REFRACTIONS OF VIOLENCE

Martin Jay

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For Frances

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INTRODUCTION

During the first decade of the terrible twentieth century, the French social theorist Georges Sorel issued a clarion call for revolutionary violence as an antidote to the flaccid, morally compromised society he saw around him. Deeply pessimistic about the exhaustion of the vital forces in European culture and anxious to jolt it out of its decline, he advocated the intensification of the class struggle rather than its peaceful resolution. Hopeful of generating moral fervor through the deliberate fostering of a new myth, Sorel hit on the apocalyptic "general strike" as a way to bring the current order to its knees. "It is to violence," his book ended rhapsodically, "that Socialism owes those high ethical values by means of which it brings *salvation* to the modern world."[1] The redemptive goal, which at the time he identified in syndicalist terms with a classless society of producers, was in fact less important than the means invoked to realize it. And so, not surprisingly, his advocacy of violence could easily be turned to other ends, as it soon was by Mussolini and the fascists, who claimed him as one of their inspirations.

Reflections on Violence, as his book was called, seems light years away from us today at the dawn of another century. Written before the two World Wars, before the Armenian genocide and the Holocaust, before the Gulag and the "killing fields" of Cambodia, before Hiroshima and Rwanda, and before countless other now emblematic instances of a violence that has proven anything but redemptive, its reckless insistence that ethical benefits would flow from the intensification of struggle seems naive at best, and deeply culpable at worst. And yet, the temptations of violence remain powerful even with these horrors registered on our consciousness, and our power to resist them is far too weak. Indeed, with the multiplier effect of technology operating to exacerbate the problem, the twenty-first century threatens to outdo its bloody predecessor.

We are, I think it fair to say, all hovering nervously in the shadow of that threat, which preoccupies us in so many different ways. And therefore I suppose it should be no wonder that without any conscious intent, my own work in the past few years has gravitated, if fitfully and without any systematic ambition, towards the question of violence. To be sure, the ostensible subject of that work often seemed to stem from the aftereffects of an earlier project, which had explored the issue of visuality, or more precisely, the French critique of "ocularcentrism."[2] That is, the extraordinary efflorescence of interest in visual culture in all of its myriad forms compelled me to return again and again to considerations of one aspect of that theme or another. But often just beneath the surface, and only really apparent in retrospect, was an inclination to mix questions of visuality with those of violence. Although not all of the texts collected in this volume are equally devoted to the interactions of these two themes, most—to my retrospective surprise—do.

Together, they provide what can justifiably be called "refractions on violence." That is, rather than self-conscious reflections on that theme in Sorel's sense or merely ruminations about visuality or violence in themselves, each essay more or less refracts one theme through the other, bending it as a ray of light is bent when it passes through one medium to another of a different density. Insofar as we live in a world increasingly saturated with images and simulacra, the ways in which actual violence often comes to us are precisely through such visual refractions. The domination of the eye as the most hegemonic sense has, of course, often been seen as a source of a violence all its own; it may well be possible to speak, as Derrida does in his early essay on Levinas, of "the violence of light" itself.[3] The fact that we live in an increasingly ocularcentric world means that we are sometimes inclined to believe that the evil eye can be taken as more than just an antiquated superstition. That is, there may be a kind of distanced violence in the penetrating stare or withering gaze that is more than a metaphorical analogue of its more proximate tactile counterpart. The underlying aggression in the photographer's "shot" has also not gone unnoticed.

Images of violence—whether produced by such technologically mediated "shots" or by the painter's hand—have often been the source of considerable controversy. As Paul Crowther notes, "the representation of violence is a source of enduring pleasure and fascination in our culture."[4] It has, of course, been no less a source of guilt and anxiety, as evidenced in periodic bouts of iconoclastic fervor, which can unleash a counterviolence in the service of purification or expiation (aimed, to be sure, at other types of images as well). Often the rhetoric of antipornography is employed to stigmatize such images still further, or more precisely to stigmatize those who find them fascinating. In so doing, it testifies to the often erotic charge intensifying our feelings about violence, either pro or con, as well as our ambivalence about the "lust of the eye."[5]

