Snowglobalism and Terror Kitsch: Flurry and Freeze in Capitalist Cosmography

Snow Globes and the Globe As Perused by Walter Benjamin

In 1930 Walter Benjamin delivered two radio lectures for children on toys. He trailed the department stores and toyshops of Berlin seeking toys from his childhood and observing what was entertaining Weimar youth. The result is not simply description. The lecture reveals something of the web of social relations into which particular toys of the past were born. German carved wooden toys were a product of climate and the mode of production. Long winter days meant that the inhabitants of the forests, the peasants and artisans, who in the summer would sell their wares to travellers, were blocked in by snowy streets and iced up passes. To pass the time they took wood, the material that was abundant locally, and began to carve. The craftsmen carved toys and, over time, they honed their skills and the toys became more complex. In summer the travellers who came to buy the usual goods from the world of adult commerce would also buy the toys as gifts for their children.[1] The toys began their wanderings. Sailors came upon them and took them on their travels, 'to Astrakhan and Archangel, to Petersburg and Cadiz, and even, indeed to Africa and the West Indies', to exchange with islanders for valuable stones, pearls and bronzes. Benjamin's wanderings through Berlin seeking toys becomes the toys' wandering through the world. A miniaturised toy world is released, it would seem, into the larger world. It is its double, its playful other, a world of topsy-turvyness, a world through the looking glass – for the toys are more valuable to some than gems; they are playthings but of crucial usefulness; they are this-world objects but they spore the otherly vagaries of imagination.

Talk of sailors in his lecture leads Benjamin to reflect on a toy from his childhood that to his surprise he finds has returned. It is a ship with metal sails on a cotton wool background also dotted with fish and ducks. A bar magnet is used to steer the ship. The whole is covered with celluloid and the fish, ship and ducks seem to be encased, he says, in ice. A toy frozen in his memory is setting out on its fake waters again. It reminds Benjamin of what he calls 'the smallest and most exciting world of toys',

[1] Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol.VII. pt.1, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main, 1991 p. 109.

ones under glass: for example, ships, crucifixions and mine shafts in sealed bottles. Benjamin reveals that, during his childhood, he pondered for years how the intricate models could be placed inside the narrow necks of the bottles. Again it is a product of time that stretches out unfilled. Sailors made them in the long days of their voyage, 'in the desolation of the water'. Every part is attached to a thread, and once it is inside the bottle, pincers and spikes tug each joint and hinge, until the model adopts its 'natural form'. It is not magic that makes the model, but patience.

Some time in 1931 or 1932 Walter Benjamin returned to objects – or worlds - under glass. He jotted down a note on the relationship to art of ships, mine shafts and crucifixions inside bottles – observing wryly that these kitsch objects may be artworks, according to a certain aesthetic philosophy, as their contents are withdrawn from touch. These curious items can be traced back to the eighteenth century and persisted through the nineteenth. The earliest known maker of mining bottles was the 29-inch high armless and legless magician Matthias Buchinger, the so-called Little Man of Nuremberg. In one of his engravings, this one of himself, executed despite his flipper hands, he included, as usual an excessive density of detail. A close examination of the curls of his hair reveals therein the entire psalms and the Lord's Prayer, in miniature letters. An unexpected immensity lurks in the flurry of squiggles, visible only to those who take the time to peer and squint or who adopt the technical aids that enhance seeing.

One more line from Benjamin on these toys that open up paths into small worlds, other worlds:

> Toy is hand tool – not artwork
> *Spielzeug ist Handwerkzeug – nicht Kunstwerk*[2]

That is to say, these toys, maybe all toys, are tools, something of use, though that is not to say simply functional. They are tools for grasping the world of larger forms on which they base themselves. They are made by hand and are manipulated by the hand, as the child plays. Fineness of form is not the crucial thing. Rather of importance is

[2] Benjamin Archive, Ms604 – reproduced in *Walter Benjamin's Archive*, Verso, London 2007, p. 73.

the effectiveness with which they allow the child to prise a way into the world of play and beyond that into the world itself, all be that world magical, fuzzy, an indistinct place, where the child is impelled to wait and play awhile, involved in games that may in fact be the truest science.

Worlds Through the Looking Glass

Benjamin's thoughts on objects under glass were stimulated by his investigations of the late nineteenth century bourgeois parlour that had been his own childhood home. These dust-trap rooms were cluttered with glass domes over hair sculptures or wax flower arrangements, stuffed animals or fake religious relics, as well as snow globes, developments out of the decorative glass paperweight. Indeed, in his adult years, Benjamin collected snow globes and, as Adorno recounts, they numbered among his favourite belongings.[3] Why should that be?

The snow globe is a curious object. Contradictions are concentrated in it. It contains a world under glass, or, later, clear plastic and, as such, the scene inside is untouchable, but the globe itself exists precisely to be grasped in the hand. The hand neatly fits around its rounded or oval contours, in order to shake the miniature scene, so that the artificial snow flakes, be they of bone, rice, corn, polystyrene or glitter, slowly sink through water, enhanced with glycol and perhaps antifreeze and anti-algae agents. It is miniaturised and cosmic. It is personal and mass. It is kitsch and sublime. It is for contemplation and for play. The snow globe comes properly to life only when it is fully filled with a liquid that becomes invisible, functioning solely as a medium for impeding and transporting snowflakes until they settle. After shaking, it is as if life suddenly enters, in a flurry of crystals, and then creeps away again. Perhaps it becomes for a moment auratic, scintillating, enveloped in a haze that is its semblance of liveliness, only then to expose itself as de-auraticised, dead, exposed in some way.

The snow globe meddles somehow with the edge between life and lifelessness, though those who followed Benjamin have differently perceived the emphases. For Adorno, in his rumination on Benjamin's collection of snow shakers, the glass globes contain

[3] Adorno, 'Charakteristik Walter Benjamins', in *Prismen: Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft*, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, Munich 1963, p. 237.

Nature morte, still life, dead life: like other 'petrified, frozen or obsolete components of culture', such as fossils or plants in herbariums, they are objects that appeal because they have alienated from themselves any 'homely aliveness'. The snow globe is an emblem of de-animation, of the passage to a reified death or non-life as characterises experience in industrial and bureaucratic capitalism. For the literary theorist Paul Szondi, the emphasis, for Benjamin, was, on the contrary, on their freeze-framing of a scene of *life*, not death. Szondi called the snow globes 'reliquaries', which provide a form of shelter, and suggests their role is to preserve something, a scene, an event, a moment. For this reason, he associated them with Benjamin's miniature memoir scenes that snapshot moments of 'hope in the past' and transport them into the future, where the hope that was uncashed in back then, might yet be redeemed.[4] Szondi's sentiment can be phrased in a more sentimental version: the snow globe circulates commercially as a souvenir or memento. It is supposed to capture an instant to be relived forever in memory, a moment that compels the viewer to express, like Goethe's Faust, '*verweile doch, du bist so schön*', 'stay a while, you are so beautiful'. A cruder, crueller description might argue that the globe replicates a standardised moment of happiness ad infinitum. The snow globe fixates the mind on a special moment stilled forever, except for the intermittently falling snow. The snow globe is always an ideal scene, a composite or fantasy, a small image or imagined world that existed only in dreams and which comes to life in its being moved, in displacement. Life is transmitted to the snow globe by the most basic gesture – a waving of the hand. The snow globe is animated for a moment by an external action, brought from lifelessness into life; it sparks a memory or fantasy. Its animation is ignited in the animation of the flakes and completed in the wistful and transported mind of the viewer.

