

walter benjamin a short history of photography

Walter Benjamin: A Short History of Photography

walter benjamin a short history of photography is not just a phrase but a gateway into understanding one of the most profound reflections on the medium that changed the way we perceive reality. Walter Benjamin, a German-Jewish philosopher and cultural critic, offered groundbreaking insights into photography's role in modern society. His essay, often referred to as "A Short History of Photography," delves into how photography transformed art, perception, and the very nature of human experience. This article explores Benjamin's key ideas, placing them in broader historical and cultural contexts, while highlighting why his perspectives remain relevant today.

Who Was Walter Benjamin?

Before diving into Benjamin's thoughts on photography, it's essential to understand the man behind these ideas. Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) was an intellectual deeply engaged with the cultural and political upheavals of his time. His work spans philosophy, literary criticism, and media theory, often focusing on how technological advances reshape culture. Benjamin's analysis of photography fits within his broader interest in modernity, mass culture, and the intersection of art and politics.

His writings, including the famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," laid the foundation for later discussions about mass media and visual culture. Photography, for Benjamin, was an emblem of the new technological landscape that fundamentally altered traditional artistic practices.

Walter Benjamin's Perspective on Photography

In "A Short History of Photography," Walter Benjamin reflects on the medium not merely as a technological innovation but as a cultural force that redefines how humans engage with the world. For Benjamin, photography was revolutionary because it introduced a new way of seeing and understanding reality — one filtered through the mechanical eye of the camera rather than the human eye alone.

The Mechanical Reproduction of Reality

One of Benjamin's most influential concepts is the idea of mechanical reproduction. Photography, unlike painting or sculpture, can reproduce images endlessly with precision. This ability to duplicate images detached the artwork from its "aura" — a term Benjamin used to describe the unique presence and authenticity of a work of art in time and space.

Photography, by reproducing reality mechanically, democratized art but also challenged traditional notions of originality and authenticity. The reproduced photograph could be disseminated widely, appearing in newspapers, books, and exhibitions, changing how people consumed images and information.

The Role of the Photographer and Viewer

Benjamin also pointed out a shift in the roles of both the photographer and the viewer. The photographer becomes a technician or operator of machines, capturing moments that might otherwise go unnoticed. This mechanization alters creativity, emphasizing selection and framing over manual creation.

For the viewer, photography changes perception by offering new perspectives and angles, often highlighting details invisible to the naked eye. The photograph invites active engagement, encouraging viewers to question what they see and consider the context beyond the image.

The Historical Context and Evolution of Photography

Walter Benjamin's short history isn't just about the technical development of photography but also about its cultural evolution. From the early daguerreotypes to the rise of photojournalism, photography's journey mirrors society's transformations.

Early Photography and Its Artistic Tensions

In the 19th century, photography emerged as a scientific curiosity and an artistic challenge. Early practitioners wrestled with technical limitations and debates about whether photography could be considered an art form. Benjamin's analysis underscores this tension — photography blurred the boundaries between documentation and artistic expression, creating new possibilities but also uncertainties.

Photography and Mass Media

Benjamin's era saw photography become integral to mass media. Newspapers and magazines relied heavily on photographs to tell stories visually, making information more accessible and immediate. This shift had profound implications for politics, culture, and public opinion.

Benjamin understood that photography's rise in mass media was double-edged: it enhanced communication but also risked manipulation and propaganda. The ease of image reproduction meant that photos could be taken out of context or staged to influence

viewers, a concern that resonates even more in the digital age.

Why Walter Benjamin's Insights Matter Today

In today's world, saturated with digital images, Benjamin's reflections on photography provide a valuable framework for understanding how images shape our reality. His ideas about mechanical reproduction and the loss of aura anticipate contemporary debates about authenticity in digital art, deepfakes, and social media imagery.

Photography in the Digital Era

The digital revolution has exponentially increased the reproduction and dissemination of images. Unlike Benjamin's time, when photographs were physical and limited by print technology, digital images can be shared instantly worldwide. This amplifies both the democratizing potential and the risks Benjamin identified: the erosion of uniqueness and the potential for manipulation.

Engaging Critically with Images

Benjamin's work encourages viewers to engage critically with photographs — to look beyond surface appearances and consider the conditions of their creation and dissemination. In an age where images influence politics, advertising, and personal identity, cultivating a Benjaminian critical eye helps navigate the complexities of visual culture.

