



AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

ON CRITIQUE: EXPERIENCE BETWEEN KANT AND  
BENJAMIN

by  
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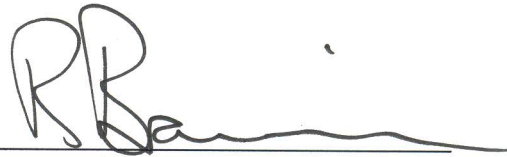
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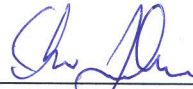
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# AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Mark Abboud Hayek for Master of Arts  
Major: Philosophy

Title: On Critique: Experience Between Kant and Benjamin

The introduction of a concept of experience has thus far, since Immanuel Kant's "What is Enlightenment?" essay, been inextricable from a notion of a systematic framework. Or, in other words, the introduction of a concept of experience has been inextricable from Kant's answer to the question of Enlightenment<sup>1</sup>. The importance of a notion of experience is central to a notion of critique, inasmuch as a notion of critique is central to the notion of experience. In other words, the relation between experience and critique is the basis for forming any conception of both. The biggest problem facing critique has always been its inevitable relapse into a set of dogmatic claims for its practice.

In the present work, I will attempt to trace the genealogy of this concept of critique, and its impact on the formation of a concept of experience, starting with an exposition of Kant's "Transcendental Aesthetic" as theory of intuition, and then moving into Benjamin's development of a concept of experience. In other words, this exposition will be split into two main parts: the first covers the philosophical underpinnings of a notion of critique, one that stems from the critical insight offered by Kant in the first *Critique*; the second part deals with the conception of a practical critical project via Benjamin's own theory of experience.

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<sup>1</sup> September 30, 1784. This essay offers the groundwork for the first step into critique, but offers it broadly and loosely. This remains central because its exposition is that of critique in the most basic sense, namely to think *for oneself*.

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“naked man of the contemporary  
world who lies screaming like a newborn babe  
in the dirty diapers of the present”

Walter Benjamin: “Experience and Poverty”

## I. INTRODUCTION

“Men work themselves gradually out of barbarity  
if only intentional artifices  
are not made to hold them in it”<sup>2</sup>.

The introduction of a concept of experience has thus far, since Immanuel Kant’s “What is Enlightenment?” essay, been inextricable from a notion of a systematic framework. Or, in other words, the introduction of a concept of experience has been inextricable from Kant’s answer to the question of Enlightenment. The importance of a notion of experience is central to a notion of critique, inasmuch as a notion of critique is central to the notion of experience. In other words, the relation between experience and critique is the basis for forming any conception of both. The biggest problem facing critique has always been its inevitable relapse into a set of dogmatic claims for its practice. By suggesting revolutionary practices of critique what has thus far happened is the replacement of old dogmatic claims with new ones. Kant states: “A revolution may perhaps bring about the fall of an autocratic despotism and of an avaricious or overbearing oppression, but it can never bring about the true reform of a way of thinking. Rather, new

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<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment?” (30 September, 1784). The notion of the experience of Enlightenment as flat is what is to be contested by Benjamin.



prejudices will serve, like the old, as the leading strings of thoughtless masses” (Kant, 59)<sup>3</sup>. Rather than a “revolutionary” yanking out of old systems and the violent enforcing of new systems, Kant already here suggests the gradual process of concept formation.

In the first part of the present work, I will attempt to trace the genealogy of this concept of critique, and its impact on the formation of a concept of experience, starting with an exposition of Kant’s “Transcendental Aesthetic” as theory of intuition, and then moving into Benjamin’s development of a concept of experience. In other words, this exposition will be split into two main parts: the first covers the philosophical underpinnings of a notion of critique, one that stems from the critical insight offered by Kant in the first *Critique*; the second part deals with the conception of a practical critical project. This second section will first trace Walter Benjamin’s theoretical move away from Kantian and post-Kantian thought in his early writings, and then look at Benjamin’s own development of a concept of experience that stands in dialectical relation to the concept of critique. The third part of this work will deal with how the concept of experience both stems out of and redefines antecedent conceptions of critique<sup>4</sup>.

In order to address the issues present to us today in the wake of such a historicizing of the concept of critique is never to say that this concept can be fully historicized. The imbeddedness of the subject in the subject matter, the imbeddedness of the critic in the practice of critique, is a notion that must necessarily be taken into account. In other words,

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<sup>3</sup> “What is Enlightenment?” I will return to the notion of dogmatism in the exposition of Kant’s first *Critique* in the next section.

<sup>4</sup> This is based on the shift in epistemology, the shift in perception that Benjamin highlights in “Experience and Poverty”. In short, the distinction between his understanding of the two kinds of experience (Erlebnisse and Erfahrungen) in “Experience and Poverty”, justify a new critical project from an understanding of the fragment as entry point.

what needs to be taken into consideration as well is the fact that critique is constitutive of history; it is through critique that we formulate a concept of history. Put simply, the present work aims at looking at the dialectics between how a genealogical exposition of the concept of experience in Benjamin redefines the notion of critique, and how critique is part and parcel of a concept of experience.

To reiterate, I will try throughout the course of this work to highlight the process of the formation of the concept of experience starting with Kant's theory of intuition in the first *Critique*. Benjamin's move away from Kantian thought will then highlight how we cannot look at the relation between concepts of experience and critique as flat and unchanging. After that, this dialectical process will be shown to be inextricable from its historicizing in Walter Benjamin's work. Kant's theory of intuition in the "Transcendental Aesthetic" will be shown to have historical material determinants from the perspective of Benjamin's works.

