

**In my End is my Beginning**  
Dialectical Images in Times of Crisis  
edited by Asia Benedetti, Angelica Bertoli,  
Andrea Golfetto, Maria Novella Tavano

# History in Fragments: What Does *A Photogenetic Line* Tell Us About Dialectical Images?

Santasil Mallik  
Western University, Ontario, Canada

**Abstract** The essay explores how the composition of the photo-architectural installation *A Photogenetic Line* (2019) by the Mumbai-based CAMP studio redounds in stretching Walter Benjamin's multiform conceptual schema of the 'dialectical image' on two essential fronts: the flash-like nature of its appearance and its monadic configuration. Decoding this function proffered by the installation, in turn, reveals a revisionary historical materialist approach that rearticulates the question of violence in light of resurgent authoritarian populisms in South Asia.

**Keywords** Monads. Flash. Curatorial. Photo archive. South Asia. Authoritarianism.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Photography and Historical Materialism. – 3 A Contemporary 'Line'. – 4 Timing the Flash. – 5 Is the Line a Monad? – 6 Historiographic Revision.

## 1 Introduction

In their installation *A Photogenetic Line* (2019), the Mumbai-based collaborative art studio CAMP (Critical Art and Media Practices) assembles a 100-foot-long architectural montage of cutouts from the photo archives of the 146-year-old Indian newspaper *The Hindu*. CAMP was co-founded by Shaina Anand and Ashok Sukumaran, along with a set of practitioners, to experiment with various media for creative research, documentation, and infrastructural interventions.



Edizioni  
Ca' Foscari

**Quaderni di Venezia Arti 8**

e-ISSN 2784-8868  
ISBN [ebook] 978-88-6969-878-1

**Open access**

Submitted 2024-10-01 | Published 2024-12-11  
© 2024 Mallik | © 4.0

DOI 10.30687/978-88-6969-878-1/005

With this work, they reframe existing photographs to intertwine disparate narrative strands in South Asian history, beginning from the waning days of British colonial presence, encompassing several landmark moments in the emergent postcolonial states, and following through to the contemporary. The cutouts do not separate the individual elements in photographs from the surroundings but variably redraw and incorporate the photographed backgrounds to initiate a conversation with other images in the installation. Hence, characters, objects, motifs, and stories cross-contextually interact to generate a layered, polyvocal account of the subcontinent. The curatorial design of the sequence methodologically follows one or more of the three self-devised patterns: people growing older or younger over the pictures, things emerging from or receding to the background, and captions referentially connecting two images (CAMP 2019).

At one point in the sequence, for example, a cutout frame depicts a paramilitary recruit in Srinagar, Kashmir, carrying a stack of plastic chairs against the faraway background of the command center's gate [fig. 1]. This reference to the gate matures to become the central element in the following cutout, showing the entry to the Aman Setu bridge that connects the borders of India and Pakistan. Incidentally, the person who clicked this photograph, Shujaat Bukhari, was later shot dead by unnamed militants in Srinagar. The next cutout up the sequence shows a group of people carrying the corpse of a person in the streets of Srinagar as a cloud of tear gas disperses in the background. Correspondingly, a teargas explosion in the lawns of Osmania University, Hyderabad, during a student protest becomes the subject of the succeeding image, followed by another cutout of men sleeping unheeded - resembling lifeless bodies - in a different lawn on a hot afternoon in Hyderabad. It further leads to an image of women occupying the lawns of the Police Commissioner's Office in Chennai and so on. In this way, CAMP envisions an alternative historiographic method where photographic signifiers constellate across geographical and temporal borders to reconceive how we narrate the past.

CAMP's construction of *A Photogenetic Line* critiques the logic of historicism because, though the installation architecturally maintains a linear composition of historical fragments, it frustrates the principle of causality. Contingency and chance guide the current of the imagistic chain, tantamounting to an ensemble unbound by the additive imperative of universal history. Here, it would not be an empty presumption to claim that the cutouts operate akin to the structure of quotations that Walter Benjamin in *The Arcades Project* considered essential for the "materialist presentation of history"; and the object constructed in the actualization of the method is what he called the dialectical image ([1982] 1999, 475). The installation offers a veritable scope to measure and reassess the conceptual contours



**Figure 1** CAMP, *A Photogenetic Line*. 2019. Installation view. Kolkata, Experimenter. <https://studio.camp/works/photogenetic/>

of the dialectical image in materialist historiography. This paper is not concerned with using the artwork to validate the concept or vice versa but in signposting it as a vantage point to test the elasticity of some of the propositions underlying dialectical images. However, before proceeding with this inquiry, it is relevant to recapitulate the relationship between Benjamin's philosophy of history and his critical affiliation with the medium of photography.

