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Dante's Inferno and Walter Benjamin's Cities

Considerations of Place, Experience, and Media

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ABSTRACT: When Walter Benjamin wrote his main texts, the theme of the city as hell was extremely popular. Some of his German contemporaries, such as Brecht or Döblin, also used it. Benjamin was aware of these examples, as well as of examples outside Germany, including Joyce's *Ulysses* and Baudelaire's poetry. And he was — at least in some way — familiar with Dante's *Inferno* and used it, and in particular Dante's conception of hell, for his own purposes. Benjamin's appropriation of the topos of the *Inferno* has been seen as a critique of capitalism and as a general critique of modernism by means of allegory. In the following analysis, I would like to take a slightly different approach and, despite Benjamin's status as an expert on allegory, consider hell in its literal sense as a place and examine the issues of emplacement that might follow from this standpoint.

DANTE'S INFERNO AND WALTER BENJAMIN'S CITIES

Considerations of Place, Experience, and Media

Angela Merte-Rankin

When Walter Benjamin wrote his main texts, the theme of the city as hell was extremely popular. Some of his German contemporaries, such as Brecht or Döblin, also used it.¹ Benjamin was aware of these examples, as well as of examples outside Germany, including Joyce's *Ulysses* and Baudelaire's poetry. And he was – at least in some way – familiar with Dante's *Inferno* and used it, and in particular Dante's conception of hell, for his own purposes.² Benjamin's appropriation of the topos of the *Inferno* has been seen as a critique of capitalism and as a general critique of modernism by means of allegory.³ In the following analysis, I would like to take a slightly different approach and, despite Benjamin's status as an expert on allegory, consider hell in its literal sense as a place and examine the issues of implacement that might follow from this standpoint.

Implacement is a physical necessity linked to our three-dimensional bodies and therefore, to some extent, a postulate of the anthropological perspective. As human beings, we are forced to situate ourselves in three-dimensional space. Or as a prominent philosopher of place, Edward Casey, puts it: 'To exist at all as a (material or mental) object or as an (experienced or observed) event is to have a place – *to be implaced*, however minimally or imperfectly or temporarily.'⁴ From this it follows, according to him, that '[n]othing we do is unplaced'.⁵ Even though inevitable, implacement is far from completely unproblematic. Implacement, that is to say, our relationship to place, is a complex, multilayered process that also involves our (having to engage in) allocating functions to places. As a process, implacement is the very mechanism that allows us to make sense of the inevitable fact of having to be in place. To see implacement as a process means, for example, that we are forced to reassess and perhaps also reimagine space and place continually, even if this means ascribing infernal qualities and functions to

places. Places are therefore – at least on one level – always constructed. This affects Dante’s and Benjamin’s treatments of hell inasmuch as experiences and memories of places ultimately become more important than actual geographical or topographical structures.

To understand how impacement and hell relate to each other, we would do well to investigate what type of place hell is. Or perhaps it is even more fruitful to begin with the following question: is hell a place at all? Dante situates hell inside the abyss. In selecting this particular location, he follows the custom of linking high places with good and low places with evil.⁶ He employs the general medieval model according to which hell is situated far below while at the same time giving his hell a very specific and individual topography. ‘Abyss’ literally translates as ‘the bottomless’ and it has been related to the void. Both the abyss and the void are places with special powers. Myths that narrate the creation of the world from the void are usually taken as evidence that the void must be a place.⁷ As a place, however, it is distinguished by its capacity to give birth to new places. The void is a ‘scene of emergent place’.⁸ It is on its way to becoming a place itself and, at the same time, it generates new places. The void can be seen as a prime example of the process of impacement. Myths about the void describe the creation of place and usually link this process to the creation of human beings. By bringing together the creation of humans and place, such myths mark the starting point of all impacement. Dante therefore chooses a very potent setting for his *Inferno*, one that allows him to treat hell as a particular place but also to use it in a symbolic manner.