## II. KANT'S COPERNICAN TURN

Kant's Copernican revolution is iterated in the first *Critique* multiple times<sup>5</sup>. What seemingly is the determination of things in themselves turns out, for Kant, to be determinations present in the subject. In other words, the determinations of space and time, which until the first *Critique* seemed to be inherent in objects, turn out to be

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<sup>5</sup> Of these instances, among others:

- Preface to the second edition B xvi: "whether we shall not make better progress in the problems of metaphysics if we assume that objects must conform to our cognition".
- B xviii: "If our intuition had to conform to the character of its objects, then I do not see how we could know anything a priori about that character. But I can quite readily conceive of this possibility if the object [...] conforms to the character of our power of intuition".

determinations set by the subject. Instead of objects being understood as *in space and time*, space and time become for Kant the forms of intuition, the conditions for the possibility of experience. In other words, the importance of Kant's transformation of the categories of space and time into the pure (a priori) forms of intuition rather than concepts lies at the basis of understanding how critique is always already conditioned by these forms of intuition, rather than inherent predicates of objects in themselves.

In the "Transcendental Aesthetic", Kant outlines the conditions for the possibility of experience. In relation to space, he states: "Space is nothing but the mere form of all appearances of outer senses; i.e., it is the subjective condition of sensibility under which alone all outer intuition is possible for us" (Kant, 81). In relation to time, he states: "Time is nothing but the form of inner sense, i.e., of the intuiting we do of ourselves and of our inner state. For time cannot be a determination of outer appearances, [because] it does not belong to any shape or position, etc., but rather determines the relation of presentations in our inner state" (Kant, 88). For Kant, space is the form of outer intuition, while time is the form of inner intuition. Space as the outer form of intuition allows us the ability to organize the world as it appears in relation to us, while time as the inner form of intuition allows for the succession of thought, and the understanding of a sequentiality that is at the basis of the subsistence of experience and cognition. What this entails is that even though we are able to abstract objects of experience from space and time, this does not mean that we are removing a certain quality inherent in the objects of experience. Rather, this sort of abstraction says nothing more about the things in themselves, it is simply a determination of the way in which we experience these objects *through* the forms of intuition, through space and time. Kant's exposition of time and space as forms of intuition is central to an understanding of how the subject of experience is able to posit itself as an object of study

that allows itself to be limited to its own faculties, in order to understand how cognition works.

### III. COHEN'S NEO-KANTIAN NOTION OF EXPERIENCE

Benjamin's reading of Kant follows from and breaks apart not only from Kant himself, but also from the neo-Kantian tradition. This tradition finds its major proponent in Hermann Cohen. Cohen's *Kant's Theory of Experience [Kants Theorie der Erfahrung]* attempts to historicize Kant's first *Critique*. But what this means is that Cohen wanted to read Kant historically as well as philosophically, in order to avoid the problems that arise from readings of Kant. What Cohen wanted to do, in short, was to integrate the presupposition of what the reader is bringing to their reading of Kant. In his case, it was the emphasis on the importance of the transcendental categories as a priori conditions for the possibility of experience. These categories are thus purely epistemological for Cohen – as I have argued are the same for Kant as well – and they provide us with a delimitation against the concerns that can be raised against Kant. In other words, it eliminates what is considered metaphysical arguments against Kant's transcendental categories.

Frederick Beiser, in his book *The Genesis of Neo-Kantianism, 1796-1880*, offers a close reading of Cohen's book. In it is present the traces or origins of what, by criticizing Cohen, Benjamin needed in order to develop his concept of experience. Beiser writes: "Cohen concludes, that the dualism between the subject and object now falls *within* the formal conditions of experience, *inside* the transcendental perspective itself" (Beiser, 484). This is, as we shall see later, is what Benjamin will deny as a reduction of the concept of experience to empirical consciousness. Put differently, the problem with Cohen is that he vehemently wished to maintain the transcendental subject, even though he has shown how

the subject/object distinction falls into experience. Beiser then lists the main premises that Cohen uses in order to maintain a transcendental subject:

“subjectivity is the sole ground of experience, that the subject knows experience a priori by constructing it, that the starting point of all knowledge lies within ourselves, and that the only objectivity is that produced or created by the subject. It is the *empirical* subject who falls within experience, not the *transcendental* subject who creates or posits the formal conditions of experience itself” (Beiser, 485).

Cohen was attempting to return to the Copernican revolution found in the transcendental aesthetic in the first *Critique*, to use it as a starting point of renewing the understanding that the conditions of the possibility of experience lie in the subject, and to show furthermore how this is a strictly epistemological claim.

In relation to the importance of history or the historian, for Cohen this relates to the notion of the presuppositions brought into the reading of the text by the reader. This does not go against his notions of the transcendental subject, and allow him to claim that the philosopher is at times a historian, by bringing in the historical moment of reading into the reading itself. It also allows him to claim that the historian is at times a philosopher, by providing critique of the philosophy he is exposed to based on his historical moment<sup>6</sup>.