## 2 Photography and Historical Materialism

For Benjamin, as evident in his "The Work of Art" essay, photography emerged as the "first truly revolutionary means of reproduction" ([1925] 1968, 224) that transformed how we perceive art and its social operations. His thesis has become something of a truism in photography criticism. Of course, he did not foreclose the possibility of the medium's co-optation by oppressive regimes or, to speak in Benjaminian terms, its redeployment in the aestheticization of politics. But, he primarily directed attention to the qualitative changes in apperception

brought about by the advent of photomechanical reproduction as a symptom of the historical transformations of the time. Esther Leslie reminds us how Benjamin himself was not immune to this. Besides the fact that photography recurrently surfaced as a thematic element in his work, his form of writing and philosophizing increasingly imbibed a photographic style (Leslie 2015, 31). It bore a significant influence on his historical materialist approach. In his monograph *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History*, Eduardo Cadava further dwells on this relationship in Benjamin's corpus. Cadava approaches Benjamin's understanding of history by focusing on the latter's persistent leveraging of motifs like lighting, flashes, the past as a fleeting image, etc., in thinking through a historical method (1997, xix). Drawing on a Benjaminian analysis, he writes:

Both historiography and photography are media of historical investigation. That photographic technology belongs to the physiognomy of historical thought means that there can be no thinking of history that is not at the same time a thinking of photography. (xviii)

A photographic mode of rendering history legible challenges the linear setting of causal relationships in traditional historiography and does not abide by sweeping philosophical categorizations *à la* Hegel. One of the central doctrines of historical materialism stated by Benjamin is that history "decays into images, not into stories" ([1982] 1999, 476). Here, the task of the dialectician is to seize these images - through historical construction - with a firm grasp as they suddenly flash up in the "now of recognizability" (473). The dialectical image emerges through a constructive force that also entails the destruction of historicism. What is crucial to connect here is Benjamin's sketches surrounding the nature of the concept are conditioned by his recourse to a photographic register of historiographic thinking.

*A Photogenetic Line* echoes Benjaminian understanding of history, not least because it uses photographs but because its construction relies on a photographic mode of address to cast historical light onto the archival records of *The Hindu*. Like the camera shutter, the cutouts break the illusion of temporal continuity, precipitating image fragments and staging the possibility of dialectically grasping them in the present. To return to a segment of the installation referred to above, the images indexing moments from the long-term political crises in Kashmir acquire a resonant, if not a prognostic, significance in the context of the work's presentation in 2019. Shortly after CAMP presented it in an exhibition at the Experimenter gallery, Kolkata, from mid-April to mid-July (Experimenter 2019), India's Hindu-nationalist government abrogated the semi-autonomous status of Indian-administered Kashmir. The decree scrapping the constitutional privileges of the only Muslim majority state in the country

came in the aftermath of months-long security clampdowns and communication blockades in the region. While the government considered its coercive move as an end-all solution to the Kashmir question, the state forces' ongoing legacy of human rights violations in the disputed territories remains unaccounted for since India's independence in 1947.

### 3 A Contemporary 'Line'

In the installation, fragments from Kashmir's violent past meet the present era of the crises to form what Benjamin would call a constellation. They do not establish a causal link, for facts become causes to materialize history only in long-delayed retrospect. Benjamin contested the idea of history as a succession of events arranged like the "beads of a rosary" ([1940] 1968, 263). In his posthumously published essay, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", he restated that a historical materialist captures the constellation crystallized when the historian's present era momentarily encounters "a definite earlier one" ([1940] 1968, 255). It, however, does not entail seeing the past in its supposedly 'true' form. The goal is to "seize hold of a memory" or retain the "image of the past" as it appears during "a moment of danger" (255). From this postulation, one can also infer that times of crisis provide the most conducive grounds for the historical construction of dialectical images.