But Dante’s hell is not just any type of place: hell is a city.⁹ The first explicit connection of hell to the city is introduced by the inscription on the gate of hell in Canto III. The first sentence of the inscription names hell as the grieving city – ‘la citta dolente’ (*Inf.* III, 1).¹⁰ The pilgrim’s journey leads him from the gate of hell to the almost idyllic landscape of limbo, which is described as ‘loco aperto, luminoso e alto’ (*Inf.* IV, 116). From there the journey goes through bleaker and bleaker terrain, further down the abyss, to the inner parts of hell, the City of Dis. This is literally Satan’s City. Its architecture fuses the layout of the medieval Italian city-state, with its gates and walls, with the mosques and minarets of Islamic architecture (*Inf.* VIII, 67–78).¹¹

The connection between city and hell goes back as far as the Bible. The underlying idea is that cities are like hell because of their sinful inhabitants. The twin cities of Sodom and Gomorrah are the chief bibli-

cal example of this type of argument; the city of Babylon would serve as another instance. Very influential throughout the Middle Ages is Augustine's contrast between sinful, man-made cities and God's city (heaven) in his *De civitate Dei* (*Of the City of God*). Dante continues the tradition of connecting city and hell by making use of all three biblical examples. Additionally, his native Florence is compared, both favourably and unfavourably, with these sinful biblical cities.¹²

Dante's hell is not only modelled on a city; it is also modelled on the body.¹³ As embodiment implies and requires implacement, the fusion of body and place that Dante presents to us in *Inferno* points to a very radical form of being-in-place. This is certainly the case for the souls in hell who are not just placed there but are also frequently immobilized, turned into veritable symbols of stasis. Changing places is – like being in place – a deeply human need. We need to move around in order to ensure our survival. In hell, the souls are fixed in one place, which is allocated to them by Minos according to their sins. For some souls, their punishment additionally consists of not being able to move at all. They might be encased in ice, staked to the ground, or turned into trees. The souls' immobility in hell takes away from their humanness by robbing them of a deeply human necessity – the ability to change places.¹⁴

The only ones allowed to move through the several rings of hell are the pilgrim and his guide Virgil. But that does not necessarily mean that they are welcome visitors. This is made clear at several points when their status is questioned or when access is denied to them. The pilgrim does not belong in hell because he is still alive, and Virgil has left his allotted place in limbo (the first circle of hell) to guide the pilgrim through hell to the Garden of Eden on top of the mountain of purgatory. In this sense they are both dis-placed. The sinners, on the other hand, are perfectly placed and perfectly implaced even though they find themselves in a situation of extreme torment and suffering. Their implacement is perfect because how and where they are placed in hell attests to God's justice. This is – as we are told on the gate – hell's sole purpose. It is not only a place of punishment but primarily a place of God's justice. Hell is a place especially created for the enactment of divine justice where all will obtain what they have freely chosen on Earth. In Dante's *Inferno*, punishment is not merely matched to the sin committed, but the landscape, the place where punishment takes place, enables and supports its form. For example, in Canto XXIII we are shown how traitors are placed in ice. Here the coldness of the traitors' hearts is matched

by a punishment that takes place in a frozen river. In some respects, contrapasso extends to place as Dante ensures that the terrain provides the tools and means (frozen or boiling rivers, etc.) for punishment. In Dante's *Inferno* the inevitability of implacement becomes a punishment in itself, and the souls are placed in a landscape that will ensure that implacement will be a torment.

