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Michael G. Levine

## Out-takes of a Life

### On A Cinematic Moment in Benjamin's *The Storyteller*

Berühmt sind Benjamins Überlegungen zum bürgerlichen Interieur vor allem im *Passagen-Werk*. Weniger bekannt hingegen sind seine Reflexionen über eine eigenartige Form von Erzählraum, der sich in der Mitte seines Erzähler-Aufsatzes lokalisiert. ‚Eigenartig‘ ist er, weil es dort weniger um mündliches oder schriftliches Erzählen geht, als vielmehr um filmische Projektionen. Was projiziert wird, sind nach Benjamin „Ansichten der eigenen Person, unter denen er ohne es inne zu werden, sich selber begegnet ist“. Solche Begegnungen gehören weder zur Erfahrung dieser Person noch zu ihrer Selbsterzählung oder Autobiographie. Diese „Out-takes eines Lebens“ werden unwissentlich aufgenommen, unbewusst aufbewahrt und am Sterbebett mechanisch projiziert.

Benjamin modifiziert in seinem Erzähler-Aufsatz die geläufige, entscheidend filmische Vorstellung, dass einem kurz vor dem Tod noch einmal das ganze Leben vorgeführt werde: Die Vorführung, die hier stattfindet, projiziert nur die Momente, die nie wirklich zum eigenem Leben gehört haben. Um diese andere Erzählart und diesen anderen Erzählraum zu erkunden, muss die betreffende Stelle im Erzähler-Aufsatz zusammen mit Benjamins Schriften zum buckligen Männlein gelesen werden. Was sich durch diese Lektüre manifestiert, ist eine andere Theorie der erzählerischen Autorität und der Tradierbarkeit von „unvergesslichen“ Erfahrungen.

In the context of a volume devoted to the relationship between narration and space the present essay focuses on a spatially significant moment in Benjamin's famous 1937 essay, *The Storyteller*. It is a moment foregrounded by its placement at the center of the essay – that is, in the pivotal tenth section of a text divided into nineteen numbered segments. The Roman numeral X standing over it may certainly be voiced and understood as the number ten but it may also be said to mark a crux, turning point or chiasmus. Moreover, and especially in a text that concludes with a discussion of ideograms, the X may, like a mark on a pirate's map, designate a privileged site, a space where something unsaid and unsayable, untold and untellable, may give way to a language of silent gestures and a play of dumbshow performances. My focus, in short, is on the *Erzählraum*, the narrative space of Benjamin's essay, a space in which other notions of narrative authority and of life's "transmissible form" may be read.

In what follows I argue, moreover, that the moment in question is barely legible in its own terms, in terms, that is, of the framework provided by the surrounding eighteen sections. The X may in this sense also mark an opening

of *The Storyteller* to other Benjaminian texts of the period and especially to a passage composed in 1934 for inclusion in *Berlin Childhood* that never made it into the final 1938 version.

My point of departure is the deathbed scene in section X that comes after Benjamin notes a number of important changes in the history of dying: how the thought of death has declined in omnipresence and vividness; how its very face has been altered; how hygienic and social developments in the private and public institutions of nineteenth-century bourgeois society have made it possible for people to avoid the sight of the dying; how the dying are stowed away in sanatoria and hospitals by their heirs; and how in modern life in general dying has been pushed further and further out of the perceptual world of the living. After noting these changes, Benjamin moves to the deathbed scene and the moment in which, as he says, “not only a man’s knowledge or wisdom but above all his real life ... assume transmissible [*tradierbare*] form.” This moment, he adds, is the very stuff of which stories are made.

Just as a sequence of images is set in motion inside a man as his life comes to an end – unfolding the views of himself under which he has encountered himself without being aware of it – suddenly in his expressions and looks the unforgettable emerges and imparts to everything that concerns him that authority which even the poorest wretch in dying possesses for the living around him. This authority is at the very source of the story.<sup>1</sup>

Because of its importance and specific wording I cite it again this time in German:

*So wie im Innern des Menschen mit dem Ablauf des Lebens eine Folge von Bildern sich in Bewegung setzt – bestehend aus den Ansichten der eigenen Person, unter denen er ohne es inne zu werden, sich selber begegnet ist – so geht mit einem Mal in seinen Mienen und Blicken das Unvergeßliche auf und teilt allem, was ihn betraf, die Autorität mit, die auch der ärmste Schächer im Sterben für die Lebenden um ihn her besitzt. Am Ursprung des Erzählens steht diese Autorität.*<sup>2</sup> (emphasis added)

Even Benjamin’s most sensitive readers tend to pass over the strangeness of the phrase set off by dashes in the text in which Benjamin speaks of the moment when a series of images are set in motion, “unfolding the views of himself

1 Walter Benjamin. “The Storyteller”. *Selected Writings (SW)*, vol. 3 (1935-1938) Ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge: Harvard University Press. P. 368-369.

