> *With [the] tremendous development of technology, a completely new poverty has descended on mankind. […] Indeed (let's admit it), our poverty of experience is not merely poverty on the personal level, but poverty of experience in general. Hence, a new kind of barbarism.*
>
> Walter Benjamin[1]
>
> *Technology was already an analysis and reconstruction of perception, already an artificial perception […] Let us extend this experience in the form of an experiment within a matrix that imitates the photographic apparatus and what it hides or houses within its entrails, an experimental dispositive of the transformation of the most intellectual of perceptions that must abandon its machinery and determinism.*
>
> François Laruelle[2]

Benjamin's claim that modern technologies reveal the poverty of the conventional notion of experience, and thus initiate a new kind barbarism, appears at first sight to be a negative judgement of the effects of modern life. However, he uses the term 'barbarism' to indicate a new, positive, concept, proposing that the 'poverty of experience' does something productive for the barbarian:

> It forces him to start from scratch; to make a new start; […] Among the great creative spirits, there have always been the ones who begin by clearing a tabula rasa. They need a drawing table; they were constructors.[3]

Benjamin cites philosophers (Descartes), scientists (Albert Einstein), avant-garde artists (the Cubists, Paul Klee) and science-fiction writers (Paul Scheerbart) as taking such 'barbaric' approaches to their respective creative practices, indicating that poverty of experience can yield constructive results across diverse regions of knowledge production. This article seeks to add another name to this list – that of François Laruelle – and to explore the ways in which Laruelle's contemporary experiments in 'non-philosophical' or 'non-standard' thinking similarly constitute a levelling of the grounds of thought which radicalizes experience, and resonate with Benjamin's own ideas about experience and technology. Laruelle characterizes his theoretical stance as a 'heresy' in relation to standard philosophy, and it perhaps seems 'barbaric' to some;[4] indeed, Jacques Derrida suggests that Laruelle's unorthodox method holds what appears as a kind of 'terror' over philosophy.[5] However, the ultimate aim of Laruelle's heresy is to introduce a radical democracy into thinking, setting philosophical concepts into a broader paradigm by supposing the equality of all genres of thought. Here, I will argue that non-philosophy can thus be understood as an example of the *positive* barbarism that Benjamin calls for.

In my discussion of Laruelle I will primarily use his writings about aesthetics, specifically his notion of 'non-photography' or 'photo-fiction', as a lens through which to view his non-philosophical approach. Laruelle's non-standard aesthetics takes a practice of creative production – e.g. photography – and uses it as the model for a 'theoretical installation' by conjugating it with philosophy using an axiomatic matrix. Thus, in the example of non-photography, rather than building a *drawing table* it is a new *camera* that Laruelle constructs

– a transcendental instrument that allows us to view the manifestation of philosophical concepts scientifically in order to understand their real phenomenality. Non-photography is an interesting area of focus in this context because Laruelle's epistemological deployment of technologically mediated perception can be placed in a certain constellation with Benjamin's writings on photographic media, where the latter are understood as a surface of inscription for the experience of thought. Thus, by superposing their respective understandings of the photographic image as a technology that conditions perception, I aim to render the immanent relations between their thinking apparent. My aim is to demonstrate that, despite the resolutely transcendental and unworldly orientation of Laruelle's epistemology, it can be utilized in theorizing the contemporary media environment – enabling us to consider formally the effect of digital media technologies on experience.

Laruelle's non-philosophical approach begins from a simple axiomatic ground, on which he builds new theoretical installations that facilitate a different vision of emergent concepts. This axiomatic flattening of the terrain of thought is premised on Laruelle's identification of an invariant structure at the kernel of philosophy which he casts as the auto-legitimating syntax that authorizes philosophy's purchase upon the real. He calls this structure the 'Philosophical Decision', and describes it as 'a fractional matrix in 2/3 terms [which] gives itself an interiority and an exteriority, an immanence and a transcendence *simultaneously*, in a synthetic or hierarchical structure'.[6] This is to say that the manner in which philosophy grasps its object(s) makes a scission in the immanence of the real in order to bind the latter to its own transcendent structures, and in this way philosophy co-constitutes what it aims to theorize. However, this procedure is concealed from philosophy's vision by virtue of the latter's own critical reflexivity; thus the process begets a self-perpetuating circularity of reason. Having 'discovered' this formal invariant, Laruelle experiments with how thought might proceed without entering into the vicious circle – using an axiomatic intervention in order to suspend the authority of philosophy, its pretension to be a sufficient means of grasping the real, and instead to think *according to* the real that is foreclosed to thought.

