Walter Benjamin; Models of Experience and Visions of the City

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Resumé

Ce travail souhaite explorer l'epistémologie et la méthodologie de Walter Benjamin, surtout dans ses écrits sur la ville. On commence par un parcours de ses premières oeuvres, faisant ressortir son écartement des paradigmes de connaissances kantiennes, et son rapprochement aux modèles epistémologiques empruntés de la théologie et de la littérature. Cela mène à son propre modéle de l'expérience. Sont explorées à la fin les idées du vrai et de la critique chez Benjamin, et ses tentatives pour réconcilier celles-ci avec son matérialisme.

Astract

This is a study of the epistemology and the methodology of Walter Benjamin's last works, and is centred on an analysis of his writings on cities. It reads these last works as being reactions to a narrowness that Benjamin perceived in the epistemology of Kant, and as an attempt to find a model of experience other than that offered by modern science. It shows him as having attempted to develop a new model of experience drawing from literature and theology, and shows the way in which he attempted to make this compatible with his materialism.

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Chapter I

Introduction: Walter Benjamin and City Theory

One of the intuitions that sets the twentieth century off from former times is our deep belief in the value of everyday life and of the intimate world.[1] This tendency has come under attack from many fronts, particularly from those writers who see it as the ethos at the foundation of the modern eclipse of politics, and the fall of the public sphere.[2] But if we look at this tendency more closely, or shift our perspective slightly, it is hard not to see a positive side to this modern ethos, and to

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[1]This is seen in numerous areas. Feminist and ecological thinkers try to show the political importance of everyday decisions we make in our private lives. Philosophers such as Roland Barthes, (Mythologies) Jean Baudrillard, (Le Système des Objets) and Gaston Bachelard, (La poésie de l'espace) all point out the necessity of interpreting and understanding the objects that we are surrounded with in our everyday life. In history a growing literature devotes itself to the study of the private sphere (this is exemplified by Philippe Ariès' immense Histoire de la vie privée). And a strain of modernist literature, influential ever since mid-nineteenth century realism, has attempted to show the ways in which private life can be seen as the focus of modern existence.

[2]To name just a few books in a vast literature: Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition (Chicago, 1957), Richard Sennett, The Fall of Public Man (New York; Knopf, 1977) and Christopher Lasch, The Culture of Narcissism (New York; Norton, 1978).

notice that it has led us to pay a new kind of attention to the life that we share in common. The modern focus on the private sphere has led us to look with new care at the environments that surround us and has given us new ways of seeing the cities in which we live.

The History of City Theory

This is something that shows up very clearly if we examine modern writing about the city and compare it with that which went before. The most important modern urban theorists -- writers like Jane Jacobs, Christopher Alexander and Constantinos Doxiades[3]-- look upon the urban environment _as_ an environment, not just as a symbol of the social life of a body of citizens. These writers examine buildings and neighbourhoods, spaces and streets, and they show how the city reaches across these forms to exert an ethical force on its inhabitants. They examine the ways in which the city can alter behavior and perceptions, help to influence our views about the possibilities of community, and even shape our ideas about society and the good. In the writings of Jacobs and Alexander the physical structure of the urban environment is shown to play a fundamental ethical and political role.

This was not always understood. The concern with the city as

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[3]C. Alexander, _A New Theory of Urban Design_, (New York; Oxford University Press, 1987), and _A Pattern Language_, (New York; Oxford University Press, 1977) Jane Jacobs _The Death and Life of Great American Cities_, (New York; Vintage Books, 1961), C. Doxiades, _The Great Urban Crimes We Permit by Law_, (Athens; Lycabettus Press, 1977) _Anthropopolis; a city for human development_, (New York; Norton, 1977).

an environment is a relatively new one[4]. It was much more common in former centuries to look upon the city as a metaphor for the society or for the public sphere. The history of city theory[5] is the history of the gradual realization that the city as an environment is not the same thing as the metaphorical city.

If, for example, we look at ancient Greek writings, we find that the city is usually used to symbolize the public sphere which only rarely coincided with the _physical_ city.[6] When Plato describes his _Kallipolis_ he is concerned with education, and with who should best govern; not with the shape of the buildings and streets or in determining where the Acropolis should stand in relation to the harbor[7]. Likewise, in the writings of the Italian

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[4]One of the few early philosophers to look at the city this way was Benjamin Constant (_Les 'Principes de politique' de Benjamin Constant_, E. Holz ed. (Geneva; Droz 1980.) esp. pp. 420-430. also Stephen Holmes, _Benjamin Constant and the Making of Modern Liberalism_, (New Haven; Yale University Press 1984, esp. ch. 2)).

[5]Or at least one valid possible history of city theory.

[6]Moses Finley points out (in _The Ancient Greeks; and introduction to their life and thought_ (New York; Viking Press, 1964) that most Greeks citizens of the fifth century still lived on farms, and that in many cases they could allow the physical city to be destroyed (say, for strategic purposes) but still somehow see the 'polis' as continuing to exist.
The exception to this (which does not effect my main point) was Athens, where Pericles in his building program had sought to give a symbolic representation to the greatness of the Athenian people.

[7]But, on the other hand, it should also be noted that Plato puts a great deal of movement in his dialogues: the trip Socrates and his entourage take down to the Piraeus in _The Republic_, the walk outside the city gates in _Phaedrus_. All this movement within the city -- going to different parts of city to talk about different things -- show Plato's awareness of the importance of the urban (and non-urban) environment as an influence on the

civic humanists of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the city is seen as the site where liberty is won and glory is pursued, not primarily as a physical environment influencing the moral life and political views of its citizens.[8] If early political theorists looked to the city it was only because politics and society and the city were all synonymous to them.

The great shift away from this came in the nineteenth century. Faced with widespread urbanization and the explosive growth of the major European cities, writers in the mid-century began to examine the effects that the spatial and social form of the city had on its inhabitants. Instead of being seen as a body coincidental with, or metaphorical of, the social body, the city was seen by writers such as Charles Fourier, Robert Owen and William Morris as standing in opposition to the political life of its citizens. The Utopian writers saw the growth of the industrial city as something unstoppable and uncontrollable; the city was autonomous, sprawling out on its own.[9]

The second major shift in the examination of the city itself, came towards the end of the century, when a generation of German scholars began to examine in more detail, and with greater

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sorts of behavior one can become involved in, to the kinds of discourse that one can pursue.

[8]Lauro Martines, Power and Imagination; City-States in Renaissance Italy, (New York; Alfred A. Knopf, 1979,) p. 34-44 72-129.

[9]Leonardo Benevelo, "The Industrial town and its critics," In The Tradition of Modern Architecture (Cambridge Mass.; the MIT Press, 1977) p.133.

theoretical rigor, the effects of cities on modern life. Without rejecting the city and putting their hopes in a utopia as earlier writers had, modern theorists such as Spengler, Simmel, Tönnies and Weber attempted to document the ways in which the modern city influenced its citizens. These German writers were particularly concerned with the effects of the modern city in the depersonalization of the individual and the rationalization of urban processes. All of them worried about the gradual mechanization of behavior in modern cities; the way in which individuals were driven into daily contact with hundreds of people and thus forced into impersonality.[10]

All of the major trends in twentieth century city theory grew up as developments from, or in opposition to, the work of 'The German School.' The most direct influence was on those theorists who continued the work of Weber, looking at modern cities as specific cultural systems which produced the norms of culture and behavior characteristic of modern societies.[11] This developed into the study of urban 'ecology,' which is associated with the The Chicago School of Urban Studies. The thinkers

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[10]From this basic premise each of the writers drew a different conclusion; Spengler had an apocalyptic vision of total societal collapse due to 'overcivilisation', Max Weber an idea of a future iron cage guarded by heartless bureaucrats, and Simmel slightly more sanguine hopes for a rediscovery of freedom through the monastic inwardness made possible by a totally mechanised social life.

[11]Particularly important here are R. Redfield's "The Folk Society" In American Journal of Sociology 44 (1938) pp. 1-24, H. Miner, "The Folk-Urban Continuum" In The American Sociological Review 17 (1952) pp. 529-37.

associated with the school were Ernest Burgess, Robert Redfield, Louis Wirth and Robert Park, and they saw the city as a sort of self-adjusting ecological organism, responding to needs created within, or coming from outside.

What these latter ways of looking at the city have in common is that they see urban forms and ways of life as having a deep effect on the way people act, view themselves, and think of their potentials for freedom. For the writers within these traditions the city is not just a metaphor for the political life of the culture, but a physical structure exerting its own force and influence. It is the ideas of these writers which stand behind urban theorists such as Jane Jacobs and Christopher Alexander, the contemporary thinkers who are working most seriously on clarifying the political role of urban environments.

Walter Benjamin and Das Passagen-Werk

I would like to read the late works of Walter Benjamin within the frame of this tradition; I aim to show the ways in which his studies of the modern urban environment stand as precursors to this tradition.

Benjamin's importance as a city theorist stems largely from his acute sensitivity to the ways in which the urban environment shapes, expresses and blocks the political and ethical life of its citizens. All of his late works are attempts to reconceptualize ethics and political action in light of the changed social conditions in the modern city; to throw off the burden of impractical models, and to make philosophy reflect more

adequately the experiences people have in modern cities.

Benjamin is guided in his work by insights borrowed from literary theory, historical materialism and Jewish theology. The richness (and difficulty) of his thought can largely be accounted for by the fact that he was trying to preserve what was best in each way of seeing the world; trying to render compatible three perspectives that seem in many ways to be contradictory. One of the goals of this study is to examine this synthesis.

The focus of this thesis is on the essays and books that Benjamin was working on in the last decade of his life, when he was devoting most of his time and intellectual energies to research on the Paris arcades.[12] Benjamin's Das Passagen-werk[13] was an attempt to analyse some of the most important political and social changes in 19th century Paris. This was done through a detailed analysis of the arcades, the glass roofed passages-- instars of the modern shopping mall -- which were built in the wealthiest neighbourhoods of the city in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Benjamin began with the city at ground level, analysing the things that a person walking through the arcades would experience first; the milling prostitutes, the displays of fashion and nouveautés, the blocks of gambling parlors, photographer's shops

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[12]'Zeugnisse zur Entstehungsgeschichte' in Das Passagen-Werk (Frankfurt am Main, 1982) p. 1081.

[13]Das Passagen-Werk is the name that the editor of the book, Rolf Tiedemann, gave the work which Benjamin referred to throughout his life much more modestly as the 'Passagen-arbeit".

and automats. Beginning with these most mundane and everyday things, he then widened his focus, in an attempt to understand the forces that shaped these phenomena; to understand not only how the arcades came to take the shape they did, but also what they meant to the people of the late 19th century.

Benjamin's goal was a hermeneutic analysis of the nineteenth century city, using as his foundation the traces that it had left in twentieth century Paris. Reading the signs present in the streets around him and in the arcades (which had long since fallen into disrepair by the time he began his research) Benjamin attempted to reconstruct the forces that gave the city its shape.