2 Walter Benjamin. “Der Erzähler”. *Gesammelte Schriften (GS)* II.2. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Herrmann Schweppenhäuser, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 1977. P. 449-450.

under which [the dying man] has encountered himself *without being aware of it*.” For example, Shoshana Felman paraphrases the moment as follows:

Medieval paintings [...] show the archetypal or inaugural site of narration to be the deathbed, in which the dying man (or the original narrator) reviews his life (evokes his memories) and thus addresses the events and lessons of his past to those surrounding him. A dying speaker is a naturally authoritative storyteller: he borrows his authority from death.<sup>3</sup>

I take issue with two aspects of this account: first, that the dying man *speaks* on his death bed, “addressing the events and lessons of his past to those surrounding him;” and second, that the reviewed life – or at least the images of it that are set in motion – are indeed his. If on the verge of death a series of images is indeed set in motion, they are, Benjamin emphasizes, views of the dying man under which he encounters himself *without being aware of it*. They are views of his life but, strangely enough, only to the extent that they do not belong to him, only to the extent that they are self-encounters without self-consciousness, moments recorded without the man’s knowledge, moments that are unconsciously retained and obviously archived. It is in this sense that one must understand Benjamin’s use of the term “unforgettable.” “Suddenly,” he writes, “in his expressions and looks the unforgettable emerges [*so geht mit einem Mal in seinen Mienen und Blicken das Unvergeßliche auf*].” Such views, I want to stress, remain unforgettable precisely to the extent that they were never consciously registered and never available to conscious recall. Only that which was never remembered, only that which will have been unknowingly retained elsewhere in a space *of* the person but not *belonging to* him, is it impossible to forget. What is unforgettable are not privileged moments of self-observation and self-recognition but rather scenes of self-encounter without self-awareness, scenes that are less the stuff of one’s own life story or autobiography than of a sort of auto-hetero-biography. Only the latter, I would suggest, are the stuff of which stories are made.

It should further be noted that the unforgettable is imparted and shared not in words but in looks. In contrast to Felman who claims that the “dying man (or the original narrator) reviews his life (evokes his memories) and [...] addresses the events and lessons of his past to those surrounding him,” I would emphasize how the scene transpires in silence, how its mode of address – such as it is – is visual rather than verbal. And what is seen is not a static image – even if Benjamin begins here by evoking medieval paintings – but rather “a series of images *set in motion*” inside a man as his life comes to an end. This series has more to do with cinematic projections than painterly depictions. Such projections are explicitly thematized in that other Benjamin text

3 Shoshana Felman. *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002. P. 28.

to which I referred earlier. Reading it together with *The Storyteller*, I hope to tease out the cinematic dimension of the scene of transmission described in the latter. Initially composed for inclusion in *Berlin Childhood*, the passage in question does not appear in the recently published English edition of Benjamin's *Selected Writing* and is to be found only at the very end of the 1934 draft published in volume 4, part 1 of the *Gesammelten Schriften*. I cite it here first in my own English translation and then again in the original German.

I imagine that the life that is said to pass before one's eyes at the moment of death is composed of those images that only the little man has of us all. They flit by quickly like pages in those tightly bound flipbooks that were the precursors of our cinematographs. With a slight pressure, the thumb moves across the edges of the page and the images, barely distinguishable from one another, become visible for just a second. In their fleeting succession one comes to recognize the boxer at work and the swimmer in his struggle against the waves. The little man has these images of me.

