

TOKYO PHANTASMAGORIA

AN ANALYSIS OF POLITICS AND COMMODITY CAPITALISM
IN MODERN JAPAN THROUGH THE EYES
OF WALTER BENJAMIN

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*Tokyo Phantasmagoria: An Analysis of Politics and Commodity Capitalism in
Modern Japan Through the Eyes of Walter Benjamin*

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PRAISE FOR KENNY LOUI'S

Tokyo Phantasmagoria

“Kenny Loui’s *Tokyo Phantasmagoria: An Analysis of Politics and Commodity Capitalism in Modern Japan Through the Eyes of Walter Benjamin* is a careful and deeply thought application of the ideas of German-Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin to the context of postwar Japan. Loui looks at the way that history is understood and remembered in Japan through the lens of Benjamin’s musings about the way that notions of time and history are themselves products of capitalistic manipulation, what Marx calls commodity fetishism. In the case of Japan, Kenny shows how the idea of time itself is employed as a way to create a certain sense of inevitability and destiny in terms of current power arrangements, in the process erasing or subsuming the experiences of the war and other practices that are more problematical. In his application of Benjamin to the Japanese context, Loui demonstrates a tremendous gift for translating a western thinker into a non-western context. This work mixes a vivid description of a ‘Tokyo Phantasmagoria’ that evokes Benjamin’s own writings on Paris in the 19th century with a serious critique of postwar ideology and social practice. Loui’s turn to Benjamin helps to allegorize and render legible the functioning of government, relationality and art in today’s Japan.”

—James R. Martel, *Associate Professor and Chair,*
Department of Political Science, San Francisco State University

“Tokyo Phantasmagoria: An Analysis of Politics and Commodity Capitalism in Modern Japan Through the Eyes of Walter Benjamin is a timely analysis of a Japan that is struggling with national identity in a time of economic stagnation, globalization and changing demographics. Bringing the analytical structure of Walter Benjamin to bear in an interpretation of post-WWII Japan, Mr. Loui illuminates the role of government influence in the historical interpretation of events, specifically of sexual slavery in Japan’s era of expansion and war in the early 1900s, and deftly connects it with the general treatment of women in 21st-century Japanese society. He highlights the complacency of the public and the dangers it faces from disinterest, falling under the mollifying influence of consumer society, and the modern world’s harsh quantification of human qualities. His reframing of Benjamin’s solutions of art and allegory (in a Japanese context) as a way out of the confines of blind faith in the consumption ideal offers an insightful solution to combating the trappings of affluence, while retaining a unique cultural identity. Japan is struggling with the transition from fast growing, savings-driven economy to a stable, mature economy, and Kenny expertly points out how Japan can either act as a cautionary tale or a guiding light to other countries following the rapid-industrialization trajectory.”

—*Brent Burgess, Centre for Environmental Policy and Governance,
London School of Economics and Political Science*

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INTRODUCTION

Revisiting the Cave

Plato's allegory of the cave, as presented in Book VII of *The Republic*, tells the story of humans imprisoned in a dark cave since childhood. All they see are the shadows of puppets presented on the wall in front of them. These shadows are, to the prisoners, reality as they know it. Plato states that "such persons would certainly believe there were no realities except those shadows of handmade things" (Rouse 1983, 313). Imagine if one of the prisoners were released and then exits the cave, exposing himself to the outside world beyond the shadows. The truth, unbelievable as it is, is revealed to him and he comes to the realization that what he originally thought was reality is nothing more than an illusion. That is Walter Benjamin's goal: To lead people out of the cave, to dispel the "phantasmagoria" of mythic reality that people have been exposed to since birth.

Walter Benjamin, an early 20th-century German-Jewish philosopher and literary critic, whose written works examine topics including, but not limited to, history, art, society and politics, was a profound thinker of his time. His writings, most notably "The Task of the Translator," "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" and his incomplete study on the 19th-century Paris arcades, compiled after his death and published as *The Arcades Project*, present thoughts and commentary for Benjamin's generation, which was experiencing the rise of both commodity culture and fascism. Benjamin put forward ideas—as well as signs and portents—relevant to his time, but what do the writings and social commentaries of a man who lived

during the early 1900s, and whose life project focused primarily on the 1800s, have to do with the present day? In other words, are Benjamin's works still relevant today? In short, the answer is yes. This discourse on the writings of Walter Benjamin will illustrate that humanity is still trapped in the cave—the cave of commodity-capitalism.

Applying Benjamin's works to 21st-century Japan, connecting significant social and political issues facing Japan in the present and in the years to come, will show how his writings are universal, being both relevant and applicable to various epochs and civilizations. Japan, Tokyo in particular, has been chosen for this study because of its rapid post-war technological and economic advancements and the rarely addressed detrimental consequences of those advances. Though Japan is said to have entered the modern age in the time between the two world wars (Harootunian 2000, x), it essentially had to start from scratch and “re-modernize” after World War II. Thus, Japan's post-modernization is a relatively recent phenomenon. As such, the symptoms of commodity-capitalism that consumed 19th-century Paris, the primary focus of Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, can be seen in its infantile and adolescent stages in 21st-century Tokyo.

