



Project  
**MUSE**<sup>®</sup>

*Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.*

<http://muse.jhu.edu>



# Each Thing a Thief: Walter Benjamin on the Agency of Objects

*Julia Ng*

## abstract

In this article Julia Ng addresses the question of material agency. Drawing on an idea that emerges from Marx's reading of Shakespeare's *Timon* to the effect that humanity's relationship to objects is characterized by "cannibalism," a usurious relationship based on exploitation and thievery, Ng argues that Benjamin's unique mixing of materialism and the theological serves as an answer to the dilemma of cannibalism and human nature. Looking in particular at Benjamin's 1931 essay on Karl Kraus—which also discusses *Timon*—Ng shows that for Benjamin, there is a redemption for this cannibalism, one that is found through recourse to the idea of letting "justice befall the object as such" and, by extension, through the development of a positive determination of life as such as well.

## 1

"I have a tree, which grows here in my close, / That mine own use invites me to cut down, / And shortly I must fell it" (Shakespeare 2001,168)—Timon's lament, which in Shakespeare's rendition occurs shortly before its utterer's demise "upon the beached verge of the salt flood" (2001,168) beyond the perimeter of Athens, is an indictment of the nature that Timon finds unable

to escape. Having given away his wealth in misguided generosity to a host of parasitic sycophants, Timon turns misanthropic when his “friends” reject his requests for help in kind to repay his debts, eventually exiling himself from the city with the intent of sustaining himself on nothing but water and roots. Yet he soon finds that removing himself from human society and its “usuring kindness” (2001, 158) is impossible, as he digs for food and instead discovers a trove of gold. Frustrated by his own need, Timon turns from cursing his “sembable’s” contempt of nature and “direct villainy” (2001, 136) to cursing nature at large. For what is this nature that would give itself up as if in a mockery of overabundance if not the “common whore of mankind” (2001, 138) that enters into relation with humankind only through use and being used? And what is human nature if not nature of man and beast, earth and sky alike, which makes of the invitation to use and be used a necessity for existence, and makes existence contingent upon using up that which sustains? “Gold? yellow, glittering, precious gold? No, gods, / I am no idle votarist; . . . / Thus much of this will make black white, foul fair, / Wrong right, base noble, old young, coward valiant. / . . . Come, damned earth Thou common whore of mankind, that put’st odds / Among the route of nations, I will make thee / Do thy right nature” (2001, 137–38). Before long, Timon gives away the gold in return for the exactment of a “planetary plague” (2001, 141) on Athens by the sword of the avenging soldier Alcibiades and by the “close fire” of the prostitutes Phrynia and Timandra, in the hope “that [their] activity may defeat and quell the source of all erection” (2001, 144).

That the “nature” from which Shakespeare deduces the relation between power and life is undeniably discursive has been a commonplace since the 1970s, when the rhetorical theory of the political began to “lament” that our access to the world of things is thoroughly mediated by relational techniques and structures. In turn, recent political philosophy has sought to dispose of the ontotheological distinctions between life and matter that remain latent in the original rhetorical approach, turning as Jane Bennett and others have to a “positive ontology of vibrant matter” that acknowledges the propensity, however fast or small, of nonhuman objects within “assemblages” that release them from a strictly negative or limited conception of thingly agency qua “recalcitrance” transfixed in orbit around human power.<sup>1</sup> Yet the very project of arriving at a positive determination of the binding and unbinding of objects must presuppose certain of its underlying concepts as given—as is evident with Marx, whose own interpretation of *Timon* in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* arguably stands at

the inception of this line of inquiry (1975–2005): 32–26). For Marx, nature *tout court* must be usurious to the extent that one has to use in order to survive; the binding and unbinding of both human and nonhuman objects is attributed entirely to monetary power, in view of which the historical and the human remain limit concepts at best.

In this context Marx's theory of commodity fetishism echoes Timon's lament that the cyclical character of nature and its laws "steals" from the human: "You must eat men. / . . . The sun's a thief, and with his great attraction / Robs the vast sea: the moon's an arrant thief, / And her pale fire she snatches from the sun: / The sea's a thief, whose liquid surge resolves / The moon into salt tears: the earth's a thief, / . . . each thing's a thief: / The laws, your curb and whip, in their rough power / Have uncheque'd theft" (2001, 155). Under the sign of cannibalism, man can only be as with each thing a "thief": his mere existence poses a danger to his own integrity—and to the integrity of the "universal" subject. To the extent that nature is defined by relations of use and usury, then, the pursuit of life is indistinguishable from the creation of gold seemingly out of nothing through the plunder of the earth and the colonial exploitation of foreign peoples, the demonic and bloody aspect of which Marx also sought elsewhere to capture in the image of cannibalism.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, in order to pursue any positive ontology of vitality there needs first to be an interrogation of the mythologies of the "right" to life in which it is embedded. That is, to the extent that the investigation of material agency begins in Marx's reading of *Timon* it also inherits the need to theorize matter from the standpoint of man's *self-imposed* impotence—from the standpoint of a reality and divinity that *actively* withdraws—and it is the contention of this article that Walter Benjamin, who sought throughout his life to bring together "the materialistic" and "the theological," is in a unique position to answer to this demand. A strong constellation of themes motivating apparently unrelated writings ranging from 1916 to the early 1930s shows that Benjamin sustained an interest in what one might call objective "thievery" across the various "periods" of his intellectual output.<sup>3</sup>

Under the sign of thievery are united Benjamin's reflections on technics and language, law and violence, possession and the right to nature, in a way that underscores a common goal to which he gives the following formulation in a fragment on word-character and executive force from 1917–1918: to "let justice befall the object as such" (1985, 6:13). Raising the question of how justice is conceivable in a wholly materialistic world where the

law is its letter and each relation a transaction with an object, Benjamin interrogates the very possibility of coming up with a positive determination of life as such, going beyond a reiteration of the legal-rhetorical genealogy to which the *construction* of bare life as such is indebted, as well as the biographical-historical context of Nietzscheanism and *Lebensphilosophie* in which he articulated his critique of what Shakespeare would have called law's "uncheque'd theft." Benjamin's interest in objects at large is motivated by a political philosophy of nature qua unsustainable life to which he assigned the general category of *Sache*, or the thing as such, as early as 1916.<sup>4</sup> These passages lay bare the conditions under which the vitality of physical and objective reality is thinkable at all, the "planetary" scope of which is explored in Benjamin's full-scale, though by no means final, study of the agency of objects: the 1931 essay on Karl Kraus, whose examination of misanthropy and rhetoric is structurally motivated by an intimate knowledge of the final two acts of a play that continues to be one of the most influential on the philosophy and politics of material agency, Shakespeare's *Timon*.