*Ich denke mir, daß jenes „ganze Leben“, von dem man sich erzählt, daß es vorm Blick der Sterbenden vorbeizieht, aus solchen Bildern sich zusammensetzt, wie sie das Männlein von uns allen hat. Sie flitzen rasch vorbei wie jene Blätter der straff gebundenen Büchlein, die einmal Vorläufer unserer Kinomatographen waren. Mit leisem Druck bewegte sich der Daumen an ihrer Schnittfläche entlang; dann wurden sekundenweise Bilder sichtbar, die sich voneinander fast nicht unterschieden. In ihrem flüchtigen Ablauf ließen sie den Boxer bei der Arbeit und den Schwimmer, wie er mit seinen Wellen kämpft, erkennen. Das Männlein hat die Bilder auch von mir.<sup>4</sup>*

The “little man” referred to here is *das bucklicht Männlein*, a figure that surfaces frequently in Benjamin's writings of the thirties ranging from *Berlin Childhood* to his Kafka essay to the theses on the philosophy of history. As has often been noted, the figure is associated with moments of rupture and strange forms of address. Thus, for example, in the last section of the final version of *Berlin Childhood* Benjamin recalls how his mother would say “*Ungeschickt läßt grüßen* [Greetings from Mr. Clumsy]” when he had broken or dropped something. “And now I understood what she was talking about,” he adds. “She was referring to the little hunchback who had been looking at me. Whoever is looked at by this little man pays no attention. Either to himself or to the little man. He stands dazed before a heap of fragments.” Benjamin's explanation of the unsettling mode of address associated with the look of the little man is accompanied by a citation of the following lines from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*:

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<sup>4</sup> GS IV.1. P. 304

When I go up to my kitchen stove  
 To make a little soup,  
 I find a little hunchback there  
 Has cracked my little stoup<sup>5</sup>

*Will ich in mein Küchel gehn,  
 Will mein Süpplein kochen;  
 Steht ein bucklicht Männlein da,  
 Hat mein Töpflein brochen<sup>6</sup>*

Again, Benjamin emphasizes that he never saw the little man. “It was he who always saw me.” As an unseen seer and as one whose look has a shattering effect upon those at whom it is directed, the hunchback is associated not only with accidents that happen but, moreover, with an accidenting of the self. His visual address comes from elsewhere, but it is a kind of outside on the inside, a blind spot in one’s field of vision, a spot one has a vested interest in not knowing or seeing. It is a spot one sees only by accident, a spot whose blinding impact one experiences only in the form of a mishap.<sup>7</sup> Accidenting the self, the hunchback’s address opens it to an otherness within. To be addressed by “Ungeschickt” is to be greeted not only by that which makes one clumsy and accident prone, but also by that which comes in the form of an accident. As his name *Ungeschickt* suggests, his greeting is never exactly sent, never sent from anywhere specific and never from a place located in any simple sense outside the self. If anything, his greeting opens the addressee to a locus of alterity one can only stumble on, a place already shattered and in ruins.

An unseen seer and unsent sender, the little man appears in the 1934 draft of *Berlin Childhood* cited earlier as a strange kind of receiver or, to be more specific, as a proto-cinematic recording device. Allow me to cite again the relevant passage. “I imagine,” Benjamin writes,

that the life that is said to pass before one’s eyes at the moment of death is composed of those images that only the little man has of us all. They flit by quickly like pages in those tightly bound flipbooks that were the precursors of

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5 *SW* 3. P. 385

6 *GS* IV.1. P. 303

7 Cf. in this regard the language of sparks Benjamin uses in *A Little History of Photography* to describe what Barthes would later refer to as the “punctum” of the image. “Immerse yourself in such a picture long enough and you will realize to what extent opposites touch, here too: the most precise technology can give its products a magical value, such as a painted picture can never again have for us. No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has, so to speak, seared the complexion of the image, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it. For it is another nature that speaks to the camera [...]” (*SW* 2. P. 510; *GS* II.1. P. 371) [trans. mod.] I discuss this language of sparks in “Of Big Ears and Bondage: Benjamin, Kafka and the Static of the Sirens.” *German Quarterly*, vol. 87, no. 2, Spring 2014. P. 196-215.

our cinematographs. With a slight pressure, the thumb moves across the edges of the page and the images, barely distinguishable from one another, become visible for just a second [...] The little man has these images of me.<sup>8</sup>

As in *The Storyteller*, it is a question here of a culminating moment, the very instant when one's life is said to pass before one's eyes at the moment of death. Life passes as though each of its moments were a separate image bound together in a little flipbook. The slight pressure of the thumb across the edges of the page sets these images in motion, giving them the cinematic appearance of visual fluidity and biographical continuity. That it is the "little man" who, according to Benjamin, "has these images of me," "images that only [he] has of us all," suggests, however, that what passes fleetingly before the dying man's eyes is not so much the film of his life as *out-takes* from it (just as the passage we are reading is itself a kind of outtake from *Berlin Childhood*). Even though the little man is now associated more with receiving than sending, more with mechanical modes of recording than disruptive ways of greeting, in both cases he marks a disruption of the self and an opening of one's life story.

