

Translated extract from

Christoph Türcke
Philosophie des Traums
C. H. Beck Verlag
München 2008
ISBN 978-3-406-57637-9

pp. 234-249

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The Philosophy of Dreams

Translated by Rodney Livingstone

High-Tech Dreamtime

This book deals with the question of origins. It would be quite wrong, however, to regard this as a new edition of the old philosophy of origins. Whereas Aristotle prioritized the unmoved mover, Rousseau nature and Bloch hope, the present work asserts that the traumatic compulsion to repeat is the *principle* from which the meaning of the world is derived and the course of the world is determined. Admittedly, there is a sense in which to treat the traumatic compulsion to repeat as a principle is to fail to understand what it is; it is simply a reactive form, a mere reflex in the first instance, a particular kind of flight from stimulus – lacking in every loftier intention, let alone a higher cultural purpose. It was only much later, once this flight from stimulus had entered the bloodstream of a number of species of hominids, up to and including Neanderthal man and Homo sapiens, that it turned out to be the road to culture, albeit a road full of privations. But culture was not its goal. ‘We seek everywhere the absolute, and always find only things’, wrote Novalis.¹ That roughly is how the process of humanization advanced. A rescue was sought, culture was found. It did not require ‘Auschwitz to demonstrate irrefutably that culture has failed’.² Even its origins in the Paleolithic Age showed the failure of something other than culture.³

The traumatic compulsion to repeat is the unique phylogenetic eye of the needle through which we must pass to arrive at culture, but it is no principle – if only because it is profoundly divided against itself. Its flight from terror is always also a flight from itself. It wishes to stop; this is why it ceaselessly repeats what is terrifying. This is why it is the human drive par excellence and demonstrates in exemplary fashion what drives wish for. They wish to be assuaged. Admittedly, amidst its panic this particular drive does something very clever. It negates the terror by means of affirmation, so that negation

¹ Novalis, *Blüthenstaub, Werke*, vol. 2, ed. Hans-Joachim Mähl, Munich: Hanser, 1978, p. 227.

² Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966, p. 366.

³ This kind of failure was repeated by Christianity in a highly significant way. ‘Thy Kingdom come’, was Jesus’s prayer, but instead of God’s kingdom what came was the Church.

becomes affirmation and affirmation negation. It thus satisfies in exemplary manner Hegel's definition of dialectics as 'the unity of differentiatedness and non-differentiatedness, or the identity of identity and non-identity'.⁴ If there is such a thing as an original dialectician it is neither Hegel's absolute spirit nor Engels's dialectical nature; it is the traumatic compulsion to repeat. Far more reliably than Hegel it shows where dialectics comes from; not from pure 'Being... without any further determination'⁵, but from indescribable suffering. Dialectics does not obey eternal laws of nature. On the contrary, the urge to come to rest drives it to dissolve itself not into pure spirit but into a pleasure without desire.

We do not commit the fallacy of monocausal explanations when we say that all rituals, customs, grammars, laws and institutions to which human culture has led are the expressions of the traumatic compulsion to repeat. For these expressions are just as surely the products of its effects as of the cessation of its activity. That compulsion has been laid to rest in them. To be sure, this only becomes evident with hindsight. We can never say in advance whether in individual cases negation through affirmation will lead to a self-defeating, pigheaded going round in circles or to a gradual process of self-deconstruction. And the fact that culture has only succeeded in establishing itself long term where a considerable deconstruction of the compulsion to repeat has taken place should not blind us to the enormous sacrifices that this process has exacted; sacrifices not only in the literal meaning of the word, the sacred human sacrifices, but also the countless individual nervous breakdowns through which the traumatic compulsion to repeat has had to work its way over prolonged periods of time before it could gradually modulate them into those rites, customs and usages that constitute the basic structures of human communities. Such a tempering process is nothing other than a process of profanation. Just as names have been submerged in sentences, becoming profane in their turn, so the traumatic compulsion to repeat may be said to have been submerged in culture. It survives in culture as an unquiet remnant, a pathological vestige of the dim

⁴ G.W.F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller, London: George Allen and Unwin and New York: The Humanities Press, 1969, p.74.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

and distant past – in an environment that is composed of its sediments but which has overcome that compulsion in itself to the point where these sediments now represent precious achievements: an ensemble of edifying rituals, familiar customs and routine processes. Such things are needed in every culture. They are the basis of every free, individual development.

