artifacts, and chronicles of events passed down from generation to generation all color our collective understanding of our past. Archives and artifacts act as “points of memory,” a term Marianne Hirsch uses as she unpacks old photographs embedded with unspoken meaning. She speaks of “points of intersection between past and present, memory and post-memory, personal remembrance and cultural recall” (61). She explains, “It is this presence of embodied and affective experience in the process of transmission that is best described by the notion of memory as
opposed to history. Memory signals an affective link to the past—a sense, precisely, of a material ‘living connection’—and it is powerfully mediated by technologies like literature, photography and testimony” (Hirsch 33). In a way, the phenomenon of memory is like a specification of the event of truth’s essential opening/clearing, but one that is as vulnerable in its play of disclosure and withdrawal as it is powerful in its formation of self and community.

Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* is an iconic example of one man’s sensory journey to his childhood in what has been a timeless coming to terms with one’s personal history. Proust believed memories are made indelible only through immediate encounters: “The truths which intelligence grasps directly in the open light of day have something less profound, less necessary about them than those which life has communicated to us in spite of ourselves in an impression, a material impression because it has reached us through our senses” (Proust qtd. in Bennett 7). Benjamin similarly reflects: “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. ‘The truth will not run away from us’ . . . . For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably” (IL 255). Memory underpins collective consciousness as it keep us connected with the past and, however painful at times, to events that have altered our existence. For this reason, the importance of memory for this chapter and the project as a whole cannot be overstated. We will approach it from the vantage points of the individual and the larger social community and will explore its transference from one generation to the next, collapsing time and enhancing a trans-historical narrative. Though Heidegger does not fold the phenomenon of memory within his network of essences
(Dasein, truth, art, freedom), he does speak of memory as a “gathering of thought upon what everywhere demands to be thought about first of all” (Krell 376). He values memory as “the Mother of the Muses” and explains “this is why poesy is the water that at times flows backward toward the source, toward thinking as a thinking back, a recollection” (Krell 376). Note this term ‘poesy’ echoes the ‘poetic’ essence, for Heidegger, of art, and springs from the root term, poēisis. Memories are woven together in formation of personal narratives, where such formation shares the same sense of unfolding’ as we found in Heidegger’s assemblage of ‘essences.’ They are used as testimonials that shape human behavior, binding us in a common experience. In both Boltanski’s and Wodiczko’s artworks, memory is the primary vehicle of transmission, allowing us access to meaning and thought. Through collective memory, both artists bridge the gap between creative impulses and the broader community of viewers with whom their work resonates, thereby tapping into the reservoir of collective truth.

D. Memory as Theater of Translation

Applying this point to what we explored at the outset of this section, one must wonder how memory gathers its thoughts and thinks back? What is its inherent potential to enhance alētheia qua truth, and how might it also elide the constraints of the sensible-intelligible dichotomy? In the introduction to Illuminations, Arendt emphasizes Benjamin’s interest in history as details of one’s particularly subjective memory. In “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Benjamin states, “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’ (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger” (IL 255). His Berlin Childhood around 1900 is a
beautiful example of such remembrance and reconstruction. Benjamin writes, in a letter to Gershom Scholem, “These childhood memories . . . are not narratives in the form of a chronicle but . . . individual expeditions into the depths of memory” (BC xii). Regarding this backwards glance, Arendt notes,

> When Adorno criticized Benjamin’s ‘wide-eyed presentation of actualities’ (Briefe II, 793), he hit the nail right on its head; this is precisely what Benjamin was doing and wanted to do. Strongly influenced by surrealism, it was the ‘attempt to capture the portrait of history in the most insignificant representation of reality, its scraps, as it were.’ (Briefe II, 685) (IL 11)

Benjamin is collecting the details of his environs, citing the *Flaneur* as best able to appreciate and understand his epoch, and in a way looking for the saving power within the danger. His *Arcades Project*, much like Proust’s *Remembrances*, are a chronicle of the tiny details that narrate history, much like an archive of sensations and impressions that lends the reader a particular lens through which to look.

While there is a distinct separation between memories and history, the two are intertwined. Benjamin’s *Angel of History* is a fitting illustration of this intrinsic connection (figure 4.1). In his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Benjamin writes,

> A Klee painting named ‘Angelus Novus’ shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to say, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (IL 257-258)
If Benjamin’s *Angel of History* is a representation of the human inclination to look back in time, to ponder events even as they accrue, its influence on memory as the process of translation or assimilation is strong. Even the Angel is powerless in affecting any change to the past and frozen, with his back to the future, as progress devours humanity. That said, Benjamin believes in such an exercise, of turning one’s glance arrears, in order to foretell the future, and we will see this practice in the works of both Boltanski and Wodiczko. In a passage from his 1932 *Berlin Chronicle*, he explains, “Memory is not an instrument for surveying the past but its theater.” Notice how this ‘theater’ echoes Heidegger’s sense of the ‘open.’ He continues: “It is the medium of past experience [Medium des Erlebten], just as the earth is the medium in which dead cities lie buried. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging” (BC xii). For Sigmund Freud, digging yields relief from neuroses (hysteria). Dreams liaise with past experiences. By probing the images of the mind, ones conjured in the ‘dream-work’ of sleep, Freud believes one finds emancipation from trauma. Benjamin’s perspective is similar, for “What is unearthed in the operations of remembrance, as it delves to ‘ever-deeper layers’ of the past, is a treasure-trove of images” (BC xii). The work undertaken “reveals the palimpsest character of memory” (BC xii). This character underscores Freud’s notion of the visual nature of our dreams and their underlying narratives of self-understanding: “Benjamin’s conception is similar to that of Freud, who holds that past traumas enslave individuals, and argues, in a different register than Benjamin, that working through the source of trauma can free individuals from past blockages and suffering” (Kellner footnote 33). *Berlin Childhood* is composed of delicate visual impressions of a distant past, though its characteristics linger in Benjamin’s encounters. It foretells the ways Boltanski and Wodiczko approach the work of memory in
relation to trauma and emancipation. As though mimicking Heidegger’s open space, or *Lichtung*, in which thinking unfolds, memories appear, analogous to revelations of thoughts, tied to the past and to the narrative (or ‘poesy’) defining one’s lived experience. Perhaps we may likewise say that memory can function as a ‘setting-to-work’ in the aesthetic sense of ‘letting-be.’

In his markedly positive view of memory’s agency, Marcuse observes, “Its truth value lies in the specific function of memory to preserve promises and potentialities which
are betrayed and even outlawed by the mature, civilized individual, but which had once been fulfilled in the dim past and which are never entirely forgotten” (EC 18-19, Kellner 32). The view that memory can encapsulate positive events means, for Marcuse, that memories transact intersubjective bonds. In a footnote, Kellner suggests, “A dialectical conception of memory merging Marcuse and Benjamin might argue that both remembrances of past joys and happiness and suffering and oppression could motivate construction of a better future if oriented toward changing rather than just remembering the world” (33). This suggestion recalls Benjamin’s understanding of the “Author as Producer” and the agency inherent in his life’s work. Surely orienting one’s endeavors toward change turns the angel of history’s glance forward. How this alteration of history’s course is achieved remains central to this investigation.

E. The Open Work of Intermedial Art

Proceeding with the terminological concepts grounding this chapter, it is interesting that what we now call installation art was more often referred to as intermedial work when it appeared in the mid-twentieth century. Intermedial infers a “coming between two things in time, place or character; to intermediate” (Oxford). Displacing autonomous artworks to a more temporal, intersubjective space requires a forward-thinking approach to creative expression. Intermedial can also signify an interception or mediation between human beings that brings forth an intersubjective, theatrical space. Its reception and critique were not always favorable. We noted, in response to Rosler’s Garage Sales, contentious conversations with Marcuse that centered on the appropriateness of such undertakings in light of
formalism’s rule within the greater art markets. Clement Greenberg also registered an influential complaint, as summarized by Juliane Rebentisch in *Aesthetics of Installation Art*:

> To Clement Greenberg’s mind, such art constitutes the dregs, as it were, of a progressive democratization of culture that has been taking place since the mid-nineteenth century, threatening both the ‘levels of aesthetic quality’ with the social rise of a semi-educated middle class and the loss of the authorities that establish and preserve values. Accordingly, in 1981[. . .] he writes: ‘What’s ominous is that the decline of taste now, for the first time, threatens to overtake art itself. I see intermedia and the permissiveness that goes with it as symptoms of this.’ (Rebentisch 79).

The decline of taste, degrading the aesthetic quality of artworks, and a democratization of culture, for Greenberg, were unacceptable formulations in the consideration of an artwork’s inherent constitution. Recall that to Marcuse’s mind, the *Garage Sales* were too much a repetition of what actually is and failed to meet his criterion that “All authentic art [. . .] aim at ‘the negation of unfreedom’” and express “a demand for liberation” (Kellner 34). But the medium of intermedial art began to flourish and Boltanski and Wodiczko emerged from a burgeoning tradition. Their ability to overcome cultural barriers and affect large numbers of viewers are testimony to the impact such artworks can have.

How might installations function as emancipatory vehicles? Can the immersion in an artist’s materialized thoughts shift thinking? Intermedial artworks have the capacity to connect with viewers in ways inaccessible to their autonomous counterparts. The potential for truth to reveal itself through the memories and thoughts articulated in performance (or theatrical ideas) renders the work more discursive and invites an open-ended thinking that is otherwise difficult to attain. Installations have the ability to bring agency to the concepts we have just investigated: essence, truth, freedom, the collective, archives and memory. Of
course, installations can also act with ‘tendency.’ Rosler’s *Garage Sales* did so with consumerism and the culture industry. Installations are also vehicles for polyphonic exchange, to borrow a term from Mikhail Bakhtin, in which a dialog is driven by multiple, equal voices. For the purpose of this chapter we will concentrate especially on truth and freedom as emanating from the works of Boltanski and Wodiczko.

§ 4.3: CHRISTIAN BOLTANSKI: CONTEXT, MEMORY AND THE WORK OF ART

Heidegger’s understanding of the truth-art relation indicates the need for an unfettered, open space for thought. We have documented how he extends the specific openness of this space to ‘freedom’ understood as a practice of ‘letting-be’ that (a) engages with the play of concealment and disclosedness, and (b) rejects the tendency to think reductively about what is before us, as though its presence were given in pure total form. If the essence of truth is ‘set to work’ in the poetic essence of artworks, then let us consider what may obtain when the specific subject-matter and aesthetic topography of given works set-to-work the essence of *memory*. The common thread resides in art as an expression of freedom in the mode of an open engagement with ourselves and others. This tripartite event of essences – truth, art, memory – can yield an *ethical* awakening.

The aim of this section is to document the connections between lived experience, its memories, and the communion of shared understanding as embedded within Boltanski’s installations. I will first trace these connections through his biographical narrative, the always-lingering recollections of the Shoah and the common ground of human relationships as experienced through his work. We will then examine how the sensibilities manifest in his work allow the viewer relives an ethical obligation to the other while
viscerally feeling the haunting of the past. Within this affect, more specifically, is Boltanski’s use of “daily items as main creative elements to construct an archive of humanity” (emphasis added, “Storage Memory”). These sensibilities, already opposed to reductivist thinking, nurture a meditative opening, a cathartic release of trauma, and a move beyond subjectivity to the ‘letting’ of a broader ethical responsibility. Clearly, the unavoidable consequence of temporal experience, and the equally important effects of memory, reveal themselves in the visual work artists produce. Boltanski’s personal memory plays a particularly important role. Born to a family of mixed religion in 1944 during the German occupation of France, Boltanski understood from a very young age the dangers of being Jewish. He explains, “[O]f course, we knew we were Jews. My father’s hiding place was right there in the house—but it wasn’t something we talked about and it filled me with shame. I really only took ownership of it and showed it in my work after my father’s death” (Barliant, “The Possible Life of Christian Boltanski”).

The impact of his childhood memories runs throughout his oeuvre with a rare potency that inscribes a place of exchange between concealment and unconcealment. While he was initially loath to delve into this material on an extrinsic, conscious level, it became imperative in the unfolding of his life’s work. In a 2016 conversation with curator Jens Hoffmann at the Jewish Museum in New York City, Boltanski explained that the Shoah, as embodied in the familial whispers of his early childhood, was his trauma and thus something to be processes aesthetically in multiple ways. He describes himself as a “shaman,” stating that his “life and art concerned asking questions and eliciting emotions” (Jewish Museum). In addition, Boltanski equates his impulses with those of Louise Bourgeois, explaining, “In all of one’s existence, we must speak about the trauma and
make it better.” He reveals an underlying sympathy with the aforementioned views of Freud and his prescribed psychotherapeutic release and refers to this activity as “a search for the key that unlocks the door” to reveal, expose and come to terms with the angst meted out within one’s personal history (Jewish Museum). Given Boltanski’s birthdate near the end of WWII, his memories become impressions absorbed from family and surroundings. Without diminishing the power of his experience, he feels his trauma at a generational remove, receiving its destruction obliquely.

Here we may speak of postmemory, which Hirsch defines as “the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” (107). Hirsch explains the ways such transferred experiences manifest within the child’s mind. Says Hirsch:

[They] are shaped by the attempt to represent the long-term effects of living in close proximity to the pain, depression, and dissociation of persons who have witnessed and survived massive historical trauma. They are shaped by the child’s confusion and responsibility, by the desire to repair, and by the consciousness that the child’s own existence may well be a form of compensation for unspeakable loss. Loss of family, of home, of a feeling of belonging and safety in the world “bleed” from one generation to the next. (Hirsch 113)

In agreement with Boltanski, Hirsch draws on a Freudian perspective regarding the need to excavate and exorcise the layers of memories clouding our vision, asserting that only through such a clear-minded understanding will relief manifest. The implications of Boltanski’s childhood pertain in this way to Gadamer’s notion of history and selfhood:

History does not belong to us; we belong to it. Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society
and state in which we live. The focus of subjectivity is a distorted mirror. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being. (276-277)

Gadamer moves us from personal experience as the locus of memory and its effects to a historical consideration blending beings into their contextual environment. Applying the point, what is important is the unspoken connection forged by Boltanski’s personal narrative and that of his viewer through a shared portal. His own biography and installations suggest a narrative that is then inscribed by each individual participant as a result of this ‘common horizon.’

During the conversation at the Jewish Museum, Boltanski explained that making art, for him, is akin to speaking with his audience (something which parallels Rosler’s impulses). The success of this dialogue can only be achieved if the topic regards something everyone knows, whether overtly or intuitively. Despite varying levels of representation, and multiple ways of understanding, the underlying language that is, following Heidegger, lived ‘in’ and ‘through,’ must be universal, able to speak to a broad audience. It also allows for the ebb and flow of ideas, the alētheiac unconcealment. To this end, Boltanski suggests ambiguity as a means for viewers to relate to artworks on similar frequencies, but not an ambiguity that elides specificity. While making cultural references, he believes the artist and work must, in Gadamer’s sense, “leave the person who responds to it a certain leeway, a space to be filled in by himself” (26). He continues, “It should also be true of the play of art that there is in principle no radical separation between the work of art and the person who experiences it” (28). In this spirit Boltanski choreographs a letting be that opens his audience to the collective. Many of the cultural references Boltanski puts into his installation remind us of
Rosler’s *Garage Sales*; he visits flea markets to acquire used clothing and then breathe a new life into the items. We are reminded of the “ghosts of those who wore them” and experience a resurrection of sorts. Boltanski literally encloses the viewer in the installation, making him a physical part of the narrative exchange. He activates the signifying potential artifacts hold in service of his broader message, one he hopes will enhance his conversations with his audience.

Memory *gathers thought*. It is also a shared medium, lending its *collective* depth to Boltanski’s visual grammar and moving the viewer from contemplation to a broader *ethical* space. His works explore the limit case of humanity’s destructive potential, the ultimate manifestation of fascism, as described in Benjamin’s epilogue. One must ask how this laying
bare of trauma serves our emancipation? To be sure, Boltanski’s focus on his traumatic absorption of the Shoah poses certain cultural problems elsewhere acknowledged by post-World War II thinkers such as Albert Camus or Adorno. The confrontation with the effects of trauma does run the risk of alienating viewers and violating Adorno’s oft-quoted notion that “there should be no lyric poetry after Auschwitz.” For Adorno, moving forward requires forging a new form of redemption and securing the very grounds for this in an encounter with inhumanity. It is, in fact, a need for coming to terms with the unthinkable. How, we ask again, might this transcendence manifest within an artwork?

To answer this question, let us look at Boltanski’s artworks and investigate the triggers with which he is able to engage his viewer. We know that his work embodies post-memory and its embedded trauma, both familial and historical. He shifts our attention from the suggestion of an exorcism to a more fact-based acknowledgment of human costs. From here, Boltanski seeks new ways of expressing his ideas, in essence, satisfying Adorno’s demands for a reassessment of our position vis à vis creative output in the shadows of the Shoah. To do so, Boltanski deploys “strategies of representation that supplement the documentary mode that is no longer possible” (Hornstein 99).

The site-specific artwork entitled Missing House successfully highlights the “interplay between Jewish absence and presence” (Hornstein 291) (Figure 4.2). It emphasizes the open space where a structure, never rebuilt after World War II and never reclaimed by the Jewish owners who were victims of the Holocaust, once stood. Its physical opening offers the space for contemplation, layering the fact of destruction with the metaphor of absence. It manifests concretely αlētheia’s play of concealment/unconcealment in communal space. The families are memorialized with plaques attached to the adjacent structures, silently bringing
the bystander’s attention to their deaths. This use of space and absence underscores the “erasure of humanity that the Holocaust exacted” (Hirsch 248). Utilizing the emptiness where the structure once stood, he recalls Hirsch’s point that, “The void cannot be filled with real or mimetic objects, it can only point to its own status as a void” (292) and eloquently expresses the “relationships between contemporary German life and the memory of Jewish culture” (Hornstein 291). *Missing House* is “emblematic for Boltanski of the missing Jews who had once inhabited it . . . as its void invited him to fill it with memory, he hoped it would incite others to memory as well” (Hornstein 69). For those who might have remembered the home prior to the war, the absence expresses profound loss. For those conscious of the impact of the final solution, the emptiness is a haunting, post-memory activation of millions of lives lost. The emptiness stands as silent testimony with unspoken tributes to those who perished. Hirsch points out, “In an opposite move, however, silence, absence, and emptiness are also always present, and often central to the work of postmemory” (247). The void created in *Missing House* challenges the notion of authenticity as exclusively the domain of archives and tangible objects. Furthermore, the use of site-specific works effectively operates in this case as a means of addressing human conflicts both ethically and in the transfer of meaning. *Missing House* is, thereby, a *gathering of thought* that successfully brings the viewer’s attention both to his own recollections and to the absence of those who have perished. Other installations further show how his visual systems are choreographed in service of our intersubjective experience.

*Monument: The Children of Dijon* was created in 1986 as a temporary exhibition, a series comprised of 142 black-and-white photographs, metal frames, glass, bare light bulbs, wire and articles of clothing (Figure 4.3). The photographic images measure 20.5 x 15 cm
each and were placed in grid-like fashion on the walls of the Chapelle de la Salpêtrière in Paris. The articles of clothing were carefully arranged on the floor of the chapel’s central nave, interrupting the line of sight to the sanctuary in which an abundance of starkly lit portraits was hung (Figure 4.4). This collection of artifacts and images elicits a multi-sensory response in its viewer, opening a vast introspective space for questions and mnemonic exchange. Within this once sacred yet historically controversial building, Boltanski successfully directs, following Gadamer, a fusion of horizons between the past and present, individual and collective memory, and notions life and death, both intrinsic and extrinsic. He establishes an ambiguous yet overwhelming connection to the Shoah by multiplying recognizable visual clues related to collective consciousness. Moreover, Boltanski disrupts notions of portraiture and vexes the understanding of photography as a conduit of fact and indexical reality (here we may recall Benjamin and Barthes’ reflections on the medium). “In most of my photographic pieces,” explains Boltanski, “I have manipulated the quality of evidence that people assign to photography, in order to subvert it, or to show that photography lies—that what it conveys is not reality but a set of cultural codes” (van Alphen 111).

The result of such aesthetic manipulation is that he opens our conversation about the potential for artistically fashioning truth from fiction precisely in and as the alēthiac and memory-based notions of truth in personal narrative. As a materially manifest space for unconcealment, the visual grammar ‘opens’ the topos of thought. The affect is an intermedial event of ‘bringing forth’ that, following Heidegger, ‘works’ to place being “in the open region in such a way that what is to be brought forth first clears the openness of the open region into which it comes forth.” There is thus a work of openness in artistic creation that
“brings the openness of beings, or truth” in an unconcealing mode of reception (Krell 187). An artwork must likewise be “understood as a discovery and disclosure of truth,” (Gadamer *Aesthetics and Hermeneutics* 101) one that exposes an essence of Being and powerfully eclipses established correspondence theories of truth. But how can an artist’s visual grammar work through the specifics of experience – its very objects – without overly ‘objectifying’ the meaning that is brought-forth?

![Image](image_url)

*Figure 4.4:*
Christian Boltanski
*Monument: The Children of Dijon*
Site-specific installation
Chapelle de la Salpêtrière
1986
Consider for a moment Heidegger’s analysis of Vincent van Gogh’s *Peasant Shoes* (Figure 4.5) (noted in chapter 1). Presumably, Van Gogh chose to paint these in homage to the toils of the common man. But Heidegger questions this presumption, concluding that the purpose, or intangible role it reveals, is its truest being. He explores the artist’s expression of the *equipment-ness* or *object-ness* of the shoes, noting that they are what they *intend* to be. This idea requires that one understand the relationship between parts and the whole in the apprehension of the work, and the spiral effect specifies the *hermeneutic circle* in terms, specifically, of allegory and symbol:

> The artwork is, to be sure, a thing that is made, but it says something other than the mere thing itself is, *allo agoreuei*. The work makes public something other than itself; it manifests something other; it is an allegory. In the work of art something other is brought together with the thing that is made. To bring together is, in Greek, *sumballein*. The work is a symbol. (Krell 145)

The sense of ‘gathering’ aligns with Boltanski’s works, but Heidegger’s view does not adequately acknowledge allegory and symbol’s fundamentally different functions. Boltanski’s work operates as an allegory, alluding to an exchange of meaning and intellectual discourse rather than an essentialist transaction between sign and signified. Allegory, in this case, occludes the various symbols and communicates through their merged relationships. As Craig Owens points out in his essay “The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Postmodernism,” “[A]llegory occurs whenever one text is doubled by another” (1026) and “[W]ork and site thus stand in a dialectical relationship” (1027). The symbol within Boltanski’s work upholds the allegory; it is absorbed within its narrative powers and performs the bridging of past to present. As an embodiment of content, allegory works as a vehicle for meaning to emerge; in this case communicating with the viewer through the
grammar of memory. The inexpressible truth that underlies an unimaginable event such as the Shoah can only be imparted by means of allegory and a subsuming of various representative symbols. Owens further explains this function:

[Allegory has the] capacity to rescue from historical oblivion that which threatens to disappear. Allegory first emerged in response to a similar sense of estrangement from tradition; throughout its history it has functioned in the gap between a present and a past, which, without allegorical reinterpretation, might have remained foreclosed. A conviction of the remoteness of the past, and a desire to redeem it for the present — these are its two most fundamental impulses. (Harrison and Wood 1026)

The function is thus more enacting than merely referential. Gadamer explains: “[T]his is the open space creative language [and visual art] give us and which we fill out by following what the writer evokes . . . we start to decipher a picture like a text” (27). The material of art exists, as an embodiment of its visual content, and carries it forward for interpretation. In our search for its inherent truth, we now look beyond the physical constructs found within a frame or space. Instead, we extrapolate signs and connect to the triggers in our psyche. We need not set allegory and symbol at odds, for the visual language is symbolic to each of us individually, in addition to its collective importance.

This notion of image as symbol carries tremendous weight as we further clarify the potency of visual language and the ways such elements become internalized and assimilated by the viewer. As Heidegger writes, “If there occurs in the work a disclosure of a particular being, disclosing what and how it is, then there is here an occurring, a happening of truth at work” (Krell 161-162). The happening within Boltanski’s Children of Dijon brings forth truth by means of an overall experience—art as event, prompting a mediation of the work through the self and the other. Thus we are returned, by means of allegory and symbol, to
personal and shared narratives and memories. The work provides the space for questioning without intending or requiring fixed responses. Truth, in its transient state, resides in the tension between what is known and what is new. The collision of the past and present moments introduces a Morpheus-like quality that renders truth irreducible to a fixed, calculable result.

Confronted by Boltanski’s choreographed experience, the viewer likely felt what Gadamer has described in saying, “Language often seems ill-suited to express what we feel. In the face of the overwhelming presence of works of art, the task of expressing in words what they say to us seems like an infinite and hopeless undertaking . . . . one says this, and then one hesitates” (Truth 401). For Gadamer, the functions of language apply to visual perception as important modes of signification. The Children of Dijon engenders this
‘hesitation’ by coordinating layers of archeological sediment, linking historical and present experience. Donald Kuspit summarizes the installation’s troubling effect:

> It is as though the faces were fragments of existence that Boltanski had excavated from some ruin of time—a remote past, all the more intangible by reason of the blurred look of the photographs, a sign of temporal erosion. They belong to collective memory—they form a collective unconscious, if one without defining contours, implying that it is limitless (*everyone has a dead child inside himself or herself*)—but the content of the memory is at once uncertain and matter-of-fact, obscure yet straightforward, indistinct yet unmistakable (98).

The installation—lit only by means of small bulbs that starkly illuminate the many anonymous children’s faces, with the remainder of the space kept intentionally darkened to magnify the impact of the arrangement—elicits a contemplative mood and solemn ambience that grips the viewer and demands his intense participation (Figure 4.3). The boundary between artwork and audience was blurred. The viewer was literally engulfed in the work through the implication of containment within the architectural and symbolic space blended with the delineation of the installation. The space becomes at once a place of reverence, sacred and meditative, while simultaneously an indictment of complicity in the death of so many children. Thus, we see that, though neither Heidegger nor Gadamer address ‘installation space’ per se, their ideas are expanded through both the medium and its artworks, resulting in an open space of contemplation.

> It is in the abstract and mysterious nature of the work, deliberately housed in the chosen space, that an acutely truthful narrative ‘translates’ into being. It is especially noteworthy that Boltanski is able to conjure this truth by building entirely upon fictional foundations. He problematizes our desire for demonstrable fact or absolute truth, and puts into crisis the authenticity of the encounter by denying the viewer concrete, verifiable
information. Yet, in an interview with the Tate, Boltanski declares, “[t]o speak the truth, you must first be a liar” (Tate Magazine, “Studio: Christian Boltanski”). He is addressing detractors who may feel duped by his contradictory choice of materials but feel this way because they hold to the premise that truth as such is something verifiable and concrete. Boltanski’s strategic ardor was demonstrated when it was discovered that one of his ‘dead Swiss’, whose image was included in an installation bearing the same name, turned out to be very much alive. But to discredit the work on such grounds is to miss the point. Despite their fabricated provenance and drift from accepted forms of identification, it is in the interstice created by the disparate visual language that a poignant truth emerges. The sum of this gesture powerfully echoes Heidegger’s hermeneutic project and magnifies his objection to the narrow confines of Western metaphysics, particularly in reference to his focus on poetics. In Truth and Method, Gadamer extends Heidegger’s attention to truth as alētheia to its broader implications for “a philosophical effort” that must “account for understanding as an ontological—the ontological—process of man” (qtd. in Palmer 163). Experience must be understood as “a stream in which we move and participate, in every act of understanding” (Palmer 117). Taken together, ‘process’ and ‘understanding’ yield a hermeneutics of dialogue in philosophy and art alike. This feature is enacted in the historical yet also timeless questions posed by The Children of Dijon.

In broader terms, what we find is a connection between memory, the archive, an opening space, and the emergence of truth within this complex of creative means. Boltanski’s use of artifacts and quotidian objects in order to stir recollection and a common experience is again important on this score and in the modes of alētheia evident in The Storehouse, Lycée Chases and Dead Swiss. And the hermeneutic valence generated through his placement of
artworks in spaces such as the Chapelle de la Salpêtrière enacts the Heideggerian stress on parts and wholes – in, for example, the Greek temple: “[I]t is the temple-work that first fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for human being[s]” (Krell 167). Boltanski’s particular installations also concretize Gadamer’s understanding of how art’s meaning and truth is extended by its viewer’s experience, both past and present. The installations affect spaces of a hermeneutic event comprised of time, memory, and emerging order. So doing, the works furnish a temporal fusion of horizons; reader and author are merged in “an event in which a world opens itself to him” through both language and art (Palmer 209). But we have not yet completed the decidedly aesthetic manifestation this ‘event’ in relation to the matters of truth and hermeneutic circularity. Gadamer, after all, asks, “What is the importance and significance of this particular experience which claims truth for itself, thereby denying that the universal expressed by mathematical formulation of the laws of nature is the only kind of truth?” (Philosophical Hermeneutics 16-17). He is implying that the position from which truth’s ‘veracity’ is sought must itself be resituated more existentially, thus drawn away from the topos of mathematical equivalence. That shift may in turn allow an event of truth’s disclosure that is more honest than the ‘correspondence’ paradigm can ever be. Both conceptually and literally, the honesty is ventured in Boltanski’s departure from accurate fact in order to shed light in corners normally kept dark. Recall that with alêtheia and Lichtung Heidegger proposes a more fundamental understanding of being and truth that incorporates the binary of light and shadow to function together, lending equal importance to the tension between what is in view and what lies hidden. Boltanski’s use of lights, images and artifacts
create a sum of truths that act in unison and flux to lead the viewer on a journey of questions and suggested conclusions, while withholding any concrete narrative (see Figure 4.4) that would supervene on the hermeneutic event. The use of light and dark in a hermeneutic circularity also instantiates the spiral quality of exchange between the material artwork’s involvement of the self and, subsequently, the community.

On this score Boltanski’s works show how Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur bridge the abstract nature of Heidegger’s thought to the more concrete phenomena of the artwork and the emancipatory potential he ascribed to it. The spiral affect consists in layers of aesthetic meaning. Gadamer explains: “When a work of art truly takes hold of us, it is not an object that stands opposite us which we look at in hope of seeing through it to an intended conceptual meaning . . . the work is an Ereignis—an event that ‘appropriates us’ to itself. It jolts us, it knocks us over and sets up a world of its own, into which we are drawn” (Palmer 72). Boltanski’s layerings of space, memory, allegory and symbol, and the subjective and collective engender such an event in the interplay between the artwork and its participant and the deeply felt internal shift. In addition, the subject/object dichotomy is rendered diffuse by one’s bodily participation within the work.

But what of the distinctly ethical component of such an appropriation? How does this charge come to light? Boltanski’s work powerfully underscores Lévinas’ understanding of ethical responsibility in the ‘face of the other’ (something that will remain crucial for us in the forthcoming artworks) through its prolific deployment of anonymous portraits of those presumed dead and those for whom the audience feels collective responsibility. In Monument: Children of Dijon, an ethico-sensory experience of cultural heritage is embedded in the moment of encounter as the collections of archival photographs and pieces
of clothing make reference to non-identifiable bodies of the past. The sheer numbers of faces and objects, offered as objects of memory, return the viewer to the Shoah through the anonymous listing of lost beings and their physical reduction to accumulated artifacts. The process is both mysterious yet connective. We recognize pieces of our past and of ourselves in the exchange. Taken separately, each of the elements carries meaning. Ingested en masse, they allude to the lists and dehumanization imposed upon Jews during the rise and height of the Nazi party. When writing a review for Frieze, Rose Jennings describes the work:

As a random example, in Les Enfants de Dijon (1985), a vast wall of blurred and funerally lit photographs of children implied a story of wartime extradition but in fact were photos of a class from a Dijon school, each re-photographed for further age-aestheticised effect. (The bodies, meanwhile, so redolent of attics, schoolrooms, fragile pre-computer repositories of memory are in fact made up by the artist.) ‘I am working with the idea of fragility and disappearance’, Boltanski has said, ‘. . . so if my work is about childhood, for example, it is not because I am interested in childhood, it is because that is the first part of us that is dead, we are dead children.’ (Jennings)

In response, Tom Lubbock asks, “How then to go on about an art which speaks so clearly for itself, and what it says over and over is dead, dead, dead?” (“Remembrance of Things Past”). After Auschwitz, after all, does not art that references such atrocities simply re-open old wounds? On the contrary, in a cathartic move, Boltanski’s works radiate a healing quality of ethical vocation, one that permeates the space in which his works are shown and one that inevitably exercises its power on the viewer.

The embedded symbolism of the chapel forces a solemnity that exalts those represented beyond earthly existence. The viewer is compelled to interpret the message
through discernable signs and familiar triggers that draw on stored memory. The phenomenon evokes what Gadamer calls art’s power of ‘recognition,’ where “recognition always implies that we have come to know something more authentically than we were able to do when caught up in our first encounter with it. Recognition elicits the permanent from the transient” (Gadamer 47). In other words, we feel a deeper connection to that which appears familiar, as though in its re-presentation it is already partially known and interpreted as truth. Our understanding of the chapel as sacred precedes our experience of its contents, thus allowing familiarity to support our interpretation of the overall effect and its moral charge. Certainly, the additive nature of Monument: The Children of Dijon stirs associations with the stores of images lodged in our memories and transfers meaning by means of its recognizable elements. It bears questioning how both the site of exchange and the images contained therein reinforce Heidegger’s Miteinandersein, or our being as involved with others, in terms of structure and its embedded meaning. Here we may see an emerging overlay between Heidegger’s structural accounts of being-with and being-toward, his sense of aesthetic parts and wholes, Gadamerian recognition, and Lévinas’ insertion of a grounding event of otherness and responsibility. But how else do the material specifics of the artwork enact an ethical charge within the ‘gathering’ of parts and wholes?

Other symbolic content in Boltanski’s installations includes biscuit boxes, pieces of clothing, yearbook photos, or newspaper clippings, bare lightbulbs and other fixtures that permeate our modern existence (Figures 4.6–4.9). If we consider these artifacts and tools through Heidegger’s lens, each piece is related to the whole and meaning is ascribed through their interconnectedness. As with the totality of Being, tools exist in relation to
other tools and those who put them to use. They come to be understood as their purpose is made manifest—through, as Heidegger asserted, a *ready to hand* quality that translates their meaning as they are put to use. Where Heidegger is speaking of our being in relation to the specifics of our world, Boltanski is speaking to the at-handedness of our memory. If

Figure 4.6 – 4.9:
Christian Boltanski
Symbolic Content: biscuit boxes, lights, faces, locations.
Miscellaneous installations
taken separately, the individual elements trigger memories of childhood, nostalgic
reminders of those with whom we have shared experience. One sees the bridge connecting
personal narrative with the broader collective experience. We find both Heidegger’s
alētheiac openness and Lévinas’ ethical charge. The yearbook photos of children and
young adults speak to a past presence that leaves questions surrounding fate and an
inevitable finality of life. We recognize the newspaper clippings and attach to them a
personal significance based on this prior knowledge. The remnants of clothing contained in
the biscuit boxes, for example, draw parallels to reliquaries and death.

I spoke earlier of the distinct internal shift brought about in viewers by Boltanski’s
layerings of space, memory, allegory and symbol, and the subjective and collective. And
we have now specified the emerging ethical center point of this hermeneutic event.
Working intertextually between the philosophical grain of hermeneutic phenomenology
and the material grain of these installations, we see how Boltanski’s complex conceptual
and material web is an immersive and emancipatory experience. The collective significance
of the symbols I have just noted is altered when assembled in large numbers, creating an
additive formula whereby narrative is transformed and meaning changed. Every viewer
sees the pieces differently, yet the overall effect is strangely shared and understood. The
unified artwork, then, acts as a locus of meaning that is offered for interpretation to the
viewer, much the way allegories function. Following Gadamer, it puts something in play,
something much larger than the self as it relates to the artwork. The cultural production is
thus an assemblage of signs to be deciphered in order to merge past and present for a
fullness of understanding. When I characterize the ethical as the center point in this spiral I
do not mean that there is a hierarchy afoot in the aesthetic dimensions; after all we cannot
abstract one experiential part from the whole. But I do maintain that the underlying feature of this immersive experience in a Boltanski space is an *alēthiac* event of moral truth, and the potential for this is orchestrated (we might say ‘author-produced’) through every atmospheric and material detail.