The images passing before the dying man's eyes do not in this sense belong to him or the experience he has had of himself. Like the optical unconscious discussed in *A Little History of Photography*, it is a question here of "another nature that speaks to the camera rather than to the eye." It is "other," Benjamin explains, "above all in the sense that the space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious."<sup>9</sup> What "speaks to the camera rather than to the eye," what addresses it and is recorded mechanically by it, are precisely those moments of encounter discussed in *The Storyteller*. Referring once again to images said to pass before one's eyes at the moment of death, Benjamin describes them as the views of himself that a dying man has under which he has encountered himself without being aware of it.

Though not explicitly mentioned in *The Storyteller*, the figure of the little hunchback seems to hover at the edge of the scene, peeking through the cinematic terms that *The Storyteller* seems to borrow from the 1934 draft of *Berlin Childhood*.<sup>10</sup> Not only are the terms cinematic – to recall, Benjamin

8 GS IV.1. P. 304.

9 SW 2. P. 510; GS II.1. P. 371

10 That this edge is a bedside reminds us of related appearances of the little man in *Berlin Childhood* and the Kafka essay where he addresses a little child, kneeling at the side of his bed, about to say his prayers, „Liebes Kindlein, ach, ich bit,/ Bet fürs bucklicht Männlein mit.“ (GS IV.1. P. 304) In the final version of *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert* this quote appears in the very last lines making an implicit connection between the signifiers *Bett*, *bitt*, and *mitbeten*. Cf. "Of Big Ears and Bondage." Perhaps more importantly in this context is the association

writes of “a sequence of images set in motion” – but the entire scene plays out as a silent film screening, since the dying man communicates to his audience not with words but only with his “expressions and looks.” Given the silence of this scene, as Benjamin depicts it, it is all the more curious that Felman would refer to it as an “inaugural site of *narration*.” The silence, it seems, is all too easy to miss. Rather than filling it in, however, as others feel impelled to do, I would like to underscore it and, in the process, explore the untold ways in which the scene acts out precisely what cannot be put into words or included in a narrative of the self. To do so, I would suggest, one needs to have the similarly worded passage from *Berlin Childhood* in mind and imagine the little hunchback hovering at the edge of this already liminal scene. Everywhere and nowhere, he is at once a keeper of recorded images and a kind of unconscious projector. No longer setting images of a life bound in a little flipbook in motion with the brush of his thumb, he is associated instead with an inner mechanism by which pictures move themselves.<sup>11</sup> “A series of images is set in motion inside the dying man,” writes Benjamin. “They are views of himself under which he will have encountered himself without realizing it.” These views are then silently screened on the face – above all in the expressions and looks – of the dying man. As noted earlier, they are views coming from elsewhere, images the man himself has never consciously seen, images that have been unconsciously archived and unwittingly projected. What suddenly surfaces in the dying man’s looks and expressions is what Benjamin calls “the unforgettable,” *das Unvergessliche*. As Freud observes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, a text Benjamin cites and elaborates on in his Baudelaire essay, memory fragments “are often most enduring when the incident which left them behind was one that never entered consciousness.”<sup>12</sup>

Like Freud, Benjamin struggles to say where and in what form the “unforgettable” endures. His recourse to gestural language and folkloric figures such as the little hunchback is telling in this regard; for it suggests, first, that there was perhaps no more proper, non-gestural way for him to describe unconscious processes of registration, projection and transmission; and

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of the little hunchback, connected in the 1934 draft with the threshold of death, with that of the *Jahrhundertschwelle*. Thus the final draft concludes, „Jetzt hat [das Männlein] seine Arbeit hinter sich. Doch seine Stimme, welche an das Summen des Gasstrumpfs anklingt, wispert über die Jahrschwelle mir die Worte nach: „Liebes Kindlein, ach, ich bit,/ Bet fürs bucklicht Männlein mit.“ (GS IV.1. P. 304)

11 Thus, when Benjamin speaks at this point of “a sequence of images ... set in motion inside a man [im Innern des Menschen],” we should view this inside less as an organic interior or consciously accessible archive than as a kind of mnemonic prosthesis and inner mechanism.