Helmut Holzhey addresses this issue in Cohen’s writings:

“Cohen met the methodological difficulty of proving the originality of an idea in its historical context by suggesting that the historian turns philosopher and voices his philosophical opinion. Aware that this would somewhat diminish the objective status of the writing of history, Cohen claimed that the loss would be compensated by the fact that topical participation and indeed intervention by the philosopher would complement purely historical research in a beneficial manner. This would be the case especially when philosophical problems, such as those of Kant, were still ‘in motion’ for the interpreter (Holzhey, 11).

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<sup>6</sup> We will see later how Benjamin undermines this neo-Kantian move, since it collapses back into empirical consciousness. This is due to its focus on the subject as the locus of the conditions of possibility of experience.

But where the neo-Kantian falls short, as we shall see in the next few sections, is in the following statement: “experience is constituted or constructed in an a priori and formal manner by ‘space, time, and the synthetic unity’ and that it is given ‘in mathematics and pure science with the character of necessity and generality’ (Holzhey, 12). This outline of the theory of experience provided by Holzhey articulates the overall project that Cohen and the subsequent Marburg School adhere to in order to both salvage Kant from the misinterpretations prevalent at the time, and reinstate the importance of the a priori forms of intuition in any epistemological practice. This is precisely the issue at hand in Benjamin’s criticism of the neo-Kantians in “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy”. The neo-Kantians invariably want to keep the subject as the locus of the possibility of experience, and the transcendental subject must adhere to a priori forms of intuition in order to say anything about the world. Even though Cohen begins to take into consideration the historical aspect of a notion of critique or experience, by strictly adhering to the transcendental subject, the collapse back into empirical consciousness proves hard to dismiss.

#### IV. BENJAMIN’S CRITIQUE OF KANT AND NEO-KANTIANISM

By looking at space and time as forms of intuition with which we organize the world, Kant at once simplified then made exceedingly more difficult the task of subsequent critical epistemology. In other words, the “Transcendental Aesthetic” as theory of intuition brings us closer to a concept of experience as a composite of our a priori faculties of receptivity and spontaneity of the intellect, by placing their forms of intuition within the subject. The “Transcendental Aesthetic” is thus the starting point, the limitation

on empirical cognition that should allow it to prosper within itself. Before going into Benjamin's own concept of experience, which has its roots in his 1913 "Experience" essay, what is important now is to show how Benjamin proposed a move away from Kant's transcendental forms of intuition as flat and unchanging forms of intuition<sup>7</sup>.

Benjamin's critique of Kant's epistemological project is most clearly stated in his early fragments, specifically in "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy". Benjamin identifies two problems with the Kantian system of the possibility of experience: "First of all, there was the question of the certainty of knowledge that is lasting, and, second, there was the question of the integrity of an experience that is ephemeral" (Benjamin, 100). For Benjamin, Kant's "Transcendental Aesthetic" provides an answer to the latter point, but fails to realize that even his answer is one that is grounded in the philosophico-historical moment that Kant was writing in. In other words, what Kant systematized was an already existing understanding of experience, one that is grounded in Enlightenment rationale and scientific positivism<sup>8</sup>. What the young Benjamin wanted to take from Kant is the systematicity of a certain understanding of experience as a groundwork for what he calls "a new and higher kind of experience yet to come" (Benjamin, 102). What seems to be topologically flat and transcendental as the forms of intuition is not to be dismissed entirely, or – as in the project of some neo-Kantians – be the ground for the application of purely mathematical or logical axioms in order to extract objective knowledge of the

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<sup>7</sup> Benjamin's project will ultimately highlight how Kant's formulation of the "Transcendental Aesthetic" is itself subject to its historical context, one based in the widespread reverence towards the scientific method at the time of Kant.

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin continues: "Even if it had become so for [Kant], as it did for the neo-Kantian thinkers, the concept of experience thus identified and determined would still have remained the old concept of experience, which is distinguished by its relationship not only to pure consciousness but to empirical consciousness as well" (Benjamin, 101).

world. Benjamin's critique of the concept of experience in Kant and the neo-Kantians is that of a critique of the scientific method of the Enlightenment. What the Enlightenment failed to recognize was its social-historical unconscious presupposition of its reception of the "data" it was using in order to formulate a concept of experience.

Howard Caygill presents the move that Benjamin proposes in "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy" as a shift from "transcendental" to "speculative" experience, where the "'transcendental' is made up of the conditions of legibility afforded by a particular surface while the 'speculative' comprises the set of such possible surfaces of legibility" (Caygill, 4). The clearest way to look at this possibility as legibility of what Benjamin calls "reading" in experience is to say that what in Kant the transcendental seemed to be the condition for the possibility of all experience, Benjamin is saying is one instance of the infinite possibilities in which experience can be conceptualized. Caygill continues:

"Benjamin fulfills the condition of a Kantian transcendental argument by stating, however obliquely, the conditions of a possible experience and by specifying the object of such an experience in terms of appearance. What is not Kantian is the way he situates the particularity of the transcendental condition of experience within the speculative context of the infinite configuration of surfaces or 'absolute composition'. The transcendental is thus a fold in the surface of speculative configuration, implying that perception is not the receptivity of impressions but the 'reading' of appearances that are themselves already organized. Even more significantly, experience as reading is not divided between an active 'reader' (subject of experience) and a passive 'read' (object of experience). The 'read' is by no means a passive datum but makes as active a contribution as the 'reader' to the accomplishment of 'perception as reading'" (Caygill, 4).

