Walter Benjamin wrote extensively on photography. Aside from his ‘A Small History of Photography’, there are references to photography throughout his works. Much of his famous essay, ‘The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, is devoted to film and photography. Indeed, for Benjamin, photography captures the very essence of the age of mechanical reproduction, even if, as he acknowledges, film is better suited to grasp its transitory, fleeting character. Moreover, Benjamin’s writings are peppered with photographic allusions. Not only do we find references to the ‘snapshot’ throughout his oeuvre — as in the piece, ‘Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia’ — but the very flash of recognition that forms the core of the ‘dialectics of seeing’ seems to have been drawn as much from the burning magnesium paper of photography as it is from the lightning flash of nature.

It is as though human beings — in an age increasingly dominated by photography — have taken on the attributes of the camera. Just as workmen in the factory, as Benjamin observes, are conditioned by the jolting, jarring, repetitive actions of the machine, such that their own behaviour begin to replicate those actions, so too human beings in general have adapted to the world of the camera. They now see the world in terms of the ‘snapshot’, and according to the mechanism of the camera itself. Indeed Benjamin makes an explicit reference to the ‘flash bulb’ and the mechanism of photographic exposure when describing the way that various architectural spaces are imprinted onto the mind by events that take place there:

Anyone can observe that the duration for which we are exposed to impressions has no bearing on their fate in memory. Nothing prevents our keeping rooms in which we have spent twenty-four hours more or less clearly in our memory, and forgetting others in which we passed months. It is not, therefore, due to insufficient exposure time if no image appears on the plate of remembrance. More frequent, perhaps, are the cases when the half-light of habit denies the plate the necessary light for years, until one day from an alien source it flashes as if from burning magnesium powder, and now a snapshot transfixed the room’s image on the plate. Nor is this very mysterious, since such moments of sudden illumination are at the same time moments when we are beside ourselves, and while our waking, habitual, everyday self is involved actively or passively in what is happening, our deeper self rests in another place and is
touched by the shock, as is the little heap of magnesium powder by the flame
of the match.¹

Here the mind acts like some form of camera obscura. This provocative analogy
establishes a connection between the mind and the architectural environment via a
form of ‘photographic’ image. And the image plays a vital role in Benjamin’s way of
thinking, especially in Benjamin’s two autobiographical pieces about Berlin, ‘A Berlin
Childhood around 1900’ and ‘A Berlin Chronicle’.² Memories are constructed as
images, and his whole recollection of childhood memories in pieces such as ‘A Berlin
Chronicle’ is presented as a tableau of largely architectural vignettes — ‘street
images’ as he terms them. Descriptions of buildings such as his old school with its
frosted glass and ‘carved wooden battlements over the doors’ are presented as
brief, verbal portraits, that develop a form of ‘unconscious optics’, highlighting often
overlooked features with their close-up details.³ These are snapshots of the physical
fabric of Berlin, on to which has been etched, as though through some
photosensitive process, a deeply personal sense of meaning. Thus the classrooms
are haunted by Benjamin’s fear of the Arbitur examination, and by ‘dreamlike
memories’ of the damp odour of sweat from having to rush up the stone steps into
the school several times a day. Otherwise insignificant places have been charged
with a special significance as part of a mental ‘map’, as Benjamin calls it, of his early
childhood experiences in Berlin.⁴

If the mind stores these images, as though in some photo album, to recollect one’s
youth is, as it were, to leaf through the pages of that album, which constitutes the
visual archive of the mind. Each image is charged with the capacity to retrieve a
past. Like Proust and his tale of the Madeleine cakes, these snapshots trigger off
unconscious associations of a bygone world, and in the flash of recognition past and
present become conjoined for a fleeting moment. But might not the corollary also
hold true? If the mind can act as a repository of images of past events like some