Until the dawn of the modern age, repetition was synonymous with the tendency to de-escalate and pacify. Then a pioneering invention was made: it was automation. Tools have existed ever since human beings came into existence. 'Automated' tools that constantly repeat the same movements, as it were of their own volition, were not developed until the dawn of modernity. Their prototypes, machines powered by steam, petrol and finally, by electricity, replaced human actions. That can bring enormous relief. People ceased to walk, they now went by train or car; they stopped sawing, planing and sharpening and used machines to perform these tasks instead. But as early as the first industrial revolution, which began in England in the nineteenth century, the wearing-down effects of machines started to gain the upper hand. Their human accessories, the proletariat, were utterly ground down in a working day lasting twelve hours and consisting in nothing but the mindless operating and servicing of the machinery until such time as they succeeded in their struggle for working conditions that made their existence bearable. Steam engines brought relief chiefly to the capitalists who owned them and were able induce others to work on them. The unequal distribution of relief and exhaustion, in accordance with your social situation, is the capitalist birthmark of machinery. It changes over time, but does not go away.

With machines superseding human activities, repetition entered into a qualitatively new stage: its displacement from the human organism and hence its objectification. Because they can be programmed, machine movements are far easier to replicate than human ones. The quality of a machine programme consists in the fact that it can be run again and again with the same reliability. The activity of machines is a novel, as it were, a superhuman mode of repetition. Mechanical operations can be carried out far more rapidly, more precisely and over longer time spans than those performed by human beings. Never, of course, without human beings to operate them. And this means that all the repetitions that human beings displace onto machines rebound back onto human beings. Routine actions, the constant repetition of identical movements were of course known in medieval craft work. Indeed, they may be said to

have provided the model for machinery. It was these actions that proved adaptable to mechanical treatment. But then came the feedback effect: factory workers were compelled to adjust their own movements to those of the machines they operated. No machine, however sophisticated, can be operated unless the human beings in charge of it adapt their own actions to the machine's programme. 'The assimilation of one ego to another one', however, is the standing Freudian formula for 'identification'.⁶ And in fact, human beings are not able to control or operate machines (and they can control them only if they do operate them) unless they identify with them to a certain degree. Identification, however, always refers to a higher authority that possesses something or can do something that one lacks oneself. And machines can always do something that their operator cannot. The feeling of superiority inspired by their efficiency is the feeling that we are sharing in their superiority. It is no more than the obverse of the feeling that they are the superior beings – in short, it is a feeling of inferiority compared to them. Günther Anders has referred to it as 'Promethean shame'. Man as 'Prometheus', as the maker of the machine world, finds himself in the embarrassing situation of feeling permanently inferior to something made by him – and he feels ashamed.⁷ Shame is embarrassing, a feeling one would rather not have, and therefore one that we tend to repress or gloss over. That requires an effort and this effort is the subcutaneous, subtle stress, as hard to grasp as it is to deny, that forms the basis of the relation of human beings to the world of machines. It is the price of the relief that machines offer us.

The steam engine took over certain kinds of movement. Screen-based technology has taken over certain perceptual processes. Much as the eye does with the retina, the camera causes images to come into being on chemically prepared surfaces – images that it retains exactly as they are, images that it literally imagines– and then makes available to any number of human eyes. What progress! Whereas human beings laboriously advance from diffuse impressions to distinct apperception, from apperception to the imagination, and are then able to impart what they have imagined to outsiders

⁶ See e.g. *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey, Penguin Freud Library, Harmondsworth, 1973, vol. 2, p. 94.

⁷ Günther Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, vol. 1, Munich, C H Beck, 1956, p. 21ff.

only indirectly by means of words and gestures, the technological imagination of the camera does all that simultaneously and directly. It is easy to understand that, when confronted by this miracle, this identification, this 'assimilation of one ego to another one' was experienced far more intensely than the steam engine had been. And when in addition technically produced images learned how to 'walk', we can see why the audience should have gazed spellbound at the first short films, even though they contained nothing more remarkable than workers leaving a factory or the arrival of a train. What was so fascinating was the fact that a machine had made it possible to imagine such events, store them and make them visible to the public to be repeated at will.