What Caygill offers is a clarification of Benjamin's epistemological project which aims towards a new concept of experience that includes Kant, but only as an instance in the formulation of a concept of experience at a certain moment in history. It is also aimed at undoing the Kantian split between subject and object. This split, as we will see, is ultimately a symptom of the failure of the Kantian system due to its historical moment of



conception, or rather the failure of the Kantian system to realize that it is itself situated within the philosophico-historical moment in which it was conceived, making it only a “fold” in the infinite configurations in which experience and its subsequent conceptualization is possible.

## V. THE MEDIUM OF EXPERIENCE AS IMPARTABILITY

To read Benjamin vis-à-vis Kant, and Kant thus vis-à-vis Benjamin, entails a grasp of two concepts: the first being a Benjaminian reading of Kant, and the second being the link between the early metaphysical and the late materialist Benjamin. These two concepts are mutually inclusive and exclusive, because they at the same time situate Kant and Benjamin in relation to each other, and show to what extent Benjamin adopts Kant’s notion of experience as bound to, or formed in, his transcendental aesthetic, but also shows Benjamin’s move away from Kant’s aesthetic as transcendental categories, and displaces these transcendental categories into the medium of impartability.

The clearest exposition of such a reading of Benjamin’s notion of experience as grounded in the medium of impartability is Werner Hamacher’s “Intensive Languages”. Hamacher highlights the Kantian position as one that is grounded in the agreement between intuition and concept, where what is experientially possible is strictly this agreement, and the possibility of thinking of a concept that does not correspond to an intuition, or an intuition that does not correspond to a concept is there, but nothing can be said about it. It cannot be cognized. Hamacher writes:

“Hence, in “On the Program for the Coming Philosophy,” Benjamin’s critique of Kant and of neo-Kantianism concentrates itself first of all on the insufficiency of “the notion of cognition as a relationship between some subjects and objects or some subject and object,” and, further, on the reduction of “cognition and experience to an empirical human consciousness.” (Hamacher, 486).

What Benjamin is highlighting is that Kant and the neo-Kantians reduce cognition to human cognition, namely to human cognition based in empirical data, or empirical cognition. Hamacher's work is an exposition of this specific reading of Benjamin, in order to be able to set the groundwork for an understanding of the medium in Benjamin. What Caygill refers to as mentioned earlier, transposed or displaced into the notion of the medium, concerns language as medium of impartability of experience in which cognizer and cognized are merely modes of the medium. Hamacher states this in the opening paragraph of his essay:

“Cognition is a relation. In this relation, something is apprehended and it is apprehended in its cognizability. Cognizability, for its part, is not an object but the medium in which cognition relates to what is apprehended and in which the two are together constituted—the one as cognition, the other as cognized. Cognizability is neither a subject's capacity to cognize, given as a transcendental structure independent of any object to be cognized, nor a property of objects, a capacity to be known that awaits the opportunity to actualize itself in cognition” (Hamacher, 485).

Here we can read Hamacher and Caygill quite closely. The shift from transcendental to speculative, as we have seen with Caygill, entails an infinite possibility of a reconfiguration of the concept of experience. Hamacher, much like Benjamin, uses the suffix –ability<sup>9</sup> to denote a potentiality of experience, its grasping as a concept, or as Hamacher calls it, cognizability. For Hamacher, the Kantian transcendental categories fall short of accounting for the possibility of experience because they are situated in the subject. Rather, the subject and object of cognizability are logically posterior to the medium of cognizability. It is in the medium of cognizability that the conditions for a

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<sup>9</sup> -ability is a central notion of the possibility of the speculative mode of experience. Samuel Weber deals specifically with this topic in relation to language as medium, of which I offer an exposition. It is through these thinkers: Caygill, Hamacher, and Weber, that we can grasp a certain reading of Benjamin's concept of experience vis-à-vis Kant.

subject to cognize, and an object to impart itself as cognized are present. What Benjamin does, in other words, is resituate the transcendental forms in the medium of perception. If thus cognition is a form of imparting, then cognizability has impartability as its mode of actualization.

This is the split, the move away from Kant that Benjamin proposes, and Hamacher designates as a “demand” for experience. We can better understand Hamacher’s argument by reading it as a different configuration of the same argument made by Caygill on legibility. The notion of speculative experience as being an infinite possibility of rereading or reconfiguration of legibility in Caygill is presented by Hamacher in his exposition of Benjamin’s notion of language and translatability:

“Benjamin conceives of the linguisticity of language not as the appropriateness of its concepts for possible intuitions, but as a demand—and an excessive demand—made on intuitions by the concept of freedom, as an excessive demand on the concept made by the intuition of something non-conceptual. Hence, translatability is for him not an empirical or epistemological-theoretical, but instead exclusively a practical possibility, transcending every given actuality. It is for this reason that translatability manifests as an infinite demand and for this reason that it initiates the event that, as the history of translation, is the event of language: no longer within the limits of empirical object-determination and the transmission of meaning, but instead bounded by mere imparting alone (Hamacher, 489-90).

The medium of cognizability presents itself as a medium of impartability, and thus as language. The linguistic terminology is heavily employed in Benjamin’s writings on experience because of his understanding of cognizability as impartability. Impartability should be read here, as communicability as well, and this is the basis for why the medium is language. It is language because of its impartability.