## 2

Shakespeare's *Timon* finds in nature, the "common mother," nothing but a "common whore" who makes even the barest of life into a relation of use, leaving himself no alternative but to attack the nature in himself and to conclude that any use, including and especially that use which is essential to life, is usurious. In at least one interpretation of this scene that has proven to be influential for modern political and economic theory, the nature that would use itself up is a mediated, estranged, and distinctly human one. For Marx, who cites at length from *Timon of Athens* in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, the usurious character that *Timon* sees in natural existence is attributable to the "power of money" conceived against the horizon of a fallen nature. As Marx notes in a brief reflection by the same name, money, that is, the gold that *Timon* discovers, is "visible divinity"—an idol that has been revealed as such—whose power to transform the human and the natural into their "contraries" "lies in its character as man's estranged, alienating and self-disposing species-nature" (1975–2005:325). As the "procurer of people and nations," money expresses its universality in its power to mediate between life and its necessities, such that the means of life appear to be attainable if and only if the real and essential properties of the human and the natural are "transformed," "translated" and "distorted" into "merely abstract notions" and vice versa (1975–2005:325).

In such transformations money reveals itself in its omnipotence to be the “true creative power,” capable of turning needs and desires into sensuous actualities and in relation to which man has no choice but to appear disabled, incapacitated, and impotent; to the extent that money mediates between man’s life and the means for living, man is alienated and disposes of himself. Holding fast to the notion of a human nature that is *in essence* distinct from the rest of nature vis-à-vis monetary power, Marx concludes that money is the “external, universal medium and faculty” by which man relates to nature at all: man, the ontological essence of whose life force only comes into being through demands made effective by money, exists in the world only to the extent that the world for him is a picture mediated by money, namely, “eminent possession” and thus a mere object of the imagination that has been transformed by money into effective reality (1975–2005:323).<sup>5</sup> Thus, for Marx, Timon laments that the “beasts [who] may have the world in empire” (2001, 153) are but “chimeras” (1975–2005, 3:325): in this view Timon’s vow to “make [the damned earth] do thy right nature” (2001, 138) would be a particular brand of misanthropy indicting not the wolf but the “alien” in man, for whom “right nature” is the nature of right (and property rights). For the early Marx reading *Timon*, money will never be repaid “in kind,” as it never expresses a transaction between man and man, or wolf and wolf, but only ever between man and not-man, which is a relation in which nature is by definition monetized from the human standpoint and inhabited only by the means for one’s life—which is to say all others, whether objects or people, are merely objects to me in the context of my bare and continuing existence.<sup>6</sup>

Though it remained unpublished until 1932, Marx’s early reading of act 4, scene 3, of *Timon* was a first foray into analyzing private property as social relation, which would culminate in his full-scale critique of political economy, *Capital*.<sup>7</sup> There, in the section on “Money,” Timon’s lament is cited as the authority for Marx’s proclamation that “just as every qualitative difference between commodities is extinguished in money, so money, on its side, like the radical leveler that it is, does away with all distinctions” (1975–2005, 35:142).<sup>8</sup> It is therefore surprising that Walter Benjamin, who had read *Capital* and authored numerous reflections on capitalism and its secularized relations of debt and use, does not mention Marx’s statements about money when he invokes Shakespeare’s Timon, “the most inhuman of them all,” as the true persona and forebear of the Austrian satirist Karl Kraus (2005, 449; 1985, 2:357). Composed between late 1930 and early 1931, the essay on Kraus was conceived as the centerpiece of a book that Benjamin

hoped would serve as the foundation for a literary criticism synthesizing the extremes of Jewish theology and historical materialism.<sup>9</sup> It is the first in which Benjamin draws explicitly on the early Marx, and it is the essay that, in his own estimation, was exemplary of his bifurcated methodology. The early Marx that he cites, however, is the 1844 review of Bruno Bauer's *On the Jewish Question*, in demonstration of his claim that Kraus's "demonic" character—his view of humanity and freedom as elements of an ahistorical and archaic nature—is in part a last vestige of the "natural," "unpolitical man" (2005, 447; 1985, 2:353–54). As a member of bourgeois society, man necessarily appears as "natural" and "unpolitical" according to Marx insofar as bourgeois life regards the world of needs, work, private interests, and rights as it does the natural basis of bare existence: devoid of social power (1975–2005, 3:167).<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, according to Benjamin, Kraus regards human dignity "not . . . as the destiny and fulfillment of liberated nature—nature changed by revolutionary rupture—but rather as a given element of nature" that is "unbroken [and] primeval"; his resistance to admitting a historical sense into his idea of nature thus casts his idea of humanity in an "uncertain, uncanny light" (2005, 447; 1985, 2:353). For while Kraus's literary practice manifests a materialist tendency in that it exhibits "a more attentive concern for the mere existence of things" than any other—Kraus rails against the journalist who "feels things only in their relationships, above all where these meet in events" (2005, 434; 1985, 2:335)—Kraus also actively naturalizes the social. Kraus "treat[s] social relationships, though not departing from them, as natural, even paradisaical, relationships, and so [does] not only . . . approach the king as if he had been born with the crown on his brow, but the lackey like an Adam in livery" (2005, 436–37; 1985, 2:339), and in invoking man's paradisaical state to level social differences he has also turned secularized, material nature into the index for mankind's criminal existence on a cosmic scale.<sup>11</sup> Thus, while relentlessly persecuting the "empty phrase" stillborn of a nonproductive technology whose old and perpetually repeating forms of life we know not how to do without, Kraus (so Benjamin) also finds himself in need of the same linguistic forms for his pursuit (2005, 435; 1985, 2:336). The writer is in this sense like the whore, who "manifests . . . the exchange of commodities" (2005, 446–76; 1985, 2:353) as much as she does "natural" female sexuality; just as the prostitute's whorish properties can be attributed to her "nature" rather than (only) to socioeconomic contingencies, so too the writer's need for words in a time when all language has been perverted

into “news events” and “public opinion” arises from the demonic, that is, nonmaterialistic “nature” of the writer.

