If, as Derrida says, “A title is always a promise” (Memoires, 115), it is already a way of speaking about—or constructing—the future, even if that promise, and the future that it proposes, is a rather limited one. That such a promise can never be entirely fulfilled or, as will no doubt be the case here, will be poorly fulfilled, or inadequate in its delivery, does not change the fact that a promise has been made.

Titles, then, always carry a certain danger, and that danger has to do with the future, with the emergence of the future, and our relations to it.

With that danger in mind, let me therefore begin with a warning, which is of course another way of speaking about—or again, of constructing—the future. But if I warn you about what is to come, this warning, like a promise, is a performatve utterance, and as such it enacts what it says: in voicing it, a warning has taken place, even if the events about which one warns do not. Like all performative statements, warning is always in a strange relation to the future. Performatives do not perform or enact the future, but a vision of the future, of potential future events. In important ways, then, my warning has to do with this
distinction—or disjunction—between speaking about, imagining or constructing the future, and, on the other hand, the future itself.

In offering this warning, I note that Derrida, while speaking about “the future of the profession,” has himself warned or cautioned that in any performative speech act, “what takes place, arrives, happens, or happens to me remains still controllable or programmable within a horizon of anticipation or precomprehension, within a horizon period. It is of the order of the masterable possible, it is the unfolding of what is already possible. It is of the order of power, of the “I can” or “I may” which is implicit in the performative” (Future, 53).¹

To be clear, Derrida is actually speaking about “event” or “eventness” here, but it seems obvious that these statements apply as well to the future. Rodolphe Gasche makes this clear when he observes that “all references to the horizon in Derrida’s later work would seem to suggest that, as a structure of anticipation and precomprehension, the horizon [not only “seems to anticipate structurally and determine the future in advance],” it “also encroaches on the material indeterminacy of future events.” (6)

Here, even before I have fully articulated my warning about the future—or at least the limited future of my talk—it turns out, first of all, to be a warning about the very act of warning, to the extent that warnings (like promises) are, as Derrida suggests, a way of attempting to control the future—or perhaps to “ward
off” certain potential futures. But Derrida’s warning seems to address more than just explicit warnings and promises; any vision of or statement about the future is necessarily predictive, and therefore at least implicitly performative. Derrida’s warning therefore seems to suggest that our statements about and constructions of the future, inasmuch as they remain subject to this horizon of mastery, to this “unfolding of what is already possible,” tend to limit or control the emergence of the future. In this sense, it is less a warning about the future than a warning about the horizon from which we imagine the future. As Gasche notes, “structured by anticipation and precomprehension, the horizon describes a space (and a time) in which whatever happens, or takes place, remains controllable and programmable—always already possible—in short, anticipatable and even calculable” (6). Or, as Derrida himself observes, horizon is, “as the Greek word indicates, a limit from which I pre-comprehend the future. I wait for it. I predetermine it. And thus, I annul it.” (Taste, 20)

But if this is the case, we may well wonder if or how is it possible to ever truly speak about the future without annulling it, to construct a vision of the future that does not simply unfold what is already possible? Would not any statement about or construction of the future inevitably be subject to the horizon about which Derrida warns us? But of course, even as Derrida warns us against subjecting the future to this sort of performative horizon, has he not himself already anticipated, and indeed enunciated, a future for which such a warning would be necessary? I would therefore argue, first of all, that it does not seem to be
possible for us to avoid imagining, predicting, or speaking about the future, even if we wished to do so. Nor do I believe that Derrida, who has spoken with some frequency about the future, means to suggest the impossibility of speaking or thinking about the future. Rather, he suggests the possibility of an *impossible future*, a future that would exceed the force, the mastery, of any performative statement or horizon. Indeed, he suggests that it is precisely this impossible future, in its indeterminacy and its alterity, that makes possible a deformation or opening in the horizon of anticipation and masterable possibility.

