

## "Feeling-Images"

*Montage, Body, and Historical Memory in Barbara Hammer's Nitrate Kisses*

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**ABSTRACT** This essay investigates the ways in which Barbara Hammer's film *Nitrate Kisses* (1992) traces stories about homosexuality throughout the twentieth century. Inspired both by the concept of "vertical cinema," as theorized by Maya Deren, and by the historical-philosophical reflections of Michel Foucault and Walter Benjamin, Hammer realizes a montage process in *Nitrate Kisses* that resurrects a forgotten historical memory through the juxtaposition of archival materials and original images. It is a memory that is reappropriated through the film as an experiential, tactile, and emotional moment. **KEYWORDS** Barbara Hammer, found footage film, *Nitrate Kisses* (1992), queer cinema, vertical cinema

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*I am fifty-three years old and made my first film when I was thirty. I am aware that twenty-three years of my work that includes fifty films, twenty videotapes, and multiple performances could be lost in the historic process. Certain people, critics, writers, and film programmers control what is seen and what is written about. I made Nitrate Kisses (1992) because lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgendered people have been left out of history.*  
—BARBARA HAMMER, *HAMMER! MAKING MOVIES OUT OF SEX AND LIFE*<sup>1</sup>

A forerunner of American queer cinema and an undisputed protagonist of underground feminist cultural expression, Barbara Hammer is a prolific and multifaceted artist. Over the course of a career that has lasted more than forty years, she has realized more than eighty works—films, videos, performances, photographs, installations, and web projects—that have profoundly influenced generations of filmmakers and artists involved in gender activism and the LGBT subculture. Although a remarkable orientation toward experimentation has led her to work with numerous technologies and artistic techniques, Hammer first made a name for herself as a filmmaker dedicated to expressing the complexity of the lesbian experience while at the same time meditating on universal questions such as war, social justice, identity, death, and AIDS.<sup>2</sup> Always balancing the personal and the political, Hammer's cinema uses the

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presence of the female body as one of its principal motifs; its centrality unites her corpus of work. In the films, this motif has a double meaning: on the one hand it is a landscape of the ego, a territory of self-knowledge that needs to be explored in its functions and natural rhythms, and on the other it is a symbolic accord between the intimate and the collective through which to meditate on reality and social relations.

The relevance of the body in Hammer's productions seems inevitably to manifest in a cinematographic language that is oriented toward the tactile and the definable, the physical and the emotional, but that is also rich in intellectual implications. The filmmaker describes her creative process as follows:

The structure in my films existed before I began talking about it. The structure is intuitive in conception. Analysis, abstraction, and my talking about it come later. That is why my films are not formalist; that is, they do not strictly adhere to an a priori rule of form, but instead spring from my intuitive gut experiences and so are phenomenological. The form is directly determined by the content. A lot of words. My films begin in what I call *feeling images*. An inseparable unity of emotion and thought/idea/image and internal bodily states of excitement.<sup>3</sup>

Through these “feeling-images” Hammer has created a body of work that sets itself in opposition to the linear plotlines of institutional cinema. It aims to recover the imaginary—and sometimes anti-narrative—potential of cinematic language, not merely to dramatize its contents, but to produce indivisible units of images, ideas, intuitions, and sensations. As a result, the debt expressed by the filmmaker to the concept of “vertical cinema” put forward in the 1940s and 1950s by Maya Deren seems clear enough.<sup>4</sup> A pioneer of the first American film avant-garde, Deren theorized the existence of a poetic and “vertical” approach to images in filmmaking, aimed at exploring in phenomenological terms the emotional substance of a given moment, and opposed to a “horizontal” narrative approach characterized by continuity and a linear development of the action. At the conference “Poetry and the Film” held in New York in 1953, Deren revealed her thoughts about “vertical” cinema:

The characteristics of poetry . . . also may be present in works which are not poetry. The distinction of poetry is its construction (what I mean by “a poetic structure”), and the poetic construct arises from the fact, if you will, that it is a “vertical” investigation of a situation, in that it probes the ramifications of the moment, and is concerned with its qualities and its depth, so that you have poetry concerned in a sense not with what is

occurring, but with what it feels like or what it means. . . . In what is called a “horizontal” development, the logic is a logic of actions. In a “vertical” development, it is a logic of a central emotion or idea which attracts to itself even disparate images which contain that central core which they have in common. Film is essentially a montage and therefore by nature a poetic medium.<sup>5</sup>

In Deren’s view, vertical cinema goes beyond the centrality of linear progression and plot in order to explore the simultaneous movement of thoughts and emotions that flow forth from the images and, above all, from their juxtaposition. Montage in this sense is not only the essential process at the heart of cinema, but also the very condition for the poetic development of filmic expression. In a similar conception of cinematic language—interpreted more than once by Hammer as specifically feminine—the notion of cinematic time also assumes a particular value: it in turn sets itself in opposition to the action and continuity of the “official” cinematic story (horizontal and “masculine”) in order to instead favor a different genre of temporality, aimed at vertically exploring the profundity of a given moment and exhibiting a simultaneous synthesis of intellectual and emotional elements.<sup>6</sup>

Considering cinematic practice as a poetic and “vertical” experience along the lines outlined by Deren, Hammer identifies in montage the possibility of producing articulations of meaning that are no longer founded on the sequentiality of narrative, but rather on synchronicity and emotional and symbolic congruencies created by the juxtaposition of images. The need to choose a lyrical, and at the same time radical, use of the cinematic medium leads us back to Hammer’s desire to deal with radical themes and content: the filmmaker’s programmatic choice to place herself outside the formulas of dominant cinematic production reflects her determination to lend visibility to the experiences and thoughts, as well as the identities and histories, of those who are destined to find no place in the circuit of mainstream cinema. In particular, since the 1990s, Hammer has employed the vertical language of film in order to recompose—or, more precisely, to “re-edit”—the “unwritten stories” of those who have been excluded from historical institutional memory.<sup>7</sup> It was with this intent that in 1992 Hammer realized *Nitrate Kisses*, which, along with the later *Tender Fictions* (1995) and *History Lessons* (2000), make up her so-called Invisible Histories Trilogy.<sup>8</sup> Produced in large part through the use of archival images, *Nitrate Kisses* is a constructed series of testimonies and findings, with the double goal of rediscovering twentieth-century lesbian and gay history and reflecting on the concept of historical research itself.<sup>9</sup> Defined by Hammer as a “political

call-to-action film,” the work represents the director’s first experience with the documentary essay film, a cinematic genre she continued to experiment with in *Tender Fictions* and *History Lessons*.<sup>10</sup>

In realizing *Nitrate Kisses*, Hammer took personal charge of the film’s montage by assembling heterogeneous and disparate fragments: photographs and documents of Willa Cather, the lesbian American writer of the early twentieth century (fig. 1); frames and sequences from *Lot in Sodom* (dir. James Sibley Watson and Melville Webber, 1933), the silent experimental film that was among the first in the history of cinema to deal with the theme of homosexuality; images of Berlin and of World War II in memory of the repression of “deviance” during the Third Reich (fig. 2); and bibliographic and visual documentation collected from the New York Lesbian Herstory Archives.<sup>11</sup> The material gathered by the artist—understood as remnants of an “other” historical memory that have been intentionally repressed and forgotten—is constantly combined with original footage shot by the director. Among the images filmed by Hammer, those that particularly stand out are the erotic sequences dedicated to four contemporary lesbian and gay couples, which are accompanied by voice-over biographical segments about people from queer communities. In the first section of the film, sequences that show an elderly lesbian couple in a moment of intimacy alternate with cover images from lesbian pulp fiction novels of the 1940s and 1950s as well as archival footage of old, ruined buildings that seems to bear witness to the passing of history and the transience of time (figs. 3 and 4). In the second part of the film, the only part specifically dedicated to male homosexuality, Hammer juxtaposes erotic images of an interracial gay couple with sequences from the proto-queer film *Lot in Sodom* and other movies, especially comedies dating back to the silent era that include grotesque male characters (figs. 5 and 6). Over these images, offscreen voices comment on the repression of homosexuality in the past, while the text of the Motion Picture Production Code of 1930—the code that for decades banned, among other things, the representation of “perverse” sexuality in movies in the United States—scrolls by, superimposed over the images.<sup>12</sup> The concluding chapter of the movie begins with the voice-over testimony of a German woman telling of the lives of lesbians in Nazi concentration camps. In this section, where archival materials alternate with hard-core images showing two young lesbian couples engaged in sadomasochistic behavior, Hammer employs captions and quotations taken from Michel Foucault and Walter Benjamin in order to express the necessity of finding useful traces through which to realize a historical counter-discourse on homosexuality, thus producing an “an-institutional” history able to undermine official history discourses.