The divergent trajectories of events evidenced in CAMP's photo-architectural composition variably react with the epoch of their exposition. Coinciding with the exhibition of the work, the Narendra Modi-led right-wing government got re-elected to power in May with a stronger mandate. Indeed, the government's revocation of the special status of Jammu and Kashmir barely three months later was the first major post-election decision rallying Hindu nationalist sentiments around India's imagined past. A slew of policy decisions further exacerbated ideological impositions, including the banning of beef, censoring films, fabricating history textbooks to concoct India's Hindu ancestry, passing discriminatory citizenship laws, etc. State-supported mob violence and anti-Muslim pogroms became even more prevalent as well. Amid the ongoing political crises, CAMP endeavors to take hold of images from the debris pile of history that flare up with the light of the present.

The installation rethinks historical materialism in the Benjaminian sense. In the essay *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of History*, political philosopher Ronald Beiner lays out how Benjamin intervened in the tradition of historical materialism in his time. Firstly, Benjamin reversed its future-facing perspective of revolutionary expectations and proposed what Beiner calls a more "redemptive relation" to the



**Figures 2-3** CAMP, A *Photogenetic Line*. 2019. Installation view. Kolkata, Experimenter.  
<https://studio.camp/works/photogenetic/>

past (1984, 424). His sketches for a radical historical method unambiguously betrayed a disposition toward retrieving the past rather than making the future. Secondly, Benjamin denied attributing any rational, straitjacketed purpose behind the dialectical movement of historical materialism. He was uninterested in tracing – and, in the process, inventing – a shape of totality ordering the images of the past. Since history is an ever-increasing accumulation of fragments against the storm of progress, he suggested making whole what already lies shattered (425). The ‘line’ of cutouts relies on a photographic language of holding the past to structurally orchestrate a historical materialist process, provoking the construction of dialectical images where present forms of crisis collide with those of the past over a constellation of associations.

#### 4      **Timing the Flash**

At this point, it is opportune to explore how *A Photogenetic Line* complicates the shape and form in which dialectical images appear during times of crisis and, adjacently, to understand the implications it holds in rethinking Benjamin’s understanding of historical materialism. Turning to the metaphor of flash will be a befitting entry point to the following discussion. The pervasive element underlining dialectical images is their necessarily sudden form of emergence. In the “Convolute N” of *The Arcades*, which reflects on the epistemological concerns of the project, Benjamin stresses that “the relation of what-has-been to the now” encounters each other in a ‘flash’ ([1982] 1999, 462). The image formed therein is “dialectics at a standstill”. The flash is morphologically crucial for Benjamin due to its unforeseen, startling effect. He counts on it to generate instantaneous insight or cognition like the illumination of a camera flashbulb, to “jolt the dreaming collective into a political ‘awakening’” (Buck-Morss 1991, 219). In Benjamin’s photographic idiom of thinking, the potential of historical images relates less to the notion of representation and more to the fleeting, abrupt form of their emergence. One might claim that he speaks with a Marshall McLuhan-esque twist, which is that the form and mode of the appearance of the messages determine the meaning they carry.

Benjaminian scholar Sigrid Weigel, in *The Flash of Knowledge and the Temporality of Images*, argues that the ‘flash’ and the ‘image’ explain and substitute each other; both signal the philosopher’s epistemological position. The “flashlike image” is a cognitive mode in which an “instant can illuminate an entire situation” (2015, 348). Weigel draws a philosophical genealogy of the ‘flash’ in Benjamin’s thought and mentions how his engagement with the temporality of photographic images made him think about the value of shock or suddenness – a “mode

of perception” characteristic of “the temporal structure of modernity” (362). She fleshes out a principal difference between Benjamin’s “flashlike cognition” (362) and language as the place of reflection. For Benjamin, she argues that the image is always on the verge of disappearing and almost impossible to capture. The only way to condense the image and render it “fruitful for thinking” is through “linguistically constructed reflection,” which Benjamin conceives as the “long-rolling thunder” following the flash (366). By referring to this distinction, she outlines the “latency of images” (352), a temporal caesura separating the insightful flash from conscious reflection.