Let us press further into how Boltanski implicates his viewer-participant in a Lévinasian intersubjective experience and call to responsibility for the other, and how the visual grammar of this event utilizes the ‘archive.’ As with *Monument: Children of Dijon*, many of his other installations include sequences of blurred black-and-white headshots, desk lamps, and evocative artifacts arranged in an organized, linear, altar-like fashion. They are photographic and tactile, intentional yet mysterious. In each, he repeatedly stirs our collective memory, while leading us methodically toward and through a disturbing,
abstract mood of finality. These affects put into crisis the notion of image as index, as he creates meaning from sometimes inauthentic evidence. By the technē (in its positive sense) of inserting objets trouvés into his installations, Boltanski once again asserts his belief in and use of fabrication as the foundation for revealing a Heideggerian essence of truth. His use of archived images, collections of people whose lives he knew nothing about, pushes to the fore the ways that anonymity becomes general—as his audience easily accepts its collective ascription.⁹

Using the archive as a means of engaging broader memory is a powerful tool for implicating the collective community in its contents. Another installation titled The Storehouse, now in MoMA’s collection, typifies this effect (Figure 4.10). Curator Roxana Marcoci writes the following about its presentation:

Enlarged photographs of seven young girls are propped atop a stack of unlabeled tin biscuit boxes containing scraps of fabric. These boxes are corroded as if marked by time and are infused with symbolic associations—they evoke reliquary boxes, archival containers, and funerary urns. The black-and-white photographs connote another era; out of focus, they constitute a visual analogy to memory, fading over time. Electric lights illuminate the seven faces like devotional candles, underscoring the effect of a memorial, an orchestration of signifiers indicating loss and remembrance. Old photographs, the tension between individuality and sameness, and the implication of vast numbers evoke the tragedy of the Holocaust. (MoMA.org)

As with the Children of Dijon, again we find visual memories and triggers stored over the course of one’s life. The headshots, as blurred and unidentifiable as they are, recall Anne Frank, whose universally read diary bore her image (Figure 4.11). The rows of faces point to a police line-up. The desk lamps shed blinding, intense light, reminiscent of torture and questioning. The bare bulbs feel less like Marcoci’s devotional candles and more like an
acute deprivation, as they render the subjects in the installation unable to see past their aggressive effect while also further blurring each subject’s facial features. In addition, their own proximity to each other would create pronounced discomfort from the tremendous heat they would be generating. The biscuit tins, each containing pieces of cloth, provoke disquieting questions and force the viewer to provide his own answers. The controlled arrangement of faces harkens Foucault’s notions of dominance and a repressive political reduction of human freedom. The gathering of symbols, individually chosen and arranged, amasses strength in their numbers and becomes allegorical. In a circular process from whole to the parts and back again, Boltanski leads his viewer to discover the message. Here we may renew two prior questions: To what extent does Boltanski’s visual strategy unburden the viewer of enframing qua alienation? How is the artwork an ethical gesture per Lévinas or Arendt?

Figure 4.11:
Anne Frank
Cover image for The Diaries
The diary was written between 1942-44
Anne Frank House, Amsterdam
As truth emerges from the careful edit of elements, the parallels to the Holocaust are indelible. There is also a connection to the Catholic iconography of reliquary, altar and human sacrifice. An intense psychic discomfort occurs when one apprehends the approximate ages of the girls (figure 4.10). Their innocence contradicts the sum of the message, creating a palpable tension and a collective sense of mourning and responsibility for the deaths of more than six million Jews. The combination of disparate objects and images provokes a truth that resides in expansive cultural memory, more specifically in Western memes. Each individual object carries its connotative significance to the viewer, who, as we have seen, is a critical part of the dialogue:

The viewer is part of the work. I try to communicate with him by stimulating his memory: the viewer has the right to interpret the pictures as he likes, to make his own picture. For me, it’s enough to just give him the signs, to communicate with him without trying to teach or direct him. I want to bring out the viewer’s interior and invisible powers. (Stiles 614)

Such ‘stimulation’ and ‘bringing out’ reflects Gadamer’s idea that “it is in the sheer being there (Dasein) of the work of art that our understanding experiences the depths and the unfathomability of its meaning” (Palmer 72). And, as we will continue to see, such ‘meaning’ bears a distinct Lévinasian hue.

Boltanski deploys the same strategies in *Dead Swiss*, when he gathers anonymous images from obituaries and news stories, once again blurring identities and concocting new narratives in which the images exist. Marcocci explains, Boltanski “creates an atmosphere of general, unspecified mourning through means—photographs, relics—traditionally valued for their privileged claim to specificity, uniqueness, and authenticity. A vocabulary of documentary signs is used movingly, but deceptively, for symbolic effect” (Marcocci 86).
Boltanski himself explains,

> What drives me as an artist is that I think everyone is unique, yet everyone disappears so quickly. I made a large work called *The Reserve of Dead Swiss* (1990) and all the people in photographs in the work are dead. We hate to see the dead, yet we love them, we appreciate them. Human. That's all we can say. Everyone is unique and important. (Tate Interview)

Boltanski’s thoughts point to an appreciation for both our temporality and value as beings. They shift the viewer’s attention to his responsibility for the other, for a need to acknowledge and understand the community shared within the past. As we feel this shift in experiencing the work, so, too, do we recognize a collective complicity in the overall narrative. Indeed, the sentiment of one’s uniqueness and social significance is emphasized by Lévinas as part and parcel of our intersubjective, ethical exchange. We are now in a position to better stress the primacy he places on this in the orders of meaning and selfhood. He states, “But it is always starting out from the Face, from the responsibility for the other that justice appears, which calls for judgment and comparison, a comparison of what is in principle incomparable, for every being is unique; every other is unique” (EN 104). And as for this ‘starting out’ in the immersive realm of the ‘unique’ signified by the ‘face’ of the other, he explains “the order of meaning, which seems to me primary, is precisely what comes to us from the inter-human relationship, so that the Face, with all its meaningfulness as brought out by analysis, is the beginning of intelligibility” (EN 103). Boltanski manipulates our encounter with the face, manifesting a Lévinasian experience of intersubjective exchange within the felt moment. The multiple anonymous images create a powerful scenario in which one feels afresh the primacy of collective accountability.

We began this section with a look at Boltanski’s life and its impact on his artistic production. From this base, we moved through the ways trauma, memory, site, and
artifacts/archive constitute an ethical encounter through the artwork. We have seen how Boltanski’s work is both expanded by philosophical ideas, and, in turn, extends these same ideas through his installations. We must understand the complexity of his artworks in order to fully appreciate its ethical tenor. Boltanski creates a mise-en-scène that addresses larger truths. He transcends the need for indexical reference of reality and creates a visceral, more widely accessible, story that engages collective memory and its endless spectrum of impressions.

He literally realigns the images to create a dialog with his viewers, who are implicated in their translation. Says Enwezor, “His work oscillates between inert collections and arrangements of conservation, sometimes pushing his concerns to perverse extremes, blurring the line between the fictive and the historical” (Enwezor 31). It is the sum of the elements that are creating the significance of the work. To review:

It is not only his own history that he manufactures. He has created installations consisting of artifacts from the life of a fictional family. He treats banal objects reverently. The biscuit boxes he uses have only been made to look old; the articles of clothing do not belong to Holocaust survivors; the Jewish children in the prewar photographs may or may not have died. And even “Reserve of Dead Swiss (large)” includes one unidentified photograph of someone still alive. (Kimmelman)

Knowing that the figures in his installations are appropriated, and to a large extent imaginary, does not diminish the strength of his message. As Boltanski states, the “installation became the means for metaphysical reflections on memory, death, the human condition, and the tragedy of the Holocaust” (Stiles 590). Our associative powers override the knowledge that the portraits are appropriated and the confluence of signs triggers our recollections, namely: the Holocaust took place and cost millions of lives, lives that continue to haunt our collective
conscience through his oeuvre. But would not Lévinas question art’s ability to motivate an ethical exchange? At the end of his essay “Is Ontology Fundamental?” he asks, “Can things take on a face? Is not art an activity that lends faces to things? . . . We ask ourselves all the same if the impersonal but fascinating and magical march of rhythm does not, in art, substitute itself for sociality, for the face, for speech” (Lévinas, BPW, 10). Lévinas offers no answer. Yet, as we experience the face within Boltanski’s installations, there is no question we feel the presence of the other (l’autrui) and experience a culpability of understanding in the wake of the unthinkable.

The ethical undertones and intersubjective exchange permeating Boltanski’s work move us to a broader dialogue centered on the phenomenon of narrative. Let us return briefly to this issue, which is important not only as an interpretive matter but also as a way to further see how these artworks achieve an intertextualization of philosophical ideas otherwise not fully available on the level of conceptual comparison alone. We have seen that, in the works, the bridging of past to present brings about a dynamic layering of transference and translation at the intersection of memory and becoming. The viewer’s individual reading of the narrative initiates an evolving story, but one without the finality of a fixed or finished hermeneutic. As Caines explains, “[A]rt makers such as Christian Boltanski have become a familiar focus for the problematics of understanding personal and cultural remembrances and their relationship to history, identity and memorial, yet they also offer us new ways to map the performativity of memory” (4). These are ways in which the self acquires qualities of the other and integrates these into a personal narrative that is ever changing. We carry with us traces of history, remnants of the past that define us and bridge to the future, and this exchange alters our interpretation of narrative content. Ricoeur sees this flux as emblematic of inter-
subjective experience that places the reader in a constant state of becoming. Content transforms as it is carried forth in its various readings, creating a truly dialogical relationship between the author/artist and his reader/viewer. The textual quality of Boltanski’s work invites viewer participation while at the same time altering perception. Recall Heidegger’s notion of the ‘work-character’ of an artwork, where “the revelation that happens through the encounter with an artwork, not the art object, is the work of art” (Bolt 41). Now we are able to say that the profundity of the encounter with an artwork’s ‘work’ lies within the experiential exchange and in the creation of a new narrative. Thus Boltanski’s work reveals how narrative, or emplotment without finality, can be added to the bringing-forth of Heidegger’s work-character. Drawing on Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Ricoeur holds,  

My thesis is here that the process of composition, of configuration, is not completed in the text but in the reader and, under this condition, makes possible the reconfiguration of life by narrative. I should say, more precisely: the sense of the significance of a narrative stems from the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the reader. (Wood LQN 26)

This language of configuration and reconfiguration across worlds adds to Heidegger and Gadamer’s views the viewer’s internalization and subsequent translation of the work, which in turn alters truth once more. He is supplementing the hermeneutic unveiling of truth, while reinforcing the implied ethics of an artwork and its potentially intersubjective force. The convergence of reader and artist also echoes the ideas of Barthes and Benjamin (examined in the previous chapter in relation to Rosler’s work), as well as Gadamer’s *fusion of horizons*. As the viewer interprets Boltanski’s installations, he discovers a new text and is transformed. In short, there is an exchange of meaning or transference of memory, an intersection of personal and collective memory wherein an impermanent community of ideas is manifested.
It should be evident that we must be careful to treat the artworks not only as visual encounters but also as the storied paradigms of their content. In other words, the artworks parallel ideas on language and narrative beyond the visual legacy they leave behind. Let us see how Ricoeur equips us to appreciate this matter, then run it back through some of the interpretive signposts we have explored. In his essay “Reflections on a New Ethos for Europe,” Ricoeur suggests modes of inter-subjective relations that underscore the notion of narrative transformation. The first of these is *translation*, which he interprets as “a matter of living with the other in order to take the other to one’s home as a guest . . . in this sense we can speak of a translation ethos whose goal would be to repeat at the cultural and spiritual level the gesture of linguistic hospitality” (Kearney 4). The second mode of ‘relation’ is found in the *exchange of memories*, in which Ricoeur states, “a new ethos is born of the understanding applied to the complex intertwining of new stories which structure and configure the crossroads between memories. It is a matter there of a genuine task, a genuine labor, in which we could identify the *Anerkennung* of German Idealism, that is of ‘recognition’ considered in its narrative dimension” (Kearney 5). Again, Ricoeur’s position in regards to ‘relation’ points to how the reader belongs “at once to the work’s horizon of experience in imagination and to that of his or her own real action” (Wood LQN 26). Finally, a model of forgiveness is offered as a means of releasing the past to remain in the present, perhaps unencumbered by memories or guilt. Recognition, reaction, and forgiveness, if understood through the narrative experience of Boltanski’s works, can accentuate Lévinas’ point regarding the primary ethical obligation through the face of the other. The installations reinforce this inter-subjective exchange and integrate the other in our thoughts and memories. Individuals seek a blending of memories to redefine the self and develop a more holistic
perspective on the essence of truth. As though restating Ricoeur’s point, Lévinas holds “[I]t is a mediation between man and the world, between man and man, between man and himself; the mediation between man and the world is what we can referentiality; the mediation between men, communicability, the mediation between man and himself, self-understanding” (Wood LQN 27). But how are these components of ‘exchange’ and ‘mediation’ further evident in the collective experience of truth that Boltanski enables?

Figure 4.13:
Christian Boltanski
Faces
Children of Dijon
In her article for *After Image*, Rebecca Caines stresses a feature that might seem counter to the resilience of these features:

[Boltanski] suggested that if such a thing be made, it should be made of something ‘fragile, that would not last, like paper,’ so that the monument in order to last had to be ‘constantly tended, looked after and rebuilt,’ as perhaps in the frequent physical watching over and rebuilding of the monument instead of building a monument in bronze that we could leave behind and forget,’ . . . we would have to physically act to remember and keep remembering. (Caines)

The fact that the very substance of the installation should be fragile and require tending parallels the need for care for our intersubjective dispositions. The hidden truth underlying what continues to be an unthinkable event must therefore be constructed in order to perpetuate an ethos of care for the other. The broader lesson here is that this gesture reflects an enterprise in creative truth that can elucidate and materialize Heidegger’s interpretation of *alētheia*. Boltanski’s repeated use of the face of the other in his installations connects with our *a priori* understanding of the interdependency of beings, thus inserting a real-time Levinasian ethics into a Heideggerian being-with and solicitude. What is remarkable is that the insertion fortifies the primacy of the ethically intersubjective by way of the fragile. This point is important because it not only builds on what I have been showing in terms of the intertextuality between (a) our philosophical concepts and the installations, and (b) the resulting intertextual results on the side of the philosophical dialogue, but also (c) a distinct supplement Boltanski brings to the Lévinasian ethic.

While Lévinas is referring to individual exchanges between two beings, isolating the ethical impulse in a singular encounter, Boltanski overwhelms the viewer with a multitude of anonymous faces from whom a returned gaze is impossible (figure 4.13). For Lévinas, “the
epiphany of the face is ethical” (199). For Boltanski, we must care for the other and nurture the fragility of our temporal existence. Though different in terms, the events are alike in kind. For Lévinas,

The transcendence of the Other, which is his eminence, his height, his lordship, in its concrete meaning includes his destitution, his exile [dépaysement], and his rights as a stranger. I can recognize the gaze of the stranger, the widow, and the orphan only in giving or in refusing; I am free to give or to refuse, but my recognition passes necessarily through the interposition of things. Things are not, as in Heidegger, the foundation of the site, the quintessence of all the relations that constitute our presence on the earth (and ‘under the heavens, in company with men, and in the expectation of the gods’). The relationship between the same and the other, my welcoming of the other, is the ultimate fact, and in it the things figure not as what one builds but as what one gives. (Totality 76-77)

Ultimately, the agency Lévinas describes is that we choose a generous disposition of responsibility, without which there is no real genesis of subjectivity. Art, by the same token, returns us to a more authentic grounding of the self in terms of the collective and by way of the face, in real-time aesthetic experience. Boltanski brings us to the Lévinasian space of address and ‘height’ by means of objects and memories, interspersed with images of others assumed dead. Things become more than objects, and the viewer is implicated the scene of death and complicity. Returning to the issue of our at-handedness in relation to the world, the installations effectively bracket what Heidegger termed our ‘equipmental’ relation to objects and the self-directed purposes motivating this.

Note, further, how such bracketing is unique in the way it deprives us of a full knowledge of the other while tasking us with (and indeed constituting us through) an unspoken responsibility. This feature points back to the idea of transcendence and height noted above and links powerfully with Boltanski’s technique of erasing individual features...
and multiplying anonymous face. Societal memory gains its ethical charge and plants the
viewer back in the “primordial discourse” of a narrative “whose first word is obligation,
which no ‘interiority’ permits avoiding” (Lévinas, Totality 201). Here one’s drive for
recognition becomes both an aesthetic resource and point of development – an intersubjective
space for truth to manifest and transform.

What is the summary outcome of these affects? We acknowledged that offering
fabrication as truth is questionable. The fictional foundation of Boltanski’s artworks poses
important philosophical questions: Is art an aggressive Making (challenging-forth) or a
Letting-Be form of enlivened poësis? For Heidegger, art’s role is to allow for the open space
of thinking to manifest, for questioning to arise. From Plato’s perspective, fashioning truth
from fiction presents a danger. The ascription of a common truth to mnemonic
representations places the responsibility for translation on the viewer and assumes the
commonality of the symbolic triggers. In addition, as we see in Boltanski’s works, overtly
falsifying identities and story lines in order to create a more essential truth could be said to
put in crisis the supposed authenticity of the archive itself, thus entirely undermining its
credibility as a translator of memory and experience. But to read Boltanski’s work under this
lens is a mistake. What is most powerful is the opening for questions that he is able to create,
and the allowance for a fluid response to emerge for each viewer-participant. If we apply a
correspondence theory to Boltanski’s work, and/or come to it from the position of analytic
distance and art-critical explanations of what is expressed, we miss its capacity for alētheia,
thus eliminating the possibility for a manifestation of open space for contemplation and
responsive thought.
§ 4.4: KRYSZTOF WODICZKO: TRUTH, TEMPORALITY AND FEARLESS SPEECH

Thus far, we have traced the possibility for unconcealment and intersubjective exchange in Boltanski’s multi-layered artworks. In addition, we have noted the importance of memory and its function in the ‘fusion of horizons’ as one participates in the event of the artwork. Through an analysis of Boltanski’s visual grammar, we have mapped the ways personal and collective memories merge through artifacts, history and the face of the other. With these observations in mind, we must now turn to the ways technology aids in the transfer of such an ethical, intersubjective exchange and clarify the role artworks play in negating enframing qua alienation. The work of Krysztof Wodiczko will help us navigate this extension.

Figure 4.14:
Krzysztof Wodiczko
Bunker Hill Memorial 1998
Charlestown, Massachusetts
At first glance, we find a number of important parallels connecting his life’s work with that of Boltanski. Beyond the basic fact that they belong to the same generation emerging from World War II, according to Sanford Kwinter, “Wodiczko is a product not only of a Europe degenerated frighteningly and swiftly into Fascism, but [he] is also a Jewish offspring of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising of 1943” (Kwinter 8). Wodiczko’s career grew out of this particular challenging reality, likely carrying with it the effects of postmemory seen in Boltanski. While Boltanski’s work focuses on memory with an invitation for viewers to surrender to introspection and an unveiling of meaning qua truth, Wodiczko’s oeuvre is more disruptive and public, acting as both a therapeutic exchange and political confrontation. But both artists seek to reveal truth as multi-layered and polyphonic. They bring forth the dialogic qualities (as also seen in Martha Rosler’s work) that allow their participants, through an orchestrated process of ethical human exchange, to come to a critical truth perhaps not otherwise available.

Furthermore, both deploy certain specific technologies in service of their overall message, be it through the use of lights, projections, artifacts or otherwise—a feature that remains essential to the trajectory of this project. As a trained industrial designer, Wodiczko pushes the edges of technology’s potential as a medium for dialogue, using well-planned video projections at significant public sites of memorial. He calls his artistic genre “interrogative design” (Transformative Avant-Garde 9) and has extended his process to a number of organizations affiliated with institutions, such as MIT and Harvard University, among others. He considers himself an interventionist, “a notorious trouble-maker who troubles a troubled world by making its troubles visible” (Transformative Avant-Garde 12, 19). Moreover, he believes strongly in the human need to “testify to the wrong in order to
propose a change for the better” (*Transformative Avant-Garde* 12).

Benjamin’s artist-producer resonates in Wodiczko’s thought, and within the strategies he undertakes to raise up disenfranchised members of society. George Smith, in his essay “The Art of Critique in the Age of Addiction,” recounts Wodiczko’s efforts in Charlestown, Massachusetts, at a time when drug wars were taking many teenage lives. Smith explains,

> As Charlestown disintegrated in its own ethnic solidarity, Wodiczko went to the homes of the murder victims and made video interviews with the mothers of the boys who’d been killed. Then at night he projected the videos onto Charlestown’s Bunker Hill Monument. Thousands watched. Within hours the code of silence was broken, and within days arrests were made and the murders stopped. (2-3)

Smith’s account of Wodiczko’s intervention highlights the ethics underpinning his work (figure 4.14). His use of the Bunker Hill Monument is a strong and subversive metaphor “symbolizing freedom” while simultaneously “[emanating from] the phallic power or patriarchal tradition and domination” (Smith 3). Doing so through community collaboration demonstrates the more potent grassroots exchange. By giving voice to victims’ mothers and sharing the recorded testimony with the broader public through using the Bunker Hill Monument, Wodiczko transcends invisible barriers and brings a devastating wave of crime to an end.

Heidegger’s position on technology qua enframing also helps us understand Wodiczko’s intermedial intentions. One will recall Heidegger’s focus on Hölderlin’s words: “But where the danger is, also grows the saving power.” Wodiczko achieves a transformative public healing through his technologically driven installations, even to the point of mobilizing the language in which beings dwell. He brings the voiceless together with the public in a powerful, ethical exchange by manipulating language, space and technological
means to reveal deeper truths that expose “the needs that should not, but unfortunately do, exist in the present civilized world” (Transformative Avant-Garde 9). Whereas Boltanski immerses his viewer in the face of the other, Wodiczko adds to this the layering of speech, a feature that drives home our intersubjective responsibilities in the manner of Lévinas’ ‘address’ of the other. The truth Wodiczko brings forth has the power to liberate the speakers from their traumas, and he devotes decades to facilitating the overcoming of otherness. His projects illustrate Dostoyevsky’s concept of social responsibility, as expressed through the character of Zosima, who says, “We are all guilty for everything and everyone, and I more than all the others” (qtd. in Lévinas, EN 105). In addition, Heidegger’s understanding of both dwelling and truth as freedom takes form in the myriad of experiences Wodiczko is able to record. Thus, we will see how Wodiczko’s artistic production, growing out of his own life’s experiences, expresses a relentless need to overcome democracy’s failures. We will trace these impulses first through an examination of his life and beliefs, and then through the instruments of translation that instill in his works a healing potential.

Wodiczko acts as an outspoken agent of truth in relation to social-political traumas he is acutely disposed to see. When speaking of his 1977 journey from Poland to the United States, Wodiczko explains, “Fairly quickly I came to realize that my hope for finding democracy and receiving its presents is a utopia . . . I came to realize that democracy is something that has to be made by ourselves because nobody can make it via a ‘directive from above’” (Transformative Avant-Garde 26). Significantly, he also came to recognize that societal inertia undermines one’s ultimate freedom. He states, “In my unending pilgrimage to democracy, I also started to understand that the privilege of having the rights which democracy can offer is connected to the duty to wake it up from the lethargic sleep it has a
tendency to drift into” (26). We are reminded of Arendt’s understanding of the source of totalitarianism as societal stasis. He states: “I saw clearly that there is nothing worse for democracy than the passiveness of its citizens” (26). He implicitly and explicitly relies not only on Arendt’s political ideas as reflected in these words but also those of Foucault, Lévinas (Face of the Other), Ricoeur (intersubjectivity), Benjamin (history and memory), Brecht (alienation or defamiliarization effect), Derrida (slippage and language), and Freud (psychotherapeutic exchange and catharsis), to name only a few. His work is rich in references to ancient Greek practices, including *parrhésia*, and its privileging of what Foucault calls *fearless speech*, in which difficult truths are spoken openly within public spaces. We must focus on this quality for a moment, as it effectively evidences the close proximity between biography and aesthetic expression in a deliberate way.

Wodiczko explains, “Foucault’s politico-ethical democratic project on the issue of fearless speaking in the struggle for the truth as a ‘critical truth’ must merge with critical memory and with recovery from trauma to become one complex social and aesthetic project” (31). Indeed, Foucault determines that, not only is *parrhésia* a socio-political event, it also depends on an audience to complete the process of *veridiction*. Foucault explains, “In ancient culture, and therefore well before Christianity, telling the truth about oneself was an activity involving several people, an activity with other people, and even more precisely an activity with one other person, a practice for two” (CT 5). He continues by quoting a passage in Galen, “[t]o tell the truth about oneself and to know oneself we need someone else whom we can pick up almost anywhere, so long as he is old enough and serious” (qtd. in Foucault 5). Notice the stress on ‘bond’ as he summarizes: “In short, *parrhésia*, the act of truth, requires: first, the manifestation of a fundamental bond between the truth spoken and the thought of
the person who spoke it; [second], a challenge to the bond between two interlocutors (the person who speaks the truth and the person to whom this truth is addressed)” (CT 11). In other words, the free exchange of truth manifests only through the speaker and his recipient, while the latter must present a challenge and warrant courage on the part of the former. Though more politically oriented, Foucault seems to be in agreement with Gadamer’s premise that dialog enables hermeneutics and interpretation.

Wodiczko’s entire life’s work can be viewed through the lens of fearless speech and the need to expose truth, to experience truth as an unfolding event regardless of the impact it may have on the recipient. The truths may be fleeting, as temporary projections transforming spaces a citizenry might otherwise take for granted. But they interrupt the normalization of problematic distraction, invigorating the new space with significance and authority. Czubak clarifies Wodiczko’s intention:

The performative instruments and projections are, according to the artist, “cultural prostheses,” serving the contemporary parrhésiastes, the followers of the Cynic philosophers, continuators of the Classical tradition of speaking the uncomfortable truth—the ‘truth that makes trouble, that is always spoken on one’s own behalf and falls foul of all the truth-producing instances.’ (15)

How does Foucault’s appropriation of Greek parrhésia help us understand Wodiczko’s aesthetic? Due to the potential for conflict should the truth offend the recipient, Foucault attributes a much-needed amount of courage to the speaker. Wodiczko likewise summarizes his projects as a search for truth and healing, with the hope for instigating change—a positive change promoting responsibility for the other. Broadly speaking, his work is largely described as “deal[ing] with the issues of human rights, democracy, violence and alienation,” thereby advancing ethical concerns (Czubak, War Veterans, 31). Part self-understanding
through truthful speaking, part empathetic exchange with the other, the ethics embodied in Wodiczko’s work further advances Heidegger’s challenge to a monologic approach into a space of multiplicity. The notion of the ‘fearless’ thus adds another distinct layer of concrete agency within the relationship between truth as unconcealment and aesthetics as ethico-address.

Figure 4.15:
Krzysztof Wodiczko
War Veterans’ Projections onto Lincoln Union Square Park, New York City
Figure 4.16:
Krzysztof Wodiczko
Guests
2009 Venice Biennale
Venice, Italy
There are numerous projects that demonstrate this affect, and each of his installations continues to have immense relevance within today’s geo-political climate. That said, I will focus first on the War Veteran Projection Series, in which veterans of war are given a public voice through which to process trauma. I will then investigate Guests, an installation created for the 2009 Venice Biennale, which addresses immigrants and alterity in a way that further manifests our theme of intersubjective responsibility. While the War Veteran Projections illustrate Wodiczko’s trademark use of notable architectural edifices, Guest took place in a contained interior space in the Polish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Both formats demonstrate Wodiczko’s extraordinary ability to, borrowing poet Paul Celan’s phrase, “bear witness for the witness” in the name of justice and truth. (Figures 4:15 + 4:16).

There have been a number of War Veteran Projections around the globe, each of which bears consistent intermedial features. Wodiczko selects prominent monuments onto which he reveals the individual narratives of returning soldiers and at times he has projected onto military vehicles, such as a High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle (Humvee). The most recent New York City event (2012) in Union Square involved a statue of Abraham Lincoln and inscribed the dialogue between war veterans of the conflicts in Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq onto the consciousness of residents. Such a choreography enabled the voiceless to speak out through the symbolism inherent in Lincoln’s sculptural representation in ways that cut through layers of invisible social separation. In a small volume titled Wodiczko, Božena Czubak vividly describes these experiences:

Held at important sites, on prestigious buildings and monuments, Wodiczko’s projections brought their participants out onto the city stage, making them visible and strengthening their public presence. As the leading actors in these spectacular public spectacles, they became political subjects, speaking through a
multitude of experiences and identities, introducing their polemical, often conflicting, rationalities into public space. (13).

Wodiczko chose the statue of Abraham Lincoln as the conduit through which the veterans would offer testimonials and process the emotional scars endured during their respective tenures in active duty. In a video interview created for More Art, Wodiczko explains that the veterans are recorded with the form of the statue in mind. Faces and hands are given priority and are “juxtaposed onto the bodily form of this statue so they will be partially themselves and partially Lincoln” (More Art) (Figure 4.17). Wodiczko continues, “Previously dormant, memorials of heroes from the past become animate with gestures and voices that include them in the public debate on war and veterans” (27). The superimposition of animated faces atop statuary further extends art as event and the Lévinasian encounter with the other.

In addition, Wodiczko activates Gadamer’s fusion of horizons in the narrative exchange and echoes Ricoeur’s understanding of the results such a fusion creates. Ricoeur states, “To appropriate a work through reading is to unfold the world horizon implicit in it which includes the actions, the characters and the events of the story told” (LQN 26). The subjects of Wodiczko’s performances reveal personal narratives that are challenging in their forthright emotional content and truth-telling capacity. Recall that Lincoln is regarded as one of America’s greatest rhetoricians, one who addressed his nation and era in the mode of caring ‘fearless speech.’ The Lincoln sculpture is elevated, which forces the viewer to look up in order to bear witness to the veterans’ speeches. This gesture lends the scene better visibility while also combining the statue’s authority with their respective voices. It not only accentuates the gravity of the dialogue, but merges past and present, compressing time into a trans-historical narrative. Wodiczko hopes that by “bringing back the past to think through it
so maybe the mistakes of the past won’t repeat themselves again is something humans can do, but only if we help them” (More Art). What is most striking in the War Veterans Projection is the absolute coordination of the video footage and the scene; the present is layered onto the past, obliterating the passage of time and creating an open space for self-reflection.

Without question, the public discourse in the mode of parrhésic exchange fuels a more extended polyphonic. Such a dialogue marks an important convergence of the ideas of Lévinas and Foucault. Speech, for Lévinas, “is a relationship between freedoms who neither limit nor deny one another, but reciprocally affirm one another” (EN 35). While Foucault primarily expresses speech as a form of catharsis in truth-telling, Lévinas moves speech closer to an affirmation of the other. Within the mutual exchange of story, Lévinas continues, “The respected one is not the one to whom, but with whom justice is done. Respect is a relationship between equals. Justice assumes that original equality” (EN 35). Indeed, the discourse Wodiczko creates becomes a scene of therapeutic exchange, invoking Freud’s understanding of exploring memories in combination with a Lévinasian undercurrent of ethical responsibility for the Other. While this pairing of thinkers seems an improbable match, Wodiczko connects their ideas through an overt, psychotherapeutic narrative process in which he also implicates his audience. Through language, the catharsis of the victim thereby also becomes the responsibility of the viewer. Veterans literally become “living monuments of their own trauma” (Wodiczko, AoW 25). Wodiczko insists that “[t]he first and foremost purpose of projections informed by the psychological condition of veterans and the society they live in is to produce a psychotherapeutic effect” (AoW 27). The veteran thus becomes a self-healer by performing a public cleansing, exercising the Foucaultian parrhésia.
in spoken words that emerge as expressions of personal truth and demand the viewer’s attention.

Wodiczko cautions, however, that “in order to animate a historical monument, the veterans first need to animate themselves, that is learn to speak out and free themselves from trauma” (AoW 27). There are, in this respect, inherent emotional risks to his projects, and Wodiczko tries to minimize any potential negative consequences by paying particular attention to the mental health of those participating in his projects. We must not overlook this praxis of ethics ‘in’ the generation of ethical works. He explains,

The psychotherapeutic aspect of this work—dealing with traumatic memory—requires creating special conditions or, to quote from Donald Winnicott, a ‘potential space.’ In creating such a space I work with NGOs and experts helping veterans deal with posttraumatic stress. This ‘potential space’ is a space of freeing memory and communication. (AoW 25)

Here again, as with Boltanski’s work, memory is interrogated. There is an intrinsic connection between the potential space to which Winnicott refers and Heidegger’s Lichtung, resulting in an open space for thoughts and ideas to come forth. There is also a distinct ‘yielding’ afoot in the experience. In her essay “Reading Wodiczko,” Rosalyn Deutsche states that his work is deeply “influenced by Fornari’s assertion [in the 1966 volume titled Psychoanalysis of War] that we must return to the unconscious of the individual subject in order to stop war. Wodiczko, with incandescent wit, notes that we are ‘inner war memorials,’ which, like external ones, must be disarmed” (Wodiczko, TAW 12). The disarming can only take place through language by means of public exposure of truth and a depth that comes from activating the dormant meaning within the chosen milieu or monuments. In the clearing for fearless speech, original justice, and thought, victims of trauma safely meet the revelation of necessary and poignant truths.
Notice that we are speaking now on a level beyond just individual healing. How might Wodiczko’s work offer an extensive societal emancipation without presuming to ‘finalize’ some calculative formula? The question requires us to take a broader view of the sites and spaces in which Wodiczko operates. In a video trailer for Maria Niro’s upcoming film, *Un-War*, Wodiczko tells his audience: “Everything we call national culture is, in principle, war culture. We have to question the whole democratic system and deploy new radical democratic methods to wake up this system. We have to attack so called democracy because, the way political economic systems work should not deprive people of their [fundamental] rights” (Niro, *Un-War*). There are powerful echoes of the epilogue to Benjamin’s artwork essay embedded in these thoughts. Wodiczko points to history’s favoring of the winners, and the capture of collective memories in the public edifices erected to celebrate such epochs. His efforts to redress historical priorities are a challenge to centuries of archives and collective memories. In Wodiczko’s words, “I try … to use public memorials as media enabling alienated citizens to communicate through the spatial symbolism of cities. A monument speaking with veterans’ voices lends them its cultural and historical prestige” (AoW 27, my emphasis). The strategy reconfigures the space of social memory much in the way that Ricoeur spoke of the reconfiguration of life by narrative. Deutsche explains,

> Against instrumental memory and its correlative, narcissistic memory, [Wodiczko] helps the statues perform the duty of ethico-political memory, doing justice to the victims of the social forces the monuments represent. Ricoeur insists that the moral priority of collective recollection must belong to the victim, and ‘the victim at issue . . . is the other victim, other than ourselves.’” (Wodiczko, TAW 8-9)

Deutsche implies the need to look outward, to see beyond ourselves to our ethical duty toward our community. Without losing sight of the affinities found in Foucault and Lévinas,
Deutsche’s invocation of Ricoeur’s ideas (particularly in light of the other as victim) recalls the second mode of intersubjective exchange, or *relation*, detailed earlier in this chapter in reference to Boltanski’s work, in which our connection with the other is founded in an exchange of memories resulting in a mutual recognition and complex web of interrelated experiences.

Evoking afresh our shared humanity, despite divergent experiences, places the focus on what is held in common and encourages a fundamentally more compassionate interaction. Ricoeur’s proposal for a “New Ethos for Europe” is as timely today as it was when he put forth his theories; one has only to look as far as the Syrian refugee crisis. The global immigration crisis, particularly in the regions of North Africa and Mediterranean Europe, bring our attention to an ever-increasing xenophobia and a cultural climate antithetical to Ricoeur’s proposition. For Wodiczko, such rising tensions and resulting oppressions are fodder for more action, more ‘speaking with.’ To this notion, Adorno would certainly assert, “By cathecting the repressed, art internalizes the repressing principle, i.e. the unredeemed condition of the world (*Unheil*), instead of merely airing futile protests against it” (AT 27). He continues, “Art identifies and expresses that condition, thus anticipating its overcoming” (AT 27-28). Adorno understands Wodiczko’s avowed care for the other, the need to overcome through artistic interventions the disparities that plague modern civilization.

In a Lévinasian turn, Wodiczko implicates the audience and its fundamental role in the exchange of truth. Czubak expresses this shift in the introduction to Galeria Labirynt’s exhibition catalogue: “The aesthetic of Wodiczko’s projections comes as a response to ethical challenges, especially the ethics of humility formed by the philosophy of Emanuel Lévinas, where by meeting Others we become aware of our own alterity” (Czubak 15). The
response is nowhere more visible than in the 2009 installation titled *Guests*, in which Wodiczko ingeniously reveals his affinities with both Lévinas and Arendt. Where the *War Veterans Projections* confront us with the face, speech, and pathos of the other, mandating a responsibility with regards to his care, *Guests* turns the viewer back into himself by depriving him of the other’s face so as to heighten the urgency of bringing our culpability to light. This does not mean the face nor its speech is now lost. Wodiczko shows “the exceptional event of the facing [en-face]” (EN 57) by letting it anonymously animate humans’ presence as they go about their daily tasks. Such anonymity is perplexing and might at first seem to elicit distance rather than proximity in the aesthetic experience. But the effect is that we find ourselves accountable even for the other’s invisibility. To leave merely a blurred sensation of presence heightens the anxiety of the encounter with the unfamiliar and subverts a viewer’s complacency and distraction. This magnification of fear calls into question our essential relationship with the other, or the unfamiliar, and returns us to ourselves to question our position in relation to such guests.