Practical Tips for Applying Benjamin's Ideas to Photography Appreciation

To appreciate photography through the lens of Walter Benjamin's insights, consider the following approaches:

- **Contextualize the Image:** Always ask where the photograph comes from, who created it, and for what purpose.
- **Consider the Aura:** Reflect on what makes a photograph unique or authentic in its original context, even if it has been widely reproduced.
- **Analyze Reproduction:** Think about how the photograph might change meaning when reproduced or circulated in different media.
- **Engage Actively:** Don't passively consume images; question what is shown, what is hidden, and what might be manipulated.

These strategies can deepen one's appreciation of photography as both an art form and a powerful cultural tool.

Connecting Walter Benjamin to Contemporary Visual Culture

Walter Benjamin's short history of photography is more than a historical account; it's a call to awareness about the power of images. His theories resonate strongly in today's visual-saturated culture, where photography is intertwined with identity, memory, and politics.

Modern artists, photographers, and theorists continue to draw on Benjamin's ideas to critique digital media, explore new artistic forms, and understand the shifting boundaries between reality and representation. By revisiting his work, we gain tools to navigate the complex visual landscape of the 21st century, recognizing both the possibilities and challenges that photography presents.

Walter Benjamin's reflections remind us that photography is not just about capturing moments but about shaping how we see and understand the world around us. His short history of photography remains a vital resource for anyone interested in the interplay between technology, art, and society.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the main theme of Walter Benjamin's 'A Short History of Photography'?

The main theme of Walter Benjamin's 'A Short History of Photography' is the exploration of photography's impact on art, culture, and society, particularly focusing on how mechanical reproduction changes the perception and aura of artworks.

How does Walter Benjamin describe the concept of 'aura' in photography?

Walter Benjamin describes 'aura' as the unique presence and authenticity of a work of art that is diminished in photography due to its mechanical reproducibility, which detaches the image from its original context.

Why is Walter Benjamin's essay on photography considered influential in media theory?

Benjamin's essay is influential because it introduced critical ideas about media reproduction, the democratization of art through photography, and the shifting role of the observer, which have shaped contemporary media and cultural studies.

What historical developments in photography does Walter Benjamin highlight in his essay?

Benjamin highlights the technological advancements in photography, such as the invention of the camera, the rise of photojournalism, and the use of photography in mass media, which transformed visual culture and societal perceptions.

How does Benjamin relate photography to changes in perception and reality?

Benjamin argues that photography alters human perception by enabling new ways of seeing reality, such as through close-ups and slow motion, thus changing how reality is experienced and understood.

In what way does Walter Benjamin discuss the political implications of photography?

Benjamin discusses the political implications by suggesting that photography can be used as a tool for propaganda and social change, as its reproducibility allows images to be disseminated widely and influence public opinion.

How does 'A Short History of Photography' relate to Benjamin's broader philosophy?

'A Short History of Photography' relates to Benjamin's broader philosophy by exemplifying his interest in modernity, technology, and the transformation of culture through mechanical reproduction, themes central to his critical theory.

Additional Resources

Walter Benjamin and "A Short History of Photography": An Analytical Review

walter benjamin a short history of photography stands as a seminal work that intricately dissects the evolution of photography and its profound impact on society, culture, and art. Walter Benjamin, a critical theorist and philosopher, offers a nuanced perspective that goes beyond the technical developments of photography, delving into its philosophical and ideological implications. His essay, often studied in media theory and art history circles, remains pivotal for understanding how photography reshaped the ways we perceive reality and memory.

Benjamin's exploration is not simply a chronological recounting of photographic milestones; rather, it is a critical inquiry into the medium's transformative power and its relationship to modernity. As the photographic image became ubiquitous, Benjamin interrogated the consequences this had on human perception, the aura of art, and the democratization of visual culture. This article provides an in-depth analysis of Walter Benjamin's "A Short History of Photography," highlighting its core themes, contextual relevance, and enduring influence on contemporary photography discourse.

The Historical Context and Intellectual Background

Walter Benjamin wrote during a tumultuous period marked by rapid technological advancements and social upheaval. His essay reflects the intellectual environment of the early 20th century, when photography was transitioning from a novel invention to a mass medium. The rise of industrialization, urbanization, and the proliferation of mass media deeply influenced Benjamin's thought process.