Reviewing every written work by Benjamin is beyond the scope of this discourse and thus it will be limited to a few selections of Benjamin's writings. Specifically, the writings that will be evaluated focus on the “dream image” of reality as *perceived* by the average person living in a commodity-capitalist society. The emphasis on the acquisition of wealth, to the point of adopting materialism as a value system, feeds into this dream image, warping people's perception of the world in which they live. As a result, people not only see what they want to see but are susceptible to seeing what *others*—particularly government and corporate entities who harness the power of the media and other tools of propaganda—want them to see. As a result, the populace finds itself trapped in what Benjamin refers to as the “phantasmagoria,” an illusory reality of a nearly-flawless society defined by technological advances and economic prosperity. But this phantasmagoria of modern life shrouds the “grotesqueness” of underlying truths such as the failure of advances in science and philosophy to eradicate poverty and other social inequities—instead the phantasmagoria hides these social ailments—and the transformation of humans into the very commodities that they value. For that reason, even though this thesis is not about prostitution per se, the topic is examined several times throughout the essay because of the link prostitution provides between humanity and commodity: every wage earner, selling her or his services, is in essence a prostitute in that the prostitute is simultaneously the seller and the commodity. As Benjamin states in his exposé of 1935 of the dialectical (i.e., two-sided) nature of the prostitute, “Ambiguity is the appearance of dialectic in images, the law of dialectics at a standstill. Such an image is afforded by the commodity per se: as fetish. Such an image is presented by the arcades, which are house no less than street. Such an image is the prostitute—seller and sold

in one” (Benjamin 1999, 10). In the end, Benjamin wrote appealing to his own generation, but as this discourse on modern-day Japan and the “Tokyo phantasmagoria” will reveal, Benjamin appeals to our generation as well.

Fragments

Much of Benjamin’s writings reference fragments in one way or the other. In a similar manner, each chapter of this thesis can be considered a separate and distinct fragment that can either stand alone or be combined into a mosaic—or as Benjamin would say, a *montage*—depicting political and social life in contemporary Japan. The first chapter itself deals with the combination of seemingly distinct “shards” of Benjamin’s written works into a coherent and illuminating discourse.

Chapter 1, “Translation and Interpretation,” focus on three of Benjamin’s essays: “The Task of the Translator,” “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” and “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” At first glance, these stand-alone works may seem unrelated in content, but they shall be taken as fragments of a larger whole, that once put together, reveal the importance of definitions and the power of interpretation in a political society. These essays will be analyzed alongside the issue of comfort women, the thousands of women who the Japanese Imperial Army forced into sex slavery during the Second World War. This issue has been chosen not only due to its relevance in Japanese politics today, but because it provides an actual real-world exemplar of what Benjamin discusses in his writings of how a government can create and proliferate to the public a certain view of reality, which may not necessarily be a lie, but may not necessarily be the entire truth either.

Chapter 2, “Tokyo Phantasmagoria,” draws upon quotes and commentary from *The Arcades Project* to elucidate the illusory nature of the modern city (specifically Tokyo) in masking the problems within capitalist societies, such as poverty. The chapter will also discuss how commodity-capitalism in Japan, with its emphasis on materialism as a value system, has humanized the commodity while at the same time, commodified humanity. Primary topics of focus will be the Japanese sex industry’s commodification of the human body and the Japanese education system’s commodification of the human mind. In this chapter, Benjamin’s project of fragmented text on the Paris arcades will be, to use his terminology, exploded out of history and into our own time as the commodity culture of 19th-century Paris is compared to that of 21st-century Tokyo.

The final chapter, entitled “Of Art and Allegory,” builds upon the discourses presented in the previous chapters. The first chapter discusses definitions and interpretation, while the second chapter smashes the false reality of modern life in Japan, illuminating the phenomena that lie hidden within the mist of phantasmagoria. Chapter 3 focuses on the application of art as a means for people to engage in politics and the use of allegory as a device to render false what was once perceived as truth and in so doing, provide a weapon for the citizenry to combat against government or corporate propaganda, and against the often unjust and oppressive ‘status quo.’ The unquestioned

“wisdom” of Confucian values will be used to illustrate the use of allegory to shed light on a phenomenon’s dialectical nature, revealing its hidden aspects.¹ That Confucianism is usually taken as dogma in Japanese society is the very rationale for why it will be the focus of allegory for the purpose of showing how deeply held beliefs can be shattered by revealing its hidden dark, or as Benjamin would say, grotesque, side. Finally, the “Superflat” style of contemporary Japanese artist Takashi Murakami shall be explored, showing how Murakami utilizes allegorical imagery in his art, in a manner not unlike how Charles Baudelaire employed allegory in his poetry, as a means of criticizing—deliberately or not—Japanese commodity culture and its consequences.

