

# **Forever Young: Juvenilia, Amateurism, and the Popular Past (or ‘Transvaluing Values in the Age of the Archive’)**

[Paul O’Kane](#)



**Whilst we mainly attend events of memorialisation,  
we are sometimes called upon for nuptials or to  
attend naming and coming of age ce**



**left:** Still from Elizabeth Price's *K*, 2015, two-channel video projection, 7:15 minutes, courtesy of the artist  
**right:** Paul Klee, *Angelus Novus*, 1920, oil transfer and watercolour on paper, 31.8 x 24.2 cm (owned by Walter Benjamin and interpreted in his 'Theses on a Philosophy of History'), photo © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, by Elie Posner

Pinned on the back of my studio door I keep a brown 'daub' made on sugar paper by my nephew when he was just three or four years old. The picture has a strangely satisfactory sense of completion and conviction, the kind we might just be looking for later in our lives and careers as artists and writers. It is imbued with the value of a certain unconscious

audacity, a kind of omnipotence born of naivety. As a hoarder as much as an archivist, I also find it all but impossible to discard my own earliest artworks and writings, anything I have completed that is made by my own hands and might be called my 'juvenilia', believing that these early works may contain treasures that are inaccessible to me now, and may deserve to be re-evaluated one day, by myself or some responsible and hopefully empathetic other. Even though my own professional status and influence is still not particularly high, I am convinced that these often inspired and unbound beginnings should not simply be regarded as the crude and tentative overtures of an oeuvre that became increasingly bold and refined, but should be simply seen as other and different works, arising at other and different (not better or worse) moments.

Another way of approaching this is for me to recall the significance of the first time a colleague pointed out to me the possibility of using a digital scanner to transpose my medium-format photographic negatives into the digital realm. In this process I experienced a certain technological jolt and began to revisit the past in a new way, bringing it rapidly into the present where these old images now share the more mobile, more easily multipliable and manipulability benefits of digital files. I soon also found myself transcribing cassette tapes to digital files, creating a similar effect for the history of my musical output. It seemed to me there and then that a transvaluation, like that promised by Nietzsche, revealed itself as past and present mingled and merged in a way that suggested a new-found equality. This seemed profound, and disruptive, if not revolutionary.

An artist who has not, or not *yet* been able to live on the professional proceeds of their creative work might, quietly at least, address themselves as 'amateur', an unarguably derogatory but otherwise merely technical term. Yet the very word 'amateur' clearly contains traces of 'heart', of amorousness, and insists that, at a certain stage of an artist's career (and of an artist's life seen in such professional terms) the artist is undeniably involved in a 'labour of love' (and what I am tempted to call, in light of my own recent publications, a 'technology of romance'). As the amateur phase develops into the professional – for the luckiest, most privileged, persistent, or 'talented' – past and present are conveniently divided into a standardised relationship and corresponding evaluation. The more or less successful / professional artist begins to be paid and may even be able to live on the proceedings of their creative work. The most fortunate few might even accumulate wealth by means of the peculiar machinations of the art market, which can be just as exorbitantly abundant as it can be punitively parsimonious.

That same market will not hesitate to forage into a professional artist's *juvenilia* if value and novelty might be found therein. Curators and historical revisionists also attend to such juvenilia with equally avaricious glee. A certain legendary organisation of old and new, late and early, amateur and professional status thus becomes blurred as the story of the artist's progress is adapted and extended to accommodate newly valued and valuable items, once hidden, and perhaps strategically secreted by the artist themselves, who may have preferred to parade only those they regarded as indicative of the 'progress' of their late, latest and best works.

Despite a constant call to fixate our gaze upon the new, the present, the contemporary, today it might be in history that we find the most surprising adventures and discoveries. There we can exercise our imaginations most fully and locate the tools and materials we need to enable us to engage with, disrupt and transform any established and habitual understanding of the

present. Furthermore, that same retro-activity might afford us a certain disruptive and critical agency that is hard to find if we are consciously fixated on and in the present itself.