Like whore, like writer: the “strange interplay between reactionary theory and revolutionary practice that we find everywhere in Kraus” (2005, 438; 198, 2:342) runs through Benjamin’s essay as a leitmotif, articulating itself in the advocacy of the private individual even as it disintegrates into the open floor plan of the single family home and frays Viennese nerves, those “last root fibers . . . to which Kraus could still find Mother Earth clinging” (2005, 438; 198, 2:342). To the extent that Kraus mimics the reduced human of his day for whom the “private individual” is the last possible form of life, he is as much an alienated man as Marx implies Timon is. Yet “Marx” and “Nature,” or materialist critique and the conception of nature as creation, are not mutually exclusive in Benjamin’s essay. That is, one is not employed to remedy the other, as Benjamin’s treatment of Kraus *as* Timon, and thus his reading of *Timon*, deviates on a crucial point from Marx’s reading of *Timon* (insofar as traces of the 1844 manuscript accrued to the version presented in *Capital*). Marx’s fashioning of Shakespeare as the authority on the alienation effected through commodity exchange is indebted to a calculated interruption of Timon’s lament: in both “The Power of Money” and *Capital*, Marx abruptly cuts off his citation of act 4, scene 3 of *Timon*, ending it just before the final words of Timon’s reaction on discovering the trove of gold and leaving out the curse in lines 1707–8 (“I will make thee / Do thy right nature”).

It would be inconsequential for an exercise in historical materialism to lay out why excising the concept of a personalized “right” or authentic nature is necessary for Marx’s thesis that all of “nature” is by definition mediated by property relations—and for Benjamin, this is precisely the point: that any authority is constructed around the form of the private, alienated individual from whom the existential essentials may by definition be withdrawn wholesale. “Kraus,” in this view, is the mirror image of “Marx”: he has “never offered an argument that did not engage his *whole person*” rather than merely commodifiable opinions, and the statement that Kraus’s “polemical authority . . . is able to lift the intellectual universe of an author—all the more surely the more worthless it is, with confidence in a truly pre-stabilized, reconciling harmony—whole and intact from a single fragment of sentence, a single word, a single intonation,” applies just as well to Marx’s treatment of Shakespeare (2005, 439; 198, 2:343, emphasis mine). The authority that they share, moreover, “is not in the least undermined by what others must avoid: its own despotism, injustice, inconsistency”

from the point of view of the private individual (2005, 439; 198, 2:343). And if for Kraus expressing authority means denying himself the opportunity to “prove his manhood” by being wrong, then Marx, so Benjamin, also renders himself impotent with every authoritative gesture he makes about Shakespeare.<sup>12</sup> This is a notion that comes surprisingly close to Marx’s own conclusion to the 1844 section on “The Power of Money”: “If through a living expression of yourself as a loving person you do not make yourself a beloved one, then your love is impotent—a misfortune” (1975–2003:326).<sup>13</sup>

Whatever else Benjamin’s essay may say about Kraus as an author or as a corpus of writing, this much is certain: wherever Benjamin criticizes Kraus for departing from Marx on the theory of nature, he is also critiquing Marx for “departing from Shakespeare” and for investing still too much faith in mankind’s rebounding virility. Regarding all men as originally fallen and cosmically criminal, Kraus’s view of nature turns out to illuminate the contours of a prealienated, universal human being holding together a “pre-stabilized” and “reconciling harmony” to which Benjamin sees historical materialism still subscribing. For Benjamin, Kraus shows that in order to follow through with Marx’s argument that all of nature is mediated by relations of production, the entirety of human existence would have to be obliterated, down to its most basic needs, desires, and rights. Kraus’s advocacy of nature is in this sense analogous to the attempt to salvage a modicum of man that is cosmically impotent and therefore *not* a chimera in Marx’s definition, an analogy that Benjamin demonstrates by making Kraus a spokesman for Timon in the attempt to capture the chimerical character of Marx’s selective Shakespeare.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in Benjamin’s discussion of Kraus’s admission—in his own journal, *Die Fackel*—that the landscape he inhabits is one “in which every day fifty thousand trees are felled for sixty newspapers” (2005, 437–38; 198, 2:341). Without citing Timon *per se*—as if the entirety of Kraus’s persona, from his theatrical “sanctification of the name” in citation down to his “hybrid” use of rhyme, could or “should be seen as originating in Shakespeare” (2005, 450–51; 198, 2:358)—Benjamin describes Kraus’s practice as an instantiation of Timon’s lament. Timon curses nature’s usury at large for obliging him to fell the very tree that sustains him; Kraus finds that the usurious character of mankind’s relation to the creaturely will, under the sign of technology, indiscriminately destroy man and creation alike, since it treats man as indistinguishable from creation.<sup>14</sup> Timon “only wants the sea to weep at his grave” (2005, 450; 198, 2:357); Kraus challenges the notion that man can find redemption from

his nature, whether historically or transcendently.<sup>15</sup> There is no “span” in which man could overcome his own nature by his own power and yet continue to exist: according to Benjamin, Shakespeare finds that “nature would produce such a creature” as Timon or Kraus “if she wished to create something befitting the world as your kind have fashioned it, something worthy of it” (2005, 449; 198, 2:357), which is to say that for Kraus as for Shakespeare, nature is to man only what he has created—and man nothing other than creature.

For Marx, such a correspondence between man and creation is impossible; if every extent of nature is monetized, then Timon can only be a “monster,” something *essentially* estranged from itself and thus retaining some essence of man as he should be were he to liberate himself from his alienated nature. For Benjamin, Kraus’s advocacy of nature thus directly contravenes Marx’s conception of revolution: if Marx sees revolutionary time as the rupture that liberates nature such that human dignity may find itself in “the destiny and fulfillment of [that] nature” (2005, 447; 198, 2:353) Kraus proposes an alternative conception of political action that does not posit time as a “span between Creation and the Last Judgment” to be “filled” by redemption or “overcome” by the history of human potency. It takes on the only form suited to the world in which life is a creative, natural force only to the extent that it is also unrepayably, unredeemably consumed: cannibalism.