Benjamin’s ‘flash’ is also structurally seen as an element in crisis, owing to its transience and involuntariness. If historical images unexpectedly flash up in moments of danger, then the threat is also of never seeing them again altogether (Hamacher 2005, 65). To put it another way, the crisis or threat Benjamin hints at appears to belong to “the innermost structure of historical cognition” (65). But the question remains: is the flash an obligatory form for historical insight and consequent reflection? CAMP’s installation provides us with an avenue to stretch the conceptual nature of the flash and reflect on the corresponding historiographic implications. The work does not diffuse the political potentiality of flashes but ‘times’ them differently. To return to the context of photography, the magnesium or aluminum wire flash bulbs in Benjamin’s time - which exploded to illuminate a scene with a burst of light - had a specific temporal character. They cloned the jolt of momentary illumination caused by natural lightning. That is why, as the art historian Kate Flint maintains in her article *Victorian Flash*, it becomes difficult to qualify the material connotations of the flash in Benjamin’s vocabulary, as it interrelatedly signifies the camera flashbulb and the lightning strike (2018, 488).

A different order of the photographic flash is productive for maneuvering *A Photogenetic Line*, especially the more modern rear-curtain sync flash or long-exposure stroboscopic flash mechanism made possible in Single-lens reflex (SLR) cameras. The results of these modes become apparent with longer exposures. Usually, the flash fires when the shutters open to expose the camera plates or sensors to light. But in the rear-curtain mode, the flash fires at the end of the exposure time when the shutter is about to close. It makes a qualitative difference in the image because the camera captures the entire trajectory of an object’s movement before freezing it with artificial light. As a result, a motion trail becomes visible leading up to the point of the object’s last position of capture. The long-exposure stroboscopic mode takes it further by firing multiple rounds of flash to freeze a moving object at several points of its movement within the frame while preserving a blurry trail. Imagistically speaking, a vague ‘line’ of the object’s trajectory manifests in the frame with different junctures of clarity. These flashes produce results analogically related to



the structure of the installation. In place of a single element, CAMP constructs a line containing fragments of various historical objects from across contexts. It is as if the installation freezes divergent narrative intersections over a single stretch of 'exposure', signaling the many possible messianic interventions in an opening of history. These temporal orderings are not altogether unforeseen in Benjamin. Nor is the question of movement remote from his articulation of the flash. Weigel claims that Benjamin's "image of a flash" and "image as a flash" were predicated upon images of motion from natural phenomena like the 'vortex' or 'eddy' (2015, 356). Especially in his early reflections on painting, she writes, Benjamin sought a "counter-image" to historicism's idiomatic "flow of time" metaphor (357). The eddy, for him, served as an alternative imagistic reference synthesizing the interaction between "the past and the present," "the eternity and the instant," and "pre- and posthistory" (357).

The line is a motion captured in its course. In the installation's rendering of historical time, a long-exposure scene appears stitched with numerous flashes. It is not the blinding flash of singular historical insight but a series of multi-angulated and prismatic flashes that multifariously illuminate the present. A review of the work points out how different cutout segments connect contemporary political crises to South Asian history. References to anti-Tamil sentiments based on language and ethnicity, which resulted in the Sri Lankan Civil War from 1983 to 2009, relate to Hindi language imposition in India; images of leaders from the Dravidian movement relate to the Hindu nationalist party's continuing attempts to undermine Dravidian identity; a narrative thread referring to a Dalit Panthers event shed light on the rising caste-related violence against Dalits and Muslims in the country (Arora 2019, n.p.). And, so, the line goes on. A *Hand Guide* for the installation captions the individual fragments and elaborates their paratactic relation in the architectural line. It is unimportant here to outline the exact basis of the dialectical encounters between the individual images of the past and the contemporary situation. The point of the work is precisely to structurally emulate the temporal dilation of the shutter's exposure to allow for multiple points of insightful flashes seaming a line of disjunctive continuity.

Critics often overlook Benjamin's comments on the long exposure by only focusing on the snapshot character of his thought. His *A Short History of Photography* includes a thorough discussion of the early long-exposure Calotype portraits by the Scottish painter-photographer David Octavius Hill, in which the protracted procedure demanded the models to "live inside rather than outside the moment" (Benjamin [1931] 1972, 17). As opposed to the snapshot, Benjamin noted how the subjects' steadfast awareness of the time-consuming photographic principle made them grow into the picture as subjects, albeit with bourgeois sensibility. Even in his appreciation of