We should approach this understanding of the medium as language as Samuel Weber

does in *Benjamin's -abilities*. This is due to two major reasons, the first concerned with solidifying the link between cognition, impartability, and thus language. The second deals strictly with the “-ability” suffix, and will help clarify what Caygill calls the move from “transcendental” to “speculative” experience, by highlighting an understanding of potentiality related to language, and therefore related to experience. Concerning the concept of medium as language, Weber writes:

“It is surely not fortuitous that Benjamin’s initial confrontation with the problem of the “medium” concerns the question of “language ‘overall’ [überhaupt] and human language” in particular. For it is only with respect to language that the “medium” cannot be approached simply as though it were a self-contained or detached “object” of study” (Weber, 38).

There are two conclusions to be drawn from this passage. By taking into consideration Hamacher’s notion of cognizability as being the medium where cognizer and cognized are related, where the conditions under which cognizer becomes cognizer and cognized are related, and by basing this relation in impartability, the medium of relation must be language. What this does is blur the lines between subject and object. And the only way to be able to see the relation as preceding the opposites, i.e. the only way to be able to see that cognizability precedes (logically) cognizer and cognized is to do so through language. What this entails – and this is the second conclusion to be drawn – is that the Kantian subject/object split must be seen as an instance in the medium of impartability of experience. Language is here used in the sense of impartability and communicability, of which human language is a historical manifestation of empirical consciousness. This is what Hamacher means when he writes “the reduction of “cognition and experience to an empirical human consciousness.” (Hamacher, 486). Language as such is to be seen as the mode in which the medium functions, not as a transcendental set of conditions for the possibility of empirical knowledge. Put differently, language, being the mode of impartability, “cannot be approached simply as though it were a self-contained or

detached ‘object’ of study”.

The second major point required in the formulation of a concept of experience as impartable is Benjamin’s use of the suffix –ability. With the use of this suffix, Benjamin looks at the structure of concepts, or the possibility of cognizability as mediated, and “what results is a series of concepts that are all constructed around this suffix:

“Criticizability,” “Translatability”, “Citability”, “Reproducibility,” and “Recognizability” [...] and “impart-ability” in the essay on language” (Weber, 42). Kant is shown here to be central to this notion of –ability. Weber writes:

“The philosophical predecessor of this unusual move is probably to be found in Kant’s use of the suffix -mäßigkeit in the *Critique of the Power to Judge*. It is no accident that this formulation is invented by Kant in order to articulate a type of judgment that provides no actual knowledge, determines nothing, and is therefore not cognitive, precisely to the extent that it remains tied to a certain singularity. Kant designates this non-conceptual, non-cognitive judgment as “reflective,” since it merely reflects the movement of the mind judging, rather than executing an act of judgment itself” (Weber, 39).

We can see here the extent to which Benjamin owes the starting points of his concepts of cognizability and impartability to Kant’s self-reflective process that is found in the third *Critique*. Benjamin’s move is then to displace this self-reflective process that is found in the subject in Kant, to the medium of impartability. This also shows the Kantian teleology without a final purpose in the third *Critique* as being central if taken modally, not transcendentally<sup>10</sup> - if taken as a mode of impartability in the medium of language, not as a transcendental category of the perceiving subject<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Weber writes: “The impart-ability that constitutes language as medium is un-mediated, immediate: not a means to an end, nor a middle between poles or periphery, but also not simply the opposite of a means, which is to say, an end in itself. Rather, language still retains one decisive aspect of the means, which is that it is not self-contained, complete, perfect, or perfectible. It is simply there, but as something that splits off from itself, takes leave of itself, parts with what it was to become something else, to be transposed, transmitted, or translated into something else” (42).

<sup>11</sup> Weber again: “Therefore the impartable cannot simply be equated with that which is actually communicated or the act of communication itself. The latter are acts or processes

## VI. EARLY AND LATE BENJAMIN

Again, Kant provides the universal forms of intuition of possible experience in the subject through the transcendental forms. For Benjamin, experience cannot be divorced from its historicization, even though the mode of historicization cannot be rendered within time as a pure form of intuition. Before getting into Benjamin's concept of experience, it is important to note that even though it may seem like a holistic argument, there is a significant difference between the earlier and later Benjamin: the metaphysically oriented earlier Benjamin, from 1913 to 1919, and the later materialist Benjamin in the 1930's. Although the concept of experience is discussed in both, the content of the discussion shifts, is put into a different configuration, or is displaced into his own version of historical materialist discourse. The impartability of experience [Erfahrungen] – in relation to Caygill's point on legibility in Benjamin – as a possibility begins with Benjamin's first essay in 1913, entitled "Experience". Albeit skeptical, his understanding of experience from intergenerational in the 1913 essay, to the personal experience of soldiers after the First World War in "Experience and Poverty" (1933), to his conceptual differentiation between shock-experience [Erlebnisse] and impartable experience [Erfahrungen], delineates a concept of experience that is inextricably linked to the material conditions under development in the 20th century, most notably the advent of technological reproducibility)<sup>12</sup>. Benjamin's concept of experience is in constant dialectical interaction with his concept of historical materialism. In order to understand this dialectical

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that actually take place, or that could take place, once and for all. The impartable, by contrast, has another mode of being, another dynamic, which consists in its transformation, its becoming-other" (44).