²‘A Berlin Childhood around 1900’ appears as ‘Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert’,
Gesammelte Schriften, IV: 1, but has yet to be published in English. ‘A Berlin Chronicle’
appears in Benjamin, One-Way Street, pp. 293-346.
³For Benjamin ‘unconscious optics’ are the visual equivalent of the Freudian ‘slip of the
tongue’. ‘By close-ups of the world around us,’ Benjamin notes, ‘by exploring commonplace
milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, on the one hand extends our
comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure
us of an immense and unexpected field of action.’ [Benjamin, Illuminations, trans. Harry Zohn,
unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses.’ [Benjamin, Illuminations,
p. 230.]
⁴Benjamin, One-Way Street, p. 295.
vast photographic album, cannot actual photographs in an exhibition act as a register of potential events? In this sense the image — especially the photographic image — may have some privileged role in summoning up an entirely new world. In this process the mind might play an active part. In order to fully appreciate a photograph, the mind must work in creative and imaginative ways so as to engage through the medium of the photograph with the world which it represents. This article addresses this question. It does so in the context of Benjamin’s autobiographical writings of Berlin, and the insights they offer as to how photographs might act as a form of window to the architecture that they depict.

**Benjamin and the Picture Postcard**

Benjamin makes few references to actual photographs in his possession, but he does claim to have been an avid collector of picture postcards. In *A Berlin Chronicle* he describes how as a young boy he started this collection, much of it supplied by his maternal grandmother, who was an inveterate traveller. These postcards had a magnetic effect on the young Benjamin. They seemed to have the capacity to transport him to the places they depicted, as though by some form of magic carpet:

> For I was there — in Tabarz, Brindisi, Madonna di Campiglio, Westerland, when I gazed, unable to tear myself away, at the wooded slope of Tabarz covered with glowing red berries, the yellow-and-white-daubed quays of Brindisi, the cupolas of Madonna di Campiglio printed bluish on blue, and the bows of the ‘Westerland’ slicing high through the waves.5

This seemingly ‘throw-away’ comment — ‘I was there, . . . when I gazed’ — is one which merits further investigation. It is, arguably, part of a consistent and highly sophisticated theory of representation that adds a certain crucial gloss to Benjamin’s overall aesthetic theory in general and to his approach towards photography in particular. Nor is the observation of this phenomenon an isolated remark by Benjamin, which should be overlooked as insignificant. In the ‘The Work of Art’ essay there is a further enigmatic reference on a similar theme:

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5Benjamin, *One-Way Street*, p. 328.
A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it. He enters into this work of art the way that legend tells of the Chinese painter when he viewed his finished painting.\textsuperscript{6}

This comment, seemingly overlooked by mainstream commentators on Benjamin, is explained by a fuller version contained in the obscure fragment, ‘Die Mummerehlen’, to be found in Benjamin’s other autobiographical text of his childhood in Berlin, ‘A Berlin Childhood’, which has yet to be published in English. This tells the tale of the young Benjamin being absorbed into the world depicted on some porcelain vase:

[The story] comes from China and tells of an old painter who gave his newest painting to friends to look at. The painting was of a park, a narrow path along the water and through some foliage, to end at a small door offering entry in the back to a little house. The friends looked around for the painter, but he was gone and in the picture. He walked along the narrow path to the door, stopped in front of it, turned around, smiled, and disappeared through the crack. So was I, with my little bowls and brushes, suddenly in the picture. I became similar to the porcelain, into which I moved with a cloud of colour.\textsuperscript{7}

The process by which Benjamin becomes absorbed either within the world of the porcelain vase or the scenes depicted on the picture postcards can be explained, I would argue, by engaging with Benjamin’s provocative theory of \textit{mimesis}, which suggests a way in which children in particular have the ability to identify with and assimilate to another world. Moreover, once Benjamin’s use of the concept of \textit{mimesis} has been examined, and its relevance to the visual arts articulated, it can be recognised as possibly one of Benjamin’s most important contributions to aesthetic theory.