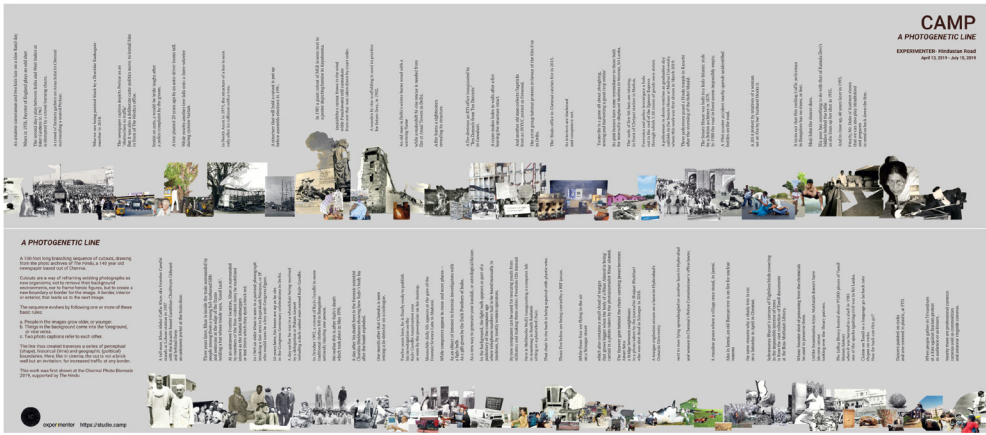


Figure 4 CAMP, *A Photogenetic Line*. 2019. Catalog, Kolkata, Experimenter. <https://studio.camp/works/photogenetic/>

Karl Blossfeldt's close-ups of plants and flowers, Benjamin particularly paid attention to their hypervisible quality rendered through long exposures, enlargement, and meticulous printing. He lauded how Blossfeldt's magnification disclosed "a whole unsuspected treasury of analogies and forms" ([1928] 2015, 124) within the plants. Such revelation or actualization inherent to long exposures receives a dialectical torque when flashes of historical light saturate them.

## 5 Is the Line a Monad?

The centrality of flashes in Benjamin's historiographic reflections closely relates to his understanding of monads. A historical materialist, he asserted, "approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad" (Benjamin [1940] 1968, 263). His emphasis on the monadic configuration is evident in *The Arcades*, where he declares that any dialectical process is inconceivable without "dealing with a monad" ([1982] 1999, 476). However, he first engaged with Leibniz's monadology in *The Origins of the German Tragic Drama* to postulate the monadic nature of ideas or historical insights:

The idea is a monad. The being that enters into it, with its past and subsequent history, brings - concealed in its own form - if indistinct abbreviation of the rest of the world of ideas, just as, according to Leibniz's *Discourse on Metaphysics* (1686), every single monad contains, in an indistinct way, all the others. ([1928] 1977, 48)

Benjamin configured the monad as a site of clarity and revolutionary potential that disrupts historical continuity, drawing upon the Leibnizian precept of seeing monads containing within themselves the entire scope of history. The monad as an indivisible unit abbreviates “an immanent totality of perceptions” (Schwebel, 609). It yields endless insights, not because of mythification but the secularization of history. Though Benjamin began thinking about the monad primarily in terms of its metaphysical reality in *The Origin*, his later writings enriched it with historical materialism.

Historian Elsa Costa interrogates the place of the monad in Benjamin’s thought to complicate further the oft-proclaimed separation between the metaphysical and theological occupations of his early writings and the historical materialism of his late years. She writes how the philosopher sought messianic transcendence - in all its theological dimensions - through “the science of extracting the revolutionary moments or monad” (Costa 2019, 132). Hence, monads stand for a “bridge between matter and the divine” (94). Like Leibniz, Benjamin was ambiguous about the relationship between the “self-generating” monads and their relationship to God or a higher ordering principle (133). Yet, he was committed to the idea of messianic redemption. Costa works out this conceptual discrepancy by stating that “historical moments” are not “discrete moments whose connection to each other is unknown” (137). Rather, Benjamin’s historiography brings them together through “the ‘string’ of messianic time” (137). Philosopher Frédéric Neyrat brings Benjamin’s understanding of monads in conversation with the nature of flashes. While Leibniz constituted an ontology of monads where each substance embodies a world by itself, for Benjamin, the worlds apart “is to be constituted and it is constituted in a flash” (80). It also marks Benjamin’s fundamental departure from Leibniz’s idea of monads belonging to an ontological order of being with an immaterial yet definite and indestructible existence. Benjamin, on the other hand, conceives the monad as an ‘event’ that does not exist before its unfolding, an element signifying the dazzling, flash-like “event of existence itself” (80).