Even though Benjamin appears far removed from Dante's medieval worldview that matches punishment to sin and to place in hell, we can find in Benjamin's texts a 'virulent theological topology'.¹⁵ Moreover, Benjamin and Dante also share certain situations and techniques: both write in exile, both attempt to combine autobiography and historical writing, and both have a symbolic, almost mythic treatment of place, as well as a deep interest in the process of implacement.¹⁶

Benjamin wrote about many places but two cities greatly fascinated him throughout his life: Berlin, the city of his childhood, and Paris, the city of his exile.¹⁷ Both these cities are connected to hell in Benjamin's writings. Echoing Dante's decision to situate hell in the abyss, the void, Benjamin writes in *Berliner Chronik* (*Berlin Chronicle*): 'But in great cities, there are countless places where one stands on the edge of the void.'¹⁸ We can see what happens when we reach such an edge, making contact with the void, by looking at Benjamin's most explicit reference to Dante's *Inferno* in *Berliner Kindheit um 1900* (*Berlin Childhood around 1900*).¹⁹ In a section titled 'Siegessäule' ('Victory Column'), he describes how as a boy he had to visit the Siegessäule on Sedan Day (2 September). It is this place that Benjamin connects with Dante's *Inferno*:

A portico ran around the base of the column, concealing it from view. I never entered this space, which was filled with a dim light reflected off the gold of the frescoes. I was afraid of finding effigies that might have reminded me of pictures in a book I had once come across in the drawing room of an old aunt – a deluxe edition of Dante's *Inferno*. To me, the heroes whose exploits glimmered in the portico were, secretly, quite as infamous as the multitudes forced to do penance while being lashed by whirlwinds, encased in bloody tree stumps, or sealed in blocks of ice. Accordingly, this portico was itself the *Inferno*, the opposite of the sphere of grace that encircled the radiant Victory overhead.²⁰

On one level, this reference to the *Inferno* can be seen as a commentary on war and on how we commemorate war. The whole idea that hell is at the base of the Siegessäule points in the direction of war and emphasizes that even victory in war is built on death and hell. Ben-

jamin appears to think of the Siegessäule as commemorating death far more than victory, referring to it as a 'funerary stele'.²¹ All three cantos mentioned in the passage quoted above deal in some way with war and death. In Canto V, the lustful are punished by a whirlwind. Although the emphasis is on cases of adultery, there are also examples in which lust led to war, as in the case of Cleopatra and that of Helen and the Trojan War.²² Canto XIII mentions the poisoned forest that starts to bleed and is the punishment for suicides. And in Cantos XXXII and XXXIII traitors are encased in ice, including those who, by committing treachery, might have caused war.

But Benjamin also makes reference to Dante and to hell in less obvious ways. Even though 'Siegessäule' provides the most direct reference to Dante, in all of Benjamin's Berlin texts the underworld creeps up throughout the representation of the city. There are basement window shafts opening onto the pavement that likewise function as thresholds.²³ Or there is an indoor swimming pool whose water turns into an entrance into the underworld:

To step across the threshold was to take leave of the upper world. After which, there was nothing more to protect you from the mass of water inside, under the arched ceiling. It was the seat of a jealous goddess, who aimed to lay us on her breast and give us to drink out of icy reservoirs, until all memory of us above had faded.²⁴

Particularly in *Berlin Chronicle* and in *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, Berlin acquires a surreal, almost magical quality. Both are texts of transformation. Berlin is turned into a fairytale wonderland where references to Dante's *Inferno* represent the uncanny underside to otherwise mostly friendly childhood places. This not just because the child's point of view distorts the vision of place but because something else has shifted. What has changed is how we experience our environment and therefore also how we experience place. The references to the *Inferno* make clear that the relationship we have with place has come under severe pressure.

While Benjamin's texts on Berlin are mainly concerned with how we utilize memory to create and access places, his texts on Paris – especially his writings on Baudelaire – explain these changes in experience. Benjamin explicitly links Baudelaire to Dante. He considers both Dante and Baudelaire to be acute analysts of their times and great allegorists. For Benjamin, Baudelaire's Paris stands on the threshold of the nineteenth century and is about to enter modernity. This transition has sev-

