

“The Exhibition of the Library” [A3,7]

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A black and white historical photograph of a busy street in a grand city, likely London. The street is lined with ornate, multi-story buildings featuring arched windows and classical architectural details. In the distance, a large, domed building, possibly a cathedral or a major public building, is visible. The street is filled with many pedestrians, including men in hats and coats, women in long dresses, and children. The overall atmosphere is one of a bustling, historic urban environment.

What does a dialectical approach, grounded in Benjamin's historical materialism and informed by the nineteenth century, reveal about contemporary issues related to display in the public library?

Outline

- Definitions
- Benjamin's theories of display
- Close reading of Borgwardt (1970)
 - "Broadest sense"
 - "Narrower sense"
- Discussion & Conclusion

Definitions

- Library display as library art
- Dual conception
 - “broadest sense”: “*the library itself* is an exhibit of books” (Borgwardt 1970, 6)
 - “narrower sense”: “books and materials on some *central theme* are collected together [...] for a short time” (ibid.)

Benjamin's Theories of Display

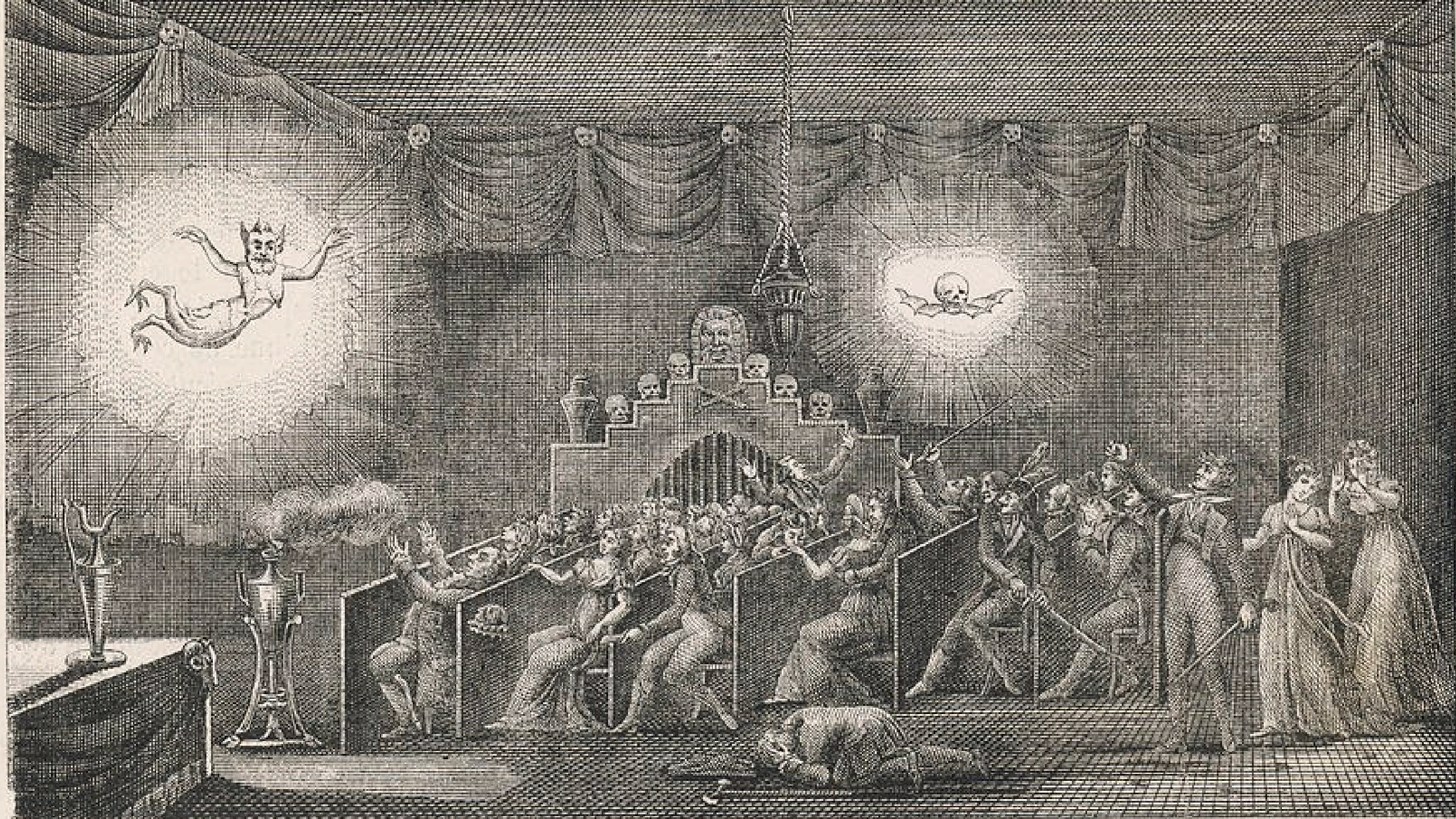
- History of the arcades
- Commodity display
- Phantasmagorias
- Archetypes of modernity
- Literary montage
- Dialectical image
- Revolutionary potentiality