In his 1929 essay on Surrealism, Walter Benjamin writes:

[Andre Breton] can boast an extraordinary discovery. He was the first to perceive the revolutionary energies that appear in the 'outmoded', in the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings, the earliest photos, the objects that have begun to be extinct, grand pianos, the dresses of five years ago, fashionable restaurants when the vogue has begun to ebb from them. The relation of these things to revolution ... [\[1\]](#)

Following Benjamin's and Breton's cue, we might use examples of artists and their works to explore the special potency and 'revolutionary' potential of the enormous archive of cultural imagery, and particularly that which has amassed as a result of mechanical and digital reproduction technologies, in and as what we might call 'the popular past'. The special pathos of this material appeals emotively and increasingly to the present, compelling a sense of responsibility to both history and humanity. Blurred faces, abstracted into grainy black-and-white tones, peer through a lens, out of a past that inevitably appears relatively youthful, inept, and even innocent. Transported by means of various recording apparatuses, they arrive in the present, 'coming down to us' subject to the compromising effects of layers of preservative reproduction. Recent Turner Prize-winning artist Elizabeth Price has repeatedly deployed these emotive archival materials (as in her two-channel video installation *K*), juxtaposing hi-def, hi-tec imagery with archival black-and-white images in a way that illustrates our current cultural condition, dangling between a rapidly emerging future and a past that swells exponentially behind and beneath us, like Hokusai's famous wave. Ironically, the proliferation and sophistication of 'new' technologies delivers us into a mutually consuming repast with the past, one that might allow us to justifiably refer to our own time as 'the age of the archive'.

Our current relationship with the past might also be found in further consideration of the concept of 'juvenilia'. The term generally refers to those products of an artist's career deemed to have appeared prior to that artist's full maturation and professionalisation, but if this is indeed an 'age of the archive' it seems to subject potentially anything and everything to revision, relativism, re-evaluation, or Nietzschean 'transvaluation', and in such a way that we might come to question our ability to confidently make clear distinctions between an artist's 'mature works' and their 'juvenilia' (thereby devaluing the past and the 'early' in favour of the new and the 'late'). And let us not forget that Nietzsche also championed 'the child' as a model of all we should aspire to, according to his 'philosophy of life'.

What would become of our culture and our values if all of our past became equal to all of our present? If our childhoods were equal to our maturities in every way? What would be the effect of such a flattening of the habitual hierarchy between old and young, between naivety and sophistication? Here we might be drawn back to Douglas Crimp's postmodern theorisation of 'the museum's ruins', in an eponymous essay where he theorises the work of Robert Rauschenberg wherein the lithographic process becomes a great equaliser, a democratising plane on which all kinds of cultural images, high and low, old and new, freely associate, disrupting hierarchy and meaning, and thereby perhaps (for our argument here) transvaluing values. [\[2\]](#) Similarly, Andre Malraux claimed that photography provided us with a 'museum without walls', ie a non-exclusive visual record of everyone and everything, collected without judgement, organised without hierarchy, and made freely available to all. Today, as can be seen in the reference above to the work of Elizabeth Price, these ideas are

far from exhausted. Of course, the scanner, and various software, apps and devices, as well as social media platforms like Instagram, Pinterest, etc, have made the radical proliferation of what we might call ‘the popular past’ all the more intense and pervasive. Furthermore, on these social media sites, not only do unprecedented quantities of images and levels of eclecticism reign, but the professional and amateur also rub shoulders and compete for attention in ways (and to degrees) previously unheard of.

In ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, Walter Benjamin showed a prescient interest in the ways in which readers of modern newspapers began to feel free to contribute their own letters and ideas to the columns of the newspapers that they read.