The thesis will culminate with a discussion on the Messiah, a figure of *hope* in Benjamin’s writings, and political action by the citizenry as a means of dispelling the phantasmagoria. The purpose of this political-philosophical discourse is two-fold: To explore Benjamin in the context of contemporary Japanese society and, via the Japanese case, to get readers to think deeply about and perhaps even question their own perceptions of reality in relation to the social problems and political challenges most, if not all, modern industrialized nations face today. As stated above, Benjamin wrote for his generation, but his thoughts and words are still applicable to our generation today and perhaps to future generations in the decades and centuries to come.

The Methodology of Montage

The analytical method Benjamin uses is that of montage, with the intent purpose not of describing, but of *showing*. “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 1999, 460; N2,1). What can be seen in Benjamin’s montage of quotations and commentary? That is up to us—for each individual reader—to decide, for there is no one correct interpretation, no one truth. Just as he discusses interpretation in his writings, Benjamin leaves us with a literary montage for us to interpret with our own eyes. In the end, a commentary on reality is an interpretation of that reality: “Bear in mind that commentary on

¹ The word ‘dialectic’ (or ‘dialectics’) has several definitions. One definition is: “A method of argument or exposition that systematically weighs contradictory facts or ideas with a view to the resolution of their real or apparent contradictions” (*American Heritage Dictionary* 2004). Drawing from the above definition, for the purposes of this essay, I will define ‘dialectic’ as contradictory properties inherent in an object or phenomenon. To illustrate my point, take the following example from Benjamin: “Dialectic of *flânerie*: on one side, the man who feels himself viewed by all and sundry as a true suspect and, on the other side, the man who is utterly undiscoverable, the hidden man” (Benjamin 1999, 420; M2,8). Is the man visible or invisible? He is one or the other, and simultaneously both—that is how he is “dialectical.” These dialectical properties, i.e., contradictions, can exist simultaneously in something, yet at times, one aspect of the object or phenomenon is promulgated as “truth,” while the other aspect is rarely acknowledged or completely ignored. Allegory can be employed as a means of bringing into the fore this hidden aspect.

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a reality (for it is a question here of commentary, of interpretation in detail) calls for a method completely different from that required by commentary on a text” (460; N2,2).

Reading Benjamin is ultimately an interpretive and thought-provoking process. Benjamin urges us to suspend the truth—what we perceive of as truth—and to cultivate our imaginations to read not only between the lines, but beyond them. *The Arcades Project* is not a book per se, but a collection of quotations and Benjamin’s commentaries and anecdotes. These literary fragments, of course, can be put together much like a puzzle to discover the messages that Benjamin is trying to convey. As such, this work is written as a constructed puzzle (or a montage); actually, more like two different yet interrelated puzzles combined, with fragments from Benjamin’s writings fitted together with fragments of relevant issues and events from contemporary Japanese political and social life. In the concluding remarks to *The Dialectics of Seeing*, Susan Buck-Morss’s study on Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, the author encourages readers of her text to engage in an “interpretive project” of their own on Benjamin’s colossal yet incomplete work (1991, 340). This thesis is one such project, one that will advance the argument that commodity-capitalism exhibits similar effects regardless of time or place and that the past and the present are not so different, essentially being one and the same—what Benjamin would refer to as the “eternal return of the same” (Benjamin 1999, 71; B4,1)—and it is for these reasons that the writings of a man who grew up in Germany during the early 20th century but wrote primarily about life in 19th-century France can be applied to events and phenomena occurring in 21st-century Japan.

CHAPTER 1

Translation and Interpretation

“Truth, for all its multiplicity, is not two-faced,” wrote Charles Baudelaire in *Oeuvres* (Benjamin 1999, 315; J48,3). Related to the topic of truth and its multiplicity is the following observation Walter Benjamin makes on fashion:

On the publicity war between the fashion house and the fashion columnists: “The fashion writer’s task is made easier by the fact that our wishes coincide. Yet it is made more difficult by the fact that no newspaper or magazine may regard as new what another has already published. From this dilemma, we and the fashion writer are saved only by the photographers and designers, who manage through pose and lighting to bring out different aspects of a single piece of clothing ...” Helen Grund, *Vom Wesen der Mode*, pp. 21-22. (72; B5,1)

As “different aspects” can be discovered by looking at one piece of clothing by changing the positioning or varying the lighting, different aspects can be revealed by observing one piece of historical “fact,” not by altering lighting, but by altering one’s position, i.e., one’s point of view. Much of what we perceive of as reality is highly dependent on our own perceptions and points of view. And in turn, what we believe is often times *learned*, both in formal and informal settings, be it in the classroom or through our own personal experiences and interactions with the world around us. History is one particular form of knowledge that cannot be acquired via our own personal experiences—it must be taught to us. The key questions then are: What is being taught, or *not* being taught, and from whose perspective?