12 Sigmund Freud. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Cited in Felman. *The Juridical Unconscious* (as note 3). P. 190 fn. 70.



second, that his way of silently staging what cannot be said more directly as an interweaving of folklore, moving pictures and medieval paintings allows these seemingly discrete genres to interact and be read ultimately in their co-implication. Indeed, if there is a privileged relationship between scenes of weaving and the act of storytelling in Benjamin's essay, it is not just because the latter reached its historical highpoint in the age of artisanal production or that weaving permitted those gathered together to listen with a kind of distracted attention to the stories being told but also because weaving stands first and foremost in *The Storyteller* for the inextricable interrelationship of various, seemingly discrete activities. Nowhere is this point made more forcefully than in his concluding remarks about the coordination of soul, eye, and hand in the act of storytelling.

Having just cited a passage from Valéry, he comments:

With these words, soul, eye, and hand are brought into connection. Interacting with one another, they determine a practice. We are no longer familiar with this practice. The role of the hand in production has become much more modest, and the place it filled in storytelling lies in waste. (After all, storytelling in its sensory aspect was never for the voice alone. Rather, in genuine storytelling the hand plays a part which supports what is expressed in a hundred ways with its gestures trained by work.) That old coordination of the soul, the eye, and the hand, which emerges in Valéry's words, is that of the artisan which we encounter whenever the art of storytelling is at home.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to the interactions of which Benjamin speaks, the passage is notable for its own signifying network. In the German the terms *Werk*, *wirken*, *Handwerk*, and *ineinanderwirken* are themselves woven into and through one another – perhaps in silent acknowledgement of the derivation of the terms *Werk* and *wirken* from *Flechtwerk* – that is, from basket- or wickerwork. Benjamin's point is that the handiwork of weaving must be understood in its inextricable relation to the work of the hands in storytelling, to a gestural language that not only supports vocal expression but also – with and against it – may tell other stories of its own. This is certainly the case in the scene of transmission silently enacted in section X, itself a densely woven intertext, to which I now return. Reading this scene through Benjamin's remarks on the little man and his flipbook, we are led to view the face of the dying man as a kind of cinematic screen on which the unforgettable is projected. Whereas film usually provides the illusion of continuous motion through the projection of twenty-four frames per second, here the continuity is illusory for other reasons as well. For under the guise of reviewing his life story as an intact and seamless narrative what the dying man actually projects in his looks and expressions is the very life he will never have consciously lived,

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13 *SW* 3. P. 161-62.

those moments of self-encounter of which he was unaware. If we continue to read *The Storyteller* through the 1934 draft of *Berlin Childhood*, we might note the way the phrase “mit einem Mal” [suddenly] in the former seems to replace the adverb “sekundenweise” in the latter in which it is a question of “images, barely distinguishable from one another, becom[ing] visible for just a second” [*dann wurden sekundenweise Bilder sichtbar, die sich voneinander fast nicht unterscheiden*]. Whereas the former emphasizes the startling eruption of moving images that, coming from “inside the man,” in fact seem to come out of nowhere, the latter seems to accentuate the speed at which they flit by, moving so quickly that they are barely distinguishable from another, and, as such, give the appearance of cinematic continuity.

Yet, as I have argued elsewhere, the word “second” has special resonances in Benjamin’s work and these resonances may themselves be heard in the superimposition of *Berlin Childhood* and *The Storyteller*. As Benjamin writes in his 1940 theses on the philosophy of history, yet another text in which the figure of the little hunchback returns, this time in conjunction with a hidden chess player and the “services of theology” which themselves “have to be kept out of sight,” he describes the second [*die Sekunde*] as the strait gate [*enge Pforte*] through which the messiah might enter.