Laruelle characterizes his suspension of philosophical sufficiency as a generic 'degrowth of philosophy' which might appear, superficially, as a kind of *impoverishment*. However, the aim of this procedure is to 'reduce philosophy *to the state of a productive force*', in order to redeploy its concepts in the context of a more immanent experience of thinking.[7] In this sense, Laruelle can be seen as a 'constructor', although it is important to note that *what* he constructs are not conceptual images of the empirical world, but rather syntactic apparatuses that allow us to view the relationship between concepts, and the immanence that is their enabling condition, in a new light. Consequently, whilst the axiom from which non-philosophy departs is that 'radical immanence' (also called 'the One', on account of its constitutive indivisibility) is the *real cause* of thought, non-philosophical practice requires some existing conceptual material to serve as a contingent *occasional cause* for its pragmatics. Essentially, then, what non-philosophy produces is a new vision – or, a more radical *experience* – of extant concepts. And in order to do this, the conceptual material must be prepared by being subject to a rigorous description.

Thus, before examining Laruelle's non-photographic apparatus, I will first outline the different levels at which the concept of 'experience' operates in Benjamin's thought, and what it means for experience in general to become *impoverished*. The notion of experience is arguably indispensable to understanding Benjamin's *oeuvre* as a whole – Howard Caygill observes that whilst Benjamin's diverse writings can be grouped into distinct phases, the theme of experience, which is evident throughout, provides a thread of continuity.[8] I will

follow Caygill in using the problematic of experience as an entry-point into Benjamin's thought, with the aim of bringing to light the ways in which it resonates with Laruelle's thinking, and the radicalized notion of experience that non-philosophy proposes. As I explore the notion of experience, I will indicate the ways in which its general impoverishment relates to Benjamin's understanding of the perceptual apparatus of modernity and the image of thought manifested by technologies of reproduction. I will further consider how this perceptual set-up is affected by contemporary digital media, in order to lay the ground for my consideration of Laruelle's non-standard photographic installation and its relevance to the digital sphere.

Benjamin: Modern Experience and the Aura of Photographic Media

In a quotidian sense, 'experience' can be understood as the wisdom that accumulates with age. At the beginning of 'Experience and Poverty' (1933) Benjamin writes, with an apparent nostalgia, of a prior time when 'everyone knew precisely what experience was: older people had always passed it on to younger ones', and he proposes that it has since 'fallen in value, amid a generation which from 1914 to 1918 had to experience some of the most monstrous events in the history of the world'.[9] As the essay develops, it becomes evident that his nostalgic tone is somewhat ironic; nevertheless this opening passage suggests that the devaluation of experience is, on one level, an historical occurrence brought about by a specific configuration of technological invention and socio-political upheaval. The Great War and its aftermath constituted an event which contradicted the inherited wisdom of the older generation in multiple ways: 'strategic experience had been contravened by positional warfare; economic experience by the inflation; physical experience, by hunger; moral experiences, by the ruling powers'.[10] In this sense, 'experience' is presented as an engagement with the empirical world. Benjamin traces what is 'monstrous' about the events of the War that contributed to the historical decline of this traditional concept of experience, to the fast pace of technological development which transformed the theatre of war beyond all recognition with devastating effects on those in the field:

> A generation that had gone to school in horse-drawn streetcars now stood in the open air, amid a landscape in which nothing was the same except the clouds and, at its center, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body.[11]

Against such a backdrop, the authority of age becomes somewhat hollow, and a rift between generations occurs – Benjamin asks 'who will even attempt to deal with young people by giving them the benefit of their experience?', and observes a decline in the art of storytelling: the old proverbs having lost their relevance to those who 'returned from the front in silence, [n]ot richer but poorer in *communicable* experience'.[12] Thus, if experience has been impoverished this does not mean that the younger generation had somehow experienced less than their forebears, but rather that what they had experienced *resisted communicability* because it exceeded all available frameworks for making sense of the world. The poverty of experience therefore manifests itself as an excess over communication which brings about an irrevocable shift in mass society's world-view; and this excess requires theoretical invention if it is to be brought into understanding.