A major political issue Japan has been facing since the end of World War II is its perception of wartime history, which has caused a rift not only between Japan and other Asian nations, but a rift among the Japanese themselves. The Japanese government's stance on comfort women—the government's inability to take *full* responsibility for, and at times, even the flat-out denial of, the military's institutionalized sex slavery prior to and during the Second World War—is a point of controversy that has caused on-again-off-again tensions in Japan's diplomatic relations with China and South Korea. Even Japanese historians debate among themselves the validity of the historical “facts” behind the comfort women issue. Overall, these domestic and international dilemmas are a result of conflict between opposing *perceptions* of history. Using a selection of Walter Benjamin's short essays and a few excerpts from *The Arcades Project*, I shall examine how history is not necessarily a series of objective facts strung together, but a narrative that contains truth as well as elements of “mythic reality.” As Benjamin himself states, it is his goal to dissolve—to awaken others from—this mythic reality, and this awakening occurs when one is conscious of past events that have been covered up (or erased) by the historical narrative presented for her or his consumption: “While in Aragon there remains an impressionistic element, namely the ‘mythology’ [...] here it is a question of the dissolution of ‘mythology’ into the space of history. That, of course, can happen only through the awakening of a not-yet-conscious knowledge of what has been” (1999, 458; N1,9).

Benjamin presents a quotation on the past's “purity”: “To read into the future is difficult, but to see *purely* into the past is more difficult still” (1999, 470; N7,5). Benjamin then supplements with a brief commentary: “The ‘purity’ of the gaze is not just difficult but impossible to attain” (470; N7,5). Ultimately, this impossibility at grasping the purity of the past is due to the subjectivity people, be it government officials or historians, apply to their interpretation of historical events. Benjamin's “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” “The Task of the Translator,” and “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” as we shall see, contain topics that are interrelated and deal with interpretation and perception of reality and their importance in the realm of politics. First, Benjamin's discourse on film technology in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” is presented alongside a government's ability, in the role of “cameraman,” to propagate a certain perspective of reality; in the Japanese case, the national government's ability to present a specific standpoint of wartime history to the general public. Second, the distinction between “mode of intention” and “object of intention,” as discussed in “The Task of the Translator,” will be applied to the case of comfort women to show how a government can utilize language and conceptions to its advantage to make the public believe its “official” point of view. In relation to the topics presented in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” car-

rying on the analogy of government as cameraman, we can consider modes of intention—i.e., words—to be the government’s roll of film. Third, a brief discussion on “Theses on the Philosophy of History” brings everything together, showing how fantasy and reality are ultimately combined to form the “truth,” and how the citizenry are strung along like puppets to believe in this one particular perspective on events—namely, the government’s perspective.

This discourse on reality and one’s definition and perception of reality will ultimately serve as a prelude to the next chapter, which focuses on the phantasmagoria, a much deeper illusion than that of the historical narrative. To elaborate, there are many people who are consciously aware of the Japanese government’s alteration of historical truth—hence the ongoing debate within government and academia about the national government’s official view of history and what “really happened”—but there are fewer people that will debate—let alone are aware of—the phantasmagoria. Like historical narrative, the phantasmagoria is essentially a narrative of its own, but one that does not rest in the past but permeates throughout time immemorial. In short, like “official” history, the phantasmagoria is an illusion derived from a certain point of view, but its effects are on a much larger scale, for practically anyone and everyone in a commodity-capitalist society—from a corporate manager or high-ranking government official to a supermarket cashier or high school student—is influenced by it. In other words, in contrast to the case of Japanese wartime history, the illusory nature of the phantasmagoria—of life in commodity-capitalism—is rarely, if ever, disputed or even acknowledged as such. Ultimately, the average person lives and breathes the phantasmagoria each and every day without ever realizing there is a hidden reality behind the one that she or he experiences.

Definitions and Historical Narrative: The Sovereign’s Camera

“The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” presents Benjamin’s thoughts on the advancement of tools to reproduce art and the repercussions of such an advancement. In Section I of the essay, Benjamin gives an overview of the evolution of art reproduction, from founding and stamping to the motion picture. Section II puts forward the concept of authenticity as it relates to art. “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (Benjamin 1988b, 220). The history of a work of art—its creation, where it has been, where it is—is the indicator of its authenticity, of its *uniqueness*. “The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity. [...] The whole sphere of authenticity is outside technical—and of course, not only technical—reproducibility” (220). Or is it? As methods of reproduction progressed, mass production of art became possible and subsequently widespread. As a result,

since a work of art may be in multiple places at once, for practically everyone to see, authenticity ceases to be of importance or of significance to the artwork. Benjamin remarks, “By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence” (221). Mentioning the authenticity of photographs, Benjamin asserts, “From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the ‘authentic’ print makes no sense” (224). And once authenticity is deemed virtually irrelevant, art no longer has a basis in ‘ritual,’ meaning its location and original usage, but, as Benjamin articulates, a basis in *politics* (224).