<sup>12</sup> For a more detailed exposition on the difference between Erlebnisse and Erfahrungen, see Benjamin's 1939 essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" Benjamin, Walter. "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" *Selected Writings, Vol. 4 1938-1940*. Eds. Howard Eiland & Michael W. Jennings. (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003).

interaction, an exposition of both concepts, the former found in “Experience and Poverty”, and the latter found symptomatically in “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility” (1935-6), is required. In short, Benjamin’s concept of experience must be localized – but never fully – in the social-historical moment in which it is present. Never fully because, as I will show, its social-historical moment, i.e. its historicizability is also subject to the critique of experience through his concept of historical materialism<sup>13</sup>. It must be stated again and again that Benjamin’s concept of experience is, insofar as it deals with the material and historical conditions of its subject matter, must also be seen as one of the possibilities mentioned by Caygill when it comes to “reading” experience in and through its historical yet unhistoricizable signature of legibility.

I will now attempt to provide an analysis of Benjamin’s earlier and later concepts of experience, and through this will try to salvage a concept of impartable experiences without relying on mystical idealistic concepts of unmediated immediacy. The opening up of a space for impartable experience inevitably entails a concept of impoverished experience that Benjamin will later put under the heading of “a positive concept of barbarism”<sup>14</sup>. In other words, to be able to stand amongst the ruins of capitalist modernity and the catastrophic events of early 20<sup>th</sup> century overwhelmed by shock-experience

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<sup>13</sup> It must be mentioned here that since we are trying to understand a new concept of experience that has historical and material conditions and factors, a brief understanding of Benjamin’s historical materialism is required. His historical materialism versus historicism can most clearly be seen as: instead of *conceptualising* a historical moment *as is* we must *engage with it* as subjects being addressed by it; that a moment in history is not to be appropriated into the narrative of an overarching systematic ontology, but as a signature, a break that opens the space for the question of the concept of experience. As Benjamin says: “The true image of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognisability, and is never seen again [...] For it is an irretrievable image of the past which threatens to disappear in any present that does not recognise itself as intended in that image” (Benjamin, 390-1).

<sup>14</sup> This will be dealt with in the second to last section of the essay.

[Erlebnisse], and open up an unseen (non)space for the advent of a new form of impartable experience, using the means provided by social-historical age in which it is present.

Already the 1913 “Experience” essay provides a prognostic reading of the first element that impedes a space for impartable experience. Benjamin’s main argument in this essay is to attack the reified concept of experience as “the common and the always-already-out-of-date” (Benjamin, 4). This form of experience [Erfahrung], which Benjamin refers to in this essay can most clearly be understood as obsolete consummation. It is obsolete because it is consummated, and it is consummated because it is obsolete. This reification of experience as a static category, one that is learned and taken as absolute knowledge is mistaken for Benjamin. This absolute idea of experience is misguided in two ways: the first is that it is absolute, unchanging from generation to generation, and impartable only as is, as consummated. The second misguided notion underlying this concept of experience is that it does not take into consideration the technological changes that have happened, namely technological reproducibility. What Benjamin is trying to undermine is the traditional notion that experience is posited as absolute alterity to be imparted, rather than be reconstituted in the historical subject as a new concept of experience.

The idealist concept of experience as eternal form and obsolete consummation in terms of content forestalls the possibility that anything new can change our modes and forms of experience. This experience is void of content, and is pernicious precisely because it has no face. Benjamin even calls proponents of this kind of experience philistines, and the philistine “rejoices in every new meaninglessness. He remains in the right [...] for if he were to become critical, then he would have to create as well” (Benjamin, 4). In other words, a proponent of a stagnant, one could even say dead form of



experience which champions only the contemplative, creation (the later materialist Benjamin will turn to the constructivist term of production) is impossible, because then he would have to create something i.e. a new content imparted by a new mode of experience. But this form of experience has been dead for a long time for Benjamin, even though it still has proponents. The problem becomes much more complex in the wake of the First World War. As I mentioned earlier, for Benjamin the impartability of experience cannot be removed from what is imparted and its historical moment. He offers an understanding of the shift in perception that happened during and after the First World War, and employs a Hegelian concept to do so, namely: a quantitative increase in lived events [Erlebnisse] (both in number and magnitude) at a certain extent leads to a qualitative rupture in the historical modes through which experience is imparted.

Benjamin states that the First World War was not just a qualitatively different experience as Erlebnisse, but also changed the mode and medium in which we impart experience [Erfahrung]: “This much is clear: experience has fallen in value, amid a generation which from 1914 to 1918 had to experience some of the most monstrous events in the history of the world” (Benjamin, 731). In his “Experience and Poverty” essay, Benjamin highlights the fact that soldiers returning from the trenches, after four years of warfare in the most significant and detrimental phenomenon of the modern age, had nothing to share. This does not mean that they did not experience anything. On the contrary, so alienated were they from others, and even from themselves, that their experiences were unimpartable in the highest degree. In other words, they could not draw conclusions from the new experiences, and this also rendered previous experiences meaningless. It is not just that it is a different experience in the same medium of impartability, but also a change in the medium of impartability itself.