As a deeply political writer whose thinking is informed by Marxist dialectical materialism, the question of history inheres as a substrate in much of Benjamin's thought and it is useful to

situate his notion of experience – and the event of its impoverishment – in relation to his understanding of temporality. Benjamin conceives the passage of time not as a homogeneous continuum of progress, but instead as a constellation of moments of 'now-time' (*Jetztzeit*) 'in which time stands still and has come to a stop'.[13] Thus he offers a view of history as a series of images, each of which causes a perceptual shock and so holds a revolutionary potential. When viewed together, these images constitute 'one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage'.[14] In accordance with this view of history as a single heap of carnage, Benjamin proposes that the role of the historian is not to catalogue the ever-accumulating data which fills an empty time-line, but rather to use a 'constructivist principle' to identify constellations between past and present in order to unleash the force of their revolutionary potential, and usher in a better future. Benjamin calls the constellations that crystallize between past and present 'dialectical images'.[15] They can be understood as thought-figures that hold a utopian potential because they are able to rupture the temporal continuum and so supply 'a unique *experience* with the past'.[16] The notion of experience used here is quite different from that of the wisdom that is gathered with age. The 'traditional' concept of experience is analogous with the additive historical method Benjamin critiques, as both presuppose a principle of accumulation. In contrast, the 'unique experience with the past' Benjamin proposes is a constructive act of philosophical vision – one which can be identified with his positive notion of barbarism inasmuch as it disregards progressive historical narratives in order to build a future upon the blank slate of an image disjoined from its chronological context.

The *visual* logic of Benjamin's historical method is relevant, here, because it is formally related to his conception of photography. Eduardo Cadava characterizes the structure of both history and photography in Benjamin as 'citational', and points towards a convergence between these two practices in the latter's thought.[17] Conceiving historical practice in terms of the medium of photography brings the material techniques that make up the technical dimension of the process of memorization to the fore. Moreover, it casts the unique experience with the past proposed by Benjamin as a *photography of history*. Consequently, Cadava argues that for Benjamin 'photography […] is a question not only of historiography, of the history of the concept of memory, but also of the history of the formation of concepts in general'.[18] Accordingly, Cadava suggests that the term 'photography' acts as a substitute for 'concept' in Benjamin's thought, thus identifying thinking as a visual experience: 'there can be no philosophy without photography'.[19]

Benjamin's emphasis on the visual dimension of thought is motivated by a desire to transform the experience of thinking that has been dominant in critical philosophy since Kant. Caygill argues that Benjamin's thought as a whole can be seen as a programme for such a renewal of experience – one which would challenge 'the very self-definition of philosophy'.[20] The matrix for this project is laid out in his early essay 'On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy' (1918). Benjamin argues that Kantian epistemology makes 'decisive mistakes' because its analytic separation of intuition from reason produces an unproductive metaphysics which hollows out the experience of thinking; whereas the task for the coming philosophy is to overcome this 'separation of knowledge from the realm of experience' so that the latter can be inhabited 'in its full freedom and depth'.[21] Caygill states that as his philosophy developed:

> Benjamin's objections to Kant, whether in the theory of knowledge, ethics and politics, or aesthetics, increasingly focused on the limits set to the concept of experience

informing the critical philosophy. Allied with this is the growing conviction that the restriction of the concept of experience is also a restriction of philosophy itself.[22]

Kant's notion of experience is reductive because it posits an idealized observer according to a logic – derived from Newtonian physics – which is ultimately mechanical, and rests on an assumption that the rational subject is defined by fixed forms of intuition. In contrast to this empirical model, as Graham MacPhee explains, Benjamin sees phenomenal objects as encoding 'different modes of experience, while the parameters of human perception through which they are apprehended change over time'.[23] This is to say that Benjamin understands human intuition to be historically variable, from which it follows that the transcendental structure of Kantian critical philosophy is itself but one possible surface of inscription in a broader speculative paradigm: 'a historically determinant response to the condition of modern experience'.[24]

The challenge for the philosophy to come, then, is to elaborate an epistemological framework that can set the transcendental architectonics of critical thought in a broader speculative terrain, and thus account for these historical transformations. Yet, in accordance with the constructivist historical method outlined above, a developmental historical continuum cannot serve as the basis for this theorization. Caygill suggests that Benjamin's early attempts to grapple with this problematic might be judged a 'cautionary failure' due to their lack of a suitable method for negotiating the relation between the *transcendental* (understood as the conditions of legibility that constitute a surface of inscription for thought) and the *speculative* (which comprises all such possible surfaces, and can hence be understood as an immanent absolute).[25] However, these early attempts remain important because they 'establish the tension between visual, linguistic and rhythmical aspects of experience which spans the entirety of Benjamin's *oeuvre*'.[26] Caygill suggests that later articulations of the expanded field of experience, which employ an empirically oriented mode of immanent critique, are more successful. These writings do not attempt to present the immanent absolute directly, in order to avoid the risk of asserting a totalizing, quasi-Hegelian metaphysical spirit. Nevertheless, this immanence inheres in Benjamin's thinking as a 'diacritical or forensic principle' which underpins his engagement with the empirical world.[27]