Even when seemingly benign images are employed as public icons, they can elicit powerful feelings of anger as well as veneration. As W. J. T. Mitchell has noted, "the association of public art with violence is nothing new. The fall of every Chinese dynasty since antiquity has been accompanied by the destruction of its public monuments, and the long history of political and religious strife in the West could almost be rewritten as a history of iconoclasm."[6] Here what might be called a closed circuit of violence is created in which the offending image is itself violated, caught in an economy of violence and visuality in which there is no complete outside. It may well be, as Derrida argued in the essay cited above, that "if light is the element of violence, one must combat light with a certain other light, in order to avoid the worst violence, the violence of the night which precedes or represses discourse. This *vigilance* is a violence chosen as the least violence by a philosophy which takes history, that is, finitude, seriously."[7]

The essays in this collection were written with a keen awareness that we do indeed live in such a finite economy in which utter redemption *from* violence is as utopian as redemption through it. The "fall" into history or finitude, whatever else it may mean, signifies a loss of prelapsarian grace and a hope for a peaceful kingdom that will be infinitely delayed. And yet, the essays also betray a belief that some countervailing light can be shed on the sources of the worsening violence that threatens our existence. As thorny as the problem of violence may seem, the following discursive refractions will, I hope, help shine a few rays of that "certain other light" to which Derrida refers.

In introducing a heterogeneous collection of occasional pieces like this one, it is best to be candid about the variations in tone and ambition that set some apart from others. Half of the essays were solicited for scholarly conferences or journals and have all of the normal apparatus and constrained style that characterize that genre. The other half were originally prepared for the biannual "Force Fields" column I have been contributing since 1987 to the general humanities journal *Salmagundi*. Often more colloquial in tone and personal in perspective, they provide an opportunity to touch on issues less suited for a formal scholarly presentation to an audience of experts. And even though their themes are often weighty, some are written in a cheekier and less solemn voice. No writing, to be sure, cancels out the mediation of its author's sensibility and normative intuitions, but the columns make no attempt to disguise them behind the rhetoric of scholarly objectivity. The result will, I hope, be taken as exploratory forays into territory—or rather, many different territories—for which no map, no systematic survey, has been provided.

The first essay, "Against Consolation: Walter Benjamin and the Refusal to Mourn," was generated by an invitation to speak to the inaugural meeting of the International Walter Benjamin Society in 1997 in Amsterdam. It was later refined at the gathering of contributors assembled by Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan in Chinchon, Spain for the volume on *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century* published in 1999.[8] Although there were still residues of Sorel's apocalyptic evocation of violence in the young Benjamin, he intransigently refused to condone the slaughter of the First World War and was unwilling to countenance consoling gestures of reconciliation after it. In visual terms, this meant he resisted architectural manifestations of national unity or positive monuments to the fallen, which were symbolic vehicles of a premature mourning that needed to be forestalled. Instead, he favored a jagged aesthetic of allegory, montage, and juxtaposition, which violated the ideological sublimation of still festering wounds, an aesthetic that would come into its own with the "dialectical images" he sought to produce in his unfinished *Arcades* project. In the spirit of Derrida's pitting of "a certain other light" against its hegemonic opposite, Benjamin refused to "work through" his anger and grief and accept the dominant discourse of completed mourning, which served to legitimate "sacrifice" for an allegedly higher cause. Like the Berlin Dadaists and French Surrealists of his day, he understood the dangers of integrated images of formal closure and resolution, preferring to remain unconsoled and melancholic until genuine transformation might occur.

After exploring so saturnine a sensibility as Benjamin's and empathizing with his resolute refusal to mourn, it may seem trivializing to turn to another, less serious moment in the German response to war, that occasioned by my participation in the founding of the Peace University in Berlin in 1995. The *Salmagundi* column I wrote on the subject, facetious as its tone may be, nonetheless touches on an important issue: can all the well-meaning, "spiritually" infused pacifist intentions in the world really do anything to temper the violence unleashed by the modern state? Here the question of vision appears largely in metaphoric terms as I express my reluctance to play the role of "visionary" assigned me in the spectacle of the University's founding ritual. Despite all my skepticism, I should report that the University's leaders have continued to solicit my thoughts on their projects and taken no umbrage at my reluctance to do so. And there are, as I indicate in the column, lots of worse causes that might be pursued by people with the entrepreneurial talents of the University's founders.