Das Passagen-Werk is thus an analysis of attitudes and world-views, of the themes that occur in texts and are mirrored in objects, and of the way that these link in to the material life of the period. Benjamin thought that by studying Paris in the latter half of the nineteenth century he could get clear about what was going on in the cities of his own time, and thus open up ways to freedom for himself and his generation. He thought that a study of early Paris could do this because there were patterns in modernity which kept recurring. The social phenomena of Paris in the 1850's and 60's served as 'ur-forms' to modernity, so that in grasping and understanding them he could better comprehend what was going on later in Berlin.

We can see the three influences I mentioned above in the way that Benjamin carried out this project. His past as a literary

critic is revealed in the way that he looked at urban objects and practices. He saw them as tied together by common themes in the same way that texts are. His work was devoted to teasing out the themes that linked together the arcades, the lifestyles of the urban dandies and the works of nineteenth century literature.

Benjamin's background in materialism and theology both show up in the way he conceptualizes the role of history. He looks upon the modern city as a system of objects, as a field which determines a body of experiences, as a text in which meanings are expressed and as a terrain in which struggles for power are played out among various groups. All of these are somehow determined, in Benjamin's view, by the capitalist mode of production, and beyond that by the recurring patterns of history which have patterns of domination built within them.

The goal of his philosophy is to see clear through all of this (if only momentarily[14]) and to help people escape the 'mythological' side of history which dooms them to misery and oppression. Benjamin sees this both as revolution (the definitive break with history) and as salvation (where human lives are saved from misery and the physical world is illuminated). This normatively-oriented history determined the way that Benjamin looked at the city.

<u>'Models of Experience and Visions of the City'</u>

What follows is primarily an expository work. It is not an

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[14]This proviso should become clearer by the end of this paper.

exhaustive introduction to Benjamin's work, and it is not a global critique of his ideas. It presents a series of approaches to Benjamin's texts; attempts to clarify certain problematic concepts in his thought (problematic either because they are very obscure in the original texts, or highly idiosyncratic and thus hard to grasp), and to show what is at stake in his some of his reformulations.

I am most concerned with Benjamin's methods and epistemology, the <u>background</u> views that guide him as he works his way through his history of Paris and towards an understanding of the modern city. One reason that I am looking at this side of the project is that Benjamin didn't complete his work on the passages. All that remains of the project are the preparatory notes, and thus we are much more familiar with his epistemology and methodology than with the theory towards which he was moving.

But I also think that it is Benjamin's reflections on knowledge and intellectual activity that form the most important part of his work. It is where Benjamin is trying to sketch out <u>how</u> we can look at cities, what we can learn from history, and how we can develop concepts that will be true to our urban experiences, that he makes his strongest contributions to modern understanding.

So I begin my study with a chapter that will seem to have little to do with cities. I look at Benjamin's early works in literary theory and philosophy in an attempt to outline the project that he was involved in, and the vision of knowledge and

experience in which it was grounded. I argue that most of his late works can be seen as based in developments of ideas from an early essay 'Uber das Programm der kommenden Philosophie' and from theoretical models set up in the introduction to his Habilitationschrift. It is in these essays that he sets out his ideas about the necessity of developing a theory of modern experience that escapes the scientific bias that he sees present in kantian and neo-kantian views of knowledge.

The rest of the thesis is made up of a series of exegeses of sections in Benjamin's later works which deal with experience and the city; particularly those in which he is writing about the difficulty of understanding the modern city. Chapter III is about the problems with observation as a model for understanding, and about Benjamin's concern with expanding our ideas of the sorts of experience that we should aim for in understanding the city. It is also about the necessity of formulating critical strategies which will counteract the influences of 'mythology'. The problems and potentials of a particularly historical experience of the city is the focus of Chapter IV, which also broaches the problem of the relation between theology and materialism in Benjamin's philosophy.

In Chapter V I try to answer some of the questions I raise at the end of Chapter II about the political pay-off of Benjamin's ideas. The chapter, which I hope will clarify the reasons for my focus in the rest of the thesis, is an attempt to show a link between Benjamin's theory of experience and his

attack on Marx's reading of modernity. I then conclude with an attempt to understand how the two sides of Benjamin's work fit together, how the work of demystification that he is involved in as a materialist fits with his attempts to bring over various insights from metaphysics.

CHAPTER II
Benjamin's early epistemology

The focus of the following chapter is on Walter Benjamin's theory of knowledge. I would like to look at the very early work where Benjamin is setting out his main intellectual strategies for the first time, and consider some of the concepts that he formulates there.

My goal is to trace several steps in the development of Benjamin's theory of knowledge. First, I want to look at his move from the Kantian idea of an experience based in perception to a more modern view of experience based in language. Then I would like to show his attempt to trace out a theory of truth which would fit with this idea of linguistically mediated experience, and to show that he is hearkening back to various pre-modern models to do so. Finally, I will explore the arguments of the second half of his book on German tragic drama in which he tries to show how we can conceive of all knowledge as being essentially allegorical.

On Kant and Language

The first major work of Benjamin's youth, in which he begins to set out the contours of his own philosophy, is an essay on Kant, 'Uber das Programm der kommenden Philosophie' (1918). In it, he describes what he thinks to be the task of any future philosophy;

> Es ist die zentrale Aufgabe der kommenden Philosophie die
> tiefsten Ahnungen die sie aus der Zeit und dem Vorgefuhle
> einer großen Zukunft schöpft durch die Beziehung auf das

Kantische System zu Erkenntnis werden zu lassen.[1]

Even at this early stage Benjamin stresses that the way forward for philosophy must be through a growth in awareness of the influence of language on thought and on perception;

> Ein in der Reflexion auf das sprachliche Wesen der Erkenntnis gewonnener Begriff von ihr wird einen korrespondierenden Erfahrungsbegriff schaffen der auch Gebiete deren wahrhafte systematische Einordnung Kant nicht gelungen ist umfassen wird.[2]

According to Benjamin, Kant, like other thinkers of the Enlightenment, had a tendency to see language as a plain and unproblematic means to reflect the world. He ignored "the fact that all philosophic knowledge has its only expression through language and not in formulas or numbers."[3]

One of the fundamental views that we have inherited from the Enlightenment is that of language as a neutral and unproblematic way of grasping the world. For philosophers such as Kant, knowing the nature of the connection between our statements and the world that they relate to can be highly problematic, but the nature of language as the medium of representation is not. Language is a neutral reflector, without meaning of its own, existing in an arbitrary relation to the world about which it speaks (or writes).

But for Benjamin -- as for so many other modern thinkers--

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[1] From W. Benjamin, 'Uber das Programm der kommenden Philosophie' in Gesammelte Schriften II/1 (Frankfurt/Main; Suhrkamp, 1977) pp. 157- 171, p. 157.

[2] Ibid. p. 168.

[3] Ibid. Translation mine.

language is not a clear medium through which we can view the
world; it has its own meaning, and it is within language that we
find truth. In a letter to Hugo von Hofmannsthal he writes;

> every truth has its home, its ancestral palace, in language;
> it is erected from the oldest logoi, and, in the face of a
> truth established in this way, the insights of the
> individual sciences remain subaltern, as long as they, so to
> speak, nomadically here and there make use of the realm of
> language, preoccupied with that view of the sign-character
> of language, whose irresponsible arbitrariness impresses
> itself on their terminology.[4]

Benjamin's own theory of language is developed across
several works and explored in close connection with a theory of
naming and a theory of Ideas. The basic goal of his work of the
early to mid- 'twenties is to formulate a view of the relation
between truth and language that does not reduce the latter to the
status of a mere 'tool', but rather gives language a relative
autonomy and reality of its own.

The first formulation is of truth as 'naming'. From this
perspective, things in the world have real names that are hidden
from human beings, and which must be discovered if men are ever
to regain a pure relation to objects. This is closely connected
to a view of cognitive language as a post-lapsarian means of
knowing. According to Benjamin's paragraphs on the first chapter
of Genesis in his 1916 essay 'Über Sprache überhaupt und uber die
Sprache des Menschen,' the everyday language that we use is
actually a fallen version of the original language of God.

In Benjamin's reading, God created the world through naming

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[4]Benjamin, <u>Briefe</u> 1:329. Quoted in Richard Wolin (1982)
p.41.

it. The creative word of God gave all things their shape, with the exception of man, who was created by the sacred breath rather than by the name. Man is thus in a different position than the other beings in creation. As a language-bearing being, a being who lives in language, man continues the work of God. But language for man serves a different role than it does for God;

> Gott ruhte, als er im Menschen sein Schopferisches sich selbst uberlies. Dieses Schopferische, siener göttlichen Aktualitat entledigt, wurde Erkenntnis. Der Mensch ist der Erkennende derselben Sprache, in der Gott Schöpfer ist.[5]

But after the Fall, man lost this direct relation to the world of being that he had through the Edenic language of names. Babel brought about the dispersal of the divine tongue into all the languages of the earth, languages that serve to separate men from the realm of being.

What differentiates this fallen language from the original language of names is that it is based on cognition and judgement, both of which imply a form of alienation from the world of things. It is only when the Messiah comes that people will find out again the real names, and once again return to an unmediated relation to being.

In this parable of knowledge that Benjamin constructs around his reading of Genesis, he is pointing out two problems with everyday methods of cognition. The first is that it leaves people cut off from the world, the second, which is connected, is that it leaves things in the world unredeemed and frozen in their

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[5]Benjamin, 'Uber Sprache Uberhaupt und über Sprache des Menschen.' in <u>Gesammelte Schriften</u> II.1 pp. 140-157, p.149.

object-hood. It is philosophy that will break this spell on things, decode them and find their true names again, sifting through language in order to return us to a solid relation to the world.

On Experience

Benjamin sees Kant as having grounded knowledge, and shown the terrain that reason can validly cover.[6] But he sees Kant as having achieved this clarity by limiting his view of human experience, and by taking as his model a particularly weak view of the way we come to know the world;

> Daß Kant sein ungeheures Werk gerade unter der Konstellation der Aufklarung in Angriff nehmen konnte besagt, daß dieses an einer gleichsam auf den Nullpunkt, auf das Minimum von Bedeutung reduzierten Erfahrung vorgenommen wurde...eine Erfahrung deren Quintessenz deren Bestes gewisse Newton'sche Physik war derb and tyrannisch angefaßt werden durfte ohne zu leiden.[7]

The Enlightenment model of experience -- which is the basis for Newtonian physics and to which Kant gives an epistemological grounding in the first Critique -- describes the relation between knower and known as one between subject and object. The world, for the thinkers of the seventeenth century, was essentially without any meaning of its own and could only be given meaning by

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[6] In fact it is precisely Kant's concern with laying out the epistemological back-ground of his views on truth and perception, that Benjamin sees as the highest achievement of the first Critique. The process of epistemological elaboration in which fundamental concepts are brought to full clarity, their relations to each other shown and the ways in which they are linked to the world laid bare, is in Benjamin's eyes, one of the clearest ways to truth.

