

# Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project

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The *Arcades Project* was an encyclopaedic project on which Walter Benjamin worked for thirteen years from 1927 until his death in 1940. The *Arcades Project* takes its name from a nineteenth century architectural form. It also borrows its structure from that same architectural form. Arcades were passages through blocks of buildings, lined with shops and other businesses. Montaged iron and glass constructions housed chaotic juxtapositions of shop-signs, window displays of commodities, mannequins and illuminations. As the nineteenth century gives way to the twentieth century, montage moves from being a prescript of construction in technology to art and literature: from the Eiffel Tower to Dada and surrealism to the city novels of Alfred Döblin, John Dos Passos, James Joyce and others. Montage construction treats its material elements as contrasting segments that must be bolted together for maximum impact. In architecture this might lead to a dramatic exoskeleton, a whole building built up from small parts whose connectedness is on display. In textual form this means fragments, aperçus, swift shifts of thought, the establishment of relationship between disparate objects, across a whole environment. For the *Arcades Project* Walter Benjamin organised the thousands of index cards on which he transcribed quotations and notations into files, called *Konvolute*. He developed a system of cross-referencing. The files comprised a vast array of interlinked scraps. When Benjamin fled Paris he gave over his collected notes of the *Arcades Project* to Georges Bataille, librarian at the National Library in Paris. He hid them well. He might have hoped to return one day to complete his researches. But completion was itself an issue. Gretel Adorno once joked that Benjamin inhabited the 'cavelike depths' of the *Arcades Project* and did not want to complete it 'because you feared having to leave what you built'. Indeed the endeavour remained uncompleted, interrupted by Benjamin's death, and so his map of the nineteenth century was only partially drafted. And so the definite significance of each passage is impossible to guess. The only certain point is that the elements were selected from the books and archives of the *Bibliothèque Nationale*, but in final form they would have been organised in a way that remains only inferable. Perhaps they might always have remained as a montage of found materials interspersed with occasional comment. Benjamin states in his file on methodology:

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.

Such a method appears analogous to dream interpretation. What does the dream offer but images, vivid, fragmentary, intense but not understood, until later, until worked over, worked back into narrative and patterns of causation, then made useful. And Paris, home to the arcades, was an appropriate place, for it was a city most chiasmal, the capital of dreams and the dream of capital. Paris was the 'most dreamed of' object of the surrealists'. It was a locus where capital did its work most intensely, in comparison to which later the 'American dream' of wonder and abundance would seem a mere shadow. The arcades house the dreams of the nineteenth century masses and their masters. The arcade houses a collective body, who wears it like an exoskeleton:

The dreaming collective sinks down in its inner life into the arcades, just as the sleeper receives messages from his inner bodily processes, noises, blood pressure etc translated and elucidated in dream pictures.

The arcades, Benjamin tells us, are fluid places, and there things strike us 'like realities in a dream', always in flux, always remoulded in meaning, montage-like, by what comes after, always delaying their full meaning. A dream logic then is the best we might expect from such a bundle of notes and fragments and images. This is appropriate enough, for the dream features everywhere in the project, as in Benjamin's work as a whole. The dream, for Benjamin, is an index of freedom - our social dreams indicate our social utopias. Children's whole existence is seen to be dreamlike, and so utopian. And yet, again, it is only in their interpretation that we can become conscious and fully understand them, and so, it is only upon awakening, shedding the dream's grasp in favour of knowledge, drawn from the dream that freedom can be restored. Benjamin writes in his 1935 Exposé of the *Arcades Project*:

The arcades and interiors are residues of a dream world. The utilization of dream elements in waking is a textbook example of dialectical thought. Hence dialectical thought is the organ of historical awakening.

Historical awakening is an aim of the project as a whole. Benjamin writes: 'The new, dialectical method of doing history teaches us to pass in spirit - with the rapidity and intensity of dreams - through what has been, in order to experience the present as a waking world, a world to which every dream at last refers.' And then, elsewhere, 'It is at this moment that the historian takes up ... the task of dream interpretation.' The study of the nineteenth century would bring the historian and the reader to the threshold of the present, to the point of waking. Benjamin would be the wide-awake, and wide-eyed dream interpreter of history.

The nineteenth century is, as the Surrealists say, the noises which intervene in our dreams and which we interpret when awake.