## 3

“Cannibalistic” time is no different from capitalistic time to the extent that it operates under the guise of self-overcoming and redemption naturalized as a universal human potential to create and construct. Under the signs of creativity [*das Schöpferische*] and construction [*der Aufbau*], all individuals are defined by their capacity to perfect themselves with the aim of becoming radically leveled with respect to their differences. Recognized as cannibalistic, however, the universal and formative human being itself appears as a creation of monetary power. Marx of course was one of the first to point out this, but for Benjamin, this fact makes it impossible to maintain, as he believes Marx does, that the state of nature is paradisaical or innocent, a state from which man has departed but to which he may attain once again by “fulfilling” his destiny. For—and this is the premise of the Swiftian tradition in which Benjamin inscribes Kraus—civilized man has not departed from simple nature but is in fact just as savage as those

living beyond the limits of civilization. Just as Timon finds gold beyond the perimeter of Athens, so for Kraus it is part of the mythology of capitalism that man pretends to have surmounted his nature and is superior to those he regards as still enslaved to it.

For Benjamin reading Kraus, cannibalism thus describes the doctrine harking back to the eighteenth-century proposals for perpetual peace, according to which the subordination of force to reason with the aim of directly unifying politics and morals is predicated on maximizing the freedom of each in conjunction with maximizing the freedom of everyone else—an impossibility without the consumption of human bodies, to the extent that their natural boundaries are regarded as coextensive with their individual identities and need to be “incorporated” and “overcome” by a higher power in the name of “right.”<sup>16</sup> In the view of the one who exposes the resemblance between the sustenance of the civic body and cannibalism—Kraus, and before him Kant—the “progress” of civilization follows the same path as nature, which is destructive in its vitality and usurious in the pursuit of its own ends.<sup>17</sup> Benjamin’s choice to emphasize Kraus’s likeness to Timon and his “cannibalism” thus uncovers a distinction crucial for his understanding of “the human”: if for Marx cannibalism describes the threat posed to the integrity of the universal subject by all pursuit of life under monetary power, Kraus, Benjamin claims, *intensifies* cannibalism *such that* the “universal” subject can no longer be upheld as the measure against which the pursuit of life would necessarily be regarded as hostage to the time and logic of capitalism.

In this light the capacity that Kraus describes as “ignor[ing] the psychological” directly corresponds to that which Benjamin calls “incorporating” [*einverleiben*], which can also mean “gobbling up” in both gastronomical and imperialistic senses: claiming for himself [“für sich in Anspruch nehmen”] the “inhuman” trait of the actor, who never speaks as himself but always only as another and only when cued, Kraus effaces the “human” insofar as it is defined by psychological content such as intention, trust, or good will. Instead of attending to such content, the actor “incorporates” the human so radically that there is no longer a question of whether or not words “embody” an authentic or “original” meaning, nor simply whether bodily integrity, the natural basis of universal subjectivity, is reducible to technique and timing. Unmasking himself as an actor, the cannibal qua satirist claims civilization’s self-proclaimed distance from nature for himself and arms himself with his admission to merely be playacting as a warrant. And so “the power of the demon ends at this realm” (2005, 450; 198, 2:358) if

the satirist is *not* merely playacting in suggesting that drawing up a plan for redemption in worldly terms is impossible, then whatever the satirist publishes and indeed the very fact *that* he publishes, with the caveat that he is in *no* way saying anything that is not merely an act, actually makes unambiguous how the impossible may be made possible: by incorporating another's linguistic corpus, by felling the tree that sustains him—in short, by consuming the other within one's power entirely for one's own purposes and not treating the other as an end in itself.<sup>18</sup>

As such, the actor's lips "drip [with the] blood" of the essentially human, insofar as "the human," played by the cannibal, anchors a preestablished harmony within which words, in their very communicative function, appear as the medium of "prophecy" and "domination." Contrasted to the Nietzschean *Übermensch*, for whom words serve to enhance the potency of humanness precisely with an eye toward "forcing open the heavens" under the guise of progressive improvement, the cannibal qua satirist is therefore precisely *not* an *Unmensch* in the sense of the "monstrous," whether unnatural or supernatural, defined against a horizon of that which is all too human (198, 6:101)<sup>19</sup> Rather, the *Unmensch* is, in what one might call its technical sense, an *Un-Mensch*, a not-man so purely nonhuman that its very "nature" is "technical," "destructive" and self-consuming to the point where the consumption of the "self" is indistinguishable from consumption seen from the point of view of materialism, from the consumption of matter (2005, 450; 198, 2:358). "Incorporating," that is, destroying "the human" that links the concepts of creativity, construction and potentiality qua redemptive fulfillment, thus "unmasks" these concepts as destructive on a far greater scale than even the "universal" and "European" subject can encompass: as Benjamin puts it at the culmination of a passage dealing with Kraus's mimicry, Kraus "participates in [the] lot [of the masses] in order to denounce them, and denounces them in order to participate" (2005, 445; 198, 2:352); implicating himself in an order of the material, of creation, of such magnitude that it is the universal subject, namely, bodily integrity of Europe that is incorporated and consumed by it.

Thus, if there is a direct analogy to be drawn between Timon's "planetary plague" on the idea that human potency positively correlates to the sustenance and regeneration of life, on the one hand, and Kraus's "defeatism" that Benjamin describes as being "of a supranational—that is, planetary—kind," on the other (2005, 438; 198, 2:341), then it is that they both belong to the same order in which the holy integrity of the body and the sanctity of the origin come under threat. To this order Benjamin designates the

concept: complicity [*Mitschuld*]. Citing Kraus “on the Last Day of Mankind” (in reference to the name of the play by Kraus), Benjamin introduces the concept of *Mitschuld* as a “feeling of guilt” [“Schuldgefühl”] with which Kraus intones the “keynote of this age, the echo of my bloody insanity, through which I share the guilt [*durch den ich mitschuldig bin*] for these noises,” in the hope that the “spirit” that has “renounced for all future its connection with the human ear” may still “allow it to count as redemption” (2005, 444; 198, 2:350). There is no doubt that *Mitschuld* resounds with the confession of guilt [*Schuld*]: as Benjamin notes, Kraus “once threw himself into the arms of the Catholic Church” (2005, 445; 198, 2:352). And in his Shakespearean mimicry of the appeal to the other-humanly for redemption, Kraus invokes the mythical nexus of guilt through which Christianity participates in capitalism’s structure of debt [*Schulden*], made possible by the power of money to universalize human atonement as a relation of exchange in which the divine is made to take an “interest.”<sup>20</sup>

