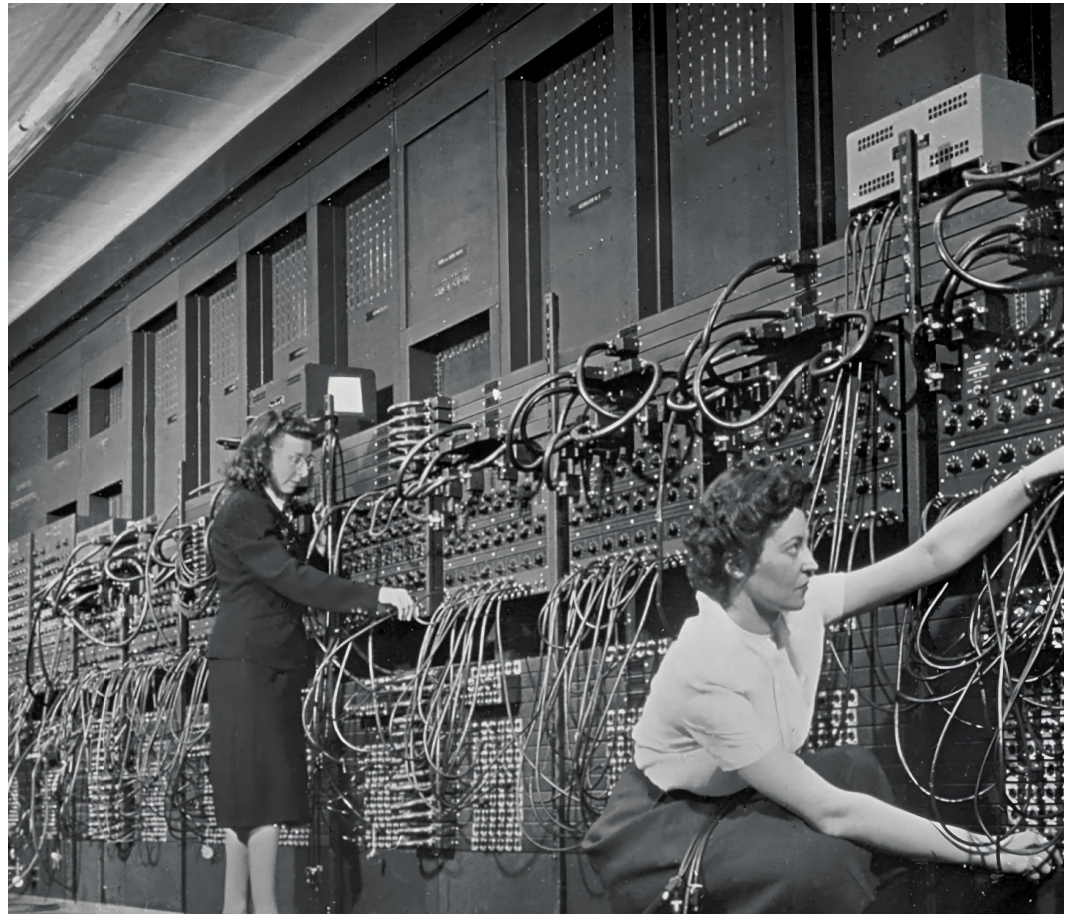Against nihilism of the imagination, which cannot envision an alternative to the present beyond an acceleration of the same, Günther Anders implores us to close the Promethean Gap by widening our fantasy to bridge the gap between *making* and *imagining*.

WELCOME TO THE ANDERSCENE

JACOB BLUMENFELD

19 Anders, "Theses for the Atomic Age", §4.

20 Anders, "Theses for the Atomic Age", §6.

21 Anders, "Theses for the Atomic Age", §6.

22 Anders, "Theses for the Atomic Age", §7.

23 Anders, "Theses for the Atomic Age", §21.

24 Anders, "Theses for the Atomic Age", §17.

25 See Günther Anders, *Die atomare Drohung. Radikale Überlegungen zum atomaren Zeitalter* (Beck, 2003 [1972].

26 Anders, "Theses for the Atomic Age", 505.

27 "State of emergency and self-defense: an imaginary interview with Gunther Anders", 1986. https://libcom.org/article/state-emergency-and-self-defense-imaginary-interview-gunther-anders.