FIGURE 1. Willa Cather dressed as Peter Paragon in “The Fatal Pin,” a Union Girls Dramatic Club Production in October 1892; from *Nitrate Kisses* (1992). (Courtesy Barbara Hammer)



FIGURE 2. “Asocial women” in Berlin, from an archival photograph taken during the Nazi period; from *Nitrate Kisses* (1992). (Courtesy Barbara Hammer)



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FIGURES 3-4. A juxtaposition between two older women making love in frame (left) and a photograph of Louise Pound and Willa Cather taken around the 1890s (right); from *Nitrate Kisses* (1992). (Courtesy Barbara Hammer)



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FIGURES 5-6. A gay male couple in the 1990s in frame (left) and a still from James Sibley Watson and Melville Webber’s *Lot in Sodom* (1933) showing two men in amorous poses (right); from *Nitrate Kisses* (1992). (Courtesy Barbara Hammer)

This strategy of juxtaposing images of different origins, both found and original, not only permits the artist to realize a documentation of homosexuality at the end of the twentieth century that is destined to become the archival material of the future, but also, to put it in Benjaminian terms, allows the viewer to link the contemporary documents and the past circumstances and facts in a dialectical constellation.<sup>13</sup> The combination of found footage and original images shot ad hoc by the filmmaker also confirms Hammer's intention to give the film a vertical development. The montage of *Nitrate Kisses* is, in this sense, the authentic matrix discourse, a collage form in which different cinematic fragments are joined together to reveal the paradoxical nature inherent in the practice of found footage and, implicitly, in montage itself: that is to say, the ability to stabilize connections and create meanings from discontinuous and even pre-existing unities. The recomposition of historical temporality, in its turn central to the film, evidently no longer derives from a linear development and a progressive coherence, but evolves by favoring the reflexive and emotional simultaneity expressed by the combination of the images. In this way, Hammer asks the viewer to play an active role and to reassemble the traces of the past in a wholly personal chronology that lacks any systematizing aspirations:

It is most important to understand the processes of history rather than simply recover the stories. I searched for movement and congealment, stasis and change, marks and traces, margins, holes and blurs, marked remnants of this marginalized history. I also had a strong intuitive hunch that history could not be imaged without a contemporary context or reference point. One needs the present to understand the past. . . . Again, I demand an active audience who must go through the historic retrieval process themselves. . . . This is much like what I did as I found fragments from the past and the present and had to decide what period they were from and what they meant in conjunction. The people in the audience become archaeologists and historians!<sup>14</sup>

The unwritten history of gays and lesbians, ejected from an institutional memory whose intent is to transmit only the viewpoint of the winners, re-emerges by overcoming exactly one of the fundamental principles of official history, namely its claim to universality, an absolutist principle from which the losers' perspectives and experiences are irredeemably excluded.<sup>15</sup> The reappropriation of historical memory advocated by *Nitrate Kisses* aims in this way to find premises other than the presumption of completeness that accompanies institutional historical interpretations. By countering official history with a

conception of biography and autobiography as a fragmented, performative, and “materialist” method of past reconstruction, Hammer allows the documents she uses to free themselves from any aspiration to objectivity in order to open unexpected passages and sudden chinks in individual and collective memory.