If the “demonic ambiguity” of guilt [*Schuld*] uncovers a hubristic logic that explodes the unidirectional, continuous “span” of experience (whereby one action is “exchanged” for another, determined in advance by the one to whom one “owes” his action) that it is supposed to guarantee, however, *Mitschuld*, or the *feeling* of guilt, breaks with this logic to the extent that it pleads on behalf of creation in full knowledge that its claim on the divine has been revoked.<sup>21</sup> Thus Benjamin visualizes *Mitschuld* not as a “span” of even an utterly discontinuous sort but as a curved surface that is *at least* bidirectional—concave from the front, convex from the back. To every moment of concavity—of “inclination” [*Neigung*], of that which might appear as a generational human affect, be it that of the Expressionists whose “roots” nourish Kraus’s work or of the medieval miniaturists who influenced their imagery—corresponds a moment of convexity as seen from the other side, the otherness of which leads “less towards the sky than down towards and even under the earth” (2005, 445; 198, 2:351). Any given moment that appears “bent” in a certain direction also has a corresponding moment that appears bent in another direction, such that no moment is reducible to an “expression,” as it were, of a force of will or natural resource.

From the back, such moments of “life” are expressions of power that *appear* natural to the extent that they bend against the “nameless power” of “guilt” and in which they are therefore also inextricably implicated. Kraus, Benjamin notes, recalls that there is nothing “natural” about the manner in which the backs pile up “into terraces of human necks and human shoulders” under a power to which one could only put a name “after the end of the

[First World] war” (2005, 445; 198, 2:351), and in a later passage, Benjamin is even more explicit: “This great type of satirist has never had a firmer ground beneath his feet than amid a race about to mount tanks and put on gas masks” (2005, 448; 198, 2:355). Only the “European” who “has not yet been able to unite his existence [*Dasein*] with technics” because he defines technical propensities as a means of self-overcoming and redemption, and thus “still clings onto the fetish of creative construction work [*schöpferische Aufbau-Arbeit*],” would deny that a capitalistic nexus of debt, technology, and nationalism “sacrificed” a generation in the name of universalism and incorporated mass extermination as a natural end of world history (198, 2:1106).

In Kraus’s confession that “I share the guilt” [*Mitschuldig . . .*] (2005, 444; 198, 2:350)—which echoes his admission that fifty thousand trees were felled each day for the printing of newspapers among which *Die Fackel* was one—Benjamin thus rediscovers the modicum of man that is *not* a Marxian chimera and that would in fact provide the measure for all things: man whose death is as technical as the nature of his subsistence, whose fallenness is of such magnitude that it is as though he had never fallen at all. Thinking this requires suspending the idea that man in his natural state may in any way be distinguishable from technical man if all of nature is indeed mediated by property relations. For so long as all others are “objects” for me in the context of my existence—and for Benjamin, this is what Kraus’s citation of *Timon* demonstrates—nature *tout court* is indistinguishable from “right nature.” The “nature” in which the human partakes is “misanthropic” in that it exacts a “planetary plague,” that is, a “planetary defeatism”: man is endowed with essential and inalienable properties, from which view life’s “span” appears then not as a detour leading from and ultimately back to an otherworldly paradise but rather as “the wasteland [*Einöde*] dividing [the human] race from creation, whose last act is world conflagration” (2005, 437; 198, 2:34) and whose measure—the measure of humanity—is found without further qualification by the satirist in “fellow men” (2005, 448; 198, 2:355). And if each man, whether adorned with a crown or “in livery,” is “Adam” (2005, 437; 198, 2:39), then each man is, like each thing, a thief: without recourse to a horizon of transcendence “the human” exists only to the extent that he poses a threat to his own integrity in the pursuit of mere life and can *only* relate to “himself” as he does to all others with regard to his bare and continued existence—as an object of his use, as not-man [*Un-Mensch*] and never also as an end in himself. As another face of cannibalism, *Mitschuld* is thus the sign under which a

materialist critique is brought to term through the eradication of any last vestige of a formative, propertied “humanity” that had been inherited from the European Enlightenment.

*Mitschuld* is, finally, the sign under which Kraus’s “enlist[ment] with the power of nature” (2005, 447; 198, 2:353) is to be understood. According to Benjamin, the “sociological realm” in which the use of oneself (prostitution, insofar as it is akin to the life of letters) occurs never becomes “transparent” to Kraus even though, as Marx says in the passage from *Capital* containing his interpretation of prostitution in *Timon*, the most delicate *res sacrosanctae, extra commercium hominum* (1975–2005, 35:42) is susceptible to the alchemical “binding and unbinding” of a natural phenomenon’s economic and sexual-progenitive aspects. All the same, it is Kraus’s insistence that the political economy of prostitution (that is, of writing), remains connected to an “ahistorical” and “archaic” notion of “humanness” [“das Menschenwürdige”], that which is worthy of being called human, that, which according to Benjamin reveals “pure mind,” “masterful activity,” “freedom,” as well as the idea that revolutionary change liberates by “determining and fulfilling” nature,” to be a “worthless chimera” in view of Marx’s own theory of nature: none of them are “transparent” and unsullied by the idea of an “unbroken, primeval” nature (2005, 447; 198, 2:353). For whenever Kraus sides with “the power of nature” in his praise of prostitution and pure pleasure, which correlates to his insistence on then “killing off” the eroticism of being wrong in order to have the last word, he writes as the “other,” the “latecomer” to language with no pretense of being “the first” or “the unique:” he arrives as the materialistic human entirely implicated in a nexus of usability in which the “right” to a thing is decided by the mere *force* of being the “last” to take possession of it.<sup>22</sup>