Among the modes of reproduction in the modern era, it is the motion picture that has the most political importance. This significance lies in film’s ability to construct reality. Benjamin explicates how reality is pieced together by a camera through the comparison of a stage actor and a screen actor. When actors act on stage, they do so in real time before a live audience; their actions, as the scene progresses, are logically sequential. Screen actors, on the other hand, act in front of the camera and scenes need not be filmed in chronological order. The fragments of footage are then spliced together in the appropriate order during postproduction and then presented to the audience as a completed sequential movie. The order in which the scenes were filmed is irrelevant to the audience, who sees the events of the film in the temporal sequence in which they were meant to be presented. Concerning film acting, the camera is ultimately in control, not the actor. “The audience’s identification with the actor is really an identification with the camera. Consequently the audience takes the position of the camera” (Benjamin 1988b, 228).

In political terms, one can make the analogy that a sovereign (be it a king, emperor, president, prime minister, congress, parliament, or other governing authority) is the cameraman and the citizenry is the audience, and in the same way that “the audience takes the position of the camera” (Benjamin 1988b, 228), the citizenry takes the position—the perspective—of the government. Like the cameraman, the sovereign controls what his subjects see; the subjects see what the sovereign wants them to see. Just as the audience views a movie through the filmmaker’s eyes, the citizenry views reality from the sovereign’s eyes. Like pieces of footage, fragmented events may be reorganized and reassembled in a way that serves the sovereign’s purposes. Benjamin asserts, “What science has ‘determined,’ remembrance can modify” (Benjamin 1999, 471; N8,1). Like science, historical events themselves are “determined,” but as one—in our particular case, the sovereign—“remembers” these events (even if he has never experienced them first hand), he has the ability to modify them via his historical narrative. For example, one perception of the Japanese Imperial military during the decades of Japanese expansionism is that of conquerors, while another is that of the military as liberators. Victims of Japanese imperialism have argued the former perspective, whereas certain groups within the Japanese government have supported the

latter claim, that the Japanese were “liberating” the rest of Asia from the threat of U.S. and European colonialism.² Like today, the early 1980s saw revisionism in Japanese history textbooks. In 1982, the language used in textbooks to describe the Imperial Army’s activities in China during the 1930s used words like “advances” instead of “aggression” to China’s dismay, who saw the textbook revisions as Japan’s attempt “obscure the nature of their wartime behavior” to the point of “denial that they had committed atrocities” (Hayes 2005, 229). Ultimately, reality is whatever the sovereign reconstructs it as, and whatever he is able to make the public believe.

Benjamin compares the cameraman with the painter, but instead of immediately addressing the distinguishing features between the two, Benjamin compares a magician to a surgeon, and it is through this comparison that he makes clear how the painter and his technologically advanced counterpart, the cameraman, differ from one another. With regard to surgery, the magician is less involved than is the surgeon in that the former does not actually, as Benjamin states, penetrate the person. Benjamin explains, “The magician maintains the natural distance between the patient and himself [...] The surgeon does exactly the reverse; he greatly diminishes the distance between himself and the patient by penetrating into the patient’s body” (1988b, 233). The magician never penetrates the person’s body and never sees the inner organs, whereas the surgeon does. The surgeon *sees* the reality of the inner body, the magician does not. Something similar can be said about the painter and the cameraman. Benjamin elucidates: “Magician and surgeon compare to painter and cameraman. The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from *reality*, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web” (233; emphasis added). Consequently, the works that these two artists produce differ in that the art of the painter is a “total one, that of the cameraman consists of multiple fragments which are assembled under a new law” (234). And like the cameraman editing a film in postproduction, a government can “edit” its historical narrative after the fact to serve whatever purpose, be it benign or malign, and unlike the average citizen or even esteemed academic, the government has the *authority* to proclaim its “final cut” of history as the *official* truth. Therein lies the analogy between film and governance, which is of great political consequence with regard to the acquisition and maintenance of power over others.

A salient example of this analogy of government as cameraman is the Japanese government’s—specifically, former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s—reliance on official documents as the sole representative of the truth concerning the issue of comfort women, a topic that will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter. During a budget committee meeting on March 5, 2007, Prime Minister Abe asserted that he did not see any evidence associating the Imperial

² Norimitsu Onishi (2007b) notes that Yasukuni Shrine’s war museum “presents Japan as a liberator of Asia from Western powers.”