One such empirical engagement can be found in Benjamin's writings on photographic media, which can be read as a situated negotiation of the expanded field of transcendental experience. MacPhee observes that for Benjamin, modernity is characterized in general by a 'decay of experience (*Erfahrung*) […] its dissolution into "lived experience" (*Erlebnis*), and […] the shattering of tradition'.[28] Photographic reproduction participates in this decline of traditional experience by setting up a technical apparatus, which marginalizes the role of living subjects in the inscription and reinscription of images. Accordingly, viewing the structure of perception through a photographic lens offers a framework for theorizing the impoverishment of experience. Samuel Weber observes that the photographic apparatus '"takes up" the "given" and does three very strange things to it': firstly, 'it apprehends it in the way a policeman apprehends a suspect', thereby bringing the intrinsic movement of the given to a stop and submitting it to extrinsic interventions; secondly, it allows the elements of the arrested object to be 'dislocated and relocated, broken down […] and recombined'; thirdly it places the product of these initial operations 'into circulation' in the media sphere.[29] The moment of arrest at the beginning of this process, which Benjamin describes as a 'posthumous shock' imparted to the instant by the camera, shares its dynamic with the shock of the dialectical image delineated above as the potentially revolutionary experience of history.[30] Weber notes that the German word for still photos is *Momentaufnahmen,*

indicat[ing] that what is ultimately arrested, 'taken up', broken down, spliced back together again and then let loose… is the *moment* itself. The 'time' of reproducibility is that of this 'posthumously shocked', immobilized, dispersed, recollected and finally forgotten moment.[31]

Yet, Weber notes that the notion of shock is an ambivalent one in Benjamin's thought, indicating both a traumatic incursion and the defensive response to it; hence this experience is not a comfortable one to inhabit, nor does it guarantee a revolutionary political outcome. This ambivalence runs throughout Benjamin's discussions of photographically mediated perception, as evidenced by the complexity of his notion of 'aura', which designates the sense of uniqueness that gives traditional artworks their apparent value. He proposes that photography inaugurates a 'new way of seeing' that answers the modern inclination 'to bring things *closer* to us' in order to overcome this irreducible uniqueness, thereby suggesting that the technological reproduction of images has the potential to elude the whole sphere of 'authenticity' that underwrites the discourse of art.[32] The concept of aura, which is rooted in ritual, is loaded with the same sense of historical continuity as the traditional notion of experience that declines with modernity. It thus tends to reinforce the dominant political ideology, which justifies the social inequities of the present with the promise of progress. In this sense, the shock imparted by the photographic apparatus has the potential to yield positive socio-political change by rupturing the linear logic of the progressive historical narrative, thus actively taking the destruction of aura as an opportunity 'to establish a new configuration of experience' in an act of 'affirmative nihilism'.[33]

Thus, the use of a technical apparatus to mediate representation makes possible 'a productive use of the human being's self-alienation'.[34] Photographic representation estranges the subject from his or her appearance as before a mirror, but this 'mirror image' has become detachable and transportable, and so holds the potential to be re-contextualized. Benjamin suggests that this process holds the possibility of a psychical immunization against the hazards inherent to the experience of the modern world – and this constitutes the positive aspect of the perceptual shift that emerges with photography. The ambivalence of modern experience, however, is made apparent by the empirical realities of a media sphere which reverses the revolutionary potential of the technological image, and instead propagates the status quo. Benjamin observes the masses chaotically embracing the 'oppressive wealth of ideas that has been spread among people, or rather has swamped them entirely'.[35] This tendency, which can be characterized as a 'reactive, passive nihilism', is arguably only intensified by contemporary digital media.[36] The technological configuration that connects ubiquitous mobile camera devices with web-based platforms that facilitate the near-instantaneous sharing of photographs across the globe has accelerated the appropriation and recontextualiztion of images exponentially. Thus, as Matteo Stocchetti argues, if 'digital visuality is a (political) form of communication that participates (reflects, affects, etc.) with the ideological conditions of a given society', then the questions raised by Benjamin about the socio-political effects of the media apparatus continue to be relevant in the digital age.[37]