Benjamin's philosophical framework was informed by Marxism and the Frankfurt School's critique of culture and capitalism. He viewed photography not merely as a technical or artistic phenomenon but as a cultural practice embedded in power structures. His analysis of photography intersects with his broader concerns about commodification, reproducibility, and the shifting nature of art in capitalist societies.

Photography and the Concept of Aura

One of Benjamin's most influential contributions is his concept of the "aura," which he defines as the unique presence and authenticity of a work of art. In his essay, Benjamin argues that photography—and later film—undermines this aura due to its reproducible nature. Unlike traditional art forms such as painting or sculpture, photographic images can be endlessly duplicated, detached from the original context, and disseminated widely.

This reproducibility alters the relationship between the viewer and the image, leading to a loss of ritualistic and authoritative value traditionally associated with art. Benjamin's insight into the aura highlights a critical tension between authenticity and mass reproduction, a theme that remains relevant in today's digital age where images circulate globally at unprecedented speeds.

The Democratization of Visual Culture

Walter Benjamin's "A Short History of Photography" also underscores photography's role in democratizing access to images. Unlike elite art forms, photography made visual representation accessible to the masses. This democratization had profound social implications, as photographic images became tools for education, propaganda, and social critique.

Benjamin observed that photography facilitated new ways of seeing, enabling viewers to engage with the world from diverse perspectives. The camera's ability to capture fleeting moments and everyday life challenged traditional hierarchies of subject matter and artistic value. Consequently, photography played a pivotal role in shaping modern consciousness and cultural memory.

Key Themes and Analytical Insights

Examining Walter Benjamin's essay reveals several critical themes that continue to inform contemporary debates on photography.

The Technical Evolution and Its Implications

Benjamin traces the technical advancements in photography, from early daguerreotypes to more accessible formats like snapshots and postcards. He recognizes that technological innovations not only broadened photography's reach but also transformed its function and meaning.

For example, the emergence of the snapshot as a casual and spontaneous form of photography contrasted sharply with the staged and formal portraits of earlier eras. This shift reflects a broader cultural movement toward immediacy, fragmentation, and the ephemeral nature of modern life.

Photography as a Tool of Ideology and Politics

Another significant aspect of Benjamin's analysis is the ideological dimension of photography. He was acutely aware of how photographic images could be manipulated to serve political ends, whether through propaganda or the construction of social narratives.

Photography's capacity to document reality also rendered it a powerful medium for exposing social injustices and mobilizing public opinion. Benjamin's insights anticipate contemporary discussions about the ethics of image-making and the politics of representation in media.

Interplay Between Photography and Memory

Walter Benjamin's essay delves into photography's complex relationship with memory and history. Photographs function as both records of the past and mediators of collective memory. However, Benjamin cautions that the reproducibility of images can distort historical understanding by detaching images from their original contexts.

This ambivalence about photography as both preservative and potentially deceptive resonates in today's digital landscape, where images are often manipulated, decontextualized, or weaponized.

Relevance of Walter Benjamin's Ideas in

Contemporary Photography

Benjamin's reflections on photography remain strikingly relevant amid the explosion of digital imaging technologies and social media platforms. The principles he outlined—reproducibility, aura, democratization, and ideological use—are echoed in current debates about the impact of smartphones, Photoshop, and image-based communication.

Digital Reproducibility and the Aura in the 21st Century

In the digital era, the concept of aura undergoes further transformation. The ease with which images can be copied, altered, and shared challenges traditional notions of originality and authenticity. Benjamin's theories provide a critical lens through which to examine phenomena such as viral imagery, memes, and digital art.

The Role of Photography in Social Movements

Photography continues to serve as a potent instrument for activism and social change. The visual documentation of protests, human rights abuses, and environmental crises echoes Benjamin's recognition of photography's political power. However, the sheer volume of images produced today also raises questions about attention, desensitization, and the ethics of image consumption.

New Forms of Visual Consumption and Perception

Benjamin's insights into how photography alters perception are amplified by the immersive and interactive nature of contemporary visual media. Virtual reality, augmented reality, and AI-generated images complicate the boundary between representation and reality, opening new avenues for both creative expression and critical inquiry.