But what of the book that has now come to be in the absence of the project having been able to fulfill its aim. There are few signposts in its arcades of quotations. And yet, in fragment form or otherwise, Benjamin's project hoped comprehensively to chart the arcades and the world in which they existed - a full history, and of course, as he noted in 'Traumkitsch', in 1925, 'dreaming has a share in history'. The panoramic purview came about by collecting statements, analyses and responses from many perspectives. The various exposés and plans for the project perhaps provide a sort of guide for the purposes of orientation in the *Arcades Project*. The 1935 Exposé emphasises the architectural interest of the project. Its sections are named after a charged nineteenth century space and a figure who is closely associated with that space: Fourier or the Arcades; Daguerre or the Panoramas; Grandville or the World Exhibitions; Louis-Philippe or the Interieur; Baudelaire or the Streets of Paris; Haussmann or the Barricades. These section headings are like pharoses on a city plan, and they help to give shape to the city, the epoch and the project itself. So too do the chunks of commentary, of which the majority appear in the later stages of the Baudelaire file and the file N on the theory of progress and methodology. These are at least pointers through the aggregate of material. Just as the map of the past remained fragmentary, so too that past itself and its features - not least the arcades - fell into ruin. The project, then, had to take up into itself the fact of ruination. It charts a ruined or half-built or half-collapsed arcade. Perhaps a ruin of a building is not so far away from a solid structure. After all, Benjamin writes that it is possible to discern more about a great building from its plans or ruins than from the completed construct itself. For Benjamin the value of the ruin was, in part, the fact that it had passed through a history. It had the marks of a process on it. The political value of that history - fact, dreams, all of it - lies in its reconstruction and interpretation, to remove thought from the realm of mythology, remaining sensitive to its relevance in the present.

First of all, from 1927, Benjamin collected quotations and made notes on streets, department stores, panoramas, world exhibitions, types of lighting, fashion, advertisements, prostitution, collectors, flaneurs, Baudelaire, gamblers, boredom. From 1934 he added another set of

themes, some of which were more directly political or economic. He did not abandon the former themes, and continued to collect notes on them. The later themes included the boulevard-building 'Haussmannization' of Paris, barricade battles, railways, conspiracies, social movements, the stock exchange, economic history, caricaturist Daumier, the Paris Commune, anthropological materialism, sects-history, the école polytechnic, Marx, Fourier, Saint-Simon, idleness, the Seine and antique Paris, lithography and reproductive techniques. Dissent, alternative histories, 'creative destruction' and utopian forecasts are as much in evidence as details of technological construction in iron, glass and lighting design or the organisation of wage labour, prostitution and literary life. The theme of the arcades had been there from the beginning. In 1927 Benjamin had planned to write a newspaper article on the arcades together with his flaneuring journalist friend Franz Hessel. This developed into another essay 'Pariser Passagen' in 1929. And out of that sprung the project, whose first file of quotations is 'Arcades, Magasins de Nouveautés, Sales Clerks'. The arcade was the *Ur-form*, the originary form, of modernity, for it incubated modes of behaviour – distraction, seduction by the commodity spectacle, shopping as leisure activity, self-display - that would come to figure more prominently as the century passed into the next. The Paris arcades sheltered the first modern consumerism. These covered walkways with glass roofs had evolved out of the Galeries of the Palais Royal. With their jumble of diverse commodities from across the Empire, they turned shopping into an aesthetic event. They were perfect sites in which to linger and to learn how to window-shop and how to desire fantastic commodities. They were built, for the most part, in the decade and a half after 1822. A guide from 1852 describes each glass-roofed and marble-lined passageway as 'a city, a world in miniature'. Such description attracted Benjamin, who had long harboured a fascination for the small, for worlds in miniature as in snow shakers or on stamps, or miniaturised bits of this world in the toys that he collected. And children interested him too, for they produce their own small world of things within the greater one. Parisian arcades are a miniature dramatization, importantly of the wider world, that is to say of the antinomies of capitalism.