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Notes

1   Jean Améry, "Rückblick auf die Apokalypse", *Die Zeit*, 1972, https://www.zeit.de/1972/27/rueckblick-auf-die-apokalypse.

2   Günther Anders, "Commandments in the Atomic Age", 14, in: *Burning Conscience: The case of the Hiroshima pilot, Claude Eatherly, told in his letters to Gunther Anders, with a postscript for American readers by Anders*, Monthly Review, 1962, 11-20.

3   Günther Anders, "Theses for the Atomic Age", *The Massachusetts Review*, 3(3), 1962, 493-505, §13.

4   "Theses for the Atomic Age", §14.

5   Anders, "Theses for the Atomic Age", §1.

6   Promethean comes from *Prometheus*, the titan who stole fire from the gods and gave it to mankind. This fire represents, above all, technological power, used to subdue the earth and create civilization. The moral consequences of this power, according to Anders, are now beyond our own comprehension, and thus requires rethinking the basic framework underlying human action itself.

7   Anders, "Commandments in the Atomic Age," 12.

8   Anders, "Theses for the Atomic Age", §8.

9   Anders, "Theses for the Atomic Age", §9.

10 Anders, "Theses for the Atomic Age", §10.

11 See the chapter "Über Prometheische Scham", in Günther Anders, *Die Antiquerheit des Menschen, Bd. 1* (Beck, 2018 [1956]) translated as "On Promethean Shame" in Christopher John Müller, *Prometheanism* (Rowan and Littlefield, 2016), 23-95.

12 See section 9 of Anders' "On Promethean Shame", in Müller, *Prometheanism*.

13 Anders, "Theses for the Atomic Age", §20.

14 Anders, "Theses for the Atomic Age", §19.

15 Anders, "Theses for the Atomic Age", §21.

16 Anders, "Commandments in the Atomic Age", 13.

17 Anders, "Theses for the Atomic Age", §2.

18 Anders, "Theses for the Atomic Age", §3.

are threatened. Since Hölderlin's words, which the Sunday preachers are so fond of quoting, to the effect that where danger looms salvation cannot be far away, are simply false (since everyone knows that at Auschwitz and Hiroshima nothing came to save them), our task is to intervene for salvation: *to annihilate the danger by putting the annihilators in danger.*[27]

This is what it means to fight in the Anderscene.

"Your first thought upon awakening be: 'Atom.' For you should not begin your day with the illusion that what surrounds you is a stable world. Already tomorrow it can be 'something that only has been': for we, you, and I and our fellow men are 'more mortal' and 'more temporal' than all who, until yesterday, had been considered mortal. 'More mortal' because our temporality means not only that we are mortal, not only that we are 'killable.' That 'custom' has always existed. But that we, as mankind, are 'killable.' And 'mankind' doesn't mean only today's mankind, not only mankind spread over the provinces of our globe; but also mankind spread over the provinces of time. For if the mankind of today is killed, then that which has been, dies with it; and the mankind to come too. The mankind which has been because, where there is no one who remembers, there will be nothing left to remember; and the mankind to come, because where there is no to-day, no to-morrow can become a to-day. The door in front of us bears the inscription: 'Nothing will have been'; and from within: 'Time was an episode.' Not, however, as our ancestors had hoped, an episode between two eternities; but one between two nothingnesses; between the nothingness of that which, remembered by no one, will have been as though it had never been, and the nothingness of that which will never be. And as there will be no one to tell one nothingness from the other, they will melt into one single nothingness. This, then, is the completely new, the apocalyptic kind of temporality, our temporality, compared with which everything we had called 'temporal' has become a bagatelle. Therefore your first thought after awakening be: 'Atom.' "