The pragmatic process that characterizes the reconstruction of historical memory through montage and image recycling directly recalls the tactile method with which the filmmaker investigates the characters’ nude bodies in a close-up examination. In this sense, the critique of the methods of official history corresponds to a parallel questioning of official eroticism. The act of scrutinizing two women’s physicality in a moment of intimacy contrasts significantly with dominant forms of eroticism: the phallogentric gaze, always prevalent in culture-industry representations of sex, is radically repudiated in order to overturn the ideological function of the body. The decision to explicitly show the intimate moments experienced by the couples in the film establishes a political action oriented toward undoing the coercive logic that has opposed the historical affirmation of homosexual identities. Hammer’s reference to Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* (1976–84)—especially noticeable in the third part of film through quotations from *The Will to Know* (which, along with *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*, constitute the three parts of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*)—is emblematic.<sup>16</sup> In the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault conceives sexuality as a “power-knowledge apparatus,” or rather as a strategic mechanism inscribed into dominant historical-cultural processes. The author does not define his research in terms of a historical-linear restitution of sexual behavior in Western society, but as an operation in progress aimed at stimulating the reader to imagine new trends of thought. In the preface Foucault writes:

This volume opens a series of studies which do not expect to be continuous or exhaustive; it will be a matter of some surveys in a complex territory. Subsequent volumes are indicated only provisionally. My dream would be a far-reaching work, capable of correcting itself while it develops, open to the reactions it brings about, to the circumstances it will encounter, and perhaps to new hypotheses. I would like it to be a scattered and changeable work. . . . I did not want to tell the story of sexual behaviors in Western societies, but to deal with a much more sober and localized problem: in which way have these behaviors become the object of a knowledge? How, that is to say, in which ways and for which reasons, has this field of knowledge, which with a recent word we call “sexuality,” been organized? . . . In which way, in modern Western societies, is the production of discourses, to which



(at least for a certain period of time) a value of truth has been attributed, linked to the various mechanisms and institutions of power?<sup>17</sup>

In *History of Sexuality*, Hammer finds inspiration to reflect, in particular, on the notion of repression and on the indispensability of this concept within every analysis that tries to decipher the relationships between power, knowledge, and sex. The filmmaker's urgency in dealing with the repressive implications connected with the apparatus of sexuality goes back to the need to understand sexual conduct laws by declaring them from time to time "legitimate" or "illegitimate," and to identify for this purpose "who makes history and who is left out."<sup>18</sup> If, as Hammer affirms, "the free expression of contemporary sexuality in the film put the hiding, denial, and repressions of the past into context," the hard-core sequences dedicated to the four couples call into question the "horizontal" of official historical time, in order to contrast it with the "verticality" of an erotic and liberating temporality.<sup>19</sup> Montage, therefore, has the function of expressing in kinesthetic terms the erotic energy that entirely pervades the film. The assembly of images becomes an experiential means aimed at arousing in the viewer tactile impressions and sensations, and involving her or him in new and revelatory forms of knowledge.

If Foucault's deliberately discontinuous approach accords effectively with a vertical conception of cinema that here lends itself to the rediscovery of the historical memory of homosexuality, *Nitrate Kisses*, as already suggested, finds a further and fundamental point of contact with the methodological and historical-philosophical reflections of Walter Benjamin.<sup>20</sup> In his *Theses on the Concept of History*—the valuable "introductory" materials to the *Arcades Project*—Benjamin expresses the need to contest the mystification carried out by official history, which is especially identified with nineteenth-century historicism, through the construction of an alternative history that can restore the "losers'" point of view. According to Benjamin, the recovery of an alternative memory presupposes a form of appropriation of the past that is once again "tactile" and intentionally fragmentary, whose model is evidently noticeable in the technique of montage.<sup>21</sup> It is therefore the linearity of time and progress on the basis of official history that, in the view of the author, must undergo a profound disruption. If, as Benjamin affirms, "historicism culminates by right in universal history," since its method is additive and "musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous empty time," materialistic historiography is in opposition to this approach through a "constructive principle," namely producing a real form of *découpage* within time.<sup>22</sup> In realizing *Nitrate Kisses*, Hammer employs a