[7] Walter Benjamin, Gesammelte Schriften I:I p. 159.

being worked into human projects. As opposed to medieval and ancient views, in which the universe embodied a chain of Ideas which the thinker contemplated and aligned herself with, the modern view is of a universe of minute mechanical interconnections which can be described by human beings, but which have no innate goals apart from those given by men, and thus no real normative influence on human plans.

Along with this view of the relation between subject and object comes a particular theory of perception. In its Kantian version the model is of a stable individual self who receives sensations from the world and arranges them with the aid of concepts, to form a unified system of ideas. Human beings are fundamentally separated from the world and concepts are the tools by which we form our impressions so that we may relate to the world through knowledge.[8]

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[8] It is not only the overtones of volition and control in this model of perception that Benjamin wants to reject; it is also the view of the knower and the known as radically separated. For we know of other ways of thinking about experience that do not put this gulf between knower and known. Benjamin mentions the primitive peoples who "identify with holy animals and plants" and insane people, who identify in part with the objects of their perceptions. There are also sick people, he continues, who do not identify pains in their own bodies as belonging to themselves, and clairvoyants, who at least claim to be able to receive other people's sensations. ['Uber den kommenden Philosophie' p. 162] An extreme example of this phenomenon is the African bushmen, who are said to feel the sensations of other people and of animals, in their own bodies. If, say, a cripple is coming from far away, a bushman may feel the pain of the damaged leg long before he actually sees the stranger. (From Bleek and Lloyd, Bushman Folklore, London, 1911.)

By looking at these cases -- and of course thinking about primitive people and the insane are by now very familiar modern ways of trying to bypass Enlightenment modes of thought-- Benjamin is trying to show ways of thinking about knowledge in

But Benjamin is particularly concerned with developing a model of experience that is no longer based on perception alone and does not place an unbridgeable gulf between knower and known. He also thinks it necessary -- and this is a point that I will be returning to again and again in the course of this study -- to respond to as wide a base of experience as possible when we are doing philosophy; not to set up an impoverished form of experience as a model. Philosophy must aim at bringing to clarity and rigor all the different sorts of experience that we have, rather than limiting itself to the one kind that we think we can describe adequately.[9]

One of the most important models of experience that Benjamin looks at -- I will be looking at several in the course of this study -- is that offered by mimesis, which he sees as one of the fundamental ways that human beings gain knowledge about the world. As he rightly points out, from the earliest dances through which primitive peoples attempted to understand the processes of the natural world[10], through to the elaborate social mimicry so

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terms of participation rather than perception, where the knower enters into an interactive relation with the thing known. He is also attempting to relativise the Kantian idea of experience, to show that it is just one way among many of experiencing the world. In our actual consciousness we rely on a whole spectrum of experiences.

[9] 'Über das Programm...." pp.162- 163.

[10] Benjamin, 'Über das Mimetische Vermögen' in GS II/1 pp. 210-213.

obvious in Proust's novels[11], the mimetic faculty has been one of the principal ways of knowing the world. And it is a way that presumes some sort of participation in the phenomena being studied; a form of empathetic meshing with it.

This theory of mimicry is linked to a theory of correspondences, the idea that there are tightly linked chains of similarity in the world, where objects in one realm (say that of human politics and history) mirror those in another (the processes of nature, for example). Mimesis is a way of knowing the world, because we can know not only the thing that we are imitating, but also other things like it; mimesis is a way into the chain of correspondences.

Now I think that Benjamin has made two moves here, although they are closely linked. The first is the turn from the Kantian theory of perception to a theory of language, and we can look on this as classically modern. Showing that the knower is not radically separated from the thing known, that language is not a clear mirror of reality but in fact a reality of its own, and that our experiences are contained in or shaped by our language; these are all common ways of overcoming Kant. On these points Benjamin has many similarities with modern structuralists and hermeneutic philosophers.

But there is another side of Benjamin's thought that points backwards, and connects him to many pre-modern ideas that modern

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[11]Benjamin , 'Zum Bilde Prousts,' GS I/2 pp. 310-324.

philosophers are often slightly uncomfortable with. In spite of man being embedded in language, Benjamin shows him as having another allegiance and another home in the realm of meaning that surrounds him. Benjamin has an idea of a transcendent world of meaning that in many ways is quite similar to the world-view of the late middle ages, with its chains of correspondence and similarity[12].

But if the people of the middle ages saw themselves as being born into a stable position within the order, and thus necessarily linked to it, Benjamin is moved by a very modern sense of loss and estrangement. Human beings may know the world through language, but only by default, since they can no longer relate to it immediately as they did before the Fall. The realm of language is different from the realm of Names; mankind (for Benjamin) is not fundamentally _speaking_ man, but Naming man, and thus has a need to _move past_ language to return to a relation to the world of Names. I think that this is the intutition that stands behind Benjamin's later emphasis on the moments of secular transcendence which get us (momentarily) out of the realm of language.

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[12]Cf. M. Foucault, _Les Mots et Les Choses_. (Paris; Editions Gallimard, 1966,) especially chapter 2.
Describing Benjamin as somebody who sees a chain of similarities and correspondences in the world is correct, because references to a world held together by relations of similitude run all through his early essays (and get their definitive statement in "Über das mimetische Vermögen"). But this is not to say that he believes we can _relate_ to this world in its totality. Benjamin writes of the Ideas through which we can know the chain of being as themselves monadic and separate, giving only isolated glimpses of reality.

On Ideas

Benjamin shows how this could come about with his theory of Ideas, which he develops in the 'Erkenntnis-kritische Vorrede' to the book on German Trauerspiel. Here the reference text is Plato, instead of Genesis but the concepts are recognizable as more sophisticated versions of the ones in the article on language and the language of man.

The point of greatest difficulty in the 'Vorrede' is also its point of greatest significance; namely, the formulation of the relation between the empirical world of objects, cognition and knowledge, and the intelligible world of truth and Ideas. The nature of this relation is of course a classic difficulty in philosophy, going back to Plato, the principal question being whether truth has an independent existence on its own, or only exists as it is instantiated in objects.

For Benjamin, as for Plato, the truth is not discovered through direct cognition, but only in a move away from the world through logos. But unlike Plato, the move doesn't lead to the forgetting of the world in the concentration on another realm, but to an embeddedness in the world as it actually is, where the meaning of the world as it actually is (the true Names of things) is seen for the first time.

Benjamin's formulation of the relation is to see the Ideas as being expressed in the objects in the same way that constellations are expressed in groups of stars. Ideas, he believes, are inseparable from the phenomena, but they appear

only when the phenomena are arranged in a certain way. It is the philosopher who arranges the concepts in an order that will allow the idea of the objects to appear, allow the truth to reveal itself.

Benjamin speaks of this truth as something elusive; something that comes in flashes. By describing it in this way he is trying to be true to what is in fact a very common experience that we have when we are thinking. We have various thoughts, propositions that we run through our mind, perhaps without us really seeing the connection between them, and then suddenly they 'fall into place' in a sort of flash, where we see how the various propositions fit together. Benjamin's view of the philosopher is of one who arranges the concepts he is dealing with in a treatise in such a way that they 'click' in the readers mind. Any given concept is only a piece of information on the page, but Benjamin holds forth the possibility that by arranging them in a particular way they can be made to come together in such a way as to show meaning and truth. This sudden flash of meaning is the Idea, which irradiates all the concepts and shows their place and purpose. Human happiness and fulfillment depends on people being able to connect with the world of ideas in this way.

Truth is seen by Benjamin as something quite different from knowledge. Knowledge is intentional and accessible to the subject. But truth is radically Other, and we can only catch glimpses of it. Access to it is by way of leaving behind any

controlled and centred individuality and entering into a non-

intentional relation with the Ideas. Thus;

> Die Wahrheit ist ein aus Ideen gebildetes intentionsloses
> Sein. Das ihr gemaße Verhalten ist demnach nicht ein Meinen
> im Erkennen, sondern ein in sie Eingehen und Verschwinden.
> Die Wahrheit ist der Tod der Intention.[13]

But it would be wrong to see these Ideas as reflecting an

order of Being. If there is an influence of Plato in this section

there is an even heavier one of Leibniz. Benjamin's Ideas are

seen as monads, existing in isolation from each other;

> Wie die Harmonie der Sphären auf den Umlaufen der einander
> nicht beruhenden Gestirne, so beruht der Bestand des mundus
> intelligibilis auf der unaufhebbaren Distanz zwischen den
> reinen Wesenheiten.[14]

This is what leads to the intensely fragmentary form of the

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[13]Walter Benjamin, Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels. In
GS I.1, pp. 203-430, p. 216.

Benjamin's extreme distrust of the individual and
subjectivity is well documented. "If I write better German than
most writers of my generation, it is thanks largely to twenty
years observance of one little rule: never use the word 'I'
except in letter. The exceptions to this precept that I have
permitted myself could be counted."

From Benjamin 'A Berlin Chronicle' in Reflections: Essays,
Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings. (New York: Harcourt, 1978)
p. 15.

It is typical of him that his two autobiographical books
Berliner Kindheit um neunzehnhundert and Einbahnstrasse are
singularly lacking in recollections of personal feeling and are
instead given up to an almost forensic analysis of particular
spaces and monuments in Berlin as they are seen through the eyes
of a child. The biographies are outward, rather than inward
directed, recording not the imprint of feelings, but that which
forms them from the exterior.

The general tendency in the work is to give almost no role
to the individual subjective consciousness. When it is mentioned
it is as something that must be bypassed to reach truth. He
praises the surrealist use of dream images because it allows
language to speak on its own, loosening individuality "like a bad
tooth."

[14]Ibid., p.217.

philosophical essay. Benjamin gives up the idea of philosophy as a system and focusses on the essay, the form that can best represent the fragmentary nature of thought. For Benjamin thinking is not the gradual and orderly move from thought to thought, up a scale of clear, distinct and justifiable propositions to some certain final conclusion. Rather it is a continual series of leaps towards the object under consideration, reapproaching it again and again from different sides, in different lights. For most writers, this fragmented and dispersed and thoroughly discontinuous nature of thought is subsumed within the orderly form of the treatise or essay. But Benjamin (and also writers like Nietzsche and Wittgenstein) attempts to remain true to the thought-process. Benjamin's essays re-present the critic's thinking, the eternal approach and re-approach of the thing examined, which is in fact the representation of truth.[15] The

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[15]The question of the role of intersubjectivity in Benjamin's idea of philosophical representation is problematic. He implies that he believes that the truth that a philosopher discovers can be communicated. But the question is whether we can really use language to represent the realm of truth we discover in a way that will be comprehensible to other people. It may well be possible that there is a space of meaning beyond language to which language can only point or show the way. But it seems unlikely that the same constellation of concepts would work the same way on two people. Although it might be possible to assume adequate reception of what is contained on the denotative level of a text, there is a great deal more to language than that, and it would seem unlikely that all people would receive so clearly that which is contained on the connotative level of the text (as well as in the images and associations that the elements on the page call to mind). Unless it could be shown that it is primarily the denotative side of the concepts that are the main force leading the idea to appear from the constellations (and the way that the constellation produces the idea is undertheorised in these works of Benjamin) then the problem of philosophical representation seems highly problematic. One reads Benjamin's

difference between the critic's thought and the essay which represents it, is in the arrangement. It is the arrangement of his thoughts in the light of the critic's later illumination, after he has finally broken through to a feeling of how everything fits together and what place things hold that allows the reader an insight into what the thing really is, an idea of its true name.