*Guests* was comprised of a series of large arched illusory windows surrounding the interior space of the Polish Pavillion. The scenes were projected onto the walls and ceiling, mimicking access to an exterior world that did not, in fact, exist materially. The interior space was darkened to magnify the impact of the projections and the paradox of being a guest in a series of films addressing alterity. At issue is the notion of being other — excluded and unseen — *in* one’s circumstances. The phenomenon foregrounds the notion of alterity or foreignness. Derrida investigates the notion of the foreigner in his short volume *Of Hospitality*. As though mirroring Lévinas’ face as ethical origin, Derrida suggests, “As though the foreigner were first of all *the one who* puts the first question or *the one to whom*
you address the first question. As though the foreigner were being-in-question, the question-being or being-in-question of the question. But also the one who, putting the first question, puts me in question” (3). What becomes clear is the intricate interconnection of beings. Derrida states, “So it is indeed the master, the one who invites, the inviting host, who becomes the hostage—and who really always has been. And the guest, the invited hostage, becomes the one who invites the one who invites, the master of the host. The guest becomes the host’s host. The guest (hôte) becomes the host (hôte) of the host (hôte)” (OH 125). How does this occur in the work? Within the projected scenes, immigrants simultaneously go about their daily business, cleaning windows, discussing their lives with one another, and altogether executing the menial labor assigned to them. There is a voyeuristic quality to standing in the space, bearing witness to that which one cannot truly see. The blurred images highlight the inherent separation between groups of people, and Wodiczko is conscious of the effect: “Through the fog of the windows the viewers are put in a space in which they turn back toward their own interior, their own inside. They are put in a situation in which they must in fact acknowledge the way they see the world from inside themselves” (242). Accompanying the vignettes are the sounds of their concurrent conversations: the cacophony of noise makes it difficult to penetrate their thoughts. What one apprehends are partial narratives offering details of difficult lives in limbo—or to use Arendt’s terms, their statelessness.

Wodiczko is well aware of the power this veil of ambiguity creates, and we might rightly regard it as a showing of the way human unconcealment is obfuscated. The invisibility of the other is critical to his message. He explains, “As the political philosopher Hannah Arendt has implied, in a democracy, visibility is equality. Invisibility and inequality
go hand [in] hand” (TAW 17). Indeed, in the visual separation the viewer feels his culpability more deeply, thereby forcing us into an encounter with our own beliefs and narratives. In conversations with Wodiczko, John Rajchman suggests that the dilemma one faces when participating in this particular dynamic is one of “dis-identification,” which is very much like Bertolt Brecht’s notion of alienation (we have noted earlier). 16 Brecht defines this effect as one “which prevents the audience from losing itself passively and completely in the character created by the actor, and which consequently leads the audience to be a consciously critical observer” (91). Alienation insists upon “making the familiar strange” in order to distance one from the emotional manipulation inherent in cinematic practices.

As a specific event of the what we have been calling ‘emancipation,’ Guests exposes a global issue affecting millions of displaced populations, people who have been deprived of legal rights to live and work in the cities or countries they now inhabit (figure 4:16). Climate change and war have forced the dangerous and often deadly evacuations of already vulnerable people. Wodiczko, who at the time was questioning Europe’s increasing xenophobia and nationalism, seems to have anticipated the exponential growth of the problem as we moved deeper into the twenty-first century. During a United Nations panel discussion on the matter of displaced populations, William Milberg, a professor of Psychology at Harvard medical school, suggested a deconstruction of the myths driving xenophobia and its related epidemic of fear. Milberg explained the economic implications of added labor forces as beneficial to the overall social fabric. Milberg and Wodiczko both essentially ask: why does statelessness result in having no rights? Milberg pointed to John Rawls’ notion that a “society is better off when the worst off is thriving” (Milberg) despite the oppressive need host countries have of depriving such privileges to their guests. 17
Wodiczko invokes Kant: “I would emphasize a notion of democratic space as founded on Immanuel Kant’s postulate that our ability to judge is based on exchange with others, on ‘using our own reason’ and not on adhering to existing norms. It is only in confrontation with other people that we may express our own ideas and decide whether to uphold them or not” (Wodiczko 23). Whether at the United Nations or the Polish Pavilion, the task is one of enacting the kind of disarming alienation that can provoke an act of ‘original justice’ and ‘ethics of humility’ through a reconfiguration of the host-guest relationship.

*Guests* poses many questions of its viewers, while checking the balance of invisibility and visibility, of inequity and presumed freedoms. By formulating the question of what it means to be foreign in a land in which one has no rights, Wodiczko suggests what is most needed is fearless speech, lending a voice to the voiceless; but he realizes, at least in the current political climate, such speech seems a utopian delusion. Yet the dire necessity for such an event to unfold, providing the intersubjective exchange that might well move thought forward and offer relief to the voiceless, is exactly what Wodiczko seeks to create. The aspiration contains a distillation of the aforementioned ideas, including a multi-layered inclusion of Foucault, Lévinas, Ricoeur, Arendt and Heidegger’s thoughts. His hope for mutual respect and understanding, unbounded by fear and suspicion can only manifest in such a utopian exchange. He states,

> One among such parrhésiastic projects for artists and designers to create inspiring artifices, situations and events to aid expression and communication through which silent and unheard residents will be able to fearlessly open up and share the unsolicited truth about their existence while others, thanks to the event, will gain the courage to be able to fearlessly bring themselves closer to them, to listen to them and to hear them. (AoW, 29)

The space his work is able to create forces the viewer to think, and to re-consider any
organized, pre-ordained ideas regarding alterity. Wodiczko orchestrates the ethical exchange and, again, echoes Lévinas’ belief in the primacy of human connection: “If the absolutely Other appears to me, is its truth not integrated by that very fact into the context of my thoughts, there to find a meaning, and into my time, there to becoming contemporary?” (EN 55). Thus, beginning in our Mitsein, to borrow Heidegger’s concept, and integrating in a dialectical confrontation, we emerge on the same plane, establishing our equality and rendering visible those who have walked in societal shadows for generations. On the side of our conceptual points of reference, we can now see that Wodiczko’s artworks are not just resonant with the ethico-aesthetic ideas, but uniquely intertextualize Gadamer’s ‘fusion of horizons’ with Lévinas’ ‘ethics as first philosophy,’ and secure the event of art as a primary site of intersubjective exchange in the alētheiac dynamic of Heidegger’s ‘being-in-the-world.’ The works spur a collective catharsis and initiate a disposition toward social responsibility that would otherwise be neglected or forgotten, just as the foreigner is rendered invisible through a lack of conscious consideration.

How has Wodiczko’s work advanced the emancipatory potential we seek to disclose? Where Rosler turns the audience toward reflection and increases awareness of social imbalances, and Boltanski immerses his audience in the power of postmemory and its haunting implications, Wodiczko applies technological means in order to manifest the active space of human collaboration. He embodies Arendt’s philosophy of thinking and action and demonstrates the power such a process can have. In other words, he encourages critical thought and its subsequent active participation as an imperative source of healing. Wodiczko insists, “The art of new public domain can be precisely such a hybrid of construction and deconstruction” (23). He builds intricate installations, which, on their faces, appear quite
simple: people voicing individual experience through the conduit of the past and collective memory, deploying the authority inherent in ancient architectural features. Each project requires months, if not years, of careful planning, measuring, composition and care, with heavy emphasis on the solicitude for the other. The implications of Wodiczko’s work in the current geopolitical climate are significant as potential avenues toward a more conciliatory worldview. The issues he addresses are ongoing, including veteran’s rights issues and increased alienation in the aftermath of service, as well as a global crisis of human displacement. Without a doubt, critical consideration of how these issues can be addressed via human relationships and language is needed. As Wodiczko explains, “We need to restore and refresh the meaning of the language of democracy” (Transformative and Avant-Garde, 27).

§ 4.5: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

I have sought to show how a deeper, more meaningful truth is translated and brought forth through the works of Christian Boltanski and Krzysztof Wodiczko. Throughout, I have focused on art as event and truth as fluid and ever-unfolding narrative, building from Heidegger’s understanding of truth as unconcealment and returning to the underlying question of intersubjective ethics. To be clear, although that association is warranted on the side of comparative philosophical concepts, its full activation has been something singularly affected in the artworks. Most of this chapter’s philosophical study was weighted on the side of our Boltanski investigation, but it should be clear that those ideas also prepared us to read the depths of Wodiczko’s aesthetic and identify further philosophical nuances converging with those prior. We have seen the ways both artists extend philosophical ideas, often bridging differing philosophical discourses while gathering together dissonant voices of
human experience for the sake of dialogue, provocation, healing, and the reconfiguration of narratives. While the artists in question address different premises, their ultimate goal is to access truth as an opening for thought and, ambitiously, to achieve the correlative of action per Arendt’s prescription. To that end, Wodiczko insists,

Referring to Walter Benjamin, the prophetic act of ‘interrupting history,’ an act which can arrest time, must be an act of closeness to our ‘time now’ and a consequence of one’s revolutionary intuition of the present, this must be combined with the hope that one can prevent the future from repeating the past and present catastrophes and injustices.

(Transformative and Avant-Garde 33)

In other words, we must belong and respond to the epoch in which we live and by which we are shaped in our lived experience while simultaneously bringing forth the lessons history has taught us. Through evocative visual language, ideas are able to emerge from darkness, translating experience into shared truth. Both Wodiczko and Boltanski grow from events surrounding them, either by means of felt experience or a transference of post-memory. Boltanski relies on the familiar and the face, while Wodiczko enhances these characteristics by adding speech and altogether reconfiguring the at-handedness of modern technology. Both artists successfully move the viewer to an ethical plane.

The application of memory in the works shifts the human inclination toward self-understanding (as proposed by Heidegger) to a space of mutual consideration (as set forth by Lévinas, Ricoeur and Arendt). As an ethical gesture, sharing experiences moves beings into an empathetic disposition, one which might potentially nurture a better future. In reference to Marcuse, Douglas Kellner explains that, “Remembrance . . . thus re-members, reconstructs experience, going to the past to construct future possibilities of freedom and happiness” (33). This hopeful outlook can be seen in the aftermath of artistic exchange as viewers appreciate
the other whose experience is being expressed. This empathy is certainly true of Wodiczko’s *Bunker Hill Monument* when the bloodshed he addressed through the mothers’ narratives was curtailed.

What are the most important elements we have seen in the way such artworks address us? First, Boltanski is able to fashion truth from fiction, revealing to his viewers an open space of questioning collective consciousness. As Heidegger has intimated, in an artwork ‘truth is set to work’ in way that holds the ‘essential’ in the ‘temporal’, and vice versa (Krell 175, 202). By means of multiple anonymous headshots, bare bulbs and wires, along with would-be personal effects acquired haphazardly at thrift shops and junk stores, Boltanski is able to haunt the present with ghosts of the past, translating his personal journey into a powerful shared communal truth. Boltanski’s installations demonstrate Heidegger’s, Gadamer’s and Ricoeur’s notion that truth is ever changing, existing in a constant continuum of translation and inter-subjective interpretations. In a deeply personal way, the works access the ethical operations of the human mind, implicating our collective responsibility for the other as we search through and endless series of stories for the faces that anchor us in our fragile lives. Boltanski is fulfilling an important role as artist-philosopher, truth teller and revealer of light. He carries forward the memories of the *Shoah*, and, profoundly, bears witness to the nature of human beings as revealed in the continuation of genocides and inhumanity.

Second, Wodiczko activates the voices and stories of those who are otherwise silent and largely ignored by an enframing and unthinking society. He selects sites whose meaning is imbued with historical narrative and collective memory. These important features are the wellspring of intersubjective exchange, giving birth to a new, dialogic narrative, thereby
redressing history for a potentially better future. Noting the influence of Benjamin on Wodiczko, Czubak describes how the projections, “revealed that which the city’s official monuments would rather deny; into the memorials of victories and winners, Wodiczko [. . .] inscribed the history of losers, the ‘secret tradition’ of the conquered and excluded. Monumental history and the monopolization of collective memory were opposed by him with work on memory written out for multiple voices. (11) The polyphonic nature of these performances also fulfills and enacts Arendt’s suggestion that peaceful interactions can only be achieved through cooperation, and they extend Heidegger’s Mitsein to a more collaborative disposition seated within the poignancy of unfolding narrative. There is a sense that Heidegger too, though imperfectly, envisioned a similar extension. In a discussion about the notion of dialogue in Heidegger’s writing, Francisco J. Gonzalez writes,

[His] later account is that Miteinandersein is a being-involved-with-(Sein bei)-something-common (Gemeinsames) and that what we partake of in common is the truth of unconcealedness of the things to which we relate. In short, Miteinandersein is a ‘sharing in the truth’ (Sichteilen in die Wahrheit). (67)

As with Foucault’s Fearless Speech, sharing the truth provides the essential moment of catharsis and mutuality that are indispensable to an ethical exchange. Gonzalez continues, “Yet especially important in the present context is that Heidegger also maintains [. . .] that truth is of its essence shared with. . . , even if one hides the truth from others, even if others do not exist” (67). The point, as we have seen, echoes profoundly in Wodiczko’s own stated priority of speaking with veterans’ voices. As we turn our attention to the coming chapter, the multiplicity of truth and historical foundations at work in this ‘sharing in the truth’ will become evermore important. Both Boltanski and Wodiczko rely on history and memory as sociopolitical sites of exchange overlaid with the weight of discourse and interpretation. The
themes of site, memory, truth and history will continue to resonate as we embark on the final chapter, which addresses the work of Noor Mirza and Brad Butler.
CHAPTER 5:

TECHNOLOGIZED TRUTH:
THE AMBIGUITY OF TRUTH / NON-TRUTH IN THE WORK OF MIRZA + BUTLER

My intention was not to deal with the problem of the truth, but with the problem of the truth-teller, or of truth-telling as an activity: . . . who is able to tell the truth, about what, with what consequences, and with what relations to power . . . With the question of the importance of telling the truth, knowing who is able to tell the truth, and knowing why we should tell the truth, we have the roots of what we could call the ‘critical’ tradition in the West.

MICHEL FOUCAULT

§ 5.1: INTRODUCTION

Heidegger assures us: “The closer we come to the danger, the more brightly do the ways into the saving power begin to shine and the more questioning we become. For questioning is the piety of thought” (Krell 341). He thus closes the “Question Concerning Technology” with an offering of hope: We might potentially emancipate ourselves from technological enframing—however, only if we can negotiate its profound and prolonged effects through a coming to terms with its essence as one manifestation of technē. As we have previously discussed, we do this by remaining open to questioning and, subsequently, thinking—thereby expressing our ultimate ontological freedom as Dasein. One might say we do so by cultivating a form of defiance, one that negotiates and resists the complacency created by normative structures of power. Howard Caygill summarizes Heidegger’s project as an
attempt to “recuperate the un-recuperable,” (Berlin) though at first this statement may seem to imply a foreclosure on our ability to break the chains of enframing qua alienation. The inherent difficulty in disrupting an embedded cycle, which, by its very nature, hobbles thought, certainly continues to pose problems, as artists grapple with the cultural inertia affecting much of the West. What we have thus far seen in the artistic agency of Rosler, Boltanski, and Wodiczko is an embrace of this difficulty and what we may now call the ‘emergency’ it reflects. To do so they first of all ‘feel’ the urgency, and this is something we cannot take for granted. Working between ontology and ontic experience, Heidegger writes, “The dispropriation of beings, which takes from them the truth of beyng, allows humanity, ensnared in such beings, to fall into a lack of sense of emergency” (The Event 141).

Enframing creates such a lack, blocking thought and preventing a concentrated examination of that which imprisons Dasein. Santiago Zabala writes about this apathy in his recent volume Why Only Art Can Save Us, in which he explains, “This [condition] demands we intervene in a project of assistance, reconciliation, and recognition. For this existential project, it is not enough simply to dwell in the accounts of the victims or to recall their experiences. We must participate in the invisible wounds, experience the ignored genocides, and proclaimed the denied dispossessions” (125). In other words, grasping the sheer fact of our challenging- and challenged-forth condition, and then in turn undertaking a rival technē of art and thinking, we must unrelentingly question the very sites of experience, their levels of concealment notwithstanding.

What have we learned thus far about how our artists, and the questions their respective works pose, feel and engage with the ‘emergency’ situation? Furthermore, how do they reach into the viewer’s psyche to engender a rebirth of Arendtian contemplation and
action? And how do these lessons draw our inquiry back into its philosophical register in a more animated and nuanced way? Though employing different visual language, their varied works foster a state Heidegger calls *astoundedness*, or, in our case, the viewer’s awakening from perpetual distraction. Such astoundedness, as we have seen, must be renewed as the emergency precondition for *poësis*, involving a disarming of our *challenging-forth* on the individual and collective levels of our being-in-the-world. As with the case of Heidegger’s ‘ethical’ register (seen in chapter 1), here too there is an important antecedent: the aesthetic phenomenon of what the Kantian *sublime* brings forth in terms of balancing us precariously between perceived danger and transformative relief. Likewise, in his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Edmund Burke points to the space of the fearsome and incomprehensible. Elaborating on the sublime, Burke explains,

> Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pleasure and pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime, that is, it is productive of the strongest emotions which the mind is capable of feeling. (Burke 39)

In essence, the sublime places us in danger’s proximity while allowing us to hold onto the knowledge that we are, ultimately, safe and indeed inspired. In much the same way, beyond shaking us out of distraction, astoundedness awakens us into Letting-Be (*Gelassenheit*) which, in turn, gives way to thought. We may then say that astoundedness in the face of the sublime becomes, for Heidegger, action in the face of danger – an action born first of all from the ‘yielding’ intrinsic to the deeper essence of *technē*. Thus, the kind of artistic emancipation that occurs as defiance in the face of enframing and its resulting inertia will
contain an astounding sense of emergency and the resulting provocation of contemplation and action.

We have charted some specific features of the tightening technological grip in the recent cultural milieu. A further feature of today’s ‘emergency’ can be called, following George Smith, *addiction*. In his essay “The Art of Critique in the Age of Addiction,” Smith writes of Krzysztof Wodiczko’s oeuvre:

> Such developments in the art of critique are promising as regards political emancipation; but just as drug addiction and alcoholism do not discriminate according to age, race, gender, class, or ethnicity, globalized modern technology addiction exceeds all limits of the political and afflicts human beings no matter where they live or which side of revolution they stand. (4)

As a pervasive symptom of enframing, addiction has occluded the space of astoundedness by generating an ever-increasing spiral of device obsession, shortened attention spans, alternative facts and rapidly disseminated misinformation that aims to destabilize governments and populations while sowing the seeds of discontent. What becomes true on the personal level leeches back into the collective *theyness*, where critical thought, central to the diagnosis of power, has given way to mediatized political showdowns and unfounded extremist views. This facet of our ‘emergency’ is further specified by Jean-François Lyotard’s conception of techno-science and informationism, and his appeal to the spirit of the avant-garde to practice defiance. He speaks of “the spectacular introduction of what are called the new technologies into the production, diffusion, distribution and consumption of cultural commodities,” and how “they are in the process of transforming culture into an industry” (*Inhuman* 34). He continues, “It seems to me that what is really disturbing is much more the importance assumed by the concept of the bit, the unit of information. When we’re
dealing with bits, there’s no longer any question of free forms given here and now to sensibility and the imagination” (34). Lyotard laments what we may call the ‘addictions’ inherent in the objectivist position and its reduction of being and thought to units of information. Though not speaking in the register of Heideggerian ‘astoundedness’ per se, he does appropriate and reconfigure its antecedent – the Kantian sublime – as a resource for the aesthetic interventions in our perilous, addictive, condition.

It goes without saying that we have been warned, not only by Heidegger but by a substantial number of cultural theorists, philosophers, artists and members of society willing to risk dissent. Among these many voices, as we have noted in previous chapters, are Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes, and Jean Baudrillard. To this list, we must also now include Lyotard, Julia Kristeva, Zabala and further insights from Caygill. In anticipation of what is to come, I will briefly position their ideas. We have seen how Sontag decries the cacophony of violent images proliferated in print and on the web, leaving the viewer numb to their impact. She reminds us, “It is passivity that dulls feeling” (102). This passivity is a prominent feature of enframing and, in Arendt’s view, the breeding ground for the banality of evil.

Furthermore, passivity, as noted in our examination of Benjamin’s position vis-à-vis film, is also a characteristic of distraction as the audience receives its contents without questioning. As though speaking directly to the more nefarious effects of distraction, Barthes describes the mythology that results from the manipulation of signs and the subsequent emergence of political messages. Preying upon our ‘technical interest’ and blithe ‘assimilation’ of media ‘nourishment,’ mythology assumes a distracted stance and requires a viewer who is absorbing its signs without critical thinking or the creation of original ideas. For Baudrillard
the resulting situation is one of simulation and pacification, a folding of reality into the hyperreal, where the culture industry, for example, manufactures *war porn*. In his words,

> Everything aestheticizes itself into spectacle, sex into advertising and pornography and the whole gamut of activities into what is held to be called culture, which is something totally different from art; this culture is an advertising and media semiologising process which invades everything. (*Disappearance of Art and Politics*: 10)

Baudrillard anticipates the continuous dissemination of news and opinions that, like an addiction or myth that does not know itself, shapes the perspectives of large demographics without their notice. This proliferation recalls Baudelaire’s ‘tissues of horror’ served up with each morning repast. The culture industry creates infectious consumables. In his short volume *The Spirit of Terrorism*, he writes,

> The countless disaster movies bear witness to this fantasy, which they clearly attempt to exorcise with images, drowning out the whole thing with special effects. But the universal attraction they exert, which is on a par with pornography, shows that acting-out is never very far away, the impulse to reject any system growing all the stronger as it approaches perfection or omnipotence. (6)

Like Sontag’s decrying of violent images and their numbing effect, Baudrillard’s reference to pornography brings to bear the addictive and ‘distracting’ nature of the medium.

> Where such surface evidence of our enframed condition begins to specify the concrete facets of our ‘emergency,’ it also reflects a deeper and abiding vulnerability that obtains at the intersection of our ontological makeup and socio-cultural myths: Julia Kristeva’s conception of the *abject*, and what we may term its artificially produced simulacrum. Baudrillard’s assessment of media qua porn here links to the irrepressible desire to participate in mediatized narrative on a primal level. According to Kristeva, as a matter of
course, abjection “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). So, what haunts the placid surface of a simulacrum world is a pre-linguistic, visceral psychic space of the abject, “a ‘vortex of summons and repulsions’ that maintains the border between life and death” (Kristeva qtd. in Barrett 70). The phenomenon suggests that the makeup of a culture gone awry has, on a deeper level, to do with the psychological receptivity to a culture’s illusion of cathartic potential. As cultural systems are erected and maintained in many ways on the basis of concealing or bracketing the abject, promising emancipation from it, two phenomena occur: (a) new technologized modes of abjection enter into our addictive propensities, and (b) the underlying psychic dimension of the abject surfaces to call their bluff. Nearly speaking in the language of Heideggerian astoundedness, Kristeva details a visceral need to confront the abject – particularly through the arts — in an effort to negotiate internalized chaos while navigating our anxiety in Being-toward-death (to borrow Heidegger’s phrase).

We will return to some of these ideas as we proceed, but I have taken some time to position them because they serve as points of reference for mapping the scene and the stakes of what a ‘saving’ turn from within the ‘dangerous’ power might involve. On the side of aesthetic possibility, we have the potential for astoundedness to play counterweight to emergency, poēsis to challenging-forth, the sublime to unthinking inertia. On the side of a more specific diagnosis of our contemporary predicament, we have a condition of addiction that manifests in techno-science, media violence and myth, simulacrum and war porn. And traversing both sides we have the coefficient of the abject running through our individual and collective being-in-the world, rendering us susceptible to false remedies while also preserving a space for the aesthetic reckoning with what ‘challenges us forth’ from within
and without. Admittedly, we must wonder whether Heidegger’s cautious optimism is warranted. To test this concern, we need to look more closely at how astoundedness and emancipation might take shape through the arts, and we need to apply some of the noted conceptual tools to the specific cultural-political scenes that constitute the ‘emergency’ felt and engaged by practitioners and the intentions in their works.

Figure 5.1 + 5.2:
Noor Mirza and Brad Butler
The Unreliable Narrator
Waterside Contemporary
June 12 – August 9, 2014
London, UK
With these layered thoughts in mind, this chapter focuses on one particular artwork by artists Noor Mirza\(^2\) and Brad Butler,\(^3\) their 2014 video essay *The Unreliable Narrator.* (figures 5.1 + 5.2) The artwork is a tour de force that depicts the 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai. The film’s goal is to return its audience to critical thinking and action by way of a consideration of multiple truths that unseat well-established beliefs and ideologies. The title alone puts the viewer on notice: the claims of any content we encounter must, by default, be questioned. Through a careful analysis of Mirza and Butler’s video essay, we will discover how the artists expose the profound implications of global enframing qua technological addiction. Through a highly technologized presentation that incorporates intercepted audio recordings, surveillance CCTV film footage, original Bollywood re-enactments and the overlay of spoken words, the artists have successfully held up a mirror for a wide-ranging audience. In addition, by actively exercising a Brechtian alienation effect and shifting the viewer’s attention to carefully mediated intersections, the audience is drawn into a reconsideration of truth and complicity, our collective responsibility for the Other and the re-evaluation of interconnected global networks of power. Aligning with Benjamin’s view that film can offer a positive distraction by expressing sound ‘tendency,’ the co-creators of *The Unreliable Narrator* make it clear no one is immune to the ongoing addiction to technology’s promise of instant recognition and effect, as well as its capacity as a destructive weapon. The subject matter is specific: the audience and media/entertainment industries become participants in the ever-growing terrorist stage. Through this shift in accountability, the film and its broader implications provoke a species of ‘astoundedness’ in an audience that is largely demoralized, indifferent, and in a stubborn state of distraction. Mirza and Butler confront this problem in a manner reflective of Céline’s modernist literature as described by
Kristeva; they draw us nearer to what Kristeva calls the “abyss of abjection” through a sustained state of ‘indefinite catharsis’ (208-209).

To properly treat the film and the singular way it affects emancipation along the lines of these themes, we must stagger our approach. It would be ineffective to simply arrange the relevant points of theory and then apply them to the artwork, or to first sustain a full reading of the film and then corroborate its work with the relevant philosophical ideas. Such approaches would be inadequate to the way I believe the film stands as an intertextual intersection in its own right between art, theory, and our contemporary social-political moment. Our work on the side of theory, correspondingly, is also gathering into a moment of intertextual convergence and possibility as it too, in Agamben’s sense, becomes ‘contemporary.’ For these reasons in what follows we will proceed by (a) introducing the art-philosophical nature of the film and the method required to interpret it, then (b) let that better attune focal elements of our philosophical apparatus, then (c) offer a detailed reading of the film that shows how the intertextualization of art, theory, and the contemporary ‘emergency’ in the discourse of the film affect a work of critical emancipation.

§ 5.2: POSTMEMORY, DISCOURSE AND INTERTEXTUALITY: A PATH FORWARD

work and theory

Consistent with our prior chapter, as we analyze the artwork, we must examine notions of power, freedom, truth, and communal participation and inter-subjective responsibility. Doing so, we will once again witness the collapse of historical time with its traces carried forward through post-memory within individual and collective stories.
Marianne Hirsch outlines post-memory in her book *The Generation of Post-Memory*, in which she describes,

[A] particular relation to a parental past described, evoked, and analyzed … [which] has come to be seen as a ‘syndrome’ of belatedness or ‘post-ness’ and has been variously termed ‘absent memory’ (Ellen Fine), ‘inherited memory,’ ‘belated memory,’ ‘prosthetic memory’ (Celia Lury, Alison Landsberg), ‘mémoire trouée’ (Henri Raczymow), ‘mémoire des cendres’ (Nadine Fresco), ‘vicarious witnessing’ (Froma Zeitlin), ‘received history’ (James Young), ‘haunting legacy’ (Gabrielle Schwab), and ‘postmemory.’ (3)

Hirsch understands the implications of such embedded memories as they travel forward in time, affecting beliefs and human conduct. As concerns *The Unreliable Narrator*, ‘vicarious witnessing’ underpins much of the ongoing narrative, and this allows us to ask how, in today’s digitized climate, the enframing aspects of the consumer industry and its various distributors and audiences become complicit in ongoing acts of terror. Furthermore, we will investigate the limits of change artists can engender through their probing and unveiling of truths. The issue is particularly significant as the artists deploy increasingly sophisticated technologies while simultaneously seeking to expose the dangers those same methodologies present. This approach places us squarely in the scope and tensions of Heideggerian astoundedness, and there furnishes a broadening way back through the question of *alētheia* qua *poēsis* as an unfolding event. In Butler’s words, the artists’ overall concern is “about what’s hidden. . . . It’s about the politics of translation, about the ways different voices and powers mediate their messages, in our conscious and unconscious minds, about how the connections between how our capital moves, how artists move” impact us (Sheerin, “A Portable Museum Makes Art on the Go”). In a work of unconcealment that invites the same, Mirza and Butler seek to expose what lies hidden from view, outside the scope of
structural influence guiding political actions. The stakes in such an aesthetic of exposure are great, for as Zabala asserts, “If [. . .] there are a number of artists whose works demand our intervention rather than simple aesthetic contemplation, it’s not because they lack classically artistic sensibility but rather because the lack of a sense of emergency in framed democracies demands a new artistic shock” (5). How might The Unreliable Narrator address this lack and issue this shock? Says Butler,

[The work] explores the contested power of the author(ity), class, privilege, violence and mediatized spectacle. It asks people to consider a 2011 Eton Exam question for 12-year-old boys arguing for the moral and necessary deployment of troops on UK streets in 2040. In the same space (separated by a thin curtain) a two-screen video work about the Mumbai Attacks depicts terrorists, journalists and Bollywood competing with each other to endure in human consciousness. (“Artes Mundi”)

The need to be seen, to become indelible, and to manifest in the daily output of spectacle is understood in light of the human need for recognition and the ongoing function of post-memory.

How may the combination of spaces maximize the embedded layers of meaning within the film, and what is specific ‘lack’ Mirza and Butler seek to expose? First, there is an important contextual indicator. The artists include the Eton Exam as a signifier for the childhood development of British leadership past and future. The impact of extended British colonialism has had a lasting effect on the Asian subcontinent, rendering geopolitical relations particularly destabilized and violent over the last 70 years. Second, the facet of geo-historical space is iterated through the interplay of the two distinct galleries, thus testing for us the plausibility of Heidegger’s artistic salvation across real-time borders of enframement. The layering of the thematic situation within the delivery site will graphically reveal the
broader emergency context for the work – the dire conditions of our globalized technological culture as evidenced above by Lyotard, Baudrillard, and Heidegger’s connective sense of the reduction of Being to standing reserve.

Third, the layered space of The Unreliable Narrator’s meaning consists in the way its intertextual nature presents a confluence of multiple discourses that collapse time, implicate a violent history and highlight the devastating effects of underlying differences. Here the space of the work’s own ideas affords a dialogical opening to the polyphonic operation of the philosophical discourses we have set in motion. The content and consequence of the artwork sheds much needed light on how far we continue to be from Arendt’s prescription of understanding and cooperation, and plurality despite the compromises this condition demands. In the work itself there is a discourse of exposure and action happening within a surrounding discourse of concealment and pacification. When asked about the challenges of basing an artwork on events that continue to have ‘repercussions,’ Butler replied, “The challenge was to provoke insight by making imaginative connections overlooked in the recycling of totalizing images competing to represent their version of ‘normal.’ What are the challenges in using a frame from the real that is already fiction?” (Seymour, “The Unreliable Narrator: how should we represent terror?”). In other words, confronting closed minds and pre-determined ideas illuminates the barriers to freedom that must be overcome. Such deliberate intertextualizing in the ‘contemporaneity’ of the work lends itself to an intertextualizing with our conceptual discourses. For example, in Aesthetic Theory, Adorno states, “What recommends itself, then, is the idea that art may be the only remaining medium of truth in an age of incomprehensible terror and suffering. As the real world grows dark, the irrationality of art is becoming rational, especially at a time when art is radically tenebrous
itself” (AT 27). The hinge between the artists’ sense of their work’s timeliness and the theorist’s sense of art’s timeliness is, we may say, the shared priority of affecting emancipation from within the dangers of alienation. Common to the film and to Mirza and Butler’s other projects is the manner in which their responses to ongoing ‘emergencies’ form a prescient intersection of art and theory. The case was similar with artworks discussed in prior chapters, but here we will find a still sharper opportunity for theory to operate contemporaneously with art as the artwork operates contemporaneously with distinct features of today’s enframing. The result is that we will not just show, but indeed experience, how the dynamic ‘work-character’ (recalling Heidegger) of a work of art animates and extends the theory used to appreciate it.

In order to approach *The Unreliable Narrator* in earnest with these needs and goals in mind, we will first of all work *intertextually*, while also tracking the geopolitical forces at play within the ongoing South Asia narrative. We will work in two distinct yet parallel methodological directions: The first involves a *genealogical* investigation of the context and subject matter of the film, while the second requires a *phenomenological* reading of the medium itself. In order to coordinate the layered issues underpinning the work the genealogical course will pass from an overview of historical events, through a consideration of post-colonial thought, and into the trans-historical nature of the November 2008 Mumbai attacks. These points of attention are important because the density of the narrative concerns structures of power and domination, India’s relationship with the British Empire, and the latter’s durable effects on her societies, past and present. We cannot offer a full treatment of the political and relational intricacies issues at play in the film and its gallery installation. But at a minimum, our study should offer a better understanding of the plurality of truths at play
within this consequential historical moment and its aesthetic re-presentation. We will also extend the work of genealogy to the work’s immediate culture-industry context by briefly examining the ratings-driven news analyses related to the 2008 attacks and their quality as a real-time technological spectacle of carnage and death served to a global audience. A resulting question will be how this mediatization places the viewer in proximity to his own mortality and whether that encounter forces one to confront the incomprehensible through the state of Heideggerian astoundedness. Herein is the pivot from the genealogical to the phenomenological, revealing how the film affects the viewer’s experience and sensibility.

Treating this question regarding viewer experience and sensibility will move us into our more phenomenological study of *The Unreliable Narrator*, in which we will undertake a close reading through the lenses of Heidegger, Lévinas, Arendt, Foucault, Baudrillard, Kristeva and Lyotard. We will analyze the ways in which the aesthetic experience is being framed by the medium and its multi-layered content, including how the film’s sequencing moves its viewer through a complex, thought-engendering intersubjective experience. The dual narrative, emerging from both Rahila Gupta’s voice (as the primary narrator) and those of the handlers in Pakistan, echoes the distant past and discloses the power of discourse; their parallel dialogues underscore the need for questioning, the piety of thought so valued by Heidegger. We will also determine how the artwork itself contributes to the philosophical treatment of the issue of truth by disabusing its audience of the way we collectively relate to the real. Mirza and Butler challenge timeworn totalizing notions of the other, putting into crisis our understanding of ideological positions and considerations of geopolitical narratives. The result, I argue, reinforces our ethical intersubjective responsibility for the other and the need, as Arendt asserts, for the openness and acceptance of the plurality of the human
condition, along with its demand for cooperation and compromise. Working phenomenologically will also enable us to press more deeply than the commonly settled focus on how the meaning of Mirza and Butler’s artwork centers on its disruption of current geo-political spaces. While this reading is in keeping with the artists’ statements, the undercurrents running through the entire video essay carry with them a richer narrative and disclose the need for a reconsideration of multiple perspectives in light of post-memory and its impact on present-day tragedies. The questions I will be asking address the multiplicity of truths as events emerging from historical, geopolitical discourses and post-colonial traces of the same. I will investigate the binaries such as truth and fiction, totalization versus acceptance of a plural world, and the potential for breaking free of the bonds alienation has imposed upon our Dasein.

What we will learn by way of these methodological and thematic focal points will amount to a very specific case of an aesthetic event that demonstrates and enriches the elements of philosophical critique outlined above and carried over from prior chapters. *The Unreliable Narrator* makes clear the incredibly complex nature of Indo-Pakistani relations, while also illuminating the lingering post 1947 British Partition struggle for control of their borders. Adorno’s concern about the tenability of poetry after Auschwitz echoes in what this video essay undertakes as it seeks to expose the visceral components of a constant state of emergency and its instrument of contrived political control through fear. We must remember that, if Heidegger and Zabala are right, it is the ‘absence of emergency’ (the unperceived emergency), or generalized inertia, that should sound the alarm of enframing’s dangers. But Mirza and Butler face a time in which, ironically, the alarm is sounded through a misleading categorical discourse of ‘global terrorist acts,’ and so their work of ‘exposure’ must press
deeper still into the layer of those infected intersubjective relations that shape human conduct and too easily negate efforts toward reconciliation. Ultimately, *The Unreliable Narrator* calls into question the hyperreal, the feast of violence and the global consumption of such territories.