eral consequences for our experience of place. One consequence is that the heightened mobility of modern life leads also to its opposite – that is, to forms of immobility. Benjamin's examples are the flâneur and the bourgeois interior. The flâneur has as a prerequisite the arcade, a place where interior and exterior are fused. The arcade is 'a city, a world in miniature'.²⁵ This is the place where he can stroll at his leisure. As the arcades die and the street is taken over more and more by crowds of people, the flâneur is turned into a *badaud* (an onlooker) who is stationary and, even worse, no longer fully human. As his evidence for this process, Benjamin quotes Victor Fournel: 'Under the influence of the spectacle before him, the badaud becomes an impersonal creature. He is no longer a human being; he is part of the public, of the crowd.'²⁶ Something similar happens to the bourgeois interior. To counteract the effects of urban modernization, especially the fact that the environment and the objects in it turn into commodities, the middle classes focus on their homes only to turn them into coffin-like encasements:

[For the style of the Second Empire] a dwelling becomes a kind of casing. This style views it as a case for a person and embeds him in it, together with all his appurtenances, tending his traces as nature tends dead fauna embedded in granite.²⁷

This is a last desperate attempt of the nineteenth-century middle class at achieving something close to perfect implacement. But perfect implacement is no longer possible – if it ever was possible – and it seems to result only in death. In *Einbahnstraße* (*One-Way Street*) Benjamin makes this even clearer: 'The bourgeois interior of the 1860s to the 1890s fittingly houses only the corpse.'²⁸ The heightened velocity and commodification of places, in turn, effects changes in our experience or, even worse, causes us to lose experience altogether. This also means that the city as a place is experienced in a different way. The modern city creates for its inhabitants a death-like stasis that is comparable to the loss of mobility and lack of experience in Dante's hell. But whereas Dante presents forms of perfect implacement, albeit relegated to the afterlife, Benjamin deals with distorted implacements in a real cityscape and a very secularized version of hell. The stasis that Dante's inhabitants of hell undergo is part of divine justice, while in Benjamin's version of hell, stasis disrupts the experience of places that feeds into the process of implacement. This disruption and loss of experience turns the modern city into hell.

The problem that results from these changes in experience lies in experience's loss of its 'aura'. It is interesting to note in this context that Benjamin uses an analogy based on landscapes in his definition of aura:

What then is the aura? A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it might be. To follow with the eye – while resting on a summer afternoon – a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that cast its shadow on the beholder is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch.²⁹

For Benjamin, experience, aura, and memory should ideally converge, which he thinks is only possible in rituals. It is this ritualistic experience that Benjamin finds in Baudelaire, especially in his *Correspondences*. Baudelaire becomes for Benjamin an author who witnesses the onset of modernity but still knows of the combination of experience and ritual. He was in a position to attest to the breakdown of aura, almost a chronicler of the aura crisis.

Cultural anthropologists like Mircea Eliade and Victor Turner describe rituals as actions taking place in real time and space.³⁰ Ritual is the ideal spatial medium. Whatever is enacted in ritual space is neither real nor fictitious but hovers over and blurs the border between reality and fiction. Turner refers to this quality of rituals as liminality.³¹ This is what the modern city lacks more and more: ritualistic threshold experiences. Opportunities for experience, aura, and memory to come together are harder and harder to obtain. Benjamin describes this process and its consequences on different levels. Two of his examples are the flâneur and the bourgeois interior. But both are dead ends in an almost literal sense. Benjamin's analysis of the bourgeois interior, the street, the home, and the city signals that earlier modes of emplacement no longer work in the modern city. They might even prevent this essential threshold experience, if they allow experience at all.