As Benjamin’s troping of the second as a doorway suggests, it is a question here more of narrow opening of time than of a small temporal unit. This opening of time has its counterpart in “The Storyteller” in the sudden gaping of that culminating moment in the dying man’s life when, according to legend, he is supposed to see his entire life pass in review before his eyes. What opens in Benjamin’s rewriting of this legendary moment is the projection of another story, the screening of out-takes of the dying man’s life. This sudden emergence of moving pictures, I would argue, has something of the messianic. What emerges in the dying man’s looks and expressions is messianic not in an extra-temporal, transcendental sense but in the sense of a sudden return of that which heretofore had no place in the man’s life, the return of what had been missed repeatedly and remained irreducibly other and imperceptible in moments self-encounter.

This shift from a culminating moment in which everything allegedly comes together suddenly and with tremendous concision to a narrow opening of time at the very threshold of life and death reminds one of that passage in the Kafka essay in which Benjamin, quoting a great rabbi, observes that when the Messiah comes he will transform the world not so much through great acts of violence but merely through a minimal modification. Not only is the hunchback once again very much on the scene but the speculation regarding the messiah’s world-altering intervention bears directly on the little man’s association with “distorted life” [*entstellte[s] Leben*] and indirectly on his stooped posture and generally distorted form.

This little man is at home in distorted life. He will disappear with the coming of the Messiah, who (a great rabbi once said) will not wish to change the world by force but will merely make a slight adjustment in it.

*Dies Männlein ist der Insasse des entstellten Lebens; es wird verschwinden, wenn der Messias kommt, von dem ein großer Rabbi gesagt hat, daß er nicht mit Gewalt die Welt verändern wolle, sondern nur um ein Geringes sie zurechtstellen werde.*<sup>14</sup>

The small *Zurechtstellung* of which Benjamin speaks, setting the term in pointed apposition to the *entstelltes Leben* or distorted life in which the little man is said to abide, seems to suggest a process of setting things aright and of allowing the permanently bent-over hunchback finally to stand up straight. As the great rabbi observes, however, this *Zurechtstellung* will occur less as a wrenchingly orthopedic correction, less as a violently chiropractic process of putting something back in its rightful place, than as a “slight adjustment,” an ever so insignificant and barely perceptible shift. It is an alteration as small as a paranomastic exchange of letters in a word (as in Joyce’s “The letter! The litter!”) or a diacritical change of spacing between them (as in Hamacher’s title *Die Sekunde der Inversion* that must also be read as “*Diese Kunde der Inversion*”). In Benjamin’s *The Storyteller* this shift occurs as an ever-so-fleeting opening of that legendarily culminating moment when one’s life is supposed to pass before one’s eyes at the moment of death. As in the last scene of *Berlin Childhood around 1900* where the little hunchback may be heard to whisper across the threshold of the new century [*die Jahrhundertschwelle*], here the doorway of life-death gapes slightly and a heretofore untold and untellable life story, the story of one’s other life, of one’s missed self-encounters, suddenly emerges, projected with incredible rapidity as a silent film or as what Benjamin will later refer to in the fifteenth of his famous theses as “historical time-lapse photography” [*ein historischer Zeitraffer*] on the face of the dying man.

It is curious then that in the context of the temporal breaches and unconscious screenings depicted at the end of the tenth section of *The Storyteller* Benjamin should speak of narrative authority. “The unforgettable,” he says, “imparts to everything that concerned [the man on his deathbed] the authority which even the poorest wretch in dying possesses for the living around him. This authority is at the very source of storytelling.” [*Am Ursprung des Erzählens steht diese Autorität.*]<sup>15</sup> If there is authority here, it is authorless. It is a source, ironically, that is without origin. If even the poorest wretch is said to possess it for those around him, this is not because it is an inalienable

14 *GS* II.2. P. 432.

15 *SW* 3. P. 368; *GS* II.1. P. 450.

property but rather because it concerns what was never in his possession in the first place.<sup>16</sup>

The shift is crucial, enabling us in turn to understand the distinction Benjamin makes between the noun *Tradition* and the adjective *tradierbar*, between what he describes in the thirteenth section as a chain of tradition created by memory that passes on a happening from one generation to the next and the “transmissible form” real life [*gelebtes Leben*] first assumes at the moment of death. The latter remark introduces the deathbed scene we have been analyzing. As this analysis has sought to suggest, there is a crucial difference between the chain of tradition created by memory and the concatenation of images associated with the “unforgettable” that is suddenly and unwittingly projected in the expressions and looks of the dying man. As we have already had occasion to note, these are not conscious images to which the man has direct access but unconscious projections those gathered around him are given to see.