This innovation provided the imagination of pioneer filmmakers and their audiences with one stimulus after another. New forms of expression and apperception opened up. Images seemed to acquire hitherto unsuspected powers. 'The Soviet film must beat people's skulls like a drum', says Sergei Eisenstein. It must be like 'a tractor ploughing up the spectator's psyche so as to create the desired class standpoint.'⁸ Walter Benjamin hoped that cinema would bring the 'intensified presence of mind'⁹ that the proletariat urgently needed to overthrow capitalist society. The near-Messianic expectation awakened by the new medium still echoes even in Claude Lévi-Strauss when he speaks 'of the excitement' he felt 'at the sight of the latest picture by Picasso, the last work by Stravinsky or the films I saw every Sunday afternoon with what amounted to religious zeal in a small, darkened cinema in the Latin Quarter or Montmartre'.¹⁰

Admittedly, one thing did escape the champions of the new medium. This was the degree to which their own imagination still belonged to the *World of Yesterday*¹¹, the extent to which they had themselves been shaped, depending on personal preference

⁸ Sergej Eisenstein, in *Film. Auge-Faust-Sprache. Filmdebatten der 20er Jahre in Sowjetrußland*, Berlin n.d., p. 27.

⁹ Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Reproducibility' in *Selected Writings*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002, vol. 3, p. 132.

¹⁰ Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'Ein Hymnus an die Jugend', *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 21.3, 1995, p. 8.

¹¹ The reference is to the title of an influential book by Stefan Zweig. (Trans.)

and social situation, by traditional, relatively contemplative media and spectacles, such as letters, newspapers, books, popular festivals, concerts and theatre. This was the imagination they brought with them into the cinema, as if it were a secure mental foundation which could only be enlarged rather than diminished in the force field of the film. And they did not yet realize that film owed its early blossoming not only to the fascination with new kinds of images, the sheer intoxication of the directors' emerging imagination, and the gold rush excitement surrounding a new medium, but also to the simple fact that film shows were initially something of a rarity – special occasions in the evenings or at the weekend. There was plenty of time between individual films for the experience to subside. A film was not instantly followed by the next one, the next talk show or news broadcast. Not until film succumbed to inflation as a consequence of its own meteoric success and became an everyday experience rather than a highlight, did it gradually reach the stage where its mechanical operation could fully impinge on its consumers.

The ideal consumers of film are anachronistic consumers – people who are still able to give a coherent account to other people of the film they have just seen, and to reflect on it, discuss it and perhaps even review it. In short, they are people who have the staying power with which to follow a film, and who bring to it attitudes they have acquired from childhood handicrafts and games of skill, from painting pictures and looking at them, from reading and writing texts, but not from film itself. For the principle governing film is, as Benjamin clearly understood, the constant 'changes of scene and focus, which have a percussive effect on the spectator.'... In fact, 'the train of associations in the person contemplating it is immediately interrupted by new images. This constitutes the shock effect of film, which, like all shock effects, seeks to induce heightened attention.'¹² To be sure, Benjamin believed that this heightened attention which he hoped would contribute to revolutionizing capitalist society was the gift of film, so to speak its automatic dowry. The opposite turns out to be the case. Only a form of awareness practised outside the sphere of film can be heightened by watching films, and even that will go only so far. If film has become so much part of our everyday lives that it occupies a major part of our free time, there can be no question of our absorbing

¹² Walter Benjamin, *Ibid.*, pp. 119 and 132.

its shock effects by means of 'heightened awareness'. Simply to contemplate this enables us to see that such absorption was basically a kind of defence mechanism, a sort of sensuous judo grip that enables us to turn the enemy's attack against him by transforming his strength into one's own so that we may overcome him. To attempt to absorb the daily television programme by means of heightened awareness is much like trying to make use of judo tricks to defeat a company of marksmen.

Now it is true that the shock effects lose their force when TV screens become part of our everyday experience, 'but the constant changes of scene and focus' that 'have a percussive effect on the spectator' do not for that reason cease to have an impact. On the contrary, they become omnipresent. Now as ever, every image sequence still produces a kind of optical shock that exhorts the spectator to 'Look at this' or 'Take note of that', etc., giving him yet another little injection to attract his attention, a tiny dose of adrenaline – wearing down his attention span by constant stimulation. The shock possesses a physiological force; the spectator's eye is magnetically attracted by the abrupt changes in lighting and can turn away only with a great effort of will. The image shock exerts an aesthetic fascination; it constantly holds out the promise of new, hitherto unseen images. It schools us in the omnipresence of the market. Its gesture 'Look at this' praises the next scene like a stall-holder shouting his wares. And ever since the screen became an integral part of the computer as well as the television set, in other words, now that it does not just fill up our leisure time but also occupies our entire working life, image shock and work have merged. The data that I peremptorily download demand no less peremptorily that I process them – or else I shall have to reckon with my being dismissed.