A closer examination of the notion of aura reveals the mechanism through which the revolutionary potential of the apparatus of reproduction is reversed into a passive and reactive nihilism. Benjamin defines 'aura' as a 'strange weave of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, no matter how close it may be'.[38] This introduces a spatial dimension into the experience of the image – an irreducible lacuna between viewer and viewed. As such, whilst photography and film answer to a desire amongst the *present-day masses to get closer*

to things, and their equally passionate concern for overcoming each thing's uniqueness by assimilating it as a reproduction', this closeness remains a mediated one, which maintains a certain detachment.[39] Thus, objects that are recontextualized through the machinations of the reproductive apparatus, whilst being subject to a certain 'lived experience', are not incorporated into the full depth of 'experience proper'. This is not because the represented object lacks presence, but because the apparatus of mediation imparts its own aura upon whatever is represented through it: it brings the object closer, but the latter is marked by the dislocating process through which it has been assimilated. Consequently, as Weber remarks, aura is:

> Reproduced in and by the very media responsible for its 'decline'. For what is clear in Benjamin's discussion, though he does not say it in so many words, and what has become increasingly evident ever since, is that *aura thrives in its decline* and that reproductive media are particularly conducive to this thriving.[40]

Thus, whilst the surface on which images are inscribed is reconfigured by the photographic apparatus, shifting the transcendental grounds of perception, vision continues to be organized by an auratic distancing, an experience of scission.

The digital infrastructure through which images are captured and circulated today has not only accelerated the process of their recontextualization, but has arguably changed the nature of the photograph such that, rather than functioning primarily as an indexical representation of an arrested moment, it becomes a networked interface. As Daniel Rubinstein remarks, 'the transition towards electronically produced and algorithmically computed images suggests that the non-visual aspects of images are at least as important to meaning-creation as visual qualities', and this shift further reconfigures the perceptual apparatus.[41] Thus Rubinstein argues that, whilst Benjamin's meditations on 'the crisis of experience brought about by the proliferation of technology and the technology of proliferation' can contribute to our understanding of the issues that arise from the digital turn, his writings on photography are less applicable to the liminal space of the networked image.[42] An image which has been encoded as data holds the potential to be materialized as a near-infinite number of copies simultaneously, and this complicates the experience of photographic space. Stephen Kennedy argues that the simultaneity of reproduction, which appears to collapse geographical distance entirely, renders digital space *chaotic*, such that 'visual dimensions relating to extension and proximity' become unreliable.[43] Thus digital space resists visual representation, and this heightens the need to develop innovative theoretical approaches to account for the perceptual configuration it generates.

In socio-political terms, the networking of images arguably continues the modern decline of experience, and indeed further reduces it. Aden Evens suggests that digital culture can be theorized in a general sense by reading its specific manifestations (e.g. photographic images) as 'an expression of the technological formalisms that undergird it'.[44] Departing from the fundamental technique that allows digital technologies to function, he concludes that the digital has its own ontology – its own way of being – and that this comes to affect the human relationships that are mediated by these technologies. Digital tools utilize a logic of binary abstraction that has the effect of 'draw[ing] off difference [and] set[ting] aside the particularities that mark each thing as singular, instead treating a thing as a reproducible arrangement of generalizable properties'.[45] Both the objects that are represented digitally and the operations that construct or manipulate them consist of the same code, and are governed by the same syntactic rules. Hence, the protocols that facilitate the capture of information,

and its infinite convertibility into other forms, also limit the choices of action available to the user – and so have a determining influence on the ways the technology is deployed. Evens suggests that this has brought about a qualitative shift in experience, whereby 'the users of digital technologies come to behave like those technologies, to share their ontology', because they have no option but to partake in the same logic of abstraction as the tools they use.[46]

Yet the perceptual reconfiguration wrought by digital media arguably has other, even more subtle, ideological dimensions. Johanna Drucker argues that the popular understanding of digital objects, as ontologically defined by an ideational substrate that can exist independently of its material manifestation, is an ideologically loaded one with longstanding philosophical precedents.[47] She suggests that the assumption that digital images exist first as code, which is mathematical in its logic, lends them a quasi-scientific positivist authority which should be questioned – because an image does not exist as such without a material surface of inscription (whether this 'materiality' is empirically manifest, as on a computer screen, or whether it is conceptual, such as the speculative surfaces of inscription that Benjamin attempted to articulate). She claims that 'the instantiation of the form in material can be usefully opposed to the concept of image/form and code storage as a single, unitary truth', thus proposing a materialist conception of digital images.[48] Drucker's discussion brings to light the way in which the conceptual framing of data as fundamentally inaccessible to phenomenological perception cleaves digital objects internally. In Laruelle's terms, the ontological presuppositions about digital images that Drucker is critiquing instantiate a decisional logic which affects our perception of what we see – the conceptual distinction between the manifest image and its ideational substrate instantiating a new structural distance, thus creating a specifically digital mode of aura.