— Günther Anders, *Commandments in the Atomic Age*, 1957

Günther Anders (Stern)—first husband of Hannah Arendt; second cousin of Walter Benjamin; student of Husserl and Heidegger; roommate of Marcuse; friend of Brecht; rival of Adorno; attendant of Kojève's lectures in Paris; co-translator with Levinas; antifascist novelist; anti-atomic-bomb activist; philosopher of technology, of apocalypse, of the antiquatedness of human beings; composer; script-writer; costume designer; a Jew who resigned from the Jewish community; a member of the 1967 International War Crimes Tribunal (alongside Jean-Paul Sartre and Stokely Carmichael) which condemned the war in Vietnam as genocide—died penniless in Vienna next to Freud's office in 1992. He lived 90 years in a world barreling from one catastrophe to next, surviving a century which straddled the unbridgeable chasm opened up by the singular event of August 6, 1945, when the bomb dropped on Hiroshima, and mankind proved its novel capacity for complete annihilation. This day, according to Anders, broke history into two qualitatively distinct periods, the time of the before, and the time of the end. It is only now, after mankind has proven its capacity for destruction, that we really do live in the end times. But living in the end times does not mean experiencing the end. We must fight, Anders pleads, to keep the end times endless. There is no going back to a time in which the possibility of destruction has been erased, forgotten, dismantled. For even if all the atomic bombs in the world were deactivated, the blueprints to make them will not be forgotten. They are, like Plato's Ideas, eternal. All we can do now is infinitely delay, permanently hold off that which is always possible, that which can always be triggered. Preventing nuclear war, stopping the murder of humanity, is a daily task that must be accomplished anew from now until eternity. It is as if our assassin is standing over us, weapon in hand, waiting silently—forever. Welcome to the Anderscene.

Günther Anders was a prolific writer, with dozens of books, hundreds of articles, and many speeches, diaries, and stories—and yet his thought has barely scraped the surface of public consciousness. Whether grappling with the philosophical ramifications of modern technology or the moral consequences of the atomic bomb, whether publishing diaries from his trips to Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Auschwitz or writing dialogues with Hannah Arendt, whether publishing his correspondence with Claude Eatherly, one of the pilots who flew the bomb over Hiroshima, or writing

everyone, not for specialists in the field of planetary risks and polycrises.[24] Avoiding this blindness does not mean succumbing to paralysis, doomerism, or fatalism, but having the moral integrity to confront the crisis with what it requires: social transformation.

Morituri of the world, unite

For Anders, Marx's injunction for the workers of the world to unite does not have the same valence in times of universal catastrophe, since what defines us now is no longer our common productive capacities but our common vulnerable status. Our condition of being always "about to die," *morituri*, however does not lead to any social or political unity either.[25] This is why Anders calls for a "product strike," a strike against the production of a particular product—nuclear weapons—in line with what German workers did in 1917–18 when they refused to produce armaments for war. Is it possible to unite the laboring *morituri* around not producing something? Perhaps for some, but the real challenge is not just shutting down a kind of destructive product, but the reshaping of society around new energy relations, which will require creating new modes of production and planning, and not just stopping old ones.

This has only been a brief sketch of Anders's thought, and I hope more people pick up where he left off and continue his thinking in our context today. Anders is one of those special philosophers who we hope is wrong. He knew this too: "I have published these words in order to prevent them from becoming true…There is nothing more frightful than to be right."[26] Perhaps he was wrong about the atom bomb, but he may still be right about the disasters that loom ahead. How does one confront this challenge? In a self-interview carried out in 1986, Anders explained why he was not a pacifist:

> For me peace is not a means, but an end; and it is not a means because peace is the end. I cannot stand to sit here and watch as we, who are threatened with death by the violent, we and our descendants, fold our arms and not dare to use violence against the violence with which we

If we do not wish to lag behind the effects of our products—to do so would be not only a deadly shame but a shameful death—we have to try to widen our horizon of responsibility until it equals that horizon within which we can destroy everybody and be destroyed by everybody—in short, till it becomes global. Any distinction between near and far, neighbors and foreigners, has become invalid; today we are all 'proximi.'[21]

Not only spatial but also temporal boundaries are being abolished. The presence of the bomb for Anders annihilates the distinction between present and future generations, "since acts committed today (test explosions, for instance) affect future generations just as perniciously as our own." This means that "the future has already begun," since "by setting fire to our house, we cannot help but make the flames leap over into the cities of the future, and the not yet-built homes of the not-yet-born generations will fall to ashes together with our home."[22] For Anders, this fire was nuclear, artificial, caused by pressing a series of buttons; whereas for us, it is wild, "natural," a symptom of an atmosphere overloaded with carbon pumped up over generations by the labor of industry and the development of land. Safeguarding the future for Anders meant preventing an act; safeguarding the future for us means acting to prevent. Since action has escaped human control and gone over to things, there is no more universal maxim of willing. Rather, there is only a *universal maxim of things*: "have and use only those things, the inherent maxims of which could become your own maxims and thus the maxims of a general law."[23] This principle for Anders is directed against nuclear weapons, but we can extend it to what Marx calls the destructive forces of machinery and money, that which no longer has any progressive function in the development of human needs.