Snow globes, like toys or children's books – all objects that are trivial, each one a spike of imagination and longing – present themselves, to use Benjamin's methodological term, as 'dialectical images', points of stilled focus in which the historical relations of life might be made visible, or, to use another of Benjamin's terms, they encourage the concoction of 'dialectics at a standstill'. This is a temporary freezing of the flux of time – exercised on an image or object - for purposes of analysis. And, conversely, it is the moving into flux of frozen (in Lukacs' terms,

[4] Peter Szondi, 'Hope in the Past: On Walter Benjamin' [1961], *Critical Inquiry*, Spring, 1978, pp. 500-1.

reified) relations – the production of links between things, parts, moments. Flurry and freeze could be seen as codes for the subjective and the objective, so neatly kept apart in social theory. Flurry as subjective blur. Freeze as the cool eye that apprehends a deadened scene. Through Benjamin, it is possible to arrive at a method, a mode of analysing phenomena that refuses conventional distinctions between 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity', and that constantly evokes both freeze and flurry as necessary aspects of knowing. Perhaps the snow globe, in particular, engages these dual forces of flux and freezing intimate to Benjamin's modernity and methodology: intermittently, when a snow globe is grabbed, a moment of quake or shattering – *Erschütterung* - is enacted. Such shattering is vaunted by Benjamin in his 1930s essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility' in relation to a reformulation of aesthetic forms, characterised as the 'liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage' brought about by film, photography and reproducible art forms. The drama of flux and flurry inside the snow globe provides a dialectical image. The snow globe's flurry of fake snow shatters the contemplative status quo, proposing both epistemological confusion and the transformative power of action. Simultaneously, the globe condenses a frozen scene, a moment in time – however idealised – isolated for critical appropriation.

Whether touchable or untouchable, kitsch or art, dystopic or utopian in form, the snow globe is a microcosm. It is a small world, a world inside the world, as are so often the objects that present themselves to Benjamin's studying eye. On this, Benjamin takes his lead from the art historian Hans Sedlmayr.[5] From other 'Viennese School' art historians he adopts the idea of the historicity of vision, its subjection to technological mediation. 'The Rigorous Study of Art' establishes the necessity of a methodological break with the broad outlines of art history, epochs, styles, the macroscopic, in order to concentrate on individual works, on microscopy. Apprehended – or brought into being - in the microscopic gaze is a microcosm. For the collector figure, one of the hero-types in Benjamin's phantasmagoria of the modern, squinting through the object to assess its history rescues the souvenir from typicality and commodity equivalence. The squint – an oblique vision - makes the object a depository of historical knowledge and

[5] See the 1931 essay 'Rigorous Study of Art', translated in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 2:2, 1931–1934*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and others, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1999.

utopian fantasy. For the modernist art critic, the interposing lens indicates the training that the human sensorium is subjected to through technological development. The camera universalises the functions of the eye-glass: improved or transformed vision. The collector's close-up gaze and the glass lens produce the world anew. The collector's gaze might fall on any object, drawn by curiosity or sentimentality. The camera's eye falls specifically on excerpted portions of a real, natural world, but it can bring into vision something other than nature's surface. As Benjamin notes in his little history of photography, written in 1931:

> For it is another nature (*eine andere Natur*), which speaks to the camera rather than to the eye: 'other' above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious. Whereas it is a commonplace that, for example, we have some idea what is involved in the act of walking (if only in general terms), we have no idea at all what happens during the fraction of a second when a person actually takes a step. Photography, with its devices of slow motion and enlargement, reveals the secret. It is through photography that we first discover the existence of this optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis. Details of structure, cellular tissue, with which technology and medicine are normally concerned - all this is, in its origins, more native to the camera than the atmospheric landscape or the soulful portrait. Yet, at the same time, photography reveals in this material physiognomic aspects, image worlds, which dwell in the smallest things - meaningful yet covert enough to find a hiding place in waking dreams, but which, enlarged and capable of formulation, make the difference between technology and magic visible as a thoroughly historical variable.[6]

Film and photography, worlds seen through glass, are conceptualised by Walter Benjamin as '*different nature*'.[7] 'Different nature' is unlike our first one, though not

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[6] Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography', *Selected Writings*, Vol 2, Belknap/Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1999, pp. 510-2.

[7] Benjamin's phrase for this is 'eine andere Natur'. This has been variously translated as 'a different nature' and 'another nature'.

distinct from it. It is our nature processed through concept and imagination, social relations and technology. It is our nature returned back to us through mediation. The glass lens of the camera produces the world anew, reactivating or re-dynamising the relationship between seer and seen, through the deployment of close-up and other lens technologies. In 'Little History of Photography', Benjamin's reference was the photography of Karl Blossfeldt. For Benjamin, his photographic images of the natural world were scientific contributions that also simultaneously showed just how mysterious the everyday could be. Blossfeldt's photographs reveal strange analogies, ones that intermingle natural and artefactual forms and dramatise the action of the camera on nature. That is to say, these are images of 'different nature', a mediated or second nature, a nature confronted by creative human labour, self-constituting and expressing a worldview, kinship and protection, in short human civilisation: ancient columns in horse willow, a bishop's crosier in the ostrich fern, totem poles in tenfold enlargements of chestnut and maple shoots, and gothic tracery in the fuller's thistle. As such the images are evidence that nature too can be a realm of human transformation in co-ordination with technology and imagination. The camera reveals aspects, indeed whole worlds of images, 'physiognomic aspects, image worlds, which dwell in the smallest things'[8], and which have previously never been seen before – except perhaps in dreams. The camera routes vision through the machine and so detaches humans from their conscious, or habitual modes of seeing. It 'reveals the secret' and so dredges the world up from unconsciousness into being known. Technology and magic dissolve into each other, or, rather, show themselves to be aspects of the same. Walter Benjamin's 'Little History of Photography' observed how, in its initial period, photography enjoyed a particular affinity with both science and the marvellous.[9] In those early days, some of its first uses explored how the whole cosmos could be projected into portable form, for contemplation in the interior. This was, Benjamin decreed, part of photography's original utopian, expansive compass. Only a small number of practitioners continued in that vein.

Another Nature: Lensed Worlds and Dialectical Snowflakes

[8] Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography', p. 512.
[9] 'Little History of Photography', p. 508.

On 15 January 1885, Wilson Bentley of Vermont, USA, became the first person to photograph a single snow crystal. Having built and adapted a bellows camera and a microscope and taking advantage of the icy winters in North America, Bentley captured snowflakes, whisked them inside a cold hut, isolated several beautiful crystals on a microscope slide and quickly photographed each one. A frozen crystal was picked out of the flurry for a few moments before it melted away. The procedure was impelled by a scientific desire to understand, by bringing into view, the snow crystal. That it produced something of aesthetic beauty was a happy side effect noted by Bentley and exploited in his publications. He went on to produce and reproduce many hundreds of images. The photography that Bentley used was by now some 40 years old, and no longer perceived as a surprising magical mirror of nature. Its usages were increasingly mundane, everyday and associated with multiplication and reproduction. Bentley's practice, though, holds onto the twin aspects of photography as marvellous and scientific. Photography, a mechanical form of image production, bore important implications for the shaping of concepts such as originality and uniqueness, key concepts of traditional art understanding. Photography and film possess no original. Each print from the negative is only as 'original' as the next or the one before it, which is to say not original at all. In this context it is of some fascination that Bentley's first photographs of snow crystals in 1885 and then the thousands that follow, despite their endlessly reproducible nature, despite their multiple, series-like appearance, provide evidence for quite the opposite: a proof of the cliché that largely still holds as scientifically true: that no two snow crystals are the same. A technique of multiplicity garners proof of uniqueness. When Bentley devised a way to capture snowflakes, he was performing a seemingly impossible task. Another contradiction: he captured accurately the image of something tiny and ephemeral, enlarging it vastly and making a permanent record of it for hands-on leisurely and scientific contemplation. It is not giant off-worlds of stars brought down to Earth, in this case, but rather the tiniest floating and random portions of our universe projected larger. The smallest particle is amplified and makes thereby, in representation, a small image world in itself, particular, unique, complex and intricate. Microphotography – and never more so than in the case of snow crystals – is a replicational, repetitive technology that evinces heterogeneity, the disparateness of nature displayed to the eye as curiosity. Blown through clouds, every crystal is subjected to random shifts of temperature. Each forms in response to these fluctuating conditions, which are unrepeatable. Some journey down from the sky

intact, their intricate designs preserved. Some fuse with cloud droplets or conglomerate into flakes. Each life history is recorded in the crystal and made visible in microphotography. What the viewer receives, in the microphotograph, is static, an arrest of a process of falling, floating, melting.