I have been speaking of how the intertextual layers within the film shape its ability to sound the alarm of a ‘lack of emergency’ and in turn attune its viewers to a reflective engagement with how phenomena of power, freedom, truth, and communal participation and inter-subjective responsibility hold concrete, and urgent, implications. And I have explained how a genealogical and phenomenological method of reading the film is necessary if we are to apprehend the full measure of this aesthetic attunement. The motive and opportunity on both fronts comes from our initial considerations (above) of how astoundedness can engage with emergency, *poēsis* with *challenging-forth*, the sublime with unthinking inertia, and how the play of techno-science, media violence, addiction, and war porn constitute a simulacrum effect within which abides the vulnerable variable of the abject. It may seem as though we are freighting the work of Mirza and Butler with a tall order of conceptual issues to answer. Though I do believe their film meets this task, we need to point out that we are experiencing an attunement on the side of our *theorizing* that will coordinate with the emergency-attunement affected in the artwork. More than just the mobilization of a critical apparatus, theory too needs to intertextualize in a way that can sound the alarm of the lack of acknowledged emergency in a crisis situation. I will now document how this is underway and how several other critical theories can serve its coordination with the film.
As we have begun to see, we come to *The Unreliable Narrator* with a stock of conceptual touchstones operating between philosophy and aesthetic works and earmarking art’s emancipatory capacity, namely: truth as a ‘propriative’ event, post-memory, enframing qua alienation, archive, authenticity and freedom. Already in *Being and Time*, Heidegger finds that, “In ‘poetical’ discourse, the communication of the existential possibilities of one’s state of mind can become an aim in itself, and this amounts to a disclosing of existence” (BT 1962 205). The aim comes to apply to the poetic essence of the arts and the possibility therein for an astoundedness before the possibility that “the frenziedness of technology may entrench itself everywhere to such an extent that someday, throughout everything technological, the essence of technology may unfold essentially in the propriative event of truth” (Krell 340). We know that the statement refers to the emergence of the saving power within the danger of enframing, but the idea will be realized in a more material way in *The Unreliable Narrator* as we reckon with our own beliefs and fixed ideas while propelled into a state of confusion within the careful choreography of horror. This realization requires a curated encounter with the psychic space Kristeva attributes to the abject, as well as a recognition, with Foucault, of how discourse manipulates and manifests within systemic and individual behaviors. It also requires a further extension of Arendt’s ethical aspirations for thinking and action, one that returns us to her position with regards to the banality of evil and the need for critical thought in order to avert the negative effects of totalization, but also an extension that draws upon her account, in *The Human Condition*, of possible avenues to peaceful co-existence. The stakes and scope of ‘astoundedness,’ as we have begun to see, can also be nuanced by reading *The Unreliable Narrator* in concert with Baudrillard’s *The Spirit*
of Terrorism and War Porn, where we find that the detachment-effect of the hyperreal is shown in situ through the Mumbai attacks and the spectacles emanating from the shadows of 9/11 – events that test our limit experience and the utter inability of the West to digest such atrocities. Where Baudrillard’s ideas cannot, however, do full justice to the nuances and complexities of Mirza and Butler’s work, we do well to reengage Lévinas’ decisive emphasis on intersubjective responsibility in the phenomenal encounter with the face. The disorienting experience generated by Mirza and Butler’s artwork evokes a Lévinasian meeting with the other – an originary ontological alarm, so to speak – and the essential ethical considerations that emerge as a result.

I will return in a moment to some important nuances in Lévinas, Arendt, and Kristeva that will animate and be animated by the film. But first, we need to position how the specifications of discourse theory in Spivak, Foucault, and Said, can signal the way that (a) theory can intertextualize to sound the emergency situation, and (b) this can help us hear the way the phenomenological and genealogical aspects of the film sound its own alarm. Spivak equips us with ways to understand the post-colonial context and its effect on identity and consciousness in South Asia and elsewhere. Her ethical perspective and focus on the rise of meaning through the social domain addresses the depths of post-colonial demarcations and reveals the foundations of the violent past that bleed into the present (both literally and figuratively). The imperial structures of power, the long-since abandoned British Raj, continue to play a role not only in the ways post-colonialists perceive themselves but also in the ways the West interprets the ongoing Orientalist discourse. In her essay “Who Claims Alterity?,” Spivak describes her own experience as a ‘post-colonial’ in a way that, as with Hirsch’s aforementioned notion of post-memory, shows how the internalized experience of
the past shapes identity and cultural mores. What becomes poignantly clear is the degree to which we as individuals attach ourselves to knowledge or meaning as prescribed by varying external forces.

Identifying the authors of such embedded knowledge frameworks requires an understanding of Foucault’s interpretation of both *discourse* and *épistème*, cornerstones of his writing in *The Archeology of Knowledge* and *The Order of Things*. John Protevi defines épistème as “Foucault’s name for the objects of his archeological method of analysis” (176). He continues: “An épistème is a set of relations or rules of formation that, at a given place and time, unite the set of discursive practices that make up an apparatus of knowledge production.” It operates as “a set of dynamic relations that exist only in their concrete occurrences in discursive regularities across fields of knowledge in a particular historical epoch” (Protevi 176). Fundamental structures of knowledge rely on épistèmes as their building blocks; épistèmes define our understanding of the constitution of history. Taking a broader view, discourse is, by necessity, as fluid as it is constitutive — changing with the forward flow of history and its authors. It is determined by the networks of knowledge and power in control of contextual ideas and apparatuses. Discourses, almost in the manner of functioning social *a prioris*, are, per Chris Weedon,

...ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern. (108)

Expansive and enabling on certain terms, and strategic in the systemic organization of knowledge and power frameworks, discourse shapes its recipient, affecting ideas and
dispositions in order to assert control. It is durable, embedding itself in beliefs, altering human conduct and individual freedoms; one could say that discourses establish the conditions in which and to which the alarm of astoundedness may be sounded or (as is often the case) suppressed.

The problem is not simply that this discursive agency happens, but that it is a coveted position of authority. In *The Order of the Discourse*, Foucault explains, “discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle, discourse is the power which is to be seized” (Foucault 211). He notes that “in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality” (210). He ascribes to it “that prodigious machinery designed to exclude” (214). With such a will to knowledge as its essential element, colonialist discourse and its far-reaching tentacles became the focal point for those acting in resistance to its nefarious effects. The centuries of external influence certainly have left indelible marks on the South Asian narrative. The long-standing archives and literature forming the colonialists’ views have “exert[ed] a sort of pressure and something like a power of constraint … on other discourses” (Foucault 213).

Acknowledging his debt to Foucault in his seminal text *Orientalism*, Edward Said writes about the Orientalist perspective:

I doubt if it is controversial, for example, to say that an Englishman in India, or Egypt, in the later nineteenth century, took an interest in those countries, which was never far from their status, in his mind, as British colonies. To say this may seem quite different from saying that all academic knowledge
about India and Egypt is somehow tinged and impressed with, violated by, the gross political fact—and yet that is what I am saying in this study of Orientalism. (11)

Colonialist discourse carries within its script the defining narratives of post-colonialism and is thus imperative for our reading of *The Unreliable Narrator*. Colonialism’s roots in oppression and inequality, in imposed educational systems and traditions, in a loss of heritage and cultural identity, have left the subcontinent enframed in a “closed space” of “strict rules” (220) that author what counts as knowledge and identity. The state of affairs may be termed a technological apparatus; and the operating features of a discourse recall Derrida’s attention to how archives are edited, controlled and purposefully biased, indicating a need for a return to plurality as a guiding principle. As the features of discourses function still further within *academic* theory, we see with Said how what ought to be a space of critique calcifies as a complicit party:

Taking the late eighteenth century as a roughly defined starting point, Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient — dealing with it by making statements about it, authoring views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism is a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. (Harrison and Wood 1006–1007)

In short, Orientalism and its totalizing effect are clear demonstrations of the propagation of discourse. As what we may call an instance of ‘theyness’ and enframing at a discrete and consequential pitch, the effects of such institutionalized knowledge are immeasurable and often deeply destructive. There is not only the side of ‘othering’ at the hands of social-political-historical discourses, but also the lateral function of academic *épistèmes* to enjoy a strategic power of their own. Said goes on to say, “Orientalism, therefore, is not an airy
European fantasy about the Orient, but a creative body of theory and practice in which, for many generations, there has been considerable material investment” (Harrison and Wood 1008). Such ‘investment’ expects its rewards, in which case the discourse must ‘ward off’ any sense of ‘emergency.’ Cloaked behind an apparent ‘lack’ of emergency, then, Said determines that, “Because of Orientalism, the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought or action” (Said 1007).

The importance of Said’s assessment to the ongoing conflicts in South Asia cannot be overstated: the devastating implications have directly informed both the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks and the related material content of Mirza and Butler’s *The Unreliable Narrator*. It is a matter of fundamental freedom, both collective and individual, and yet at the same time a precise instance of an ‘emergency’ that conceals its own enframing operations. Lingering subjugation, whether extrinsic or now internalized, continues to manifest within intersubjective dynamics. Anthropologist Talal Asad describes Said’s work as

. . . not only a catalogue of Western prejudices about and misrepresentations of Arabs and Muslims ... [but an investigation and analysis of the] authoritative structure of Orientalist discourse—the closed, self-evident, self-confirming character of that distinctive discourse, which is reproduced, again and again, through scholarly texts, travelogues, literary works of imagination, and the obiter dicta of public men-of-affairs. (648).

One hears in this description how the inertia of complacency – that which an alēthiac artwork wants to ‘defy’ and place before the face of the other – is *active*. The totalizing effect of globalism results in an inability to distinguish the unique character of a society, let alone of an individual. Vast populations are lumped into specific categories by means of embedded
ideas, disseminated by the dominating power. An attunement to such phenomena is crucial to any investigation of the emancipatory critique offered in *The Unreliable Narrator*.

To this state of affairs, an aesthetically issued emancipatory critique would doubtless need to engage the problem of inter-subjective violence, something further insights from Arendt and Lévinas supply. Arendt bases her critique on an account of person-to-person relations, where the importance of respecting individual character is paramount to one’s essential freedom. She explains, “the moment we want to say who somebody is, our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying what he is; we get entangled in a description of qualities he necessarily shares with others like him; we begin to describe a type or a ‘character’ in the old meaning of the word, with the result that his specific uniqueness escapes us” (HC 181). Her statement points to the destructive disposition of unquestioned discourse and its inherently reductive nature. One of her resources for subverting this problem is, as we have noted earlier, the way Heidegger’s notion of *Miteinandersein* added a stress on ‘being-involved-with’ and ‘sharing in the truth’ to his more formal conception of *Mitsein*. One mode of this, Gonzalez points out, was ‘friendship,’ understood as “growing and resting ‘in a genuine passion for the matter that is shared [gemeinsame Sache]’ (147)” (Gonzalez 67). The idea confirms the importance and possibility of moving from a position of self-based preoccupation to shared experience. The idea of a shared passion corresponds as well to Heidegger’s (often overlooked) early sense of the historical nature of heritage and communal living. In §75 of *Being and Time* he explains, “The ‘world’ belongs to everyday trade and traffic as the soil from which they have grown and the stage where they are displayed. In public being-with-one-another others are encountered in the activities in which ‘one’ ‘gets into the swim of things’ [*mitschwimmt*] ‘oneself.’” (369). He continues, “The
occurrence of history is the occurrence of being-in-the-world” (369). With this communal
dynamic in view, Arendt presses into the political realm of plurality and our essential Being-with. The application brings her to the themes of totalization and othering, which link her ideas to those of Lévinas and sharpens our focus on the matter of violence that will be of central importance to the film

In Lévinas’ text, Totality and Infinity, ‘totalization’ is at once a conceptual and practical force that has a negative effect on intersubjective freedom. Anthony F. Beavers explains that totalization occurs on the personal level when

I have cut off the connection with the other that is necessary if ethics is to refer to real other people. This is a central violence to the other that denies the other his/her own autonomy. Lévinas calls this violence totalization and it occurs whenever I limit the other to a set of rational categories, be they racial, sexual, or otherwise. Indeed, it occurs whenever I already know what the other is about before the other has spoken. Totalization is a denial of the other’s difference, the denial of the otherness of the other. That is, it is the inscription of the other in the same. If ethics presupposes the real other person, then such totalization will, in itself, be unethical. (“Introducing Lévinas to Undergraduate Philosophers”)

Beavers’ explanation highlights the fundamentally unethical nature of such inter-subjective activity. Against this tendency, Lévinas holds: “A relationship to an Other that, precisely because of irreducible difference, refuses to give itself to a thematizing knowing and thus, is always assimilative” (Entre Nous 72). A recovery of ‘irreducible difference’ in thought and deed would break the hold of totalization’s reduction of persons and communities. By the same token, Arendt would say that totalization denotes the violent breach of Heidegger’s Miteinandersein, and does so through an increasingly violent momentum on the personal and collective levels that are simultaneously shaped by the power plays of discourses. What we
find within this breach is the manifestation of what Heidegger had termed ‘challenging-forth’ on a scale that is as broad and accelerating as it is specific and particular to the experiences of distinct people groups and historical moments. As experienced on the ground – the position from which and to which The Unreliable Narrator speaks – the violent momentum settles into a pattern of what we will call othering. As with the breach of Heidegger’s Miteinandersein, here we find the patterned inversion of what Lévinas sought to recover in alterity, and thereby the toxic reframing of our essential ‘being-involved-with’ and ‘sharing in the truth.’ Involved-with and sharing-in on what terms, on what discursive mobilization of power? In principle otherness should fold within the vocation of a healthy and just pluralism. Notice the Arendtian extension of ‘sharing-in’ as she clarifies her terms:

Human distinctness is not the same as otherness. . . . Otherness, it is true, is an important aspect of plurality, the reason why all our definitions are distinctions, why we are unable to say what anything is without distinguishing it from something else. . . . In man, otherness, which he shares with everything that is, and distinctness, which he shares with everything alive, become uniqueness, and human plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings. (HC 176)

Arendt recognizes the challenge inherent in our plurality, while also compassionately marking the difference between otherness and distinctness. But where the contest for power prevails amid the mobilization of, and addiction to, discourses, otherness is appropriated as a coercive strategy; it becomes the grammar of Orientalism, denies human uniqueness, and creates a separation between ourselves and those we deem ‘different.’ In a subtle way, this strategy seeks to manage power’s ability to preserve an enframing agency at the expense of what would be a healthier praxis. Arendt explains the issue in terms pertaining to the
actualized relation between word and deed on the side of what the *more just* power of
‘involvement’ and ‘sharing’ would be:

What first undermines and then kills political communities is loss of power and final impotence; and power cannot be stored up and kept in reserve for emergencies, like the instruments of violence, but exists only in its actualization. Where power is not actualized, it passes away, and history is full of examples that the greatest material riches cannot compensate for this loss. Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities. (HC 200)

In essence, non-hegemonic power manifests in truth, and truth emerges from the authentic collaboration between word and action. The enframing nature of discourse would be dispelled only in its return upon itself in truth. The ethical need to do so challenges established historical discourses (narratives) that serves to perpetuate empty dominance. Arendt’s point, operating like a robust advancement of Heideggerian ‘solicitude’ and a concrete application of Lévinasian ‘original justice,’ underscores the need for (and stakes in) deconstructing Orientalist discourse and its traces.

What we are seeing here on the side of theory (and what will be paralleled on the side of *The Unreliable Narrator*) is an intertextualizing production that incorporates Heidegger’s ontology of our being-with and worldhood, Foucault’s analysis of the conditions and implications of discourse coursing problematically through both, Said’s specification of the hegemony inscribed in the Orientalism paradigm, and Lévinas and Arendt’s overlapping critiques of the violence within totalization and otherness. Taken together, these ideas envision and initiate an ethics of thinking and collective responsibility that would address the
social-political realm in a diagnostic and curative way. They also point afresh to the unique ability of artistic works to do the same. But for theory and/or art to reassert the just collaboration of word and deed they must at the same time traverse the deep interior divisions that form the ongoing psychological root of othering. Kristeva’s theory of abjection serves this need by revealing a kind of enframing afoot within the makeup of our fragile identities, and in turn within the social patterns of constituting systems of power on the basis of this fragility’s artificial marginalization. Let us return to this issue for a moment. Speaking ontologically to the tension internal to subjectivity and sociality alike, and their pretensions to maintain the ‘sameness’ (or semblance) of an identity, she explains how the abject amounts to what seems an ‘impure other.’ It is the space between birth and language, belonging to the realm of the maternal—floating somewhere in the placenta-filled void permeating one’s being prior to fully achieving autonomy. It is a place of visceral responses to environmental or bodily factors; we feel disgust, even horror, at spoiled milk, bodily emissions, dead bodies. But the tendency is to suppress the abject and put it out of play internally and externally across our Mitsein. “And yet,” she continues, “from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master” (2). Operating as a kind of deconstructive threat internal to psyche and system, subjectivity and discourse, ego and épistème, abjection “disturbs identity, system, order.” Abjection, in its own way, resists ‘totalization.’ She speaks of it as what “does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). This resistance follows the subject from within, drilling into the psyche while simultaneously informing yet revealing the contingency of personal, cultural and religious constructs. It is ultimately inescapable. But art – in her case especially modernist literature – can uniquely address the matter and show it, endure it,
reckon with it in a way that does not pretend a final purging of the fragility it evokes. Kristeva asserts, “On close inspection, all [art and] literature is probably a version of the apocalypse that seems to me rooted, no matter what its socio-historical conditions might be, on the fragile border (borderline cases) where identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist or only barely so—double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject” (207). Kristeva is executing her own genealogy of this particular function of the abject, with a more lived, a priori focus than that of Foucault – but one we can apply to the problematic operations of discourse that he has shown. The Unreliable Narrator will take on the double challenge of recognizing the psychological fact of abjection yet at the same time revealing the manipulative way specific systemic discourses and blithely categorical ‘emergencies’ constitute their power on the basis of, essentially, abjecting their ‘others.’

Returning us to the surface effects of the breaches noted above, we better appreciate Arendt’s opposition to identity-altering categorizations that deny individuals their unique ability to ‘distinguish’ themselves, to be unique among men, and to act on the basis of genuine pluralism. What must be recognized above all is the potential for each of us to hold distinct views, to believe in multiple principles and to be individual-plural. Such existence requires, as we have seen, the reconfiguration of power toward a better integration of word and deed, but without presuming that the constituent parts of the plural (be they persons, sects, or states) are fixed in static identities. She explains: “Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live” (Arendt, HC 8). This says: we are the same in terms of how we are never the same, and that should be a paradox that inspires justice.
In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world … This disclosure of ‘who’ in contradistinction to ‘what’ somebody is—his qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings, which he may display or hide—is implicit in everything somebody says and does. (Arendt HC 179)

It is the acceptance of uniqueness and distinction, lending a voice to those who might otherwise be oppressed or without rights, that Arendt proposes as a path forward to peaceful coexistence. But this is no easy task, for as power is at the heart of discourse and control is exerted through its embedded texts, both the alarm over a ‘lack of emergency’ and an emergency intervention in the enframing must be sounded at once.

What discourse theory, post-colonial critique, and the alarms of totalization and othering alike point to is a technē of strategic objectifications and paralyzing implications that Arendt would have us recognize and subvert in the name of a durable pluralism. Taken as an intertextual body, these critical theories seek to ‘astound’ and thereby emancipate. They are not simply thematic supplements to the genealogical and phenomenological approach our reading of The Unreliable Narrator requires, but collaborators with the tendency, durability, bringing-forth, and face of justice, and indefinite catharsis affected in the film. The collaboration matters because, after all and as Weedon asserts, dispelling the authority of power structures requires an understanding of “a dynamic of control and lack of control between discourses and the subjects, constituted by discourses, who are their agents. Power is exercised within discourses in the ways in which they constitute and govern individual subjects” (Weedon 113). As applied to local and international conflicts, trans-historical narratives and archives are active, complicit participants in the ongoing post-colonial
narrative and its consequences. We need to re-negotiate the traces of the past with an eye toward our uncertain future.

§ 5.3: PAST–PRESENT: MUMBAI TERROR ATTACKS OF 26/11

The Unreliable Narrator is, by necessity, multi-layered. Viewing it in isolation from its historical and contemporary context is, therefore, a mistake. The seventeen-minute video essay compresses a lengthy historical narrative into its frames. The film questions global power structures, media fascination with atrocity, issues of nationalism and truth’s multiplicity. Understanding its inherent potency requires an inquiry into South Asia’s complex past, though a detailed treatment of that full history exceeds the limitations of this project. That said, at minimum, we must assess a few key moments, while noting the traces of British imperialism that linger in ongoing acts of violence. A brief overview of the Indian subcontinent’s tumultuous colonialist narrative and ongoing conflicts is necessary. I have moved the main content of this genealogical study to Appendix C, but I will reprise a few of the key findings briefly here.

Two immediate lessons occur on the near side of the region’s history. First, Mirza and Butler’s subject matter extends directly from the nationalistic tensions born of centuries of British rule in India, and the film specifically references the hostilities attending the 1947 partitioning of the Indian subcontinent into separate nation states and its Hindu and Muslim populations. These events, and the discourse they materialized, persist in the collective post-memory of that region today. Second, subsequent history shows the further exacerbation of geopolitical turmoil on the subcontinent as foreign powers – namely, the USA, USSR, and
China – vied for its strategic value in relation to conflicts and opportunities in, for example, Afghanistan.

A further, and still more penetrating series of lessons occur when the deeper history of the region is considered. First, there was the instigating allure of South Asia to seventeenth century British trade interests, and the resulting conflicts that ensued as the material interests of the East India Company grew into broader strategic interests pitting the British against mounting competition from the Dutch, Danes, Portuguese, and French. The quest to advance and maintain strategic control led to military force (including the use of private armies) and occupation. Second, the rise of British rule meant the suppression of cultural pluralism through measures targeting language, education, and religion – acts that solidified the grip of discourses on ‘words and deeds,’ countered events of resistance, and established a pattern of material and cultural inequity funneling all the way to the pages of the noted Eton examination booklet. Third, with the rise of industrial technologies and international interventions at the entry into the twentieth century, the region bore the weight of war-bent global violence and resurgent inequities in the form of political abuse, the caste system, and British-inspired identity politics. Fourth, and related, the path of approach to the India/Pakistan partition saw discourses of racial superiority, contests for power between Muslim and Hindu governance campaigns, gross atrocities of inter-sectarian violence as land and laws were ‘transitioned,’ and in turn the death of an estimated one to two million civilians in the weeks after India and Pakistan won their independence from British rule. What Ayesha Jalal states regarding these events speaks to the broader nature and impact of each of the lessons we have noted: “the Partition is the central historical event in twentieth century South Asia. . . . A defining moment that is neither beginning nor end, partition
continues to influence how the peoples and states of postcolonial South Asia envisage their past, present and future” (qtd. in Dalrymple).

Moving into the post-colonial context, the genealogy contextualizes the subject matter of the film by surveying how the exchange between discourse-function and lived-experience authored new iterations of fragility, chaos, violence, territorial disputes, and the intrusions of global strategic interests on the subcontinent. Such events, and the power structures and contests that drive them, reveal how it can be deceptive to believe that ‘freedom’ is a liberating force, and likewise how the atrocities brought to bear on the subcontinent continue to haunt current generations through a pervasive infusion of post-memory and discourse. In each of their video essay’s choreographed frames, like each of these genealogical layers, Mirza and Butler draw the viewer into an encounter with a repetition of this brutal past complete in all its graphic details and urgency.

Reading the contemporary moment in light of this genealogy, William Dalrymple of the *New Yorker* observes: “1947 has yet to come to an end” (*New Yorker*). The message of *The Unreliable Narrator* is much the same, and what confirms Dalrymple’s point is also what the film takes as its precise subject matter: the Mumbai terror attacks of November 2008. We need to understand the nature of how these events reflect issues of the larger genealogy as they arise at the center of Mirza and Butler’s work. To this end, I will now offer a brief contextualization of the Mumbai attacks in concert with a return to some of our philosophical points of reference as we enter into the close reading of the film. There are five main points to note as regards technology’s advance and its perpetuation of our enframed condition. We will track these items as follows: (a) the use of technology as a driving force in global violence, (b) the spectacle of technologization, (c) technology’s facilitating of terror,
(d) the body as a technological weapon, and (e) the relentless perpetuation of embedded discourse.

First there is the phenomenon of technological networking utilized for hostile disruption. As is the case with many épistèmes, on Foucault’s account, the impacts of South Asia’s history have spread beyond its own borders, implicating a broader global audience in the ongoing manifestations of violence. The expansion of historical momentum and discourse appears within each frame of The Unreliable Narrator and its exploration of multiple views of events. At their core, the attacks were technological, multi-national, and driven by deeply-felt, hostile discourse and post-memory. The carefully choreographed assaults lasted 4 days, from 26 to 29 November 2008, and, as clearly expressed by the Pakistan-based handlers, were intended to rival the media spectacle surrounding the New York City events of September 11, 2001. The New York Times reported the events in Mumbai “may be the most well-documented terrorist attacks anywhere” (Bajaj and Polgreen “Suspect Stirs Mumbai Court”), underscoring its ‘success’ when considered from the perpetrators’ point of view. A series of networking systems were put into play throughout the siege: Twitter, Facebook and Flickr, along with news distributors and bloggers, and Google Maps. Numerous intelligence agencies, including the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), coordinated with information-sharing services. The significance of such multipronged technological webs encircling a series of events highlights the depth of human addiction and the strategic value of this as a ‘standing reserve.’ As humans harnessed nature, technology, in turn, envelops beings. Per Heidegger, “[T]he revealing that holds sway throughout modern technology does not unfold into a bringing-forth in the sense of poiēsis. The revealing that rules in modern technology is a challenging [Herausfordem],
which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy which can be extracted and stored as such” (Krell 320). The assailants perpetrating the Mumbai attacks understood this dynamic well enough to choreograph their actions for the technological stage. Enframing furnishes an opportunity for theater and spectacle.

Second, there is the manner in which the agitations of globalization become an opportunity for affecting the kind of simulacrum — and spectacle-based narrative delivery system that advances group aims. Although separate terrorist groups were responsible for 9/11 and 26/11, they both, symbolically and politically, exemplify the totalizing effects of globalization. The series of Mumbai attacks were carried out by a terror cell, Lashkar e Taiba (LeT)\textsuperscript{5}. This group was originally founded to aggressively disrupt India’s continued control over the province of Kashmir. The group’s association with Pakistan and eventual operations as jihadists, serve as glaring reminders of ever-present post-colonialist conflicts. Separated by seven years, both events reveal much about an ongoing power dynamic driven by political and economic alienation. Baudrillard’s \textit{The Spirit of Terrorism}, as well as his essay titled “War Porn” serve well on this point. He approaches terrorism through the lens of mediatization; he offers a critique of both the technological advances driving the accessibility and spectacle of such images, as well as news consumers. When speaking of 9/11, Baudrillard explains, “Among the other weapons of the system which they turned around against it, the terrorists exploited the ‘real time’ of images, their instantaneous world-wide transmission, just as they exploited stock-market speculation, electronic information and air traffic” (ST 21). The same can be said for the Mumbai attacks, aimed at crippling the financial systems rooted in the city center. The challenges presented by suicide bombers, the rupture of traditional methods of war and the omnipresence of such attacks forever alter the
landscape of the greater global community now perenniially living under the specter of fear and violent outbursts. What emerges is a widely disseminated simulacrum of abjection and an unavoidable encounter with death.

Our third point draws the first two into a now deeper consideration of how the attacks speak to the character of terrorism and its relation to enframing systems of domination. Baudrillard explains that, “Terrorism, like viruses, is everywhere. There is a global perfusion of terrorism, which accompanies any system of domination as though it were its shadow, ready to activate itself anywhere, like a double agent” (ST 8). The dominant discourse thereby carries within it an integrated refusal to appropriate fully its modes of oppression and lacks an Arendtian pluralistic cooperating spirit. In addition, this polemic refusal fails to heed the warnings issued in Spivak’s writing about nationalistic post-colonial discourse. The only possible consequence of such an impasse is the eruption of violence. As regards the totalizing effects of such globalization, Baudrillard continues,

The more concentrated the system becomes globally, ultimately forming one single network, the more it becomes vulnerable at a single point (already a single little Filipino hacker had managed, from the dark recesses of his portable computer, to launch the ‘I love you’ virus, which circled the globe devastating entire networks). Here it was eighteen suicide attackers who, thanks to the absolute weapon of death, enhanced by technological efficiency, unleashed a global catastrophic process. (ST 7)

Indeed, the technological capabilities facilitate such acts through available digital mediums such as Google Maps, satellite phones, SIM (subscriber identity module) cards and untraceable Voice over I.P. addresses. American David Headley, a member of Lashkar e Taiba and active participant in the 26/11 attacks, used Google Maps to situate potential targets. The LeT trainees subsequently practiced moving through their appointed
destinations by means of such specific information systems. Much like the events of 9/11, the Mumbai attacks focused on the heart of India's financial and Bollywood districts, with all their symbolic power. The opulence of the two primary hotels, the Taj and Oberoi, and their politically significant clientele, were as much primary targets as the lengthy historical narratives driving hostilities between India and Pakistan.

As though commenting on the West’s inertia, Baudrillard suggests, “The aim is simply to wreck the system—itself indifferent to its own values—by means of its own weapons. Even more than the system’s technological weapons, the key arm they appropriate, and turn to decisive effect, is the non-meaning and indifference which are at the heart of the system” (ST 56). It is almost as though the terror cell sought to disrupt the ‘danger’ of a systemic challenging-forth by way of yet a further, and avowedly violent, ‘saving’ danger. The apathetic disposition Baudrillard critiques parallels what Arendt would consider a failure of thought and questioning, negating our potential for any developed understanding of our present human condition. Thus, the enframed character of the targeted attacks is not be disputed per se. Rightly, though in a terrible irony, the attacks lay bare the West’s inability to comprehend the motivating forces of such acts. Baudrillard clarifies, “Here, then, it is all about death, not only about the violent irruption of death in real time—‘live’, so to speak—but the irruption of a death which is far more than real: a death which is symbolic and sacrificial—that is to say, the absolute, irrevocable event” (ST 13). But to use death as a strategy against ‘death’ is to materialize the dangerous power against the systematic scope of that very power. The shattering of a fundamental belief in preservation of life as a feature of our existence is indeed problematic, for specifically in this instance it severs the very premise of any saving power. Baudrillard states:
Not only do these people not play fair, since they put their own deaths into play — to which there is no possible response (‘they are cowards’) — but they have taken over all the weapons of the dominant power. Money and stock-market speculation, computer technology and aeronautics, spectacle and the media networks — they have assimilated everything of modernity and globalism, without changing their goal, which is to destroy that power. (15)

Young jihadists commit to acts of martyrdom, looking to the afterlife for reward. They are incentivized by an ultimate performance, committed in defense of the greater Islamic community or ummah. Through concrete actions, with the finality of death as a medium, terrorists are able to subvert Western normative systems of thought, deeply disrupting discourse. Interestingly, Lévinas explains, “In war beings refuse to belong to a totality, refuse community, refuse law; no frontier stops one being by another, nor defines them. They affirm themselves as transcending the totality, each identifying itself not by its place in the whole but by its self” (TI 222). The assailants in both 9/11 and Mumbai transformed the self into a weapon in the name of religion.

These tensions bring us to a fourth element at the intersection of Mumbai, the field of systemic enframing that terror seeks to disrupt, and specifically the phenomenon of surveillance at issue in The Unreliable Narrator. With the medium of terror attaching to the human body, and events multiplying across the globe, Baudrillard observes, “The specter of terrorism is forcing the West to terrorize itself—the planetary police network being the equivalent of the tension of a universal Cold War, of a fourth world war imprinting itself upon bodies and mores” (ST 62). By extension, the constant policing forecloses on concepts of individual freedom and privacy, in a concrete sense manifesting in a virtual panopticon. Foucault elaborates on the very essence of such surveillance and its correlative effect on the
human psyche. With the notion of being constantly watched, we begin to exist in a state marked by such conditions, including an effect on our relationships with others. Technological enframing, as described by Heidegger, is now embedded in daily life, supplanting Dasein’s ability to live authentically. Surveillance is characteristic of Zabala’s ‘absence of emergency.’ As a reflection of our generalized complacency in the face of serious crises of existence, the degradation of questioning offers enframing full control. In sum, the networks undermining critical thought preclude access to the open space for other-thinking to occur unfettered. Heidegger, Arendt, Foucault, Spivak and Baudrillard thus reveal the hidden emergencies (or absence of emergencies) occluding emancipation. What these points show is that we cannot presume to categorize the Mumbai events as egregious violence without first recognizing the broader systemic violence that, in large measure, motivated them. That it is not to say that terrorism is justified, but that it has its reasons; the film compels viewers to feel these reasons.

A fifth and final element of the contextual manifestations of how “1947 has yet to come to an end,” an element specifically represented in the film, concerns the more fundamental inter-subjective exchange unfolding beneath the surface of violence (Hajari 261). It is important to note that, within the human subplots unfolding throughout the terrorist attack, only one assailant out of the ten Mumbai attackers survived. He was a teenager by the name of Ajmal Kasab. By jihadist standards, he failed in his mission by not being killed; he did not enter the realm of heaven and join Allah in celebration of his martyrdom. His testimony elucidated the tremendous amount of orchestration behind the attacks and offered substantial evidence implicating other Pakistani civilians as well as members of the Pakistani military.7 For his role, Kasab’s father was paid the sum of $1,900.00; this price reveals the
severity of economic alienation experienced by this family in Pakistan. It will become clear how Kasab’s capture, interview and humanization transformed him from an object of hatred, a terrorist, to one of compassion as a Lévinasian intersubjective exchange unfolded. *The Times of India* reported that “Kasab filed a mercy petition with the President of India, which was rejected on November 5th, 2012” (“Ajmal Kasab Hanged”). His plight—in the hands of his family, Lashkar e Taiba, the Indian courts and the global audience—shifted how he was perceived and undermined his guilty verdict.

The five points of reference I have just addressed are not to be taken as strict ‘causes’ for the attacks nor the sensibility of the film. They speak to a genealogy of the present that has lasting implications. In the same way that Sloterdijk’s notion of atmo-terrorism forever alters the human landscape, acts of jihad, captivating the attention of a rapt global audience, continue to proliferate. Baudrillard notes,

> In all these vicissitudes, what stays with us, above all else, is the sight of the images. This impact of the images, and their fascination, are necessarily what we retain, since images are, whether we like it or not, our primal scene. And, at the same time as they have radicalized the world situation, the events in New York can also be said to have radicalized the relation of the image to reality. (ST 20)

By turning to a *phenomenological* examination of the film, we learn how the work and its elements, including duration and assimilation of multiple perspectives, both reinforce narrative and undermine the connection with discourse. Understanding the profound impact effected through layers of sediment and discourse will leave the viewer and critic better able to appreciate the multiple perspectives represented, including how the Mumbai attacks exacerbated an already hostile environment and brought additional nations into the narrative. What remains to be seen is how these épistèmes are animated within the aesthetic experience
of the film, potentially wresting us from our stupor and offering emancipation from our enframed state. When speaking of the issue of freedom, as expressed by the ideas underpinning democratic consciousness, Butler remarks, “One of the complications here is the term freedom. In our research, we have found many of the greatest speeches about freedom have come from oppressed people. One then should ask—what are the forces that stop these radical visions coming into being?” (Seymour).

§ 5.4: A CLOSE READING

For the sake of insight, we will analyze the film in sequential order to draw out the ways in which the artists maintain the multiple layers of meaning throughout, revealing the depths of historical and socioeconomic underpinning its narrative. Throughout the film, phenomenologically speaking, several primary elements specific to the film’s unique aesthetic are simultaneously in play. The first of these elements is the steady use of the spoken word as a mediator of ideas, complete with variations in content and mood. (figure 5.3) Language thus takes on its primary role as disseminator of meaning. One is reminded of Ricoeur’s essay “Life in Quest of Narrative,” in which he states, “[Language] is a mediation
between man and the world, between man and man, between man and himself; the mediation between man and the world is what we call referentiality; the mediation between men, communicability, the mediation between man and himself, self-understanding” (27). It is, therefore, left to us, the audience, to interpret the narrative and decipher its meaning vis-à-vis the world and ourselves. Heidegger expresses this notion in a reference to discourse in Being and Time. He states, “Being-in and its state-of-mind are made known in discourse and indicated in language by intonation, modulation, the tempo of talk, ‘the way of speaking.’ In ‘poetical discourse,’ the communication of the existential possibilities of one’s state-of-mind can become an aim in itself, and this amounts to a disclosing of existence” (BT 1962; 205). Mirza and Butler’s carefully composed overlapping of multiple voices is a specific visual grammar, a polyphonic expression of the multiple undercurrents.