The essay that follows, "Fathers and Sons," also contributed to *Salmagundi* as a column, focuses on the intersection between collective and personal violence, dealing as it does with the traumatic ordeal of a contemporary figure in Germany, Jan Philipp Reemtsma. The penitent son of a Nazi industrialist who has dedicated his life to progressive causes, Reemtsma was also the victim of a shocking kidnapping in 1996. Kept in a darkened cellar for a month before his miraculous release, Reemtsma wrote a powerful account of his confinement, which only ended with the payment of an enormous ransom. Contrasted with the darkness of his underground prison, it might be argued, was the light his Institute for Social Research in Hamburg has tried to shed on the complicity of the German Wehrmacht during the Holocaust. The traveling exhibition they mounted to document the criminal deeds of ordinary German soldiers was met with enormous controversy, stirred still further when some of its images were shown to be misleadingly labeled and attributed (this happening after my column had appeared).[9] After some initial hesitation, Reemstma withdrew and remounted the exhibition, taking into account the accusations of his detractors, but maintaining the larger argument presented visually by his photographs and documents. In an era when the trustworthiness of what we see is rendered ever more suspect by the spread of ever more effective simulacral techniques, the demand to use visual material as historical documentation with utmost care has rarely been as explicitly presented as in this extremely fraught case. It is a mark of Reemstma's integrity that he responded constructively to the challenges to certain images and was willing to remount the exhibition to take new evidence into account.

The next essay recounts an uncomfortable personal story of an historian—to be precise, this historian—feeling violated by posthumous revelations of disdain for him on the part of two of his most admired subjects, Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem. "The Ungrateful Dead" doesn't deal directly with the issues of violence and visuality, except in the sense that it foregrounds the power of idealizing images in our intercourse with the past and the costs of the historian's transferential investments. When this *Salmagundi* column was translated in the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, it solicited a wave of consoling letters from German friends, including a well-intentioned, if somewhat deflating, comment from Jürgen Habermas, who recalled that Adorno had never mentioned me to him at all!

A far less trivial issue is raised in the following piece, which was prepared for the Biderman Lecture at Princeton in the spring of 2002 and a forthcoming volume of essays on the Holocaust and objectivity edited by Sarah Harasym. As the controversy roused by the misattributed images in Reemtsma's exhibition on the Wehrmacht's role in the Holocaust shows, the validity of visual evidence remains very much a contested dimension of our struggle to remember, understand, and prevent the recurrence of unfathomably terrible events. Without coming to any definitive answers, "When Did the Holocaust End? Reflections on Historical Objectivity" explores the limits of an objective historical account that depends on conceptual and representational strategies that go beyond any simply fidelity to discrete "facts." Even the seemingly straightforward films of the liberation of the camps, it turns out, need to be understood as mediated documents rather than merely indexical traces of real events.

Moving back to a much more personal level, the next essay, "The Conversion of the Rose," speculates on the implications of the astounding and entirely unexpected deathbed profession of a new faith on the part of the British philosopher and Frankfurt School expert, Gillian Rose. Violence was, in fact, one of the constant themes of her remarkable work, as it was in subtle ways in her turbulent life, including what she called "violence-in-love."[10] The issues of mourning and melancholy, raised so powerfully in Benjamin's oeuvre, were also ones she probed, albeit ultimately coming to a different, more positive conclusion. In retrospect, it is possible to understand her deathbed conversion to Anglicanism as an enactment of her challenge to what she condemned as his "*aberrated mourning*, and the yearning for invisible, divine violence."[11] In embracing the visibility of her new religion's incarnationist theology, Rose sought to affirm creation, contradictions and all, rather than remain frozen in a melancholic posture of permanently delayed consolation.

The next essay, "Pen Pals with the Unicorn Killer," also prepared for *Salmagundi*, is perhaps the most troubling of the entire collection because it touches on a freshly committed, monstrous crime and the flight of the man who committed it. My own, totally contingent link to the murder it involves came unexpectedly through a letter sent in response to "The Conversion of the Rose" by the fugitive, using a pseudonym, who was only shortly thereafter discovered in his French hideout. Ira Einhorn, having lost his battle against extradition to the United States, was subsequently retried and found guilty again in September

2002.[12] A while after my column appeared and when he was still in French custody, I received several extensive e-mail messages from Einhorn, protesting his innocence and trying to persuade me to join the campaign to exonerate him. Although I did respond to the first one or two entreaties, I found myself reluctant to be drawn deeper into a story whose competing versions I had no objective way of adjudicating, and so let the correspondence lapse. While no longer hoping that the exhortation I permitted myself in the column will have an effect, I followed the playing out of this miserable tale with grim fascination.