In 1893, the German meteorologist Gustav Hellmann published his scientific reflections on snow crystals. These were accompanied by heliogravures from microphotographs by Richard Neuhaus. Originally, Hellmann confesses, each winter, gleeful at the appearance of snow, he attempted to sketch individual snow crystals, but melting and evaporation meant he had to fill in the missing parts and so he relied on symmetry. Comparing these drawings with crystals glimpsed for a moment under a microscope, they appeared 'too schematic and too stiff'.[10] Hellmann observes how drawings, as, for example, in the sketches of Mrs Glaisher, carried out at her meteorologist husband James's behest, idealise the crystal's form. The drawings of snow crystals produce symmetrical, geometric figures that do not exist in actuality. They do this as a way of finishing off an image whose original model was long melted away. Or perhaps drawing captured a geometry that existed only for a moment long ago at the snow crystal's formation, never to be visible to a human eye.[11] In contrast to the drawing, the microphotographs reveal imperfections, asymmetries, deformations, deviations from the laws, which is to say that the photographs detail the 'reality' of the snow crystal. Through the microphotographs, Hellmann commented:

> Now we no longer have ideal shapes and schematic figures in front of us, but real images, as offered to us by nature. Indeed, one could say that, in spite of the icy congealment of the object what we see here are images of nature as warm as life.[12]

The human eye perceives – after the intervention of the mechanical eye with its enlarging lens - a 'real image', an image of reality. The microphotography of snow crystals mediates, via the camera, what Walter Benjamin characterises as a different

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[10] Gustav Hellmann, *Schneekrystalle: Beobachtungen und Studien,* Rudolf Mückenberger, Berlin, 1893, Introduction, p. 9.
[11] Ibid, p. 21
[12] Ibid, p. 24.

nature, one that is accessible to machine-enhanced perception. This different nature visaged by the machine is deemed more real, livelier. In its image form, mediated by technology, nature returns as more animated. Like Blossfeldt, Hellmann discovers analogies – relationships - through the magnifying lens too. That the snow crystal resembles other natural forms, botanical forms in particular, is the revealed secret of the triple technologies of the magnifying lens, the exposed filmstrip and time-defying coated papers. It is the magical trick or technologically acquired fact, which makes tangible what was not tangible before, for example, that snow crystal columns are actually hollow tubes.

What the machine brings back for vision is not deadly, not ahuman or inanimate, even if the mechanism that recovers it is. Rather, as Hellmann phrases it, it makes images that are ‘warm as life’, despite the icyness of their subject matter. And while the photographed ice crystals do not move before the eye, the image that appears on the filmstrip and gets printed on photographic papers is the end-result of a process that takes place over time – or through history. It betrays the marks of such process in its imperfections, thus compounding time or history in a single image that is as ‘warm as life’ because it is so real. That is to say, animation - the apparent ‘breath’ of life (a meaning suggested by its root ‘anima’, a cognate of ‘animus’, or mind) – might be found in what seems like stillness. The microphotograph of the snow crystal brings into vision a small image world imbued with life interrupted, cancelled, preserved, and like ours it is one in which historical process has produced the present state of things. The frozen but mobile nature of ice is frozen again, through the camera, into a stilled image, which, in its enlargement and displacement of the crystal produces a ‘different nature’. That image of ‘different nature’ pulsates with a flurry of life. Indeed its ‘different nature’ is, it could be said, exactly such enhanced liveliness. Worlds projected under glass are stilled and animate at one and the same time, which means they can be seen (better) and they propose nature to be a realm of potential, indeed historical transformation.

In the second version of ‘The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility’ (c.1935), Benjamin outlines a dialectical sense of technology, distinguishing between first technology and second technology, much as in other contexts post-Hegelian philosophers distinguished between first and second nature.

First nature is nature unmediated by human knowing. It is blind occurrence without concept. Second nature is manifested reason, the world as moulded through law, economy, family. From a Marxist perspective, adopted by Benjamin, second nature is still a blind occurrence, for humans are still not in control of their relationships with nature and with themselves. Benjamin's contribution of the category of second technology is a critical effort to reconceptualise the relationship between people and nature in an epoch of technological reproducibility. Benjamin's gambit is that technology might, at least in some sense, appear also as more or less unmediated from knowing, or rather, as that cannot be, in any real sense, it may or may not be is disconnected from socialised understanding and therefore control. Here he describes the difference:

> The great technical deed of first technology is, to a certain extent, human sacrifice. The great technical deed of second technology lies along the lines of remote controlled airplanes that do not need a crew. Once and for always is relevant to first technology (it has to do with mistakes that can never be rectified or the eternally substituted sacrificial death). Once is as good as never is relevant to second technology (it deals in experimentation and a never-tiring variation in the conditions of testing). [13]

Benjamin notes how, as it develops socially, humanity imagines elaborate technological utopias that are capable of removing humanity from sites of danger. That is to say, humanity develops 'second technology', though there is nothing to say that 'second technology' will necessarily translate into practice over time, and indeed he says that only social revolutions can accelerate its appearance. In 'first technology' humans react to nature's overwhelming powers by attempting to master it, and therefore they abuse it. This signifies a form of self-abuse, in as much as humans are a part of nature and not disconnected from it. First technology is self-immolation. 'Second technology' is the

[13] Walter Benjamin, G.S.VII.1 p. 359. 'Once is as good as never' is a German proverb, but it is also attributed to Nietzsche, and understood there to be a melancholic reflection on the uselessness of a life that can be lived only once. In a short piece that includes reflection on Trotsky, in 1932, called 'Einmal ist Keinmal', Benjamin regards the repetitive gesture demanded by 'once is as good as never' not as a dismal ensnarement in bourgeois economy and bourgeois categories, but rather as a essential gesture in a model life that always attempts to start afresh – with presence of mind – and aims to respond sincerely to the specific requirements of the current moment. See G.S.IV.2 p.1009 and G.S.IV.1 p.434.

distancing of humans from nature, and from danger, but in a specific way. 'Second technology' liberates people from vulnerability in the face of nature and protects them from risk. Instead of mastering nature, second technology 'aims rather at an interplay between nature and humanity'. For Benjamin second technology is developed through play, the enlightened opposite of ritual. Rather than a mastery of natural forces, it indicates a mastery of social forces. This mastery is a precondition for playing with natural forces, once humans are released from drudgery. These playful relationships, these aspects of testing and variation are rehearsed in the new technologies of art, specifically in film.

We have been in the snowfields, the forests, the wide oceans, the snowy worlds inside the snow globes. Each might be seen as traditional locations for experiencing the sublime. Kant's sublime, a shattering affect, was evoked in the viewer by the awful shudders of earthquake or the sight of the mass of shapeless mountain masses piled on one another in wild disarray, with their pyramids of ice, or the turbulence of the gloomy raging sea. Wild, eruptive nature – the swirling sea, massive ice floes, a looming, dark, snow-capped mountain, a sudden chasm - provokes in the viewer a welter of feelings, most notably a type of *terror* as the mind realises the immensity and indifference to humanity of that which is perceived. The mind struggles to regain its composure and superiority to blind nature. Kant developed his philosophy of the sublime as a response to the Lisbon Earthquake of 1755 and its shattering of metaphysical conceptions generally and specifically: generally in that his aesthetic, moral and theoretical schemas shatter older theological notions. Specifically in that his philosophy of the sublime might be seen as a mode of recomposing the shattered self that has been confronted with the raging, vast powers of destructive nature. In 1931 one of Benjamin's radio lectures for children was on the Lisbon Earthquake.[14] The lecture spends some time relating the eyewitness account of Reverend Charles Davy, which details the horrific magnitude of the event, the loss of lives, the collapse of solid structures. Benjamin relates how the earthquake was so remarkable because it was vast in the scale of its destruction both of human lives and of a place that was, furthermore, at that point at the height of its power as a colonial empire. The streets of Lisbon, he observes, were at that time international, lined with the great trading