Such a formulation does not of course overcome, nor does it seek to overcome, the disjunction of this future from the horizon in which we articulate or construct it. This disjunction is not a gap to be crossed, a division to be transcended or healed, an opposition to be synthesized. It is clear that there can be no direct link or route from our horizon to this impossible future. There can be no road or bridge to this future, nor any other project that would lead to it, build a foundation for it, or draw plans for its construction. In regards to this impossible future, it would seem that we truly “cannot get there from here.”

Rather, as Derrida repeatedly suggests, this future can only come *to us*, can only arrive unannounced, unbidden, *without warning*. It appears, for example, as “an *irruption* that punctures the horizon, *interrupting* any performative organization, any convention, or any context that can be dominated by a conventionality” (Future, 53). Or it is figured in the form of “seismic events [that] come from the
future,” which destabilize, fracture, or open the “ground” of possibility. Or, as is familiar to many, the impossible future makes its appearance in more spectral forms: spooks in our heads, untimely travelers, ghosts of the future, a messianism without a messiah. Derrida: “At bottom, the specter is the future, it is always to come, it presents itself only as that which could come or come back” (Specters, 39).

Through these figurations, Derrida seeks to open a space within the horizon of his own work for the emergence of this impossible, other future. There is obviously much that might be said about these irruptive, seismic, and ghostly figures—including even some warnings—but for now, let me simply suggest that in these figures, we can perhaps discern a different, but certainly disruptive and spectral figure: the figure of allegory—which itself has, as Walter Benjamin observes, a certain unsettling, untimely association with ghosts, with interruptions and fragments, with catastrophe and ruins.

2 I certainly do not mean to argue that Derrida’s work is allegorical in the conventional sense of the term, where images and metaphors are seen as pointing directly, and often didactically, to abstract figurative meanings, in addition to their more literal meanings. Yet, even in this common notion of allegory, it is apparent that allegorical meanings are seen as a kind of coded, additional message, a surplus to a more literal meaning. As the etymology of the
term implies, allegory is always a matter of speaking otherwise, of signifying something other than what it ostensibly designates. As Benjamin and after him Paul de Man (and others) will stress, allegory always involves a disjunction between the allegorical signifier and what it designates or signifies. And, as I hope to suggest, it is the uncanny opening provided by this disjunction that can allow us to open a space from which the future may emerge.

But before moving forward, however haltingly, toward the future, I must first recall the distinction between allegory and the symbol that was the context for Benjamin’s (and de Man’s) discussion of allegory. Benjamin, as he seems always to do, takes the terms of this distinction and inverts them, reversing the Romantic valorization of the symbol over allegory. He therefore poses allegory in contrast to the “the illusion of totality or of organic wholeness” associated with the symbol. In the symbol, sign and meaning were supposedly united, integrally bound to one another, so that the symbol served, in Creuzer’s terms, as “the very incarnation and embodiment of the idea.” The symbol is therefore imagined to be more than a mere sign that points to what it designates; the symbol incorporates the idea without leaving a gap or disjunction. It is seen as a kind of living presence, in which sign, meaning, and referent, physical nature and the spiritual, are simultaneously combined in an organic whole. One might in fact say that, much like the work of art in Benjamin’s later essays, the symbol has, or is presumed to have, an aura.¹
This sense of a living presence or aura in the symbol helps us to understand why Benjamin sees allegory as involving a "renunciation of the idea of harmonious totality." In allegory, nature is subjected to a kind of mortification, which aligns allegory with history and with signification: “Whereas in the symbol, the transfigured face of nature reveals itself in the light of redemption, in allegory the observer is confronted with the facies hippocratica of history as a petrified, primordial landscape” (Origin, 166). It is precisely the mortifying, annihilating or destructive tendency of allegory that tears objects out of their previous context, tradition, or horizon and disperses them. It transforms the supposedly living wholeness of nature into an accumulation of dead fragments and ruins, scattered empty signifiers that become material for the allegorist:

if the object becomes allegorical when submitted to the glance of melancholy, which drains the life from it, if it remains dead, albeit secured for all eternity, it is all the more at the mercy of the allegorist . . . It acquires the significance that the allegorist gives it. He inserts it and subverts it; this must be understood not psychologically, but ontologically. In his hand the thing becomes something else. (Origin, 183-84).