All this makes it clear that the image shock has become the focal point of a global mode of attentiveness that blunts the human capacity for paying attention by constantly making excessive demands. Television programme makers have long since ceased to expect the average viewer to watch lengthy programmes from beginning to end. They reckon with the likelihood that the slightest loss of tension will lead him to switch channels and they are happy if they can at least tie him down to the highlights of their schedule, which they advertise with spectacular trailers. *This* type of viewer is the appropriate spectator for the image-shock regime, not the film critic who works up his film or computer-screen experiences after the showing, produces articles and books and hence always lags behind what he has seen. Admittedly, even the written word submits

increasingly to this mode of attentiveness. Every piece of print that wishes to be taken seriously has to force itself on our attention in exactly the same way as a cinematic image appears to our eyes. Consider the appearance of the modern national newspapers as compared with those of twenty years ago. In comparison with that period, the modern paper looks more like an illustrated magazine. It can scarcely afford to appear without large colour pictures. Newspapers become more 'accessible' all the time, which really means 'text impoverished' and richer in illustrations. Books follow the lead of the newspapers. Even the eyes of the educated increasingly want to be guided by a slick layout, and find themselves in need of an extra paragraph here or a graphic there or indeed an illustration, so as to be able to endure the process of deciphering printed matter. The entire system of print design is based on the tacit assumption that scarcely anyone nowadays has the concentration and stamina needed to study a text line by line from the first page to the last.

All these phenomena are manifest attention-deficit symptoms. The so-called attention deficiency disorder (ADD) or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is merely a glaring instance of this. This disorder occurs in children who are unable to concentrate on anything, to keep their attention fixed on anything, to form friendships or sustain a shared game. Such children make a start on all sorts of things but are unable to finish them. They are in a constant state of unrest, with no safety valve or ability to settle down to one thing and this turns them into perpetual troublemakers at school, in their family and in youth groups. Nevertheless, there is one highly effective way of pacifying them. According to the child psychologist Wolfgang Bergmann, 'There are children who cannot sit still for a second and whose eyes constantly rove all over the place, in search of something or else avoiding something. If such children are put in front of a computer, their gaze becomes fixed and clear and their activities purposeful and patient'. 'At any rate, it is more than striking how well hyperactive children and teenagers who seem to be lost in the real world find their way around computers and how in the world of computer games and online contacts they seem to function with a confidence that they do not possess in the so-called "first reality", their everyday lives.' And why do they find it so easy to feel instantly at home in the world of computers? 'A few hand movements suffice to gain control of an object or to dial up a communications partner for the mutual exchange of this or that fantasy or to establish relations with this or that contact – everything seems to be available in retrievable form.' Nevertheless,

'everything is geared to *instant gratification*. As soon as this gratification has been experienced, the representation of the longed-for object, action or contact with others vanishes. With a hand movement, a click on the keyboard, they disappear 'as if they had never existed'.¹³

Here, too, we see the game of '*fort*' (Gone!) and '*da*' (There!) as it was played by Freud's grandson, only in this instance it is the other way round: '*da*' and '*fort*'. Whereas little Heinerle threw away the reel with a piece of string attached in order to be able to pull it back, whereas, in other words, he rehearsed the process of retrieving what was absent, for the hyperactive child whatever is 'gone' is simply non-existent – it's over and done with. He has not even begun to enter the phase reached by little Heinerle. He has never succeeded in fully achieving the experience of remembering an absent person and keeping him present in his mind, even though he is physically 'gone'. In consequence, the playfellow who has so recently been courted is forgotten as soon as he has had to go home, the promise that was given so recently amid floods of tears to stick to certain rules vanishes with the wind as soon as he has left the room, just like the violent quarrel he has just had or the game of football he had won the previous day. Nothing 'sticks', nothing has a lasting effect; desires do not grow into a stable resolution, successes fail to produce self-confidence.

It goes without saying that in the first instance the attention deficit of these children is the same deficit as the one they have themselves *experienced*. The attention they are unable to pay is just what has been withheld from them. Can we therefore say that the cause of ADHD is not so much 'television' as the lack of parental care? Empirical studies that have attempted to investigate this topic have led nowhere, however sophisticated their methodology, because they have no conception of what an attentiveness *pattern* might look like. They do not know that such a pattern is not an apparatus but a general social force field. Adults commonly lack the words needed to articulate this distinction, children all the more so. What small children possess, in contrast, is a keen awareness of their attentiveness environment. And if they spend their entire infancy in a television environment they will have every opportunity to learn early

¹³ Wolfgang Bergmann, 'Ich bin nicht in mir und nicht außer mir', in Bernd Ahrbeck (ed.) *Hyperaktivität*.