[14] Benjamin, 'The Lisbon Earthquake', *Selected Writings* vol. 2, pp. 536-40.

houses of English, French and German merchants. But the earthquake itself is international too in its physical outreach. From Finland to the Dutch East Indies, Benjamin notes, 'mighty tidal waves were felt and it was calculated that they moved with amazing speed – in a quarter of an hour! – from the Portuguese coast to the mouth of the Elbe.' Benjamin invokes Kant, but not because of his theories of the sublime. Instead, he notes, of Kant that his writings on the earthquake represent the beginnings of the science of seismology. Benjamin's radio lecture is about *science*, about the ways in which technology's predictive abilities will avert future catastrophe, the way in which nature can be brought into technology's ambit and so made safer. Benjamin is concerned to stress the latest discoveries of the science of seismology, which show that the earth is dynamic, active, always tremoring, always animated, though we humans may not consciously notice it. The earth is not a passive entity, but a historically shifting whole in dynamic interrelation with itself, as well as with us and with technology. He tells us how we now know that storms affect the crust. Mountains erode. The seabed becomes denser with accretions. The earth cools and rocks are fractured by tensions. The gravitational pull of extraterrestrial bodies moves the sea and the earth's surface. Earthquakes were thought – from the Greeks, through Kant until the discoveries of 1870 – to be caused by gases and burning vapours in the centre of the earth. But, he notes, earthquakes do not come, as people may imagine, from the innermost core of the earth. Rather they arise from events on the earth's crust. It is the surface that erupts, not the deep internality. The crust is in a state of permanent turmoil. Matter is constantly moving, indeed through endless displacement of tectonic plates – like the cut ups and re-configurations of montage - the earth is ever 'striving to achieve equilibrium'. The earth is animated and animate. This active, acting body develops itself and it encounters technology, mediated through humans, and their social relations. It is in this context that the quake – *Erschütterung* – that Benjamin describes as intrinsic to film can be seen as a technological replacement for the shattering (and re-composition) that accompanies the sublime. Technologies, in the form of lenses, are deployed to counter sublimity

Shattering Nature, Fascist Nature and Two Types of Technology

For Benjamin, the most appropriate use of the camera lens and the processes of editing or printing-up subject reality to a *shattering*, in the form of a segmenting that slices

through the natural appearance of everyday life, contravening any tendency of film to glide across the mirror-surface of reality in pure reflection. Reality as mediated in film or photograph is disturbed, cut into, opened up. It is frozen and flurried at once. For Benjamin such dissection, an investigation of the world in close-up, the production of links between things through montage, the analysis of movement through slow-motion, the enlargement of details to reveal information in the flurry, and so on, are crucial to a critical, scientific approach to the world. This is accompanied by an anti-naturalist, utopian rebuttal of physical laws and 'natural' constraint. The image becomes 'a multiply fragmented thing, whose parts reassemble themselves according to new laws'.[15] Film and photography might not do this, might just re-affirm the surface of reality, but their very nature, their very technology cries out to be deployed in montage form. What point film without montage? What point photography without superimposition? What point film without slow-motion or speed-up or photography without super-enlargement of scale? The image of reality, as specifically represented in film and photography, is an image of the real that has been mediated, subjected to analysis. It works with incongruities, destruction, construction, reconstructions. Benjamin's response to the aesthetic of cinema is in keeping with the attitude of other critical modernists. In a protest against bad films, *Film Enemies of Today – Film Friends of Tomorrow*, written in 1929 as a manifesto for the Stuttgart *Film und Foto* exhibition, Hans Richter begins with the basics of cinematic form, outlining the twenty-four frames a second principle, then moves immediately into the tricks of slow-motion, speed-up, superimposition, lens distortion, animation. It is the camera as box of tricks that makes film a valid form, and Richter reinforces this by listing camera operators rather than directors in his filmography. The camera as box of tricks leads the assault on naturalism. Richter asserted in radical anti-naturalist fashion:

> It is the case, then, that the same is true of film as has long been proven with every other art form. To be bound to nature is a restriction.[16]

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[15] Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility', *Selected Writings: Volume 3, 1935-1938*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2003 p. 227

[16] Hans Richter, *Filmgegner von Heute – Filmfreunde von Morgen* Facsimilie 1968, Verlag Hans Rohr, Zurich, p. 33.

What of the mountain film world so familiar in German film at the very moment Richter wrote those lines?

In October 1933 Siegfried Kracauer wrote a scenario for a comedy film based on Alphonse Daudet's novel *Tartarin sur les Alpes*.[17] His first observation was that the comedic French novel lent itself to '*filming on an international* scale' for a number of reasons. On the one hand the film would appeal internationally because it provided an opportunity for glorious images of landscape in the Swiss Alps and Provence and its plot necessitated the presence of a cosmopolitan ensemble, such as are to be found in tourist resorts. On the other hand, its international appeal is filmic: the plot was to be carried primarily by visual and sonic effects rather than dialogue, and it provided the opportunity to deploy splendid film tricks, such as had never been seen before. In Kracauer's imaginary film equal emphasis is given to the audience, conceived as international and desirous of stunning visual experiences, and the specifically filmic character that foregrounds tricks, effects, representation. The actual story, as Kracauer's scenario indicates, lends itself to an exploration of perspective, and is an inquiry into the character of the artificial and the real, construction and the found. One character, Bompard, tells the hero Tartarin a tall tale about how Switzerland does not exist as a real country with real mountains, but is in fact a huge *Kursaal*, an entertainment complex at the heart of a health resort, open from June to September. The mountains are fakes. The staff is sworn to secrecy. All is a 'harmless artificial product' run by a corporation. Should a skier fall into a glacier, he or she lands on a cushioning bed of snow and a porter quickly appears and enquires whether Sir or Madam has any luggage. As a result Tartarin believes that the great mountain, the Jungfrau, is a completely harmless creation of the corporation. He climbs it fearlessly. Here Kracauer notes that filmic tricks will come into their own, as Tartarin crosses snow bridges and crevasses. When his mountain guides warn him of dangers he winks knowingly at them. They in turn come to believe that he is indeed a great Alpinist. Later Bompard admits that he had lied. Already committed to climbing Mont Blanc, the liar and his dupe continue. Kracauer notes how the 'film benefits from this episode'. The climbing of Mont Blanc contrasts with the previous climb. It is dominated by fear and trembling. The two men get lost in a snowstorm and fall either

[17] Kracauer, *Werke*, vol. 6. Pt. 3, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main, 2004, pp. 518-22.

side of a ridge clutching a rope. Each cuts his end of the rope, seemingly leaving the other to fall to his death. Both arrive back at their Provencal village only to learn of each other's deceit. The trick figures as both a technical and a narrative aspect of the film.

Kracauer's choice of Daudet's comic novel gives him the opportunity to invent specifically filmic responses to storytelling and to nature. The natural beauty of the mountains is significant for him, in terms of the film's appeal to an international eye, but this natural beauty is matched – and in a sense negated – by the plotline's conscious play with the notion of the artificial and constructed, the faking of nature and the nature of faking, which is translated into camera tricks and effects. Kracauer uses the mountainous landscape in his 1933 scenario as pretext for an exploration of filmic deceit, while at the same time rendering a story of deception in the most effective and amusing way possible. In this regard his approach was quite unlike that of a contemporaneous ensemble of mountain filmers, whose particular mountain genre was seen as quintessentially German. These mountain filmers were constellated around the director Arnold Fanck and his favoured actress Leni Riefenstahl. By 1933, these had been making mountain films and glacier films for some time. Indeed Kracauer, a keen skier in his youth, had long had an interest in these mountain films. One of his very first film reviews – from 1921 – was of Arnold Fanck's *Das Wunder des Schneeschuhs* (1919/1920), a pedagogical film about the art of skiing, which he saw presented in a Frankfurt film theatre for popularly instructive film art. Here Kracauer enthused about how the camera could bring back images of a 'rare beauty' that were previously only visible directly to alpinists and skiers.[18] The mountain films hoped to achieve sublime affect, though the final victory of mental capacity over nature is not explicitly a theme. Rather, the focus is on the details of the struggle, the possibility and fact of human failure, of superheroic endurance and, sometimes, the deus ex machina salvation by an aeroplane summoned by a radio. Nature is overcome by technology, but suddenly and brutally.