Laruelle: Radicalizing the Photographic Apparatus

For Laruelle, all images – when viewed in the standard mode – instantiate a separation from the real which they claim to represent; in this sense digital media do little to alter what is essentially decisional in the logic of images in general, whether digital or analogue, material or conceptual. Thus Laruelle could not be characterized as a theorist of digital culture as such. Indeed, Alexander R. Galloway casts his thought as being 'against the digital' inasmuch as the decisional structure that the former identifies at the kernel of philosophy is a discretizing, and hence essentially digital one.[49] We can relate this discretizing logic formally to that which undergirds the digital realm. Moreover, as outlined above, Laruelle's analysis of the *philosophical Decision* identifies it as an auto-constituting circle; and Evens diagnoses a similarly recursive circularity in the logic of the digital, which 'both calls forth the binary code as the essential tool of its ultimate abstraction and also derives its power of abstraction from the binary code'.[50] Laruelle's non-standard approach is therefore useful in theorizing digital media because its axiomatic framework, which offers a way of viewing the production of *conceptual* images that avoids making a decisional cut, can be similarly applied to the formal logic of the digital. What is interesting about his framework (and why it constitutes a productive shift in perception) is that he proposes *using a method of abstraction* to see beyond the scission inherent in (philosophical) representation. This employment of abstraction as a means of thinking according to the real is Laruelle's particular innovation.

Laruelle does not produce new conceptual representations that abstract from reality in the way a digital photo reduces its object to code, but rather uses abstraction to construct models for viewing the manifestation of concepts in a more immanent – more real – mode. He

proposes that 'techniques of creation which are other than philosophical' can be introduced into non-philosophy to aid in this construction.[51] The name 'non-photography' indicates one such theoretical installation, which utilizes a notion of automated vision modelled on that of the camera. If all conceptual representations make an image of the world, then technological forms of image capture serve to both analyse and reconstruct our understanding of the process of conceptualization by building an artificial apparatus of perception, and Laruelle seeks to radicalize this technical process by building an 'experimental *dispositif*' that 'imitates the photographic apparatus'.[52] Thus we can identify a certain accord between him and Benjamin, insofar as both see technological innovation – and in particular photography – as a potentially productive development that works alongside philosophical thought to construct a 'new way of seeing'.[53]

Yet, when viewed according to Laruelle's non-philosophical stance, Benjamin's theorization of photography ultimately remains 'decisional' in its logic. As we have seen, whist the reproductive apparatus reconfigures modern perception, facilitating the decline of traditional experience and disrupting the temporal continuum, the auratic 'apparition of a distance' is not reduced in this shift but rather reinscribed as a constitutive feature of the medium itself. The auratic structure that Benjamin identifies as a persistent feature of our perceptual relation to images, characterized as it is by an irreducible scission between viewer and viewed, is formally isomorphic with the philosophical Decision. If photography, thus conceived, serves as a model for the materialization of thought, then this thought too will be marked by the same decisional structure. This, perhaps, explains at a formal level the ambivalence of Benjamin's thinking about the 'shock' experience of photographic perception and the political value of technological image-media – decisionally grounded reasoning is condemned to an auto-constitutive circularity.

Laruelle's formal analysis of the structures of sufficiency that legitimate both photography and philosophy shows that they share the same 'fetishism' inasmuch as the figurative conception which 'impregnates the theory of photography' is nothing other than the 'realist illusion proper to philosophy'.[54] Thus, philosophy and photography can be seen to share an immanent – if abstract – identity. Hence Laruelle characterizes philosophy as having been constituted in an '*onto-photo-logical*' flash, long before the invention of the camera.[55] This image of philosophical thought resonates with Cadava's observation that in Benjamin's thought 'there can be no philosophy without photography'.[56] But where Benjamin produces a 'photography of history', John Ó Maoilearca explains that Laruelle's non-standard aesthetics 'materializes […] thought through a photography of philosophy'.[57]