Benjamin's study of the arcades investigates the composition of an epoch; the age of Industrial Capitalism, as seen and theorized by producers and consumers, politicians and intellectuals, the socially powerful, the disenfranchised and the social resisters. As such it is a panoramic examination. For Benjamin, the arcades launch an exemplary environment in which the tenets of a modern perception and experience are elaborated: a mode of perceiving and a quality of experience that is both forged by and appropriate to the modern age. It is disorienting, dreamy, chock-a-block with stimuli. His *Arcades Project* records facets of a commodity society with its continual flow of goods, impressions, forms. Modern experience, he characterizes through his swift shifts of focus, as a string of *Momentaufnahmen* – records of the moment, snapshots. And what is snapped, snapped up, snapped onto, is product, commodities. These commodities are short-lived; their life spans reveal the tempo of capitalism. Their existences are correlated to fashion's caprices. Benjamin reviews the facets of the commodity on display, where it becomes a dream-infested body of meaning. Everything desirable can be a commodity, a public display of fetishism. In the process of commodification, wish-images, the fragments of utopian potential, promised in the first flirtatious kisses of modern industrialism, congeal into fetish. Newness becomes a fetish. Transitoriness must ever outbid itself, in order to maximize profit. This means according to Benjamin's schema of the dynamic of the modern, the novel rapidly becomes outmoded, it quickly becomes out-of-date fashion. Remaindering is the other side of this – history as bargain bin. And in this permanent move to built-in obsolescence, the commodities of the modern disclose secret connections to the mythological, that which is ancient and out of reach. This is the dialectic established at the core of the modern. It is a relay between the newest and the oldest. The novel is rapidly outmoded and always then, importantly for Benjamin, on the brink of becoming antiquated. That is to say, the new must contain itself antithesis – as possibility – dialectically inside itself. Any map of the modern, such as is the *Arcades Project*, whose object – the arcades, department stores, social movements against capitalism, world exhibitions and so on, all already aged by the 1920s – could at best trace

the broken contours of now decrepit labyrinths. And so, a disrupted sense of time is conveyed in the fragments of the Arcades Project. Each moment, each short quote or comment appears only to disappear again back into the rubble of an unfinished book, an incomplete thought, an uncompleted, interrupted action. But this time of delay, of afterwards, an indication again of the method of interpretation – where meaning might come of the fragments of a dream, related upon awakening, in all its intensity.

The first arcades were built in Paris for Napoleon's return from the Egyptian campaign. War is often, for Benjamin, the other face of industrial expansion. The dialectic asserts itself, here in the couplet production/destruction. One of the ideas Benjamin pulls out from the archives of the Bibliotheque Nationale points to the fluidity of connections between the later palaces of industrial innovation and display and the ordering and drilling of the battleground. And the arcades were swallowed up in the Haussmannization of Paris, when broad boulevards were cut through in a militarization of city space designed to deter barricade-building and to enable the swift passage of state vehicles. As Benjamin writes, arcing between past and present: 'Haussmann's work is accomplished today, as the Spanish war makes clear by quite other means'. Haussmann was appointed by Louis Napoléon as the prefect of the Seine between 1853 and the Emperor's fall in 1870. His replanning moved the working classes and the poor out of the city centre to the East and remodelled the West for the bourgeoisie. The arcades, places of chance encounter, niches and unpredictability, fell victim to this city tidy-up, described by Marx, in *The Civil War in France*, as 'razing historic Paris to make place for the Paris of the sightseer!'. Paris turned into a place of touristic contemplation, away from the action of class struggle. By the time of writing, Benjamin's object of study has already become unfashionable, or at least under threat, which makes his project a piece of history writing in the sense which he loves best: writing an obituary to the recent past, which, echoing still in dimming childhood memories, is his pre-history, an understanding of which casts direct light upon the now.

These arcades were products of the first international style of architecture. They were trademarks of the modern metropolis, its wealth (only for some) and its imperial domination. They were crammed with colonial plunder. The empire had provided the impulse for an expansion in commodity production, in terms of new sources of raw materials, which could be worked over and sold off in the newly established markets and zones of influence. But the effects of Empire also reflect back on the Imperialist nations, not least by providing the raw materials of a burgeoning commodity market. Imperialism grasped the world as totality, a total market and exploitable productive source. Imperialism had begun the process of unifying the world – in trade. It completed the reversal of the task in human terms: more divisions, more competition, more nationalistic hatreds. Boundaries dissolve, in a way, in trade: but only for the traders. In describing how Victor Hugo publishes a manifesto to all the people of Europe to mark the world exhibition of 1867, Benjamin notes how the motives displayed spin off into a fantasy of actual unification of peoples, attributing a common language and will. For the international workers' associations, internationalism remains a dream, from which the First World War rudely disturbs them. Equality proves to be a chimera. The world exhibitions had shown that too, anyway, along the dividing lines of class and nation. They promised to be places where everyone could rub shoulders democratically and where status was relocated in objects themselves and not persons. Benjamin quotes Rjazanov to point out how isolated from actuality this fantasy was:

In 1855 the second world exhibition took place, this time in Paris. Workers' delegations from the capital as well as from the provinces were now totally barred. It was feared that they gave workers an opportunity for organizing.