Allegory, then, destroys or disenchants the supposedly living, organic quality of the world, in order to add new significations to its objects. The relation between the allegorical sign and what it signifies is acknowledged to be constructed, arbitrary. In allegory, as Benjamin famously argues, “Each person, every object, each relationship can signify an arbitrary other” 175. In allegory, the world becomes subject to signification, and allegorical signs therefore refer to other signs. Unlike the symbol, they do not presume to coincide, to be one with, what they represent. Allegorical signs can never be complete, whole, neither in themselves nor as a part or embodiment of a larger totality or context; they can
only be seen as fragments or ruins.

There is obviously a temporal as well as a spatial dimension to Benjamin’s notion of ruin, which supports his alignment of allegory with change and history. In a somewhat different way, de Man also emphasizes the temporality of the disjunction inherent in allegory, noting that “this relationship between signs necessarily contains a constitutive temporal element; it remains necessary, if there is to be allegory, that the allegorical sign refer to another sign that precedes it” (207). Unlike the symbol, which as de Man argues, “postulates the possibility of an identity or identification,” allegory “designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference.” But if allegory speaks from within the space of this temporal disjunction, this is not only to say that it speaks through or by means of this disjunctive relation, it is also to say that it actually speaks this disjunction—which is to say, it speaks it openly, publically. For, as Benjamin suggests, it is not simply the disjunction between the sign and what it signifies that defines allegory, but precisely the fact that this disjunction or ruination is necessarily displayed or exhibited.³ First, the ruined status of allegorical signs necessarily involves a dispersion and exhibition that allows these signs to be presented to an audience or public in different places and times. But also, this display involves play.
Thus, while it is of course the case that, for Benjamin and de Man, the temporal
disjunction that is exhibited in allegory is necessarily related to the past, to past
signs, allegory’s disjointed, ruined temporality also involves it in a relation to the
future. There is, first of all, a *structural similarity* between the way allegory
highlights its temporal disjunction with the past and the disjunction that separates
the future—or at least the kind of impossible, other future that Derrida imagines—
from the horizon in which we articulate or construct it. When it comes to the
future, it is, after all, difficult to claim that our signs, images, and statements
about it refer to, much less coincide with, actual phenomena. Are not our
relations to and constructions of the future, therefore, necessarily interruptive,
disjointed, allegorical? Is it not precisely this untimely disjunction that is
disavowed in most notions of prediction and future probabilities? Allegory,
then—with its emphasis on ruins and untimeliness, on the volatility of
signification—may perhaps provide an opening to speak about, write, or
otherwise construct a vision of the future that would keep our untimely relation to
the future in view, on display, but also in play.

It is, after all, the ruined status of allegorical signs that makes them open to
change, to history, and thus to human use, and reuse. It is what allows the
allegorical sign to be transformed into “something else,” and Benjamin even goes
so far as to compare the allegorist’s creative transformations to the
transmutations of medieval alchemists. One might be tempted to say that
Benjamin sees something magical in allegory’s transformative capacity, its ability
to create out of destruction or ruin. But this would only be partially true, for he also sees a similar transformative potential in the sciences and, of course, in modern technology’s ability to wrench things out of a familiar context or tradition. In this sense, Benjamin’s revision or reinterpretation of the notion of allegory in his Trauerspiel book, which is itself an allegorical approach, will prove quite prophetic; it will open a space not only for his own future work, but also for an even broader transformation of the horizon in which modernity and technology will be viewed. Allegory will, in fact, never cease to play a major role in Benjamin’s future work and thought, even when he does not use the term explicitly. It will serve as a figure for his entire view of modernity, as can be seen when he argues that “Allegory is the armature of modernity” (SW 4, 183). And yet, an armature—a term that Benjamin uses frequently in the Passages—generally involves a framework that is interior, and therefore hidden, invisible. And arguably, it is precisely allegory’s invisible but crucial role in modernity that Benjamin attempts to dis-play in the Passages.