Conclusion: The Enduring Legacy of Walter Benjamin's "A Short History of Photography"

Walter Benjamin's essay remains a cornerstone in the study of photography's cultural and philosophical dimensions. His analytical approach, combining historical detail with theoretical depth, offers invaluable perspectives on how photography shapes our understanding of the world. By situating photography within broader socio-political and technological contexts, Benjamin's work transcends its time, continuing to inform scholarly discourse and artistic practice.

As photography evolves in the digital age, revisiting Benjamin's "A Short History of Photography" provides essential insights into the medium's potential and pitfalls. His

exploration of aura, reproducibility, and ideology encourages ongoing reflection on the power of images in society—a conversation that is as urgent now as it was nearly a century ago.

Walter Benjamin A Short History Of Photography

walter benjamin a short history of photography: A Short History of Photography Walter Benjamin, 1972

walter benjamin a short history of photography: Photography Liz Wells, 2004 This seminal text for photography students identifies key debates in photographic theory, stimulates discussion and evaluation of the critical use of photographic images and ways of seeing. This new edition retains the thematic structure and text features of its predecessors but also expands coverage on photojournalism, digital imaging techniques, race and colonialism. The content is updated with additional international and contemporary examples and images throughout and the inclusion of colour photos. Features of this new edition include: *Key concepts and short biographies of major thinkers *Updated international and contemporary case studies and examples *A full glossary of terms, a comprehensive bibliography *Resource information, including guides to public archives and useful websites

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walter benjamin a short history of photography: Benjamin Gary Smith, 1989-09-15 Walter Benjamin (1896-1940) has been called by Hannah Arendt the greatest critic of the century. While an increasing number of Anglo-American literary critics draw upon Benjamin's writings in their own works, their colleagues in the philosophical community remain relatively unacquainted with his legacy. In the European intellectual world, by contrast, Benjamin's critical epistemological program, his philosophies of history and language, and his aesthetics have long since become part of philosophical discourse. The present collection of articles, many of which were contained in earlier versions in the Winter 1983 special issue of the journal *The Philosophical Forum*, initiates the project of establishing Benjamin's importance to philosophy. A balance of original work by Benjamin and important commentary on his works, this volume includes the crucial chapter from Benjamin's magnum opus *The Arcades Project*, his *Program of the Coming Philosophy*, and *Central Park*, as well as essays by leading scholars (including Theodor W. Adorno, Leo Lowenthal, and Rolf Tiedemann) that treat single philosophical themes and relate his ideas to those of other thinkers such as Gadamer, Goodman, and Rosenzweig. Gary Smith's introduction to the volume provides an extremely useful and sophisticated entrée for readers unaccustomed to the breadth of Benjamin's philosophical allusions, as well as an informative summation of the contents of the volume. This book will be of interest to philosophers, literary theorists, art historians, anthropologists, and other social scientists.

walter benjamin a short history of photography: Selected Writings: 1935-1938 Walter Benjamin, Howard Eiland, Gary Smith, 1996 This volume offers extensively annotated translations of essays that are key to Benjamin's rewriting of the story of modernism and modernity, as well as a diary from 1938 and penetrating studies of Bertolt Brecht, Franz Kafka and Eduard Fuchs.

walter benjamin a short history of photography: Visual Culture: What is visual culture studies? Joanne Morra, Marquard Smith, 2006 These texts represent both the formation of visual culture, and the ways in which it has transformed, and continues to transform, our understanding and experience of the world as a visual domain.

walter benjamin a short history of photography: Photography, Cinema, Memory Damian Sutton, 2009 This is a philosophical investigation into the differing sensations of time in cinema and photography. Throughout the work, Sutton connects and grounds cinema and photography as starting points to comprehend how we come to terms, ultimately, with time itself as pure, immanent change.