The second element involves the use of color to accentuate the mood of fear throughout the film. Color is the vehicle by which the artists move the viewer from one media source to another, while tapping deeply into our emotions. (figure 5.4) The third significant element is the use of archival footage and lo-fi imagery; a deployment of news
reels and amateur video capture. The artists spare no detail, including images of carnage re-enacted in the Bollywood film. They translate the imagery by seamlessly connecting the Bollywood aesthetic with the surveillance footage. In using such crude devices, the artists are stressing the authenticity of the narrative and its direct connections to the unfolding events. A fourth important element is the use of embedded visual signs expressing the collision between east and west, while underscoring a fundamental alienation of the other. These signs create layers of connotation, alluding to the geo-political narrative underpinning the film. A fifth element is the careful use of momentary silence and emptiness, serving to heighten the viewer’s attention. Finally, the film reaches its apex in a shift of accountability, executed through the intersubjective exchange unfolding throughout but most notably during the interview of the only captured assailant. The blending of these particular elements lends the film its power, transforming the viewer into a complicit, responsible party. As we follow the film’s arc, these elements work synchronously, underscoring the emotional trajectory through which the artists create meaning.

The film opens with a black screen and the sound of a telephone ringing. This deliberate emptiness heightens the viewer’s attention and emphasizes the voices that begin speaking in hushed tones. Subtitles translate conversations throughout the film. The second voice begins with an insistent demand — “Well?”—that immediately establishes a hierarchy of power. Indeed, in response, the first voice implores, “Please don’t be angry. I had to move things around a bit.” The commanding voice simply wants to know, “Has the work been done?” The subordinate replies that he was awaiting this communication so that his superior might “listen.” Instead, the leader quietly states, “Do it, in God’s name.” The omission of visual imagery allows swift understanding of the unfolding dynamic. (figure 5.5) In the next
moment, our eavesdropping and the concentrated darkness are punctuated by gunshots.
Within the first thirty seconds of the film’s duration, the viewer surmises the existence of a
power relation and unfolding of deadly violence. The caller confirms that a target was
successfully achieved, stating: “Yes, both of them, together.” The screen transforms.

![Figure 5.4:](image)

We watch shadows of men navigating through a body of water carrying burdensome
equipment. (figure 5.4) A nighttime image, grainy and yellow, simulates infrared film. The
lo-fi nature of the images signals a surveillance camera, though the action that is underway is
difficult to apprehend. We recognize the infrared quality of night vision and its signification
of military intelligence recordings. To this, Baudrillard would assert, “All the security
strategies are merely extensions of terror. And it is the real victory of terrorism that it has
plunged the whole of the West into the obsession with security—that is to say, into a veiled
form of perpetual terror” (62). The implied necessity of incessant global surveillance
suggests the terror cells have successfully shifted power structures and entirely limited the
liberal democratic conception of freedom. Mirza and Butler’s use of a military aesthetic flags these very limits and places the viewer within its operations – essentially, within the ‘emergency’ so often ignored in our technological, enframed state. To apply Zabala’s point, Mirza and Butler force a reckoning with the ‘absence of emergency’ by “calling into question our comfortable existence” (Zabala 111).

A woman begins to speak. The film’s primary narrator, she immediately establishes a tone of authority; she appears to belong to the documentary genre of ‘truth seekers.’ Her voice and language are solemn and express, at least initially, the tremendous gravity of the unfolding event. She tells us of the cell phone intercepts between the ten dispatched terrorists and their ‘controllers,’ who all belong to LeT. Her comments add further specificity to the opening scene. As though speaking directly to Baudrillard’s ideas, she comments, “Fear and technology become contiguous.” While the imagery shifts to a bluish hue, revealing a scene

![Image](Figure 5.6: The Unreliable Narrator / Screenshot. Colors, Shadows, and the Abject.)
of utter devastation inside a restaurant, she begins to pose questions: “Who is pulling the string? Who is checking it? Who is the puppeteer? Come I will show you the fear of the voice at the end of a dangling telephone line, the duty to report back full of darkness.” While she guides us through her questions, the film takes on the visual markings of video-game aesthetics, reducing the protagonists to actors in a hyperreal setting and creating the potential for the viewer to interact with the scene, as though its director. The audience ingests the action from within, actively participating in the assailants’ quest for more targets. Mirza and Butler push us to participation then pull us back in moments of dissonance, carefully reminding us that we are dancing on the borders between reality and fiction (*Museum of Non-Participation*). This movement between fact and fiction mirrors Heidegger’s understanding of *alethēia* and the notion of truth as fluid both in its revealing and concealing. In short, there will always be the negative with the positive. The protagonists move with apparent confidence and purpose. Amidst these visual shifts, the narrator acknowledges the helplessness of the assailants, noting how they obediently respond to the orders meted down through their constant digital connection. These details reflect a specific position in society, one of powerlessness and economic disadvantage. Arendt writes about these characteristics as problematic to accountability. She states:

I think we shall have to admit that there exist extreme situations in which responsibility for the world, which is primarily political, cannot be assumed because political responsibility always presupposes at least a minimum of political power. Impotence or complete powerlessness is, I think, a valid excuse. Its validity is all the stronger as it seems to require a certain moral quality even to recognize powerlessness, the good will and good faith to face realities and not to live in illusions. Moreover, it is precisely in this admission of one’s own impotence that a last remnant of
strength and even power can still be preserved even under
desperate conditions. (RJ 45)

Despite what little is known about the assailants as the film begins, it is safe to assume the young men are on this mission partly because they have been recruited from places of deprivation. The ‘impotence’ of these men in their own circles leaves them vulnerable to authorities promising them a better (perhaps emancipatory) path.

Once again, the artists alter the color of the scene: The screen is filtered red. (figure 5.7) Images flow as the terrorists shoot. The narrator continues, “They are using our technology against us.” The first-person plural brings ‘us’ increasingly onto the stage. We are implicated. She then quotes the Daily Mail, detailing the web of devices and methodologies that have guided the assailants—Global Positioning System GPS, satellite phones, Voice over IP, to name only a few. The young men incessantly used their cell phones, even shooting as they spoke on them.

Figure 5.7:
The Unreliable Narrator / Screenshot. Color and shadows.
The Mumbai attackers spent most of their onslaught on their phones, uploading their massacre to the internet. One fighter, the film points out, shot at police and filmed at the same time. The movies the attack spurned, most notably *The Attacks of 26/11* and the TV-series *Terror in Mumbai*, gave the attackers the oxygen they craved.

The suggestion is clear. These murderous, attacks were designed for, actively targeted and hungrily craved the attention of the news cameras. They were rehearsed, and then they were performed. And, in the most macabre and repulsive way, an interactivity took place. The Mumbai attacks, and indeed every modern terrorist attack, is personally mediated by the perpetrators, even within the act. And we respond with relish. (Seymour, “The Unreliable Narrator: How should we represent Terror”)

Terrorists monitored their Blackberries in order to check international reactions. The narrator tells us: “The gunmen troll the internet for information even after the hotel television feeds were cut.” These observations underscore the global connectivity and access, with particular emphasis on the need to be seen by a world obsessed with mediatized terror. The assailants carried out their actions on the global stage while their handlers claimed responsibility via emails sent to local news agencies. CCTV footage is also introduced to the sequence, adding yet another “cog in the spinning technological wheel.” As the viewer watches the assailants moving in the corridors of luxury hotels, the narrator initiates the first jarring moment of dissonance by sexualizing the young men. As though distracted by their masculinity, she describes them as “young, muscly, children firing toy guns . . . handsome, cool, wearing their branded baseball caps backwards, strolling slowly . . . killing at random” (*The Unreliable Narrator*). Her flattery transforms the assailants into Bollywood heroes, pop-culture symbols who grow larger than life as the action unfolds. Their role as video-game characters is magnified. (figure 5.8)
Her admiration and objectification of the assailants returns us to Baudrillard’s understanding of terror as war porn, fodder for the movie industry and its hungry audiences. This stinging Brechtian alienation effect prevents the viewer—now in possession of a heightened awareness of the critique—from losing himself in the narrative. In a point that relates to such aesthetic decisions, Baudrillard explains,

For images to become a source of true information, they would have to be different from the war. They have become today as virtual as the war itself, and for this reason their specific violence adds to the violence of the war. In addition, due to their omnipresence, due to the prevailing rule of the world of making everything visible, the images, our present-day images, have become substantially pornographic. Spontaneously, they embrace the pornographic face of the war. (CoA 207-208)
The point conveys the necessity of a Brechtian break that is capable of interrupting the ubiquity of the image. The narrator’s objectification of the young men points a finger at a film industry that scarcely waits to capitalize on the ongoing attacks. Baudrillard, in turn, reminds us of the continual barrage of images—perpetuated and replayed by both the media and film industries—that are rendered into addictive pornography rather than into any source of legitimate truth. We witness viewers mesmerized by their television screens; the handlers motivating the assailants in anticipation of the spectator’s fear response. Acknowledging the connection between Baudrillard’s ideas and *The Unreliable Narrator* thus frames the film’s impact within a greater contextual enframing. This bridging of ideas facilitates truth’s unconcealment in a way that distills the problem of the absence of emergency. The artists address the continual feedback loop that underscores the performative nature of violence in our global technologized environment as they endeavor to expose ideological discourse. In short, they point to the ways we negotiate meaning through discourse. Moreover, the multiple layers also concern the ways media industries interpret and benefit from acts of terror, obsessively replaying their images.

The narrator returns to the cold facts, a counting of the dead in the ongoing siege: “10 in Leopold’s Café, 52 at Chhatrapati Shvagi Terminus, 5 hostages at Harriman House executed, 100 at the Taj Palace and Oberoi Trident Hotels” (*Unreliable Narrator*). Reportage footage is woven in, bringing to bear the overwhelming sense of panic gripping the city. A news anchor is heard suggesting “The whole city has been shot up.” (figure 5.9) The film then cuts abruptly to more CCTV reportage documenting the violence as it took place. The frenzy overtaking Mumbai is clear: bodies lying dead, men running and hiding, cars racing in desperate attempts to rescue the mounting numbers of wounded and
dead. All the while, technology is woven throughout the delivery. Herewith, the Abject asserts itself, as does the long-lingering unconsciousness of post-memory and refusal of discourse that colonialism had long suppressed. The film places its viewer in immediate proximity to fatal events and the excrement that defines such encounters, “a ‘vortex of summons and repulsions’ that maintains the border between life and death” (Kristeva qtd. in Barrett 70).

Defying the West’s understanding of conflict, the narrator explains, “It was agreed by the perpetrators that their own bloody fragments would be mixed into the body politic … together in death, the loop closed” (Unreliable Narrator). Death signifies success for jihad; it promises a reunion with Allah, who awaits the Jihadist martyr in heaven. This
notion of death, as a means of reclaiming authority and power, bewilders European cultural discourse. Baudrillard clarifies,

It is the tactic of the terrorist model to bring about an excess of reality, and have the system collapse beneath that excess of reality. The whole derisory nature of the situation, together with the violence mobilized by the system, turns around against it, for terrorist acts are both the exorbitant mirror of its own violence and the model of a symbolic violence forbidden to it, the only violence it cannot exert—that of its own death. (ST 14)

The power, anxiety, and death that constitute terror acts are a reflection of the undercurrents of the society against which terrorists fight. The programmatic approach to undermining the power dynamic results in an excess of reality, a framework the Western discourse forecloses. Emerging from alienation, seeking the stage to magnify their actions, the terrorists win a war on grounds on which the West will not engage. This refusal mirrors Kristeva’s understanding of the abject and the profound anxiety we feel as it “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva 4). Only in the common ground of death, specifically, can the loop close.

Yet another layer is introduced, seamlessly edited into the film. The narrator tells us, “Bollywood closes in too.” Mirza and Butler appropriate scenes from the feature film “26/11,” further adding to the complex web of interests capitalizing on the unfolding atrocities. The footage gains clarity, moving seamlessly from the indistinct CCTV clips to hi-definition capture. The images of the dead, strewn throughout opulent five-star hotel lobbies, are shown. A statue of Vishnu accentuates the religious undertones of the events, and the ongoing strife of Partition. (figure 5.10) The decades-old Muslim-Hindu animus creates another layer of connotation. The narrator states, “The meaning of an act lies not in its doing

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but in its being seen.” Indeed, as Stuart Hall tells us: “The process of representation has entered into the event itself. In a way, it doesn’t exist meaningfully until it has been represented, and representation doesn’t occur after the event; representation is constitutive of the event” (Seymour, “The Unreliable Narrator: How should we represent Terror”). An act lives on the level of appearance, fulfilling the need human beings have for visibility. It is the consequence of enframing qua alienation we have explored in earlier chapters and is the underpinning theme of countless screenplays and dramatic re-enactments.

The narrator continues, “Muslim gunmen in burning five-star opulence, Hindu Gods in the foreground . . . unstated clash of civilizations is a popular narrative here too.” (figure 5.11) A number of important issues reside in these succinct lines: economic and political dominance and expressions of power, religion and its discourses, and a critique of the film.
industry’s opportunistic perpetuation of the cycle of violence through imitation. The contrast of 5-star opulence with those who fight against it carries traces of the colonial condition—the British Raj has been replaced with the guests of the Taj and Oberoi hotels. Per Hall’s aforementioned statement, the events remain incomplete until they have been rendered into film. Lashkar-e-Taiba has become “master of camera and choreography,” mobilizing not only the assailants as protagonists, but enlisting the media industries in service of their own discourse. Overall, *The Unreliable Narrator* shifts between scenes of carnage and the glow of television screens for which their multi-part plot is being deliberately directed. We, as viewers, become acutely aware of the human need for instant recognition, the social-media equivalent of seeking out ‘likes’ through unfolding action.

Figure 5.11:
*The Unreliable Narrator* / Screenshot. “Burning 5 star opulence” The Taj Oberoi Hotel burning.
The camera alters the landscape. The narrator organizes its importance into three categories. The first involves “events witnessed and possibly broadcast by the camera” that allows audiences to ‘see’ in real time what is happening ‘outside.’ Next, she distinguishes the events that are “already in progress that are changed by the arrival of the camera.” Lastly, she points to “events choreographed and created purposefully for the camera.” She continues, “Lashkar-e-Taiba utilizes all three—rich fodder for an industry waiting to profit. The narrator tells us: “18 titles associated with the November 26 attacks [were] registered, some while the event was still underway.” Reinforcing the excess of reality, the narrator continues, “This is an act of martyr, dangerous, explosive—the anti-thesis of the liberal acting in their own interest.” And, yet, this impulse—to be seen, to play for the camera, to be recognized by the spectator as we act out our scenes on the global stage—is a shared feature of humanity. In her volume, *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt explains,

To appear always means to seem to others, and this seeming varies according to the standpoint and the perspective of the spectators. In other words, every appearing thing acquires, by virtue of its *appearingness*, a kind of disguise that may indeed—but does not have to—hide or disfigure it. Seeming corresponds to the fact that every appearance, its identity notwithstanding, is perceived by a plurality of spectators. (vol. 1, 21)

Thus, we are seen by a multitude of viewers, and in the case of the Mumbai attacks, by a global audience. Technology makes this urge for recognition accessible, in all its desperation and violence, as the Mumbai attacks have shown. The handlers in Pakistan maintained a connection with both their puppets and the world news organizations broadcasting their efforts. They conducted the onslaught with precision and intent, looking for images to reflect their efforts. As concerns this need, Arendt continues,
The urge toward self-display—to respond by showing to the overwhelming effect of being shown—seems to be common to [humans] and animals. And just as the actor depends upon stage, fellow-actors, and spectators, to make his entrance, every living thing depends upon a world that solidly appears as the location for its own appearance, on fellow-creatures to play with, and on spectators to acknowledge and recognize its existence. […]

We, too, are appearances by virtue of arriving and departing, of appearing and disappearing; and while we come from a nowhere, we arrive well equipped to deal with whatever appears to us and to take part in the play of the world. (LM vol. 1, 21-22)

Arendt acknowledges our finitude and the temporal appearance we make as human beings.

An indispensable feature of our existence is its shared nature—our unique presence among others. According to Estelle Barrett, “The heterogeneous language of the artwork, then, becomes a site of inter-subjective exchange with the viewer. The structure of the artwork thus has the capacity to effect a transference of affect that underpins the renewing and cathartic impact of aesthetic experience” (93).

It is within this transference from the artwork to the viewer’s affective response that Lévinas must weigh in. How does the choreographed sequencing of *The Unreliable Narrator* return the ethical duty for the other back to the viewer? How can an audience be implicated in such acts of violence without active participation? We have already seen how a feature of the need for recognition is expressed in Lévinas’ ethics of intersubjective responsibility—in our encounters with the face of the other. Just as *The Unreliable Narrator* explores questions of spectatorship and choreographed performance, the screen fills with images of such encounters, bringing us in proximity with both specific victims and the only captured assailant. Lévinas explains, “I speak of responsibility as the essential, primary and
fundamental mode of subjectivity. For I describe subjectivity in ethical terms. Ethics, here, does not supplement a preceding existential base [as Heidegger would have it]; the very node of the subjective is knotted in ethics understood as responsibility” (EI 95). The intersubjective encounter engenders a visceral response. While we saw previously how Boltanski and Wodiczko implicate the viewer by forcing an encounter with the face of the other, Mirza and Butler extend Lévinas’ position by virtue of the assailants’ enmity. The resulting exchange is fundamentally empathetic, as we take on the burden of caring for the other, regardless of his violent intentions. In other words, with Lévinas’ input, we can better understand that the other for whom we feel responsible is also thought to be our enemy, in a sense someone to be overcome. Instead, we find ourselves in the midst of an exchange. (figure 5.12) Mirza and Butler animate this ethical position when they confront the viewer.
with the face of a young child whose life is abruptly coming to an end inside the train terminal. They press the issue further as Kasab, the captured assailant, undergoes a police interview. The film shifts from signifying a real-life video game to an ethical intersubjective exchange, calling into question embedded discourse surrounding the identities and nature of jihadists. The narrator states “The suicide mission closes the loop between the body and the weapon of terror.” The body and weapon become one and the same. In addition, the encounter between victim and assailant confuses the assailants, the victims and the spectators.

The police officer interviewing Kasab tells him not to cry. (figure 5.13) He conducts the interview on live television, broadcasting Kasab’s confession in real time. He observes, “You have killed poor people like you,” suggesting Kasab “should have realized this before

Figure 5.13: *The Unreliable Narrator* / Screenshot. The police tell Kasab not to cry.
[he] started.” The youth and vulnerability of the assailant, who now lies helpless in a hospital bed, reveals his humanity. The exchange initiates a confounding shift in perspectives, as we the viewers are no longer certain of our specific position with respect to a terrorist’s identity. We cease to objectify him as we acknowledge his fragility and emotional state. Lévinas elaborates,

The proximity of the Other is not simply close to me in space, or close like a parent, but he approaches me essentially insofar as I feel myself—insofar as I am—responsible for him. It is a structure that in nowise resembles the intentional relation which in knowledge attaches us to the object—to no matter what object, be it a human object. Proximity does not revert to this intentionality; in particular, it does not revert to the fact that the other is known to me. (EI 97)

An act of terror works to defeat this interplay; it seeks to annihilate the possibility for ethical intersubjective experience. Despite these efforts, the duration of the events, lasting four days and costing hundreds of lives, animated the exchange for both viewer and assailant. Of this effort, Baudrillard says, “The other will be exterminated symbolically. One sees that the goal of the war is not to kill or win, but abolish the enemy, extinguish [. . .] the light of his sky” (CoA 209). This goal ruptures the Lévinasian intersubjective relation by foreclosing on our experience of the other, turning man against man without encountering his face, thus shifting toward the death of the other and oneself as the unifying force countering alienation. This alternate plot creates a twist in the ethical dynamic brought about by corrupted structures of power, or what Baudrillard refers to as “the malady of modernity” (CoA 209).

From a distance, the handlers interrupt once again. Ironically, they begin speaking with the words “Peace be with you.” Immediately, the caller wants to know if the “fire has been set” as the images shift back to CCTV footage that reveals one gunman limping in a
hotel corridor, while the other attempts to kick in a doorway in search of more guests to kill. The intent is to spread more fear, and the caller points out that the “flames will begin to make the victims more afraid.” He continues by demanding the young men throw some grenades. “There is no harm in throwing a few grenades . . . how hard can it be . . . just pull the pin and throw it.”

The handler’s physical separation from the events manifests in his distance from the intersubjective exchange underway in Mumbai. From their voyeuristic position, the handlers want to see the drama expand, demanding of the assailants an uptick in their actions. The handlers seem to be living from within a discourse in its own right—a subplot within the overall context of *The Unreliable Narrator*. The caller sarcastically comments, “We can’t watch if there aren’t any flames,” underscoring their choreography of the action. All the while, the young men are dazzled by the sheer magnificence of the luxury hotels, places hitherto off limits to them. They comment on the extravagant kitchens, gift shops and 30-inch computer screens, expressing a mood of astoundedness in a practical, tragic, though understandable vein. According to *New York Times* journalists Vikas Bajaj and Lydia Polgree, “It [was] clear from the electronic record that the attackers seemed unworldly tools of their handlers” (NYT, 20 July 2009). We are reminded of decades of colonialist oppression, economic disparity, and a narrative of European superiority playing out within the carefully arranged sequence of the film. Jaded, the handlers ask why they have not set fire to these various features; they are wanting to see the luxuries rendered to ashes on the global stage. The caller instructs the assailants to “start a proper fire. That’s the important thing.” The assailants promise to deliver. (figure 5.11)
The past emerges once again within the present. Mirza and Butler return us, the viewers, to Kasab’s bedside. Over the course of his interview, we learn of his enlistment into LeT by his own father, whose economic desperation led him to sacrifice his son in the interest of remaining family members. The officer probes, “How much did they give you? Did they put [the money] in your account?” Kasab replies, “There is no account. They gave it to my dad.” As the teenage boy lies in his hospital bed, his story—complex, personal and tragic—alters the viewer’s perception. The underlying narrative is cruel and marked with the features of economic alienation—so extensive as to drive a father to send his own child to a premature, violent death. The transformation of our relationship with the captured assailant is impactful. Suddenly, we are faced with a moral crisis born in multiplicity and the desire to come to his aid rises within us. As a result of this transference, the interview had challenging repercussions during Kasab’s eventual trial, making its ultimate outcome controversial.

Regardless of the effects of this intersubjective exchange, Mirza and Butler claim no moral ground. Butler explains,

> We tend not to moralise. Instead we ask ourselves: What is the line between a freedom fighter and a terrorist? and whose freedoms are being fought for? Male brotherhood? Independence from occupation? Marxist-inspired struggles for the freedom of the working class and the 99 percent? Can you be sure when the next revolution happens that you will be on the side you might have expected, hoped or imagined? What happens if a movement you believe in recognises you as its enemy? (Seymour)

Instead of preaching a new brand of discourse, Mirza and Butler beg us to question its single story. Their intent sends the viewer to a place of contemplation and wonder. Straddling the genealogical and phenomenological, Butler states, “We set out to confront and challenge audience expectations” (Seymour).
In so doing, the artists disarm, halting the challenging-forth, and astound the viewer from within the primary scene of a larger, more nefarious structure of power actively shaping the players under its spell. In this way,

Art is called upon to exploit its own unique capacities to contribute actively” . . . to the politics of testimony. In other words, art is not trying to take the place of testimony but to enhance testimony through engendering affective responses that “are not born of emotional identification or sympathy; rather they emerge from a direct engagement with sensation as it is registered in the work. (Bennett, 2005; 3, 7)

The deliberate historical references become ever clearer. We must ask how these references are relevant to the unfolding scenes? Certainly, Mirza and Butler’s confrontation with our expectations motivates an interrogation of discourse. The film continues to accentuate the human drive for attention, the pressure to destroy and the ongoing directives issued by faraway handlers. The film’s narrator reminds us of our “complicity in our fascination with the power of the image.” At this point, she draws the important connection to Partition, describing the nightmare as “a moral response to the tortured, humiliated and photographed bodies of the slim men and women elsewhere . . . a drama of violent death . . . a form of revenge of Bollywood proportions.” The historical reference is underscored by the handlers’ resolute message, delivered through the assailants in their final moments. They insist the young men “give the government an ultimatum: say this was just the trailer. Just wait until you see the rest of the film.” Wearily, one assailant asks if he ought to write down these words lest he mistakenly misinterpret them. The handlers abbreviate their message and ask him to simply say that “the main feature is yet to come” (Unreliable Narrator). (figure 5.14)

This ominous communication extends the reign of terror, appropriating the language of cinema and a promise for further global entertainment qua war. It implies a future of
violence, growing in the shadows of embedded discourse. Its intent is to perpetuate the fear that is constantly recycled by the news industry. Lashkar-e-Taiba implicates its global viewership, closing the loop between terrorist, victim and spectator, in its value as entertainment and within its ultimate ending in death. Like Baudrillard, and echoing Zabala, Gupta concludes, “the narrative is designed to form a situation of permanent emergency where there are no civilians and so, there are no innocent casualties.”

The video essay comes to a close as Fadullah, the last assailant to be killed, is speaking on the telephone with his handler. We listen to his voice captured through cell phone intercepts. His voice is tired and pained. He is aware of his finitude and hesitant when asked to terminate hostages. His lack of will points to an ethical exchange as described above. Gupta asks us to consider his position when she says: “His final speech justifying the
necessary and moral use of violence against Kafirs.”⁹ He watches as his companion dies, petitioning “Allah’s acceptance of his martyrdom.” The handler encourages him to get out and resume the attacks, instructing him to “fight bravely and put the phone in [his] pocket, leav[ing] it on.” The voyeuristic quality of this request is pronounced, deepening the handler’s apparent need for confirmation and attention. *The Unreliable Narrator* ends with the voice on the phone quietly calling out Fadullah’s name in the instant after his death. His lingering presence on the black screen reflects the disquieting effects of such violence, even when offered in the name of jihad. We are left much the way we started; with the singular, focusing effects of coordinated emptiness and sound.

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*Figure 5.15:*
*The Unreliable Narrator / Screenshot. Emptiness and sound, closing the loop to the beginning of the film.*
Mirza and Butler’s video essay is deeply challenging. Its duration is difficult to endure and puts into crisis underlying expectations and normative beliefs. That said, we must ask where do the artists leave us as the film concludes? Otherwise stated, how does the film’s epistemic critique blend with its ‘astounding’ viewer impact in a way that initiates and motivates emancipation? What the film shows most viscerally is how stories, to borrow from Mirza and Butler’s artist statement, “slip between construction, rhetoric and reality with implausible ease: language itself appears to create and propagate the conditions of authority, violence, and division. As the Narrator continues to hijack the rhetoric of cultural and political discourse to rupture, Mirza and Butler expose the absurd ventriloquist act” (Museum of Non-Participation, The Unreliable Narrator). Returning for a moment to Sallis’ chapter “The Promise of Art,” he states: “One might well wonder whether the relation of the artist to the work is simply a matter of creation, even at the time he produces it, considering the need for that ‘other side,’ the need to be bound by something beyond oneself so that one is stretched beyond oneself” (Trans. 169). The implication shifts the role of artist to ethico-political facilitator of change, superseding the materiality and presence of the work itself, lending a transcendent quality to artmaking. Sallis’ words underscore the ethical tendency present throughout The Unreliable Narrator, and its potential to move us beyond ourselves into more profound critical contemplation. Such a movement ‘beyond,’ as we have seen, happens by way of demanding a consideration of plurality and forcing a Lévinasian encounter with the other that sets into motion a response and shift in discourse. On this point, Butler elaborates,

In our practice, we employ different methodologies to talk to different locations of power. . . . We also employ these strategies, whilst simultaneously championing the power of the imagination, absurdity, aesthetics and the desire to locate new
languages of resistance. After all, politically many of the forces we are fighting against are actively investing in their own imaginative agendas, often with limited censure and backed by huge resources. (*Artes Mundi*)

Whether this statement points to the terrorists and their use of technological avenues is unknown. What is apparent is the intention expressed within the creation of artworks to give a wake-up call to the audience—to bring our focus to the emergency itself.

The work that remains is to expand upon the ways the artists hold up a mirror for the viewer reflecting the layers of embedded beliefs and misinterpretations of the *other*, thereby fulfilling our initial stated purpose of responding to Heidegger’s call to action. We will do so by revisiting the thematic trajectory of the film. From our examination of post-colonial dispositions to embedded technological networks directing human interactions, the groundwork for understanding Mirza and Butler’s ideas has been made clear. Additionally, we have seen how they successfully critique the ways such beliefs are cemented in the collective consciousness. This turn further emphasizes the importance and function of the artwork as an emancipatory force, able to shift our thinking into a more active disposition. It answers, in its own way, Zabala’s belief that “[a]n aesthetic force is needed to shake us out of our tendency to ignore the ‘social paradoxes’ generated by the political, financial, and technological frames that contain us [including] the ‘historical accounts’ of invisible, ignored, and denied events” (5). The ‘social paradoxes’ to which Zabala points permeate historical narrative as it relates to the Mumbai attacks. The hidden truths buried in *épistèmic* structures mask disruptive energies that must inevitably surface in response to such controls. Kristeva’s proposition of the abject as repressed energy with which we must inescapably and uncomfortably reckon mirrors the need for a broad reconciliation with the undercurrents driving global terrorism.
The overall nature of the project leads to a profound experience of confusion, as it disabuses the viewer of the way he relates to the real. Embedded discourse is interrogated and left open for judgment. Inter-subjectivity is foregrounded and the ethical responsibility for the other is powerfully experienced in each confrontation. As the narrator reminds us, we are all connected in a loop—in death, in our aspirations, in our plurality. As Mirza and Butler astound us, we are faced with the incomprehensible suffering imposed by centuries-old oppressive power structures and institutions that demand the self-sacrifice of indoctrinated religious foot soldiers. Baudrillard addresses the roots of this condition:

It all comes from the fact that the Other, like Evil, is unimaginable. It all comes from the impossibility of conceiving of the Other—friend or enemy—in its radical otherness, in its irreconcilable foreign-ess. A refusal rooted in the total identification with oneself around moral values and technical power . . . bereft of otherness, eyes itself with the wildest compassion. (ST 49)

The denial of the other in his essential state of being forecloses on his freedom. Acts of terror are an ultimate form of resistance to the spreading Western capitalist apparatus. Butler reminds us: “Next to victory, there is nothing so sweet as defeat, if only the right adversary overcomes you” (Seymour). In the aftermath of both 9/11 and 26/11, there is a pervasive failure to understand that systems of globalization and exclusion are creating the existing means of resistance.

This interchange between the aesthetic experience of the film and the lived experience of our milieu magnify the issue of how, in a very real sense, discourse creates a false sense of safety. Returning to Foucault, we can now better appreciate how the layers of discourse upon which power structures depend operate. He explains,
In short, we may suspect that there is in all societies, with great consistency, a kind of gradation among discourses: those which are said in the ordinary course of days and exchanges, and which vanish as soon as they have been pronounced; and those which give rise to a certain number of new speech-acts which take them up, transform them or speak of them, in short, those discourses which, over and above their formulation, are said indefinitely, remain said, and are to be said again. (Young Holocaust Memorials 56-57)

The latter form of discourse embeds itself in collective consciousness and anchors the accumulation of knowledge in a system of beliefs that perpetuate myths—myths of superiority, of sovereignty and the justification of oppressive methods. The colonialist discourse explicitly establishes cultural hierarchies. The Unreliable Narrator must be understood as a case of astounding in relation to emancipation from enframing.

To be sure, the acts of violence rest in centuries of embedded beliefs, drawn forward in post-memory, thereby excluding the potential for multiplicity to manifest. Said offers an example of the destructive nature of embedded beliefs:

So far as the United States seems to be concerned, it is only a slight overstatement to say that Moslems and Arabs are essentially seen as either oil suppliers or potential terrorists. Very little of the detail, the human density, the passion of Arab–Moslem life has entered the awareness of even those people whose profession it is to report the Arab world. What we have, instead, is a series of crude, essentialized caricatures of the Islamic world, presented in such a way as to make that world vulnerable to military aggression. (Said, “Islam Through Western Eyes,” 11)

This statement speaks to the absence of political plurality that Arendt laments. This void in mutual understanding demands an examination of the interstitial space between differing discourses. Arendt, we recall, aspires to a more “democratic Being-with” or Miteinandersein,
thereby moving societies to a just political space in which freedom and equality are the norm.

We must pass beyond the idea of the single view of the world to one that is inherently social and pluralistic—the very space that Mirza and Butler investigate throughout *The Unreliable Narrator*. In her book, *The Phenomenology of Plurality*, Sophie Loidolt explains,

> . . . that plurality should be actualized involves the normative claims that this alone makes the individual (qua individual) experience herself as meaningful, and that only the fostering of plurality keeps the common world from collapsing into one monolithic, and potentially murderous frame; it also comprises the ontological claims that in fact there are individualities to be gained and realized in interaction and that we are in fact dependent on others, i.e. on plural subjectivities, to achieve this state. (155)

All the evidence presented herewith demonstrates that we have devolved into one ‘monolithic potentially murderous frame,’ and so need to expose our own participation in reinforcing discourse. Butler states, “It is important to us to hold open a space for radical aesthetic practices, to continually experiment and invent new social and political forms” (“Artes Mundi Questionnaire”).

One of the overall ways the film holds open such a space is by exposing a negative movement toward homogeneity in globalization, a further propagation of colonialist practices. Baudrillard understands the underbelly of such destructive advances. He states,

> What comes with the transition from the universal to the global is both a homogenization and a fragmentation to infinity. The central gives way not to the local, but to the dislocated. The concentric gives way not to the de-centered, but to the eccentric. And discrimination and exclusion are not accidental consequences; they are part of the very logic of globalization. (ST 69)
If this is the case, and the terrorist movement exists as a shadow of the system of globalization and totalization, Baudrillard’s assessment offers a plausible approach to current political nationalistic climates (in the United States and around the globe), in which alienated factions of society are turning to violence against a system that wants to absorb them. His assessment brings us face to face with the need to accept the other in his fundamental and distinct otherness, paying close attention to Arendt’s belief that “human plurality, the basic condition of both action and speech, has the twofold character of equality and distinction” (HC 175). To further enhance this view, we need Lévinas’ powerful input in order to fully appreciate the ethical position the film creates. It is insufficient to consider its emancipatory potential without his understanding of intersubjective, ethical responsibility. In essence, Lévinas completes the complex socio-emotional rendering, shifting our innermost beliefs and creating an important dissonance.

There are more specific épistèmic indicators driving meaning within the film. The anchorage in the title suggests we must critically question, taking nothing we see or hear for granted. Neither can we assume the existence of any single plane of truth, thereby reconnecting us with Heidegger’s understanding of alētheia. As concerns the title, Butler states, “We began to think of an Unreliable Narrator not as a character but as a condition . . . a condition where some global players gain from maintaining a feeling of permanent emergency” (Seymour). The suggestion of unreliability emphasizes a compromised position — one that demands an acutely attuned mind. Shifting from the individual to a broader condition moves unreliability to discourse and social architectures of power. According to the artists, the film is inspired by “the differing global interpretations of events … which alerted [them] to the diverging forces of interest involved in situations [such as] this”
Butler’s thoughts echo Foucault’s elaboration of discourse as a carefully managed series of edits aimed at maintaining existing dominant forces. He states, “There is scarcely a society without its major narratives, which are recounted, repeated, and varied; formulae, texts, and ritualized sets of discourses which are recited in well-defined circumstances; things said once and preserved because it is suspected that behind them there is a secret or a treasure” (Young Holocaust Memorials 56). Furthermore, as we analyze the film’s careful sequencing, the technologized medium of terror takes center stage, its far-reaching impact embedded in the individual frames. In Stuart Hall’s estimation, “The process of representation has entered into the event itself. In a way, it doesn’t exist meaningfully until it has been represented, and representation doesn’t occur after the event; representation is constitutive of the event” (Seymour, “The Unreliable Narrator: how should we represent terror?”).