Visuality and violence are more intimately intertwined in the next chapter, a former *Salmagundi* column entitled, “Kwangju: From Massacre to Biennale,” which chronicles a visit to the South Korean city where “Unmapping the Earth,” an international art exhibition and accompanying conference were held in 1997.[13] Once again the issue of how to memorialize past victims of violence came to the fore, as did the difficulties of drawing new cultural maps in a rapidly changing world. But perhaps the most powerful lesson of the trip, which is drawn at the essay’s conclusion, concerns the yawning gap between local or even national democratization and economic globalization. How to “represent” the people is more than just an aesthetic question when it is not clear what institutions exist to transmit a discursively generated popular will into political action. The simulacral nature of so much contemporary democracy is particularly painful to acknowledge at a time when countries like South Korea have cast off their authoritarian past and are searching for ways to achieve meaningful political reform.

If politics and visuality are intimately intertwined, no less imbricated are images and the law. In “Must Justice Be Blind?,” prepared for a conference at the Tate Gallery in London organized by Costas Douzinas and Lynda Nead in 1996,[14] I attempted to tease out the implications of the blindfolding of the statue of Justitia, which began in the fifteenth century. Acknowledging that the putative impartiality of justice is neatly symbolized by the goddess’s covered eyes, the article also explores the costs of denying sight to a female viewer, able to discern the differences between individual cases. What has been called the violence of conceptual subsumption, in which equivalence is forced on the nonidentical, finds here a certain visual expression. But the essay concludes that such violence may be useful in checking the counterviolence of a singular, nonrule-bound judgment that pretends it can be certain about the guilt or innocence in concrete, incommensurable cases. It concludes with a plea for a negative dialectic of the two judicial imperatives, brilliantly symbolized by a sixteenth-century image of justice with two heads, one blindfolded and one not.

Prepared for a conference organized by Robert Pippin called "After the Beautiful: Politics and Modernism" at the John M. Olin Center at the University of Chicago and published in the inaugural issue of the new Australian journal *Critical Horizons* in 2000, the next essay speculates about the transformation of spectatorship at the end of the twentieth century.[15] As indicated by its title, "Diving into the Wreck" focuses on the fascination with simulated disasters and vicarious traumas in the popular media, which, borrowing Hans Blumenberg's metaphor, collapses the distance between spectators and shipwrecks. Arguing for the preservation of a certain visual distance against the proximate kinaesthetic thrills of the culture industry, it voices concern for the anaesthetic implications of excessive virtual immersion in pseudodisasters, which effaces the contemplative distance that is needed for not only aesthetic, but also political judgment.

Distance and virtuality are also the themes of the next essay, which was first presented at a conference organized by the French Department of University College, London, at the Tate Gallery, in 1997, and then published in a remarkable collection edited by my Berkeley colleague Ken Goldberg on *The Robot in the Garden*.[16] Examining the consequences of the discovery of the speed of light in the seventeenth century by the Danish astronomer Ole Roemer for our understanding of the temporal dimension of visual experience—in particular the deep time revealed by what the essay calls "astronomical hindsight"—I argue that our current world of virtual simulation is itself haunted by residues of its origins in a past reality. The result is that the apparent self-sufficiency of the virtual world, stressed by commentators like Jean Baudrillard and Paul Virilio, is disrupted by the flickering remnants of a past that is not entirely effaced in a timeless present. As in the case of the entertainment industry examined in the previous essay, the claims of absolute virtualization are challenged by the return of a real—traumatic or not—that escapes being absorbed without remainder into a world of simulacra "all the way down."

Although the issue of violence is less on the surface in the next essay, which was initially prepared for a conference in Amsterdam in 1994 on "France–USA Transatlantic Exchange of Ideas," it nonetheless is not far beneath.[17] Trying to explain the extraordinarily receptive response to the French critique of ocularcentrism in America, "Returning the Gaze" focuses on the ways that the hegemony of vision has been associated with aggression and domination in modern society. Although the French were perhaps the first to make these connections a target of sustained analysis, as I had tried to demonstrate in *Downcast Eyes*, Americans sympathetic to postmodernist critiques of high modernist art and modern rationalized society soon found that analysis equally persuasive.

