PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION

JOANNA TOKARSKA-BAKIR

Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, Ph.D. is an historical anthropologist, religious studies scholar, and a professor at the Institute of Slavic Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences at Warsaw and has been a fellow of the Humboldt Foundation, Mellon, Davis Center for Historical Studies, Princeton University, IAS Princeton, and the Imre Kertész Kolleg in Jena. She specialises in the anthropology of violence and is the author of, among other publications, a monograph on blood libel *Légendes du sang. Une anthropologie du préjugé antisémite en Europe* (Albin Michel 2015), *Pogrom Cries. Essays on Polish-Jewish History, 1939–1946* (Peter Lang 2017, 2019), and a monograph, *Cursed. A Social Portrait of the Kielce Pogrom* (Cornell 2023), for which she was awarded the Yad Vashem International Book Prize and Jan Długosz Award (2019). – Address: Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences, Jaracza st. 1, V. floor, 00-338 Warsaw, Poland.
E-mail: joanna.tokarska-bakir@ispan.edu.pl.

Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* returned to Berlin on 8 May 2025, on the eightieth anniversary of the Third Reich's capitulation. Not for long. It was on display at the Bode Museum until 13 July. Right now, it's probably packing for its return trip to the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

How did this watercolour by the Swiss-German artist, purchased in 1921 by Walter Benjamin, end up in the Middle East? It was taken there by Gershom Scholem, to whom Benjamin had left it in his will, entrusting it in the interim to Georges Bataille and Theodor Adorno.

"Leaving something in one's will" suggests a peaceful departure after a hardworking life. But the forty-eight-year-old Benjamin's death in 1940 was anything but peaceful; he

died by suicide in 1940. As Scholem wrote, the writer took his own life "while fleeing from the Germans."[1] This happened at a border crossing in Spain. A local civil servant in Port Bou threatened the group with which Benjamin was crossing the Pyrenees that he would have them deported back to France, where the Gestapo was waiting for them all.

Hannah Arendt reconstructs the circumstances of their apprehension thus: "One day earlier Benjamin would have got through without any trouble; one day later the people from Marseilles would have known that for the time being it was impossible to pass through Spain. Only on that particular day was the catastrophe possible."[2]

Benjamin always had Klee's watercolour with him, but when he fled Paris, he left it with someone for safekeeping. According to Scholem's testimony, the writer felt a "mystical identification" with the *Angelus Novus* figure portrayed on Klee's picture, which resembles a bird with its wings spread or a lion's mouth standing on two chicken-like claws. His exegesis of it is to be found in Thesis IX of his *Geschichtsphilosophische Thesen*:

> A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.[3]

1 Gershom Scholem, "Walter Benjamin," trans. Jan Balbierz, *Literatura Na Świecie* 284, no. 3 (1995): 117.

2 Hannah Arendt, "Walter Benjamin 1892–1940," in *Men in Dark Times* (Harcourt Brace & Company, 1968), 171.

3 Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History: IX," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (Schocken Books, 1969), 257–258.

Eighty-five years on, Paul Klee's work is in Berlin again.

Berlin, corner of Seesener and Paulsborner Straße, May 2025. Photo JTB

The exhibition in the Bode Museum occupies two rooms. In the first, opposite the entrance, is Klee's watercolour, surrounded by photographs of Benjamin and original writings typed or handwritten by him. The alarm-secured picture confronts the viewer with the evolution of Benjamin's concept of the aura:

> Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence. This includes the changes which it may have suffered in physical condition over the years as well as the various changes in its ownership.[4]

4 Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, 220.

These "changes which it may have suffered in physical condition over the years as well as the various changes in its ownership" are addressed in the design of the second room, which is entitled *The Berlin Angels*.

These Berlin angels—those in the Wim Wenders film *Himmel über Berlin / Wings of Desire* (1987); Giambattista Bregno's *Kneeling Angel*, a Baroque sculpture mutilated by Allied bombardments and then spirited away to Moscow as a war trophy; and the angel inspiring Matthew the Evangelist in the photograph of a Caravaggio painting destroyed by fire—are thus associated with Benjamin's *Engel der Geschichte*.[5] But rightly so? In his historiographic thesis no. VI, Benjamin wrote that "even the dead will not be safe from the enemy, if he wins."[6] Who controls the angelic narrative in the Bode Museum? Friend, or foe? Its unsettling context is further extended by the Albert Dürer copperplate etching *Melencolia I*, which features yet another angel.

In the second room, a photograph of the bombarded Berlin showing a group of children playing[7] against the backdrop of the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church is displayed in the same position as the *Angelus Novus* in the first room. What does this association suggest, and how binding is it? It is as though the Germans, from whom Benjamin was fleeing, were answering him: We didn't want your death; we are victims. Our bombarded cities were populated by children and lofty, art-loving souls. We were wronged. A black melancholy is all that is left us.

---

5 This selection is accompanied by the commentary: "The Berlin Angels. From 1943 until the end of the war, Berlin was bombed with increasing intensity by the Allies. The German capitulation of May 8, 1945 did not put an end to the destruction: in mid-May, two fires destroyed the control tower of the Friedrichshain anti-aircraft bunker which housed thousands of works of art from the Berlin museums. Almost 440 paintings from the Gemäldegalerie were lost in flames, including Caravaggio's *Saint Matthew and the Angel*. Hundreds of sculptures were also destroyed—such as Giambattista Bregno's *Kneeling Angel*. These lost or damaged angels are reminiscent of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* and Walter Benjamin's *Thesis IX*, which seems like a dark prophecy. In 1987, Wim Wenders took up the angel motif in one of his most famous films staged in Berlin, *Wings of Desire*."

6 Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History: VI," in *Illuminations*, 255.

7 The explanation on the board alongside the photograph reads: "This photograph, taken shortly after the end of the war, shows both the extent of the destruction in the German capital and life as it begins to resume, as shown by the three boys playing in the ruins. In 1953, Berliners fought to ensure that the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church was not completely demolished and rebuilt, but remained a ruin as an eternal reminder of the war, complemented by a new building. Wim Wenders' film *Wings of Desire* begins at the top of the tower of this destroyed church."

So much for World War II: when, eighty years after the war, this relic of Walter Benjamin returns to the capital of the country that started it, a curator in a German museum, rather than staging a commemoration, has composed a paean to narrative fetishism. When does a story become a fetish? When it attempts to evade confrontation with a traumatic truth, offering comfort where there is none.[8] *Der Engel der Geschichte* as fetish? Scary thought.

As Gershom Scholem wrote, "However sublime it might be to forget, we cannot. Only by remembering a past that we can never completely master can we generate new hope in the resumption of communication between Germans and Jews, and in the reconciliation of those who have been separated."[9]

8 "Fetishism," Eric Santner writes, "is a strategy whereby one seeks voluntaristically to reinstate the pleasure principle without addressing and working through those other tasks which, as Freud insists, 'must be accomplished before the dominance of the pleasure principle can ever begin'. Far from providing a symbolic space for the recuperation of anxiety, narrative fetishism directly or indirectly offers reassurance that there was no need for anxiety in the first place." Eric Santner, "History beyond the Pleasure Principle: Some Thoughts on the Representation of Trauma," in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution,"* ed. Saul Friedlander (Harvard University Press, 1992), 147.

9 Gershom Scholem, "Jews and Germans," *Commentary* (Nov. 1966): 31–38.