[3] Today, we all feel the ready confidence to do likewise, having noted that, given the opportunity and the ‘platform’, our own wit, wisdom and news can look just as well on the screen as that of our most seasoned, established and ‘official’ journalists, comedians and commentators. Hence arises the controversial divide between the ‘populist’ and the ‘expert’, and even a crisis of expertise per se as we wonder: should we view this as a progressive, democratic and liberating tendency (perhaps another aspect of a Nietzschean transvaluation of values), or should we fear its barbaric, possibly proto-fascist and post-Enlightenment implications, as the crowd (or ‘mob’) is elevated to the status of a democratically empowered dominant force, albeit one without any recognisable ‘head’ or leader? What might happen if the unsupervised ‘amateur’ or ‘juvenile’, following the logical procedures of democracy ascends to take charge of the next stage of our modernity? This is surely a potential nightmare or Armageddon for those currently empowered middle classes whose status and role is justified precisely by their *professional* qualifications and experience.

Rather than here pursuing this fiery political question to its ends, we can instead return to Benjamin’s observation of Breton and there ‘zoom-in’ on the special value awarded to early photographic images (also implicating early films). In the early twentieth century, photography and film are marked out in their infancy (and once again we might call them ‘juvenile’) as the inspiring ‘new technologies’ of their day. A 1927 film by Walter Ruttmann, made in and around Berlin, documents a day and night in the life of the modern city.<sup>[4]</sup> The work is typically modern, and typically photographic in the special way that Walter Benjamin discerned within the photographs of Eugene Atget – ie photographic images are not works of art according to any established understanding of the work of art up to that moment. The photographic, and later the cinematic (especially perhaps when applied to the streets of the modern city), allows the ordinary, the evident, the immanent, the ‘there’ and the already there to take place *in* art, and, for Benjamin, to take the place *of* art. The photographic or cine camera frames the ordinary and thereby honours and elevates potentially anything. Existing values are thereby transvalued.

Today, those at pains to make distinctions between the digital and analogue epochs of photography might also be led to acknowledge that photography’s most profound contribution to our culture undergoes only a quantitative and not a truly qualitative difference as it crosses this generational and millennial boundary. The digital realm is an exponentially enlarged ‘museum without walls’. Correspondingly, the first cameras were also forms of ‘scanner’, beginning, in the nineteenth century, the work of our twenty-first century ‘age of the archive’ as they first began to harvest ‘the popular past’.

As Benjamin says in his comments on Breton, the revolutionary power of ‘the outmoded’ includes ‘the first photographs’, ie the ‘juvenilia’ of the medium of photography itself as well as the juvenilia of modernity, of the modern city, and of Paris, the first modern city. All these

are specially, strangely, and newly valued by Breton/Benjamin, not because they are ‘new’ and thus ‘modern’ but because ‘*the vogue has begun to ebb from them*’, ie because these apparently young phenomena are thereby, and unexpectedly, revealed as ‘already old’. And here, not only does the relative value of the young become subjected to a transvaluative process, but any habitual or standardised relation of old to young becomes scrambled.

The photographic or cinematic artist (eg Atget or Ruttmann) no longer ‘creates’ an image of a world from base materials in the way a painter does, but, rather, frames choices selected from and of the extant visible world. For Benjamin, recording in this way equates art with forensics as images become ‘historical evidence’. A truly and appropriately modern art is thus born in time to record the emerging modern world. The two reciprocate, flatter, complement one another. Certain images seem to lend themselves to ‘the photographic’ or ‘cinematographic’. The passing of trams; neon advertisements reflected in wet tarmac roads; fashionably dressed crowds entering a theatre – all are elevated simply by being chosen, not just by art but by history, and thus become embroiled in a conspiracy of the two, raised up as spectacles of novelty and note while simultaneously laid down in the archive, like wine destined to grow with age in sensory qualities.

The photographic and cinematic image turn art into history and creativity into curating. History, in turn, is rendered a photographic process. Benjamin called his essay on Surrealism ‘a snapshot’ and used other aspects of photographic and cinematic processes (including the ‘close-up’ and ‘slow-motion’) as means by which to ‘picture’ alternative forms and movements of time and history.<sup>[5]</sup> Photography and cinema’s newly indexical image also created a new sense of evident continuity between past and present, the kind over which Roland Barthes famously emoted in his *Camera Lucida*.<sup>[6]</sup> Thus today we are able to look ‘back’ and see the birth of our societies and our cities, the birth of our own modernity, aided by photography and cinema in such a way that we also see this ‘old’ world as young and as innocent at least of those crimes we know that only subsequent history will bestow.