walter benjamin a short history of photography: Photography in the Third Reich: Art, Physiognomy and Propaganda Christopher Webster, 2021-01-07 This lucid and comprehensive collection of essays by an international group of scholars constitutes a photo-historical survey of select photographers who embraced National Socialism during the Third Reich. These photographers developed and implemented physiognomic and ethnographic photography, and, through a Selbstgleichschaltung (a self-co-ordination with the regime), continued to practice as photographers throughout the twelve years of the Third Reich. The volume explores, through photographic reproductions and accompanying analysis, diverse aspects of photography during the Third Reich, ranging from the influence of Modernism, the qualitative effect of propaganda photography, and the utilisation of technology such as colour film, to the photograph as ideological metaphor. With an emphasis on the idealised representation of the German body and the role of physiognomy within this representation, the book examines how select photographers created and developed a visual myth of the 'master race' and its antitheses under the auspices of the Nationalist Socialist state. Photography in the Third Reich approaches its historical source photographs as material culture, examining their production, construction and proliferation. This detailed and informative text will be a valuable resource not only to historians studying the Third Reich, but to scholars and students of film, history of art, politics, media studies, cultural studies and holocaust studies.

walter benjamin a short history of photography: Art and Archive. Genealogy and Contemporaneity (1920-2010) Anna Maria Guasch, 2024-12-31 This book provides a comprehensive exploration of the relationship between art and the archive. The author examines how artists have engaged with archival materials, practices and methodologies throughout history, from the avant-garde movements of the early 20th century to contemporary artistic practices. She explores the ways in which artists have appropriated, transformed and recontextualized archival documents and narratives to create new meanings and perspectives on history, memory, and identity. Guasch also discusses the role of the archive in shaping artistic production, reception and historiography, highlighting its significance as a site of cultural memory and knowledge production. Through a series of case studies and theoretical reflections, the book offers insights into the diverse ways in which artists have navigated the archive as a source of inspiration, critique and intervention in the artistic process. Art and Archive represents an archaeological and genealogical history of the relationships, sometimes linear, sometimes discontinuous, between art and the archive. The archive ceases to be a dusty space or a repository of historical artifacts, to become an active discursive and relational system that establishes — aesthetically, socially and politically — new relationships of temporality between past, present, and future, in what is understood as the time of the "future perfect".

walter benjamin a short history of photography: *Archive, Photography and the Language of Administration* Jane Birkin, 2020-12-18 This alternative study of archive and photography sits firmly against the backdrop of the traditional archive. Although many types of image assemblages feature-public and private, formal and informal, physical and digital-they are all considered in relation to the highly regulated systems that operate within the institutional milieu. Cataloguing is presented as a radical form of knowledge production, and the catalogue as a critical tool for mapping image time. The unfamiliar and overlooked language of image description is considered as having a life, a worth and an aesthetic value of its own. Functioning at the intersection of text and image, this book combines media culture and techniques of the archive, as well as contemporary discourse on art and conceptual writing. There is a media-archaeological debate throughout as to how physical archive systems and material technologies connect with different archival models,

including social media spaces and other image networks.

walter benjamin a short history of photography: *Queer Methodology for Photography* Asa Johannesson, 2024-02-01 This book presents new ways of approaching photographic discourse from a queer perspective, offering discussions on what a queering methodology for photography may entail by drawing links between artistic strategies in photographic practice and key theoretical concepts from photography theory, queer theory, critical theory, and philosophy. With different examples of conceptual perspectives, including representation, formalism, and mediumlessness, it seeks to diversify queer methodology for photography. While primarily addressing photography, this book is entwined with broader philosophical questions concerning identity, difference, and the creations of systems of thought that limit the possibilities of existence to binary categorisation. It proposes a new concept of the photographic image that addresses its materiality, in the form of the poetic and the political, in relationship to a generative principle that is named as a queer quality: the photograph's ability to voice queer concerns also beyond its role as representation. This book will be of interest to scholars working in photography, art history, queer studies, new materialism, and posthumanism.

walter benjamin a short history of photography: *The Photograph* Mary Price, 1997 This richly evocative study of photography has two major emphases, that the language of description (be it title, caption, or text) is deeply implicated in how a viewer looks at photographs, and that the use of a photograph determines its meaning.