In Benjamin’s monadological proposition of history, individual events are fragmented, “self-contained specimens” reflecting the past (Laurentiis 1994, 33). On dialectically grasping the fragments, they unveil the “essential features of human history” and “social relationships” otherwise opaque to whom Marx would call alienated subjects (33). If flashes invoke the temporal aspect of Benjaminian history, monads refer to the speculative shape of history’s appearance. But, more importantly for Benjamin, monads fold into each other, perhaps, like a Möbius strip. *A Photogenetic Line* provides an apposite model for imagining this fold in play, as the cutout fragments correspond to disparate historical worlds illuminating the present and vice versa. The fragments are the visual counterpart to monads,

and the architectural rendition of delayed or long exposure stroboscopic flashes stages the possibility of them intersecting and passing through the contemporary. Though the contexts of the individual cutouts vary widely, they encounter the ongoing political crisis in concrete ways.

The principle of montage comes closest to mirroring CAMP's collective enunciation of monadic histories. It is not because the installation employs photomontage as an aesthetic device but because it embodies montage as a historiographic principle. Regarding the role of montage in Benjamin's construction of history, cultural theorist Max Pensky explains:

Benjamin's decision to carry the montage principle over into critical historiography implies that *historical* fragments... can be constructed by removing them (via historical research) from their embeddedness in a particular context (in which they are recorded only insofar as they are insignificant, the "trash of history"), and "mounting" them in a series of textual juxtapositions - informed by a so-far missing principle of construction - such that the juxtaposed fragments constitute a constellation. (2004, 186)

The dialectical images emerging from the constellation facilitate an epistemological shift to generate new "interpretations of the fragments' relationships with one another" (186). In the context of *A Photogenetic Line*, montage becomes a dialectical means to disclose historical consciousness through multiple monads.

One can construe that the installation plays out Benjamin's extension of Leibnizian monadology as it traverses a 'metaphysical' together with a 'historical materialist' conceptualization of monads. The 'line' by itself transfigures into a monadological structure 'containing' other monads within a messianic temporal thread. Each fragment recontextualized in the installation also refracts the rest, spotting Benjamin's claim that every individual monad "contains, in an indistinct way, all the others" (Benjamin [1928] 1977, 48). There is a play between the intensive singularity of revelation and the multiplicity of worlds underlining the philosophy of monads, a relation remarkably manifest in *The Arcades*. Indeed, Benjamin crafted his unfinished curatorial compendium with a "monadological armature", where he sought to reveal the historical essence of the nineteenth century in the Paris arcades - as if they represented a singular, miniaturized cosmos - while assembling an enormous array of materials (Friedlander 2024, 55).

Benjamin's pluralist conception of interactive monads refines Leibniz's. The fundamental premise of dialectical images constellating in a flash, where thought arrests history, sits at odds with the Leibnizian notion that only God, the absolute monad, can intervene

with the perceptive continuity of other monads, a continuity arising out of their independent, isolated existence. It is where Benjamin comes in to reorient “each monad’s eternal isolation from every other”, turning them into potentially associative historical objects (Fenves 2003, 84). Marxist critic Frederic Jameson (2020) rightly observes that the oft-interpreted ‘standstill’ moment of the formation of the dialectical image does not bring our hermeneutic movement to a stop. Instead, it permits us to analyze the multiple choices, outcomes, or a “shared dilemma” (2020, 223) the messianic moment provides. It is a radical explosion of thought into fragments rather than its cessation. CAMP’s installation efficiently drives home this aspect, stringing heterogeneous narrative worlds with the long exposure ‘nowness’ of the present. The architectural model of the work is of utmost relevance as it inducts the viewers into a participant interaction with historical knowledge. So far, the dialectical images discussed in relation to the work considers the involvement of the viewers as an implicit aspect.