There can, I think, be little doubt that Benjamin saw allegory’s transformative abilities as, for the most part, a potentially liberating force, not only creatively or artistically, but socially and politically as well. Here, again, it is precisely allegory’s deconstructive capacity—its ability to take apart the context or totality in which signs or objects were embedded or emplaced—that produces or enables this liberating effect. It is worth noting that over time, Benjamin’s figurations of this deconstructive ability seem to grow increasingly violent. If he
initially figures this deconstruction in terms of death and mortification, as a
draining of life that produces dead fragments, or simply in terms of incomplete,
ruined structures, he comes to see allegory as involving a wrenching or cutting of
things from their contexts. In his later work on historiography and on
technological reproducibility—both of which can be seen as involving allegorical
processes—he will turn to figures of catastrophe, storms, lighting flashes, and
revolution, as well as notions of “tearing apart,” blasting and exploding. Here, for
example, the ruins of allegory become the “far-flung debris” produced by
cinema’s “dynamite of the split-second.”

This shift toward more violent figures of allegorical deconstruction can, in part, be
attributed to Benjamin’s increasingly Marxist views, but also to his sense of the
changing role of allegory in an increasingly commodified world. But it is also
important to note that these violent figures are also figures of opening. It is this
opening that allows things that were formerly “embedded in tradition” or “fixed”
within an illusory totality to be removed and freed for use or dis-play. These
figures, moreover, not only depict explosive openings, they emphasize the
dispersion or scattering involved. This figure of a dispersion of signs and objects
appears with some prominence in Benjamin’s description of allegory in the
Trauerspiel book, but it will become crucial to his conception of technological
reproducibility. Here, not only do the processes of technological reproduction,
exemplified in cinema, enable images to be “torn apart,” dispersed and exhibited
in different places and times, they also seem to have a similar effect on human
beings, on the mass public. This is a point to which I will return in a moment.

Benjamin’s frequent use of figures that depict a dispersed movement or opening may seem to some to be at odds with his Messianic ideas of history and time, with their basis in a temporal stoppage or cessation: a messianic arrest of happening, which he poses against a sequential or progressive movement or unfolding of time. Yet, even his figures of stoppage or arrest involve a wresting away or a blasting of events and eras out of a historicist continuum. He suggests in fact that this historical continuum is itself a kind of container in which historical data are stored and sequentially ordered. It is not surprising, then, that he sees an arrest of time as precisely a way of breaking, tearing apart, or exploding this closed order or system, of dispersing or freeing its data for new constructions and assemblages. In this, his ideas of a stoppage of time obviously seem modeled on the ability of photography and cinema to arrest or capture images and moments, which is what allows them to be moved, dispersed, and reconstructed “according to new laws.”

If Benjamin’s ideas of historical materialism mirror his views of the workings of technological reproducibility, both may also be seen as allegorical processes. There can be little doubt, I think, that Benjamin sees these processes as opening—or displaying—a dispersed space that is necessary to political, revolutionary change—and, I think, to a vision of the future that is not simply an extrapolation or continuation of the present.
Benjamin is of course often charged with being politically naïve, with overestimating the liberating potential of techniques of reproducibility or, more generally, of an allegorical approach. He was not, however, so naïve as to think that technological reproducibility could not be co-opted in the service of capitalism, or fascism, examples of which he points out on multiple occasions. Moreover, he quite explicitly and repeatedly observes the similarities between allegory and commodity processes, as when he argues that “The wrenching of things from their familiar contexts—the normal state for goods on display—is … linked to the destruction of organic contexts in the allegorical intention.” (SW 4, 173). Even more directly, he notes, “The commodity has taken the place of the allegorical mode of apprehension.” (SW 4, 188). This replacement or co-opting of allegory by the commodity—or what might then be called the commodity’s overtaking of allegory—is a problem that Benjamin does address, although, as is usual for him, not in a straightforward way. Although he does not reject a more orthodox Marxist point of view that would explain the difference between allegory and the commodity in terms of property relations and the ownership of the means of production (and reproduction), Benjamin does not seem satisfied by this explanation. He will, instead, extend his discussion of allegory and commodities in a direction that, it seems to me, is prophetic for an age of information.