walter benjamin a short history of photography: *Photography Theory* James Elkins, 2013-10-18 *Photography Theory* presents forty of the world's most active art historians and theorists, including Victor Burgin, Joel Snyder, Rosalind Krauss, Alan Trachtenberg, Geoffrey Batchen, Carol Squiers, Margaret Iversen and Abigail Solomon-Godeau in animated debate on the nature of photography. Photography has been around for nearly two centuries, but we are no closer to understanding what it is. For some people, a photograph is an optically accurate impression of the world, for others, it is mainly a way of remembering people and places. Some view it as a sign of bourgeois life, a kind of addiction of the middle class, whilst others see it as a troublesome interloper that has confused people's ideas of reality and fine art to the point that they have difficulty even defining what a photograph is. For some, the whole question of finding photography's nature is itself misguided from the beginning. This provocative second volume in the Routledge The Art Seminar series presents not one but many answers to the question what makes a photograph a photograph?

walter benjamin a short history of photography: *An Analysis of Susan Sontag's On Photography* Nico Epstein, 2018-02-21 Susan Sontag's 1997 text, *On Photography*, brought photographic theory into the university classroom with its staunch defence of the medium as art and inspired a new wave of Marxist Criticism in the field. Sontag explains the way in which we are addicted to images and depend on them for knowledge of our surroundings and the problems and challenges this causes. Already an established academic figure, Sontag brought Walter Benjamin's theories in into the academic mainstream. The book retains its relevance in the everyday world because of the applicability of its ideas to the world of digital photography.

walter benjamin a short history of photography: *Encyclopedia of nineteenth-century photography* John Hannavy, 2008 The first comprehensive encyclopedia of world photograph up to the beginning of the twentieth century. It sets out to be the standard, definitive reference work on the subject for years to come.

walter benjamin a short history of photography: *"Biography, Identity and the Modern Interior"* Penny Sparke, 2017-07-05 Through a series of case studies from the mid-eighteenth century to the start of the twenty-first, this collection of essays considers the historical insights that ethno/auto/biographical investigations into the lives of individuals, groups and interiors can offer design and architectural historians. Established scholars and emerging researchers shed light on the methodological issues that arise from the use of these sources to explore the history of the interior as a site in which everyday life is experienced and performed, and the ways in which contemporary architects and interior designers draw on personal and collective histories in their practice.

Historians and theorists working within a range of disciplinary contexts and historiographical traditions are turning to biography as means of exploring and accounting for social, cultural and material change - and this volume reflects that turn, representing the fields of architectural and design history, social history, literary history, creative writing and design practice. Topics include masters and servants in eighteenth-century English kitchens; the lost interiors of Oscar Wilde's 'House Beautiful'; Elsa Schiaparelli's Surrealist spaces; Jean Genet, outlaws, and the interiors of marginality; and architect Lina Bo Bardi's 'Glass House', S?Paulo, Brazil.

walter benjamin a short history of photography: The Struggle for Utopia Victor Margolin, 1997 . Focusing on the difficult relationship between art and social change, Margolin brings important new insights to our understanding of the avant-garde's role in a period of great political complexity.

walter benjamin a short history of photography: The Modern Woman Revisited Whitney Chadwick, Tirza True Latimer, 2003 Between the two world wars, Paris served as the setting for unparalleled freedom for expatriate as well as native-born French women, who enjoyed unprecedented access to education and opportunities to participate in public, artistic and intellectual life. Many of these women--including Colette, Tamara de Lempicka, Sonia Delaunay, Djuna Barnes, Augusta Savage, and Lee Miller--made lasting contributions to art and literature.

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walter benjamin a short history of photography: WerkstattGeschichte Verein für kritische Geschichtsschreibung e.V., 2025-03-27 WerkstattGeschichte ist eine Zeitschrift, in der über Geschichte und ihre Akteur*innen ebenso reflektiert wird wie über historisches Forschen und Schreiben. Sie bietet Platz, konventionelle Perspektiven zu durchbrechen und neue Formen der Darstellung zu erproben. Die Zeitschrift bleibt der Sozialgeschichte verbunden, legt aber deutlichen Wert darauf, die »große Geschichte« aus einer alltagsgeschichtlichen Perspektive zu befragen. Im aktuellen Heft, herausgegeben von Cornelia Aust, widmen sich die Beiträger*innen Körper- und Körperlichkeitsvorstellungen, die das 18. und 19. Jahrhundert prägten. Sie analysieren, wie die Wahrnehmung und Vermessung von Körpern zur Herstellung von geschlechtsspezifischen und rassistischen Differenzkategorien genutzt wurden und legen so die Essentialisierung von Körpereigenschaften offen.

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