on and in a traumatic fashion how the attention of those closest to them is divided between them and that environment, and how affection between human beings degenerates into something superficial and unreal because of the claims on their attention that the television environment permanently asserts. It is very hard for empirical research to get to grips with the kind of traumatic withdrawal of affection in early childhood that arises in such an unobtrusive manner. There are no manifest shocks, no significant absences on the part of the parents – and yet a vital withdrawal of affection must have taken place, otherwise this permanent lack of motor control would not be there, the unceasing search for something that has not yet assumed the form of a lost object. Only subsequently, when those affected hurl themselves collectively at TV screens like moths at a flame do we perceive the source of their restlessness. The fact is that long before they have learned how to recognize ‘screen images’ as objects, TV screens as things, they have experienced the attention-absorbing power of the flickering screen, and they have experienced it as deprivation. This deprivation calls for repetition if it is to be overcome. It seeks to quench its desire at its source. In this way, hyperactive children seek peace of mind and support from the very machines that they have experienced diffusely as pre-objective, almost spectral but nevertheless definitive as the source of their restlessness and the obstacle to their inner peace of mind. That is the logic of trauma: ‘I feel drawn to the very thing that horrifies me.’ It was by following this logic that mankind arrived at the first, diffuse and still spectral imagining of the creative spirit, the first sanctification of terror. In the behaviour of hyperactive children, this same logic celebrates its high-tech resurrection.

It does not follow that such children now have relationship problems only with screens and no longer with their fathers and mothers. On the contrary, they suffer because in this force field of a new attentiveness situation, primary interpersonal relations no longer have contours firm enough to provide them with a basic minimum of support and orientation. *The New Maladies of the Soul*, writes Julia Kristeva, ‘have a common denominator: the difficulty of representation. Whether they assume the form of psychological muteness or whether various signals are tried out that are then found to be “hollow” or “artificial”, this missing psychological capacity for representation hampers

sensorial, sexual and intellectual life and may even damage the biological functions.’¹⁴ A significant trend towards these non-representational, fluctuating maladies that scarcely reach the point of assuming the concrete form of a tangible clinical picture has come into being only since this new pattern of attentiveness has started to develop distinct contours. To deny any link between the two is like disputing the fact that infection and fever are connected.

This is not to argue in defence of strict causal links, whether sociological or medical. A sociological argument might assert that ‘children who sit for so-and-so many hours every day in front of the TV screen will be sure to fall victim to ADHD’ – an assertion that can be confirmed or refuted by considering their social position, sex or capacity for mental resistance. A medical explanation might claim that the neurological irregularities sometimes seen in children with ADHD are the true cause of the disability. Neither claim is made here. On the contrary, it is obvious that ADHD is more of a makeshift explanation for a diffuse phenomenon than a distinguishing pathological diagnosis, and that it cannot be properly appreciated in the absence of a comprehensive cultural perspective. ADHD is not simply an illness in a healthy environment. On the contrary, ADHD only exists where a culture with an attention deficit is already pervasive. And it is truly no exaggeration to describe as a law governing the phenomenon of attention deficits, the ‘concentrated distraction’¹⁵ in which a thousand tiny shocks concentrate people’s attention on something that grinds them down. You can defend yourself against this effect, but in the long run you cannot ward it off entirely. Anyone who can count up to three can deduce that whatever currently goes by the name of ADHD – cautious estimates suggest that in Germany around one child in six is affected by it – is no more than an overture: a beginning, a tuning up, an advance warning or anticipation of central themes, without our being able to say with certainty what will follow on. Exactly as in music. By the same token, we should also insert the high-tech attentiveness pattern into a general cultural context if we wish to judge the significance of the caesura it introduces into the history of human repetition. The takeover of identical

¹⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Die neuen Leiden der Seele*, Hamburg: Junius, 1994, p. 15.

¹⁵ See Introduction, p. 13.

human actions by machines and the feedback effect of this on human beings inaugurated a process in which mechanical repetition might be said to turn against its progenitor, organic repetition. With screen images this development entered a new phase. Whereas hitherto only external human muscles were implicated in this process, we now see how internal neurological movements have become embedded in a web of stimulus evasion pathways. To create these pathways Homo sapiens required the major portion of the early phase of his development; he was forced to mobilize unprecedented energies in the process of condensing, displacing and reversing his impulses in the course of countless acts of repetition that were intended to imagine the traumatic terror and to soften, set bounds to, shape and synthesize its diffuse images, and so to develop them into an internal world of ideas. And then came the marvel of a technological imagination that not only accomplished all these tasks with astonishing ease but even succeeded in externalizing images that had arisen inwardly and turning them into a public, eye-catching sight, quite unlike people's internal image-world, which is doomed to lead a blurred, anaemic existence enclosed in the interior space of the mind.