Benjamin is well aware that we need tools for managing our experiences as well as the process of emplacement. One possible way of dealing with both would be media. It is in *The Work of Art in the Age of its Reproducibility* that Benjamin links media, experience, and place. Like Nietzsche before him, Benjamin develops art out of a ritualistic context: 'the unique value of the "authentic" work of art always has its basis in ritual'.³² Such media might then still provide the ritualistic link that could help us escape from the encased and immobilized state of being in hell:

Our bars and city streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories seemed to close relentlessly around us. Then came film and exploded this prison-world with the dynamite of the split second, so that now we can set off calmly on journeys of adventure among its far flung debris.³³

As marvellous as this sounds, there is just one problem. Media undergo the same type of aura crisis as does our experience. Benjamin is aware of this and he notes that film can cause both catharsis and destruction.³⁴ This is what turns the modern city into hell: the interplay of experience, media, and implacement has stopped working. The modern city is a place where our relationship to place is shattered but where we still must make sense of being in place.

Dante and Benjamin share an understanding of the inevitability of implacement, and both present us with a place where experience of place and memory becomes more important than 'geographical' features. They utilize aspects of theological topography, such as hell's position in a deep abyss, but they also reach very different conclusions about the function of place. Dante can still present perfect implacement even though it is situated in an afterlife. This does not mean that implacement in medieval times was less problematic. Dante's blend of the individual and the universal seems to indicate that implacement in the thirteenth century already had a very personal dimension, but the questions that he raises are concerned more with divine justice and the hope that might result from it. Like Dante's *Inferno*, Benjamin's urban hell is a very bleak and tormenting place. But while Dante's *Inferno* is a self-contained, separate place, for Benjamin, the infernal has spread throughout the city and permeates everything. Even though both describe Hell as a state of stasis that is characterized by immobility and the loss of experience, in Benjamin's case the stakes seem much higher as this stasis cannot be contained. Because it affects experience, it also affects our experience of place and renders implacement more distorted and harder to achieve.

NOTES

- 1 For a discussion of Brecht's use of the motif of city as hell in relation to Benjamin, see Sigrid Weigel, *Walter Benjamin: Die Kreatur, das Heilige, die Bilder* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer Verlag, 2008), pp. 141–69.

- 2 Gershom Scholem mentions in his diary on 9 May 1918 that he and Benjamin read two sonnets by Dante ('Un di si venne a me melancolia' and 'Deh peregrini che pensosi andate') together in a translation by August Wilhelm Schlegel. See Gershom Scholem, *Tagebücher, nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923*, ed. by Karlfried Gründer et al., 2 vols (Frankfurt a.M.: Jüdischer Verlag, 2000), II, p. 223. Benjamin's list of texts that he read during his life time also includes: A. W. Schlegel, *Dante über die göttliche Komödie* (no. 480) and Erich Auerbach, *Dante als Dichter der irdischen Welt*, Berlin 1923 (no. 1100). See Walter Benjamin, 'Verzeichnis der gelesenen Schriften', in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann et al., 7 vols (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1989), VII/1, pp. 438 and 461.
- 3 Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 'Infernalische Aspekte der Moderne: Anthropo-theologische Elemente in Benjamin's Geschichtsbegriff', in *Ein Physiognom der Dinge: Aspekte des Benjaminschen Denkens*, ed. by Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Lüneburg: Zu Klampen Verlag, 1992), pp. 153–170; David L. Pike, *Passage through Hell: Modernist Descents, Medieval Underworlds* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).
- 4 Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 13 (italics in the original).
- 5 Edward S. Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. ix.
- 6 On other ways of combining moral concepts with spatial relations with the help of our body, see Casey, *Getting Back into Place*, pp. 43–71, and George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).
- 7 Casey, *The Fate of Place*, pp. 3–22.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- 9 I would like to thank Manuele Gagnolati for the following references as well as other very valuable comments on Dante from which this article has benefited: Joan M. Ferrante, *The Political Vision of the 'Divine Comedy'* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Catherine Keen, *Dante and the City* (Stroud: Tempus, 2003).
- 10 The text of the *Commedia* is quoted from Dante Alighieri, *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, ed. by Giorgio Petrocchi (Florence: Le Lettere, 1994).
- 11 Ronald L. Martinez and Robert M. Durling point out in their commentary to the *Inferno* that Dante's use of Islamic architecture expresses the medieval belief that Muslims practise devil worship; see *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Inferno*, ed. and trans. by Robert M. Durling, intro. and notes by Ronald L. Martinez and Robert M. Durling (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1996), p. 136.
- 12 Contemporary Florence is always linked to hell and the Infernal Babylon, while the Florence of the past (*Paradiso* XV) is idealized as perfect and Edenic; see Claire Honess, *From Florence to the Heavenly City: the Poetry of Citizenship in Dante* (Oxford: Legenda, 2006).