\textbf{Benjamin and Mimesis}

In \textit{One Way Street} Walter Benjamin offers a telling description of a child hiding:

\begin{quote}
Standing behind the doorway curtain, the child becomes himself something floating and white, a ghost. The dining table under which he is crouching turns him into the wooden idol in a temple whose four pillars are the carved
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{6}Benjamin, \textit{Illuminations}, p. 232.

legs. And behind a door he is himself a door, wears it as his heavy mask and as a shaman will bewitch all those who unsuspectingly enter. At no cost must he be found. When he pulls faces, he is told, the clock need only strike and he will remain so. The element of truth in this he finds out in his hiding place. Anyone who discovers him can petrify him as an idol under the table, weave him for ever as a ghost into the curtain, banish him for life into the heavy door. And so, at the seeker’s touch he drives out with a loud cry the demon who has transformed him — indeed, without waiting for the moment of discovery, he grabs the hunter with a shout of self-deliverance.8

What is striking about this story is the way in which the child becomes one with the environment. Behind the curtain, the child turns into the curtain, ‘floating and white, like a ghost’. Under the dining table the child becomes a wooden idol in a temple, and behind a door ‘he himself is a door’. The child has become so perfectly at one with the environment that he fears that he may never escape. Just as he might carry the burden of the face he is pulling, if caught making the expression when the clock strikes, so he risks remaining camouflaged and absorbed into the environment. He needs to offer a shriek of self-deliverance so as to free himself from the spell under which he had made himself identical to the interior landscape around him.

What Benjamin is alluding to here is his theory of mimesis, a theory that he developed in two short writings, ‘Doctrine of the Similar’ and ‘On the Mimetic Faculty’, the latter being a condensed reworking of the former.9 Mimesis here should not be understood in the terms used, say, by Plato, as simple ‘imitation’. Rather mimesis in Adorno, as indeed in Walter Benjamin’s writings, is a psychoanalytic term — taken from Freud — that refers to a creative engagement with an object. Freud writes about the term in the context of jokes. Mimesis is ideational. It operates through the medium of the idea, and is what allows one to empathise with the subject of a joke. In listening to the tale about the unfortunate individual who slips up on a banana skin, one puts oneself in the position of that individual, and imagines oneself also slipping up, drawing upon memories of similar experiences. One thereby identifies with that individual. But the implications of the term extend beyond empathising with the subject of a joke. Mimesis is a term, as Freud himself predicted, of great potential significance for aesthetics.10

8Benjamin, One-Way Street, p. 74.
10‘. . . I believe that if ideational mimetics are followed up, they may be as useful in other branches of aesthetics. . . ’ Sigmund Freud, Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious (1905), trans. James Strachey, London: Routledge, 1960, p. 193. For further reading on mimesis, see Erich Auerbach, Mimesis, trans. Willard Trask, Princeton: Princeton University
For Benjamin the concept of *mimesis* allows for an identification with the external world. It facilitates the possibility of forging a link between self and other. The principle behind *mimesis* is the urge to seek similarities in the world as a means of relating to it. ‘Every day,’ writes Benjamin, ‘the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction.’ To understand the meaning of *mimesis* in Benjamin we must recognise its origin in the process of modelling, of ‘making a copy of’. In essence it refers to an interpretative process that relates either to modelling oneself on an object, or to making a model of that object. Likewise *mimesis* may come into operation as a third party engages with that model, and the model becomes the vehicle for identifying with the original object. In each case the aim is to assimilate to the original object. *Mimesis* is therefore a form of imitation that may be evoked both by the artist who makes a work of art, and also by the person who views it.

*Mimesis* for Benjamin is a linguistic concept. It offers a way of finding meaning in the world, through the discovery of similarities. These similarities become absorbed and then rearticulated in language. As such language becomes a repository of meaning, and writing becomes an activity which extends beyond itself, so that in the process of writing writers engage in unconscious processes of which they may not be aware. Indeed writing often reveals more than the writer is conscious of revealing. Likewise the reader must decode the words resorting to the realm of the imagination which exceeds the purely rational. Thus the activity of reading also embodies the principles of *mimesis*, serving as the vehicle for some revelatory moment. For Benjamin the meaning becomes apparent in a constellatory flash, a dialectics of seeing, in which subject and object become one for a brief moment. *Mimesis* can also be observed, according to Benjamin, in dance movements. Here he opens up the possibility, which Adorno goes on to explore, that the principle of *mimesis* can extend to all forms of aesthetic expression. So it is that photography and the visual arts might be included within the range of its scope.