Louis Daguerre famously delivered (apparently by accident), in his image of Boulevard du Temple in 1838, the first human being to be recorded in this way. Walter Ruttmann adds another significant figure to a modern pantheon of empty streets and urban loners in a fleeting moment from his film (about fifty-nine minutes in) when an adolescent-looking boy or girl, who may be selling newspapers along the tramlines, glances for a fleeting moment into the filmmaker’s lens. Watching this particular ‘clip’ today, the moment seems re-enacted for eternity due to the particularities of the photographic record and its innately, instantaneously, unavoidably archival effects. An ordinary event and an anonymous young person occupy a place and a status once reserved for the sacred and rare, but what might also interest us is this boy’s particular face, chosen (according to the logic of Barthes’s ‘*punctum*’) as something jumping unexpectedly out of history to potentially pierce the audience’s heart, not with love for this particular person, nor even with empathy for the society and humanity of 1920s Berlin and concern for all we now know it will eventually endure, but as affected by the sublime indexicality which links us materially, physically, unarguably and sensually to all those people and events that have passed on and into the past.<sup>[7]</sup>

Following Barthes, but also Giorgio Agamben in his essay ‘Judgement Day’ about Daguerre’s figure,<sup>[8]</sup> this child never ceases to gaze into my own eyes, and to call, to call upon me, and thus on all of us, ‘us’ being the people of now, the people of that child’s future, just as he or she is a member of our peopled past. The call of the people of the past is emotive, demanding and curious, but it is also youthful, and inevitably so. The past

necessarily appears younger, more innocent than us, as yet innocent of its own future, the future that we know and that we are. Thus the mechanically reproduced image of the past becomes just as *morally indexical* as it is physically indexical, a primarily ethical and political rather than primarily aesthetical image.

Both the amateur and the juvenile are relatively inept, but also relatively innocent of cynical and mature professionalism and its hard-headed strategies; innocent of professionalism's collectively agreed conspiracy to prioritise achievement over perhaps more delicate, dainty or wayward aims. In Zen Buddhism, however, we can come across tales in which it is precisely the novice and newcomer who is able to see the highest possibility of thought and action, thoughts and actions to which those more sumptuously (and therefore presumptuously) qualified are blinded by their own sense of status and accompanying hubris. In this case, we might suspect that the 'highest' achievements of art and craft, and of thought and life, might not be available to the most experienced, but are, on the contrary, the privilege only of the open-hearted, unambitious, unconscious and wide-eyed novice.

Some of the values we might presume to hold dear are those of age, experience and maturity, and of progress in skill and craft, skills and crafts that, according to a certain history of art, seem to go hand-in-hand. Meanwhile we know that modern art, from the outset, consistently challenged and changed all such values, whether they were inherited from the elite academies (from 'above') or from the artisan's craft traditions (from 'below'). From Coleridge and Wordsworth publishing their shockingly rustic 'Lyrical Ballads' in their twenties, to Manet achieving notoriety in his thirties by paradoxically 'succeeding' in a 'salon of the refused', and on through to the glorious insolence of post-World War Two teenage rock 'n' roll, pop, punk and hip-hop, avant-garde cultural and creative activities have long asserted that the locus of modern value lies in the spirit of youth, wrapped in a kind of emphatic belligerence that is, by definition, unavailable to the mature and established. Values in modernity are no longer what they used to be, our Nietzschean model is indeed a deconstructive 'philosophising with a hammer' whereby values are transvalued by becoming constant targets and sites of renewal rather than authoritative standards. It is only thereby that we become Nietzsche's child, or what Bob Dylan called '*Forever Young*'.