military with the direct coercion of women into sex slavery. Abe based his argument on the premise that though there were official documents connecting the military to the establishment of sex brothels, there were no official documents linking the military to the direct coercion of women to serve in those brothels, stating, “There was no coercion such as kidnappings by the Japanese authorities. There is no reliable testimony that proves kidnapping” (*China Daily* 2007). Historian Yoshiaki Yoshimi counters Abe’s assertion, explaining that the former prime minister’s comments discounted the testimony of former comfort women and that history could not be constructed on the basis of “official documents” alone: “The fact is, if you can’t use anything except official documents, history itself is impossible to elucidate,” adding, “There are things that are never written in official documents [...] That they were forcibly recruited—that’s the kind of thing that would have never been written in the first place” (Onishi 2007a). In the end, Abe’s use of official documents alone to define history parallels the cameraman’s decision to use certain scenes in the final cut of his film. “Unabridged” historical narrative is similar to *all* the footage shot for a film; it includes *everything*, ranging from official government documentation to eyewitness accounts and people’s diary entries. Removal of anything from this total compilation constitutes “abridging,” and quite possibly altering, the historical narrative. This alteration of the original narrative via the cutting of certain “scenes” thus transforms reality into the illusion of reality as the remaining “footage” is presented as the entirety of the narrative. Benjamin explains the illusion in film resulting from the editing process: “In the theater one is well aware of the place from which the play cannot immediately be detected as illusionary. There is no such place for the movie scene that is being shot. Its illusionary nature is that of the second degree, the result of cutting” (1988b, 233).

As the cameraman cuts scenes from the totality of the footage to construct his final version of a film, the Japanese government cuts “scenes” from the overall historical narrative—namely, all “unofficial” information—to create its version of history. Norimitsu Onishi (2007a) comments that the focus on only official documents as determining what or what isn’t included in the historical narrative “has long been part of the government’s strategy to control wartime history.” As long as the Japanese government has within its disposal not only the ability to define “official history,” but the ability to promulgate its version of history as the one and only truth, it has the power to maintain a degree of control over what the citizenry thinks about and how it thinks about it. And generally speaking, history is a subject area considered “boring” by students, most of whom—unless they have a keen interest in the subject matter, are history majors or aspire to become professional historians—probably limit their study of history to the confines of the classroom. Kazuo Ogura, president of the Japan Foundation and former Japanese ambassador to Vietnam, South Korea, and France; makes

note of this lackadaisical attitude towards history among Japanese youth in an interview with the *Asahi Shimbun* (2008): “Perceptions of history naturally differ by country and person. [...] The problem is that young Japanese people have no interest in history and do not know much about it before discussing perceptions of history.” Therefore, with knowledge of history limited to what is written in a textbook combined with the fact that the Japanese government has control over the content of said textbooks, the government also controls, to a certain extent, what students learn about history, molding these young people’s points of view on many significant historical events.³

In summary, through the use of the media as a mode of disseminating information, a government, if it so chooses, can create reality and manufacture truth, as illustrated above with the case of the Abe administration’s stance on acknowledging only official documents as truth, as the only available “footage” of history. And this creation of a reality is associated with translation. Take for example the death of civilians in war. These dead civilians can either be characterized as “casualties” or as “collateral damage,” each word resulting in a completely different emotional reaction from the recipient of the news. The former characterization may induce emotions of sadness and anger, while the latter may induce no emotional reaction at all. Benjamin makes note of “a romantic grove” and “a melancholy lake” being called “a green grove” and “a blue lake,” respectively (1999, 321; J51,4). What emotions do people feel when told of a *green* grove or *blue* lake as opposed to a *romantic* grove or *melancholy* lake? Like “collateral damage” and “casualties,” the former terms used to describe the grove and the lake are likely to induce little, if any, emotional response.

Differences in emotional reactions can also occur when one substitutes the term “sex slave” with that of “comfort woman” or “prostitute.” Assuming that a person does not have any prior knowledge of the Japanese comfort women issue (e.g., a Japanese student learning about World War II history for the very first time), by the government presenting comfort women as merely that—as prostitutes, with the implication that they were compensated for their services and voluntarily entered into such service—that person would probably not observe any ill-feelings toward the Japanese government; since prostitution was legal at the time, the government was not guilty of any heinous crime by employing sex workers. In contrast, if the government were to present these women as sex slaves, as victims who were sexually violated, this would likely entice strong emotions and a negative view of the

³ Academic curricula in schools across Japan are approved and overseen by the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports, and Technology (MEXT for short). Thus, MEXT decides which textbooks are authorized for use in schools. MEXT oversees all stages of the textbook approval process, and those who are assigned to the textbook review committees are often of a conservative ideological slant (Hayes 2005, 192). Though “screening [of textbooks] is supposed to be free of political interference” (Onishi 2007b), ideology—a conservative one at that—nevertheless plays a role in education, in what knowledge a student ultimately acquires, or does not acquire.

actions committed by the Japanese government and military in the years prior to and during the Second World War. In short, reality is determined by the person (or group of people) who translates the events into the spoken or written word and presents them to the public for mass consumption. It is this power of manipulating words—modes of intention—to propagate a certain historical narrative or perception of reality that we shall explore next.