The identification of the anaemic imagination of human beings with the vigorous imagination of technology and the feedback from technology to human beings inaugurated a triumphal progress of the technological imagination. But this led to a new wave of repetition compulsion sweeping over mankind. Screen images, constantly accompanied by sound and occasionally by haptic or olfactory frippery so as to suggest holistic experience, do indeed run round the clock and broadcast their attention-seeking impulses unremittingly, but they no longer repeat the kind of actions that become embedded in rituals and habits. The fact that expensive programme designs are needed for constantly recurrent broadcasts, such as the news and long-running series, shows that the dynamic thrust of mechanical repetition moves in the opposite direction. It is deritualizing, disembedding. This is due to the fact that it has no need of ritualizing and embedding – in stark contrast to the emerging human race of the Paleolithic Age, which had a pressing need of precisely that. The traumatic excitement that had once led to the formation and repetition of rituals, the desire to rid oneself of that excitement and to find peace of mind – all that is alien to the technical compulsion to repeat. It simply unwinds mechanically; without pain, without tiring, without desire, without goals. And the vast power of its need-free functioning and its self-sufficiency is what sets in motion nothing less than the reversal of the logic of human repetition. Until the onset of modernity this

power was engaged in de-escalation, embedding, reassurance. But with the turning of the technological imagination against the human variety a new form of repetition was introduced that starts to reverse the history of repetition up to then. Its de-ritualizing, disembedding effects are starting to convulse the mental foundations of culture that had gradually established themselves from the Paleolithic Age on. The 'archaeology of the mind' is more than just a metaphor.

We may express this in the language of Hesiod's *Theogony*: Zeus, the Titan, who turned against the Titans in a struggle for universal power, and who established the world order by condemning them to a subterranean existence, created a power that sprang from his head ready-made and fully armed. And now this product of his own head has turned against him, just as he turned against the Titans. The only difference is that this new power is unable to establish a higher order of things; it merely decomposes the existing order, erodes the barrier between the superior world and the nether world and damages the original act of repression. This was the act by means of which hallucination overcame itself and broke apart into a fermenting nether world and a bright but anaemic world of ideas, thus converting the mental space into what it has since become.

No doubt, for hard-boiled empiricists there is no such thing as a mental space, because they are never able to touch, see, hear or quantify it for themselves, but respond only to its utterances. Talk of mental space is therefore speculative in the precise sense of the word; speculation can only open it up. But a science that fails to do this does not go beyond a non-conceptualized process of mere registration. It will never even impinge on the primary processes that enable human beings to imagine, think and speak. Primary processes are even less perceptible and tangible – and this must be taken together with what has been said about them here, namely that they are threatened in their existence by the regime of mechanical repetition. No empirical experimentation can provide proof of this. But this conclusion forces itself upon us when we take a closer look at the victorious onward march of the technological imagination.

This imagination can do something that human beings cannot. It can turn what has been imagined inside out. With this it takes over with its superior mechanical skill not only the nervous cost of the human imagination, but even the focal point which ignited that human effort. In the Bible this was known as the 'here and now', in Aristotelian language as 'this here' (*tode ti*). Its archaic form is given by the terrors of

nature and enough has been said in the course of this book to show that only through their traumatizing power and the compulsion to repeat them over and over again so as to master them, can the synthesis of condensation, displacement and reversal be achieved that constituted, first, the ritualistic space of the human imagination and then the mental one. And now, when the terrors of nature have faded and have modulated into a plethora of cultural arrangements where they have become embedded, the technological imagination has taken up the same refrain. Through its unremitting flow of image-shocks it becomes the machine of the 'here and now' or the 'this here'. Each one of these shocks is of course a completely harmless, barely noticeable contact – and yet it does not cease to be a shock. Admittedly, it is a shock that is far from traumatic in itself; but repeated millions and millions of times, it wears us down. In this way the mechanical repetitiveness of the technological imagination grinds its way through mechanically produced mini-shocks so that the human imagination which had once been formed in response to powerful shocks now finds itself being undermined again. Shock against shock, repetition against repetition, imagination against imagination – this retrograde development has set a global process of disembedding in motion. It is a retrograde step in another respect too. The technological imagination seduces us because its images are authentic, sensuous and display-friendly. They are the direct copies of external reality that can be externalized no less directly. In this respect technology puts the human imagination to shame since the latter suffers from the fact that its images cannot easily be produced; at the same time, it retracts one of the great achievements of the human imagination, namely the distinction between representation [*Vorstellung*] and hallucination. Mental images only became so anaemic and abstract when they migrated to the realm of ideas, relegating their own hallucinatory origins to a nether world. Only by virtue of abstract ideas could a technological imagination be conceived that confronts such ideas with their own anaemic nature and, by overwhelming them with a flood of rich, deep, obtrusive images, constantly poses the question: who are you then, you weaklings? Shouldn't you just give up?