Thus we might return to Nietzsche's assertion of a transvaluation of values and of value per se. What would a world without such values look like? Are values an all-too-human conceit that animals and machines do not share? And is this transvaluation precisely what the amateur, novice or juvenile promises and brings as a disruptive gift to all and any established senses of 'achievement'? Is this not in fact the new itself, coming as a child who innocently (and perhaps ignorantly) *rejuvenates* life and our understanding of it, even in, or precisely in, the child's typically barbaric and bombastic, inarticulate and unrefined manner?

Out of the past peer appealing faces, photographed and filmed; and we might even hear their voices, too, sustained and carried into the present by mechanical then digital reproduction. They are our concern, we have a responsibility for and to them, if only because, as Benjamin says in his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History': 'our coming was expected on earth'.<sup>[9]</sup> We might interpret this short but profound phrase to mean that the lives of previous generations were governed partly by this parameter – that a subsequent generation was and is always 'expected'. In some way, any life is and must be led, however consciously or unconsciously, with respect for generations to come. We might do this most obviously today by trying to preserve the planet as an environment fit for humans, but we might suspect that Benjamin also meant something less obvious, less concrete, ie suspect that he meant that

every life led is led in ways governed and limited by the fact that others have preceded and will proceed and succeed us.

The past, 'old' as it is, will also always be young, always both older and younger than ourselves. New technologies and our 'age of the archive' mean that the past will henceforth be increasingly populated and thus 'popular'. The past is a cornucopia to rival the all-too-new, shining and gift-wrapped present of consumerism. It is an 'undiscovered continent' (Nicolas Bourriaud) that we visit, not only to find previously unknown objects but also to renew the already affirmed and known, the 'pre-loved'. Meanwhile, each journey to the past invites us to redraw the very backdrop against which all historical objects have thus far been set.

The new, the future, the current, the present and ourselves all arrive inexorably, 'expected', and yet as barbarians speaking in new voices with new words, accents and championing new rights and values, inevitably tending to induce some degree of fear along with all our promise. And yet, as the poet Constantine Cavafy once eloquently implied, every barbarian comes also as a kind of necessity, a gift, a deliverance, not only as 'expected' but as needed and necessary, as the future for which we, along with those before or after us, have consciously or unconsciously prepared – what Cavafy calls, in the last line of his poem *Waiting for the Barbarians*, 'a kind of solution'.

Once we have announced 'our coming was expected on earth', we might look at the 'popular past' and the 'age of the archive' anew, and see not only an emotive appeal made to us by the past but also a kind of pact, a paternal reassurance that our own experience is, and always was, served, supported and shaped by the past, and by the entirety of the past, without division. In return, the past requires us, and each generation to care of it and for it, like a child perhaps, even as we also acknowledge the past's parental role in preparing the world for our own coming. Taking greater heed, care, and caring more by way of gratitude for the past, we might come to realise that we serve that same function for future generations, 'expecting' them, just as we ourselves were 'expected on earth'. Consequently, we might begin to live more consciously and explicitly *for them*, empathising with those others who preceded us and who will follow us, as much as we live for ourselves. And this in itself might constitute what Breton referred to as a 'revolution'.

[1] Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street, and Other Writings*, E Jephcott and K Shorter, trans, Verso, London and New York, 2000, p 229

[2] See Douglas Crimp, 'On the Museum's Ruins', *October* 13, summer 1980, pp 41–57; republished in Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1993

[3] Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' [1936], in *Illuminations*, Schocken Books, New York, 1969, pp 217–251

[4] *Berlin: Symphony of a City*, 1927, director Walter Ruttmann, 20th Century Fox; a German silent film, co-written by Carl Mayer and Karl Freund

[5] See Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia' [1929], E Jephcott, trans, in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, Peter Demetz, ed, Harcourt, New York, 1978

[6] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Cape, London, 1982

[7] Something similar happens in the famous finale of Truffaut's 1959 movie *The 400 Blows*

[8] In Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, J Fort, trans, Zone Books, New York, 2007, pp 23–27

[9] Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' [1950], in *Illuminations*, Schocken Books, New York, 1969, p 254

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