To explain, I must first point out that Benjamin seems to associate commodities
with the idea of aura, and with a particular notion of the individual self. This
association seems based, first of all, on the link between the fetishism of
commodities and the sense of living presence that Benjamin sees in the aura. If,
however, technological reproducibility may be said to kill the aura in much the
same way that allegory turned nature into dead objects or fragments, the aura
seems to be reborn in, for example, “the cult of the movie star” which Benjamin
links directly to the commodity, but also in the “cult of the Fuhrer,” and the fascist
aestheticization of politics. As Samuel Weber comments:

The Star and the Dictator had a similar function and origin. In both, the “amorphous
mass” could find a face and a voice that it might call its own, or if not its own, that it
could at least recognize and use to secure its own position. A face with eyes that seemed
to look back and a voice that seemed to address one directly. (101).

Here, one of the defining characteristics of the aura, the investment in the object
of a “characteristic of human relationships”—“the ability to look back at us”—is
reinstituted even in reproduced images. This reproduced auratic image,
Benjamin argues, becomes a way for the masses to express themselves, to see
themselves in a unifying face with which they come to identify. The screen
becomes a mirror, or at least a kind of closed feedback loop, that allows each
person within the mass to identify with the image at a personal level.

In a similar way, the fetishism of commodities imputes to inanimate objects a
living, and indeed human, quality or aura. And while it is perhaps difficult to
imagine a commodity looking back at us, or even having a face, Benjamin
observes the “bourgeois attempt to humanize/personify the commodity,” while
also noting, on the other hand, “The commodity wants to look itself in the face. It
celebrates its becoming human in the whore." (SW 4, 173). Thus, although Benjamin does not actually say this, he does suggest that the commodity, much like the auratic image, allows individuals to identify themselves with or in relation to it, much as they would in human relationships. This identification is not a merger. As with the contemplation of the artwork, it requires a certain distance that allows the subject to maintain a belief in its own identity, autonomy, and freedom of choice. In this sense, it seems to serve a similar function to what de Man sees as occurring in the symbol: it enables the self to form “an illusory identification with the non-self.” This circuit of identification is not only illusory; it is also a closed circuit, a private circuit—and as such, it seems to maintain some of the cult value associated with the aura, which now becomes fetish value. It is worth remembering that in his text from 1921, “Capitalism as Religion,” Benjamin had referred to capitalism itself as a cult, and precisely because capitalism constitutes itself as a closed circle, a horizon, which, for all its variations, allows no alterity within it.

It is in this context that Benjamin sees allegory as resisting the “deceptive transfiguration of the commodity world,” a transfiguration that hides the commodity’s status as an empty, allegorical object. The commodity seems to take on a life of its own, thus enabling an illusory private, “face to face” relation. In contrast, allegory not only highlights and displays the disjunction between signs and what they signify, but also disrupts the identification between the human self and commodities. Indeed, allegory disrupts—or has the potential to
disrupt—the very idea of the self as an autonomous, living whole: allegory’s seventeenth-century emblem is, after all, the corpse. The rise of modern technology and technologies of reproduction not only produces a dispersion of the artwork’s aura, but a corresponding dispersion that affects human apperception and consciousness, as illustrated in Benjamin’s emphasis on shocks and distracted reception. Benjamin stresses the similarities between the way images are apprehended by the filmic apparatus and by this distracted reception, using, as Samuel Weber observes, “the same German verb—aufnehmen. . . to designate cinematic production as well as reception” (91). In both cases, the images are “taken” or “taken in” in an interrupted, scattered or distracted manner—as fragments or shocks rather than as a totality. And this scattered, interrupted filmic reception becomes part of the human sensorium or body.