The new modes of consumerism were to colonialise consciousness. The fact of consumerism, of the priority of the commodity, dominated any relation to the world, even the unconscious world. For Benjamin this was a consciousness invaded by the petrifying and fantastic

workings of commodity fetishism and reification. The arcades are stocked high with the cultural by-products, specious clusters of projected fantasies and congealed monuments to the days of their production and all that has recently been 'forgotten' called the *Moderne*, modernity. They collaborate briefly with fashion – die Mode, the modish. But Benjamin is ever-keen to stress the dialectical switch involved. At the same time as consciousness is colonised by the commodity, consciousness responds to the utopian side of commodity production, holding open a space for genuine response to the presentations of commodified desires. The impulse for accepting the commodity is the actual wish to see dreams fulfilled. The arcade substitutes, in Benjamin's analysis, for the world or the dream of the world. Marx's work hoped, from the outset, to 'reform consciousness' as he wrote to Alfred Ruge in 1843, and such reformation 'consists *entirely* in making the world aware of its own consciousness, in arousing it from its dream of itself, in *explaining* its own actions to it'. Arcades are a form of consciousness, and simply an architecture. They are house rows or corridors that have no exterior, no external existence. This Benjamin aligns with the structure of the dream: 'Arcades are houses or passages having no outside – like the dream'. They share the characteristic of self-containment with the optical amusements - panoramas, myrioramas - that they house.

The innermost glowing cells of the city of light, the old dioramas, nested in the arcades, one of which today still bears the name Passage des Panoramas. It was, in the first moment, as though you had entered an aquarium. Along the wall of the great darkened hall, broken at intervals by narrow joints, it stretched like a ribbon of illuminated water behind glass. The play of colors among deep-sea fauna cannot be more fiery.

The arcades and the panoramas are like monadic, perfect worlds in miniature, glass bauble snow- shakers. This self-containment is their 'truth'.

The true has no windows. Nowhere does the true look out to the universe. And the interest of the panorama is in seeing the true city - 'The city in the bottle', - the city indoors. What is found within the windowless house is the true. One such windowless house is the theater; hence the eternal pleasure it affords. Hence also the pleasure taken in those windowless rotundas, the panoramas. ... Those passing through arcades are, in a certain sense, inhabitants of a panorama. The arcade is a windowless house as well. The windows of this house open out on them. They can be seen out these windows but cannot themselves look in

Phantasmagoria and panoramas and the arcades that nestled there represented, in Benjamin's schema, a certain way of seeing, a universalism. Living in a panorama, that is how total the event in consumer-based society has become. Mass consumers are on display. Capitalism is a drama in which they participate. Consumers occupy the space of the display itself, and thus become an integral part of it. The significance of windowlessness goes further than this. As windowless truth the arcades and the panoramas adopt the form of the monad, a figure that recurs in Benjamin's writings and is adapted from the philosopher Leibniz. A monad is an object blasted free of time for the purposes of analysis – it is concentrated time, pre-history, the present, and post-history are crushed together there. It is a good site for investigation into modernity. It is an important moment of the past that can explain the present and the possibilities of the future. An image of a greater totality - the experience of an historical era - can be found there. It is a threshold. The arcades give way to another form, the department store. It is here than a modern mass is forged, and this is a mass that will eventually enter the stage of history not as a revolutionary subject, but as the mass of mass politics, the politics of totalitarianism. .

For the first time in history, with the establishment of department stores, consumers begin to consider themselves a mass. (Earlier it was only scarcity that taught them that) Hence, the circus-like and theatrical element of commerce is quite extraordinarily heightened.

Consumers emerge blinking from the arcades and enter a new buying zone – the department store, where the rules are different, where the victory of scale is obvious. The mass of mass society, identified as the swelling ranks of customers, audience, producers, visible from the late nineteenth century, is the potential site, argues Benjamin, for politicization, because the idea of the mass and consumerism necessarily plays with the supplying of collective demands and the promise of fulfillment of utopias. Benjamin locates this mass in the department store, at the sites of consumption. It gains a certain self-consciousness, as a mass *an sich*, a mass of consumers, made equal [to each other, to the commodity] in the fact of exchange.

Specifics of the department store: the customers perceive themselves as a mass; they are confronted with an assortment of commodities; they take in all the floors at a glance; they pay fixed prices; they can make exchanges.

It is an ambiguous consciousness that Benjamin is eager to map out in the *Arcades Project*, in order to establish the political actuality and potential of this mass. Consciousness might turn out to be catastrophic. Or it might become a consciousness of the catastrophe, combined with the will to interrupt the endless flow of the novel as the ever-same. This is the dialectic that grounds modernity, a myth of progress unmasked as the eternal return of the ever-same. It has its banal commodity face.