procedure similar to that suggested by Benjamin, conceiving montage as an expressive and formal device that challenges the notion of homogeneity attributed to history. The juxtaposition of archival documents and contemporary images allows her to produce a tension between past and present, from which emerges the unfinished margin of history and therefore the possibility to intervene in it. In this film, the redemption of neglected memory does not look for cause-and-effect relationships, but it is marked by the implicit discontinuity of montage that allows the past and historical knowledge to be condensed into an instant, in the “now of knowability” made possible by the sudden flash of an image.<sup>23</sup>

In contrast to the linearity and causality of official historiography, Barbara Hammer employs a method of fragmentary reuse of the past in which the use of archival documents and the exploration of naked bodies performed by the movie camera interpenetrate to reveal in “tactile” terms the lost history of homosexuality. From this perspective, *Nitrate Kisses* constitutes, without a doubt, a notable example of poetic and “vertical” cinema, within which the dialectical temporality of montage prevails on the mere “horizontal” development of the plot. ■

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ALESSANDRA CHIARINI was recently awarded her PhD in cinema, music, and theater from the University of Bologna, with a dissertation entitled “Still Moving Images: The Dialectical Relationships Between Cinema and Photography in Contemporary Artistic Practices.” Her primary research interests include the interplay between art and cinema, appropriation art, and New German Cinema. She has written essays on Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Studio Azzurro, and Cindy Sherman, and on the relationship between cinema and photography in contemporary media culture.

## NOTES

1. Barbara Hammer, *Hammer! Making Movies Out of Sex and Life* (New York: Feminist Press, 2010), 204.

2. For an introduction to Barbara Hammer’s work, see the artist’s official website.

3. Hammer, *Hammer!*, 85.

4. *Ibid.*, 235, 261–62.

5. “Poetry and the Film: A Symposium with Maya Deren, Arthur Miller, Dylan Thomas, Parker Tyler. Chairman, Willard Maas. Organized by Amos Vogel,” in *Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 174. The conference was held in October 1953 at Cinema 16, New York. In my opinion, this quote by Deren summarizes in a suggestive way Barbara Hammer’s poetics of montage that I find emblematically expressed in *Nitrate Kisses*.

6. To cite Hammer: “Finally . . . there appeared on screen the black-and-white 16 mm films of one Maya Deren. Something was radically different. The screen was filled with images that were created from a different sensibility, an aesthetic I intuitively understood. For the first time, a woman’s cinema filled the screen in this dark, cavernous lecture

hall. . . . Maya Deren's critical work as a theorist of her own cinema encouraged me to think deeply about my images and the formal manner in which I used them. . . . Her explanation of a 'vertical cinema,' a poetic cinema of feeling built by creating emotional layers and depths rather than linear stories, made perfect sense to me." Hammer, *Hammer!*, 234–35.

7. Hammer, *Hammer!*, 168. In this respect it is inevitable to think about the technique mentioned by Walter Benjamin "to incorporate the principle of montage in history. Thus, to erect the largest constructions from the smallest, most sharply and keenly tailored elements. Thereby, to discover the crystal of the total event in the analysis of small individual moments." Walter Benjamin, "Das Passagen-Werk," in *Gesammelte Schriften V*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 575.

8. The term comes from Elisabeth Lebovici, "The Screen as the Body," *Mousse* 32, <http://www.mousse magazine.it/articolo.mm?lang=en&id=789>.

9. Through this film Hammer specifically questions "what it is like to investigate, to look for traces, to uncover and find forgotten or misleading paths." Quoted in Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, "Barbara Hammer," in *Film Voices: Interviews from Post Script*, ed. Gerald Duchovnay (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 6.