The point here is that to reproduce something may step beyond mere imitation. Benjamin reverses the hierarchy between object and its representation. He challenges the earlier Platonic notion of *mimesis* as an essentially compromised form of imitation that necessarily loses something of the original. For Benjamin *mimesis* alludes to a constructive reinterpretation of an original, which becomes a creative


act in itself. Furthermore, it potentially becomes a way of empathising with the world, and it is through empathy that we can — if not fully understand the other — at least assimilate to the other. In mimesis imagination is at work, and serves to reconcile the subject with the object. This imagination operates at the level of fantasy, which mediates between the unconscious and the conscious, dream and reality. Here fantasy is used as a positive term. Fantasy creates its own fictions not as a way of escaping reality, but as a way of accessing reality, a reality that is ontologically charged, and not constrained by an instrumentalised view of the world.

**Children and Mimesis**

The urge to seek similarities leads one to read similarities into the other, and — ultimately — to read oneself into the other. Thus, for example, in ‘The Berlin Chronicle’ Benjamin tells the story of a child trying to hunt a butterfly. The butterfly begins to take on human characteristics, while the child takes on characteristics of the butterfly:

The old rules of hunting took over between us: the more my being, down to its very fibres, adapted to my prey (the more I got butterflies in my stomach), the more the butterfly took on in all it did (and didn’t do) the color of the human resolution, until finally it was as if capturing it was the price, was the only way I would regain my humanity.\(^\text{12}\)

It is precisely through children’s play, as Walter Benjamin has observed, that one can best see the principle of mimesis at work. For Benjamin ‘play’ is for many the ‘school’ of mimesis: ‘Children’s play is everywhere permeated by mimetic modes of behaviour, and its realm is by no means limited to what one person can imitate in another.’\(^\text{13}\) The child therefore has a form of privileged access to mimetic processes. Much depends on the child’s creative imagination, and it is this that allows the child to invest discarded objects with a special significance. As Benjamin observes:

[In the child’s bureau] drawers must become arsenal and zoo, crime museum and crypt. “To tidy up” would be to demolish an edifice full of prickly chestnuts


that are spiky clubs, tin foil that is hoarded silver, bricks that are coffins, cacti that are totem poles, and copper pennies that are shields.\textsuperscript{14}

It is as though the creative imagination of the child — the capacity for indulging in make-believe — gives the child a greater ability to assimilate. And if \textit{mimesis} is the key to understanding the principle of representation in art, children’s play might offer us some insight into that question. This is precisely the viewpoint taken by Kendall Walton: ‘In order to understand paintings, plays, films and novels, we must look first at dolls, hobbyhorses, toy trucks and teddy bears. The activities in which representational works of art are embedded and which give them their point are best seen as continuous with children's games of make-believe.’\textsuperscript{15}

\textit{Mimesis} involves the capacity to mimic and identify with not only the animate world, but also the inanimate. Benjamin notes that children may equally play at being inanimate objects. ‘The child plays at being not only a shopkeeper or teacher but also a windmill and a train’, he notes, as though the windmill or train has some animate life force that the child can appropriate.\textsuperscript{16} The play between the animate and the inanimate, between life and death, is crucial to understanding the force of \textit{mimesis}. The origins of this adaptation to the inanimate may be found in instinctual mechanisms of self-defense. Animals, when threatened with life-endangering situations, will often freeze, so as to blend in with their environment, and escape the gaze of the predator. These instincts may also be traced in human responses. But this ‘surrendering’ of life in the moment of becoming one with the inanimate world serves ultimately to reinforce life. These gestures of surrender are in fact predicated on survival.

It is this ability to assimilate with the inanimate world which makes Benjamin’s observations so relevant to the question of architecture. It suggests a capacity to read oneself into the environment, and to see oneself reflected in that environment.\textsuperscript{17} If, moreover, we are to understand \textit{mimesis} as offering the possibility of assimilation not only by modelling oneself on an object, but also by engaging with the model of that object, we can see how photographic representation may provide that mechanism of identification. Photography becomes the model, and architecture

\textsuperscript{14}Benjamin, \textit{One Way Street}, p. 74, quoted in Buck-Morss, p. 263
\textsuperscript{16}Benjamin, \textit{Reflections}, p. 333.
\textsuperscript{17}Identification can therefore be seen as a narcissistic form of identification. Narcissistic identification with others has been explored by many theorists, including Laura Mulvey in the context of film theory, but the notion of identification with an inanimate object remains relatively unexplored.
the object of assimilation. Through the architectural photograph we may read ourselves into the architecture, just as the young Benjamin found himself within the scenes depicted in his picture postcards, as though transported there by some magic carpet.