[18] Siegfried Kracauer, *Werke*, vol. 6. Pt. 1, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main, 2004, p. 11.

In 1925 Kracauer reviewed a film titled *Der Berg des Schicksals. Ein Drama aus der Natur*.[19] The film seems to be about the mounting of the awesome needle of rock Guglia del Diavolo, which in reality was called Guglio di Brenta or Campanile Basso. But in fact it was impossible to film there and so the mountain around which everything seems to revolve appears actually only in long shot, while other less dangerous peaks served as the location for filming. Kracauer sarcastically recounted the plot with its pompous and senseless battles against nature, but praised the 'glorious recordings of nature', which were patiently won and enhanced technically.[20] There is, he notes, an aesthetic, 'kaleidoscopic' play of ever-same and ever-changing nature, with reflections of mountains in lakes, an artificial illumination of rock formations, cloud masses disintegrating, seas of cloud welling up and ebbing away as the clusters hurry by faster than in reality and dissipate, 'defrauded', he notes, by the time-lapse. This camera trick, Kracauer underlines, gives the film of nature its 'peculiar charm' because of its speed up effect, which concentrates events and generates an 'optical intoxication'. In the same year he saw the worst of films – another mountain film called *Firnenrausch*, glacier frenzy - which he condemns as 'seelenkitschig', kitschy to its core.

Kracauer reviewed *Der Heilige Berg* in 1927. Here he develops a critical stance that returns later in the influential study *From Caligari to Hitler*, where the mountain film genre is denounced as a proto-fascistic aesthetics. Kracauer writes in 1927 of 'a gigantic composition of body-culture fantasies, sun-idiocy and cosmic bilge'.[21] This film contains a key scene that Kracauer would mock in his scenario of Tartarin in the alps: our hero accidentally causes his love rival to hang perilously in mid-air on the end of a rope that connects them, but rather than condemn him, he remains obedient to the mountaineer's code and tries to save him, while risking his own life.[22] For Kracauer, the film expresses excellently what he describes as the particular mode of 'non-existing' of some youth groups who, in panic, fleeing what they see as mechanisation, might find representations of themselves in the film's 'foggy

[19] Kracauer, *Werke*, vol. 6. Pt. 1, pp. 132-3.
[20] Kracauer always has an eye for the glorious 'Naturbilder'. See, for example, the 1926 review of *Der Wilderer*, *Werke* 6.1. p. 220.
[21] Kracauer, *Werke*, vol. 6. Pt. 1, p. 298.
[22] Kracauer mentions this in *From Caligari to Hitler*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1947, p. 112.

concoction of vague sentimentality'. Amidst the mists of the mountains a hazily-outlined identification is possible for some muddleheads. In addition, the plot twists are absurd, but in the bad way, not the dada way. The recording of nature is, on the other hand, wonderful, at least in part: 'the sea shines as never before on the screen'. A new discovery for film is the motif of the night-time ski ride with burning torches, but some of the photography is contaminated, Kracauer observes, by the evil spirits of the plot: 'They are art prints on glossy paper and the operator said beforehand to the natural objects being represented: "please smile nicely"'. Of Fanck's screenplay for Mario Bonnard's *Die Heiligen Drei Brunnen* Kracauer wrote in 1930 that it was 'devoid of ideas'. The 'pseudoheroic bombast' of roaring elements, miraculous technology and storms of passion betrays only the fact that the author is unaware where real heroism resides.[23] Kracauer mocks Luis Trenker's character, 'a hundred-percent man' who is lacking only his knight's armour. The unbearable rhetoric of the fable is matched by the hackneyed editing.

In his reviews of the mountain films Kracauer always expresses awareness of film as film, that is to say, also, the artifactual (or even artificial) nature of film, its mediation of nature, embellished visibly or not or, in Benjamin's sense, dissected by camera and editing techniques and technologies. The nature of the mountain landscapes is presented as a mediated experience and not passed off as a natural one, while not denying the showcasing of nature as delightful. Kracauer's mountains are constructed in film and as such become something else, 'a different nature'. The raging peaks and troughs of mountains are reversed – or 'estranged', as Kracauer terms it in his essay 'Photography' from 1927, in their representation on the flat cinema screen. How could it be otherwise? As Bloch and others argued, nature had been subsumed fully through its mediation by mechanical imagery and the techniques of tourism.

None of this tallies of course with how those involved conceptualised their filmmaking. Participants in the mountain film genre often wrote about the mountains, though not usually about the processes of filming. There were a number of memoirs and mountain themed books, such as Trenker's *Bergwelt, Wunderwelt: Eine alpine Weltgeschichte* from 1935, which told the history of mountain inhabitants and

[23] Kracauer, *Werke*, vol. 6. Pt. 2, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main, 2004, p. 350.

climbers from their very beginnings in the times of Adam and Eve to his present. The cinematographer Hans Schneeberger wrote a historical text published in 1941, as part of the war effort, it was called *Der berstende Berg* and was a study of the 'heroic deeds' of mountain soldiers, from the Tyrolean Kaiserjäger to the contemporary Alpini. Fanck and Riefenstahl reflected extensively on their mountain films. For Fanck, film was a means for representing the authentic experience of nature, and one that is universally understandable. In 1928 he wrote in 'Die Zukunft des Naturfilms':

> Only through the language of film can one appeal to the whole nation (*Volk*), indeed to nations. And above all – only film can portray nature and life within nature with the highest achievable reality and vividness. This was precisely what I needed: to show nature as it is, so beautiful and fertile, so idyllic and dramatic, so sunny and so gloomy, stiff and mobile – quite simply to convey the experience of nature – that was the task that I set myself when I turned my attention from the natural sciences to the cinematography of nature.[24]

Fanck's sense of his own filming presents nature 'as it is', which is to say, its mediation in film brings back, for him, only that which is already assumed to be there. In 1930, a piece on the future of the mountain film stated that the visual nature of the mountains had been fully exhausted in filmic terms and no other or new images could be brought back.

> Climbing, skiing, icefall, crevasses, ice walls, rock and ice ridge, avalanches, clouds, snowstorm, dusty snow, sparkling ice, water, etc etc, all glittering under sunlight or partially illuminated in the night light of lanterns, torches or spotlights, will now be repeated in every film that

[24] 'Nur durch die Sprache des Filmes kann man sich an das ganze Volk, ja an Völker, wenden. Und vor allem - nur der Film kann Natur und Leben in der Natur mit der höchst erreichbaren Realität und Lebendigkeit zeigen. Dies war eben, was ich brauchte: Die Natur zu zeigen, wie sie ist, so schön und fruchtbar, so idyllisch und dramatisch, so sonnig und so düster, starr und bewegt - ganz einfach das Erlebnis der Natur zu vermitteln - das war die Aufgabe, die ich mir gestellt hatte, als ich mich von den Naturwissenschaften der Naturkinematographie zuwandte.'
Arnold Fanck, 'Die Zukunft des Naturfilms' (1928), in: Jan-Christopher Horak with Gisela Pichler, eds., *Berge, Licht und Traum. Dr. Arnold Fanck und der deutsche Bergfilm*, Bruckmann, Munich, 1997, p. 143.

> takes place in the high mountain ranges. And anything new in terms of images will not be won from the mountains any more, because there is nothing else in this region of eternal ice that could be represented optically. (I am ignoring on purpose snapshot images of things such as high mountain fauna and flora, as well as the milieu of those people who inhabit the mountains, because all of that does not belong to the proper high mountain region, that is to say, to the region of glaciers and rocks above human and vegetable life, where my themes have up until this point almost exclusively taken place.)[25]

Fanck refused the possibility of a development of images, such as might be brought back by new technologies, or film stocks or indeed new experiences. This was quite unlike the contemporaneous analysis of Ernst Bloch in his essay from 1930 titled 'Alpen Ohne Photographie'. 'Alps Without Photography'. This essay bemoaned the ways in which it was impossible to see the mountains now without seeing them through the 'ineradicable' mediation of picture postcards. However, the mountains now were not the same as the mountains before. As a historical development, the mountains had become the location of a new perception, that of the skier, who does not apprehend them optically or in the old way, but rather in a what Bloch calls a 'new and strong', more broadly physical way. The skier sees the mountains through swift descent, rather than slow ascension, through effortlessness. Furthermore, new ranges have been opened up by tourism and skiing, which means new perspectives have quite literally been found. Though he provides examples of it in his filming, sometimes tracking repeatedly the rapid descent of the skier or the view that can be granted only by a camera eye, this historicity of the mountain vision and the expanded nature of the mountain experience is what Fanck screens out.