Dialectic of commodity production: the novelty of the product attains (as a stimulation to demand) a hitherto unknown significance; the ever-again the same appears for the first time manifestly in mass production.

It has its philosophic spin-off. One file of the *Arcades Project* is called 'Boredom and Eternal Return'. The old is inherent in the new, it is a return. This represents the Janus face of progress, pulling in two directions at once. It is a dialectic of progress, whose actual stakes are social regress, under the aegis of a certain technological progress, as opposed to human progress. Progress, in Benjamin's view of modernity, connects to the catastrophe. Hell has already happened. Precisely *this* capitalist technological idea of progress ushers in catastrophe. The vision of eternal return and catastrophe was practiced in the panoramas, given its big debut in First World War, which then becomes a simple dress rehearsal compared to what we have come to know as the holocaustic calamity of World War Two. The repetition compulsion is set in motion by the structures of commodity production, the eternal return of the ever-same. This is catastrophic experience. War has started, for it never really finishes. The ruins are blasting into focus. The nineteenth century is falling down. Its ruins were already contained in its plans. In his 1935 Exposé Benjamin writes that it was Balzac who first spoke of the ruins of the bourgeoisie, but it was Surrealism that first allowed its gaze to wander uninhibitedly across the field of rubble that the capitalist development of the productive forces had left in its wake. Balzac could see the ruination contained in that order - immanent to it - but it takes time and a liberated consciousness (or rather the fall into unconsciousness and then awakening) to cash this out fully. Now, in Benjamin's moment of writing, 1930s, there was no doubt. The ruins of past promises were visible, and behind - or in front of - the broken promises lay even more devastation. Ruin and devastation recur, as motif, as also historical fact. Ruin is a natural phenomenon and a social one. The *Arcades Project* moves fluidly between two types of ruin. One of the striking aspects of nineteenth-century capitalism, as represented in Benjamin's harvest of quotations, is its simultaneous naturalisation and mythologisation of social and historical forces. This took on various forms: Grandville's lithographs of over-lively commodities; the fetishistic language of stocks and shares and misconceptions of the value-form; the re-iterated ideological succumbing to fate; the countless images of Paris poised on the eve of destruction. References to Pompei's volcano are several in the *Arcades Project*, and in a children's radio lecture on the demise of Herculaneum and Pompei, Benjamin speaks of the ashes which 'nested in the creases of garments', the curves of ears, between fingers, shafts of hair and lips', and these 'solidified

before the bodies decomposed, so that we possess today a series of faithful imprints of individuals'. The volcano is a particular mode of destruction. It petrifies. It acts like a snapshot of an otherwise ungraspable history. Volcanic ruin models memory become history for Benjamin. In the autobiographical snapshots of 'A Berlin Chronicle', which Adorno identified as the subjective counterpart of the Arcades Project, Benjamin finds in his memory of school

... rigidly fixed words, expressions, verses that., like a malleable mass that has cooled and hardened preserve in me the imprint of the collision between a larger collective and myself. Just as a certain kind of significant dream survives awakening in the form of words when all the rest of the dream content has vanished, here isolated words have remained in place as marks of catastrophic encounters.

Into this petrified landscape, the proletariat, in conjunction with technologies, should have erupted a second time, in an already volcanic landscape, to cash in the promises of their masters. But they failed to become the final agents of destruction. The naturalising, mythical effects of capitalism won out, even when the proletariat's own representatives enthusiastically embraced the natural and automatic role that it and the productive forces should play in the script of emancipation.

Hausmann had obliterated history when he cut the boulevards through old Paris. Into the evacuated space of historical consciousness descended the mists of fetishism and phantasmagoria. Or the phantom solidified like lava, as Benjamin indicates when he writes: 'With the Hausmannization of Paris, the phantasmagoria was rendered in stone'. Fetishism and the phantasmagoria were cultivated in the world exhibitions, out of which crawled the modern entertainment industry and the consumer's dreamy disposition with its attitude of 'pure reaction'. If Benjamin's synopses allow some coherent ordering of the material, then it seems that the fragments direct Benjamin to unearth things, impulses, objects, matter that has decayed. First, in the earliest attempt, in 1927, to present his interest, Benjamin follows the Surrealist procedure to the letter.