**Mimesis and Sympathetic Magic**

But what exactly can one understand by the expression ‘as though transported there by some magic carpet’? Can one make a direct comparison between *mimesis* and magic? We might reflect here on the world of voodoo dolls, effigies, models and other types of representation which attempt to establish some link between an originary object and its miniaturised representation through a form of sympathetic magic.18

There are clear parallels between *mimesis* and magic. Both appear to operate within the same conceptual orbit, and both establish an ideational relationship between subject and object. In the context of architectural photography, the photograph appears to stand in a not dissimilar relation to the architecture that it depicts as the figurine does to the originary object in sympathetic magic. Just as the viewer of a photograph may *imagine* him or herself within that scene, so too the primitive imagines a relationship between the voodoo doll or image and the intended victim. One might point also to a more direct connection between magical practices and the domain of art and architecture. Freud acknowledges the affinities between the world of art and sympathetic magic. Citing Reinach who observes that the ‘primitive artists who left behind the carvings and paintings in the French cave did not seek to ‘please’ but to ‘evolve’ and conjure up’, Freud traces parallels between the two:

18These practices have fascinated anthropologists for some time. *The Golden Bough* by James George Frazer, for example, is full of such examples. ‘When an Obejway Indian desires to work evil on any one,’ writes Frazer, ‘he makes a little wooden image of his enemy and runs a needle into its head or heart, or he shoots an arrow into it, believing that wherever the needle pierces or the arrow strikes the image, his foe will the same instant be seized with a sharp pain in the corresponding part of his body; but if he intends to kill the person outright, he burns or buries the puppet, uttering certain magic words as he does so.’ [James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, London: Penguin, 1996, p. 15.] Significantly, in terms of any discussion of photography, the representation of the victim need not be a three dimensional model, but may equally be a two dimensional drawing: ‘Thus the North American Indians, we are told, believe that by drawing the figure of a person in sand, ashes, or clay, or by considering any object of his body, and then pricking it with a sharp stick or doing it any other injury, they inflict a corresponding injury on the person represented.’ [Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, p. 15.] Of course these gestures need not be malignant. Magic can also be used for more benign purposes such as medicine and hunting.
In only a single field of civilisation has the omnipotence of thoughts been retained, and that is in the field of art. Only in art does it still happen that a man who is consumed by desires performs something resembling the accomplishments of those desires and that what he does in play produces emotional effects — thanks to artistic illusion — just as though it were something real. People speak with justice of the ‘magic of art’ and compare artists to magicians. But the comparison is perhaps more significant than it claims to be. There can be no doubt that art did not begin as art for art’s sake. It worked originally in the service of impulses which are for the most part extinct today. And among them we may suspect the presence of many magical processes.\textsuperscript{19}

It would be wrong, however, to equate art — as a form of \textit{mimesis} — with magic. Certainly, even if Freud is happy to bracket them together, Benjamin always resists this temptation. There is a clear genealogy to art. Benjamin acknowledges that at one stage pictures were indeed connected with magic. ‘The elk,’ he notes, ‘portrayed by the man of the Stone Age on the walls of his cave was an instrument of magic.’\textsuperscript{20} But equally he adds that there has been a shift, as the work of art later became recognised in its own right, and a further shift, within the age of mechanical reproduction, when the accent on ‘cult value’ has been replaced by one of ‘exhibition value’, such that its status as a work of art is perhaps incidental:

With the different methods of technical reproduction of a work of art, its fitness for exhibition increased to such an extent that the quantitative shift between its two poles turned into a qualitative transformation of its nature. This is comparable to the situation of the work of art in prehistoric times when, by the absolute emphasis on its cult value, it was, first and foremost, an instrument of magic. Only later did it come to be recognized as a work of art. In the same way today, by the absolute emphasis on its exhibition value the work of art becomes a creation with entirely new functions, amon which the one we are conscious of, the artistic function, later may be recognised as incidental.\textsuperscript{21}