These features of epistemic critique and a movement ‘beyond’ that speaks to the imagination are supported by the way in which the film is a balance of truth and fiction. Its credibility rests in its use of documents and archives, though these are mingled with clips from Bollywood’s feature film “26/11.” The film’s power resides within this mashing up of disparate elements, seamlessly constructing new vantage points and interrogating embedded discourse. That said, Baudrillard reminds us that, within our current paradigm, truth is fluid and reality, whatever the term may mean in a post-modern world, is elusive. Signaling this challenge, he states: “Truth but not veracity: it does not help to know whether the images are true or false. From now on and forever we will be uncertain about these images. Only their impact counts in the way in which they are immersed in the war” (CoA 207). Baudrillard questions the nature of truth in a gesture reminiscent of Heidegger’s model of a fluid
alētheiac unconcealment. Furthermore, Baudrillard notes the inseparability of the image from the protagonists of war as they are united in action and representation. Digital technology extinguishes the need for subsequent organized reporting, as it occurs within the moment; it closes the gap between event and its representations in the media. The immediacy of digital transmission results in a rapid transference of ideas, events and news, moving in and out of view. Indeed, the underlying construction of the video essay suspends the application of any corresponding, singular truth, dethroning any correspondent or objectivist inclinations. The resulting irrelevance of established discourse is important to the plurality Mirza and Butler underscore, and to the way their art, following Heidegger, positions the viewer at the clearing (Lichtung) where unconcealment happens: “through technē … man discloses something, brings it into presence” (Beistegui 108). The act of incorporating live coverage of the event, including CCTV footage and cell phone intercepts, accentuates the credibility of their narrative. Unconcealment, thus specified, disrupts one’s ability to hold fast to any singular discourse and demands a reconsideration of one’s embedded beliefs. To this thought, Foucault might add that this disruption of meaning renders the boundaries between what lies within discourse and what is excluded more porous. Thus, the film is able to positively deconstruct épistèmes, while also disrupting the technological épistemic strategies enframing us. This capacity brings to bear Benjamin’s understanding of film as a collective medium able to ‘distract’ its audience, allowing a communal platform for enjoyment. That may be, but in this case, we find a ‘distraction’ that effectively includes a Brechtian ‘alienation effect’ employed to counteract the kind of distraction that, following Adorno, might hobble critical thought. Quite literally, Brecht’s alienation effect interrupts the theatrical moment, returning the viewer back to himself—to an awakening from a fictional space. Butler believes his
background as a filmmaker enables him to be nimbler with regards to the medium, working in service of the artwork’s ability to astound. He explains, “The training in celluloid makes my films better . . . the apparatus makes you think about—not what film does—but what it is, fundamentally, the way it works” (Sheerin “A Portable Museum”). In much the same way Brecht uses alienation effects in theatre in order to remind his audience of the nature of performance, Mirza and Butler weave into their narrative acute moments of dissonance, which interrupts the mind’s need to believe in a single truth. Butler specifically refers to film’s “authority about frames, about economics—about light and composition and structure” (Sheerin “A Portable Museum”). The alienation effect, as we have seen, happens at intervals throughout their delivery and collaborates with cinematic elements of color, composition, narration, news accounts and external testimonies – all of which form a collection of differing perspectives that disrupt fixity and catalyze a profound psychological impact. The carefully crafted sequencing of frames moves the viewer’s attention from structures of power to scenes of carnage, while joining multiple voices into a single stream of consciousness. The action moves quickly and chaotically, shifting from one scene to another, highlighting the violent nature of the events. The flow of images carries within it traces of South Asia’s historical trajectory, including symbols of religious practice, geopolitical tensions and post-colonialist discourse. The artists’ command of the medium thus allows them to create a seamless sequencing of emotionally charged moments, integrating disparate footage into a credible whole, while simultaneously referencing important historical facts. In its own narrative scope, and in its carefully curated scenes, the film self-consciously works from within the ‘dangerous’ nature of their chosen subject matter, and their aesthetic decisions succeed as a ‘saving’ way to address the topic’s inherent complexities.
§ 5:5: CONCLUSION

Our study of the way in which layers of theoretical inquiry, social-political experience, and a converging genealogy of both come to the fore in an aesthetic event has allowed us to examine transhistorical narratives and their impact on global violence, notably the Mumbai attacks of 26 November 2008 and the subsequent re-presentation of the events in *The Unreliable Narrator*. I have investigated the ways artists Noor Mirza and Brad Butler focus our attention on multi-layered spaces of discourse, truth, power, inequality and political justice, and have argued that within their multi-layered narrative the viewer is ultimately forced to reckon with himself in the shifting sands of truth and discourse. We have seen how the artists’ sophisticated use of digital technologies in response to a highly technologized event ultimately disrupts embedded discourse and thereby forces the viewer to reconsider truth and its fluid, pluralistic nature. *The Unreliable Narrator* analyzes the ever-present dangers we confront in our daily existence, particularly our relationship with technology, and the choices we make in relation to the resulting pervasive global mood of fear. In addition, a close reading of Rahila Gupta’s tightly written subtext speaks to a lengthy history of colonization and oppression, revealing traces of the past erupting within current political actions.

If, per Heidegger, our emancipation from enframing resides within the danger, Mirza and Butler’s work operates from within the technological characteristics of film—along with an assemblage of archival and surveillance methods—to expose the core of our enframing qua alienation. This is central to my argument: they bring to light the instability of truth within the fixed and biased narrative of discourse. The unreliability of embedded beliefs and
systems of power leave us altogether unable to manifest a pluralistic, intersubjective global community as prescribed by Arendt. The artists’ simultaneous use of and critique of the technological machine accentuate the darkest characteristics of its very essence, pointing to our addiction to its relentless attachment to established information systems.

The resulting instability is clear. Arguably, hegemonic depersonalization exhibits itself within discourse and an inability to ‘see’ the other for who he is, rather than ‘what’ he is. Per Arendt, we have thus lost the capacity to see through the dark lens of totalization as we cling to familiar narratives. Spivak tells us, “This rock bottom comfort, with which the nation thing conjures, is not a positive affect” (NI 15). This disharmony is most clearly expressed in moments of war and terror, having been built on unstable ground. By all accounts, putting one’s stake in historical narrative only leads to more of the same. Lévinas observed, “The peace of empires issued from war rests on war” (TI 22). Indeed, as the global community has moved beyond the 26/11 Mumbai attacks (as well as countless other examples of such conflict), with its deep roots in the furies of Partition, one can be sure, as Dalrymple asserts “1947 has yet to come to an end” (New Yorker).

If one is to ask how an artwork might disrupt the indelible marks of the past and awaken intersubjective responsibility, one needs only watch the seventeen-minute reel and feel astounded, left to question the multiple layers of discourse underpinning its harrowing story line. The Unreliable Narrator demands a reconsideration of truth and history. By looking at historical forces contributing to the ongoing South Asia conflict, we have seen how an artwork can precipitously turn this lengthy dynamic on its head. The re-presentation of the forces in play throughout the Mumbai attacks offers a radical pluralistic perspective,
one demanding we withhold judgment and exhibit empathy. When asked in an interview how such political questions are negotiated, Butler responded,

> As political subjectivity takes a multitude of forms, your question is best addressed in the work of art. Over 19 years of our unfolding collaboration, we have noticed a shift in our work from asking questions, to depicting conditions. Conditions of domination, fear and exclusion as well as resilience, resistance and potential. . . . This tension is important to us, and also reflects our own shifting interest in focusing less on art as a set of commodities and signs, and focusing more on its ability to point to a lack of connections . . . to help us accumulate this intention over time. (*Artes Mundi*)

In the space between questioning and representation, Mirza and Butler take on the essence of alienation. By bringing the viewer in close proximity with the events and their perpetrators, as they unfold in real time, the artists stage inter-subjective encounters that shift fixed truths and highlight the acute conditions created by enframing qua alienation. The Lévinasian exchange creates confusion, which, in turn, morphs into thought. The very basis for our beliefs no longer finds a firm footing. To this fundamental shift, Sallis asserts,

> [T]he alleged pastness of art can be put in question only if there is a break with this truth, a decision from and about it that displaces it. Only then can the promise of art be renewed. Only then will there be grounds for hope that art might prove to be still an essential and necessary way in which that truth happens that is decisive for our historical Dasein. Yet the truth that may thus prove to happen in art will necessarily be other than the truth of beings that defines metaphysics. (Trans. 157)

Truth understood as a fluid pluralistic event of unconcealment is potentially revealed within the artwork. The artwork allows an opening for thought to manifest, the space Heidegger refers to as *Lichtung*, which is at once creative and free. This is the opportunity afforded to us when confronted with Mirza and Butler’s work, as read from a background of understanding.
afforded by the interplay of thinkers considered herewith. It does not suffice to interpret the artwork through a single lens; the sheer complexity of the narrative demands multiple voices. One set of ideas enlarges the field of vision other thinkers provide. How does this hermeneutic necessity in regard to the artwork mirror a reflective necessity more broadly?

Arendt expresses this idea in the prologue to *The Human Condition* by unassumingly saying: “What I’m trying to do here is to simply stop and think what we are doing” (5). At a 2017 conference addressing *The Crisis of Democracy: Thinking in Dark Times*, Roger Berkowitz explains, “[Arendt] means that we stop, we pause, we take a deep breath, and we think . . . we engage in a conversation with ourselves about a question, about what we’re thinking about; and this is thinking. It’s a self-reflective form of thinking. It’s what [Arendt] calls a two-in-one conversation, where we engage in dialogue with ourselves” (conference notes). Arendt believes in our innate desire to ‘do right’ in relation to others; we must live with ourselves and the internalized consequence of our actions. She describes the interpersonal dynamic:

If he is a thinking being, rooted in his thoughts and remembrances, and hence knowing that he has to live with himself, there will be limits to what he can permit himself to do, and these limits will not be imposed on him from the outside, but will be self-set. These limits can change considerably and uncomfortably from person to person, from country to country, from century to century; but limitless, extreme evil is possible only where these self-grown roots, which automatically limit the possibilities, are entirely absent. (RJ 101)

Surely, this gesture of contemplation appears, at first blush, an overly elementary response to such enormous global strife, as that represented in Mirza and Butler’s installation. And, yet,
questioning, and its incarnation in critical thought, is the force capable of radically disrupting discourse. Bhabha expresses this potential in the following:

What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These ‘in between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.
(Harrison and Wood 1111)

In fact, the respect conferred in distinct beings as unique individuals returns in service of the community as a whole. Bhabha encourages us to dwell in the interstitial spaces of experience in order to better understand cultural difference. We must listen carefully to the experience of others, taking into consideration the complex power structures underpinning these differing perspectives.

Along such lines, in order to re-think and re-structure beliefs and discourses we need, says Arendt, “a reconsideration of the human condition from the vantage point of our newest experiences and our most recent fears” (HC 5). Arendt offers no formulaic solution, nor has this chapter made any such claim. That said, what is most promising is seen in the artwork’s manifestation of thought—how film can generate the discomfort of self-reflection and an empathetic review of global circumstances. *The Unreliable Narrator* does this with economy and power. Mirza and Butler address these many issues through both the genealogical content and the aesthetic experience provided in their editing choices. Through its seamless appropriation of archives and live footage, we are placed in the center of an ongoing power dynamic. We ‘feel’ the effects of history and ideologies from within the space of power dynamics. We are literally forced to rethink, and to do so in a way that enters, with Bhabha,
into an urgent predicament: “The borderline engagements of cultural difference may as often be consensual as conflictual; they may confound our definitions of tradition and modernity; realign the customary boundaries between the private and the public, high and low; and challenge normative expectations of development and progress” (Harrison and Wood 1111).

The challenging of normative discourse has proven to be elusive. Realigning our positions demands a fluid and open mood of cooperation. At the time of this writing, these shifts feel quite distant, or nearly impossible to achieve.

Despite all that Arendt witnessed over the course of her own lifetime, she remained optimistic. She claims, “The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability. . . . The new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle” (HC 178). Perhaps it is this miracle to which Heidegger points when he prescribes our salvation within the danger. To his mind, the answers to these complex human challenges lie within the realm of art. Sallis reminds us:

> Just as the ontological questioning is directed not simply at Being but at the sense of Being, at that from which Being comes to be determined, so likewise in the question of art the concern is not simply with its essence but with that from which the determination of its essence is effected. To the extent that a new determination is actually forged, it will be thought from out of this anteriority, from the origin. (Sallis 171)

*The Unreliable Narrator* questions, shifts and astounds. If any artwork embodies a response to Heidegger’s plea, Mirza and Butler’s powerful video essay does; it offers a path forward.

The profound effects of Mirza and Butler’s work notwithstanding, there is still much work to be done if we are to address Heidegger’s plea for our emancipation from technological enframing qua alienation. As we move forward through history, the increased presence and control exercised over human beings by technological forces has magnified.
Arendt warns, “[R]ule of neither law nor men but of anonymous offices or computers whose entirely depersonalized domination may turn out to be a greater threat to freedom and to that minimum of civility, without which no communal life is conceivable, than the most outrageous arbitrariness of past tyrannies has ever been” (RJ, 4). The need to question and think must take center stage. It begs us to ask whether we have the courage to dispel discourse and reconsider our intersubjective responsibility to those around us.
CONCLUSION:

Ô mon corps, fait toujours de moi un homme qui s'interroge.

Frantz Fanon

This project began with Martin Heidegger’s call to action, set forth at the end of his essay, “The Question Concerning Technology,” a call to action I have interpreted as an ethical plea. It is a demand that asks us to think and question, returning Being to its essential creative disposition. To borrow from Christopher Yates’ writing, Heidegger implores us to overcome “a coercive neglect of Being’s own primordial and determinate agency” (125). For Heidegger, it is within this agency that we are able to free ourselves from our enframed condition, a freedom we experience within our awareness and angst in relation to Being-toward-death. In other words, it is within our ability to take stock of and ‘think’ our finitude that we may choose to dwell authentically in this life. Whereas much of the literature addressing Heidegger’s essay focuses on explaining his critique in relation to his deep historical ontology, I have analyzed the possible ways the realm of art might concretely offer us the means to resist technological enframing, thereby restoring Dasein’s primordial creative bearing. As a reminder, this undertaking was largely motivated by a perceived condition of enframing in our post-digital world — a condition I believe is eroding the human capacity for questioning and thought. It is a fear that is echoed in Hannah Arendt’s prediction of
bureaucratic mindlessness and depersonalizing domination. In the preface to *Responsibility and Judgment*, she states:

The idea that when the chips were down diversity must be sacrificed to the ‘union sacrée’ of the nation, once the greatest triumph of the assimilatory power of the dominant ethnic group, only now has begun to crumble under the pressure or the threatening transformation of all government—the government of the United States not excluded—into bureaucracies, the rule of neither law nor men but of anonymous offices or computers whose entirely depersonalized domination may turn out to be a greater threat to freedom and to that minimum of civility, without which no communal life is conceivable, than the most outrageous arbitrariness of past tyrannies has ever been. (RJ 4).

The dehumanization in the face of “anonymous offices or computers” is a condition with which we are reckoning in our current lived-experience—forces so impersonal that we fail to fully understand their implications. Arendt’s assertion bears the imprints of Walter Benjamin’s epilogue to the *Artwork* essay, wherein he presages Jean Baudrillard’s ideas and the age of *Twitter* when he says: “Humankind, which in Homer’s time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, is now an object of contemplation for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the highest order” (IL 242). As a result, “The audience is therefore involved in a vast negative countertransference with itself; and once again, this is the source of the dizzying attraction of this type of spectacle” (CA 182). While Baudrillard is referring specifically to our attachment to televised acts of terrorism, the premise is the same—we are mesmerized and complicit, and often do not even realize this. Though rooted in somewhat divergent preoccupations, Arendt, Benjamin and Baudrillard warn of our connivance within
Heideggerian enframing, leaving us wholly responsible for our own ultimate emancipation from its grip.

From this point of departure and by means of an intertextual analysis of artworks alongside a wide range of philosophical texts, each chapter has investigated the ways we might overcome enframing and alienation through the realm of art. We saw, in chapter 1, the ways Heidegger clarifies our enframed position. This investigation established the groundwork for subsequent discussion while emphasizing the fundamental importance of our intersubjective care in being-with or Mitsein. The focus throughout is given to Heidegger’s ambiguous suggestion that within the ‘danger’ of our enframing coexists the ‘saving power,’ that is, the realm of art. Looking for direction within this demand, I have relied on two important statements which bear repeating herewith. The first is Heidegger’s comment “For questioning is the piety of thought” (Krell 341) The second resonates with the potential for a solution. Heidegger asks, “How can this happen? Here and now and in little things, that we may foster the saving power in its increase. This includes holding always before our eyes the extreme danger” (Krell 338). Both fragments suggest the need for an openness to thinking and questioning that restores ‘primordial and determinate agency,’ thereby allowing us to live more authentically.

No doubt, we needed to look to more material discussions of art’s function within culture and society. For this turn, chapter 2 focused on the writing of Walter Benjamin with particular emphasis on his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” The question underpinning much of this chapter’s work addresses how we might experience artworks as technologies alter their presentation, putting into crisis our understanding of an original, while also appreciating the reproductions’ democratic, emancipatory potential.
Benjamin asserts that our freedom can only come from an ethico-political ‘tendency’ and practice, on the part of authors and artists alike. The correct tendency balances skill with its revolutionary impulse in a quest to overturn enframing forces. Moreover, we deconstructed Benjamin’s understanding of ‘distraction’ in order to identify certain weakness in his overall premise, but not to dismiss his case on that account.

Building on Benjamin’s author qua artist as producer, chapter 3 introduced the work and ethico-political tendency of Martha Rosler, most notably her *House Beautiful: Bringing Home the War*, and the *Garage Sales* series. I argued that Rosler is able, through the use of mechanically produced imagery and staged installations, to cut through cultural inertia and prompt a determinant agency. I articulated Rosler’s position as artist-producer while also offering insight on the reading of reproductions in the age of their ubiquity. For these points we turned to Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag, among others. Furthermore, we acknowledged a furthering of the democratic involvement of the audience into a more immersive, participatory role. This move set the groundwork for the chapters that followed with a phenomenological look at the nature of the *Garage Sales* as sites of intersubjective exchange. Rosler’s use of personal effects connected deeply with the works of both Christian Boltanski and Krzysztof Wodiczko and anticipated the new ideas presented within the intersubjective scope of their varied works.

In chapter 4 we looked to the works of Boltanski and Wodiczko while analyzing the potential for the emergence of a more profound, *alētheiac* truth through installation art in terms of the animation of memory and fearless speech. We established that this fundamental life of truth is more readily accessed through constructed narratives and fictional elements. It also revealed the ways technologically driven artworks can instigate thought provoking
intersubjective dialogues, deepening our bonds to the lives of others. Within this activation, Boltanski and Wodiczko bring to bear our intersubjective responsibility for the other. In addition, the artists accentuate history’s repetitious nature and manifestations within our thoughts and conduct. Both artists required different thinkers to assist with a reading of their works. What they ultimately achieve, we determined, is an increase in our thinking and questioning, responding thereby to Heidegger’s plea by tuning into our minds and thoughts and opening us to truth as *alētheia*.

Finally, chapter 5 reached the culmination of many prior points through a discussion of Noor Mirza and Brad Bulter’s 17-minute video essay, *The Unreliable Narrator*— an encapsulation of history, memory, and current events as seen through the horrors of the Mumbai terror attacks of 26 November 2008. What the artists were able to successfully achieve is a criticism ‘on’ technological-material terms ‘of’ the embedded narratives and beliefs shaping global perspectives on nationalism and acts of terrorism – a shaping wrought through technologies in the form of discourse apparatuses and technological media. This process required a consideration of post-colonial thought and the laying bare of historical power struggles as South Asia asserted its autonomy from the British Empire. The artists do so by seamlessly connecting disparate sources of information and testimony, animating memory and undermining the foundations of perceived truths. Their work exposes corrupt structures of power, historical sedimentation and archival forces. While created by means of advanced technological systems of information gathering and surveillance, *The Unreliable Narrator* undermines enframing and highlights the necessity of thinking and an openness to an *alētheiac* unconcealment of truth. The artwork returns us to our primordial thinking
disposition and forcefully demands that we question our position in relation to unfolding events. In his book *Proust and Signs*, Gilles Deleuze explains:

Thought is nothing without something which forces and does violence to it. More important than thought, there is ‘what leads to thought’; more important than the philosopher, is the poet. Victor Hugo writes philosophy in his first poems because he ‘still thinks, instead of being content, like nature, to lead to thought.’ But the poet learns that what is essential is outside of thought, in what forces us to think. The *leitmotif* of Time regained is the word *force*: impressions which force us to look, encounters which force us to interpret, expressions which force us to think. (PS, 160-161)

Indeed, as we saw, Mirza and Butler spare us no moment of violence, leaving the viewer to reckon with the jarring realities of a geo-political entanglement so deep as to send us back centuries to find its roots. They carefully create the “encounters which force us to interpret, expressions which force us to think.” Our study of their work showed that, ultimately, it is by allowing thought the open space to come into presence, out of concealment that we will find the freedom of creative expression so fundamental to Dasein. The artists covered across this dissertation share a dialogic access to the happening of truth through intersubjective exchange. We have seen the ways their artworks, regardless of medium, are provocative, compelling a contemplative state in the viewer.

As is tacitly understood by all of these artists, the industrial and technological framings that have shaped much of the last two centuries have broad implications. Moreover, their impact on cultural artistic practice has been profound, altering the ways artists must respond. Making a point that has become central to this study, Santiago Zabala explains, “After the eras of ‘imitation’ and ‘ideology,’ when artists were often commissioned for their work, we have now entered the era of the ‘lack of a sense of emergency’; now artists, along
with their audience, are called to intervene for the sake of humanity” (8). This statement summarizes Heidegger’s plea—to awaken ourselves for the sake of Dasein’s fundamental survival. Zabala suggests the need for the kind ethico-political practice we have seen through our artworks and emphasizes a countering blow to the pervasive mood of intertia gripping societies. Howard Caygill would add that, “Art can offer a place and an occasion for thinking resistance if not freedom” (OR 174). Indeed, freedom from enframing originates in thinking and questioning. If artists, formally and materially, think resistance as an activating motivation, questioning the world in which they dwell, the result carries the potential for emancipation. We have seen how each artist selects particular mediums to convey messages. Moving from print to performance, their choices challenge preconceptions about the role of art and the inclusion of their audience. Writing about performance artworks in times of war, Richard Meyer explains, “Performances in real time became the uncommodifiable instances of dissent, in which the lines between aesthetics and activism, reflection and real time, were purposefully blurred” (Meyer 59). We saw this move in the performative works of Rosler and Wodiczko who facilitate human exchange and undermine fixity. Ultimately, the erasure of structures that contain and constrain artworks helps move their message to a broader audience. As we have seen, our resistance to enframing happens within an intersubjective awakening at the site of artistic exchange, within Dasein’s native disposition and responsibility for the other.

That said, we continue to face a crisis in our relationship to technology. We are, to reiterate Heidegger’s lament, no longer thinking. Despite clear warnings and generalized apathy, enframing persists as the dominant force in our daily existence. Artists are aware of the nefarious consequences of our technological addiction and absolutist thinking. Says
Meyer, “even in the fog of the present, we must seek to adumbrate its outlines, however vague and veiled” (Meyer, 61). We must think and act. If questioning is the piety of thought, we must, once more, provide the grounds for such questioning and enact a genuine thinking on the basis of a philosophical imagination artistic ability to, following Heidegger, ‘astound.’ Artists are tasked with the monumental burden of forcing a cultural awakening—stirring a much-needed revolution of thinking.

There are, within this body of work, certain remaining issues that must be acknowledged. First, there is the difficult issue of undertaking an ethics in light of the philosophers whose writings I am analyzing. One might say Heidegger is a glaring example of this, but Howard Caygill would also advance a problematic tendency in Emmanuel Lévinas’s position (otherwise formative for us) with respect to the Palestinian conflict, most notably his response to the “massacres in Sabra and Shatila”—a response devoid of any empathy for the victims of Israeli attacks. Caygill elaborates: “Totality and Infinity is about war and Lévinas’ relationship to war is not a sentimental one . . . . He says, quite strikingly, that war is necessary and, in some cases, beneficial” (Gray and Holmburg “Interview”). For Caygill this failure calls into question Lévinas’ own position that ethics is first philosophy (see Alastair Gray and Philip Holmburg’s interview of Caygill for Studies in Social and Political Thought). To these obstacles, I assert that for our purposes here it is the philosophical writing, not the individual, that matters. A reading of their ideas, in concert with the artworks in question, strengthens our understanding of the connections to Heidegger’s plea. Personal conduct notwithstanding, Heidegger’s call to action is profound and deeply ethical. It merits a response.
Yates’ sense of the underlying problem of humanism also persists—that is, the ambiguity regarding individualism in a post-structuralist world in which the self is perpetually under erasure. We continue to face the challenge of subjectivity and the need to clarify its ontology. In view of the destruction of enlightenment individualism, we must ask what this person and community are who are in such need of emancipation? I have located the answer within the site of exchange wherein artist and audience multiply their voices, thereby extending thinking beyond themselves. To Heidegger’s temporal, historical being, we add Arendt’s paradox of our uniqueness within a plural world and Lévinas’ conception of how moral responsibility is what first constitutes subjectivity. Arendt explains, “In man, otherness, which he shares with everything that is, and distinctness, which he shares with everything alive, become uniqueness, and human plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings” (HC 176). Arendt honors the uniqueness in all beings while defending the fact of difference within a collective. As we continue to grapple with these challenges, Charles Bambach offers perhaps the most succinct explanation I have found that summarizes a solution:

[s]ince we are immersed within the frame (Gestell) of a technological thinking that defines beings as ‘standing reserve’ (Bestand) there for the needs and projects of human beings, we fail to think the dynamic temporality of the human being in its experiences and practices. Instead, we detach ethics from its lived experiential context and produce it as a kind of calculative technological measure, a set of rules and principles that will set up “standards” (Maßstäbe) for human behavior that will be binding in advance. But all of this ethical thinking merely winds up detaching us from our specific historical situation by attempting to provide a universal set of principles that will govern human relations. As with much of the technological project of universalizing-calculative thinking, ethics fails because it detaches us from our specific historical
grounds and uproots us from the earth. Until we can reframe the Hölderlinian question of our proper belonging to the earth, that is, until we can rethink the question of what it means to be human, we will never be able to properly raise the question of ethics and its relationship to justice. (Bambach 107)

The artists I have examined do, in fact, rethink ‘the question of what it means to be human’ with a keen eye on events shaping not only the past, but also our futures. If we are undertaking an ethical project, it bears understanding how such responses are revealed.

I will end this project with two final points of emphasis which we must carry forward. The first reinforces the ongoing human alienation in the face of emerging technologies—an accelerating problem we face with increased uses of, for example, Artificial Intelligence, pervasive automation, and extensive programmatic device addiction. As concerns the alienation of citizens within sophisticated technological systems, I am reminded of the 1936 Charlie Chaplin film, *Modern Times*, in which Chaplin (playing the main character) demonstrates the ill-effects of industrial automation and its underlying capitalist greed. Perhaps not coincidentally, the film was created at the same time as Walter Benjamin penned his *Artwork* essay. Overall, the film follows a boy-meets-girl plot, ending predictably with the couple happily walking into the sunset though not without having endured a poignant struggle against technological forces of enframing. Chaplin illustrates the dangers of automation: dehumanizing assembly lines, physical twitches, overbearing surveillance systems, and the driving forces of progress and greed. The assembly-line machines are driven at the whim of the factory owner who disregards the safety and wellbeing of his workers. The workers, in turn, cannot keep pace with his demands. Eager inventors propose a feeding machine to the factory owner which would enable workers to eat while remaining on the assembly line, theoretically streamlining productivity. We watch, in discomfort, as the
machine shoves food into Chaplin’s overstuffed mouth while he is strapped wretchedly to his seat. Little has changed today. What we are fed is a steady diet of data—created and disseminated by corporate entities, for the sole purpose of driving ratings and profits. The result is a similar reduction of human beings to what Heidegger called the standing reserve. The mindlessness that follows is symptomatic of enframing and a constant threat to our essential being. Digital distraction magnifies Chaplin’s message and heightens the need for a forceful interruption and prompting of thought as set forth above by Deleuze. By necessity, Zabala suggests that, “Rather than points of arrival for consumers’ identification, contemplation and realization of beauty, works of art are points of departure to change the world, a world that needs new interpretations instead of better descriptions” (Zabala 9). As with Benjamin’s author qua artist producer, Zabala diagnoses the need for more attuned artistic responses. I certainly agree with this prognosis.

The second and final point concerns Arendt’s own ideas, particularly regarding distinctness in relation to thought and action, as a response to the call to action Heidegger sounds at the conclusion of his Technology essay. As we have seen, Arendt exposes the structures that emphasize political dominance or difference in their discourse, and she strongly encouraging us, her readers, to embrace plurality. Indeed, it is within this multiplicity and the conversations one has with oneself that accountability and agency are nurtured. The artists we have studied likewise confirm, and urgently so, that we must interrogate and think through circumstances and events, confronting the fact of our intersubjectivity and responsibility for the other. In essence, per Arendt, we must respect the dignity of our inherent distinctiveness and uniqueness among peoples in both words and
deeds. We recall her point that “[h]uman plurality, the basic condition of both action and speech, has the twofold character of equality and distinction.” (HC 175). She continues:

Speech and action reveal this unique distinctness. Through them, men distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct; they are the modes in which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but qua men… A life without speech and without action… is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men. (HC 176)

The statement contains echoes of Heidegger’s concern about technological ‘challenging-forth,’ of the muted condition of alienated and enframed human beings whose thoughts and actions can no longer surface. As ‘dead to the world,’ stands bereft of genuine opportunities to practice the interrogation and truth that are its primordial nature. But within this danger, as we have seen through the work of these five artists, we might rekindle a life of speech and action and reclaim Dasein’s full measure. To do so, the mind must remain open to community as strength, to releasing predispositions and fixed beliefs in favor of an intersubjective ethos of care and responsibility. The point is to undermine the possibility of enframing, not just oppose it. The distinct ‘work-character’ of a work of art can envision and execute this task in a way that simultaneously reopens an encounter with self and world. As Gadamer observes, “[e]verything familiar is eclipsed. To understand what the work of art says to us is therefore a self-encounter” (101). We are thus astounded into returning to ourselves and into thinking. Moreover, by allowing plurality, by challenging the embedded monological discourses and fixed power structures, artists can overcome enframing, little by little, through the representation of multiple truths. To think is to begin anew, to initiate the motivation toward action and change. As Brad Butler explains, “our work reflects our own shifting interest in focusing less on art as a set of commodities and signs and focusing more
on its ability to point to a lack of connections,” or, one might say, a lack of emergency (Art Review interview). It is in forcing a revealing, an alētheiac event of truth, that artists are able to shift mindsets and re-frame discourse. There is no formula for this, and no assurances, for as Arendt holds, “[t]he new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and probability …. The new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle” (HC 178).

Through a shock to our fixed position, art can and must overcome fixity, false pretenses, and any denial of truth as event. When it does so it embodies and sets to work the Arendtian integration of thought and action. In action, for Arendt, resides the liberating mystery of a ‘beginning’ that breaks into the scene of other beginnings.

To act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin (as the Greek word archein, ‘to begin,’ to lead,’ and eventually ‘to rule,’ indicated), to set something into motion (which is the original meaning of the Latin agere). Because they are initium, newcomers and beginners by virtue of birth, men take initiative, are prompted into action. (HC 177)

An aesthetic of thinking and action can restore the care of our promptings and thus the motion of poēsis that is, though forgotten, inscribed within the technē of our worldhood. It is within our natural agency to be free, authentically living our Dasein, that we find the salvation to which Heidegger and Hölderlin point. Christopher Yates observes: “The time of need, in short, needs a truer measure. This in turn means an untwisted production; a ‘straighter’ poetizing” (Yates 125), and, I might add, an openness to the clearing in which one’s primordial and determinant agency can come into full existence.
ENDNOTES:

INTRODUCTION:

1 Numerous writers have composed essays in exhibition catalogues and anthologies—some treating the artists in relation to philosophical inquiry. On this point, Boltanski’s work is perhaps most connected to points of memory and the power of installation.

2 Hannah Arendt’s relationship is noteworthy in connection with Heidegger’s controversial membership in the National Socialist Party. Her support for his scholarship was quite controversial, given his past. Her status as a Jew also made her comments all the more substantive since the basis for his diminished status directly correlated to the Shoah and his apparent apathy toward the activities of the Nazi party. Her essay “Heidegger at Eighty” (Thinking Without a Bannister, ...) is a sensitive yet direct defense of his work — a poignant request for his re-inscription to the annals of philosophy’s greatest minds.

3 Heidegger’s membership in the National Socialist Party (Nazi Party) will be addressed more fully in Chapter 1.

4 Foucault comes into clearer focus in Chapter 5, with a specific focus on discourse and episteme. These concepts are also deeply connected with memory and post-memory, both of which are elaborated in Chapter 4.

5 As recently as 27 April, 2018, for example, the Korean peninsula has engaged in peace talks after 70 years of conflict. But the threat of North Korea’s nuclear program, together with the mercurial nature of current Unites States policy, looms over this possibility. At the same time the current presidential administration in the United States has jeopardized the efficacy of prior settlements with Iran’s nuclear program. Both Pakistan and India have nuclear capability, and their ongoing strife is well known. To say that the era of nuclear threats is behind us is naïve. This point, as we will note in chapter 3, relates to Peter Sloterdijk’s understanding of atmo-terrorism and its conditioning of our psyche.

6 At the time of this writing, the U.S. finds itself embroiled in a critical juncture of misinformation, cyber-attacks, election meddling and foreign use of technological tools with the aim of compromising our system of government. Madeleine Albright wrote an Op-Ed for the New York Times on April 6, 2018, in which she details the global rise of fascism. She states, “In fact, fascism — and the tendencies that lead toward fascism — pose a more serious threat now than at any time since the end of World War II” (NYT, 6 April, 2018).

7 Most scholarship holds that Heidegger ‘resisted’ being categorized as ethical. This said, the supplication at the end of “The Question Concerning Technology” demonstrates a concern for humanity that can only be described as ethically driven regardless of his objection to basing morality in knowable, atemporal ethical norms.

8 I do not deny that modern technology has brought very important advances in quality of life. Instead, the concern here is with the ‘relationship with technology’ and how it uses human beings as its tool, not the reverse. But does not technology advance thinking? It can, and yet contemporary research flags important concerns about (1) the effects of the digital environment on the human brain, and (2) the proliferation of digital addiction and the personal and social dysfunction that results.

CHAPTER 1:

1 As stated in Gelassenheit, 20/52.

2 There are multiple sources for these translations. Michael Inwood’s Heidegger Dictionary, online glossaries and appendices, all offer the same direct interpretation.

3 Heidegger is neither directly opposing nor extending the prior ethical philosophies but, rather, is showing that we have to derive a kind of ethical path (of thought/action) from within the concrete Enframing situation and the ontological Thinking/Freedom apparatus of Dasein therein.

4 It is important to recall that for Phenomenology a crucial step is to ‘bracket’ aside our normal ways of thinking about issues and questions, our assumptions of ‘common sense’ (what Husserl calls the Natural Attitude). This is what Heidegger does in Being and Time with the modes of Inauthenticity and Theyness that have befallen Dasein. It can be said then that Enframing amounts almost to a kind of ‘bracketing’ that technological society is doing to us – specifically, to our dwelling and thinking. If that is the case then we can read Heidegger’s Technology essay and its culminating stress on art as a counter-bracketing.

5 Quoted in Charles Bambach, 28, from Hymns and Fragments 88-89. Hölderlin’s poetry inspired much of Heidegger’s writing on the subject. Charles Bambach’s volume sheds important light on the nuances of poēsis and the notion of care.


7 Babette Babich further explores the exchange between Jaspers and Heidegger, posing an important question: “How might a reading of Nietzsche constitute a specifically political resistance?” (Existenz). Babich also elaborates on the finer details surrounding a German
CHAPTER 2

1 To this end, a volume of particular interest is Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (EPM) in which he details his understanding of the essence of man as a creative force. His view of capitalism as ‘inhuman’ is based in the notion of alienation — or man’s estrangement from his own essence and subsequent isolation and unhappiness.

2 The abbreviations refer to the following works by Marx: EPM: Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844, PoP: The Poverty of Philosophy, GIP: The German Ideology, Pre-C: Karl Marx/Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations. These are listed in McMurtry’s volume, *The Structure of Marx’s World-View*.

3 Krell’s preface to “The Origins of the Work of Art” in *Basic Writing*, is helpful on this point. He explains: “We find help for our efforts to understand the notion of ‘world’ when we turn to Heidegger’s analysis of ‘worldliness’ in Being and Time, sections 14-18. There he defines ‘world’ as the structural whole of significant relationships that Dasein experiences—with tools, things of nature and other human beings—as being-in-the-world. ‘World’ is that already familiar horizon upon which everyday human existence confidently moves; it is that in which Dasein always has been and which is somehow co-disclosed in all man’s projects and possibilities. ‘World’ [also] names the essential mystery of existence . . . . Regarding ‘earth’ we can here provide only one hint. During the winter of 1934-1935 Heidegger lectured at Freiburg University on two poems by 4rich Hölderlin (1770-1843) . . . . Perhaps the Ursprung of Heidegger’s notion of ‘earth’ must be sought in poetry, which occupies a special place among the works of art.” (Krell 141-142).

4 Jacques Derrida elaborates further on this notion in his 1968 essay “The Ends of Man,” included in the collection *The Margins of Philosophy*.

5 This ‘eradication’ presents itself as a parallel counterweight to Heidegger’s view of technology’s eradication of Dasein’s authenticity / poëtésis. In other words, the two form opposite sides of the same coin while in pursuit of the same goal — emancipation and freedom. For Heidegger, this freedom emerges in our innate ability to think and question. For Marx, and subsequently Benjamin, this freedom overcomes fascist structures — and accesses the potential for authentic, creative expression. In essence, the notion of eradication differs while the outcomes hope for facets of the same emancipation.