In the crowded arcades of the boulevards, as in the semi-deserted arcades of the Rue Saint-Denis, umbrellas and canes are displayed in serried ranks: a phalanx of colorful crooks. Many are the institutes of hygiene, where gladiators are wearing orthopedic belts and bandages wind round the white bellies of mannequins. In the windows of the hairdressers, one sees the last women with long hair; they sport richly undulating masses, petrified coiffures. How brittle appears the stonework of the walls beside them and above: crumbling papiermache 'souvenirs' and bibelots take on a hideous aspect; the odalisque lies in wait next to the inkwell; priestesses in knitted jackets raise aloft ashtrays like vessels of holy water.... Over stamps and letterboxes roll balls of string and of silk. Naked puppet bodies with bald heads wait for hairpieces and attire. Combs swim about, frog-green and coral-red, as in an aquarium; trumpets turn to conches, ocarinas to umbrella handles; and lying in the fixative pans from a photographer's darkroom is birdseed.

This is the same uncanny jumble of outmodedness that attracted the Surrealists. But Benjamin develops a more critical aspect. Untimeliness is a political-economic category. Capitalism itself becomes outmoded, yet still present in the nineteenth century. This is evidenced in the setbacks and repeated uptakes of revolutionary struggle. Paris is *the* capital of the nineteenth century because the echoes of the French Revolution – a revolution on behalf of the universe – reverberate through it in revolutionary wave after wave. Paris in the nineteenth century was an *Ur*-place, a site to mine in order to find out about the mechanisms of bourgeois rule and the renewed attempts to oppose it. It is there that the contradictions of bourgeois class rule are most spectacular, as class alliances are formed and broken. Consolidated is the rule of capital alone. Benjamin's 1935 and 1939 synopses of the project ascend to the revolutionary climax of class struggle. The Communards burn down the Paris

that the 'artist-demolitionist' Baron Haussmann had built in his 'financial' and 'military' re-planning of the city. But this negation of his negation is not sustained, and the class fighters allowed themselves to be, once again, misled by the bourgeoisie.

The *Arcades Project* repeats these attempted historic gestures too, in recovering them, and also in its imagination that there re-presentation might, in itself, elicit historical activity:

We can speak of two directions in this work: one which goes from the past into the present and shows the arcades, and all the rest, as precursors, and one which goes from the present into the past so as to have the revolutionary potential of these 'precursors' explode in the present. And this direction comprehends as well the spellbound elegiac consideration of the recent past, in the form of its revolutionary explosion.

But the dream of nineteenth century abundance and/or revolutionary transformation has shifted to anticipation of the catastrophe. The optical bedazzlements of the nineteenth century - new gas lighting, new colour dyes, new modes of harnessing energy - turn into the colourful infernos of the First World War and then intensify in the holocaustic fire terror of the Second World War. I.G. Farben was there all the way. The ruins of the twentieth century were the part- ruins of the nineteenth century, exploded yet again by a *Technik* gone wild.

Technological advance is not progress but a continuous strip without beginning and end, whose fateful destructive/productive dynamic can ultimately only be ripped apart by the simultaneously sober and intoxicated proletariat, but it is in ruins too, now.

The *Arcades Project* was originally to be called a '*dialektische Feen*', a dialectical fairy scene. Benjamin's first conception was the telling of a politicized version of the Sleeping Beauty story as a fairy-tale of awakening (from this myth of permanent progress and human submission to destiny). In *Pariser Passagen*<sup><1></sup>, an early collection of notes for the *Arcades Project*, he refers to youth as fulfilling that role of the sleeping princess, possessing an experience akin to the experience of dreaming. The twentieth century would need to awaken from the objects of the nineteenth, from the promises of abundance, from the seductive objects in the park of attractions. The dream takes place in the new architectural sites of modernity.

Dream houses of the collective: arcades, winter gardens, panoramas, factories, wax museums, casinos, railroad stations.

The *Arcades Project* was to be some sort of Marxian retelling of a fairy-tale, in which the Sleeping Beauty is awoken from the nightmare-dream sleep of capitalism's commodity phantasmagoria. Walter Benjamin wrote to Adorno in June 1935 to ask if he knew of any psychoanalytic study of awakening. Adorno, for his part, thought that Benjamin's project did not get to the point of awakening and in fact was continuous with bourgeois psychology, whereby bourgeois society privileges dream and the subjective interior as prime mediator of social reality. To maintain such a historically specific model of self is to fall under the 'spell of bourgeois psychology'.