It is through the adoption of the axiomatic method and a description of the immanent vision that manifests itself according to these axioms that Laruelle effectuates the suspension of philosophical/photographic realism, and this is arguably where the 'barbarity' of his thought resides: in order to find a non-specular paradigm for thinking he looks to a form of reasoning that, as Ray Brassier remarks, '"continental" philosophy has consistently belittled and demeaned as un-thinking'.[58] This is not to say that philosophy has never appealed to axioms – Benjamin identifies Descartes as one of the 'great creative spirits' because he 'required nothing more to launch his entire philosophy than the certitude "I think therefore I am"'; i.e. an axiom concerning the nature of Being.[59] However, Laruelle contrasts Descartes' 'ontological axiomatization' with his own *transcendental* usage of axiomatics as 'a theoretical instrument', rather than a foundation.[60] Thus, his use of axiomatization is more indebted to science than to philosophy. Much as non-Euclidean geometry suspends the parallel postulate in order to construct new spatial models that set the existing ones in a

broader paradigm, non-philosophy departs from the suspension of the fundamental presupposition that formally governs philosophy's relation to the real (its auto-constituting sufficiency) in order to use its concepts differently – without, however, negating them.[61] Consequently, Laruelle states that his theory 'must remain an explicative theoretical hypothesis', because an axiomatic, by definition, can be neither proved nor disproved; it can be tested on the basis of whether it constitutes a consistent system, but cannot form a sufficient ground for truth-claims concerning the world beyond itself.[62] Hence non-philosophy is an immanent mode of thinking; it remains within itself in principle, but it also remains an abstract construct.

In the context of non-photography, this remaining-within is described in terms of a seeing *in-photo*. Laruelle asks: 'A photo as such – what would that be, what would it manifest – not through the object it shows, but *qua* photo that shows it?'[63] That is, he stops looking *at* the photo and instead looks *through* the photo, in effect asking what the experience of vision would be for the photo itself. Thus he uses abstraction to construct a fictional scenario in which the force of seeing belongs to the photo. If we use this hypothetical scenario to look again at Benjamin's analysis of the perceptual shift brought about by the technological reproducibility of images, which estranges the modern subject by detaching the mirror-like image from its spatio-temporal situation and allowing it to be re-contextualized, it becomes apparent that the non-photographic vision radicalizes this estrangement inasmuch as it no longer presupposes a phenomenological subject at all. According to Laruelle's non-standard view, the 'subject' is nothing other than a lived experience of thinking that is determined by immanence.

Thus we return to the question of experience. Essentially, Laruelle's non-standard usage of photography seeks to analyse the experience of philosophical thinking, and to superpose it with another, more radical one. It is through these contrasting notions of experience that the constellation with Benjamin's thought becomes most apparent. In 'On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy', Benjamin states that 'all genuine experience rests upon the pure "epistemological (transcendental) consciousness"', then goes on to gloss the experience that corresponds to this transcendental consciousness as needing to be 'stripped of everything subjective' because it is 'different in kind from any empirical consciousness'.[64] Similarly, Laruelle states that: 'The only rigorous formalization of which thought will be capable […] is necessarily pure-transcendental rather than empirico-transcendental', and thus treats all worldly knowledge as simple material 'for experience'.[65] Thus we can see an accord between their projects, each taking a constructivist approach to the transcendental problematic of how to relate these two levels of experience. Benjamin proposes the task of philosophy as: 'the discovery or creation of [a] concept of knowledge which […] relat[es] experience *exclusively* to the transcendental consciousness'.[66] Yet, as Caygill suggests, he lacked an appropriate method for manifesting this relation to the immanent absolute and experiencing the transcendental – instead approaching the problematic of the structure of perception through an empirically-oriented immanent critique. Yet critique remains decisional in its structure, hence inscribed with an auratic distance. Laruelle's use of fiction as a scientific tool, in contrast, enables us to envisage precisely the kind of pure-transcendental experience that Benjamin hypothesizes – exiting the ambivalent circularity of decisional reasoning by supposing that thought can *depart from* the immanent absolute, rather than forever trying (and failing) to reach it. His non-standard axiomatic suspends the empirical sufficiency of the photographic apparatus and so frees it to be used as a lens through which to manifest an immanent image-(of)-thought.

Conclusion

This in-photo vision remains an abstract construct with no pretension to be true, and Laruelle's non-photographic thought is thus a kind of theoretical 'science-fiction'. Moreover, as pure-transcendental it does not serve to represent the empirical world. Yet, because it offers a new vision of whatever theoretical materials are utilized as its occasional cause – one which suspends their authority over the real without altering their content – it enables conceptual objects to manifest themselves without dominating what they represent. Thus the effects of Laruelle's usage of abstraction are quite the opposite of the reductionism identified by Evens in digital logic – rather than conditioning users' mode of being by narrowing the available choices for action (and hence thought), Laruelle offers an image of the subject of thought that is generic in the sense that it is without predicates. The estrangement brought about by the non-photographic apparatus thus radicalizes Benjamin's idea that technology has a potential role in immunizing us against the psychological hazards of contemporary life, and offers a utopian experience of thought in the now.