A similar curiosity about the ways that American intellectuals refracted ideas from France motivated the subsequent essay, which was delivered to a conference organized by Robert Barsky at University College, London, Ontario on the theme "Paris-Substance-America: The Passage of Literary and Cultural Criticism" in 1999, and published in *Substance* three years later.[18] It focuses on the attempt made by the editors of a series of books published by Princeton University Press and called "New French Thought" to substitute a fresh pantheon of Parisian intellectuals for the post-structuralists discussed in the previous essay. Neoliberal for the most part, these thinkers stress the importance of human rights and the sanctity of the individual as a bulwark against unjust state power. But a closer look at the content of their thought shows no consensus about the origin, justification, or extent of those rights, leaving us with the nagging doubt that the challenge to their transcendent foundation provided by French critics of Enlightenment notions of reason, humanism, and the subject still needs to be met.

The next essay looks for inspiration from American rather than French theory, finding in the "somaesthetics" of John Dewey and Richard Shusterman a suggestive source of new ideas about the relationship between art and democracy. Written for a conference on that theme organized by Herman Pfütze and Karlheinz Lüdeking for the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Aesthetik in Berlin in 2002, the essay explores a version of transgressive body or performance art ignored by the American Pragmatists, but which may have something useful to tell us about the ways that art and democracy refract each other. The tradition is one in which violence towards the artist's body, as well as towards the aesthetic sensibility of the audience and its expectations of visual pleasure, raises uncomfortable questions about the fragility and vulnerability of the body in the modern world. As a counterpoint to the popular manipulation of traumatophilia discussed in "Diving into the Wreck," "Somaesthetics and Democracy" comes to the paradoxical conclusion that this more esoteric and elite art may ultimately better serve democratic ends.

The final two essays, both *Salmagundi* columns, can be understood in retrospect as unintended book-ends around the most violent and visually spectacular act of the twenty-first century: the destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Written the summer before and aimed at the pious claim of Senator Joseph Lieberman that religion is the basis for morality, "The Paradoxes of Religious Violence" explores the intimacy of violence and religious faith, which often suspends ethical commands in the name of a higher calling. Although the examples come from sacrificial violence in the pagan, Jewish and Christian traditions, their Islamic counterpart was frighteningly apparent shortly after the column appeared. The final essay, "Fearful Symmetries: 9/11 and the Agonies of the Left," was written in its shattering aftermath and seeks to rescue some lessons from the tradition of negative dialectics associated with Theodor Adorno for dealing with its implications.

We appear, alas, very much on the threshold of an age of increasing opacity and incoherence, in which many of our earlier narrative tools and analytical strategies seem inadequate to the challenges that face us. Violence, no matter how one defines, measures, justifies, or condemns it, looms ever larger as a feature of human interaction. However bright the searchlight we shine on its causes and remedies, it baffles our attempts to contain it. After the horror of 9/11 and against the anticipation of even worse to come, Sorelian threnodies to its redemptive power seem more obscenely misplaced than ever. All we can do, it seems, is hope that some dim light can still be cast by refractions of a violence that has proven more refractory than the champions of enlightenment had ever imagined in their most vivid nightmares.

1

AGAINST CONSOLATION

Walter Benjamin and the Refusal to Mourn

In August, 1914, Walter Benjamin, along with many other twenty-two-year-old German men, volunteered for the Kaiser's army. He acted, however, according to his friend Gershom Scholem, "not out of enthusiasm for the war but to anticipate the ineluctable conscription in a way that would have permitted him to remain among friends and like-minded people."[1] Benjamin was, as it happened, refused, and when it came the turn of his age group to be drafted that fall, he faked palsy and was able to postpone induction until another order arrived to report in January, 1917. Again he was able to avoid conscription by trickery, undergoing hypnosis to simulate the symptoms of sciatica.[2] Shortly thereafter, Benjamin left Germany for Bern, Switzerland with the hypnotist, who was also his new wife, Dora Kellner. This was Benjamin's first emigration from his native country in a period of crisis, but not his last. After the armistice, following a short stay in Austria, the Benjamins returned to Berlin in March 1919, where he spent the turbulent years of the Weimar Republic until forced to flee to Paris in 1933.