10. *Ibid.*, 119. *Nitrate Kisses* is also Hammer's first full-length film. She had previously worked exclusively with short films.

11. "In 1990," asserts Hammer, "while researching Dr. James Sibley Watson's archive, I became aware of the large number of outtakes in 35 mm nitrate film from *Lot in Sodom*, 1933. This extraordinary early film by Watson and his gay colleague and co-director, Melville Webber, was one of the early queer films made in the US. I sensed a gay-positive attitude by the filmmakers due to the manner in which the men in the film were directed, lit, and clothed (near nothing at all). The subtext of beautiful nude, male bodies in celebration overwhelmed the biblical myth of punishment allotted the men of Sodom (a myth reinterpreted by scholars today to be about violence and rape, not sodomy). I wanted to retell the Sodom and Gomorrah story with a contemporary view of gay pride. The film became much more than that." Hammer, *Hammer!*, 204.

12. The film refers particularly to the point in which the text states, "Sex perversion or any inference of it is forbidden."

13. "I montaged this material," writes Hammer, "with two lesbians who wear and use leather and chains in their lovemaking. These are the images that could be censored today by some lesbian communities as well as by the public at large. There are some forms of gay and lesbian lovemaking which I feared could be censored by some of our own communities and so be lost to history. The women who prefer leather, who pierce and tattoo, old lesbians in their sixties and seventies—these people and their sexualities inform our lives today and must remain in our history tomorrow." Hammer, *Hammer!*, 205. As Benjamin in fact states: "Image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. Only dialectical images are genuine images." Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 462.

14. Hammer, *Hammer!*, 204, 206.

15. It is a concept of history compatible with that proposed by Walter Benjamin, who says that historical reconstruction is the product of a selective memory based on the dialectic between “winners” and “losers”: “Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which current rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried in the procession. They are called ‘cultural treasures,’ and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment. For in every case these treasures have a lineage which he cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great geniuses who created them, but also the anonymous toil of others who lived in the same period. There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is never free of barbarism, so barbarism taints the manner in which it was transmitted from one hand to another. The historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from this process of transmission as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain.” Walter Benjamin, paralinguistic to “On the Concept of History,” in *Selected Writings, vol. 4, 1938–1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 391–92.

16. The part of *Nitrate Kisses* in which Hammer examines the repression of homosexuality in Nazi Germany, combining archival footage and original images of a sadomasochistic lesbian couple in intimacy, begins with a caption that cites the following significant quotation of Michel Foucault: “If repression has indeed been the fundamental link between power, knowledge, and sexuality since the classical age, it stands to reason that we will not be able to free ourselves from it excepts at a considerable cost: nothing less than a transgression of laws, a lifting of prohibitions, an irruption of speech, a reinstating of pleasure within reality, and a whole new economy in the mechanism of power will be required.” Michel Foucault, “The History of Sexuality,” in *Knowledge and Postmodernism in Historical Perspective*, ed. Joyce Applebay, Elizabeth Covington, David Hoyt, Michael Latham, and Allison Sneider (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 419.

17. Michel Foucault, “Preface to the Italian edition of *La volontà de savoir*,” *Pli: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy* 13 (2002): 11–12.

18. Quoted in Foster, “Barbara Hammer,” 123.

19. Hammer, *Hammer!*, 205.

20. The debt to Benjamin is unequivocally expressed in the third part of the film, in which the caption says, “Who is the angel of history?” evidently referring to his Theses.

21. “Method of this project: literary montage. I needn’t say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them.” Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 460.

22. *Ibid.*, 396. Monica Dall’Asta, “La storia (im)possibile: ancora su Histoire(s) du cinéma,” *La Valle dell’Eden* no. 12–13 (2004): 111.

23. Walter Benjamin, “Theory of Knowledge,” in *Selected Writings, vol. 1: 1913–1926* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 276.