What this implies -- and this too has a certain tangential relation with Wittgenstein -- is that the primary task of the philosophical writer is not to <u>say</u> something, but to show

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texts like any other text of philosophy, trying to ground the main concepts, finding connections, building concepts, attempting the clarification that will help bring them towards some sort of unity. The benefits from the works do not seem to come from constellations being formed on the page. But Benjamin may be correct about constellations being the ground of the leap from mere knowledge to what we call truth, for of course we all know the experience of various elements from a philosopher's work linking with elements from other reading and from outside to illuminate various problems. It is only the ability to communicate this process, to bring it back into language and to make the philosopher's constellations those of the reader, that I am questioning.

In these early works of Benjamin it is extremely unclear what the place of truth <u>is</u>. There seems to be no tradition or community to which the truth or the ideas are aimed, and no concern with grounding redemption in concrete practices. Representation is important to Benjamin, but communication seems to be less so. This is only apparently a contradiction of terms. There is an emphasis on truth and redemption in the 'Vorrede', but they are for their own sake, they are goods in themselves. Benjamin's goal is to re-enchant objects and phenomena (such as the artifacts of the German baroque) and reveal ideas (such as 'Allegory' and 'Trauerspiel') but to do so merely theoretically. The goal seems to be to make of the text a place where the truth can appear, where it can manifest itself in the fallen world. It is the strain of holding to this mystical and esoteric position that leads Benjamin to consider the possibility of making redemption into a community project, and thus moves him closer to Marxism. (I will return to these questions in later chapters.)

something (zeigen, nicht sagen, as Benjamin says in the theoretics chapter of the Passagenwerk[16]). The philosopher arranges a certain set of thoughts or images. These do not so much say something about the world as point to it, point to something that cannot be said about the world but only seen in it.[17] Truth is not a logical form, but rather an image, or series of images, and inseparable from this series. This becomes immensely important in his theory of history, which I will

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[16]"Methode dieser Arbeit: literarische Montage. Ich habe nichts zu sagen. Nur zu zeigen." Benjamin, <u>Das Passagen-Werk</u> GS V.1 p.574.

[17]The verb 'seen' here, and in numerous other places in the course of this thesis, is highly problematic.

Through the force of several centuries of constant usage, English (and German) have both rendered extremely supple a wide body of metaphors linking experience to sight. Thus we 'have points of view', 'picture things' in particular ways, or 'change perspectives', 'take a look' at new theories, and generally aim to 'see' things in new ways. There are several problems with these metaphors when used in examining Benjamin's works. First of all they give automatic primacy to the Kantian model of experience-as-perception that Benjamin wants to break with. Second, they tend to gloss over the fact that experience really is much wider than mere sight, and can often be much more like smelling (where the thing we sense is evanescent and elusive, like a subtle odor which we have to approach very cautiously if we are to catch it) or like hearing (where the object is often un-localisable and indivisible, in the way that objects which we see are not).

However, with all this said, I am afraid I still tend to use a large number of catch-all visual metaphors in this paper, due to the irresistable undertow in normal English usage which drags in that direction. It is not like trying to use non-sexist language, where the choice of pronoun has only a minor (and often salutary) effect on the function of the word. Verbal metaphors of sight are simply the most supple and well-honed verbs we have for describing perception; what they lack in subtlety they make up for in usefulness and ease of control.

When their use would be disastrously misleading I have used the more general (and rather unexciting and inflexible) word 'experience'.

examine in Chapter IV. Truth exists, not in propositional knowledge, but in a relationship among things in the world, and this will be seen if they are arranged in such a way as to show the truth they contain.[18]

Allegory

In the case of the Trauerspiel book, the truth discovered is the Idea of allegory. I would like to look briefly at Benjamin's analysis, both to illustrate his method in action, and because it will allow me to fill in the background view of the world that informs much of his early (and later) criticism.

Benjamin's goal in <u>Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels</u> is to rescue the Ideas of Trauerspiel and allegory. After the German Romantics and the work of Ludwig Klages, chief theoretician of the circle that gathered around Stephan George, the allegory was seen as a degraded art form, a stunted version of the symbol, and

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[18]The philosopher thus has two tasks in bringing truth to representation. At the level of knowledge the philosopher's work -- if he is looking at a literary genre, for example -- is commentary, exhaustively researching and analyzing the elements of the thing studied, working at it until it yields the concepts that will make it available to philosophical representation. Any literary work or theoretical treatise is embedded in a particular social and historical situation, which can serve as a veil, hiding the truth content of the work. Commentary renders clear the historical context.

Thus for his book on German Trauerspiel, Benjamin wrote a commentary that analyzed the social and political influences that run like a filigree through the dramas of the seventeenth century. But that was only a necessary first step, the immanent critique which laid bare the main intentions of the text, and showed the ways in which the poems succeeded and failed. Then came the philosopher's true work, the one of redemption; saving from the texts the kernel of truth, the gold that could be carried off. And then finally representing this truth in a philosophical text so that the reader can respond.

the baroque tragic dramas of the seventeenth century were seen in the same way; as decadent modern versions of ancient tragedy. According to traditional literary critics, the Trauerspiel was aiming at the same things as ancient tragedy -- to inspire fear and pity -- but it ended in travesty; a stage full of murders, suicides, incest and parricide.

Common to both rejections is the attempt to class one artistic form under another in order to show that it is a failed or second-class version, instead of trying to appreciate the form as it is in itself. Benjamin's strategy, however, is the opposite; he attempts to redeem each of the forms by showing how they can exist on their own as Ideas.[19]

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[19] The notion of 'redemption' or 'reconciliation' at the heart of so much of Benjamin's early work, itself needs clarification.

There seem are several ways in which he uses the idea of redemption. One is in the sense of rescuing, and he uses it when he is talking of phenomena and the need to save them from neglect and forgetfulness. Walter Benjamin was a collector, with a connoisseur's fascination with old objects that had fallen by the wayside; old picture books, jewelry, knick knacks. And in his scholarly life he was an inexhaustible searcher after texts that were undeservedly lost. This urge to save shows up at the very heart of his work, in the desire to rescue ideas and artistic forms, and raise them up out of their degraded state. The best example of this is this work on allegory, where he shows the value and validity of the forms in spite of its scholarly neglect.

He also uses 'redemption' in a more strictly theological sense, as the act of God that will raise up a fallen world. When this happens the real meaning of things will be shown, and man will relate immediately to the world once again. Benjamin sees it as a return to the realm of the Tree of Life, the edenic tree that ruled over life in the garden before man's fall, and before the relation to the world was made problematic by eating from the Tree of Knowledge. [This is based on a story from the kabbala that deeply influenced Benjamin. (Wolin (1982) p. 38.)] It would be a world where men knew the true names for things, and their true place.

So Benjamin analyses the specifically allegorical way of seeing the world. He shows that allegory is not just a literary form, a way of presenting the world, but a mode of experience. The allegorical way of experiencing the world is of a place devoid of stability and solidity. If the symbol sees objects and experiences in the world as rich in meaning, and linked directly to a transcendant realm, then allegory is its opposite -- for it emphasizes all that is passing, doomed to decay and mortality. The symbol embodies that to which it refers -- a tree for life, a Praxiteles statue for an ideal of humanity -- and thus offers a direct connection through the symbol to the realm that is being represented, which is seen to be directly accessible.

But an allegorical emblem is merely a sign of that to which it refers. In allegory there is no necessary relation between signified and signifier -- it is the allegorist who gives the allegorical symbols their place and signification by fixing them within a structure of meanings. This is a reflection of the baroque allegorists' vision of the world as a fallen and unredeemed place, one in which to rest in appreciation of physical objects or even beauty is to rest in illusion.

Then there is a third use of the notion of redemption, which is a secularized version of the second, and comes out most clearly in Benjamin's later works. Redemption there is seen as the final realization of human happiness, where human beings finally manage to escape the realm of necessity, of the struggle for survival, and manage to live a good and true life in relation to a reawakened physical world. Benjamin sometimes writes of this as the overcoming of the mythological, 'the mythic' being in this sense the eternally recurring cycles of growth and death.

The German Romantics of the next century wanted to see beauty as a way of reaching beyond the world, to achieve direct sensual access to the world of ideas. The artistic symbol was a way to participate in this realm of ideas, of representing truth directly and immediately. By looking at a beautiful symbol the viewer's consciousness was to be lifted up to a higher plane.

But for the baroque allegorists -- and for Benjamin himself -- the world does not offer direct access to truth, or to Ideas or to 'Messianic time'. A relation of pure immediacy to objects and experiences never leads us past them to knowledge or truth, and it is a mistake if we let ourselves be seduced by the beauty or intensity of experiences into thinking that we are relating to truth.

Seen from the point of view of allegory, the Romantic use of the symbol was possible only by a leap of bad faith. For the Romantics were, according to Benjamin, the generation that realized most acutely the gap between fallen nature and human hopes for fulfillment, between the frozen-ness of the world and the human longing for home. They tried to bridge this gap, and cover up the problematic nature of experience, by recourse to symbols -- to escape melancholy in rapture. But for Benjamin the allegory is more faithful to a human experience which is doomed to a melancholy historical consciousness, and cannot in good faith leap back to a Greek concept of wholeness.[20]

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[20]The Romantic notion of an immediate relation to Being through symbols grew up around the reception of Winkelmann, and his writings on Greek statuary.

The allegorical understanding of the 17th century as it is mirrored in the Trauerspiel was melancholic, but nevertheless held forth a hope of redemption. The plays were primarily theological - the profanity and fallen-ness of the world were painted with glowing intensity all the more to point up the necessity of redemption. The melancholy Lutheran dramatists painted as starkly as possible the absence of God from the world of earthly acts in history in order to show the necessity of some messianic intervention. They mercilessly strip off the masks of earthly beauty and power, showing that each is an illusion, in order to show that redemption does not shine forth in the world, but needs to come from outside, through God's grace, or through an eventual messianic intervention.

This obviously mirrors Benjamin's own concerns. The melancholy allegorical consciousness is a model for experience in a world where direct access to wholeness is no longer possible, where beauty is always a stopping-too-soon on the way to truth. And its view of history as a place of decay and decline is close to Benjamin's own views. Any view, such as that of the Romantics, which sees nature as fundamentally good, leaves human beings embedded in a world of decay and decline. Benjamin seeks freedom by defining truth on a slant to history, as something which is timeless and intentionless -- 'moments out' which escape the laws of decline. Benjamin's insight that a purely immediate relation to the world is impossible as a means to truth (in post-lapsarian times) and flawed because it mires man in unfreedom, is

of course similar to Kant's, in that man's freedom is defined against nature (against the world of desire and natural process.) But if Kant places the way out in the legislative power of autonomous human reason, Benjamin sites it rather within the human ability to decode the plain of Ideas which lies behind the plane of history and nature.