In the Introduction to their book *Photography and the Optical Unconscious*, Shawn Michelle Smith and Sharon Sliwinski (2017) dwell on Benjamin’s passing reference to the stereoscopic image to highlight the participant dynamics of dialectical images. The stereoscopic image is, after all, “a virtual image” (2017, 9) that comes into being when the binocular perception of human sight interacts with the stereoscopic device. Benjamin believed it crucial to harness people’s “internal mechanism of perception” to develop a historical materialist project. Therefore, his approach of collecting miscellaneous notes, images, and anecdotes from the Paris arcades implied that the readers would complete them by bringing their respective historical circumstances to bear on those artifacts. The resulting “doubled images,” similar to those formed in the stereoscope, are to crystallize into a revelatory dialectical image. Benjamin’s dialectical images are not materially evident objects in the world; they emerge through “the imaginative interaction between reader and text” to galvanize past subjects into an “awakening” (11). *A Photogenetic Line* architecturally perpetuates this interaction by taking the viewers through a 100-foot line of fragments with remarkable historical valencies vis-a-vis the present.

## 6 Historiographic Revision

The installation presents an aesthetic context to reexamine the conceptual order of dialectical images, primarily its intrinsic modalities of the flash and the monad. Against the backdrop of resurging authoritarian populism in India, the work acquires a discernible critical edge. Whereas India’s right-wing populist agenda claims a unified and essentialized image of the country’s past, CAMP takes up Benjaminian historiography to ‘fragment’ its authoritarian dreams.

Today, social media platforms have become the mainstay for spreading disinformation by anti-democratic forces globally, where the relationship between the content and the image appears sublime or inviolable. Fake news with misconstrued visuals transmutes into tools for implementing anti-minority pogroms, as was the case during the Delhi riots in 2020. Contrarily, Benjamin's historical materialist approach exposes images to the light of history and politics. Unlike the grammar of disinformation that relies on shock and abreaction, dialectical images emerge at the site of critical thought to expand political understanding (Ferreira 2021, 491). The temporal setting of the cutout fragments in *A Photogenetic Line* is also markedly different from the doom scroll temporality of images fueling platform economy, making the viewers slow down as they navigate the 100-foot-long architectural line and work with possible semantic associations.

For Benjamin, the continuing presence of oppression is made possible by a particular approach to history involved in fabricating the origins of the present in ways that downplay the marginalized. Such modes of narrativizing history routinely perpetuate oppression (Fritsch 2001, 299). He conceived critical historiography as a retroactive endeavor to "free the present for a memory of the duntrod-den in history" (299). This attention to the oppressed from among the pile of historical debris brings the "present inheritors" in touch with not a so-called originary past but with those whose "legacy is most difficult to identify and decipher" (299). Thus, the construction of dialectical images is ineluctably related to a revisionary historiography of violence and oppression. In the context of South Asia, postcolonial criticism following the development of the Subaltern Studies collective in the 1980s indicated a similar shift to listen to those at the fringes of officiated narratives about the region's past.

Subaltern Studies scholars like Gyanendra Pandey (2006), Shahid Amin (1995), and Partha Chatterjee (1994) have attended to the notion of 'fragments' to process the multiple intersections of subalternity based on gender, caste, ethnicity, etc. In their archival research, the fragment conceptually refers to a locus of difference for tracing alternative stories and methods. For instance, their investigation of sectarian conflicts in India focused on the fragmentary nature of oral narratives, literary productions by survivors, rumors, or FIR reports to write 'minor' histories against the totalizing tendencies of statist narratives. CAMP's work corresponds to the same critical lineage, as it splinters the photo archives of a national newspaper and recontextualizes them to speak to the present. There is no panoptic historiographic design that places the cutouts in a line, and all they follow is a contingent, though playfully coded, pattern. The installation's curatorial and critical-archival strategy lays out the constellatory connections between ongoing forms of violence and multiple past events.

The imagistic quality of the photo-architectural stretch calls to attention Benjamin's understanding of dialectical images. But, more importantly, the installation helps us reassess the key elements underlining his unfinished treatment of the concept. Though prevailing comprehensions of the dialectical image view it as a singular, nucleated burst of historical light that constellates in crises, *A Photogenetic Line* foregrounds the possibility of imagining its multiplicitous, temporally recursive, and kaleidoscopic modes of appearance. It bears considerable implications in working out an alternative historiographic method building on Benjamin's historical materialist approach. The monad and the flash are but two constituent elements in his theoretical apparatus, based on which this article tests the tensile strength of dialectical images under the duress of the ongoing contemporary. It is not to claim that the installation provides a readily applicable prototype to write counter-histories of violence, for the nature and form of dialectical images are contingent upon the time and site of their conception. Yet, it shows us how reworking the elementary materials of history in terms of their medium and mode of presentation reevaluates the foundational principles of dominant historiography. Perhaps, between dream and awakening, we can imagine other patterns of historical emergence besides the lightning strike.