Yet, filmic reception is not private, but collective and public. It is a mass reception, but, as Benjamin seems to see it, this mass is neither a collection of individual subjectivities nor a unified, collective subject; rather, it is a more scattered, inchoate, and distracted entity. One might think of it as a kind of mass body, capable of “taking in” the shocks of film and of modern life, and doing so in, as Benjamin argues, a tactile and habitual way. This is, in fact, a body that is no longer distanced from—or entirely separate from—the images and shocks that it comes into contact with. Benjamin describes the mass as “absorbing” these images and shocks, but also as participating in them. Therefore, in much the
same way that technological reproducibility “replaces [the artwork’s] unique occurrence with one that is mass-like,” this mass body seems to replace the idea of the subject as a unique living whole. In fact, Benjamin refers to this mass body as a “matrix,” out of which “newborn” behaviors emerge from older, more customary ones (SW 4, 267). Without then entirely discarding the “maternal” implications of the word “matrix.” Benjamin mobilizes the sense of a matrix as a medium, echoing its similarity to mass media, to technologies of reproduction, but also its sense as an open, generative space—out of which new and unforeseen things—including the future—can emerge.

This mass matrix is, in a sense, the space of both the allegorist and the allegorical, at once dispersive and dispersed, emergent and generative. It produces and is the product of those allegorical processes of appropriation, dismantling, compiling, and recombining that find their modern form in the processes of technological reproducibility. Benjamin also seems to imagine this matrix as an open space, without horizon, which seems to correspond to that “vast and unsuspected field of action (or room for play, Spielraum)” that film opens by exploding the familiar “prison-world” (SW 4, 265). Certainly, this field or matrix is not static, and Benjamin links it to the “mass-movements of the day,” but, in keeping with the notion of play, its movements are not directed toward a predetermined destination or destiny. In this sense, it may be seen as involving a dangerous, explosive potential, a degree of risk, of unpredictability. And it is perhaps this unpredictable lack of directionality, this dispersive and scattered
quality, that distinguishes it from more conventional Marxist and Leftist notions of mass or revolutionary politics—which generally seem to see the masses as a collective subject, an extension of the individual human subject or self, albeit without the same tendencies toward bourgeois individualism and private property.

But if this mass matrix or body cannot be conceived as a living subject, neither can it be seen simply as an emblematic corpse. I do not think that I am wrong to say that Benjamin sees something im-personal and inhuman in this mass, something that has more in common with the autonomous processes of technological reproduction than it does with traditional notions of the human subject, bourgeois humanism, or even, perhaps, the humanities. Indeed, it seems to have some of the uncanny qualities associated with technologies that have come to life, that simulate and threaten to replace human life—a scenario that finds its model in the assemblage of dead body parts animated by electrical shocks described in Mary Shelley's allegorical tale. The mass matrix seems also to be an assemblage of human parts, altered by its encounters with the shocks of modern life, but without the unitary consciousness and bodily boundaries of Frankenstein's creation. It remains a loose, heterogeneous assemblage, always disjointed, in ruins, and its reproductive, generative force arises out of this disjunction. And out of the generative disjunctions of this matrix, Benjamin seems to hope, will also emerge a future that is not based on the closed, private circuit of human-commodity relations, and its perpetuation of the “ever self-
same.”

3

Of course, it would, I think, be difficult to claim that this mass matrix ever actually existed in Benjamin’s own time, or at least in the form that he seems to imagine. This does not invalidate it. The mass matrix, which is merely suggested in Benjamin’s statements, is itself a figure, an emblem, an allegory: not an allegory of the future itself, but a generative allegory, an allegory of emergence that opens a space for the future to appear and perhaps even to speak.