Earlier in this chapter, I tried to show that Benjamin is in many ways classically modern, yet at the same time linked to various pre-modern models. The theory of allegory reveals another facet, the side of Benjamin that is close to contemporary post-modernism. It is his portrayal of all knowledge as essentially allegorical, his belief that there is only a weak relation between signifier and signified, and his idea that language is what we have in place of the Name (in place, we might say, of the 'direct presence of the object') that makes Benjamin so popular with post-modernists and deconstructionists.

But Benjamin does not think that all we are left with in the world is a play of signs. For even if allegory cannot embody the truth in the way that the symbol does, it does make clear the fact that the world is fundamentaly bereft and lacking in the meaning that we need. The slippage between signifier and signified points towards the truth that we require to return to the world. The theory of allegory does not supplant the theory of Ideas, but supplements it, by giving an adequate theorization of knowledge. Although Benjamin does finally have a post-modern theory of knowledge, there is still an idea of truth at the

centre which is pre-modern, close to that of the fifteenth century, or even Plato.[21]

The Move to Marxism

Up to this point I have tried to present Benjamin's ideas with as much sympathy as possible. But now I would like to turn briefly to some of the problems that arise in his early works, and which lead him to a gradual rapprochement with marxism.

The most important element in the early aesthetics is the theory of constellations developed in the Trauerspiel book. It was a technique developed around a theory of truth that fundamentally anti-idealistic. This was the over-coming of Kant; the creation of a secular metaphysics[22] through the closing of the gap between the empirical and the intelligible realms, the anti-idealistic construction of the noumenal world.[23] Showing that it was the physical world in its most immediate manifestations[24] which was the source of truth, Benjamin was able to go on in his later work to examine objects and phenomena that usually slipped below the epistemological horizon, things that

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[21]Although in that case it would be Plato turned on his head. For, as Susan Buck-Morss points out, in his works "the phenomena appear as the truth in the ideas [instead of the ideas as the truth in the phenomena] so that the dignity of the transitory particulars is maintained." (Buck-Morss (1977) p. 91.

[22]The phrase is, again, Adorno's, from Negative Dialectics translated by E.B. Ashton, (New York; The Seabury Press, 1973,) p. 28.

[23]Rolf Tiedemann, Studien zur Walter Benjamins, (Frankfurt/Main; Europaische Verlagstalt, 1965) p. 23.

[24]Or, in the case of literary criticism, the world of representations and artistic works...

were usually considered closed to philosophical consideration. It is this 'micrological' method that Adorno praised in a 1931 article on Benjamin,[25] and which he employed in most of his own sociological works.

But there are several problems with this. The main one is the fragmented and disjointed nature of the ideas that are found through the creation of these constellations. As we have seen, the ideas are seen as existing independently of each other as Leibnizian monads. 'Allegory,' 'Trauerspiel' 'Myth', each can be approached and contemplated on its own, and will 'redeem' a set of phenomena in the world, but there seems to be no way of connecting the various ideas together in a tradition that will illuminate the world as a whole. Increasingly, in the course of the late nineteen-twenties, Benjamin comes to see his own construction and contemplation of ideas as suffering from the same problems as bourgeois collecting.[26] It tends to divide the world up into objects (or in the case of philosophic contemplation, monad-like 'facts') which have no real connection between them.

Another problem, as Jurgen Habermas points out in his essay[27] is the esoteric nature of these early critical works. The

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[25]Theodor Adorno, 'Die Aktualität der Philosophie' in Gesammelte Schriften I (Frankfurt/Main; Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970) p. 337.

[26]Cf. Tiedemann, p.45.

[27]Bewußtmachende oder rettende Kritik -- die Aktualität Walter Benjamins' in Zur Aktualität Walter Benjamins. (Frankfurt/M; Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972. p.145.

experiences that Benjamin is trying to ground in the early works are extremely close to those of mysticism, as is the style of exposition. This does not so much cast doubts on the validity of Benjamin's theories as it does raise questions about their usefulness. Increasingly Benjamin himself saw the need to bring his thought down to earth and ground it in some sort of concrete practice.[28]

Benjamin's reservations about his theories became particularly acute when he began to consider Marxism seriously, particularly Lukacs' early Marxism in _History and Class Consciousness_. Lukacs' ideas seemed to him to be in many ways similar to his own[29], particulary the central insight that in capitalist society the products of labor and the laborers themselves come to be seen as if they were mere _things_ rather than as organically related to human projects. But even if Lukacs' theory of a reified, 'thing-ified' world mirrors Benjamin's views on an epistemological level, the conclusions that he draws -- namely, that the deadness of the world must be overcome by the activity of the productive class -- are quite different. Benjamin was deeply influenced by Lukacs' emphasis on the need for effective political practice, and in the years after reading _History and Class Consciousness_ he sought various ways by

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[28]Thus he writes in a letter to Adorno' "speculation sets out upon its necessarily bold flight with some prospect of success only if, instead of donning the waxen wings of esotericism, it sees its source of power in construction alone." Quoted in Habermas (1972) p.145.

[29]Letter to G. Scholem, quoted in Scholem (1975), p. 36.

which his earlier esoteric notions of redemption could be made to link up with concrete <u>practices</u> of redemption. He was also led to be aware of his own position as an isolated intellectual, and of the way in which his own position as an intellectual free-agent mirrored the atomism of his class and time.

A third serious flaw in the early works which begins to disturb Benjamin by the late 'twenties is the concept of history as pure decay. In the 'Vorrede' to the Trauerspiel book, and in the treatment of allegory, human history is seen to be made up of cycles of decline and decay. The only hope is to step outside of history briefly into the timelessness of the contemplation of ideas, which irradiates phenomena briefly and shows their proper nature (or at least <u>sides</u> of their proper nature). But for a wider-scale historical redemption it is necessary to await the arrival of the Messiah.

Benjamin's meeting with Marxism makes him consider more seriously the possibility of progress <u>within</u> history, and the creation of a redemptive historical tradition. He begins to consider seriously the ways in which history can be rescued from the sway of mythology, and human hopes for a good and just life could be fulfilled within time.

It should be emphasized that Benjamin seldom gives up any of his earlier ideas completely. The later developments are usually re-orientations rather than the abandonings of his earlier positions. The early notion of Messianic redemption is secularized, the Ideas undergo a metamorphosis and return in <u>Das</u>

Passagen-Werk, his last work, as dialectical images, and the allegories that he saw at the heart of the seventeenth century baroque dramas are shown to rise again in the Fleurs du Mal of Baudelaire. It is the later transformations of these esoteric early ideas that I will be considering in my next chapters.

CHAPTER III
Experience in the City

...Et la récapitulation que je faisais des déceptions de ma vie. en tant que vécue, et qui me faisaient croire que sa réalité devait résider ailleurs qu'en l'action, ne rapprochait pas d'une manière purement fortuite et en suivant les circonstances de mon existence, des désappointements différents. Je sentais bien que la déception du voyage, la déception de l'amour n'étaient pas des déceptions différentes, mais l'aspect varié que prend, selon le fait auquel il s'applique, l'impuissance que nous avons à nous réaliser dans la jouissance matérielle, dans l'action effective.
                                    M. Proust, Le temps retrouvé p. 877

La rue...seul champ d'expérience valable.
                                    André Breton[1]

As we saw in the last chapter, the idea that anchors Benjamin's project is that there is something fundamentally wrong with models of history and intellectual practice based upon science. He sees philosophy as having taken a wrong turn when, with Kant, it attempted to model its theory of knowledge upon that of modern science. Benjamin's goal is to rescue philosophy, and especially Marxism, from this illegitimate tutelage, and to give it new models. He is particularly concerned with understanding the forms of modern experience that ground our knowledge.

From the very first articles in which he examines cities, Benjamin links the study of the city to his concern with modern experience. He quotes Breton to the effect that the street is the main site of experience in the modern world[2]. But the experience gained there is problematic.

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[1]Used as the epigraph to Benjamin's essay 'Marseille' in Gesammelte Schriften IV:I, p. 359.

[2]See the epigraph to this chapter.

One of the themes that recurs throughout Benjamin's work (we examined one version of it in the last chapter) is that direct observation is essentially flawed. What we might think of as the most obvious way of approaching the city -- a journalistic description of it, a simple attempt to go out into the streets and describe what is there -- offers us very little. It might give us many interesting facts about where buildings are, and who is doing what in the city[3], but it keeps us on the surface; we do not know what is behind the puzzling (or even the ordinary) events we encounter in the streets, nor how to make our observations meaningful.[4] Mere description is flawed because our everyday habits of perception separate us from objects, making us see in them only what we have seen before. Our culture supplies us with a body of viewing habits -- mythological and ideological lenses -- that make our descriptions of the world reflect back the few basic patterns allowed within our society. It is not just that there are imperfections in these lenses -- although Benjamin the critic obviously thinks there are such imperfections -- but

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[3]Such, Benjamin shows, was the utility of the numerous works on urban physiognomy published in the late 19th century.

[4]Benjamin's stance towards observation reveals one of the fundamental paradoxes within a certain strand of modernism. At the same time that the world is seen as the fundamental focus for human aspirations (so that becoming aligned with it can become a reasonable goal) it is also seen as elusive and disappointing, not offering the full presence and intensity that human aspirations would seem to require. This of course is the same perception that is behind Benjamin's conception of allegory as the grounding-strategy for modern experience. It offers a combination of a demystified world which still stands as the focus for concern; the site of a hidden and autonomous truth.

also that habits <u>in general</u> cut us off from the world.

The Early Works on the City

In the short journal articles that Benjamin wrote on foreign cities he can be seen exploring this problem.[5] The aim of these articles is well captured in the opening sentence of the article he wrote on Moscow;

> Schneller als Moskau selber lernt man Berlin von Moskau aus sehen...die neue Optik, die man auf sie gewinnt, ist der unzweifelhafteste Ertrag eines russischen Aufenthaltes."[6]

The new optic, it is implied, allows Benjamin to see some elements of his own city for the first time. Having seen variations on the cultural and political forms he is familiar with he is forced to realize that the forms of his own city could be different.[7] The estrangement brought about by travel makes his experience of Berlin fresher and broader.

The same idea is developed in slightly different way in <u>Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert</u>, which Benjamin began in 1932. <u>Berliner Kindheit</u> is Benjamin's autobiography, told in a series of snapshot-like presentations of the main monuments of

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[5]These articles, gathered together under the title 'Denkbilder' in the <u>Gesammelte Schriften</u>, were written for various newspapers and journals in the mid-'twenties. They were the subject of an excellent essay by Peter Szondi, the only essay I know of which deals exclusively with Benjamin as a city theorist.

[6]Walter Benjamin, 'Moskau' in <u>Gesammelte Schriften</u> IV:I, p.316.