By contrast, Marx suggests that there can be a principle according to which things may be justly distributed without either explicit agreement or physical force—it is on the basis of the possibility of a principled or legal distribution of goods that he can levy criticism against the divine sanction that modern society has granted money to invoke *and* revoke the status of a thing as *extra commercium hominum*.<sup>23</sup> But (Benjamin argues via Kraus) this would require legitimizing the right to a thing in the same manner that, according to Marx, money was invented: by invoking *first* possession as a *right* to claim a thing for one’s own use and exclude it from use by others with regard to present and future claims, in the name of preserving a *nexus rerum* into which *res sacrosanctae* has been converted by the principle of distribution.<sup>24</sup> Whether the *nexus rerum* manifests as a society in which

private interests are seen as best providing for the welfare of the *res publicae* or *res communis humanitatis* or as a paradisaical state of equal distribution for all, then, hinges entirely on a metaphysical definition of man as capable of “loving” himself *as* man (1975–2005:326)—which is to say that so long as there remains an element of humanness that is considered sacrosanct and entirely removed from use, such that nobody may privately own, capture, consume, or kill it, all things on the surface of the earth are useable and can potentially be possessed.

For Benjamin, Kraus’s implication of even the ideas of humanity and freedom in the archaic and ahistorical thus indicates nothing other than that being implicated in the circulation of commodities is a global phenomenon—an inability to be “withdrawn from the realm of guilt that Kraus traverses from pole to pole: from mind to sex” (2005, 447; 1985, 2:353). Exposed as the love between man and man, however, the *nexus rerum* appears as an assemblage of moments in which exertions of brute force are legitimized as the rightful and enduring possession of things; as Benjamin puts it, “There is no idealistic overcoming of the mythical man, only a materialistic one: this is the truth for the sake of which the not-man [*Unmensch*] has come to man. This materialistic overcoming of mythical man—of guilt [*Schuld*—is executed [*vollzieht sich*] through the creature’s solidarization with destructive nature. It is what makes the new relation to technics” (1985, 2:1106).

## 4

In *Die Fackel* Kraus cites a “Shakespearean” verse “not even his own” containing an apparently innocuous observation by a soldier in the aftermath of the Battle of Arras: “It was a nightingale and not a lark which sat there on the pomegranate tree [*G r a n a t b a u m*]”—the “last blasted tree beside the fortifications,” as Benjamin reminds us—“and sang” (2005, 454; 1985, 2:363).<sup>25</sup> The triviality of the remark—lark or nightingale, the distinction would seem to be subsumed by the devastation that has presumably just taken place *and vice versa*—matches the emptiness of phrases purporting to present facts and events. Kraus, however, inserts an emphasis [*Sperrung*] to space out the “Granat” from the “Baum” and explode the “idyllic context of meaning” as if a grenade [*Granate*] had “summon[ed] the word by its name [and] wrench[ed] it destructively from its context.” In this saving-destroying manner, so Benjamin, Kraus’s practice of citation “calls [the word] back to its origin,” though not one that is its “own”: as with rhyme, Kraus’s destructive-technical spacing rips phrases from their radically leveling

contexts and reinserts them in a nexus of sonority in which they gain a new, hybrid vitality beyond the equivocality of mode, authority and genre.

Similarly, by clinging onto a last vestige of “personality” and “natural” man Kraus also “reverses the development of bourgeois-capitalist affairs to a condition not their own.” For when Kraus speaks as the cannibal he also speaks with “Jewish certainty”: not in terms of the non-non-Jew that Bruno Bauer would deprive of the universal rights of man nor of the Jew as cannibal-hoarder latent in Marx’s response to Bauer that all men are equal in their separation from one another (1975–20053:12–66) but in terms of those who were once obliged to drive the “traders and lenders,” the “pharisees and scribes,” from the temple and who have been deprived of the luxury of “embodying” the divine in “description,” “intellectuality” or “publicity” (2005, 451; 1985, 2:39).<sup>26</sup> Instantiated in an “original” hybridity, “Jewish certainty” makes unambiguous that the law is founded in the history of possession and dispossession, breaking with the mythical conception that right can and should be exercised against the unwitting transgressors of boundaries with the authority of fate, even as it bases itself on the principle of overcoming physical limits so as to redeem itself from brute force. As Benjamin would write in his essay on Kafka, written three years after the Kraus essay in 1984 and echoing a thought already developed in his 1921 “Critique of Violence” (1985, 2:199), “Man can unwittingly transgress [unwritten laws] and thus become subject to atonement. . . . [T]he transgression in the sense of the law is not accidental but fated, a destiny which appears here in all its ambiguity. . . . It takes us back far beyond the time of the giving of the Law on twelve tablets to a prehistoric world, written law being one of the first victories scored over this world” (1985, 2:412).

Thus the creature who is in solidarity with destructive nature and takes on the visage of the cannibal-satirist is, in the end, none other than the figure of certainty that vanquishes the demon with the letter of the law—or, more precisely, with the vitality of the matter on which the law can have at most a *last* claim and with the “blood, understanding, and human dignity” with which “humanity, culture and freedom” are so dearly bought (2005, 448; 1985, 2:355). For whatever form it assumes—the child for whom a purpose is yet to be ascribed, the angel whose voice “pass[es] into nothingness” (2005, 457; 1985, 2:367)—the creature confronts the man whose rights only appear “necessary” and “inalienable” to the extent that he is essentially unrestrained and unknowing and enters into association with others only under the aegis of the law that preserves this conception of man as its natural basis and maintains private property as the criterion for

determining what is worthy of being called “human.” And since the law not only determines that citizenship and bourgeois-capitalism are the “right nature” of man but also that the Jew is a noncitizen and a nonman because he stands in another relation to law, the law of universal rights comes into direct conflict with its own letter and demands a reconfiguration of the nexus between “right” and the means of life. For if there is no original possession universal to all, there is no right that encompasses all of life, nor a politics that may overcome the equivocality of private and public, except one that cannot be represented as a dispute over means and borders or the subordination of the other to one’s own ends: a politics of “pure means,” or a cannibalism without consumption.