Film images, whether documentary or fictional, besiege the observer with hallucinatory intensity. He sees them willy-nilly through the magic eye of the camera that does not distinguish between hallucination and representation. By assimilating his gaze to that of the camera's, he enters into a technically precise dream scenario turned towards the external world – a scenario that in a sense others have dreamed on his

behalf. He has no need to bring it into existence for himself through condensation, displacement and the reversal of latent motifs, and can therefore dream effortlessly because only the outward side of the dream remains: the manifest dream content. There can be no doubt that because of its special resemblance to dream, film has opened up a new dimension of experience. Paul Klee's famous dictum that 'Art does not reproduce the visible, but makes visible'¹⁶ holds good without reservation for the great works of the cinema. But at a high price. Even in its greatest works the technological imagination makes no distinction between hallucination and representation – and inevitably labours at the task of weaning the human imagination from that distinction.

If only the inability to distinguish could be confined to a few relaxing hours in the cinema. We all need such phases of regression, the relaxed, distracted sinking into a condition in which hallucination and representation playfully merge with one another – precisely so as to be able maintain our robust sense of reality. The problem is *concentrated* distraction: the regime. It celebrates its moments of glory in great films. In the lowly spheres of everyday life the regression of representation to hallucination takes the form of weeping and wailing. ADHD children are proof of this. Their ideas are little more than an appendix to what they happen to be experiencing and wanting at any particular moment, and by abandoning themselves to this 'here and now' and immersing themselves in it the more completely the more it twitches and flickers, they approach a new kind of daydream - not the contemplative kind in which you are lost in thought, in which your ideas fade away into images and for moments on end acquire a hallucinatory vividness, but a hectic kind of daydreaming in which dream and waking are so intertwined that those affected by it neither dream intensively nor reach the point of a structured waking. Where the realm of mental activity, in other words the inner mental space, fails to reach a critical mass, the daydream finds itself in a similar plight. It fails to develop into a mental back office where the remains of the day that the waking consciousness has failed to digest can be assimilated so that sleep, which is just as essential to the nervous system, can supervene – the mental equivalent of being made to stay behind after school.

¹⁶ Paul Klee, *Kunst-Lehre*, Leipzig: Reclam, 1987, p. 60.

Benjamin had already noted that ‘In every century mankind is forced to “stay behind”.’¹⁷ Even so, human beings’ ability to ‘stay behind’ has significantly declined in the course of the twentieth century so that they, just like hyperactive children, cannot be so easily forced to do so. More swiftly than could have been imagined, we now see transposed onto a larger scale what Benjamin so accurately foresaw in the context of the miniature format of the film: ‘The train of associations in the person contemplating it is immediately interrupted by new images.’¹⁸ In other words, these images prevent us from dwelling on them, becoming attached to them, digesting them and ‘staying behind’ to contemplate them. If such blocking activity ceases to be sporadic and individual, if it becomes systematic and develops into a general attentiveness pattern this would mean that to be a human being in the modern world just means being up to date. In other words, it would mean bringing to the ‘this here’ of the day the attention it demands. In that event, presence of mind could mean only dedicating the mind to the present – to the here and now. And indeed, updating is the quintessence of modern contemporaneity - the activity to which everyone who maintains a website is condemned. This is the identity card that counts nowadays. Since contemporaneity is always at risk of falling behind the times and has constantly to be brought up to date, updating turns out to be the activity par excellence by which identity is established. It is the high-technology version of Aristotle’s *ti ēn einaī*.