[7]In the article from which this quotation was taken the difference noted and the changes hoped for are both seen in political terms. Benjamin wishes that the frozen bourgeoisie of his native city could be moved by the political fervor and creativity that he noted in Moscow in the 'twenties.

his boyhood and the experiences which centred around them for him. It is an attempt by Benjamin to read the city, not through an awakening gained by the comparison with a foreign city, distant in space, but by looking at the same city at a point in the past. Berlin is sighted across the distance of Benjamin's own life. His goal is a Proustian one; to uncover the moments in his past life which were the first foreshadowings of the relations and understandings which were later to become important to him[8]. Walks in the Berlin Tiergarten opened up to him the experience of the labyrinth, a central figure in his later thought. The view into the poor coutyard across from his parents' house gave him his first inkling of the importance of class differences. An understanding of these images allows him to understand the way that the city has become part of his mental habits, how it formed his thoughts. But it is also an attempt to find out what the city means for his generation. Biography becomes a way of entering into a deeper experience with the objects around him.

Again in <u>Berliner Kindheit</u> the city remains elusive to Benjamin; but here the elusiveness is seen as somehow fundamental to arriving at a fuller experience of the city.[9] Benjamin dreams

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[8]And not just to him. <u>Berliner Kindheit</u> may be about the biographical traces imprinted on the city, but Benjamin is less concerned with remembering his own childhood than he is with tracing the contours of a form of life of which his own childhood is representative. The autobiography is not entitled 'My Berlin Childhood,' but simply 'Berlin Childhood.'

[9]In the course of Benjamin's writings on the city, <u>Das Passagen-Werk</u> included, the city never appears straight on, as an individual element of analysis, but only as one element in a relation; as a space in which processes that Benjamin is

of being lost in a city so that he might see it without the veils
of familiarity;

> Sich in einer Stadt nicht zurechtfinden heißt nicht
> viel. In einer Stadt sich aber zu verirren, wie man in einem
> Walde sich verirrt, braucht Schulung. Da müssen
> Straßennamnen zu dem Irrenden so sprechen wie das Knacken
> trockner Reiser und kleine Straßen im Stadtinnern ihm die
> Tageszeiten so deutlich wie eine Bergmulde widerspiegeln.
> Diese Kunst habe ich spat erlernt; sie hat den Traum
> erfullt, von dem die ersten Spuren Labyrinthe auf den
> Loschblattern miener Hefte waren...[10]

And again in <u>Einbahnstraße</u> he speaks of a city suddenly become
alive;

> Ich war in Riga, um eine Freundin zu besuchen,
> angekommen. Ihr Haus, die Stadt, die Sprache waren mir
> unbekannt. Kein Mensch erwartete mich, es kannte mich
> niemand. Ich ging zwei Stunden einsam durch die Straßen. So
> habe ich sie nie wiedergesehen. Aus jedem Haustor, schlug
> eine Stichflamme, jeder Eckstein stob Funken und jede Tram
> kam wie die Feuerwehr dahergefahren. Sie konnte ja aus dem
> Tore treten, um die Ecke biegen und in der Tram sitzen. Von
> beiden aber mußte ich, um jeden Preis, der erste werden der
> den andern sieht...[11]

Both of these passages refer to experiences in which the
city suddenly becomes intensely meaningful for the person within

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interested in take place, or as an element which pulls and shapes
movements that he interested in. There is no 'theory of the city'
at the heart of the book, just an analysis of various practices
and institutions (<u>flanerie</u>, the arcades) which could not be found
anywhere but in a city. <u>Das Passagen-Werk</u> is not about the city
so much as it is about urban life. The city is like a star which
exerts a force on eveything which Benjamin examines, while
remaining invisible itself.

[10]<u>Gesammelte Schriften</u> IV:I, p.237.

[11]<u>Gesammelte Schriften</u> IV:I, p. 110.

it.[12] The author's attention, suddenly honed and rendered sharp by an extreme state of mind (loss, lust), perceives layers of meaning and messages in the city that he did not see before. As is often the case in Benjamin, this conjunction of heightened attention and meaning results in the perceived object appearing to be unpredictable, and full of life; flames darting out of gates, cries in the wilderness, the sudden appearance of objects. The man lost in the city moves from being an unmoved observer of a dead landscape (streets, signposts, bars) to a rapt listener of a world which has suddenly been given a voice. Broken out of habit, the looker no longer fully controls what he sees; there is no longer an internal picture of the world that allows the walker to project forward a vision of the trip he is about to make. The picture gone, he is forced to lean to the world and pay it careful heed, forced to see it as something living. The looker has moved from having a projective, picturing, consciousness, to an attentive hearkening to the objects around, which Benjamin,

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[12]This becomes even more obvious in a variation of one of the above citations quoted by David Frisby;

> Not to find one's way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal. It requires ignorance -- nothing more. But to lose oneself in a city -- as one loses oneself in a forest- - that calls for quite a different schooling. Then signboards and streetnames, passers-by, roofs, kiosks, or bars must speak to the wanderer like a cracking twig under his feet in the forest, like the startling call of a bittern in the distance, like the sudden stillness of a clearing with a lily standing erect at its centre. Paris taught me this art of straying; it fulfilled a dream that had shown its first traces in the labyrinths on the blotting paper of my school exercise books.

(Quoted from One Way Street p. 298, in Fragments of Modernity; Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin. (Cambridge, Mass; The MIT Press, 1986,) p. 229.)

quoting Malebranche, equates with prayer.

Childhood, distance, disorientation and eros all lead to modes of experience which Benjamin thinks can open us up to the city. They have in common that the relation between the knower and the known is not based purely upon conceptual knowledge, but rather on some form of participation between subject and object; a form of attention, of heeding the objects. The goal of much of Benjamin's work is to find some way of combining these heightened forms of experience -- which he will call in a later work, 'profane illuminations' -- with the possibilities for critical reflexivity and distancing which underlie the Kantian view of Erfahrung. It is this combination that he begins to formulate in his later works.

Das Passagen-Werk

In his works on the Paris arcades[13] Benjamin begins to

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[13]This body of work included, besides Das Passagen-Werk itself, a series of essays on Baudelaire which make up the torso of a book which was to be at the centre of Benjamin's work on the arcades. They have been gathered together in a collection entitled Charles Baudelaire -- Ein Lyriker im Zeitalter des Hochkapitalismus (Frankfurt, 1969). The collection includes 'Das Paris des Second Empire bei Baudelaire' an initial essay on Baudelaire which was highly influenced by surrealist ideas of montage, and a second essay 'Uber einige Motive bei Baudelaire' which Benjamin wrote in response to the criticisms levelled against the first essay by his friend T. Adorno. The essays are followed by a collection of aphorisms on Baudelaire called 'Zentralpark'.

Also linked to the arcades work are several essays, including 'Paris, die Hauptstadt des XIX. Jahrhunderts' which gives an over-view of the planned project; an article on surrealism which he saw as a theoretical "awning" for the work, as well as 'Uber den Begriff der Geschichte', which developed the philosophy of history in which the arcades project was to be based.

This last set of works on the city should also include

explore these themes within the new framework of materialist history. The long-standing concern for the city is lighted by a focus on the ways collectivities reproduce their material life, by a concern with revolution, and by an increasing awareness of the necessarily historical dimension of any study of the urban space. This concern was already present in Berliner Kindheit; but in the work on the arcades Benjamin wanted to concentrate more on the effects of history upon the collective;

> Formen, wie die >>Berliner Kindheit<< sie mir darbietet, darf gerade dieses Buch an keiner einzigen Stelle und nicht im geringsten Grade in Anspruch nehmen...Die Urgeschichte des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts, die im Blick des auf seiner Schwelle spielenden Kindes sich spiegelt, hat darin ein ganz anderes Gesicht, als in den Zeichen, welche sie auf der Karte der Geschichte eingraben.[14]

Benjamin's impetus for beginning the study of the Paris arcades was the reading of a number of surrealist works, most notably Louis Aragon's Paysan de Paris.

Benjamin saw the surrealists as forming the most advanced literary movement of his day, both in their methods (collage, automatic writing, the exploration of varied states of consciousness) and in their focus, which was primarily on the city. The surrealists saw even the dull Parisian suburbs as a source of artistic inspiration, and geared their artistic lives towards opening themselves up to as wide a spectrum of

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essays such as 'Der Erzahler,' which connects with many of the themes in the Baudelaire essays, and an article on the collector Edward Fuchs, in which Benjamin discusses his views of historical materialism.

[14]Gesammelte Schriften V:II, p. 1139.

experiences as possible. Benjamin writes;

> Die Dame ist in der esoterischen Liebe das Unwesentlichste.
> So auch bei Breton. Er ist mehr den Dingen nahe, denen Nadja
> nahe ist, als ihr selber. Welches sind nun die Dinge, denen
> sie nahe ist? Deren kanon ist für den Surrealismus so
> aufschlußreich wie nur möglich. Wo beginnen? Er hat sich
> einer erstaunlichen Entdeckung zu rühmen. Er zuerst stieß
> auf die revolutionaren Energien, die im >>Veralteten<<
> erscheinen, in den ersten Eisenkonstruktionen, den ersten
> Fabrikgebauden, den frühesten Photos, den Gegenstanden, die
> anfangen anzusterben, den Salonflügeln, den Kleidern von vor
> fünf Jahren, den mondanen Versammlungslokalen, wenn die
> vogue beginnt sich von ihnen zurückzuziehen. Wie diese Dinge
> zur Revolution stehen -- niemand kann einen genauren Begriff
> davon haben, als diese Autoren. Wie das Elend, nicht nur das
> soziale sondern genauso das architektonische, das Elend des
> Interieurs, die versklavten und versklavenden Dinge in
> revolutionaren Nihilismus umschlagen, das hat vor diesen
> Sehern und Zeichendeutern noch niemand gewahrt.[15]

Benjamin wrote of Aragon's <u>Paysan de Paris</u> that, "evenings in bed

I could never read more than one or two pages before my heartbeat

got so strong that I had to put the book down."[16] The affinities

of the book with Benjamin's concerns are strong. Aragon's novel

is about a man who wanders through Paris and finds the city

communicating to him in mysterious and sudden ways. Aragon, like

Benjamin, wanted to develop strategies to fight off the tendency

for everyday consciousness to freeze into set patterns, and he

wanted to find ways to create in his waking hours the same

intense and unexpected relations to objects that people have in

their dreams, where the normal associational nets that bond

object to object break down, and where things in the world

suddenly seem to take on a life of their own.

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[15]Walter Benjamin, 'Der Surrealismus' in <u>GS</u> II.1 pp.295-310,
p. 299.

[16]Quoted in Buck-Morss (1977) p. 125.