Such politics does not express itself in the reabsorption of man in abstract citizenship or in the binding of social power to everyday life. Rather, it appears as citability, as the explosion of meaning in a metaphor or rhyme, as Kraus’s always imminent “likelihood” of confessing to materialist humanism “at the first opportunity—in short, as the latent “agency” of objects and “their right,” as it were, to suspend themselves in nondifferentiation and nonuse and oscillate at the threshold of becoming and disappearing. For Benjamin, maintaining this stratum prior to determination is crucial, as it is “the matrix of justice” (2005, 454; 198, 2:363) and the precondition for overcoming the mythic violence of fate in modern law, and in a sketch for the essay he reconceives it in the terms of the satirist’s stratagem: humor. “Humor,” observes Benjamin, “condemns people without cause of the person—namely as things [*Sachen*].” But “for this reason it is . . . the world of execution without judgment [*urteilslosen Vollstreckung*],” of condemning unwitting transgressors such that they may redeem themselves from fate. Thus word-character and executive force can be regarded as sharing a common goal: “In this way, humor overcomes in the realm of language the demonic forces in the realm of the law” (198, 2:1107).

*Program in Comparative Literary Studies  
Northwestern University*



## notes

1. Such political philosophers include Isabelle Stengers, Manuel DeLanda, Alain Badiou, and Quentin Meillassoux. Bennett borrows the notion of “actant” from Bruno Latour to capture the vibrancy of inorganic matter in order to interrogate the ontological and metaphysical presuppositions that accompany any talk of an “individual” or “unique” life. See Bennett 2010, viii, and Latour 2004, 237

2. In volume 1 of *Capital*, for instance, Marx likens both the creation of money and the generation of capital to the bloodiness of first possession, or “primitive accumulation,” brought upon the New World and simultaneously given the appearance of natural law by the European cannibal-industrialist: “In fact, the veiled slavery of the wage workers in Europe needed, for its pedestal, slavery pure and simple in the new world. *Tantae molis erat*, to establish the ‘eternal laws of Nature’ of the capitalist mode of production. . . . If money, according to Augier, ‘comes into the world with a congenital blood-stain on one cheek,’ capital comes dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt” (1975–2005:77).

3. Benjamin was, famously, a collector of everyday objects. Since my purpose in this article is to investigate the possibility and ethico-political ramifications of conceiving of the nature of things, however, I set aside the task of constructing a genealogy of particular objects in favor of uncovering some of the places where Benjamin lays bare the conditions under which the agency of the physical and objective world is thinkable.

4. “Sache” is rendered as “thing as such” to maintain its distinction to the “Ding an sich” or unknowable “thing in itself” that delimits and orbits human cognition in the Kantian tradition. Benjamin grouped together a number of terms under this category; in the 1916 essay “On Language as Such and on Human Language,” for instance, “Sache” is treated as interchangeable with or is further specified by the terms “Materie / Material (der Schöpfung)” (“material [of creation]”) and “(Sprache der) Dinge” (“[language of] things”) (198, 2:144, 147–48, 150), and in his “Notes Towards a Work on the Category of Justice” of the same year, Benjamin gives to the ethico-political articulation of this term the name “Guts-Recht des Gutes” (“good right of the good”) (Scholem 1995, 1:401–2). A year later “Objekt” becomes another specification of “Sache” (198, 6:13).

5. “Only through developed industry—that is, through the medium of private property—does the ontological essence of human passion come into being, in its totality as well as in its humanity. . . . The meaning of private property—apart from its estrangement—is the existence of essential objects for man, both as objects of enjoyment and as objects of activity” (1975–2005:32).

6. “Money is the procurer between man’s need and the object, between his life and his means of life. But that which mediates my life for me, also mediates the existence of other people for me. For me it is the other person” (1975–2005:33).

7. For publication information on the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, see the editor’s note in Marx, 1975–2005:23.

8. In the 1846 edition of *The German Ideology*, the same lines from act 4, scene 3, of *Timon* are cited again by Marx *in toto* as speaking to his theory of “alienation due to private property”; the contradictions between money and personal peculiarity, according to Marx, were “already known to Shakespeare better than to our theorizing petty-bourgeois” (1975–2005:23).

9. During this period (1930–1931), Benjamin’s intense collaboration with Bertolt Brecht led to their ultimately ill-fated plans to found a journal entitled *Crisis and Critique*,

with the aim of “teach[ing] interventionist thinking” in order to restore “theory to its productively justified role.” Notes on their conversations specified that while Brecht believed theory to be strictly tied to “what can be achieved in a given society,” Benjamin held that there had been historical moments, primarily religious ones in the past, that had instigated a “radical destruction of society’s icons” as Marx had done. For this reason Benjamin proposed “two research methods: 1. Theology. 2. Materialist dialectic,” which, according to Bernd Witte, generally caused misunderstandings between Benjamin and his friends (including Brecht and most notably Scholem) as he sought to apply this method in his literary-critical essays of the period. See Witte 1991,125–26.

10. See Benjamin 2005,454;198,2:364.

11. Of Kraus, Benjamin writes that “cosmic man has won them [the ‘thunder and lightning, storms, surf, and earthquakes’ borrowed from Stifter’s Austrian and distinctly non-Kantian landscape] back for creation by making them its world-historical answer to the criminal existence of men” (2005,437;198,2:339).

12. “‘For a man,’ Kraus once said, ‘being right is not an erotic matter, and he gladly prefers others’ being right to his being wrong.’ To prove his manhood in this way is denied to Kraus; his existence demands that at most the self-righteousness of others is opposed to his wrongness, and how right he then is to cling to this” (2005,439; 198,2:364).

13. This interpretation of the role of prostitution in *Timon* finds its way into its corresponding section in *Capital* in the sentence preceding the one concerning the capacity of commodity exchange to level difference: “Not even are the bones of saints, and still less are more delicate *res sacrosanctae extra commercium hominum*[,] able to withstand this alchemy” (1975–2005,35:42). In a footnote, Marx elaborates: “Henry III., most Christian king of France, robbed cloisters of their relics, and turned them into money. It is well known what part the despoiling of the Delphic Temple, by the Phoenicians, played in the history of Greece. Temples with the ancients served as the dwellings of the gods of commodities. They were ‘sacred banks.’ With the Phoenicians, a trading people par excellence, money was the transmuted shape of everything. It was, therefore, quite in order that the virgins, who, at the feast of the Goddess of Love, gave themselves up to strangers, should offer to the goddess the piece of money they received.”