“An impenetrable chain of mountains,
no, caverns of commodities—
that was the town” (Benjamin 1978, 40)





Gravé par E. Mérieu.

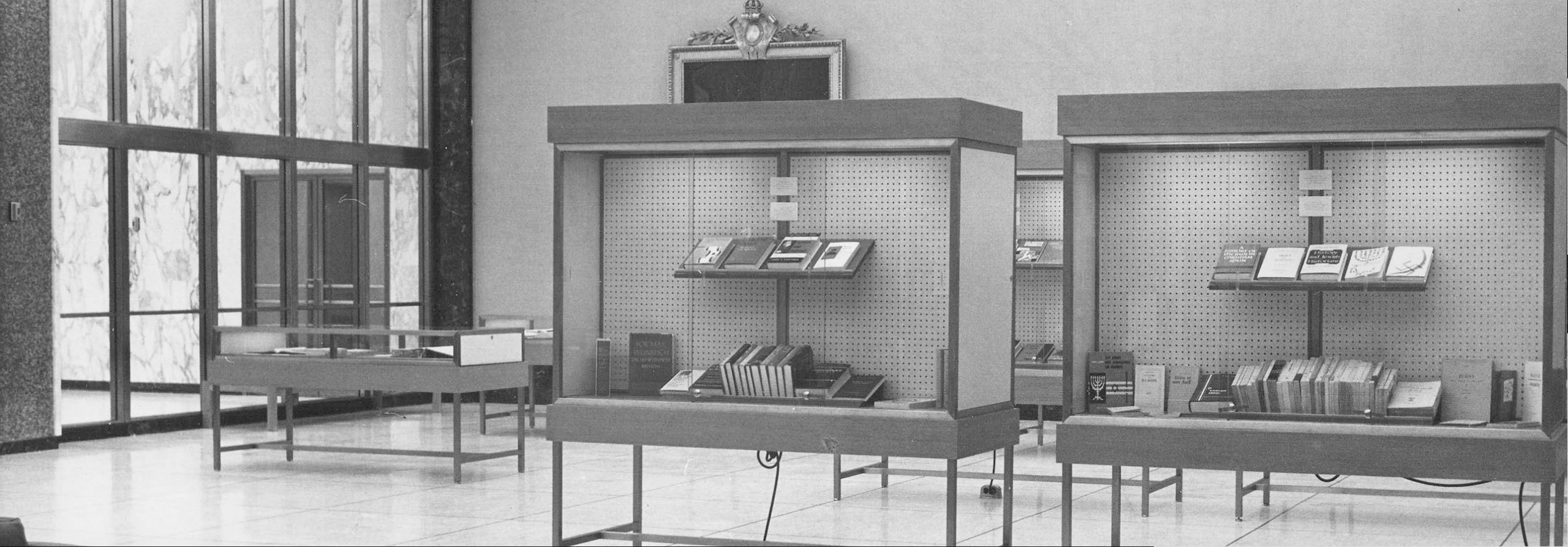


“It’s not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the 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 (that is, not archaic); and the place where one encounters them is language.” [N2a,3]