Yet, what they themselves actually observe is unclear. Indeed, when life takes on “transmissible form,” it appears to do so blindly, mechanically and unconsciously. The views of himself which the dying man had never before seen, the self-encounters of which he had been unaware, thus suddenly find themselves screened on his face. Just as something within him, something we have referred to for lack of a better term as “the little man,” has blindly recorded these encounters, and just as these unforgettable images have been mechanically set in motion and unwittingly projected in his looks and expressions, so too can we assume that those in a position to view them do so without knowing what they are seeing and in turn pass them along without realizing they are doing so, without ever having possessed them in the first place.<sup>17</sup> This, I would

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16 This includes those moments of self-encounter of which one is not consciously aware and the “unforgettable” that endures precisely insofar as it never entered consciousness or conscious memory in the first place.

17 What it might mean to take things in without understanding them and how important this is to the retention and transmission of stories is discussed by Benjamin in section VIII. “There is nothing,” the section begins, “that commends a story to memory more effectively than the chaste compactness which precludes psychological analysis. And the more natural the process by which the storyteller foregoes psychological shading, the greater becomes the story’s claim to a place in the memory of the listener, the more completely is it integrated into his own experience, the greater will be his inclination to repeat it to someone else someday, sooner or later. This process of assimilation which takes place in depth, requires a sense of relaxation which is becoming rarer and rarer. If sleep is the apogee of physical relaxation, boredom is the apogee of mental relaxation.... For storytelling is always the art of repeating stories, and this art is lost when the stories are no longer retained. It is lost because there is no more weaving and spinning to go on while they are being listened to. The more self-forgetful the listener is, the more deeply is what he listens to impressed upon his memory.”

suggest, is what Benjamin means when he speaks of life assuming transmissible form at the moment of death. Such transmissions have more the form of an unconscious *chain reaction* than a traditional sequence created by memory. Rather than being consciously passed on as possessions from one generation to the next, they are perpetually *disowned*.<sup>18</sup> And it is in this way that we can understand how the authority of which Benjamin speaks, the authority that is said to be at the source of storytelling, is authorless.

I imagine the X then as the pivot on which Benjamin's text turns, operating a slight but decisive shift from chains of tradition created by memory and transmitted across generations to chain reactions in which what has been unwittingly recorded, projected and viewed is unwittingly passed on. It operates a shift from property and its inheritance to inappropriable, unpossessable and unforgettable scenes being perpetually disowned. It operates a shift from the voice to the hands in which the latter are no longer understood merely to subtend and underscore what is said but through their silent gestures to tell a story of their own. In this sense "hand gestures" themselves stand for dumbshow performances and silently screened projections. And finally it opens the moment of death itself to an otherness within, insofar as the myth of the culminating instant at which suddenly and with unbelievable speed an entire life passes in review before the dying man's eyes gives way to projections of the life of another, a series of discontinuous moments connected neither with one another nor with the conscious experience of the one who had gone through them. Something radically other opens and is set in motion at the very limit of life and death. It is this opening, I would suggest, that is the very stuff of which stories are made.

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(*SW* 3. P 366-367; *GS* II.2. P. 446) Needless to say, there is much that must be adjusted here to understand it in relation to the passage in section X especially with regard to terms like "memory" and "repetition." Yet even here it does not appear that Benjamin is speaking about memory as a process of conscious understanding and retention. Quite the contrary. To be bored while listening to a story is to attend to it in a pointedly inattentive and distracted manner. This inattentiveness and "self-forgetfulness" loosens the otherwise tight weave of concentration and conscious focus, allowing what is heard to pass more easily into the so-called "depths" where another "process of assimilation" is performed. One wonders here where the locus of memory is and whether the memory in question has to do primarily with conscious recall. Similarly, when Benjamin describes storytelling as "the art of repeating stories" one wonders what repetition involves. Might it not be more akin to unconscious acting out where what is silently performed is precisely that which cannot be consciously recalled and put into words? His remarks on hands and the role they play in storytelling seems to allude precisely to this gestural dimension.

18 Cf. Stanley Cavell. *Disowning Knowledge: In Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.