By the time that Aragon wrote <u>Paysan de Paris</u>, the Paris arcades that had once been centres of sophistication and glamor had become abandoned, dusty spaces. Aragon wandered through the passages as if he was in a dream, unfolding complex mythologies around the objects that he saw. A typical passage is the following;

> At the level of the printing shop where calling cards are type-set while you wait, just above a little flight of stairs descending into the rue Chauchat, at this north pole of mystery, where one emerges from the grotto into the depths of a bay choppy from the manoeuvres of errand boys and furniture removers, and straddles the two vantage-points which pit exterior reality against the subjectivism of the passage like a man teetering on the brink of his abysses, tempted equally by the spate of objects and by his own whirlpool -- in this strange zone where everything lapses, attention and inattention alike, let us halt briefly in order to experience fully our vertigo....Here the two great cross-currents of the mind are equivalent to one another and lose sway over me. Two universes discolor at their meeting point, like a woman painted with all the artifices of love when the first rays of morning light, having lifted the room's skirt of curtains, gently infiltrate themselves. An instant elapses, then the scales dip toward the multifarious gulf of appearances. How weirdly attractive are things thrown together at random: over there is somebody crossing a street, and the space surrounding him is solid; over there are a piano on the sidewalk and automobiles seated beneath their drivers. Pedestrians of unequal shape, matter of uneven temper, everything changes in accordance with the laws of disparity, and I stand agog at God's imagination, an imagination adjusted to minute and discordant variations, as if his chief venture were, on any given day, bringing together an orange and a string, a wall and a glance...[17]

Benjamin's sympathetic attitude to Aragon's project should come as no surprise, given the former's concern for rescuing the modes of consciousness that might allow us to break out of conceptual and propositional relations with the world/city.

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[17]Louis Aragon, <u>Le Paysan de Paris</u> (Frederick Brown, Tr.) (New Jersey; Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1970) pp. 36-37.

Benjamin responded to Aragon's way of looking at the city as a text overlaid with meanings, and to his attempt to find the forms of experience in which the thinker could connect with these meanings.

But Benjamin mistrusted the mythological side of Aragon's narrative; the way in which the poet attempted merely to <u>dream</u> around the signs that he read from the surface of the city, surrounding each object plucked from the city with a bouquet of metaphors. Benjamin's goal, he wrote, was not to dream but to wake;

> Abgrenzung der Tendenz dieser Arbeit gegen Aragon: Wahrend Aragon im Traumbereiche beharrt, soll hier die Konstellation des Erwachens gefunden werden. Wahrend bei Aragon ein impressionistisches Element bleibt -- die >>Mythologie<<-- (und dieser Impressionismus ist für die vielen gehaltlosen Philosopheme des Buches verantwortlich zu machen) geht es hier um Auflosung der >>Mythologie<< in den Geschichtsraum. Das freilich kann nur geschehen durch die Erweckung eines noch nicht bewußten Wissens von Gewesenen.[18]

'Waking' (Erweckung) is a central notion in Benjamin's thought, and tied up with the idea of illumination. He thought that the great achievement of the surrealist movement was to have secularised the idea of illumination, having transformed it into "a profane illumination of materialist anthropological inspiration.."[19]

Benjamin uses 'Profane illumination' as an umbrella term for relations to the world in which the object slips free from the subject's conceptual grasp (we have already seen several of

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[18]<u>Gesammelte Schriften</u> V:II, p. 1014

[19]Quoted in Buck-Morss (1977) p. 125.

Benjamin's models for this sort of experience). Most religious traditions have some such notion of a sudden lightning-like illumination in which truth is perceived; the idea that there is a sort of experience far above our everyday forms. But with the increasing secularisation of life, and the triumph of the mechanistic world-view these insights threatened to disappear. The chief benefits of surrealism for Benjamin was that it attempted to keep alive this impulse to illumination. But he distrusted the irrationalist thrust within surrealism, and criticised it for being mythological;

> To win for the revolution the powers of being high: surrealism revolves around this in every book and endeavor. That can be called its most particular task.
> [But] the most passionate examination of hash-smoking will certainly not teach half as much about thinking (which is an imminent narcotic) as the profane illumination of thinking about hash-smoking. The reader, the person thinking, the person waiting, the _flaneur_, are just as much _Illuminati_ as the opium-eater, the dreamer, the intoxicated, and they are profaner.[20]

Mythology

Benjamin's main criticism of Aragon was that his thinking was imbued with a mythological sediment that needed to be cleared away. The mythological way of experiencing and describing leads us to reproduce the structures of domination in our society, in spite of the fact that our way of seeing might _seem_ startlingly original.

'Mythology' is a key critical term for Benjamin, and in this he clearly shows himself to be an Enlightenment thinker, since

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[20]Ibid., p. 126.

myth has always been at the heart of the Enlightenment's 'unfinished project'; standing as the opposite of the movement towards clarity. It is interesting to look at some of the influences on the way that Benjamin uses the term.

In the main writings of the Enlightenment, myth is seen as the unreflective realm of special interests that prevents mankind from taking the historically necessary step towards full autonomy. Myth is seen as a pre-scientific understanding of nature, a systematised blindness which justifies injustice, at best only a flawed inkling of a truth that would later be brought to full development by science.

This analysis of myth produced a strong reaction amongst the Romantics, who attempted to show that there were irreducible truths embodied within myths, and that both the truths and the mythical forms in which they were embodied were necessary to prevent the dissolution of society. Myths represented a collective view of the cosmos and enshrined the values of a people, preventing the crisis of meaning always risked by the men of the Aufklärung.[21]

The romantic view of myth had a revival at the beginning of the century in the circle that gathered around Stephan Georg and

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[21]This is clearly Wagner's view of what he is doing in re-working the legends of the Rhine. Some writers, such as Holderlin or Novalis, attempted to give their contemporaries new myths based on the ancient Greeks; their goal was in part to realign their culture, in part to rescue the truths of the ancient myths. See also Manfred Frank, Der kommende Gott. Vorlesungen uber die neue Mythologie. (Frankfurt/M 1982)

which included the philosopher Ludwig Klages, whose irrationalist readings Benjamin had early attacked in his book on Trauerspiel. Like the earlier Romantics, this new generation called for the creation of new myths which could strengthen society.

As Winifried Menninghaus has pointed out, it is in the context of this movement of conservative mythologists that we must situate Benjamin's anti-mythological stance in Das Passagen-Werk.[22] He writes, in a passage used as the epigraph to the paperback edition of the book, that his goal is;

> Gebiete urbar zu machen, auf denen bisher nur der Wahnsinn wuchert. Vordringen mit der geschliffenen Axt der Vernunft und ohne rechts noch links zu sehen, um nicht dem Grauen anheimzufallen, das auf der Tiefe des Urwalds lockt. Aller Boden mußte einmal von der Vernunft urbar gemacht, vom Gestrupp des Wahns und des Mythos gereinigt werden. Dies soll fur den des 19ten Jahrhunderts hier geleistet werden.[N 1,4][23]

This seems to be a classic statement of an Enlightenment aim, with its metaphors of chopping and clearing, and the portrayal of a threatening underworld of unreason that lies to the side of the path to be cleared.[24] But it also owes a debt to

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[22]W. Menninghaus, "Science des seuils. La théorie du mythe chez Walter Benjamin," (traduit de l'allemand par Alain Juster) in W. Benjamin et Paris.

[23]Citations from within the body of Das Passagen-Werk will be given in this form. The letter refers to the section of the book in which the quotation is found; within each section the references are arranged numerically, and in subdivisions represented by a small case letter.

[24]It should be noted, though, that the way Benjamin uses 'Mythos' in this passage is somewhat different from the usual ways we encounter it, for he is writing of myths embedded within the 19th century -- not the revived myths of Wagner or Holderlin, but the actual myths of modernity itself. In another place he

the Romantic idea that myths encapsulate profound truths (just as religion contains within it the record of human learning about illumination experiences). But this truth has to be rescued in order to be used by reason; myth appreciated without conscious reasoning mediation will continue to mystify and shore up oppression.

It should be noted that Benjamin's theory of myth was also influenced by Freud, who used reason to track the mythic structures within dreams and thus read off the most important factors buried within the subject's waking life. For Freud, the mythic contours of the dream _express_ the psychological forces at work in the subject's day to day existence; forces, however, which remain invisible if one only has access to the subject's account of what she has done, thought and seen.

Benjamin used myth in a similar way, although instead of a dreaming subject, he saw myths in terms of a dreaming collectivity;

> Die okonomischen Bedingungen, unter denen die Gesellschaft existiert, kommen im Uberbau zum Ausdruck; genau wie beim Schlafer ein ubervoller Magen im Trauminhalt, obwohl er ihn kausal >>bedingen<< mag, nicht seine Abspiegelung sondern seinen Ausdruck findet. Das Kollektiv druckt zunachst seine Lebensbedingungen aus. Sie finden im Traum ihren Ausdruck und im Erwachen ihre Deutung.[K 2,5][25]

According to Benjamin, these myths are expressed in the forms

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states that his goal in his work on Paris to be is to wake up, 'Erwachen aus dem neunzehnten Jahrhundert' [N4,3], by which he means to wake up from the mythical view, to move towards a profane illumination that will dispel the darkness of myth, yet at the same time save the truth within.

[25]Quoted in Meninnghaus, p. 536.

visible in the city;

> Diese Untersuchung, die es im Grunde mit dem Ausdruckscharakter der frühesten Industrieerzeugnisse, der fruhesten Industriebauten, der fruhesten Maschinen aber auch der fruhesten Warenhauser, Reklamen etc. zu tun hat, wird...fur den Marxismus wichtig. [N 1a,7]

One can look at the forms in the city and read from them the forces at work in the material life of society. Aragon's method of mythological perception is useful because of its extreme sensitivity to elements in the environment. Benjamin will link this method of perception to a theory of expression developed from both Marx and Freud, and thus develop a method for reading the city as if it were a text, uncovering from it its buried meanings.

Conclusion; Myth Experience and the City

So Aragon's conscious attempts to derange his senses, to break the reasonable picture of the city which he holds inside him, reveal a side of the city that is new and could be useful. But it requires the work of a critic like Benjamin to remove the mythic distorsion; to reveal the grounding of Aragon's images in the structures of material existence just as Freudian analysts read a dream, or a Marxist reads the traces of the base within the superstructure.

What sets Benjamin off form other theorists is his emphasis on the importance of both movements in the reading of the city; his idea that we must pay attention both to method (strategies for decoding myths) and to the modes and practices of experience that give the raw material upon which this work of reading must

rest. Before the reading begins there must be some perception that de-seats the reader, that opens him/her to the city in a movement of pure and bewildering attention. Perceiving the city with a picture of it already in mind will lead to a reproduction of that picture within every perception. Instead, the thinker must respond to the city as something living, full of meanings and strategies of its own. Only then can one think one's way to something that is not already known.

CHAPTER IV
Benjamin's Critical History

>>Die Reform des Bewußtseins besteht nur darin, daß man die Welt...aus dem Traume über sich selbst aufweckt.<<
-Karl Marx[1]

The insidious thing about the causal point of view is that it leads us to say: "Of course, it had to happen like that." Whereas we ought to think: it may have happened like that and also in many other ways.
-L. Wittgenstein

Benjamin compared historical study to the use of a stereoscope.[N1,8; N2a,3] Stereoscopes, which were popular in the last half of the nineteenth century, were devices with a wooden slot at one end in which two photographs were placed, one slightly different from the other. The viewer, looking through the lense of the device, would see the scene that had been photographed -- a landscape, a popular monument, one of the wonders of nature -- as if she were actually standing before it. Though each picture on its own was flat and unassuming, viewing the two together brought the scene alive. Objects and details became visible for the first time, things that had been lost in the background came into focus and stood out, the world suddenly appeared in three dimensions.