Benjamin’s suggestions about the relations of allegory, technological reproducibility and commodification in his day apply all the more strongly in an age of information, where the processes of digital reproducibility transform not only images and sounds, but every aspect of the world, into data. Digital information is, by definition, dispersed, broken out of its previous contexts, so that it can be disseminated, recombined, and “exhibited” anywhere. A similar sense of dispersion is inherent in the very concept of information, as in Shannon and Weaver’s theorization of information as a measure of statistical indeterminacy or randomness. Information is, in this sense, precisely a measure of diffusion or scattering.

I do not mean to suggest that this conception of information as a matter of dispersion is inherently liberating, as the triumphalist rhetoric of some technology advocates and companies would argue, although it has raised useful questions
about traditional notions of property and ownership. But, as we have all seen, capitalism is adept at controlling this kind of randomness and dispersion, at channeling information into the closed circuit of commodity flows and property relations. And, much as in Benjamin’s time, the circulation of informational commodities revolves around the illusion of the autonomous, individual self. Indeed, the ever-more customized, personalized consumption of commodified images, information, and media not only relies on the illusion of the self’s autonomy and freedom of choice, it also serves as a reflexive proof of that self’s identity, self-expression and freedom. In an age of commodified information, there would seem to be little possibility for disjunction, no opening for any real alterity, indeterminacy, or emergence. The horizon of masterable possibility would seem to have been drawn tight.

And yet, it is precisely here, I believe, that Benjamin’s suggestion of a generative matrix can, in the context of a digital world, serve as an allegory that might help to open the circuit of human-commodity relations. As I have already hinted, this notion of a generative matrix does not, in my view, involve a liberation—digital or otherwise—of humanity from commodity relations; rather, it involves a change in the conception of the human subject that has served as a support for commodification and ownership. And that means a change at not only the level of the individual, but also at a collective level.

I do not, however, mean to argue, as some of you might suspect, that Benjamin’s
mass matrix is somehow prophetic of the radical possibilities of digital or networked media in some general sense, nor of social networking in particular. As suggestive as those possibilities are, they still tend to rely on a notion of interpersonal group relations that does not, as of yet, question the primacy of traditional Western notions of the human subject. Indeed, in the case of *Facebook*, it seems clear that these relations are based precisely on the model of person to person, face to face interaction that Benjamin brings into question. Instead, I want to suggest that what makes this matrix generative is precisely the fact that it is *not simply* human. Benjamin defined this matrix in terms of an altered mode of apperception and participation, which both mimes and responds to the shocks of technological processes, complicating the conventional distinction of subject from object, internal from external, body-space from image-space.

The possibility of a generative matrix in an age of information would not, then, involve merely the digitization of human interaction, the extension of human abilities via technologies, nor other transhuman or science-fictional possibilities that continue to find their basis in the individual human subject. Indeed, what is inhuman or non-human in this matrix is not, I think, essentially technological. Nor do I mean to figure this matrix as a cyborg or hybrid of human and technology. Rather, what is non-human here is an element of chance or indeterminacy or even risk that is not under instrumental human control, which Benjamin generally figures as a space of play, and of dis-play.
The generation of random or non-deterministic elements, motions, and behaviors has obviously been made easier to achieve through digital technologies, but it is clear that Benjamin drew heavily in his own work from avant-garde arts, such as Dada and Surrealism, that highlighted indeterminacy, chance, games, and random processes, which he explicitly sees as forerunners of filmic and montage techniques. His *Arcades Project* obviously takes the meandering, playful randomness of the Surrealist *errance* as a model for its own explorations of Paris and its history.