6 Incidentally, we continue to see this kind of extreme price driving and cultural status embodied in artworks and at their points of sale. Damien Hurst’s *Shark* is a perfect example of this ongoing display of collector status and endlessly upward spiral of prices. It begs important questions about the intrinsic values of artworks, as previously described by Arendt. If Hurst’s *Shark* is a manifestation of man’s creative impulses, the substructure (technologies and the capacities to manufacture) have driven forms of expression to an outer extreme of possibility.

7 When saying Benjamin departs from Heidegger’s ideas, I am implying an intertextual shift rather than a literal, chronological response. This is not an historical redirection, rather an analysis of the functions of the different ideas in relation to the realm of art.

8 Adorno wrote to Benjamin in response to his original, unedited essay. He corrected what he believed were some of Benjamin’s most flagrant errors and encouraged him to review his thoughts regarding the autonomous work of art as a dialectical, technical entity in itself. In addition, Adorno would have preferred Benjamin address the negative aspects of the film industry, which, in his opinion, Benjamin had glossed over entirely in the interest of his essay. Adorno also defended the position of the intellectual class as a guiding service to the proletariat who, in turn, serves the intelligentsia by leading the way toward revolution. (Taylor 120, Harrison and Wood 529).

9 It is important to recall the forces of Fascism Benjamin experienced were those of the Third Reich and Hitler’s *Final Solution* while also commenting upon the established position held by artworks within the culture and society of the time.

10 The essay describes some of the noteworthy moments in his career as collector. Each volume has its place on the continuum of his career and he valued them immensely. It is said that he discovered his library had been confiscated shortly before he took his life while escaping the Nazis in 1939.

11 We will see this issue in more depth in the forthcoming chapters — as these ideas present an extension of Marx’s ideas and a shift with further technological ‘progress.’ Jean Baudrillard’s assessment of American culture, notably institutions such as Disney, indicates we have moved further away from reality and are unaware of the state in which we now live.

12 It’s particularly interesting to note the transitions that were occurring in film during the course of Benjamin’s life. Charlie Chaplin was pushing the edges of acting and sound. Leni Riefenstahl’s propaganda productions for the Third Reich were on the cutting edge of
technological advances. Her work, its purpose notwithstanding, was revolutionary. A curious moment of warning—one connecting directly with Heidegger’s plea, is Chaplin’s film, Modern Times, in which he depicts the mind-numbing effects of modern progress. All of this would have been known to Benjamin, certainly, and the implications such films had on contemporary beliefs matters.

13 What Adorno does not anticipate is the ‘in between’ time eventually created in the age of artificial intelligence and automation. Leisure time, assumed during the Marxian era as the space for meditative thought and contemplation of ideas, has been subsumed by television, gaming, social media and other mindless forms of entertainment. The shrinking of thought and meaningful exchange in the face of this technological evolution underscores Heidegger’s worst fears of enframing and our forgottenness.

14 Martel’s comment invokes Heidegger’s understanding of enframing directly. It is in the essence of our relationship with technology that we experience the pitfalls of such an exchange. The reversal, and the subsequent reduction of human beings to standing reserve, is a crucial factor of this undertaking. Marx’s understanding of homo faber underscores Heidegger’s lament that we have fallen short of our authentic potential.

15 “Let art be created, let the world perish” or otherwise stated “Let art be created, though the world shall perish.” The battle cry of the Futurists holds, for Benjamin, clues into the ultimate manifestation of a resistance to progress — or revolution. The grip with which Fascism holds onto its property systems while oppressing the proletariat will inevitably result in ultimate destruction.

16 Of course, this issue may have been carefully delineated in his original version, building into his writing the necessary preparation for his final prognosis. In the subsequent extant iterations, however, the apparent suspension of his argument for freedom through the reproduction is quite jarring.

17 An excellent study of the artwork is posted in the ‘smart history’ group on Flickr. The author has carefully annotated the file and clarified the identities of the numerous figures. She points out the satire set forth in the use of text and the way Höch overlays female and male identities. The tiny presentation of Höch’s own face at the bottom right of the frame would have easily escaped notice had I not analyzed this study. (Flickr.com/SmartHistory).

18 The exhibition ran from 25 March 2017 – 30 July 2017 at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in collaboration with the Art Gallery of Ontario where the 4,000 plus images are normally housed. Both the Boston MFA and the Ontario based museum created websites offering an intimate look at Ross’s life and work — as an official propaganda photographer for the Third Reich and in his unofficial capacity as a chronicler of daily life in the ghetto. He narrowly escaped death as he remained in Lodz after the evacuation of 70,000 occupants to death camps. “These images reflect the determination of Henryk Ross, a talented Polish Jewish photojournalist and a rare Lodz Ghetto survivor, to document what he called ‘our martyrdom.’ Between 1940 and 1944, Ross took carefully staged fictions of ghetto life that served as Nazi propaganda, but he also secretly recorded the grim realities of what truly happened. As the war wound down, he buried 6,000 negatives in the ghetto, returning after Germany’s surrender to find half intact. Ross eventually moved to Canada, where he died at 81 in 1991. In 2007, the Archive of Modern Conflict donated all of his negatives and contact prints to the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, which organized this exhibition” (NYT 15 March 2017).

19 Though this may simply be for lack of the full, original draft Benjamin sought to publish but was cut back to a large extent by those in the Frankfurt School deeming it unwise to express the more Marxist views.

20 Quoted in Miguel de Besteigui’s volume, The New Heidegger, 107

21 Technically, it is five individuals if one counts Mirza and Butler as two, but since the work I am considering was created in partnership it is clearer to count them as one source.

CHAPTER 3:

1 Found on page 101 of the volume translated by Christopher Isherwood, published in 1947.

2 See Heidegger’s elaboration of Dasein’s potential in Being and Time, §53, pp. 249f. In essence, we cannot access that which remains closed off to us, either by foreclosing on Gelassenheit or by living inauthentically in relation to the world.

3 See §41 & 42 in Being and Time, with particular attention to pp. 185-192 in which Heidegger elaborates his position with regards to temporality and care. See also page 227 “Care, which forms the totality of the structural whole of Dasein, obviously contradicts a
possible being whole of this being according to its ontological sense. The primary factor of care, ‘being ahead of itself,’ however, means that Dasein always exists for the sake of itself’ (BT 227).

4 It is also noteworthy that Rosler’s images represent the lost original and, simultaneously, the dissemination of an activist message House Beautiful: Bringing Home the War is, in fact, devoid of any discernable original prior to its reconfiguration, foretelling the hyper-reality that is our current state. This creates an intriguing paradox which further exposes the tensions in Benjamin’s thoughts—can a work of mechanical reproduction be ‘original’ in a way that is not jettisoned by the eclipse of aura? The point would not be to reinstate the ‘cultic’, but rather to appreciate how originality is plausibly inscribed in artistic reproduction as an act of original critical thinking aimed at startling the viewer, thereby prompting action. The inventiveness of the re-presentation shifts the reproduction’s intent and undermines its initially focused outcome.

5 This is particular to the notes reprinted in the Belknap edition of the Artwork essay.

6 In addition, it could be said that myths, with their careful construction and ideological intent, are an important cornerstone of discourse—something we will devote more attention to in chapter 5 as it relates to Foucault, Said, Bhabha and Spivak’s ideas.

7 Clearly, his interrogation of the visual vocabulary present in both the Panzani ad and the Paris Match cover facilitates an understanding of the works presented by Rosler. As she is using magazine reproductions—some advertising while others war footage—she is connecting directly to the methods he uses to decipher such codes and myths.

8 Distraction has a number of potential layers of meaning relevant to this study. In this context we note that there is a fine line between distraction as a form of thoughtlessness and distraction as a potential avenue for political advancement and emancipation.

9 This term was used in a lecture given for MoMA and delivered via Coursera online, produced by Susan Meister.

10 It also returns us to the current crisis in Syria from which the image of a five-year-old child permeated the web. One single dead child can stir moral outrage while millions of other victims are overlooked.

11 The primary sources for her comments were the Rear Window interview as well as the Creative Time Summit keynote speech.

12 Marcuse is said to have led a negative campaign against Rosler’s use of the gallery space. This fueled the debate surrounding the function of artworks, and the push toward a post-modernist perspective on culture. Rosler references the heated exchange in an interview with Benjamin Buchloh in which she responds to his question regarding her “fellow students” who objected to the work. She responded, “It was the Marcuse contingent—his students in the philosophy department. The art students understood it well enough! A Marcusan wrote a polemic against the work in the university newspaper: how could I have actual objects, such objects, for sale in an art gallery? We wound up having a public discussion with Marcuse and a few other people about the role of art, what is an appropriate art object…” (Martha Rosler, Positions in the Life World, ed. Catherine de Zegher. MIT, 1998.)

CHAPTER 4:

1 Hal Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” October 110, Fall 2004: 3-22.

2 WWI poets remembered their experiences and subsequently recorded these in poems. A poignant example of memory as altered by authors can be traced in reading two poems: Wilfred Owen’s Dulce et Decorum Est and John McCrae’s In Flanders Fields, both written around 1915 as both men negotiated and lost their lives in the savagery of WWI. Owen’s writing is particularly strong in its connections with Sloterdijk’s understanding of modernity’s birth, discussed in chapter 2 of this project.

3 Museum status, for some thinkers, is not necessarily a ‘good eventuality’ as it partakes in the consumer channeling of artworks as a status higher than the common man can appreciate.

4 Benjamin’s memoir is a case in point.

5 The Jewish Museum hosted Christian Boltanski on December 15, 2016, for an evening of questions and dialogue with Jens Hoffmann and a diverse audience. The evening was held in connection with the exhibition “Take Me I’m Yours,” which ran for several months from 2016 into 2017. The conversation covered enormous ground, ranging from the current exhibition to Boltanski’s inspiration for his work, life and ongoing preoccupations.

6 This installation has been interpreted four different ways in separate locations, each creating an individual version of the overall effect. For the purpose of this essay, I will be examining the one in the Paris chapel, at the Hôpital de la Salpêtrière, a site that has a controversial history of confinement and treatment of the ‘insane’ by such notable doctors as Charcot and Freud. The historical function of the hospital was confinement and separation of the indigent citizens.
The installation ‘Dead Swiss’ is comprised of newspaper clippings of obituaries detailing the passing of various Swiss citizens. During one of the exhibitions, it was discovered that one of the subjects in the project was still alive. In response to this, Boltanski stated that ‘what is not true today will perhaps be true tomorrow’, a testimony to his understanding of our temporal place on earth.

For more on Heidegger’s sense of ‘location’ see Krell 154.

The fact that the audience accepts what Boltanski offers is ‘true’ is part of the effect he is able to achieve. This is also the danger inherent in this sort of system whereby truth is understood as manufactured from ‘lies.’ Craig Owens states: “the allegorist does not invent images but confiscates them” (1026). This speaks also to the acceptance of appropriated imagery as art, reflecting the context in which the work is created.

Other organizations benefitting from Wodiczko’s influence are ‘Electronic Civil Disobedience,’ the Vera List Center for Art and Politics in New York City, and MIT’s ‘Interrogative Design Group.’

Foucault, well aware of the later institutionalization of ‘confession,’ is clear in his distinction that parrhésia preceded Christianity’s practice in the company of a priest. This distinction, to his mind, seems to add credibility to the truth exchange taking place under such conditions. See The Courage of Truth, pages 5-11.

Paul Celan from “Ash Aureole,” in Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan, ed. John Felstiner, New York, Norton: 2001. p. 261. It also bears noting that Celan made a strong critique of Heidegger after a visit to the latter’s hut in the black forest.

For a brief overview of “Abraham Lincoln: War Veteran Projection,” see the clip from Maria Niro posted on Vimeo. While it does not offer the full 27-minute loop, it does illustrate the animated statue and the well-crafted exchange. https://vimeo.com/53446621.

Wodiczko spoke of the Lincoln Veterans Projection with More Art: http://moreart.org/projects/krzysztof-wodiczko/. Within the video’s short 4-minute duration, a statistic from Nicholas Kristof’s New York Times column asserts: “the United States is now losing more soldiers to suicide than to the enemy. Include veterans, and the tragedy is even more sweeping. For every soldier killed in war this year, about 25 veterans now take their own lives.” (More Art video, 3:10). The accompanying text reads: “For thirty-two days, their voices and gestures animated the silent sculpture that has stood in the park since 1870. The superimposition of moving image, sound and sculpture worked to create a complex work of art reflecting the incommensurable distance existing between those who went to war and those who didn’t. Speaking through the mouth of Lincoln, the participants made their experiences starkly public thereby asking the audience to face the wider implications of war, particularly the fate of traumatized war veterans.”


Brecht’s word Verfremdungseffekt is a typically challenging German term to translate. It has been called alienation effect, but also defamiliarization effect.

William Milberg was speaking at a UNIS conference on Migration. He offered substantial evidence demonstrating that immigrant groups were productive members of society — often more so than their citizen counterparts.
and CNN. Headley was certainly not alone in his efforts, and others have been interrogated and detained, though without subsequent sentencing.

Numerous publications have traced Kasab’s journey from the initial hospital interrogation to his final appeals. He was eventually hung in 2012 while incarcerated in Yerwada prison under a veil of secrecy. The Pakistani government was informed of his death by letter, which they apparently refused to accept. The Indian officials then faxed it, again underscoring the ongoing tensions between the two nations. Kasab’s family was informed by courier.

Despite Lévinas’ objections to Heidegger’s prioritization of the individual, Heidegger’s fundamental position vis-à-vis Dasein matters. Lévinas is shifting from our singularity (authentically living despite the ‘they’ being present in our world) to a dependence on the other for self-manifestation.

Kafir is an Arabic term for infidel, or one who does not believe in Allah’s supreme rule. It can also be translated as ‘one who covers the truth’ but is typically used to describe an unbeliever. "The Koran says that the Kafir may be deceived, plotted against, hated, enslaved, mocked, tortured and worse. The word is usually translated as ‘unbeliever’ but this translation is wrong. The word ‘unbeliever’ is logically and emotionally neutral, whereas, Kafir is the most abusive, prejudiced and hateful word in any language." (Bill Warner, Center for the Study of Political Islam, “Sharia Law for Non-Muslims,” Chapter 5: The Kafir. 2010.)
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**ARTWORKS:**


---. Details from multiple installations.

---. Faces, multiple installations.


Salomon, Charlotte. Various scenes from her artworks. 1940-1943, gouache and text overlays on transparency film, Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam.


§ APPENDIX A: A GENEALOGY OF ETHICS ON THE THRESHOLD OF HEIDEGGER’S “THE QUESTION CONCERNING TECHNOLOGY”

Having explored some of the key terms driving Heidegger’s ideas in chapter 1, we can now turn to its second focus—the longstanding ethical tradition resonating within his works. To repeat, it would be a mistake to confuse Heidegger’s undercurrents with the formative ethical systems preceding him. What should be noted, however, are the threads of resemblance motivating an intersubjective responsibility, felt with particular potency at the conclusion of the “Question Concerning Technology.” If we are to position Heidegger’s plea for our salvation through the realm of art, examining past traditions will clarify the radical nature of his thinking while keeping intact some of the conditions making conduct ethical.

To begin, Aristotle offers two specific lines of thought: he sets a course for an ethics of living and lends his *Four Causes* to Heidegger’s opening thoughts in the “Question Concerning Technology”—most notably the *causa efficiens* which Heidegger uses to deconstruct meaning and advance a new understanding of the gathering that takes place within the act of creation. Following Aristotle, Mill’s *Utilitarianism* and Kant’s *Groundwork for a Metaphysics ofMorals* will be investigated in light of a brief consideration of ethics, noting the threads carried from the past and forward into Heidegger’s own writings. Lévinas and Arendt have much to offer in terms of Heidegger’s legacy, both direct and indirect. Lévinas protested that Heidegger ignored the *other* as a constituting force in the shaping of our selfhood, placing ethics as first philosophy. In addition, Lévinas offers a fervent critique of Heidegger, the man in action, and his involvement with National Socialism—a fact that we investigate briefly at the close of chapter 1. Arendt diverges slightly from Levinas’
objections by manifesting an *ethics of thinking* and *action*, born within Heidegger’s thoughts on non-objective or meditative thinking and the allowance for truths to unfold as events or *alētheia*.

In sum, the dialogue that exists between this shortlist of philosophers is rich and nuanced, shedding much needed light on Heidegger’s ethical undertones. We will see in Heidegger’s work, while not extrinsically anchored in normative ethical thinking, traces of these past traditions. Where Aristotle values contemplation as virtuous, Heidegger demonstrates the need for meditative thinking, or the dwelling in uncertainty that results from remaining open to truth as an ever-becoming event. Kant recognizes a drive toward Reason while Heidegger exposes dispositions that consider such motivations more holistically. Mill’s position reveals an enlightened self-interest and Heidegger, once again, might view this as an expression of an inauthentic self-care as it disregards our fundamental dispositions. What is clear is the resonance manifesting throughout Heidegger’s writing and reinforces the position that his plea is an ethical one.

And, yet, the question of an ethics is problematic in current times. The loss of any ‘solid ground’ or stable values in general makes such a proposition challenging. We fall into questions of intent, genealogy and slippage as we interrogate basic normative codes of conduct, wondering all the while if such regulations are legitimate in a world wherein meaning is constantly shifting. In what follows, I will examine ethical positions that connect, whether directly or indirectly, with Heidegger’s undertones specific to the “Question Concerning Technology.” What becomes apparent is a trans-historical conversation through which many principles that have been deemed appropriate to justice and civil conduct endure, transforming quite subtly, as Heidegger would agree, over time with the ongoing
flow of history. It remains true, however, that “structures of right and wrong [continue to] exist in all known cultures” (Brooks). Regardless of the negation ethics faces in postmodern cultural critiques, it can easily be argued that a society lacking such structures falls into rapid ruin. To illustrate this, David Brooks wrote these reflections in an Op-Ed for the *New York Times* in October of 2016:

Moral capital is the set of shared habits, norms, institutions and values that make common life possible. Left to our own, we human beings have an impressive capacity for selfishness. Unadorned, the struggle for power has a tendency to become barbaric. So people in decent societies agree on a million informal restraints—codes of politeness, humility and mutual respect that girdle selfishness and steer us toward reconciliation. (Brooks)

Brooks is addressing an apparent dissolution of ethical standards as was vividly illustrated in the 2016 United States presidential race. In order to clarify his thoughts, he continues with a return to justice as a guiding principle, as did Plato when writing the *Republic*: “[W]hat is just is balanced and in harmony with itself” (Plato quoted in Brooks). Brooks is returning to the Greeks, as often did Heidegger.

We know that justice is paramount in Plato’s *Republic* although, to our 21st century minds, the means he suggests to achieve such harmony are often extraordinary. And, yet, the fundamental ideas remain. Plato quotes Socrates as saying:

And in truth, justice is, it seems, something of this sort. Yet it is not concerned with someone’s doing his own job on the outside. On the contrary, it is concerned with what is inside; with himself, really, and the things that are his own. It means that he does not allow the elements in him each to do the job of some other, or the three sorts of elements in his soul to meddle with one another. Instead, he regulates well what is really his own, rules himself, puts himself in order, becomes his own friend, and harmonizes the three elements together, just as if
they were literally the three defining notes of an octave—
lowest, highest, middle—as well as any others that may be in
between. (Plato 443c 132)

In other words, it is by means of self-regulation and an aim at harmonious co-existence with
the ruling forces that one maintains a just disposition among others. Plato maintains that it is
by means of an innate sense of self-control that one maintains greater political balance. That
said, the diagnosis of democracy as potentially corrupt as compared to its aristocratic
counterparts seems to be playing out as our modern world devolves. Democracy’s just
society is failing to maintain the equalities and freedoms inherent in its original values. It
may also be observed that our technological means of communication are exacerbating the
disintegration of ideals by rapidly disseminating unsavory and flatly false commentaries.
There seems to be no bottom to the depths we are falling. This is precisely the state of Being
about which Heidegger warns us—the calamitous disintegration of our capacity for thought
in relation to *Gestell*.

For Aristotle, a philosopher preferring the primacy of experience over dwelling in the
purity of ideas, our ultimate virtue is to achieve happiness through *eudaemonia*, or, loosely
translated, a *flourishing spirit*. This interpretation of joy differs from our understanding in
today’s parlance: our current measure might equate joy with gratification in matters of
personal gain. *Eudaemonia* is a happiness born in a life of contemplation or in reasoned
philosophical practice. This particular approach to an ultimately virtuous life forecasts
Heidegger’s understanding of *meditative thinking* and Arendt’s *ethics of thinking* as a
premise for basic societal order. Aristotle determined:

> For contemplation is both the highest form of activity (since
> the intellect is the highest thing in us, and the objects that it
> apprehends are the highest things that can be known), and also
> it is the most continuous, because we are more capable of
continuous contemplation than we are of any practical activity.  
(Barnes 1177a, lines 20-5, NE 270)

Arendt would agree that our highest vocation is to think and to act from those reflections independently. Doing so is beneficial to a more tempered society.

Aristotle recognizes the multifaceted nature of such an enterprise, understanding that the world and its circumstances are in flux. He states,

Our discussion will be adequate if it has as much clearness as the subject-matter admits of; for precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions, any more than in all the products of the crafts. Now fine and just actions, which political science investigates, exhibit much variety and fluctuation, so that they may be thought to exist only by convention and not by nature.  
(Barnes 1130)

Aristotle differentiates between convention (normative rules) and our own human nature (innate to us, the will) as able to determine a righteous path. Here, we can see one broad connection emerging between Heidegger and Aristotle: neither thinker situates ethics within transcendent Truths, choosing rather the structures and the indicative agency of human beings. For Aristotle, this manifests itself in seeking our Eudaimonia. For Heidegger, human beings express their virtue through the Care-structure. These notions run parallel in some ways while being subtly different.

Aristotle seems to preface the reconfiguration of the Essence issue that we later see in Heidegger’s efforts (cf. Truth, Technology, Dasein). There are certain features that merit elaboration in relation to Heidegger’s ethical undertones. The first of these is the articulation of virtue as an ongoing event spanning the entirety of life and demanding an inclination toward thought or contemplation. Virtue becomes a holistic project—rather than isolated moments—that result in a life of happiness. We must live this life fully and in accordance
with our highest nature. In Aristotle’s words, *eudaemonia* is “an activity of the soul in accordance to excellence” (NE 17, Barnes 1098a16) and is reflective of a fully productive life. The ultimate good that comes from our virtue, therefore, benefits society as a whole and will contribute to a meaningful and peaceful state. Reason is our guide and thinking is our calling. In Heidegger’s words, “the way is one of thinking.” To which he adds, “we would be advised, therefore, above all to pay heed to the way, and not to fix our attention on isolated sentences and topics” (Krell 311). This echoes Aristotle’s virtuous life as a journey of contemplation.

Aristotle also insists that the obligatory negates good will and virtue, and in order to be authentic, virtue must be experienced as an intrinsic motivation that seeks to elevate the mind. He elaborates: “Excellence, then, is a state concerned with choice, lying is a mean relative to us, this being determined by reason and in the way in which the man of practical wisdom would determine it” (NE, ch. II, §6, 1107a, 1148). He distinguishes between happiness as derived from selfish pleasures and a more general concern for community as a whole. In addition, “some people have thought that the ‘natural law’ of human life is ferocious competitive struggle, with little room for altruism and justice” (Blackburn 85) To this, Aristotle counters, it is “finer and more godlike to bring about the well-being of a whole city than to sustain the happiness of just one person” (NE 1094b7–10). If we are indeed intended to be happy, and happiness is derived through virtue, then it follows that we must lead lives of virtue in order to be happy with both being a practice or process as opposed to simply a cause and effect formula.

This circular understanding of our worth demonstrates that a person of discipline, education and good intentions will inevitably be ethical. Yet there is also the notion that we
live among others, which for Heidegger, affects much of our thinking and actions. Aristotle insisted, “[T]he wise man, even when by himself, can contemplate truth, and the better the wiser he is; he can perhaps do so better if he has fellow-workers, but still he is the most self-sufficient” (Barnes §1177b1, 1860). We are reminded of the similarity between Aristotle’s praise of friendship and Mitsein, as explored in Heidegger’s use of language. We are always already amidst others, and while this is a critical feature of our being, it does not determine nor elicit our own contemplative life, to borrow Arendt’s nomenclature.² It simply may drive us to better conduct or higher pursuits of intellectual understanding.

For Heidegger, our interconnectedness has darker potentials as well. The problematic modes of Theyness reflect the social pressures of Vice in Aristotle, wherein our internal harmony, needed to remain virtuous, is shifted. This imbalance forces a closing off through the influence of others, thus mirroring the impact of theyness as a prerequisite for Gestell. This externally imposed influence would signal, for Aristotle, a corruption of the mind, thereby constituting vice. Aristotle’s notion of Friendship illustrates this point well. We must maintain ourselves in light of our relationships, holding the position that what we wish for others must be uniquely for their good. Per Aristotle, “Those who wish good things to their friends for the sake of the latter are friends most of all, because they do so because of their friends themselves, and not coincidentally” (NE 1156b9–11). It is worth noting, however, that while Aristotle is explicit about the Moral nature of these dispositions, Heidegger is simply accounting for the Structures of Dasein. The underlying case for Authenticity and Care implies a moral charge, thereby carrying traces of Aristotle’s virtue forward in a radicalized way.³
Aristotle’s ethical system has an enduring quality. Its rootedness in reason informs Immanuel Kant’s 1785 revolution in ethical thinking as expressed in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. In both this volume and the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant sets forth the Categorical Imperative, a normative ethics based in man’s capacities for intrinsic reasoning and moral judgments. Ultimately, the potential for reasoned ethical functioning translates to the greater good of humanity. As moral beings, we act in the world in response to our duty as a reasoned end in itself and with consciousness fixed on its universal nature. Kant explains,

> But what kind of law can that be, the representation of which must determine the will, even without regard for the effect expected from it, in order for the will to be called good absolutely and without limitation? Since I have deprived the will of every impulse that could arise for it from obeying some law, nothing is left but the conformity of actions as such with universal law, which alone is to serve the will as its principle, that is, I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law.

*Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* 4:402, 17

Kant is operating on the assumption that we must live by our duty, creating in so doing a universal application of moral conduct in the face of a shared humanity. This communal existence underscores a ‘shared capacity to love, and suffer, and hope, and fear, and remember’ (Blackburn 124). We reach for a higher plane of conduct through our virtuous *a priori* disposition, namely our capacity for and drive toward reason.

The attainment of reason presupposes a cultivated desire to be ‘good’ and act in concert with the benefit of others while managing the ongoing internal struggle we have with the volatility of our desires. Good conduct demands we use *Reason* to direct our *Will* toward moral goals, for our personal sakes and those of others. For Kant, this discernment is a matter
of *Practical Reason*, thereby echoing the Greek notion of ‘praxis.’ His undergirding principle mirrors the Golden Rule as found in numerous religious teachings, while endeavoring to escape some of their contradictions. He asserts, “Act only on that maxim that you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” (4:21, 34). This oft-cited edict attempts to separate itself from religious undertones by deploying reason as its guiding principle. While religion relies on metaphysical bases, Kant, in contrast, enthusiastically offers the ability to summon ethical conduct from the Self, making it possible for anyone to act from duty without dependence on externally imposed ideas. As with Aristotle, the benefit to a virtuous life—or, in Kant’s case, a dutiful and rational existence—is the general health of the greater population, predicated on justice and harmony, rather than purely on happiness. Kant writes, “So act that you use humanity, in your own person as well as in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means” (4:428, 41). The universal application of the Categorical Imperative intimates that what is good for one must necessarily be determined as good for all.

In order to understand the continued relevance of these ideas, we must return briefly to David Brooks. He states, “If somebody is destroying the basic social and moral fabric through *brutalistic* rhetoric and vicious misogynistic behavior, it doesn’t really matter that he agrees with you on taxes and the Supreme Court; he has to be renounced or else he will drag the whole society to a level of degradation that will make all decent politics impossible” (Brooks). Here is a well-suited illustration of the universalization of ethical conduct at work in contemporary world events. If we all comported ourselves in the manner of those currently striving for power, civility as we know it would cease to exist. This uncivil environment
underscores Kant’s understanding of the need for universally acceptable normative structures by which we must live.

Arendt has much to say regarding the free fall associated with the misuse of power and denial of will as a potentially corrupting force. In her explorations of totalitarianism and its connections with Heidegger’s understanding of *theyness*, she offers the following insights:

In an ever-changing, incomprehensible world the masses had reached the point where they would, at the same time, believe everything and nothing, think that everything was possible and nothing was true … The totalitarian mass leaders based their propaganda on the correct psychological assumption that, under such conditions, one could make people believe the most fantastic statements one day, and trust that if the next day they were given irrefutable proof of their falsehood, they would take refuge in cynicism; instead of deserting the leaders who had lied to them, they would protest that they had known all along that the statement was a lie and would admire the leaders for their superior tactical cleverness. (OoT 499)

Arendt reveals the insidious ways our modes of thought are appropriated and corrupted. This corrupted mode of thinking will become evident as a concretization of Heidegger’s ideas in Arendt’s *ethics of action* in which just action is predicated on the ability to think or to apply all of our collaborative faculties in assessing what presents itself to us.

Of course, there is far more to Kant’s investigation than I have room to address here. What remains important is the undercurrent that structures of conduct are needed in order for a well-functioning society to thrive. The defining features of the Categorical Imperative take into account civility and appropriate conduct in relation to others, suggesting, however subtly, an intersubjectivity that presupposes a need for order. Although conceived on terms that Heidegger will not fully endorse, Kant’s longing for such a world is reflected in his notion of the *kingdom of ends* in which our desire for goodness and obedience lies in service
of the greater good of humanity. Kant explains, “[E]very rational being must act as if he were by his maxims at all times a law-giving member of the universal kingdom of ends” (Kant 1997a, 45/4:438). Our humanity becomes the ends; the rational being, capable through self-mastery of moral conduct, is the vehicle by which we coexist in harmony. In such a way, each of us gives law to furthering humanity and establishing a righteous order. In addition, these structures are motivated not by some means but, instead, for the sake of duty and the good in themselves. Kant elaborates, “[M]ere conformity to law as such, without having as its basis some law determined for certain actions, is what serves the will as its principle, and must so serve it, if duty is not to be everywhere an empty delusion and a chimerical concept” (Feinberg 593). Kant begins with subjectivity and then moves outwards to intersubjectivity, as an extension of the self’s obligation to moral duty rather than a dependent preexisting disposition as Heidegger would imply.

Another more calculated ethical formulation is set forth by John Stuart Mill whose volume Utilitarianism establishes the credo: “the greatest happiness for the greatest number.” He bases ethical value on reason, mathematics and perhaps a kind of enlightened self-interest since Mill roots his ideas in the pleasure-pain principle. Though he builds upon an Aristotelian premise of happiness as the greater goal of living, he deviates in his interpretation of what this means with regards to an ethical system. Mill states,

*The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals ‘utility’ or the ‘greatest happiness principle’ holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness … that pleasure and freedom from pain are the only things desirable as ends; and that all desirable things (which are as numerous in the utilitarian as in any other scheme) are desirable either for pleasure inherent in themselves or as means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain.* (7)
Our responsibility to the ‘happiness principle’ holds us accountable to the greater good of our fellow human. Clearly, the notion that depriving another of happiness counts as an immoral act directly speaks to an intersubjective responsibility. Mill states “that the happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct is not the agent’s own happiness but that of all concerned” (17). This notion of harmony recalls Plato’s understanding of a just society needing to be in sync with its basic element—the citizen.

Mill further makes the case that utilitarian systems invoke the golden rule, albeit indirectly, and labels it the “complete spirit of the ethics of utility” (17) with its principle of the greatest happiness being synonymous with avoidance of pain. In this idea, we find the thread that binds together Plato’s injunction to educate children in such a way as to make them virtuous, Aristotle’s advancement of a virtuous, happy life and Kant’s Categorical Imperative bound in a “social arrangement [that places] the happiness or (as, speaking practically, it may be called) the interest of every individual as nearly as possible in harmony with the interest of the whole” (Mill 17). Although this premise does carry the vestiges of a *Kingdom of Ends*, Kant considers *Happiness* a weak premise of ethical conduct. Mill also argues that “an act that fails to maximize happiness is called wrong only if ‘we mean to imply that a person ought to be punished in some way or other for doing it — if not by law, by the opinion of his fellow creatures; if not by opinion, by the reproaches of his own conscience’” (xi). The *greatest number principle* is based in feelings of ‘pleasure,’ particularly as avoidance of pain rather than a paradigm of Duty as with Kant. In addition, Mill’s self-society relation maintains a certain ‘distance’ within its formulation as to how we approach moral ideas and practices. Mill explains,

Those who know anything about the matter are aware that every writer, from Epicurus to Bentham, who maintained the
theory of utility meant by it, not something to be contradistinguished from pleasure, but pleasure itself, together with exemption from pain; and instead of opposing the useful to the agreeable or the ornamental, have always declared that the useful means these, among other things. (Mill 6)

In his quest to concretize utilitarianism, Mill overlooks what is fundamental to both Aristotle and (later) Heidegger—the journey toward wholeness or virtue is an ongoing process. It generates a revealing or disclosure of truth as temporal and in motion. The formulaic nature of utilitarianism deprives it of this possibility, thus falling short by limiting thinking and making ethical decisions somewhat clinical.

The very premise of the greatest happiness theory deploys an objectifying perspective that loses track of the process view of subjectivity and norms found in both Aristotle and Heidegger. It could even be posited that Mill’s happiness theory contributes to Heidegger’s understanding of enframing in its alienation and extrinsic motivations. While this may be the case, it bears noting the ways ethical philosophies structured the need for moral conduct prior to a phenomenological hermeneutic approach. Heidegger’s phenomenology of being-in-the-world transfers virtue to a necessity for authenticity and care while maintaining their process-based practice. It is within this ever-becoming ethics that “The Question Concerning Technology” places humanity’s saving grace.

Mill’s inclination toward the greatest happiness principle generates an intention that puts into crisis the means of its achievement. Perhaps, to this end, Karl Marx’s investigation of the relationship between labor and capital, with the explicit directive to liberate the proletariat from his self-alienation, deserves mention, particularly in relation to Heidegger’s use of Marx’s term standing reserve (see QCT 321-322). There is a clear relationship between Marx’s alienation and Gestell specifically expressed within theyness and the essence
of technology. The direct appropriation of the term *standing reserve* suggests that technology carries traces of capitalism in its alienation of man from himself through labor. No longer is man in direct contact with his disposition toward ‘making’—a consequence of the industrial revolution and assembly line manufacturing. Human beings abandon their natural inclinations and participate in organized schemas, belonging as a result to the societal systems that come to dominate existence. In making this connection, the relationship between capitalism and technology exhibit the same corruptive forces. de Beistegui elaborates on this point:

> Man has become his own slave, a working animal that must carry on working in order to produce, and to produce in order to consume. His will, this very will that constitutes his pride and that he erects as an instrument of his domination over the whole of the earth, is nothing but the expression of what Heidegger calls the ‘will to will.’ Yet this man does not realize that his labor and his will spin in a vacuum, moving him ever more forcefully away from his essence. (104)

Again, the sense of alienation—a severe distancing from our life structures—comes to the fore. Technology acts in such a way as to render human beings to the ends in themselves, negating our humanity in this objectifying move. Heidegger’s explicit warning of the imprisoning characteristics of *Gestell* and *theyness* appear in the appropriation of human dispositions in the greater technological apparatus. *Dasein* is taken hostage, and authentic, poetic dwelling retreats to the shadows of existence.