Translating ‘Comfort Women’: Modes and Objects of Intention

Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator” examines, as its title suggests, the work—and the responsibility—of the translator. What distinguishes a good translation from a bad translation? Benjamin answers these questions indirectly, articulating that “no translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original” (1988a, 73). In other words, with the exception of the difference in languages, a poor translation is one in which the translated version of a work is virtually identical to the original work. But since a translation is expected to convey the same content of the original work, but in another language, is the aforementioned statement then counterintuitive? The answer thus depends upon how one defines the purpose of translation.

In the beginning of his essay Benjamin states, “Translation is a mode” (1988a, 70). After an examination of the translatability of an original work, Benjamin then explicates the difference between “mode of intention” and “object of intention.” Benjamin says that “kinship does not necessarily involve likeness” (74). The kinship that Benjamin refers to is that of languages, i.e., the relationship between the language being translated and the language employed for translation. Every language uses words to represent specific objects and concepts and unless they are closely related to one another, or one language borrows from the other, no two languages use the same word to represent the same idea. As Benjamin explains, “While all individual elements of foreign languages—words, sentences, structure—are mutually exclusive, these languages supplement one another in their intentions” (74). The distinction between *mode* of intention and *object* of intention is therefore of vital importance. A mode of intention is the word used to represent a certain object or concept, tangible or intangible. An object of intention, in contrast, is that to which a word refers. To illustrate the difference between mode and object, Benjamin uses the words *Brot* and *pain*. “The words *Brot* and *pain* ‘intend’ the same object,” says Benjamin, “but the modes of this intention are not the same” (74). The German word *Brot* and the French word *pain* refer to—i.e., *intend*—‘bread,’ as we would refer to this object of intention in the English language. The intended object of *Brot*, *pain*, and *bread* is the same, but the modes, the words that denote, or the *names* given to, the object are clearly distinctive from one another. In the end, there are essentially two objects of intention: the object itself and the object perceived as a result of the particular mode used to refer to that object. Via the issue of Japanese

comfort women, I will explain how differing modes of intention can actually shape the object of intention in the mind's eye.

Modes and Objects

The ongoing controversy surrounding comfort women, a euphemism used to describe the up to 200,000 women from Japan's colonies and territories across Asia (a majority of whom were Korean and Chinese) who were coerced or tricked into sexual slavery in brothels run by the Japanese military during World War II, stems from the Japanese government's reluctance to take full responsibility for, and its renewed desire to revise history concerning, the forced sexual slavery of these women.⁴ Japanese school textbooks originally did not include references to the sex brothels set up and operated by the Imperial Army, but in 1997, a few years after the discovery of official documents directly linking the military to the creation of "comfort stations" and former Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono's 1993 statement acknowledging and apologizing for the Japanese military's involvement—directly or indirectly—in coercing women into sexual servitude, all school textbooks approved by the Japanese government included passages on comfort women.

In 2007, fourteen years after Japan formally acknowledged the existence of comfort women and the military's involvement and ten years after textbook revisions, a group in the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), helmed by former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and former Education Minister and current chairman of the "Fraternity of Lawmakers Who Are Concerned About the Future of Japan and History Education," Nariaki Nakayama, sought to, and literally succeeded in, rewriting history. Of the junior high school textbooks which were revised to include references to comfort women, only two now do (Onishi 2007a); the rest were re-revised to reflect the Abe administration's stance on the issue. Nakayama announced his satisfaction in removing any acknowledgement of comfort women from school textbooks: "Now few textbooks carry words like 'military comfort women' or that the women were 'forcibly taken' (to the frontline brothels). I think that's good" (Yoshida 2007). He went on to say that comfort women were not sex slaves, but prostitutes compensated for their services: "(Working at the brothels) was their commercial business. They were never sex slaves" (Yoshida 2007).

According to Nakayama, "In the first place, the term 'comfort women' didn't exist at the time (of World War II). What didn't exist is carried in his-

⁴ Due to the destruction of official government and military documents pertaining to comfort women, estimates of the number of comfort women vary, ranging anywhere from 20,000 to 200,000. Two leading historians on the subject give opposing estimates. Chou University professor Yoshiaki Yoshimi claims that comfort women numbered between 50,000 and 200,000. Ikuhito Hata, a Nihon University lecturer who holds the position that there were no "sex slaves" (according to Hata, comfort women were more along the lines of professional prostitutes), on the other hand, estimates the number to be approximately 20,000 (Nakamura 2007).