- 13 See Robert Durling, 'Deceit and Digestion in the Belly of Hell', in *Allegory and Representation*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), pp. 61–93.
- 14 This immobility corresponds to the general stasis that the sinners undergo in hell. There is no development or insight into sin. See also Manuele Gagnolati, 'Gluttony and the Anthropology of Pain in Dante's Inferno and Purgatorio', in *History in the Comic Mode: Medieval Communities and the Matter of Person*, ed. by Rachel Fulton and Bruce W. Holsinger (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), pp. 238–50.
- 15 Weigel, *Walter Benjamin*, p. 32. Weigel also states that Benjamin's discussion of secularization follows a topographical thinking (p. 50).
- 16 On historicity and autobiography in Dante, see Erich Auerbach, *Dante, Poet of the Secular World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961). On Benjamin's autobiographical writings, see the section 'Sprachphilosophie, literarisches und autobiographisches Schreiben', in *Benjamin Handbuch: Leben–Werk–Wirkung*, ed. by Burkhardt Lindner (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2006), pp. 585–680. On Benjamin's use of autobiography with respect to implacement, see Angela Merte-Rankin, 'Creating the Map of Life: Imagining Spaces in Walter Benjamin's Berlin Portraits', in *Imagining Space: Negotiating Cross Discipline Terrains*, ed. by Sabine Strümper-Krobb and Kathleen James-Chakraborty (New York: Peter Lang, forthcoming).
- 17 On Walter Benjamin and the city in general, see Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). On the connections among topography, memory, and Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, see *Topographien der Erinnerung: Zu Walter Benjamins Passagen*, ed. by Bernd Witte (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2008).
- 18 Walter Benjamin, 'Berlin Chronicle', in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith, trans. by Edmund Jephcott, 4 vols (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2005), II/2, p. 600.
- 19 *Berlin Chronicle* was written in 1932 and not published during Benjamin's lifetime. *Berlin Childhood around 1900* was written between 1932–34 and only partly published. It can also be seen as a reworking of *Berlin Chronicle*. See also Anja Lemke, 'Berliner Kindheit um 1900', in *Benjamin Handbuch: Leben–Werk–Wirkung* (cited above in note 16), p. 654.
- 20 Walter Benjamin, 'Berlin Childhood around 1900', in *Selected Writings*, III, p. 349.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 348.
- 22 On the political dimension of *Inferno* V, see Teodolinda Barolini, 'Dante and Francesca da Rimini: Realpolitik, Romance, Gender', *Speculum*, 75 (2000), pp. 1–28.
- 23 Benjamin, 'Berlin Childhood', p. 384.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 373.
- 25 Walter Benjamin, 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire', in Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life*, ed. by Michel W. Jennings, trans. by Harry Zohn (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2006), p. 68.

- 26 Victor Fournel, *Ce qu'on voit dans le rues de Paris* (Paris: Delshay, 1858), quoted in Walter Benjamin, 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire', p. 249.
- 27 Benjamin, 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire', p. 78.
- 28 Walter Benjamin, 'One-Way Street', in *Selected Writings*, 1, p. 447.
- 29 Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Reproducibility', in *Selected Writings*, III, p.103.
- 30 Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959); Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969).
- 31 Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), pp. 7–28.
- 32 Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Reproducibility', in *Selected Writings*, III, p.105.
- 33 Ibid., p. 117.
- 34 Ibid., p. 104.

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