## Bibliography

- Amin, S. (1995). *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1922-1992*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Arora, A. (2019). "How Do You Revive a Newspaper's Photo Archive in Present-Day India?" *The Wire*, June 29.  
<https://thewire.in/media/a-photogenetic-line-newspaper-photo-archive-present-day-india>
- Beiner, R. (1984). "Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of History". *Political Theory*, 12(3), 423-34.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591784012003005>
- Benjamin, W. [1925] (1968). "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". Arendt, H. (ed.), *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Transl. by H. Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 217-52.
- Benjamin, W. [1928] (1977). *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Transl. by J. Osborne. London: NLB.
- Benjamin, W. [1928] (2015). "New Things About Flowers". Leslie 2015, 123-32.
- Benjamin, W. [1931] (1972). "A Short History of Photography". Transl. by S. Mitchell, *Screen*, 13(1), 5-26.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/13.1.5>
- Benjamin, W. [1940] (1968). "Theses on the Philosophy of History". Arendt, H. (ed.), *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Transl. by H. Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 253-64.
- Benjamin, W. [1982] (1999). *The Arcades Project*. Transl. by H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.

- Buck-Morss, S. (1991). *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. Cambridge: Massachusetts University Press.
- Cadava, E. (1997). *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- CAMP, Critical Art and Media Practices (2019). *A Photogenetic Line*.  
<https://studio.camp/works/photogenetic/>.
- Chatterjee, P. (1993). *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Costa, E. (2019). "When the Angels Played: Monadology and Divine Absconson in Walter Benjamin". *Doctor Virtualis*, 15, 91-138.
- Experimenter (2019). *A Photogenetic Line*.  
<https://experimenter.in/artists/54-camp/works/775-camp-a-photogenetic-line-2019/>
- Fenves, P.D. (2003). "Of Philosophical Style – From Leibniz to Benjamin". *boundary 2*, 30(1), 67-87.  
<https://doi.org/10.1215/01903659-30-1-67>
- Ferreira, M.C.P. (2021). "Dialectical Images and Contemporary Times: Thinking Critically About Authoritarian Populism". Morelock, J. (ed.), *How to Critique Authoritarian Populism*. Leiden: Brill, 473-93.
- Flint, K. (2018). "Victorian Flash". *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 23(4), 481-9.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/jvcult/vcy045>
- Friedlander, E. (2024). *Walter Benjamin and the Idea of Natural History*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9781503637719>
- Fritsch, M. (2001). "History, Violence, Responsibility". *Rethinking History*, 5(2), 285-304.
- Hamacher, W. (2005). "'Now': Walter Benjamin on Historical Time". Benjamin, A. (ed.), *Walter Benjamin and History*. London: Continuum, 38-68.  
<https://doi.org/10.5040/9781472547828.ch-003>
- Jameson, F. (2020). *Benjamin Files*. London: Verso.
- Laurentis, A.D. (1994). "A Prophet Turned Backwards: Materialism and Mysticism in Walter Benjamin's Notion of History". *Rethinking Marxism*, 7(4), 28-43.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08935699408658121>
- Leslie, E. (ed., transl.) (2015). *On Photography*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Pandey, G. (2006). *Routine Violence: Nations, Fragments, Histories*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Pensky, M. (2004). "Method and Time: Benjamin's Dialectical Image". Ferris, D.S. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 177-98.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/ccol0521793297.010>
- Schwebel, P.L. (2012). "Intensive Infinity: Walter Benjamin's Reception of Leibniz and Its Sources". *MLN*, 127(3), 589-610.  
<https://doi.org/10.1353/mln.2012.0093>
- Smith, S.M.; Sliwinski, S. (eds) (2017). *Photography and the Optical Unconscious*. Durham: Duke University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822372998>
- Weigel, S. (2015). "The Flash of Knowledge and the Temporality of Images: Walter Benjamin's Image-Based Epistemology and Its Preconditions in Visual Arts and Media History". *Critical Inquiry*, 41(2), 344-66.  
<https://doi.org/10.1086/679079>