The First World War witnessed the most destructive aspect of a society incapable of controlling – or at least keeping up with – its technological means of production. It is important to note here Benjamin’s political and technological understanding of war which he presents in the “The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility”: “War [...] makes it possible to set a goal for mass movements on the grandest scale while preserving traditional property relations [...] only war makes it possible to mobilise all of today’s technological resources while maintaining property relations” (Benjamin, 121). By preserving the traditional relations of production (and the traditional concept of experience for that matter), by forcing them to be preserved, the drastic change in technology witnessed in the modern age was met equally by its drastic perversion, its extreme transformation into war machines capable of leveling entire battlefields. In other words, the suppression of the socio-political change in property relations that was supposed to be brought about by the new technological advances required a radical transformation of these advances through a world war in order to maintain the traditional property relations and frame them through traditional concepts of experience. The phrase “to have an experience, as a possession (which can be shared)” is here taken as the analog of a society in which you possess goods as commodities which can be exchanged through capitalist property relations. Put differently, Benjamin’s critique of capitalist modernity is a dual critique: first it detects wars as displaced fields where unresolved and disavowed social antagonisms are “played out” and “displayed”; second the experiential counterpart of such a society remains blind to the very changes of experience that it is undergoing.

From a quantitative standpoint, this intense overstimulation that occurred during the First World War and continued afterwards led to too much experience [Erlebnisse]. This enormous increase in the quantity of experiences, shock-experiences, in turn led to a qualitative shift, namely a privation of impartable experience [Erfahrung]. Differently put,

the mode of impartability decreased while the content of experience as *Erlebnisse* increased. This qualitative mismatch, a crisis of and in impartability is conceptualized in Benjamin as the poverty of experience [*Erfahrungsarmut*]<sup>15</sup>. Benjamin continues to say that this experiential impoverishment is not only on the individual level, but also on the collective level. This sort of poverty is at the first instance brought about by the outer forces that govern people's lives: "strategic experience has been contravened by positional warfare; economic experience by the inflation; physical experience, by hunger; moral experiences, by the ruling powers" (Benjamin, 732). These four dimensions are simply instances of what the aforementioned role of war does in order to keep property relations the same. The Marxian point of the later Benjamin, that the class struggle in and after the First World War was determined by and called for a new mode of experience which was not met, is theorized by Benjamin in terms of *Erfahrungsarmut*, the poverty of experience. *Erfahrungsarmut* is hence Benjamin's notion to address a historical crisis that happens in both fields: the modes and forms of experience and the modes and forms of society.

On a psychological level, due to the immense shock experiences both in number and intensity, people "long to free themselves from experience; they long for a world in which they can make such pure and decided use of their poverty [...] they have 'devoured' everything, both 'culture and people', and they have had such a surfeit that it has exhausted them" (Benjamin, 734). This longing is not limited to psychology, neither to individual nor mass psychology. Rather, Benjamin a historical materialist reading of experiential poverty. The challenge of the latter finds its conceptual framework in a positive concept of barbarism. Benjamin is not proposing an end of history as something that can be experienced, or a moment in time where experiences is no longer impartable. Instead, *ex negativo*, he sees in this poverty of experience a new not yet defined space, a

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<sup>15</sup> This concept will be dealt with in the section on barbarism.

non-space for those who are ready to face the challenge to construct a new form and medium of impartable experience. This new experience is impartable only in a new impoverished medium as fragment, as ruin, as ruined. He writes: “[poverty of experience] forces him to start from scratch; to make a new start; to make a little go a long way; to begin with a little and build up further, looking neither left nor right” (Benjamin, 732). This starting from scratch provides the uneven ground from which Benjamin launches his positive concept of barbarism. However, in order to fully grasp this new ground, we have to understand the medium, that is the technological medium in which the new barbarian experiences.

## VII. FIRST AND SECOND TECHNIK

In the second version of “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility” essay, Benjamin proposes a far-reaching distinction between first and second *Technik*<sup>16</sup>. This distinction is central to an understanding of a new concept of experience, because, as mentioned earlier, the social historical moment for Benjamin both determines and is determined by a concept of experience. The material conditions of production are central to the understanding of a new concept of experience<sup>17</sup>. Furthermore, technological change is not just another aspect of experiential content, but rather is inherent to the entire concept of experience, its impartability, medium, and form. This

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<sup>16</sup> Benjamin specifically chooses *Technik* and not *Technologie*, which in German means technique, but also denotes technology. In other words, *Technik* relates to the “what” of technology (i.e. material technologies) and the “how” of technology, the ways in which technology is utilized, the technique that is needed in order to make technology productive.

<sup>17</sup> Even though Benjamin mostly addresses the aesthetic realm in this essay, and the advent of new forms of art (photography, film, etc.), the following can be seen as a symptomatic reading of a more ubiquitous understanding of a concept of experience. In other words, we need the distinction between first and second *Technik* in order to better understand Benjamin’s concept of experience.

section will deal with the understanding that we need in order to come to terms with this new form of impartable experience, to solve the problem presented in the “Experience and Poverty” essay, namely to find a new technological medium in which *Erlebnisse* can be rendered in a new impoverished form of Erfahrung.