tory textbooks. In other words, what is wrong is in the textbooks. Now I think it proper to see this (description) removed from the textbooks” (Jong 2007). This is “twisted logic,” says *Chosun Ilbo* Tokyo correspondent Son-U Jong in a March 2007 editorial, asserting that just because the term “comfort women” did not exist in the past does not preclude the existence of comfort women. Benjamin may ask: Does the non-existence of a mode of intention infer the non-existence of an object of intention? As Benjamin explains, each language has its own mode of intention to refer to a particular object of intention. To reiterate, *pain* and *Brot* are two different words, but intend the same object: bread. For that matter, languages have synonyms, so one object of intention may be referred to by several different modes of intention, even in the same language. As a simple example, the object of intention ‘woman’ can be called *onna* or *josei* in Japanese—regardless of what word (mode of intention) is used, the object of intention is the same. Even if the words, *pain*, *Brot*, or *bread* did not exist in the lexicon of language, the object would still exist. Hence, as Jong argues, Nakayama’s argument is flawed because even if the women coerced by the military or its middlemen into sexual service were not referred to as *ianfu* (comfort women) at the time—perhaps they were just referred to as *baishunfu* (prostitute) or some other term—they still existed and what happened to them, by their own testimonials, did occur.

Faithful Reproduction: The Task of the Translator

What exactly is the task of the translator? Benjamin articulates the following: “The task of the translator consists in finding that intended effect [*Intention*] upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original” (1988a, 76). This statement is an extension of what Benjamin mentioned earlier about a poor translation being a duplicate of the original work. The translator, as she or he is in the process of translating a written work, essentially has to take special care in the selection of words and phrases; the translator has to determine what modes of intention best convey the *spirit* of the original text. Take the Japanese word *sumimasen* for example, which means “I’m sorry,” “excuse me” or “thank you” depending on context. *Kimochi warui* is another phrase with ambiguous meaning. This phrase, literally translated into English, means “feeling bad,” but can convey this meaning or others (e.g., “That’s disgusting” or “I feel sick”) depending upon the context in which it is used.⁵ A translator must therefore take context into

⁵ In the final scene of *The End of Evangelion*, a Japanese animated film serving as the finale to the series “Neon Genesis Evangelion,” the character Asuka utters the words “kimochi warui,” which presented a difficulty to translators of the English version of the series for the context of the scene in which the lines are said was in itself quite ambiguous. Tiffany Grant, the voice actress who portrayed Asuka in ADV’s English dub of “Evangelion” said the following regarding the ambiguous phrase: “The most widely circulated translation of the last line of EoE is ‘I feel sick’, but Amanda Winn Lee (voice of Rei Ayanami, who also directed EoE) said she asked several translators, and

account if she or he is to convey the essence of the original text. In short, the decision of which word or phrase captures the essence of the original text is dependent on the translator himself, and thus two different people tasked with translating an original work can and do produce different translations.⁶

Of finding this spirit of the original text, Benjamin elucidates: “Unlike a work of literature, translation does not find itself in the center of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one” (1988a, 76). Drawing upon the analogy above, one can say that the translator stands outside the “forest of language” without entering it, “calls into it” and waits for a returning “echo” that resonates the mode of intention—the word or phrase in the translating language—that captures the true essence of the original work being translated. This having been said, the translator should not consider literalness to be the pith of a good translation. Literalness may in fact be detrimental to translation.

Benjamin mentions that fidelity and license are two considerations important to the task of the translator. Fidelity to the written word and the license of “faithful reproduction” (Benjamin 1988a, 78) often clash with one another. On the one hand, the translator must be veridical and precise regarding the words to be translated (fidelity), but must also have the freedom to use words and phrases that may not serve as a literal translation of the original work, though nevertheless communicate the *meaning* of the original work (license). Benjamin argues for license over fidelity as he says,

she felt ‘disgusting’ was the most accurate adaptation. You could say she is disgusted with/sick of the situation or with Shinji himself. [...] although (Eva creator) Hideaki Anno seems to change his mind frequently about what various things mean in Eva, Anno once said that Asuka’s comment about feeling ‘sick’ was a reference to morning sickness” (2004).

⁶ Of three prominent English translations of *The Tale of Genji*, each features a slightly different approach. According to Janice P. Nimura (2004), Arthur Waley, the first to translate *Genji* into English between the 1920s and 30s, “was more concerned with conveying the spirit than the letter of the original,” while Edward Seidensticker, who produced a second translation in 1976, “stuck closer to the [original Japanese] text, conveying its sparseness as well as its stateliness and flashes of wry humor.” The latest translation, written by Royall Tyler in 2002, “navigates a course between his predecessors,” being “less baroque than Waley’s, less brisk than Seidensticker’s.” Nimura then compares the translations of the opening line from *Genji* by each of the three authors. *This comparison* illustrates that there is no one “true” translation, that the interpretation of an original text truly is dependent on the perspective of the translator. Waley: “At the Court of an Emperor (he lived it matters not when) there was among the many gentlewomen of the Wardrobe and Chamber one, who though she was not of very high rank was favored far beyond all the rest.” Seidensticker: “In a certain reign there was a lady not of the first rank whom the emperor loved more than any of the others.” Tyler: “In a certain reign (whose can it have been?) someone of no very great rank, among all His Majesty’s Consorts and Intimates, enjoyed exceptional favor.”