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[25] Klettern, Skilaufen, Gletscherbruch, Spalten, Eiswände, Fels und Eisgrat, Lawinen, Wolken, Schneesturm, stäubenden Schnee, funkelndes Eis, Wasser, etc. etc., alles unter Sonnenlicht glitzernd oder partiell aufleuchtend im nächtlichen Licht von Laternen, Fackeln oder Scheinwerfern, werden sich nun in jedem Hochgebirgsfilm immer wiederholen. Und etwas bildlich Neues wird das Hochgebirge nicht mehr hergeben, einfach, weil es nichts anderes mehr in diesen Regionen des ewigen Eises gibt, das optisch darzustellen wäre. (Ich übergehe dabei absichtlich solche Bildmomente, wie Hochgebirgsfauna und -flora, sowie das Milieu des im Gebirge ansässigen Menschen, weil das alles nicht mehr zum eigentlichen Hochgebirge gehört, d.h. zu den Gletscher- und Felsenregionen oberhalb menschlichen und pflanzlichen Lebens, in dem meine Themen bisher fast ausschließlich spielten
Arnold Fanck, 'Die Zukunft des Bergfilms' (1930), in: *Berge, Licht und Traum*, p. 149.

Fanck and Riefenstahl both composed memoirs, whose similar titles indicate something about their common atmosphere and attitude. Fanck's, which appeared in 1931, was titled *Der Kampf mit dem Berge*. Riefenstahl's was *Kampf in Schnee und Eis*, and appeared in 1933. Riefenstahl was committed to the idea of *Kampf*, fight. The mountains, she notes, symbolised the fight of man with nature, with their dangers, the resistance of peaks, the craftiness and cunning of snowdrifts.[26] Her memoir contained little reflection on the filmic aspects of the shoots, though there are occasional references to Riefenstahl's education in editing, gained from Fanck and others on site in the mountains, whereby she learnt that 'new atmospheric moments may be composed out of the divergent material' and that, through sequencing individual scenes, she could generate 'a new creative process' through which, in turn, 'a completely new idea can be won'.[27] One chapter in the memoir is titled 'No Use of Tricks!' (*Mit Tricks wird nicht gearbeitet*) and it tells tales of Riefenstahl's burial by a small avalanche, and third degree burns from an exploding torch, magically ameliorated by the icy breath of an old peasant mother. The press, she complains, afterwards refused to believe that scenes were captured at the risk of death.[28] Riefenstahl's approach is strictly 'first-technological' in Benjamin's sense. Risk and sacrifice are its watchwords. That this is retrogressive – in all the ways that will be underlined in Benjamin's epilogue to 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility' (on Fascist aesthetics and the abuse of the machine pushed into the service of unenlightened cult values) - is amplified by the fact that it is through the potentially 'second technology' of film itself that this vision is pressed.

Considerations by Riefenstahl on the composition of the filmic 'symphony', of the 'forming of images', as she called it, were rare, except in the sense of outlining the physical feats necessary for achieving particular shots. The 'white hell' is not a filmic construction, but the participants' reality. What is observed through these is the extent to which the 'natural' aspects of the glaciers and mountains overshadow the 'artificial' act of filming. The memoir concentrates on acts of physical endurance, caused by things such as the delays brought about by the uncontrollable and

[26] Riefenstahl, *Kampf in Schnee und Eis*, Hesse und Becker Verlag, Leipzig, 1933, p. 25.
[27] Riefenstahl, *Kampf*, p. 24.
[28] Riefenstahl, *Kampf*, p. 30.

unpredictable weather conditions. Not Bloch's excitement about rapid descents, rather the focus is again and again on the labour of dragging the self upwards, skywards, legs ever heavier, or worse, being blocked in, for days, weeks, and finally months, never moving, impeded by icy conditions. At these times, death threatens through starvation or exposure. Indeed much of Riefenstahl's memoir concerns the disruption to – or the impossibility of - filming. Cameras freeze up, cables split, spotlights fail, legs are broken, glaciers collapse too quickly or too late. And all the time the snow threatens whiteout, with snow falling so quickly nothing can be seen. All is blur. Or all is frozen. Both states impede knowledge and the genius of filmmaking. In blur distance and perspective are indiscernible. Mountains merge totally into cloud and sky - and so, screening this, the screen would threaten only to convey an original blankness. This is the 'real story' of the films in Riefenstahl's memoirs, their inability to come into being, or when they do, to appear against all odds. Indeed, the memoir is the real story, not the film, because the film, for the audience, is perceived only as an achievement, as effortless and unmediated presentation, and it is something that Riefenstahl says no longer interests her once made.[29] There is very little specifically filmic in the film memoirs, though analogies that 'naturalise' film abound: the whiteness of the screen and the blizzard whiteout are aligned. The latter, of course, looks like the former, but is in fact its negation. The blanking out of film by snow might be seen as anti-filmic gesture that blanks out a modern engagement with film. In the late 1920s, Laslo Moholy-Nagy imagined the white surface – in his case a white square on a square white canvas by Malevich – as painting's end and film's new dawn. Broadcasting the arrival of the new kino-culture of 'colour and light', Moholy-Nagy flagged up a crisis of art brought on by technological change:

> Symptoms of the commencing decline of traditional painting – I am not referring to the terrible economic plight of the artists at the present time – are already apparent in a number of directions. The development of the suprematist Malevich may serve as an example. His last picture: a white square on a square white canvas is clearly symbolic of the film screen, symbolic of the transition from painting in terms of pigment to

[29] Riefenstahl, *Kampf*, p. 49

> painting in terms of light. *The white surface can serve as a reflector for the direct projection of light, and what is more, of light in motion.*[30]

Moholy-Nagy's enthusiasm for the white on white square converted Malevich's negation into a plus, rescinding the quest for artistic autonomy by positing the painter's canvas as a surface for something else, a screen. Where Moholy and friends took the negation of painting and its translation in various ways into film as their common sense, the mountain films reversed film into painting. Critics, including those in Kracauer's ambit, such as Georg Simmel and Ernst Bloch reflected on the fate of the sublime, especially as it is taken up by the German Romantics, and they wrote of the ways in which the Alps came to represent an unhistorical landscape, an evacuation of history and agency. The Romantic aesthetic degraded is kitsch, and Kracauer was quite happy to use this epithet of mountain films. Other film reviewers pointed more graciously to the presence of a Romantic aesthetic in the mountain films. Fritz Rosenfeld, a Socialist film critic from Vienna, for example, described *Der Heilige Berg* as 'nature and poetry, nature in poetry' and observed that it presented reality at that point where it becomes 'ghostly' or 'fairy-tale like' and, in an allusion to Caspar David Friedrich's paintings, he notes how 'Fanck places people mostly as a silhouette against the sky or the snowfield'.[31] Another critic acknowledged a Romantic aesthetic as direct negation of the filmic in a telltale phrase. Kurt Mühsam, reviewing *Die weisse Hölle vom Piz Palü*, 'The White Hell of Pitz Palu', observed its 'painterly detail'.[32] The reviewer in *Lichtbildbühne* Nr. 301 praised Fanck as a 'great genius of German film' and he translated the film's theme into a metaphor for the film's wondrousness: this new 'Nibelung song of the mountains', which 'soars high as towers' 'above the shallow lowlands of the usual feature film'.[33]

Riefenstahl's memoir of her time in the mountains includes reminiscences about the final film she starred in under Fanck's direction, *S.O.S. Eisberg*, which premiered in

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[30] See *Moholy-Nagy; An Anthology*, edited by Richard Kostelanetz, Da Capo, New York, 1991, p. 132.
[31] *Der heilige Berg*, Völkermagazin, Berlin, in *Berge, Licht und Traum*, p. 210.
[32] Dr. Kurt Mühsam, *'Die weisse Hölle vom Piz Palü, '* in *Berge, Licht und Traum*, p. 211.
[33] Cited in Thomas Bogner, *Zur Rekonstruktion filmischer Naturdarstellung am Beispiel einer Fallstudie. Natur im Film „Der heilige Berg ' von Dr. Arnold Fanck*, PhD 1999. Accessed online.