In section VI of the essay, he states: “The first technology really sought to master nature, whereas the second aims rather at an interplay between nature and humanity” (Benjamin, 107). The kernel of the argument here is the qualitative shift in experience, where instead of positing some sort of stagnant definition of experience, the advent of second technology opens up the space for a dialectical interaction between man and nature, subject and object. Benjamin’s move away from post-Kantian philosophy is to say here that the ability to form new impartable experience, has as one of its factors the material conditions in the historical signature of the subject of experience. In other words, the new impoverished form of experience cannot be undertaken without taking into consideration the material forces in the specific social historical moment in which it is unfolding, i.e highly developed industrial capitalism and its technologically reproducible media. But how is this possible? He continues: “Dealing with this apparatus [second *Technik*] also teaches them that technology will release them from their enslavement to the powers of the apparatus [first *Technik*] only when humanity’s whole constitution has adapted itself to the new productive forces which the second technology has set free<sup>18</sup>” (Benjamin, 108). This relates back to the point made on shock-experience, where the subject has not come to terms with the qualitative inabilities caused by the traumatic impact of too much experience (in terms of quantity).

Another way to see this would be to say: it is only when the historical conditions for the development of second *Technik* came into being (highly industrialized capitalism

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<sup>18</sup> Bracketed additions are my own.

of early 20<sup>th</sup> century), that Benjamin is able to criticize the entire concept of technology as undialectical, which conceives technology as only the instrumental organon of domination over nature, and not as a medium of possibility for social and experiential change.

Benjamin states: “This second technology is a system in which the mastering of elementary social forces is a *precondition* for playing [das Spiel] with natural forces”<sup>19</sup>

(124). Benjamin clarifies this point even further:

“Because this technology aims at liberating human beings from drudgery, the individual suddenly sees his scope for play, his field of action [Spielraum], immeasurably expanded. He does not yet know his way around this space. But already he registers his demands on it. For the more the collective makes the second technology its own, the more keenly individuals belonging to the collective feel how little they have received of what was due them under the dominion of the first technology. In other words, it is the individual liberated by the liquidation of the first technology who stakes his claim” (Benjamin, 124).

Benjamin is not displacing technological media into a new transcendental category; he is rather displacing the forms of intuition into the medium of perception. This is where we can see the Benjaminian reformulation of the concept of experience as being historically determined and determinable. It is historically determined insofar as second *Technik* opens up the space for a new concept of experience. It is historically determinable insofar as it will allow for the formulation of a new concept of experience. Put differently, the new impoverished form of experience finds its adequate medium in the new space of second technology.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

In his essay “The Poverty of Theory”, Sami Khatib reasserts what Benjamin was trying to deliver as means for the advent of a new form of *Erfahrungen*:

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<sup>19</sup> Emphasis my own.

“The task of forming the new medium of experience gets its cue from the world of fragmented *Erlebnisse*, a world of alienation and experiential emptiness, which Benjamin calls *Erfahrungsarmut*, poverty of experience. The figure who has mimetically adjusted his or her life to the modern world of experiential poverty is the new barbarian – the one who acknowledges and estranges this poverty in order ‘to start from scratch; to make a new start’” (Khatib, 11).

The barbarian is thus the one who is willing to start anew, to look at the ruins surrounding him, the ruins of experience [*Erlebnisse*], and realize that his task is not to construct an overarching system using the technology available to him or her, what Benjamin would refer to as esoteric “galvanization” (Benjamin, 732)<sup>20</sup>. Instead, the opening up of a space for experience [*Erfahrungen*] begins with a destruction of these illusory “remedies” for fragmented experiences, and then a construction of a new form of impartable experience shrunk down to its impoverished, barbaric size.

Finally, and with Benjamin, we can see how the dialectical concept of experience is grounded in but not reducible to social historical conditions, because these very conditions can only be cognized by relying on a new form of impartable experiences. Kant’s transcendental subject and its pure forms of intuitions is not simply historicized. Rather, Benjamin is true to the challenge to give a non-historicizable account of the historical conditions any concept of experience is based on. The unhistoricizable character of this mode of historicization stems from the fact that it already relies on the ever-changing ground of various heterogenous historical signatures, configurations of historical time, which form and inform the formulation of any concept of experience. This includes the origin of any modern concept of experience, namely Kant’s concept of transcendental

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<sup>20</sup> Benjamin refers to this esotericism as such: “the reverse side of this poverty is the oppressive wealth of ideas that has been spread among people, or rather has swamped them entirely – ideas that have come with the revival of astrology and the wisdom of yoga, Christian Science and chiromancy, vegetarianism and gnosis, scholasticism and spiritualism” (Benjamin, 732).

intuition. This is not to say that there is a metahistorical perspective from where we could locate Kant in the totality of his historical circumstances, which would be the historicist perspective. Rather, Benjamin, without fully answering, poses the question of how we can grasp the historical configuration that positions us vis-à-vis Kant. This positioning itself cannot rely on absolute perspectives or objective measurement, neither is it a multiperspectival relativism. Benjamin's theory of legibility contains the structural conditions under which a historical text is constituted and becomes legible. The very relation between the text and the reader conditions the very forms under which new concepts of experience are formulated. With regards to Benjamin's earlier and later critiques of Kant and concepts of experience, we cannot miss a certain irony. Whereas the earlier Benjamin criticized Kant for the flat formalism of his concept of experience, the later materialist Benjamin will reverse this argument, and will radicalize the very impoverished notion of experience in the age of technological reproducibility, and calls for a new mimetically impoverished form of life that is the new barbarian. Thereby, the distinction between form and content of experience that is at the basis of Kant's theory of intuition and therefore experience is overturned. What is content becomes form and vice versa, since in the medium of experience the subject of cognition and the subject of experience are not separated from the conditions of experiential impartability, and the historical social conditions of technology as a medium.

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