We can therefore detect in Benjamin’s thought a sympathy for \textit{mimesis} that extends to new forms of representation such as photography, but which distances itself increasingly from magic. As Susan Buck-Morss explains:

\textsuperscript{20}Benjamin, \textit{Illuminations}, p. 218.
\textsuperscript{21}Benjamin, \textit{Illuminations}, p. 219.
[Benjamin] holds open the possibility of a future development of mimetic expression, the potentialities for which are far from exhausted. Nor are they limited to verbal language — as the new technologies of camera and film clearly demonstrate. These technologies provide human beings with unprecedented perceptual acuity, out of which, Benjamin believed, a less magical, more scientific form of the mimetic faculty was developing in his own era.  

Indeed Adorno, who subsequently develops Benjamin’s thesis on mimesis explicitly distances art from magic. While Adorno acknowledges a certain affinity between the two, in that the artist, like the magician exerts a form of ‘organised control’ that has parallels in the conjurer plotting a trick, art does not follow the same project as magic. Although both are grounded in the human imagination, art does not lay claim to some truth in the same way as magic. While art operates in the domain of the ‘as if’, magic claims to operate within the domain of the actual. ‘Art,’ notes Adorno, ‘is magic delivered from the lie of being truth.’

Nonetheless, through the process of mimesis — an imaginary identification with a representation of an object — the original object can be invoked. And the process applies equally to photography. Photographs can be seen in the same light as mimetic representations of actual buildings, which might, as it were, ‘conjure up’ those buildings for the beholder. Photographs can therefore be seen to charged with the potential to open up a ‘world’. Although the mimetic impulse should not be equated with sympathetic magic, there are clear affinities between the two. The photograph therefore plays out its role as an object of wish-fulfillment. It is as though we might entertain the wish of entering another world through the medium of the photograph itself, as though stepping through some window.

Conclusion

What then is the consequence of this? Above all it highlights an important aspect of what it is to be human. According to the film Bladerunner one of the features which distinguish replicants from humans is their need for photographs. Without a natural memory imprinted on to their minds as though on to some photographic plate, as

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Benjamin describes it, replicants need to construct an artificial memory for themselves through photographs of someone else’s childhood.

Yet it could be argued that it is precisely the capacity to gaze at a photograph and to imagine oneself in the picture that marks out the very essence of what it is to be human. The capacity to recognise similarities is one of humankind’s distinguishing features. As Benjamin comments: ‘Nature creates similarities. One need only think of mimicry. The highest capacity for producing similarities, however, is man’s.’ Moreover, Theodor Adorno once claimed on the subject of mimesis, ‘The human is indissolubly linked with imitation: a human being becomes human at all by imitating other human beings.’ If we extend Adorno’s comments from a mimesis of other individuals to a mimesis of architectural environments through representations of that environment, we might argue that what defines human beings as being human is their capacity to identify with those representations and through them to conjure up whole environments which they depict. And so it would appear that while human beings have adapted to the camera, and have assimilated themselves to its technological mechanisms, such that they now read the world in terms of the snapshot, it is also through the camera — and the images that it produces — that they can understand precisely what it is to be human.

But what is crucial is the manner in which one gazes at these representations — photographic or otherwise. The action of mimesis is dependent upon a state of mind. One has to be receptive, and alert to the possibilities of the creative imagination. And it is children above all who would appear to be the most receptive to images, and the most capable of reading themselves into them, so as to imagine other possible worlds. One has to be open to the realm of fantasy, and the fantasy of the creative genius, as Freud himself observes, is born of the play and games of children.

Perhaps, then, there is something to be said for viewing photographs with a certain childish imagination, while not overlooking, of course, the negative side of childish behaviour — the threat of regression into some fascistic tantrum. To gaze with a childish imagination in front of a photograph — or indeed any pictorial image — is to be, as it were, absorbed by it. It is to dream oneself into another place, like Benjamin

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24 Benjamin, Reflections, p. 332.
being transported into his postcards, or like the Chinese painter disappearing into his painting, or indeed like Alice stepping through the looking glass.

Neil Leach