Apocalyptic Blindness

Faced with the reality of threat, what do politicians and bureaucrats do? They send it to committee, creating a special field in which the question of "to be or not to be" can be solved. For Anders, this is "fatal proof of moral blindness," since confronting the reality of our condition is the task of

a thorough critique of Heidegger, Anders has yet to join the pantheon of now respectable twentieth-century German Jewish thinkers like Benjamin, Adorno, Marcuse, Arendt, Strauss, Bloch, and so on. As the Auschwitz survivor and philosopher of torture Jean Améry wrote in a 1972 article called *Looking Back on the Apocalypse*: "Günther Anders was and remains the most lucid critic of the technological world, whose twilight of the idols he sees in the glow of the atomic bomb."[1] Now, in a time where technological development has become so advanced that its direction is functionally autonomous from human ends, so dominant and omnipresent in the basic working of society that it has displaced human judgement over many moral, intellectual, and biological matters; now, when technology's avatars sell us the means to protect us from their own weapons of mass alienation, now might be the time to read Anders anew.

Next to Anders, Adorno seems like an optimist. While the negative for Adorno is shot through with glimpses of utopia, for Anders the most we can hope for is fear—rational, motivating, action-guiding fear to orient us in the present against the cancellation of the future. "Have the courage to be afraid," he tells us. "Force yourself to produce that amount of fear that corresponds to the magnitude of the apocalyptic danger. For also fear, fear above all, belongs to those feelings which we are unable or unwilling to realize."[2] Or rather: "don't fear fear, have the courage to be frightened, and to frighten others, too. Frighten thy neighbor as thyself."[3] While Adorno grappled with the irreparable wound of Auschwitz, and Arendt tried to think the human condition in the atomic age, Anders brought Auschwitz and Hiroshima together in a single framework of catastrophe that marked a new epoch in human history, one defined by the impotence of our omnipotence. Omnipotent because some humans now have the all-powerful ability to destroy the world with technological means, and impotent because most humans have no power to do anything about it. It is within this scenario of what Anders calls the "inability to act" that one must act. How can one act in such a condition? To act without acting, since the provenance of action has been relocated to the things we make and not to those who make them, can only mean a strike, since a strike is the most powerful act of not-acting we have. Can there be a productive strike against such destructive things, a great refusal against making that which can unmake us? That was Anders's wager. He knew, however, that it

was "possible that our efforts will make no progress whatsoever. But even this failure should not intimidate us; repeated frustration does not refute the need for repeating the effort."[4]

I want to try and read Anders in a new context, not atomic war, but dangerous climate change, or, what has been called—incorrectly—the Anthropocene. What happens if we switch out the word "atom" for "climate" in his texts? What does "End times or time of the end" look like when it is not (only) the bomb but pandemics, water scarcity, deforestation, and global heating that pose major threats to a flourishing human civilization? How should we read *The Obsolescence of Human Beings* today, nearly seventy years after the first volume, in which current technological developments have eclipsed whatever Anders already thought then was a sign of total domination? Do we still experience *Promethean shame*, or have we now become shameless? Anders's reflection on the atomic inauguration of a real apocalyptic era, one which rendered humanity perpetually at the edge of extinction, was tied to a specific Cold War context in which mutually assured destruction kept apocalypse permanently at the door. The atomic threat has by no means gone away—perhaps it is closer than ever before, given the number of nuclear-powered states currently at war—but we are so used to it now that it doesn't really register as a concern in everyday consciousness. What has changed since Anders's time is not simply the increased quantity of planetary threats but the new quality of them as well. We live not in a post-apocalyptic world but a poly-apocalyptic one, where catastrophe no longer takes the form of a singular event in time but that of time's unfolding itself. The slow creep of heat, of drought, of species loss, of plagues, of storms, floods, air pollution, and soil degradation is regularly punctuated by extreme interruptions that remind us of the downward slope we are on. Let us see if Anders can help us navigate this runway of despair.