1933. If mountain filming was an act of endurance, filming amidst icebergs was even more treacherous, for they were mobile mountains, drifting, while changing shape. For one scene, the cameras had to be placed on ice floes, which drifted and were prone to breaking. Riefenstahl describes a moment of unforeseen drama when an iceberg began to spin partway through a scene, jeopardising the lives of two of the crew. The process was caught on camera – not as a film scene but as a document. Despite capturing the unscripted actions of two people exposed in a situation never before filmed, this scene could not be included in the film – its authenticity went too far, its staging too uncontrolled, despite the espoused ideology of 'no tricks'. And in this strange region, beyond the known, is a place where, as in the high mountains, the markers of time's passing disappear, as the days and weeks blur into whiteness, an effect redoubled in Greenland when the sun shines through the night. She closes her memoir with reflections on 'the magic of Greenland', a place where all values and measures no longer match those of Europe. Greenland, far away and mysterious – Riefenstahl compares it to a veil woven of thousands of invisible threads surrounding those inside it – is the Ultima Thule, a mythic land where some believed the race of giant Aryan supermen had first resided and exercised their phenomenal physical, psychical and technological capacities. The memoir closes where Nazi mythology picks up.

The penultimate line of *Kampf in Schnee und Eis* asks its readers to imagine Greenland by imagining a world without 'superfluous, unproductive' technologies: 'No telephone – no radio – no post office – no railway and no car - - '.[34] She does not mention film or cinema, but, then again all through the memoir it is repeatedly disavowed. Except there where it is evoked as a weapon. One of Riefenstahl's chapter headings is *Wir Greifen die Eisberge Mit der Kamera An.* - We attack the icebergs with the camera. The language is bellicose. Riefenstahl uses it to describe the filming of the icebergs from Ernst Udet's swooping aeroplane - technology swoops in to beat nature to pieces. The language intimates a hostile confrontation between nature and technology. The pitching of technology against nature is a familiar trope in reactionary thought. It is no surprise to find it in Riefenstahl. And conversely, Kracauer's sense – as typical for the progressive theorists with which he was

[34] Riefenstahl, *Kampf*, p. 113.

associated – was of a mediation between technology and nature, encapsulated in his mountain film scenario, which was unthinkable without film tricks. That is to say the confrontation between film technology and filmed nature is one that foregrounds the mediation of one through the other. 'Second technology' meets a 'different nature'. Film – most graphically in this case - presents the possibility of remaking the world again. Film is a synthetic reproduction of time, of space and tone. In its refusal of the physical laws of the cosmos, film reinvents. Film's cognitive moment is the exposure of the illusory and arbitrary nature of reality. All reality perceived by humans is a construction, argues Kracauer in *Die Angestellten*.[35] At its most radical film should refuse to cover up the contradictions of second nature in mythical images of nature itself. The illusion must not be duplicated as real itself: reality must be rewritten as illusory. For Benjamin, in film adventurous travellers are offered a multitude of trips through widely strewn ruins in a world turned anti-physical. The dynamite of the split-second explodes this world, notes Benjamin. Space is expanded and shrunk by montage, while time is stretched and contracted by time loops. Herein is its utopian or critical impulse. It plays out something that can be achieved socially, through revolution, a world of play, a *Spielraum*, a 'play space', or 'room for manoeuvre', to be gained.

Kracauer mocked the mountain film genre as sentimental, confected to appeal to immature minds who were impressed by heroics in the face of nature. It was ostensibly narrative that failed, narrative that introduced elements of kitsch. Later, in *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947) he decided that the heroism of the films was 'rooted in a mentality kindred to the Nazi spirit'[36] In his newspaper reviews Kracauer consistently praised the documentary element of the films – wonderful shots of nature had been captured by Fanck and his ilk – and he repeated this in *From Caligari to Hitler*. But he supplements this with a focus on the thematic. Images of clouds above the mountains were an inkling of the dubious ideology to come. Kracauer drew a line of connection from the cloudy formations above the mountains and the emergence of Hitler's Nuremberg-bound aeroplane from the clouds in Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, a propagandistic seeming documentary on the 1934 Nazi Party rally in

[35]Siegfried Kracauer *Die Angestellten*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main 1971.
[36] Kracauer, *From Caligari*, p.112

Nuremberg.[37] The mountain films are replete with images of clouds, of mist and fog, of vapour and blinding light bouncing off snowfields into camera lenses. These puffs and flares obfuscate. The clouded vision they generate is meant to provoke emotion not rational thought. They are special effects for affect. Such clouded filmstrips were for Kracauer portents of the unenlightened gloom to come. In the opening sequence of *Triumph of the Will*, shots of clouds are meant to establish a lofty tone and a reverential encounter with German nature. These clouds part to reveal Hitler's Junker aeroplane. The saviour of Germany descends to earth from above. The clouds, in German '*Wolken*', form a canopy uniting the '*Volk*', the German people. These same fascist clouds are seen from below in the closing episode of *Triumph of the Will*, a backdrop to the marching SA men, who come to carry out their master's transcendent will.

Here is flurry and blur unresolved and composed so as to be closed to rational analysis. Nazism projects the brooding soul of the German people into the clouds, a pathetic fallacy. But Riefenstahl did not go as far in her pathetic fallacy as Walt Disney did some nine years later, mockingly. The opening sequence of the anti-Nazi cartoon *Der Fuehrer's Face*, featuring Donald Duck, shows a brass band with musicians Hirohito, Goering, Goebbels and Mussolini goose-stomping through a little German town under clouds that have taken on the shape of swastikas. In this little detail the cartoon conceptualised something profound about the relentless reach of the totalitarian mode, in which even nature is made to conform to the master's ideology. The photomontagist and Communist John Heartfield encapsulated a similar sentiment for critical purposes in his 'O Tannenbaum' poster of 1934 – the Christmas tree's branches have grown bent in the form of swastikas. These humorous and reproducible cultural reflections provide an image of how, for Fascism, nature is ideologised and technology is repressed.

Freeze, Flurry and Playing With Meaning

At the close of his second radio lecture on Berlin toys from 1930, Benjamin invokes the Romantic author Clemens Brentano. The interiors of the bottles that his toy