Walter Benjamin was thus spared the glory and misery of the *Fronterlebnis*, the community of the trenches that so powerfully marked his generation for the rest of their lives, if they were lucky enough, that is, to survive it. But he did not, in fact, escape the violence caused by the war. Indeed, it might be said to have sought him out immediately after the hostilities were declared. On August 8, 1914, two of his friends, the nineteen-year-old poet Friedrich (Fritz) Heinle, to whom he was passionately devoted, and Heinle's lover, Frederika (Rika) Seligson, the sister of one of Benjamin's closest comrades in the Youth Movement, Carla Seligson, committed suicide together in Berlin. Their act, carried out by turning on the gas, was designed as a dramatic protest against the war, a war in which lethal gas was, as we know, to take many more victims. Benjamin learned of the news when he was awakened by an express letter from Heinle with the grim message "You will find us lying in the Meeting House."[3] The place of their deaths was not chosen accidentally; "the Meeting House" (*Sprechsaal*) was the apartment Benjamin had rented as a "debating chamber" for his faction of the movement.

All accounts concur that Benjamin was inconsolable for months, and indeed seems never to have fully recovered from the loss of Heinle, to whom he could only bear to refer in later years as "my friend."[4] According to Pierre Missac, who came to know Benjamin in 1937, he was able to overcome his shame at surviving only by "mythologizing the lost friendship."[5] In the quarter century that followed the initial trauma, ended only by his own suicide in 1940, Benjamin composed seventy-three unpublished sonnets, discovered in the Bibliothèque Nationale in 1981. Some fifty-two of these he arranged in a cycle dedicated to Heinle, prefaced by a motto from Hölderlin's *Patmos*, which began: "Wenn aber abstirbt alsdenn/An dem am meisten/Die Schönheit hing (. . .)."[6] His will, which was discovered in 1966, revealed that "my entire estate contains in addition to my own writings primarily the works of the brothers Fritz and Wolf Heinle," the latter having also been a poet and friend, who died prematurely in 1923 at the age of twenty-four.[7] Until the end, Benjamin had hoped to get his friend's own poetry published, a desire that was to remain unfulfilled until many years later.[8]

Although several commentators have shown that Benjamin's disillusionment with the Youth Movement began well before the war, the suicides intensified and brought to a climax his disgust for the devil's pact he saw between the movement's alleged idealism, its celebration of pure *Geist*, and its patriotic defense of the state.[9] With the death of the adolescent Heinle came the end of Benjamin's faith in the redemptive mission of youth itself, although he remained stubbornly wedded to its ideals. In March 1915, he abruptly broke with his mentor in the Youth Movement, Gustav Wyneken, in a harsh letter that detailed his feelings of betrayal.[10] During the rest of the war, Benjamin distanced himself from others who defended it, such as Martin Buber, and brutally dropped old friends from the Youth Movement, such as Herbert Belmore.[11] Instead, he gravitated towards like-minded critics of the conflict, although never himself actively engaging in antiwar agitation, and wrote increasingly apocalyptic treatises on the crisis of Western culture. His estrangement from the German university community, which reached its climax with the now notorious rejection of his *Habilitationsschrift* at the University of Frankfurt in 1925, began with his disgust at the spectacle of so many distinguished professors enthusiastically supporting the so-called ideas of 1914.[12] The empty bombast of their chauvinist rhetoric hastened his abandonment of traditional notions of linguistic communication, as well as whatever faith he may have had left in the German Jewish fetish of *Kultur* and *Bildung*.[13]

It has long been recognized in the extensive scholarship on Benjamin that the war had a decisive effect on all his later work. As one commentator typically put it, “it is the first world war which provides the traumatic background to Benjamin’s culture theory, fascism its ultimate context.”[14] In particular, it has been acknowledged as a powerful stimulus to his remarkable thoughts on the themes of experience and remembrance, which were to be so crucial a part of his idiosyncratic legacy. One of the most frequently cited passages in his work, from his 1936 Essay “The Storyteller,” is often cited to show its relevance. It reads:

> With the [First] World War a process began to become apparent which has not halted since then. Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? What ten years later was poured out in the flood of war books was anything but experience that goes from mouth to mouth. And there was nothing remarkable about that. For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath those clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body.[15]

The modern crisis of experience, or more precisely of the integrated, narratively meaningful variety known as *Erfahrung* as opposed to mere discontinuous, lived experience or *Erlebnis*, was thus brought to a head, Benjamin tells us, by the war and its aftermath. Despite the efforts by celebrants of the *Fronterlebnis* such as Ernst Jünger to recapture its alleged communal solidarity, Benjamin knew that the technologically manufactured slaughter of the western front was anything but an “inner experience” worth reenacting in peacetime. In his trenchant 1930 review of the collection edited by Jünger entitled *War and Warrior*, he ferociously denounced the aestheticization of violence and