Benjamin would perhaps have approved of Laruelle's transcendental radicalization of science fiction. He refers to Scheerbart, whose 'barbarism' was to propose a new architecture built almost entirely from glass.[67] He suggests that that this glass architecture would transform culture, opening society up because transparent structures would alter modes of conceptualization. Scheerbart prescribed the 'avoidance of the quicksilver effects of mirrors', which he saw as being 'dangerous – like poison'.[68] Laruelle's non-specular construct of photographic vision utilizes the qualities of glass – which Benjamin observes is a 'hard smooth material to which nothing can be fixed' – as a transcendental lens with which to see *through*.[69] Glass maintains the separation of realms (the philosophical from the immanent-real) but allows a superposed vision which creatively resets our relation to – or rather, our *identity with* – both. Benjamin states that 'Objects made of glass have no "aura"'.[70] Neither does the fiction of the non-photographic apparatus; this is why its abstract deployment of technology to re-envision philosophy is a positive barbarism with a utopian potentiality adequate to the digital age.

Notes

[1] Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," 732.
[2] Laruelle, *Photo-Fiction*, 33.
[3] Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," 732.
[4] On the notion of heresy, see Laruelle, "Non-Philosophy as Heresy."
[5] In Derrida and Laruelle, "Controversy over the Possibility of a Science of Philosophy," 74, Derrida remarks: 'I have to admit that, with regard to *polemos* and terror, there were moments while I was listening to your description of philosophical terror as constitutive of philosophy, etc., when I was sometimes tempted to see in your own description a rigorous analysis of what you were in fact doing here'.
[6] Laruelle, *Principles of Non-Philosophy*, 4; for a full elucidation of this structure see "Analytic of Philosophical Decision," 231–249.
[7] Laruelle, "Degrowth of Philosophy," 331.
[8] Caygill, *Benjamin: The Colour of Experience*, 12.
[9] Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," 731.
[10] Ibid., 732.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid., 731 (my emphasis).
[13] Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 253, 254.
[14] Ibid., 249.

[15] Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 462.

[16] Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 254 (my emphasis).

[17] See Cadava, *Words of Light*.

[18] Ibid., xviii.

[19] Ibid., 5.

[20] Caygill, *Benjamin*, 2.

[21] Benjamin, "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy," 102.

[22] Caygill, *Benjamin*, 23.

[23] MacPhee, *The Architecture of the Visible: Technology and Urban Visual Culture,* 186.

[24] Ibid., 196.

[25] Caygill, *Benjamin*, 3.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid., 7.

[28] MacPhee, *Architecture of the Visible*, 196.

[29] Weber, "Art Aura and Media in the Work of Walter Benjamin," 89–90.

[30] Ibid., 98.

[31] Ibid., 100.

[32] Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," 519.

[33] Caygill, *Benjamin*, 31.

[34] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 32.

[35] Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," 732.

[36] Caygill, *Benjamin*, 31.

[37] Stocchetti, "Images and Power in the Digital Age," 8.

[38] Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," 518.

[39] Benjamin, *Work of Art*, 23.

[40] Weber, "Art Aura and Media," 101.

[41] Rubinstein, "Value of Nothing," 128.

[42] Ibid., 129.

[43] Kennedy, *Chaos Media*, 17.

[44] Evens, "Web 2.0," para. 2.

[45] Ibid., para 3.

[46] Ibid., para. 9.

[47] Drucker, "Digital Ontologies."

[48] Ibid., 142.

[49] See Galloway, *Laruelle: Against the Digital*.

[50] Evens, "Web 2.0," para. 19.

[51] Laruelle, *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy*, 135.

[52] Laruelle, "Photo-Fiction," 33.

[53] Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," 519.

[54] Laruelle, *Concept of Non-Photography*, 8.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Cadava, *Words of Light,* 5.

[57] Ó Maoilearca, "Making Non-Standard Thoughts," 173.

[49] Laruelle, *Concept of Non-Photography*, 10.

[58] Brassier, "Axiomatic Heresy," 28.

[59] Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," 732.

[60] Laruelle, *Dictionary of Non-Philosophy*, 78.

[61] On the relation to non-Euclidean geometry, see Laruelle, *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy*, Chapter III.

[62] Laruelle, *Principles of Non-Philosophy*, 11.

[63] Laruelle, *Concept of Non-Photography*, 7.

[64] Benjamin, "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy," 104.

[65] Laruelle, *Principles of Non-Philosophy*, 9.

[66] Benjamin, "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy," 105.

[67] Scheerbart, "Glass Architecture," 41.

[68] Ibid., 47–48.

[69] Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," 733–734.

[70] Ibid., 734.

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