Marx’s understanding of alienation touches upon Kant’s concern for the corrupting force of using others as a means to an end. It begs us to wonder how the reductive nature of technology has been simultaneously perpetuated and ignored? In addition, it asks how an *ethics of thinking*, per Heidegger and Arendt, might embolden the potential for *freedom*? This
barring of thought and prohibition of authentic dwelling underpins much of Hannah Arendt’s ideas; her numerous texts on the subject echo Heidegger’s concerns. In the essay Collective Responsibility, Arendt demonstrates her concern for issues shaping moral conduct:

If we strip moral imperatives of their religious connotations and origins, we are left with the Socratic proposition ‘It is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong,’ and its strange substantiation, ‘For it is better for me to be at odds with the whole world than, being one, to be at odds with myself.’ However we may interpret this invocation of the axiom of noncontradiction in moral matters, as though the one and the same imperative, ‘Thou shalt not contradict yourself,’ is axiomatic for logic and ethics (which incidentally is still Kant’s chief argument for the categorical imperative), one thing seems clear: the presupposition is that I live together not only with others but also with my self, and that this togetherness, as it were, has precedence over all others. (RJ 153)

Arendt’s contention is that we cannot help but be members of a community, and perhaps this, above all else, shapes our conduct. Arendt formed her career in an attempt to understand the conditions needed for ultimate corruption to manifest in both the political sphere and in the life of the mind. Her work clearly demonstrates the ways theyness and enframing influence larger political movements and bring out, in so doing, the potential for extreme corruption. While she is best known for diagnosing the banality of evil in relation to Adolf Eichmann’s trial in Jerusalem, what will concern us principally is Arendt’s careful consideration of thinking and action as ethical practices in themselves. In addition, Arendt’s understanding of freedom as that into which we are born will reflect Heidegger’s assertion that we must exercise a responsibility toward choice as we actively seek an authentic disposition toward living. Arendt’s requisite ethics carry traces of Aristotle’s practice of contemplative virtue in context of the greater communal good, Kant’s sense of active reason
and the *Kingdom of Ends* and Heidegger’s departure from essential normative ethical structures. Her ethics is a process of reflective consideration of our world and its events.⁵

Arendt is speaking in practical terms about the conditions that make evil manifest. She states, “[I]n the center of moral considerations of human conduct stands the self; in the center of political considerations of conduct stands the world” (RJ 153). For Arendt, we can only achieve an ethical way of being by means of continued practice, similar to Heidegger’s view of *alētheia* as an ongoing revelation. Our singularity remains the expression of our best possible self in order that we live a virtuous life—in line with Aristotle’s *eudaemonia* as a consequence of a contemplative disposition. Our ethical conduct emerges from a place of self-regulation. Arendt explains,

> If he is a thinking being, rooted in his thoughts and remembrances, and hence knowing that he has to live with himself, there will be limits to what he can permit himself to do, and these limits will not be imposed on him from the outside, but will be self-set. These limits can change considerably and uncomfortably from person to person, from country to country, from century to century; but limitless, extreme evil is possible only where these self-grown roots, which automatically limit the possibilities, are entirely absent.

(RJ 101)

Arendt acknowledges the subtle movement of societal norms but underscores the personal responsibility we each possess with regards to our choices and behaviors. If our virtue lies in our singularity, we own the responsibility for ethical action. She tempers Kant’s version of practical reason by asserting that the rational plays a role in thinking *in collaboration with* our *will*, as the two are correspondingly intertwined. To Arendt, “[Kant’s view] was insufficiently political, because the dutiful agents take no responsibility for the consequences of his acts, because Kant’s notion of duty, as Eichmann showed, can be perverted, and
because (although of course Kant knew nothing of this) the limitlessness of thoughtless evil eludes its conceptual grasp” (RJ xxii). As this statement implies, we are too easily co-opted by external forces such as Heidegger’s theyness and forgottenness in relation to being-in-the-world. This interdependency reflects Heidegger’s assertion that we are indivisible beings with dispositions and moods that direct our behavior.

Arendt further concretizes Heidegger’s ontological concern by recognizing the role we play toward ourselves in every interaction. Arendt continues, “Solitude means that though alone, I am together with somebody (myself, that is)” (98). Her assertion reflects Aristotle’s understanding of friendship as a mirror of self-love. In Responsibility and Judgment, she quotes Cato who says, “Never am I more active than when I do nothing, never am I less alone than when I am by myself” (99). Thought becomes a preamble to action and, akin with Heidegger’s ideas on poēsis, contemplation underpins the manner of the poets. The banality of evil exists in the vacuous absence of thought and morphs into an extreme and corrupted species of theyness when left unchecked. This represents a missed function of Mitsein and collectivity.

Arendt’s ideas, as discussed above, are critical to this project, particularly as reflections of Heidegger’s ethical undertones. As both his student and subsequent defender, Arendt expresses in real terms the consequences of ignoring the suppression of self-reflection and thought, resulting in a complete negation of Aristotelian contemplation. She illustrates such a path in the following description:

In an ever-changing, incomprehensible world the masses had reached the point where they would, at the same time, believe everything and nothing, think that everything was possible and nothing was true…. The totalitarian mass leaders based their propaganda on the correct psychological assumption that,
under such conditions, one could make people believe the most fantastic statements one day, and trust that if the next day they were given irrefutable proof of their falsehood, they would take refuge in cynicism; instead of deserting the leaders who had lied to them, they would protest that they had known all along that the statement was a lie and would admire the leaders for their superior tactical cleverness. (OoT 499)

This scenario (which has repeated itself throughout recent history with unfortunate frequency) highlights what might result from an abandonment of thought to external, corrupt forces. It is the ultimate expression of Heidegger’s Gestell, demonstrating the mental imprisonment hobbling the masses.

Also noteworthy is Arendt’s belief in our freedom as an a priori ontological disposition, opened to us at birth. In other words, we arrive with a tendency toward action and are able to choose our paths accordingly. She states, “[T]he new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting” (HC 9). This freedom echoes Heidegger’s understanding of the potential forming the basis of Gelassenheit and the active ‘letting be’ also inherent in this characteristic. It is through the work Arendt accomplishes that we begin to see manifestations of Heidegger’s philosophy of thinking. He lays the foundation on which Arendt carefully builds her ideas, taking his ideas farther than he was able to do himself. She continues, “The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world” (HC 177–8). The potential for action, unexpected and unique, is part of the solution proposed in Heidegger’s plea and exercises this birthright. To reiterate his words, “The relationship will be free if it opens our human existence to the essence of technology.
When we can respond to this essence, we shall be able to experience the technological within its own bounds” (Krell 313). According to Arendt, the responsibility human beings have toward a response is therefore always already present from the start of life and the potential for the unexpected is constant. This implies that our obligation toward participation and action are within us, yet possibly dormant, as might be the case under the conditions of theyness. Arendt touches upon Kantian duty (more so than Heidegger was willing to do) to uphold what is morally correct while acknowledging external effects influencing decisions each individual must make.

With Arendt’s ideas, we see the presentation of personal responsibility and culpability in relation to our singular choices—something ultimately existential in nature as we have the ethical burden of self-direction. We are the bearer of guilt when we face ourselves in such culpability. This notion suggests an ultimate responsibility for the greater good of our community through appropriate actions and builds on Kant’s assertion that we are collectively co-creators of our humanity. While not implicating the other directly, Arendt does suggest the need to protect the greater good of the world through conscious choice and deliberate action. As we have noted above, Arendt refers to this as our collective responsibility.

Despite this collective responsibility, it bears asking to what extent our self-direction is determined by intersubjective exchange? To this query, Emmanuel Lévinas proposes ethics as originary of philosophy, rather than as a distinct and separate branch of study, with our responsibility and interconnectedness binding us inextricably to the Other. Although Lévinas was among Heidegger’s most vociferous critics, he nonetheless carried forward traces of Heidegger’s ontological hermeneutics. His ideas do not fall strictly into a traditional ethics,
however, and are expressed in terms of relationships. We see this in our encounter with the *Face*, with the recognition that I must, in a sense, account for my existence through the gaze that confronts me. He says, “Here the concern for justice is born, which is the basis for the theoretical. But it is always starting out from the Face, from the responsibility for the other that justice appears, which calls for judgment and comparison, a comparison of what is in principle incomparable, for every being is unique; every other is unique” (EN 104). Arendt’s singularity is manifested indirectly in these thoughts, although with a move toward our collective disposition. Lévinas continues, “One of the most important things for me is that asymmetry and that formula: All men are responsible for one another and I more than anyone else” (107). In other words, in beholding the Other, I am most accountable for his existence, regardless of his actions or disposition. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, it is within this exchange that the *Self* is grounded.

Pushing beyond Kant’s formulation of Humanity and Mill’s greater happiness theory, Lévinas ultimately radicalizes *Mitsein* as the shaper of our being. He asks, “Is that the word of God? A word that requires me as the one responsible for the Other; and there is an election there, because that responsibility is inalienable” (108). The return to responsibility connects with Heidegger’s Care and Arendt’s notion of our singularity, but maintains the bonds that drive our ethical conduct. From this premise, Lévinas argued that Heidegger’s thinking did not consider the *Other* in any significant way, despite his exploration of *Mitsein* and *theyness*, and the correlative dispositions that affect our interactions with the world. Furthermore, Lévinas observes that it was Bergson, not Heidegger, whose thoughts introduced temporality and shifted philosophical focus to human creative intuition, or the *élan vital* (Kearney *Dialogues* 65). Thus, for Lévinas, the life process of care, in its
essentially temporal disposition, emerges either directly or indirectly from Bergson. As Lévinas moved toward phenomenology as a method, he explains, “The phenomenological method permits consciousness to understand its own preoccupations, to reflect upon itself and thus discover all the hidden or neglected horizons of its intentionality” (Kearney Dialogues 65). (These particular points are increasingly important in the analysis of the artists’ works in chapters 3-5.)

As we have seen through this brief exploration of ethical traditions, enframing has been a consistent worry either in its expression through theyness or the manner in which it manipulates being into falling prey to greater societal forces imposing structures of thought. Freedom, contemplation and living the fullest potential of our humanity connect ethical premises, and prescriptive solutions seek to protect what is our highest manifestation. These normative structures or decrees have varied throughout the ages, but an enduring concern for essential freedom remains. Heidegger’s efforts intended to break free of such norms. As we have noted throughout, Heidegger’s shift beyond the normative addresses the more foundational need for authenticity and care, dispositions we must incorporate into our individual lives. He reassigns new meaning to old premises, exploring the ways Dasein, through its structures and dispositions, leads us to freedom. In the introduction to Responsibility and Judgment, Kohn explains, “For Arendt the contingency of human freedom is the real crisis in which we live today; it cannot be avoided, and the only meaningful question that can be asked is whether or not our freedom pleases us, whether or not we are willing to pay its price” (RJ xxvi). Arendt is walking a fine line balancing our existential reality on the one hand with the necessity for collective responsibility on the other. Herewith, we move into our singular position, all the while maintaining the necessity of moral conduct.
This returns us to Heidegger’s opening paragraph in the “Question Concerning Technology,” in which he implicates our contemplative nature on the quest to ensure our ultimate freedom within the event of truth. The suggestion that we might return to our essence by means of thinking has prophetic undertones given the current global relationship human beings have with technology and the widespread disappearance of contemplation as a source of virtue and liberation.

Through our exploration of themes and a small number of key thinkers in the ethical tradition, we are now in a much better position to understand Heidegger’s ethics as an ontological practice and disposition—something that may not be directly evident as we read his texts. Although only briefly, I have highlighted some systems that resonate within his notion of Mitsein, care or solicitude as ongoing practices and structures of our being. In addition, we have looked at Heidegger’s continued concern for the salvation of Dasein through the authentic expression of our potential. Although traces of each of the aforementioned thinkers manifest in Heidegger’s writing thereby coloring his ideas, it is his departure from normative ethics toward a phenomenological hermeneutics that is most significant.

NOTES:

1 “How to Repair Moral Capital,” NYT, Oct. 20, 2016. Brooks has written extensively about the immoral displays in our government and the long-term effects these downgraded ethics will create.
2 vita contemplativa is something Arendt unpacks in her writings about thinking. This concept also corresponds to her notion of a vita activa, which underpins her ethics of action—something that will become increasingly important as this project unfolds.
3 The premise that only the best men can become virtuous by means of a contemplative life is dangerous. It moves forward into a Nietzschean position that very few detach from the herd and achieve the status of über-mensch. In addition, “some people have thought that the ‘natural law’ of human life is ferocious competitive struggle, with little room for altruism and justice” (Being Good). He states, it is “finer and more godlike” to bring about the well-being of a whole city than to sustain the happiness of just one person (EN 1094b7–
10). (Stanford Plato site) And Nietzsche is shifting the paradigm away from Morality, which his Genealogy shows to be a kind of evolving construct. That’s a kind of blow to what Aristotle otherwise takes for Granted (that Virtue/Vice have some kind of definite basis), although both could be said to be doing an ethics of existence.

4 Kant ultimately abandons the ‘Happiness’ grounding principle after seeing it pass into Bentham’s pre-Mill Utilitarianism. Kant does not believe Happiness can be contrived as the basis for Ethics.

5 If one includes Nietzsche in the above list of influences, then one sees how Arendt goes into the existential plane (immanence) like him but without erasing Morality. In a sense, she one-ups Nietzsche.
APPENDIX B:

BENJAMIN + HEIDEGGER ON LANGUAGE AS THE ORIGIN OF MEANING

For Benjamin, language serves both as a style of reasoning and careful attention to words and as a conduit for understanding human experience. In her introduction to Illuminations, Arendt quotes Benjamin’s words penned in a letter to Hugo Hofmannsthal in 1924,

The conviction which guides me in my literary attempts … [is] that each truth has its home, its ancestral palace, in language, that this palace was built with the oldest logoi, and that to a truth thus founded the insights of the sciences will remain inferior for as long as they make do here and there in the area of language like nomads, as it were, in the conviction of the sign character of language which produces the irresponsible arbitrariness of their terminology. (IL 47)

Arendt draws a parallel between the thoughts expressed herein and Heidegger’s later writings — demonstrating the lasting impact of Benjamin’s ideas and the foretelling of Heidegger’s objection to science as a dominant purveyor of truth. In addition, traces of Heidegger’s ‘language as the house of Being’ such as he presents in his Letter on Humanism can be detected in his letter. Thinking is at home within language as it finds its expression therein. Heidegger states:

Such offering consists in the fact that in thinking Being comes to language. Language is the house of Being. In its home man dwells. Those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home. Their guardianship accomplishes the manifestation of Being insofar as they bring the manifestation of Being to language and maintain it in language through their speech. Thinking does not become action only
because some effect issues from it or because it is applied. Thinking acts insofar as it thinks. Such action is presumably the simplest and at the same time the highest, because it concerns the relation of Being to man (Krell 217).

His view of Freedom is similar; it is an abstraction that we are unable to ‘hold,’ a presencing that comes before us. By the same token, to live within language can both liberate and limit expression while manifesting in every facet of existence. If indeed language is the home of truth (we might say where truth dwells) above the capabilities of the sciences, and if we are to avoid the ‘irresponsible arbitrariness’ of its usage, then a careful examination of the terminology deployed in Benjamin’s essay, as well as those expressed in related texts, seems paramount. Such an examination allows us to acknowledge Benjamin’s reasoning and careful attention to Marxist language while also keeping track of the dangers language faces when falling into fixed structures — in essence, becoming enframed. At the very least, unpacking Benjamin’s terminology will enable us to set a proper course for a clear understanding of what follows, all the while underscoring the trans-historical nature of the foundational ideas.
APPENDIX C:

GENEALOGY OF SOUTH ASIAN HISTORY:
THE AMBIGUITY OF TRUTH / NON-TRUTH IN THE WORK OF MIRZA + BUTLER

We turn our attention first to the issues informing the subject matter of the artwork, undertaking a genealogical investigation of the ideas and historical events shaping its content. To assist with this effort, we will examine the historical narrative with the support of colonial and post-colonial thinkers Said, Spivak and Bhabha, while recognizing the internalization of colonialism by many who live in its aftermath. In addition, Foucault’s discourse and Arendt’s plurality will serve to both question and clarify the enduring difficulties expressed in South Asia’s tumultuous story. The profound connections between past and present will become vividly clear as we undertake our reading of Mirza and Butler’s video essay in section 4 of chapter 5.

In support of this genealogical approach, Foucault writes, “History . . . is certainly the most erudite, the most aware, the most conscious, and possibly the most cluttered area of our memory; but it is equally the depths from which all beings emerge into their precarious, glittering existence” (OoT 219). History, particularly the violent oppression of a nation by external forces, quite literally collapses within each frame of Mirza and Butler’s artwork, demonstrating the continuum of a past that, regardless of decades of emotional separation, is directing contemporary geo-political actions. There are several overarching questions that inform our investigation: How does history actively manifest in present-day events? How does an understanding of the past benefit our understanding of ongoing acts of violence? Certainly, one must investigate Foucault’s épistèmes as units of an historical a priori
anchoring broader knowledge and understanding. Without such an investigation, one risks not fully experiencing the emancipatory potential of *The Unreliable Narrator*.

At the center of Mirza and Butler’s film is an understanding of colonialism and the post-colonial nationalist tensions between Pakistan and India born of centuries of British rule. Furthermore, the artwork alludes to the viciously animated hostilities and subsequent discourse brought into being by the arbitrary 1947 territorial partitioning of the Indian subcontinent. The partition, as delineated by the departing British Raj, along with the elected Hindu and Muslim leadership, recklessly accelerated the effort to define national boundaries based on the separation of Muslims and Hindus. The division emphasized cultural difference over political collaboration. The rushed imposition of externally drawn lines of demarcation created a wave of destruction that actively simmers in collective post-memory (or the latent spaces feeding current beliefs) decades later.

The voiceover script underpinning the film speaks of “a Dadaist nightmare framed as a moral response to the tortured, humiliated and photographed bodies of the slim men and women elsewhere—it is a drama of violent death, a monstrous form of revenge of Bollywood proportions” (*The Unreliable Narrator*). As testimony to this fact, at the time of this writing, both nations are celebrating 70 years since they gained their respective ‘freedom’ from British rule—and only now are those who survived the subsequent genocidal carnage articulating their trauma in various collections of oral and written histories.¹ These stories, recounted on the pages of various publications, illustrate the lingering pain and trauma inflicted upon the South Asian people so many decades ago.

Also consequential are the strategic considerations imposed upon the subcontinent by larger nation states, including the US’s cold war with the former USSR, China vying for both
military and economic benefits, and the former USSR pressing down through Afghanistan. In his book *Deadly Embrace*, author Bruce Riedel places a large share of responsibility for the turmoil affecting Pakistan on the United States, whose focus on the region shifted in the aftermath of the defeat and withdrawal of the “Soviet Fortieth Red Army in Afghanistan, which was followed by the collapse of the Soviet Union and end of the cold war” (3). With regards to this dynamic, Riedel continues “[the U.S.] then focused its attention elsewhere (ironically, much of it on Iraq), leaving Afghanistan to become transformed, not into a stable and friendly nation, but a hostile and fanatic foe eager to host al Qaeda and as the base for the deadliest attack ever on U.S. soil” (3). The short-term interference of foreign powers continues. In the November 10, 2017 issue of *The Week*, several editorial writers speak of recent U.S. overtures favoring India, explicitly denouncing Pakistan and further exacerbating festering tensions. Depending on their various interests in India, the outside nations’ motivations and actions vary, but the result is the same: a subcontinent in unending geopolitical turmoil, which provides fodder for the expansion of jihad and ongoing acts of aggression.

Where did all of this conflict originate? With the dawn of the seventeenth century, the British were initially enticed to South Asia by its potential for economic expansion and global trade. Their actions paved the way for what is now called globalization. What the British encountered, according to the *New History of India*, was an ensemble of largely Muslim Mughal emperors, who ruled with relative tolerance and ethnic respect, adapting their own cultural practices to existing local Hindu norms, thereby facilitating a pluralistic society. The British joined the stage during a period of relative peace. Queen Elizabeth I signed the East India Royal Charter in the year 1600 granting its ambitious stakeholders the
right to establish trade in the region to their great economic advantage (Baladouni). While the East India Company’s intention was material gain rather than territorial acquisition, the weakening Mughal Empire offered an opening for further strategic control; the Brits’ increased jurisdiction was largely taken by force and coercion (Dalrymple). Some regional leaders bowed to the expanding British presence, willingly cooperating with demands, while other regional leaders fought aggressively to maintain their dominion. The Mughal Emperor Nuruddin Salim Jahangir (r. 1605-1627), in a gesture of cooperation, wrote a letter responding to the 1612 invitation from James I to sign a reciprocal trade treaty giving the East India Company exclusivity and property rights in exchange for European goods and “rarities.” Other local rulers were not so welcoming. By the end of the seventeenth century, with trade open to other British interests, the field of competitors for the available economic opportunities grew along with the stakes involved in such commercial ventures.

The British struggled all the while with other external commercial forces competing for trade advantages. In these early stages of commerce, other nation states were finding trade routes lucrative. Piracy abounded as ships began their voyages laden with materials headed for Europe with subsequent violent conflicts fought on Indian soil and waters. The Dutch, Danes, Portuguese and French were among these other nationalities fighting for a stake in the wealth generated through South Asia’s trading routes and natural resources. Despite these monetary interests, while establishing deeper alliances with British, the Portuguese ceded their control over Goa, Bombay and Chittagong in 1662 as “part of the dowry of Catherine of Braganza” (Tyacke 39). Though there were multiple challenges to its advancing control, the East India Company, using growing military strength and pervasive
force, eventually monopolized the Indian Subcontinent, profiting from its total occupation while systematically repressing local cultures and mores.

This measure of control was achieved by means of private armies, deployed by the East India Company and its directors. In Dalrymple’s words, “It was not the British government that seized India at the end of the 18th century, but a dangerously unregulated private company headquartered in one small office, five windows wide, in London, and managed in India by an unstable sociopath—[Robert] Clive.” The ruthless profiteering initiated in the early seventeenth century set up structures of dominance and established longstanding hierarchies of power administered by foreigners who cared little about South Asia’s rich cultural heritage. Nor were the British interested in perpetuating the pluralistic social norms hitherto enjoyed by the Indian people.

These activities and proclivities to force a submission of the other, the native as it were, mirror Foucault’s understanding of dominance and control, as laid out in *Discipline and Punish*. In addition, the imbalance of power toward the colonialist forces nurtured an undercurrent of resistance as described by Caygill. Indeed, the progressive overtaking of India’s territories planted the seeds for later resistance, seeds that would lay dormant for many decades. Edward Said explains,

The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony … The Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be ‘Oriental’ in all those ways considered commonplace by an average nineteenth-century European, but also because it could be—that is, submitted to being—made Oriental. There is very little consent to be found. (Harrison and Wood 1007-1008).
Said understands the nature of colonization and domination, and the resignation of vast populations under such structures. Under British rule, cultural characteristics were sublimated and replaced, thus creating an alienation of heritage, along with a pervasive mood of shame for one’s own identity and alleged inferiority. The suppression (manifesting in the replacement of the dominant language, the introduction and imposition of new religious mores, the wholesale replacement of educational systems, shifting the measure of a successful society, etc.) created a tide of resentment and resistance. In Mirza and Butler’s work, this chasm exists in the space between the Eton exam and brutal realities unfolding in Mumbai, a space of cultural dissonance and inequity surfacing today.

In the “Order of Discourse,” Foucault asserts, “Any system of education is a political way of maintaining or modifying the appropriation of discourses [that is, the transference of discourse(s) from one person/social group to another], along with knowledges and powers which they carry” (222). These ideas echo Heidegger’s understanding of Being as historical, embedded within Heritage and life among others. By imposing British educational systems and enforcing the belief in its superiority, millions of South Asian children were raised into this ideological position. Said elaborates, “[W]hat we must respect and try to grasp is the sheer knitted-together strength of Orientalist discourse, its very close ties to the enabling socio-economic and political institutions, and its redoubtable durability” (Harrison and Wood 1008). Over centuries, South Asia’s consciousness shifted; it simultaneously bowed to the prevailing discourse and sowed seeds of resistance.

The profound marginalization created insurrections, among them the Rebellion of 1857. “In 1857, Indians rose in revolt against the high-handed and oppressive [East India] Company rule—particularly its insensitivity toward their religions—and it took excessively
brutal action by the Company’s army to regain control of its possessions” (Parliament.uk). The violence and atrocity evidenced in this conflict prompted the British Crown to intervene, ultimately passing the Government of India Act of 1858; the Crown assumed control, making Victoria Queen and Empress of India. This act did not ameliorate levels of oppression nor end the stronghold over India’s populace. Quite the contrary, the remaining economic ties held the firmly imposed structures wholly in place, with British interests well ahead of India’s. Mirza and Butler’s artwork carries the traces of this historical reality, one in which visitors to South Asia retain the privileges and wealth denied to the vast majority of its native-born citizenry. The disparity is evidenced as the young jihadist recruits express awe over luxuries and opulence they have never before witnessed, riches so startling as to shift their attention from their mission to destroy it. Their role reveals the historical divide and reinforces the inequities created through centuries of colonization and oppression.

We will see clearly how the acceleration of technologies and events made possible with the industrial revolution magnified the challenges faced by India’s people, regardless of faith or economic status. The 20th century brought with it increased global violence, and as discussed in prior chapters, unspeakable atrocities and genocide. The British Raj, and its subjects, fought in both World Wars, with substantial losses of life and economic prosperity. World War II, though ostensibly ‘won’ by the Allied forces, left Britain in economic ruin. The long narrative of imperialism that had come to define British identity began to falter.

During the decades between World Wars, several key figures grew into Indian political power, emerging from British educations as attorneys, practicing law to the extent the British Raj permitted. Three key figures—Mahātmā Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Pandit Jawaharial Nehru and Mohammed Ali Jinnah—orchestrated an Indian independence
movement. They formed the Hindu Congress and Muslim League, gathering enormous momentum in support of their respective campaigns. Their efforts and the upheaval that ensued were not welcome by the British Raj; they were imprisoned and, physically abused. Gandhi’s personal experience with racial inequity in South Africa galvanized his principled approach of non-violent resistance, living his ideals through his actions and an outright rejection of his own position within the Hindu caste system, choosing instead to live among the ‘untouchable caste,’ Hinduism’s lowest rung in society.

At the risk of grossly oversimplifying a long and arduous historical trajectory, what emerged from British imperialist rule was a focus on difference; disparate religions and identity politics existed within Western structures. Arendt warns against such strategies of oppression, as they negate the distinctive characteristics of unique beings, thus setting up a foundation of discord. Notions of superiority (already built into the Hindu caste system) were exacerbated by long-standing oppression. Alex von Tunzelmann explains, in her volume *Indian Summer,* when “the British started to define ‘communities’ based on religious identity and attach political representation to them, many Indians stopped accepting the diversity of their own thoughts and began to ask themselves in which of the boxes they belonged” (Dalrymple “Great Divide”).

The categorization of human beings reflected the well-trodden discourse of racial superiority that satisfied the imperialist need to hold onto power. This discourse is also reminiscent of Kristeva’s understanding of the Abject as an ‘othered’ impurity, used to constitute a social system of identity and structure. Such efforts reinforce Foucault’s notion of discourse’s exclusion of the other as a means of control. Foucault states,

But when we view things on a different scale, when we ask the question of what this will to truth has been and constantly is,
across other discourses, this will to truth which has crossed so many centuries of our history; what is, in its very general form, the type of division which governs our will to know (notre volonté de savoir), then what we see taking shape is perhaps something like a system of exclusion, a historical, modifiable, and institutionally constraining system. (Young 54)

Jinnah capitalized on the mounting tensions, pressing for an independent Muslim state, so as to avoid further marginalization and oppression by the larger Hindu governance. Eventually, through extensive deliberation and complex political negotiations, Britain was ready to relinquish control of her ‘crown jewel’ to its rightful people, the 400 plus million Indians preparing for freedom, whatever that freedom might represent. While both the British and the Hindu Congress were vehemently opposed to any division of the sub-continent, Jinnah and other members of the Muslim League believed it to be the only acceptable direction, if their voices were ever to have any consequence.

Amid increasing levels of inter-sectarian violence, the ultimate decision to divide India and a newly founded Pakistan fell to Louis Mountbatten, the last Vice Roy to oversee the British Raj. Sir Cyril Radcliffe, the chairman of the Border Commission who held little prior demographic understanding of the region, drew the divisions. Pakistan’s projected lands would be separated by a stretch of Indian soil, thereby creating East and West wings of a nation whose largely Muslim populations had little else in common other than their fundamental religious beliefs. The Mountbatten Plan, crafted from conversations with individual political leaders and an urgently felt presentiment that India would imminently dissolve into civil war, yielded Pakistan to Jinnah, while endeavoring to keep its landholdings as small as possible so as to satisfy the Hindu Congress. Furthermore, Mountbatten advised the ‘princely states’ to accede to their choice of either Pakistan or India.
When warned by Abul Kalam Azad of potential outbursts of violence, Mountbatten responded,

At least on this question I shall give you complete assurance. I shall see to it that there is no bloodshed and riot. I am a soldier and not a civilian. Once partition is accepted in principle, I shall issue orders to see that there are no communal disturbances anywhere in the country. If there should be the slightest agitation, I shall adopt the sternest measures to nip the trouble in the bud. (Jagmohan 49)

The illusion of control as stated in these comments expresses the Orientalist power position—without recognizing the social strife underway. The British simply assumed that through their sovereignty and domination they would maintain civility throughout the period of transition. Caygill carefully notes the outcomes from any such displacements of power when unmet with an equilibrium of polity. When explaining Arendt’s position with regards to the suppression of disparate populations, he explains, “Total domination seeks to reduce human diversity to a biopolitical essence, an animal species, except that Arendt went even further in saying that this ‘animal life’ is itself further reduced to a ‘thing’ that can be shaped and controlled” (Resistance 154). What becomes clear, through a genealogy of India’s past, is such external control has disastrous consequences.

Indeed, Mountbatten’s assurances were met with an unfathomable wave of brutality, reaching such depths of depravity that Margaret Bourke White, on photographic assignment for Life Magazine at the time, described the ensuing events as on par with those she witnessed at Buchenwald only two years prior. An estimated one to two million civilians perished in the weeks after India and Pakistan won their independence from British rule, leaving indelible scars on both sides of the newly established border. William Dalrymple writes for the New Yorker, “Across the Indian subcontinent, communities that had coexisted
for almost a millennium attacked each other in a terrifying outbreak of sectarian violence, with Hindus and Sikhs on one side and Muslims on the other—a mutual genocide as unexpected as it was unprecedented” (Dalrymple 2015).

Ayesha Jalal states “the Partition is the central historical event in twentieth century South Asia. . . . A defining moment that is neither beginning nor end, partition continues to influence how the peoples and states of postcolonial South Asia envisage their past, present and future” (qtd. in Dalrymple). Indeed, accounts of the atrocities continue to haunt current generations through a pervasive infusion of post-memory and discourse. The radical displacement of entire communities coupled with extreme animosity emanating from the highest levels of leadership set course for an unstable future. This outcome was well anticipated by Gandhi who understood that even the smallest measures of violence would escalate (Caygill Resistance 76). Dalrymple concludes, “Today, both India and Pakistan remain crippled by the narratives built around memories of the crimes of Partition, as politicians (particularly in India) and the military (particularly in Pakistan) continue to stoke the hatreds of 1947 for their own ends” (Dalrymple “Great Divide”).

How does the sum of violence and strife manifest in current South Asian socio-political dynamics and discourse? We have noted centuries of foreign oppression and a constant undercurrent of corrupt commercial enterprise with vast segments of India’s population placed in service of capitalist interests. It is not surprising, given these conditions, that resistance and force should marry in an effort to subvert political discourse and self-interest. Yasmin Khan, author of The Great Partition, judges that Partition “stands testament to the follies of empire, which ruptures community evolution, distorts historical trajectories
and forces violent state formation from societies that would otherwise have taken different—and unknowable—paths” (Dalrymple “Great Divide”).

The power vacuum created when the British Raj vacated its authority left an entire population at odds with itself. While the nature of South Asian (read Orientalist) discourse was indeed shifting, there continued to be embedded traditions of thought creating ever deeper divides. Spivak tells us, “Any extended discussion of remaking history in decolonization must take into account the dangerous fragility and tenacity of those concept metaphors” (Harrison and Wood 1095). Those concepts refer to nationalism, secularism, internationalism and culturalism (Harrison and Wood 1095). The improbable freedom achieved by both the Hindu Congress and Muslim League proved to be tenuous. Arguably, the two nations have yet to experience the unhindered independence they fought so hard to gain. With regards to this post-colonial condition and its implicit fragility, Homi Bhabha explains,

It is in the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated. How are subjects formed ‘in-between,’ or in excess of, the sum of the ‘parts’ of difference (usually intoned as race/class/gender, etc.)? How do strategies of representation or empowerment come to be formulated in the competing claims of communities where, despite shared histories of deprivation and discrimination, the exchange of values, meanings and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual and even incommensurable? (Bhabha, Harrison and Wood 1111)

It is the absence of dialogical collaboration—though this common value had existed for centuries—that drove South Asia into chaos. Without a mutual vision of what freedom and
independence might look like to the whole (despite its pluralistic nature), the vacuum filled with bottomless rage, and perhaps the fear of further future repression. Whatever the cause of the mass killings and mutual genocide, decolonization left Pakistan and India in a perpetual state of war.

The idea that freedom is a liberating force is deceptive. Mirza and Butler’s video essay makes our understanding of these currents indispensable to our apprehending of their message. Within each of the film’s choreographed frames, we encounter a repetition of this brutal past complete in all its graphic details and urgency. To this notion, Spivak writes,

For the moment let us hold onto the fact that the de-colonization does quite seriously represent a rupture for the colonized. It is counterintuitive to point at its repetitive negotiations. But it is precisely these counterintuitive imaginings that must be grasped when history is said to be remade, and a rupture is too easily declared because of the intuition of freedom that a merely political independence brings for a certain class. Such grasping will allow us to perceive that neocolonialism is a displaced repetition of many of the old lines laid down by colonialism. (Harrison and Wood 1094).

Spivak notes the repetition of well-entrenched systems of control and ongoing violence to the other. Thus, the power grabs originating in India’s independence movement led to self-interested manipulation. Jinnah’s immovable desire for an independent Muslim state, while initially moderate and secular in intent, continues to nurture ongoing acts of violence.

Neither India nor Pakistan will relinquish desired ownership of Kashmir. The first war over the disputed territories broke out in October 1947, just weeks after independence. In 1949, The United Nations imposed a cease-fire and a fragile (and brief) state of order marked the northernmost region of India. Over the past seven decades, a number of other conflicts
have arisen, usually provoked by the ongoing dispute over Kashmir. These conflicts have included the 1965 War, the 1971 War, the 1989 Kashmir Insurgency, the 1999 Kargil Conflict and the active proliferation of nuclear weapons on both sides of the border. Following the devastation of 9/11, 2001 found the region, once again, on the brink of war, with Pakistan attempting to ease tensions by cooperating with the United States with regards to the capture of Osama bin Laden. All the while, global strategic interests continue to invite the attention of other nation states, whose respective stakes in the region include natural resources, strategic military operations and the sale and provision of arms.

In his narrative history titled *Midnight’s Furies*, Nisid Hajari concludes the conflict is “getting more, rather than less, dangerous: the two countries’ nuclear arsenals are growing, militant groups are becoming more capable, and rabid media outlets on both sides are shrinking the scope for moderate voices. . . . It is well past time that the heirs to Nehru and Jinnah finally put 1947’s furies to rest” (Hajari 261). Hajari introduces the media’s complicity in advancing prevailing beliefs, foretelling Baudrillard’s assertion of its ultimate complicity with human action. Needless to say, the unrelenting production of discourse continues to limit human consciousness to a single story, precluding cooperation and possible relief from violence.

As though speaking through Arendt’s understanding of plurality and equality, Spivak addresses the difficulties of moving past political manipulations of discourse:

Briefly, it seems possible to say that an alternative and perhaps equally fragile mode of resistance to them can only come through a strategic acceptance of the centrifugal potential of the plurality and heterogeneity native to the subcontinent. Yet, heterogeneity is an elusive and ambivalent resource (except in metropolitan ‘parliamentary’ or academic space) as the recent past in India, and indeed on the globe, have shown. Its direct
Arendt speaks to the “paradoxical plurality of unique beings” (HC 176) as the fundamental premise underpinning the “basic condition of both action and speech” (HC 175). In much the same way that Arendt encourages the acceptance of plurality and political difference as expressed in cooperation, Spivak concisely summarizes the South Asian conflict, acknowledging the political jockeying and manipulations, which have resulted in widespread, ongoing devastation. Mirza and Butler underscore both Arendt’s and Spivak’s thoughts, expressed in the numerous references to geopolitical complexities manifesting in constant fear and violent outbreaks. To this point of view, Dalrymple adds, “1947 has yet to come to an end” (“Great Divide”).

NOTES:

1 A number of articles appeared in 2017 on this topic, in response to the anniversary celebrations and lingering malaise the partition created. The New York Times and Washington Post published articles focused on the memories that linger and have recently been mined by the surviving populations on both sides of the line.


5 Ironically, among the goods exported by the British was saltpetre, a key ingredient in gunpowder — something which, at the time, was in enormous demand by the King and colonies. (I say ‘ironically’ as it is an instrument of war, exported for further conquests and control by force by a growing imperial nation. The global involvement in the Mumbai attacks reflect this same sharing of weaponry as a continued means of controlling entire regions.) It is said that demand for this commodity outpaced its availability as it was needed to supply military forces, thereby reaping steep gains for the East India Company. As though forecasting later weapons trades within South Asia (which will manifest darkly in the Mumbai terrorist attacks), the export of potassium nitrate (saltpetre) supported military actions and violent globalization. The web of capitalist interests extended further through the export of tea, opium and textiles, with the East India Company transacting much of this commercial exchange. With its interests vested in India’s production and strategic location, it is little wonder that the East India Company ruled with unbridled force, suppressing any dissent voiced by the Indian people. Its fortunes and lavish lifestyles depended on it.

6 Catherine of Braganza married Charles II and became the queen of England, Scotland and Ireland. She reigned from 1662–1685.