Year Zero, 1945

Like the dating of the Anthropocene for many, 1945 is Anders's golden spike demarcating a new historical epoch for mankind. But the Anderscene is not a geological era marked by humanity's impact on the planet as a natural force, rather, it names the beginning of a time in which humans

principle of atomic weapons for Anders, the principle of geoengineering is pure nihilism: "Whatever we destroy, it's all the same to us." [15] Against this nihilism of the imagination, which cannot envision an alternative to the present beyond an acceleration of the same, Anders implores us to close the Promethean Gap by widening our fantasy:

> Your task consists in bridging the gap that exists between your two faculties: your faculty of *making* things and your faculty of *imagining* things; to level off the incline that separates the two: in other words: you have to violently widen the narrow capacity of your imagination (and the even narrower one of your feelings) until imagination and feeling become capable to grasp and to realize the enormity of your doings; until you are capable to seize and conceive, to accept or reject it-in short: your task is: *to widen your moral fantasy.*[16]

Anti-apocalytics

Anders believes that for the first time in the world, anti-apocalypticism is possible: "Since we believe in the possibility of The End of Time, we are Apocalyptic, but since we fight against this man-made Apocalypse, we are—and this has never existed before—'Anti-Apocalyptics.'"[17] What is the man-made disaster we fight against now? It is the global heating of the planet, along with the social and ecological cascade of interlocking crises made by particular human beings for particular ends, continued to this day. While millennial movements of the past sought to hasten the apocalypse, in vain, now it is actually possible, and in fact, the normal course of affairs if movements don't rise to stop it. While for Anders, "political actions and developments are taking place within the atomic situation," for us it is the climactic situation in which political actions take place.[18] "What we are fighting is not this or that enemy," he proclaims, "but the atomic situation as such," or, we would say, the climactic situation as such.[19] In this situation, "distances are abolished ... everybody is in deadly reach of everybody else."[20] To live up to the new spatial conditions of our collective vulnerability means reshaping our moral boundaries of who is included in our community of concern:

Insufficient Reification

The problem is not that the division of labor in capitalist society reifies us, making us like things. Rather, it is the opposite, we are insufficiently thing-like:

> One cannot adequately interpret the phenomenon by giving it the Marxian label of "reification," for this term designates exclusively the fact that man is reduced to a thing-function. We are stressing, however, the fact that the qualities and functions taken away from man by his reification are now becoming qualities and functions of the products themselves, that they transform themselves into pseudo-persons, since, through their mere existence, they are acting.[13]

Opposing the engineering of our bodies to become more like our products does not mean naturalizing some "unfixed" state of the human being. It is rather about the very modern attempt to escape our vulnerable interdependency on each other, to avoid the recognition-seeking fragility of ourselves by sealing the pores of selfhood from any disturbance. Promethean shame in times of climate change has a similar function: the shame not at what "we" have done—for we haven't done this at all—but the fact that we cannot do anything about it, that we are so powerful in destruction and yet so weak in creation. We are ashamed in front of the planet for not being able to act at its scale; ashamed in front of the future for not living up to its demands. This is why geoengineering is logically inevitable: it is the one attempt to live up to the disaster by out-disastering it, the Promethean attempt to put the climate back in its place as under our control, to show it that we are in charge of our destiny. The fact that geoengineering is itself unpredictable and dangerous will be irrelevant to the feeling of acting at all. For "in the very moment in which we have become capable of the most monstrous action, the destruction of the world, 'actions' seem to have disappeared."[14] The Promethean shame in front of our monstrous actions and perfect products converges in the supra-human action of geoengineering the climate to prevent global temperature rise while maintaining our fossil-fueled way of life. Like the

can end the world. The harbingers of apocalypse before 1945 were in fact liars, soothsayers, or con artists. The world before 1945 was incapable of delivering redemption in the form of apocalyptic revelation. Only since August 6, 1945 has apocalypse become a real option for humanity, but this is an apocalypse without kingdom, that is, one without any redeeming quality. No utopia at the end of this one, it is simply the end. This is what the bomb announced to the world on 1945, not just death and hellstorm rained down from above, but a new timescale of humanity: "On that day we became, at least 'modo negativo,' omnipotent; but since, on the other hand, we can be wiped out at any given moment, we also became totally impotent."[5] Whereas climate scientists see the post-war period as the *Great Acceleration* (marking a dramatic rise in human activity across many social and ecological indicators), from an Andersian perspective, we must instead understand this period as the *Promethean Gap*, defined by our fundamental inability to grasp the scale of our actions.