For Benjamin, though, the spell can be broken through a '*Technik des Erwachens*', 'technique of awakening'. For Benjamin, biographically, the first stage of awakening had been historically specific. It had been the First World War blasting his consciousness into a sort of shell-shock. It is this experience which he reworks as a social experience in the 1920s and 1930s, aided by an approach that is historical-materialist (of sorts). Benjamin analyses a social shell shock. The critic turns therapist. There is a play-off then in Benjamin's work between the representation of the dream, given in fragments and quotes, speaking for itself with all its confusion, and the tentatively begun labour of analysis – social-psychoanalysis. Benjamin wished to portray the Paris of the Second Empire as a prototype, the origin of

capitalist bourgeois civilization. The politically current relevance of his historiography is found in that civilization's vanishing point in his *here and now*. Benjamin looks back at the dream of the past, engaging in a sort of mock-predictive historicizing. Historical materialism becomes a critical exercise in a time of crisis.

The materialist presentation of history leads the past to bring the present into a critical state.

The mixing of time points, of cause and effect, fused in a melange of multiple historical determinations, is a methodological feature of the *Arcades Project*. Historical progress is dispensed with, but, at the same time, all events are seen as interconnected, implicated in each other. Critical analysis will reveal the events' permanently current germaneness, just as the unconscious knows no time, but time is needed to present a diagnosis. The work on the *Arcades Project* takes place through a period of political intensity – and only appears to be a backward looking archaeology. The ruins of history spike the present. Benjamin sees his work as a contribution to the crisis of new historical thinking in the intellectual civil-war of the 1920s. The *Arcades Project* participates in this same sense of a connection between social crisis and intellectual crisis, a sense of necessary social revolution and critical-intellectual revolution as concomitant. Benjamin's point is the Marxist recognition of the necessity of historicizing that which appears natural. The central core of the project fragments expounds and details how modern reality, this *only an appearance* of modern reality, might be experienced, if it is not penetrated by analysis, as a dream world stoked by myth.

Capitalism was a natural phenomenon with which a new dream-filled sleep came over Europe, and, through it, a reactivation of mythic forces.

Just as the Surrealists argued, Benjamin stated that under conditions of capitalist productive expansion, industrialization had brought about a re-enchantment of the social world. A deep complexity of social arrangement was evolving. Modern experience took place in a mass society organized around great institutions of shopping, schooling, bureaucracy, welfare and total warfare. Yet underneath the surface appearance of accelerating rationalization of the system, there was the flip-side, a world of myth, a contradictory formation, modernity as mythology. These myths found form in entertainment, advertisements, commodity promises. Myth is wedded to consumerism and its self-publicity. In the modern metropolis, the 'threatening and alluring face' of myth gleamed. Characters from new capitalist myths beamed down from hoardings on street walls that advertised 'toothpaste for giants', as Benjamin noted in *One Way Street*. The advertisement is one method whereby the commodity infiltrates the dream-world of the consumer. It blurs over the commodity character of things. The Surrealists would envelop these dream signs from advertising and the appealing products of industrial fantasy into their poetry, in order to recreate a modern aesthetic of the new city. Benjamin feared that the Surrealists were too entranced by the mythology of the modern to ever break from it fully. They preferred to keep sleeping, for that is when their best ideas stole upon them. They were not unlike their ancestors of the previous century, the one that so ensnared them.

The nineteenth century; a spacetime 'Zeitraum' (a dreamtime 'Zeit-traum') in which the individual consciousness more and more secures itself in reflecting, while the collective consciousness sinks into ever deeper sleep. But just as the sleeper - in this respect like the madman - sets out on the macrocosmic journey through his own body, and the noises and feelings of his insides, such as blood pressure, intestinal churn, heartbeat, and muscle sensations (which for the waking and salubrious individual converge in a steady surge of health) generate, in the extravagantly heightened inner awareness of the sleeper, illusion or dream imagery which translates and accounts for them, so likewise for the dreaming collective, which, through the arcades, communes with its own insides. We must follow in its wake so as to expound the nineteenth century - in fashion and advertising, in buildings and politics - as the outcome of its dream visions.

In a dream-sleep the world and its business pass as in a phantasmagoria, a metaphor that Benjamin uses in order to instigate a series of cross-references between modern experience and contemporaneous optical devices, the gadgetry of entertainment and early film and photography. Examples abound of phantasmagoria fascination, such as this quoted by Humphrey Jennings in his 1938 quotation-patchwork study of the fantasies and fears of industrialisation, *Pandaemonium*.