Broadest Sense

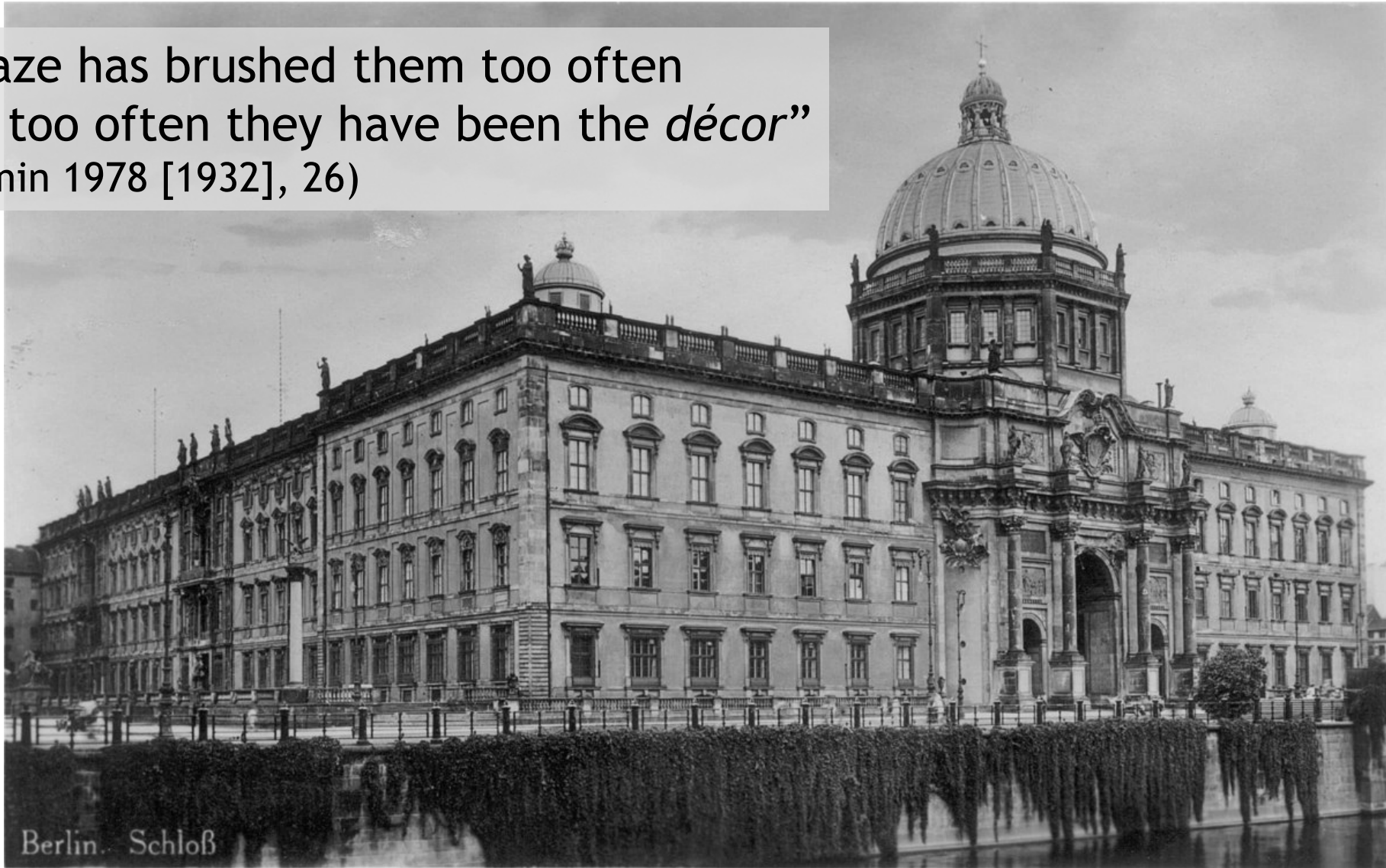




Narrower Sense

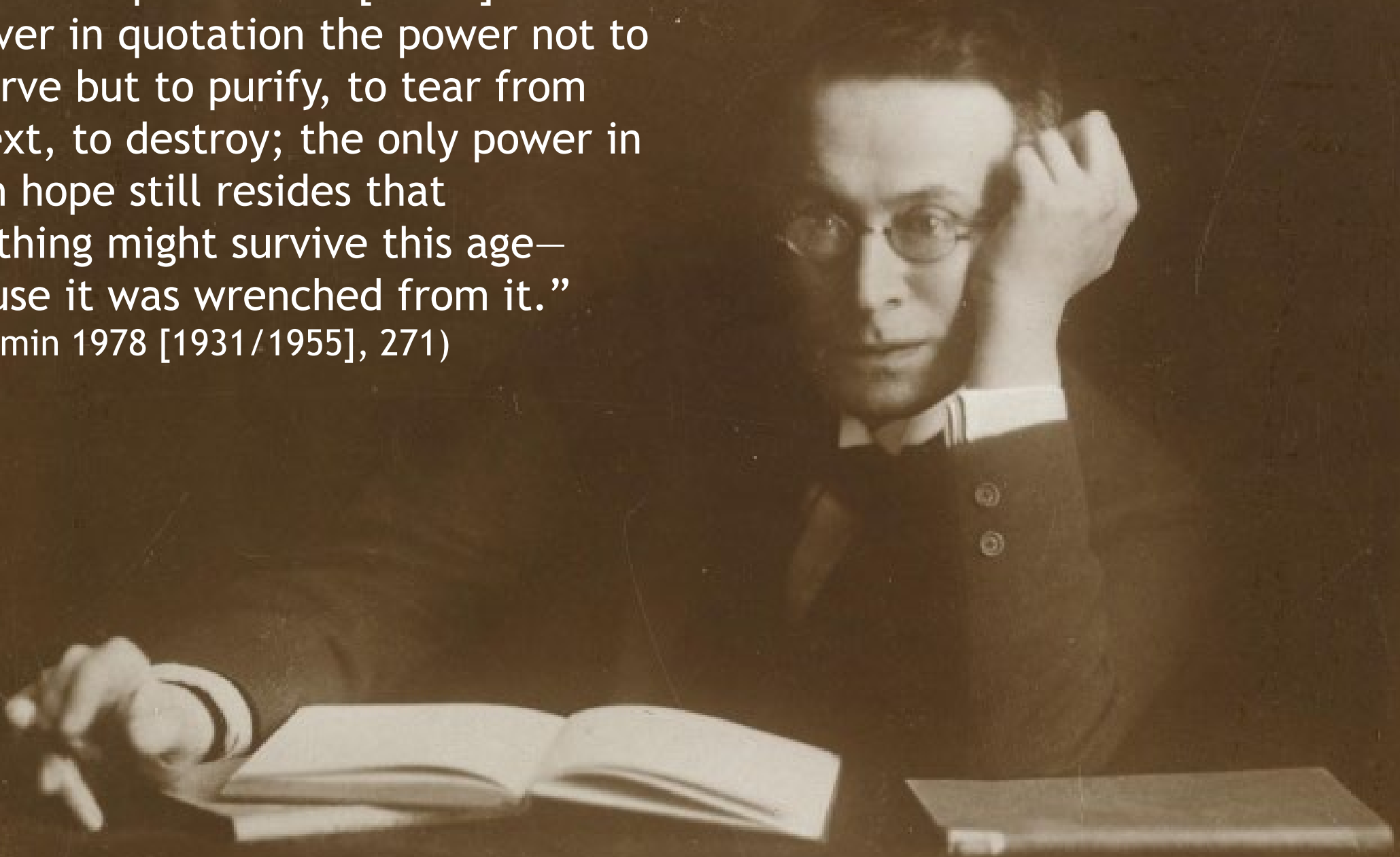
“The library has something to offer everybody, and therefore something to interest everybody: the housewife, the business man, the artist, the actor, the farmer, the artisan, the schoolboy, the collector, the dilettante. But the world of commerce has taught us that the public remains deaf and blind to goods available unless they are advertised again and again. In just the same way, books, to attract the readers for whom they were intended, must be brought vividly to their attention. To do this it is often necessary to remove them from their places on the shelves for a time, arrange them in a new and prominent position, open at attractive pages, with colourful objects and posters grouped about them to catch the eye.” (Borgwardt 1970, 15; emphasis mine)

“My gaze has brushed them too often
since, too often they have been the *décor*”
(Benjamin 1978 [1932], 26)



“That books are removed from their logical places in the classification scheme is a common objection to the principle of library display. This is said to be the negation of librarianship. But provided that the display is successful in its object—that of getting books used more—this objection can surely be set aside. The prominence given to books on display is in itself an advertisement as to where the books are to be found. If this fails, the library staff should know at once where to find any particular book that is being displayed.” (Borgwardt 1970, 10)

“Only in despair did he [Kraus] discover in quotation the power not to preserve but to purify, to tear from context, to destroy; the only power in which hope still resides that something might survive this age—because it was wrenched from it.”
(Benjamin 1978 [1931/1955], 271)



Discussion & Conclusion



A praxis of library display

- Displays that shock
- Displays of older items removed from their historical context, on the threshold irrelevancy
- Weeding practices that value the rag heap of history
- Displays of non-mass market objects
 - self-published books
 - books by local authors
 - things made in the library
 - natural items
- Displays and exhibits that embrace playfulness
- Exhibits that contrast non-mass market items with books as commodities
- Cataloguing, classification, & shelving systems inspired by literary montage
- Transformed spaces that challenge the notion of the library as a “cavern of commodities”

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Thanks!