Updating is held to be the very quintessence of realism and competence. Its success consists in reducing reality to topicality. But by that very fact it unexpectedly approaches the mode of perception characteristic of dream, which knows only the present and recognizes only what takes place *now*. The mode of perception characteristic of film, a manifest dream content without a latent mental ‘back office’, becomes transferred to the perception of all actualities wherever the attentiveness

¹⁷ See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999 p. 118. [See also Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5.1, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982, p. 177]

¹⁸ Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of its Reproducibility’, p. 132.

pattern prevails: in the case of stock exchange speculators, who constantly monitor the rise and fall of share prices on their screens, this leads to the sort of waking dream state to be found in children concentrating on their computer games. Notorious restlessness, a constant state of tension and distractedness are the unfailing attributes of such activities. And so it is inevitable that attention deficits and hyperactivity syndromes should make themselves felt in the updating avant-garde both on the stock exchange and in the higher echelons of management, at least as much as in hyperactive children, only in an incomparably more comfortable way and at a far more exalted level. Nevertheless, *les extrêmes se touchent* and their common feature is the rapid decline in the ability to 'stay behind' – both literally and figuratively. Updating, we might say, is the disembedding of mental staying power.

The current disembedding process manifests itself to social critics chiefly as a deregulation process of neo-liberal capitalism. It was not possible in the framework of this book to treat the extent to which that capitalism has eroded social and cultural institutions, as well as the forms of government, the family, enterprise and production. *The Philosophy of Dreams* had to start by digging a little deeper, namely into the effects of this process as they are reflected in the archaeology of the mind. It had to relate the Paleolithic Age to high technology in order to gain a perspective on the world-historical regression that the process of disembedding has initiated. Hegel spoke of 'a retreat into the ground'¹⁹ It has gradually become clear how prophetic his words were. To be sure, this retreat is still in its initial stages, but even now we can see that the mechanical compulsion to repeat, the strength of concentrated distraction, not only cannot be halted by any social and cultural institution but that it does not stop at that profound stratum of the mind that has shown itself in the course of this book to be the hallucinatory grounds of all mental and linguistic activity. This is what Freud called 'primitive thought'. We might also call it 'dream power'. The entire drama of this dream power should be outlined. Having already been dethroned in the Paleolithic Age, relegated from the quintessence of mental power to its nether regions, it is now threatened with dissolution – ironically by its most progressive children. The dreamlike, hallucinatory image sequences beamed out endlessly by a global image machine make living dream power

¹⁹ Hegel, *Science of Logic*, p. 71.

look outmoded; its images look anaemic in comparison, its activity a lame attempt to catch up, never up to date, always getting to grips with events when they are already over and done with, forever too late, incomplete and confused. Dream power versus dream power, high-tech simulated dream power as opposed to antiquated living dream power – that is the paradoxical constellation in which the elementary human ability to ‘stay behind’ threatens to disappear. However, a culture that is no longer capable of ‘staying behind’ puts our mental space as such into question – the only scope for ‘deferring experience’²⁰ (*Nachträglichkeit*) that has ever existed in the natural course of history. Without such a process of deferred experience, such things as patience, devotion, foresight or precautionary action would not exist. We begin to grasp the huge contribution made by the scope available for deferred action only when it has ceased to be self-evident because it has slipped into a global regime of ‘concentrated distraction’ and a barrage of sensations clamouring for attention have rained down on it as if with a countless, never-ending series of pinpricks. And only when this process is viewed in an overall cultural perspective do we gain a sharpened sense of the pace of its development. How many millennia were needed before the traumatic rituals of early mankind could be embedded in more temperate repetitive processes! And how much of this has been stirred up once more in the course of a few decades! Even if the current excavation of the archaeology of the mind were to last for another three or four centuries before reaching the crunch point, that would be breathtakingly fast.

Global disembedding, however, is no monocausal, one-dimensional process any more than the embedding of the traumatic compulsion to repeat had been for the rituals and institutions of culture. And it is no fate. From the very outset, it has called forth countervailing forces. Fundamentalism is one of the most sinister. The mindless insistence on staying as we are has been as shocking as dubious rituals and articles of faith.²¹ But there are other opposing forces as well. Faint, if hopeful, signs of these are sustainable projects on the part of anti-globalizing aid organizations; long-term resistance by teachers to the advance of concentrated distraction in the educational

²⁰ See Chapter 2, p. 132 above.

²¹ See Christoph Türcke, *Fundamentalismus – maskierter Nihilismus*, Springer: zu Klampen, 2003.

system or citizens' action groups in favour of community-based 'staying behind' projects or of visits to exhibitions and reading experiences. Such developments show that disembedding can also provoke re-embedding. 'Staying behind' can be learned through practice, indeed in an age when it is under threat, it can become a virtue to an unprecedented degree. In contrast, a culture that does not tolerate 'staying behind' is itself intolerable. It starts to become feverish like a man who after waking cannot get back to sleep and finds himself forsaken by dream, the guardian of sleep. But where there is no dream, there is no peace of mind, no contemplation and no hope.