Promethean Gap

The Promethean gap (or lag, discrepancy, slope) consists in the separation between our praxis from our capacity to represent or comprehend it.[6] It is, in short:

> the effect of the daily growing gap between our two faculties; between our *action* and our *imagination*; of the fact, that we are unable to conceive what we can construct; to mentally reproduce what we can produce; to realize the reality which we can bring into being. For in the course of the technical age, the classical relation between imagination and action has reversed itself.[7]

What makes climate change so disturbing is that "we are unable to picture the immensity of such a catastrophe," since "what we have to visualize today is not the not-being of something particular within a framework, the existence of which can be taken for granted, but the nonexistence of this framework itself."[8] For Anders, this was the conceptual framework of human action, which cannot make sense of an act which renders activity itself meaningless. For us, this would be the framework of the Holocene,

the period of general climactic stability in which civilization evolved. Picturing the immensity of our catastrophe does not require imagining a nuclear holocaust, but rather grasping what exactly the world will look like in the future at all. The one thing that we thought was constant these last millennia amongst the variables of human affairs has now become the most chaotic of all, disrupting the coordinates upon which a future can be planned.

Inverted Utopians

For Anders, the gap is not between our grandiose visions of what we want to do and our paltry capacities to carry them out, but rather the reverse. "We are smaller than ourselves," he writes, "incapable of mentally realizing the realities which we ourselves have produced. Therefore we might call ourselves 'inverted Utopians': while ordinary Utopians are unable to actually produce what they are able to visualize, we are unable to visualize what we are actually producing."[9] This inverted utopianism of the present "defines the moral situation of man today. The dualism to which we are sentenced is ... that of our capacity to produce as opposed to our power to imagine."[10] It is truly hard for us to realize what we have done and are doing to the life on this planet, including to ourselves and future generations. Our moral and mental models cannot compute this scale of human action. The Promethean gap is between ourselves and what we have made, the Promethean lag lies between what we are doing and what we think we are doing. That means: we are late to grasp not what we will do but what we have done. In the present, the immensity of anthropogenic climate change captures this dilemma perfectly, in which we struggle to come to terms with what has already been produced; for Anders, though, it was modern technology that posed this problem, in the face of which one can only feel *shame*, Promethean shame, that we are not as perfect as it.

Promethean Shame

The gap between our actions and our imaginations produces a feeling of shame when it comes to our products. This is the shame that we are not manufactured like our products, the shame that we are born, not made; that we are mortal, unique, individual; the shame that we are not immortal through production of the same product; the shame that we cannot live up to the machines, that we are not as reified as them, that we are not as alienated as them; that we have created a world we do not understand, do not identify with, do not control, do not recognize, and yet desperately want to join.[11] This is a world of serialized products and technical apparatuses watching over us, not with loving grace, but with pity that we are not like them. Promethean shame for Anders is our feeling before products that our bodies are not as strong, not as beautiful, not as fixable as them; shame at our minds for not being as smart as them, shame at our words for being confused, shame at our thoughts for being imprecise, shame at our torsos, legs, arms and thighs for aging, weakening, constantly needing care, sustenance, repair. Our products are more perfect than we will ever be, and, at the same time, more dangerous than we can imagine. This is a double shame: shame at not being our own products, and shame at feeling shame in front of them.

Iconomania

A coping mechanism for our Promethean shame at being born and not made can be seen in our addiction to images, what Anders calls *iconomania*.[12] The addiction to seeing ourselves and others, to seeing Hollywood stars, forever young, in the same image, over and over again, is not simply a means of identification with representation over reality but a ritual process of overcoming mortality itself. Looking at images of ourselves, already in the 1950s for Anders, was a way of immortalizing ourselves, of escaping our individual defects and living in the static moment of eternal life captured in the image in front of us. While photographs are mummifications for André Bazin, for Anders they signify eternal life: and yet it is a life of ourselves as already dead, like the products we seek to imitate. It is no exaggeration to say that iconomania today has surpassed Anders's wildest imagination, becoming not merely a coping mechanism for Promethean shame but our basic mode of relating to the world. The image no longer grants us temporary refuge from the mortal plane but cements us to the ground of reality by pre-adjusting our behavior to its potential capture.