14. “For the fact that mankind is losing the fight against the creaturely is to him just as certain as the fact that technology, once deployed against creation, will not stop short of its master, either” (2005,437–38;198,2:341).

15. “Only the span between Creation and the Last Judgment here finds no redemptive fulfillment, let alone a historical overcoming” (2005,437;198,2:340).

16. That Benjamin had the project, and problems, of perpetual peace in mind as one of the horizons for this essay is also suggested by the fact that he makes mention of the poem by Kraus entitled “Towards Perpetual Peace” (2005,452;198,2:361).

17. Kant prefaces *Towards Perpetual Peace* (1795) with the famous “saving clause” that in his naiveté vis-à-vis “worldly wise” statesmen, he be allowed to “throw eleven pins [*Kegele*]” (a reference to the nine articles and two supplements comprising his text) without fear of

being accused of deception. As Susan Shell points out, “throwing pins” is proverbial for making the impossible possible, as well as reminiscent of the apparently long-forgotten game of skittles in which human bones are cast by savages or gods, and Kant’s use of the phrase is indicative of the link he sees between the appetite for war and the consumption of human flesh (1997, 150–61).

18. Here again Benjamin appears to model Kraus after the author of *Towards Perpetual Peace*. For a discussion of cannibalism in Kant’s treatise under the aegis of satire, see Fenves 2003, 92–113.

19. A comparison between Benjamin’s treatment of Nietzsche vis-à-vis capitalism in the 1919 “Capitalism as Religion” and the 1981 essay on Kraus deserves a much fuller treatment than I can provide here. For an analysis of the logic of the *Übermensch* implied in capitalistic time and as presented in the 1919 fragment, see Hamacher 2002. In the Kraus essay, Benjamin makes numerous allusions to his position contra Nietzsche through his characterization of Kraus, including a brief reference to the “wrath” with which the Krausian *Unmensch* meets the Nietzschean *Übermensch* (2005, 452; 198, 2:361). See also Benjamin’s comparison of Timon’s wish to be mourned by the sea alone to Kraus’s “throw[ing] down [his] challenge to mankind”—his challenge to mankind to “renounce humanity”—“from a remote village in the Swiss mountains” (2005, 449–50; 198, 2:357).

20. In the 1919 fragment “Capitalism as Religion,” Benjamin defines capitalism as a “cult-religion” of permanent duration, such that the indebtedness [*Verschuldung*] of the divine via the logic of redemption qua exchange does not come to a halt until the “end” of the world has been achieved—until the divine is held completely, which is to say “finally,” “timelessly,” and “presently,” indebted to the human (198, 6:102).

21. In “Capitalism as Religion,” Benjamin draws a comparison between the “type of capitalist religious thinking,” that is, thinking of the structure of debt / guilt in immediate connection with the structure of events in the world qua “history,” and Marx’s projection of an infinitely progressing capitalism that would, given the compounding of economic “interest” [“Zins und Zinseszins”], “become” socialism (198, 6:102). With reference to another fragment dating to 1919 (198, 6:92), Werner Hamacher has made the argument that Benjamin draws on the ambiguity of the Greek term *aition*—roughly, “cause” but meaning both “provenance” and “guilt” insofar as the early Greeks equated time and guilt—in his exposition of *Schuld*’s relationship to the idea of world history (2002, 82–83). For another interpretation of Benjamin’s fragment, see Samuel Weber’s “Closing the Net: ‘Capitalism as Religion’ (Benjamin)” (2008, 250–80).

22. Benjamin uses the example of the *Lustmord* in Frank Wedekind’s *Lulu* to further illustrate Kraus’s citational gesture as a form of killing off the erotic (2005, 439; 198, 2:343). “Pure pleasure” would be the correlate to “art for art’s sake,” which Benjamin describes at length in the passage where he cites Kraus on “the laws of his own craft, intertwined with those of sexuality”: “Man has wrestled a thousand times with the other, who perhaps does not live but whose victory over him is certain. Not because he has superior qualities but because he is the other, the latecomer, who brings woman the joy of variety and who will

triumph as the last in the sequence. But they wipe it from her brow like a bad dream, and want to be the first” (2005, 446; 198, 2:352–53).

23. Here Marx is referring to the power that divine law has in the Roman legal tradition to take things out of commerce and render them incapable of being objects of private ownership.

24. According to Marx, the producer of commodities enters a *nexus rerum*, or social pledge, as the circulation of goods develops in modern times, but in this nexus the need to continually purchase does not necessarily align with the sale of one’s own goods, which depends on time and circumstance. In order to meet one’s own needs, one has to have purchasing power to begin with—or as Marx puts it, “to have sold previously without buying.” The invention of money not only results in the accumulation of wealth enabled by the trading of futures and the privatization of social power but is existentially important in the context of the globalization of commodity exchange (1975–2005, 35:41).

25. Here Benjamin cites Kraus’s paraphrase of the famous line from act 3, scene 5, of *Romeo and Juliet*.

26. Benjamin counterposes Kraus to the George Circle’s “cult” of believing that “the cosmic rising and falling ‘deifies the body and embodies the divine.’”



## works cited

- Benjamin, Walter. 198. *Gesammelte Schriften*. 7 vols. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann et al. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- . 2005. *Selected Writings*. Vol. 2. Ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith. Trans. Rodney Livingstone. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Bennett, Jane. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Fenves, Peter. 2003. *Late Kant: Towards Another Law of the Earth*. New York: Routledge.
- Hamacher, Werner. 2002. “Guilt History: Benjamin’s Sketch ‘Capitalism as Religion.’” *diacritics* 32 (3–4): 81–106.
- Latour, Bruno. 2004. *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Marx, Karl. 1975–2005. *The Collected Works of Marx and Engels*. New York: International Publishers.
- Shakespeare, William. 2001. *Timon of Athens*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shell, Susan. 1997. “Cannibals All: The Grave Wit of Kant’s Perpetual Peace.” In *Violence, Identity, and Self-Determination*, ed. Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber, 150–61. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Scholem, Gershom. 1995. *Tagebücher: Nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- Weber, Samuel. 2008. *Benjamin’s—abilities*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Witte, Bernd. 1991. *Walter Benjamin: An Intellectual Biography*. Trans. James Rolleston. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press.