A common form of vision is a phantasmagoria, or the appearance of a crowd of phantoms, sometimes hurrying past like men in a street. It is occasionally seen in broad daylight, much more often in the dark; it may be at the instant of putting out the candle, but it generally comes on when the person is in bed, preparing to sleep, but by no means yet asleep. I know no less than three men, eminent in the scientific world, who have seen these phantasmagoria in one form or another. It will seem curious, but it is a fact that I know of no less than five editors of very influential newspapers who experience these night visitations in a vivid form.,

The phantasmagoria, then, is the counterpart of awakening, it is the time of falling asleep, the images that flood the mind, as the rational self slips into dreaming. The phantasmagoria was a popular late nineteenth century theme – but Benjamin revamps - or overhauls - the technologies of the past century in order to approach that century, or rather *mediate* it. In *Konvolut N*, theoretical centre of the *Arcades Project* he borrows words from Rudolph Borchardt's writings on Dante:

Pedagogic side of this undertaking: 'To educate the image-making medium within us, raising it to a stereoscopic and dimensional seeing into the depths of historical shadows'

We make images, just as we make dreams, and just as Benjamin gathers up images and vivid moments of the 19th century. This is our condition, but we need to turn it to liberatory ends. We need to escape the phantasmatic presentations, a dim and befuddled consciousness of events, in favour of a dialectical seeing, that investigates, from an enlightened perspective, social relations. But that involves an education of that image-making technology within, teaching it how to read the ruins, the fragments, the traces and half-echoes. It needs to be sent into reverse, to become the tool of awakening, not a symptom of the fall into sleep.

The *Arcades Project* asks how a mythic dream consciousness, such as the longing for dream fulfillment in the commodity or the idea of love satisfied in prostitution or the desire for human union through imperialism, can be rattled, forced to wake up from the wishful thinking it indulges. Perhaps assertion simply of the actuality of commercial brutality would suffice. Perhaps boredom in the end would finally force a change, through being unsustainable. Marx had characterised Second Empire history in France, in Hegel's terms, as 'grey on grey': history without events; development whose sole driving force seems to be the calendar. But boredom also induces sleep. The yawn is the gesture of both. Strangely, the dreaming collective is realised between 1917 and 1927 in the post- encephalitic wave of dream- sleeping sickness which swept Europe, sending its victims into Sleeping Beauty and Blue Beard comas.

From 1934, while Benjamin is making notes for the *Arcades Project*, his own dreams, he claims, become ever more politicized. Conceiving of history as a territory, a series of spaces and spatial relationships, he writes to Scholem that his dreams and the historical traces he perceives in them 'represent an illustrated atlas of the secret history of National Socialism'. Echoing Joyce's 'history is a nightmare from which we are trying to awake', Benjamin wants to wake up from his dreams turned historical nightmare. The imperialist mentality is turned in on itself, into the self. Space – the spacetime, the time of dreams - has become a map of

Lebensraum, the living space that Hitler's army set out to conquer in the East. While the Nazis pushed one way, Benjamin's moved in the opposite direction. from country to country, stumbling finally to ground on stretch of no-mans-land between Spain and France. These are bad dreams. The collective has succumbed to the spectacle. The mass finds a home in the totalitarian states, where *Gleichshaltung*, conformity, co-ordination, is an effort to produce a stunningly homogenous social receptacle. Benjamin brings the phantasmagoric consciousness and its glossing over of the reality of class difference into connection with both commodity fetishism and totalitarianism, forming a span between his study of nineteenth century Paris and his meditations on nazi Germany.

The circumstance of the new is perhaps nowhere better illuminated than in the figure of the flaneur. His thirst for the new is quenched by the crowd, which appears self-impelled and endowed with a soul of its own. In fact, this collective is nothing but appearance. This 'crowd,' in which the flaneur takes delight, is just the empty mold with which, seventy years later, the Volksgemeinschaft 'people's community' was cast. The flaneur who so prides himself on his alertness, on his nonconformity, was in this respect also ahead of his contemporaries: he was the first to fall victim to an ignis fatuus that since that time has blinded many millions..

Dreams might be able to be read, which is to say interpreted as wish-symbols which, made conscious, could then be striven after in reality. However, dreams can also be too seductive, countering activity. Doesn't Freud say that the dream is a trick to keep us sleeping? And Benjamin knows their dangers:

Motif of dream time: atmosphere of aquariums. Water slackening resistance.

The technique of awakening was never completed. Benjamin only compiled the raw materials for an analysis, yet to be carried through to completion.

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**Chto delat/What is to be done?** was founded in early 2003 in Petersburg by a workgroup of artists, critics, philosophers, and writers from Petersburg, Moscow, and Nizhny Novgorod with the goal of merging political theory, art, and activism.

Since then, Chto delat has been publishing an English-Russian newspaper on issues central to engaged culture, with a special focus on the relationship between a repoliticization of Russian intellectual culture and its broader international context. These newspapers are usually produced in the context of collective initiatives such as art projects or conferences.

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