[37] Kracauer, *From Caligari*, p. 258

searches have evoked, with their model ships, crucifixions, mountains and hardened wax, look to him like the magical land of Vadutz, which Brentano describes in the introduction to his fairy take 'Gockel, Hinkel and Gackeleia' from 1838. Brentano writes: 'All the magical mountain ranges of the world of stories, fables and fairy tales, Himmelaya, Meru, Albordi, Kaf, Ida, Olymp and the glass mountain lay for me in the little country of Vadutz.' Vadutz is the imaginary place where Brentano placed all the playthings that he loved. Vadutz is imagination. It is the world of childhood. Vadutz is a land where nature is reimagined just in the way Bloch saw it refunctioned in folk and fairy tales, becoming elsewise to itself, turning into its opposite in a display of endless potentiality. In 'Better Castles in the Sky', an essay from 1959 in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, he wrote of how clouds are the 'fairy tale quality of nature'.[38] They are, so think children, 'distant mountains', entities in 'a towering and wonderful foreign land above our heads', a Switzerland in the sky. The cloud is not only a 'castle or ice-mountain to the fairy tale gaze'. It is also an 'island in the sea of heaven or a ship, and the blue skies on which it sails resemble the ocean'. In the child's mind the fluffy clouds turn into solid mountains. The airy blue sky is imagination's watery sea. The heavens are like a mirror, reflecting the Earth's inversion. And so, if down here below is the world of body and action, up there above is the world of mind, thought, imagination and other histories, including better ones. The clouds are the fuzzy matter of utopian speculation for Bloch. They are moving screens onto which can be projected a revolutionary Not-Yet, the contents of an unbounded 'anticipatory consciousness'. This vague awareness of a liberated life that takes shape blurrily in our daydreams is a stimulus for the real-world political action that seeks to fix the wishes. In Bloch's revolutionary eschatology, the clouds are to be brought back down to Earth. Our new, improved selves, lives, political arrangements will roll in from the clouds and lodge on our ground. Vadutz, the cloudscape – these are the indistinct, magical, fuzzy places of childhood waiting and longing. This is a world in which the child remoulds nature, but according to imagination and social prompts from the adult world that will one day and in some form become his or hers. It is a world too where technology and magic are one, as cartoons, modernised versions of the folk and fairy tale world, well understood in their presentation of lively objects, or cows that turn into a musical boxes, skirts that become parachutes

[38] Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art*, The MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1989, pp. 175-6.

when needed, or church steeples that crunch themselves up in order that the crazy plane can avoid crashing into it with Mickey and Minnie Mouse on board. This world of dynamic activity and transformation is a world that Benjamin conceptualised too and while he did not give it a place name, in his Berlin memoirs, he donated it a word, *Mummerehlen.*

Mummerehlen is his name for the transformation of things within and into a realm that is specific to the child – and perhaps the poet, or any other inhabitant of the frozen and flurried borders of the objective and subjective. Muhme Rehlen – Old Mother Ehlen - was the name of a character in a fairy tale, but, because of its unfamiliarity to the child, because the child merges things, as is the child's want, Muhme Rehlen melts into a single word *Mummerehlen*. He writes:

> The misunderstanding disarranged the world for me. But in a good way: it lit up paths to the world's interior.[39]

A meaningless word, but one that is also choc-a-bloc with significance, with resonance, with flurries of meanings at its core. *Mummen* means to disguise. Mummelsee is a mountain lake in the Black Forest, a watery realm that Benjamin thought might house the Mummerehlen, its sluggish waters enveloping it like grey cape. Mummerehlen is a word vessel for what Benjamin calls 'the whole distorted world of childhood'. If it is a mishearing, in turn it is mute. He notes that the mummerhlen had almost no voice – 'Its gaze spilled out from the irresolute flakes of the first snow'. And yet Benjamin barely sees it, for as he tells us, in one version of the anecdote, it is a ghost. Or it is unlike itself, for it is like a cloud.

> Mute, porous, flaky, it formed a cloud at the core of things, like the snow flurry in the little glass domes.[40]

For Benjamin there are clouds at the heart of language, unrollable infinities of meaning and inflection. Language is cloudlike and first finding our way into it is like

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[39] Benjamin, 'Berlin Childhood Around 1900', *Selected Writings: Volume 3, 1935-1938* pp. 390-1.
[40] Ibid. p. 392.

floundering. Only the child, or poet, welcomes this generative flux. Reflecting on his own shaky appropriations of language as child, absorbing vocabulary through mishearings and associations, Benjamin notes how he disguised himself in words that were properly clouds. Words and clouds alike are negotiated through their similarities, their homonyms and paronyms, their metaphors and similes, and, ungrasped or ungraspable, they become the shape-shifted building blocks of the child's own invented reality. Indeed, the German language allows for a slippage between word and cloud. Benjamin takes advantage of this, shifting between *Worte*, words, and *Wolke*, clouds, just as the child slippily 'disarranges' the world through misunderstanding. Such disarrangement is productive, making word and world the child's own. In mishearings the child distorts language, eliding words, imbuing them with extra layers of meaning and imputing intentions in a way that makes language magical again, discovering the spell within worn-out words. The word is eroded through childish use, and so, for the child Benjamin, 'Markt-Halle', market-hall, became 'Mark-Thalle'. This linguistic corrosion is significant. In the market hall, under its new corrupted name, something other than business-as-usual happens: it is the home of imaginative play and fantastic speculation, outside of the banality of buying and selling. This and other vignettes in Benjamin's memoirs *Berlin Childhood around* 1900 relate various mishearings and slippages. These miniature exposures of significant experiences were written up, in the 1930s, as an attempt to freeze and preserve possibilities, lives, promises, that were losing currency. The world out there, in the city, was glimpsed by a child hungry for experience, and found in strange corners, but as a privatised bourgeois boy, his field of play was increasingly diverted inside, into books as he went on the quest for adventure. 'Boy's Books' describes swirls of falling snowflakes tracked through the window of a warm parlour by a bookish bourgeois boy who is prone to illness and trapped in the home. This snow is a sign of worlds that are compelled to develop inside our larger cosmos but which point beyond the world that is, leading into ones that might be. In this one, the cosmos is a snow globe:

> Sometimes in winter, standing in a warm room, at a window, the flakes of snow told silent stories to me, which I never quite grasped, for too thickly and unremittingly new things forced their way forward in amongst the

> familiar. Hardly had I intimately attached myself to one snowstorm, another one caught up within it, demanded submission.[41]

The gush of chaotic nature is unprocessable and overwhelming for the self. It cannot be grasped. It cannot be made the object of sublime mastery, not in this form. Some mediation is required. He turns from the outside world to the world evoked inside the self, in books.

> But now the moment had come, in the flurry of letters, to chase the story, which had escaped me at the window. The distant lands I met here played together like the snowflakes. And because distance when it snows no longer travels into farness, but inside, so there lay Babylon and Bagdhad, Acco and Alaska, Tromso and Transvaal inside of me.[42]

It is an analogous experience. There is a flurry of letters like snowflakes dancing, but these are brought into line, frozen-fixed for reflection in imagination. The world of snow enters him. Like the distant lands to which the carved toys found their way, Benjamin encounters the world, but this time inside the smaller globe of his own head. He becomes the distance. Inside of him are the snow's flurries. Inside of him has become a snow globe. He has become the world. Or at the very least he possesses a world for him. Under such cover, it is possible to hide and play. And, indeed, for Benjamin, this wandering vagueness that is the cloud, this shape-shifting form, this endlessly variable that is the clouds, the world seen through snow flurries, is the material actuality of the playing child:

> From time to time, I was whirled around in it. This would happen as I sat painting with watercolours. The colours I mixed would colour me. Even before I applied them to the drawing, I found myself disguised by them.[43]

When Benjamin the child paints in watercolours he loses himself in clouds of colour on the palette. These clouds of colour, notes Benjamin, are clouds of fantasy, and

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[41] Ibid. p. 356.
[42] Ibid. pp. 396-7.
[43] Ibid. p. 393.

fantasy knows only endless changing and elusive form. Clouds are continuously dispersing, just as imagination is a constant process of flux. The child distorts itself in the cloud that is language only vaguely understood, in order to play games in which it takes on the name of the door, the curtain, the under-the-table. As child, Benjamin would push his head between the heavy dumbbell-like earphones of the telephone to listen to the noises that seemed as much a truth of the world outside as the noises that are evokd by holding a sea shell to one's ear. It takes time to realise that we are listening to the surge of our blood, to our own selves. The child readily accepts that experience is forged by technologies, and so is 'second nature'. The child melds itself with objects and environments, materials and spaces, words and concepts that become mutable and unfixed, like clouds. The adult Benjamin puts his efforts into discovering how technology might carry out the curious work that language and the object world alike do for the floundering, playing child. He attempts to locate how and under what conditions technology – in the shape of second technology – can mediate 'different nature', a mutable one, a better world inside our unhappy world, one that is a realm of play, transformation and potentiality. As transformative as snow when it blankets the Earth, smoothing roughness or obliterating colour. As transformative as the flurry of snowflakes that disrupts the usual functions of the self and the environment, and takes us back to a wistful, perhaps never-never land, of childhood, which stands for hope.