Yet, while the use of indeterminacy and random elements in artistic work, and in Benjamin’s own scholarship, has continued to play an important role in what, with computer technologies, has come to be called “generative arts,” random processes have certainly not been exclusive to the arts, as Benjamin was well aware. For example, the mathematical bases for modeling or producing random behavior, such as fractal generation, the idea of Brownian motion, Markov processes, and Random Walks, existed well before computers.

Peter Fenves has in fact pointed out that in 1916 Benjamin and Scholem discussed the idea of seeing historical time not as a movement along a straight line, but in terms of complex curves, that would be “continuous but non-differentiable.” A curve of this kind would have no direction since at every point it
takes a sharp turn and no segment of it would be line-like. These kinds of curves are what Mandelbrot would later come to call “fractals.”

More generally, all of these mathematical models of randomness are closely related to diffusion or dispersion. Dispersion is a random process, and without this aleatory element, any notion of a generative matrix would not be generative. It would merely be a system of production: closed and predictable in stochastic terms. It would remain within, in Derrida’s terms, the horizon of possibility and control. And I remind you that for Derrida this horizon was itself centered on the “I can” or “I may” of the individual subject’s speech act. But the notion of a generative matrix suggests the possibility of a less individualistic and a less humanistic performativity, which would no longer be constrained by the performative utterances, promises, or warnings of its authors.

Of course, the role of random processes in the humanities and human sciences has remained much less developed than in the sciences and the arts, even in the so-called digital humanities. The suggestion that scholarship of any kind should open itself to montage techniques and shocks, to random processes, to games of chance and play, much less to mathematical formulae and digital techniques for generating indeterminacy, challenges in fundamental ways the humanistic traditions of disciplinary scholarship in the humanities and human sciences. But to be clear: I do mean to suggest a simple replacement of the humanist scholar by technological, random, or ludic processes. I simply suggest that these
processes can allow the untimely, disjunctive, dispersive possibilities of the future to emerge, rather than be controlled and channeled as they are in scientific and capitalistic forms of prediction, such as game theory and the so-called “decision sciences.” Such models rely on the illusory identification of probabilistic models with real-life phenomena in the interests of bringing the future under human control. Benjamin’s notion of a generative matrix (as well as his own work) suggests, on the other hand, both the scholarly and political value of opening, displaying, and enabling precisely what those models see only as dangerous risks. In this sense, our relation to the future seems less a matter of a messianism without a messiah than of a generative allegoresis that is never simply the allegorist’s. But this is also to say that the emergence or construction of the future is always disjointed, untimely, and never entirely ours.
References


Gasché, Rodolphe. “Piercing the Horizon,”


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1 A slightly different phrasing of the cited passage appears in *Without Alibi*.
2 It is worth noting, in this context, that Benjamin argues that Experience of the aura . . . rests on the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between the inanimate or natural object and man. The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return. The symbol seems clearly to be invested with a similar living presence or aura, which serves to reflect and thus confirm our own identity as human beings. De Man makes a similar kind of argument, which is discussed later.
3 Benjamin: “the emblematist does not present the essence implicitly, ‘behind the image.’ He drags the essence of what is depicted out before the image, in writing, as a caption, which forms an intimate part of what is depicted in the emblem-books” (185).

4 As many commentators have noted, Benjamin’s ideas share certain similarities with Derrida’s notions of messianicity and the future. Derrida, for his part, did not seem to agree with this assessment. Yet, whatever the similarities or differences
between them, both clearly use these ideas in an attempt to figure an opening for an impossible, unforeseen other future.

I have in fact argued previously that the desire to restore a living spirit to what is seen as an overly technologized modern world is one of the hallmarks of Nazi thought and aesthetics.

To be sure, this identification does remain completely static; it is a defining trait of commodity culture that new commodities must continuously arise to replace old ones. But this stream of fetishized commodities might therefore be seen as replacing what in the work of art “reflects back at us that of which our eyes will never have their fill. What it contains that fulfills the original desire would be the very same stuff on which the desire continuously feeds.” This desire is precisely what keeps the identificatory circuit operating.