For Benjamin, historical knowledge is something like this. We see an element around us with one eye, while we look to the past with the other. The past helps us to clarify the present, and vice versa. Our understanding of events and problems in the

[1]These two quotations stand as the epigraph for Benjamin's notes on his theory of knowledge and his theory of history. (Das Passagen-Werk p. 570)

world around us aids us in grasping similar phenomena in the past; and social forms in the past show us that the world around us need not stay exactly as it is, because it already has been different.[N7a,3] This helps to release us from the power of myth, one of the principal functions of which is to veil the social formations around us so that they appear to be like parts of the natural world, as if they were 'second nature' and not changeable by human beings.[N9,5] The benefit of the materialist method is that it "leads the past to put the present into a critical condition" [7a,3]

So, the goal of Das Passagen-Werk is to help gain freedom from the myths of the nineteenth century. Benjamin saw himself as writing a history of the nineteenth century that would finally bring the last half of it of into clarity for people of the twentieth, a history which for the first time would sail clear of the 'nonsense' that most works on the period had fallen into.[N1,4] History, in Benjamin's last works, is portrayed as the best tool for gaining a critical understanding of the city.

Against Cultural Historicism

But even though historical study can help to wake us up from myth -- when it is pursued with presence of mind[2] and a concern for present struggles -- there is always a temptation to fall back into epic history, a form of history which is itself mythological. History may well serve to bring us into a closer

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[2]My translation of 'Geistesgegenwart,' which he sees as the central political/ethical category guiding his research; the care and concern with the problems of one's own time.[N12a,1; N11,4]

and more acute relation to what is going on in our cities and in our political world (by freeing us from our habitual actions, opening up new practices and ways of experiencing) but on the other hand, if it is not pursued with the historical materialist's orientation towards liberation, it can actually increase the weight of modern oppression.

This happens when historians pass on traditions as if they were commodities. Susan Buck-Morss writes;

> Benjamin's judgement of this attitude was abrupt and unequivocal: those who were able to take pleasure in culture as it was transmitted, did so out of empathy with the oppressors. From the standpoint of the given-present, the past appeared as a the source of origins which explained (away) the present. Or, past history was read as the boundary that set off the present era and gave proof of its uniqueness. Such history was comfortable and complacent, tempting one to sink into the past as in an armchair. It totally obscured a revolutionary vision of the present as itself the boundary for a radically different future.[3]

Cultural historicism tends to ignore, or at least gloss over, the fact that the tradition that it passes on can only be one part of what actually happened. Since it emphasizes only those things that have continued on into the present it tends to leave out all of history's failures -- all the things that have been left behind in the success of a particular nation or dynasty, practice or idea.

Cultural historicism presents only the victor's history.[4] It

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[3]Susan Buck-Morss, 'Walter Benjamin -- Revolutionary Writer,' In New Left Review July-August 1981, p.60.

[4]"Nur dem Geschichtsschreiber wohnt die Gab bei, im Vergangenen den Funken der Hoffnung anzufachen, der davon durchdrungen ist: auch die Toten werden vor dem Feind, wenn er siegt, nicht sicher sein. Und dieser Feind hat zu siegen nicht

doesn't do justice to the fact that in each epoch there is an infinity of things going on, as in our own, and that any historical narrative is like a narrow path crossing a forest; it reveals only an infinitesimal bit of what is actually there.[5]

Benjamin wants to develop a historical practice that will look at more of the past than that which was successful in it-- those tendencies that flourished and still have an influence on the present; he wants to look at struggles which were unsuccessful, thinkers who failed to gain long-lasting influence, practices which died out. Focussing on these things can help us step back from the present, put it into question, see the extent to which it is contingent. This helps us to free ourselves from its mythic sway, and aids us in our struggles to be free from it, our struggles to formulate new practices. Benjamin's goal is to construct a historical method which allow us to pick up the threads in history that can supply us with revolutionary aid in the struggles in which we are involved, threads which have fallen out of sight within the bourgeois histories we find propping up

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aufgehört."('Über den Begriff der Geschichte,' In Illuminationen (Frankfurt/M; Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977) pp. 251-263, p. 253.

[5]We are automatically aware of the way in which our own time is made up of a bewildering thicket of tendencies and counter-tendencies, progressive and regressive forces, hopeful moments and moments which push us to despair. We would be very sceptical if anybody tried to sum up our century or decade in a few phrases, or even in a very large book. But we have a tendency to be much less sceptical of somebody who writes a book that purports to describe the Enlightenment, the Victorian era, or the sixteenth century. Benjamin strives for a historical method that will do justice to the complexity of the epochs studied, that will make no attempt to describe the past in a definitive way.

the present order.

Thus history must centre around the present and the elements of present existence which we consider problematic -- struggles which we are engaged in, the movements which threaten us, our opportunities for meaningful action. Benjamin, who had long been attracted to revolutionary Marxism, and had fallen under the influence of the Marxist Bertolt Brecht in the years in which he was writing Das Passagen-Werk, saw these opportunities in terms of revolutionary socialism.[6] This gave a historical framework for Benjamin's concern with salvation, a concern which he saw as the gold to be smuggled from the edifice of theology in order to enrich the coffers of secular marxism.

History, Theology and Progress

Benjamin's theory of history is based on the idea that there is a fundamental functional similarity between Marxism and theology that allows insights from one to be applied within the other. He believes that both are oriented towards forms of salvation, that they are centred on similar theories of time and that they both aim at overcoming history.

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[6]But of course it goes without saying that the historiographical model that Benjamin laid out can be used to apply to any of the other struggles in which we are involved. For example, somebody who believed that formulating an ecological theory was the most important intellectual task of his generation, and wanted to step away from mankind's war-like relations with the ecosphere, might want to write a history of how this relation arose, or of other societies with alternate views, or of the body of theorists within our own century who have tried to lay out ways in which we can relate to the physical world as a non-dominating partner.

In 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte' these insights are developed around an opposition that Benjamin sees between the time of myth and the time of the Messiah -- Benjamin's allegorical presentation of two fundamental ways of experiencing the historical continuum. Mythic time, for him, is the historical time in which mankind is embedded, which moves in eternal cycles of birth, death and regeneration. It is unredeemed time, because within it, within a purely natural view of man, suffering is merely a form of failure, and injustice can only be seen as something which must be borne.

According to Benjamin, mythic time is not limited to pre-modern eras, but in fact underlies all of modernity as well. Although structures of domination, violence and systemic injustice take new forms in the modern world (with industrial capitalists standing in for tribal war-lords) the basic relations are the same as in the primitive world; a small group of men preserves the rest of humanity in ignorance and need.[7] For Benjamin the concept 'mythology' refers both to the mythical relation with the object-world that preserves mankind within an unredeemed life, and also to the cultural manifestations (textual, architectural, spatial) which buttress and reflect this

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[7]This insight, that certain basic power relations and behavior patterns within modernity are just new forms of ancient relations of domination (that, for example, cultural historicism may serve the same oppressive function in modern society that force and violence did on the pre-historic world) proved to be one of Benjamin's most influential ideas. It stands behind many of the formulations of Adorno and Horkheimer in The Dialectic of Enlightenment about the mythic elements alive within the Enlightenment.

fundamental relation and its socio-economic concomitants.

To this conception of a mythic time which is both homogeneous (the eternal play of the same forces) and empty (with no times which can be seen to stand above any others) Benjamin opposes the concept of meassianic time. He develops an idea of a redemptive state of time which stands outside of nature's cycles. His source for this was primarily the texts of Lurianic kabbalism, in which God's truth was portrayed as scattered throughout the world; embedded but hidden within the historic continuum. In this view history is not empty and eternally the same, but the site of hidden moments of godly time. Just as the job of the kabballist within Jewish myticism was to sift through texts and rework them to reveal the true word of God, so the historian was to rummage through history in order to find the elements and images which he could use to show his way free of the spell of the eternal return of the same.

Benjamin not only believed that there were many similarities between Marxism and theology; he also believed that the only hope for historical materialism was if it adopted theology as its model of history and experience.

There are several reasons for this. First, both historical materialism and theology see mankind as being fundamentally misaligned with nature. For Marxists, this is because humankind remains trapped within the realm of necessity. Man becomes the slave of work instead of being able to cooperate consciously with his fellows to make labor into a tool for the collective control

of the planet. One sees something similar in Jewish theology, which portrays profane men as remaining unilluminated about a world which actually holds within it the keys to their salvation.

Second, both traditions portray time as fallen and unredeemed. For Marx the historic continuum is the pre-history of a future in which people will have become realigned with the world. Jewish theologists see ordinary time as mere history, something opposed to the messianic order. Both historical materialism and Jewish theology see history as having its completion sometime in the future, either through the proletariat rising up and making a definitive break towards a truly human order, or through the coming of the Messiah.

Benjamin was not the only writer of this period to draw explicit parallels between Marxism and theology, but he was one of the few who saw this as a similarity which actually increased the legitimacy of Marxism rather than putting it into doubt.

Where Benjamin breaks with Marxism, and where he thinks that theology is not only superior to historical materialism but can also serve as a corrective to it, is in his view of progress. Marxism (or at least the variant of Marxism influential in Benjamin's day) saw a process immanent in history which would lead to the triumph of the working class and a definitive break with the realm of necessity. "Nothing," Benjamin wrote, "has corrupted the German working class so much as the notion that it

was moving with the current."[8] This belief led to the idea that it was not necessary to <u>search</u> for the means by which the working class could free itself from contemporary power relations; they were led to believe that the practices they were actually involved in would eventually lead them to freedom. Benjamin, with his saturnine emphasis on the almost insuperable odds against achieving happiness <u>within</u> history, and his explicit view of natural time as the mythic realm of eternal return, attempted to render historical materialism more sophisticated by examining and re-shaping the concept of progress at its base.

Benjamin's fundamental idea is that progress is a form of interruption, a rupture which breaks the usual pattern of history rather than a tendency latent within history itself;

> Fortschritt ist nicht in der Kontinuität des Zeitverlaufs sondern in seinen Interferenzen zu Hause: dort wo ein wahrhaft Neues zum ersten Mal mit der Nuchternheit der Fruhe sich fuhlbar macht.[N9 7].

One of the main goals of any serious project of materialist history must be to debunk traditional views of progress;

> Es kann als eines der methodischen Objekte dieser Arbeit angesehen werden, einen historischen Materialismus zu demonstrieren, der die Idee des Fortschrits in sich annihiliert hat.[N2,2][9]

Benjamin believes that the term 'progress' underwent a semantic shift after the Enlightenment. Before the 19th century the concept still had a critical function. Some trends, ideas,

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[8]Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' quoted in Buck-Morss (1981) p. 54.

[9]Also (in the N Konvolut) 10,2; 11,4; 11a,1; 11,3; 12,3; 13,1; 13,2; 13,3; 13a,1; 13a,2; 13a,3; and all of 14.

and institutions were seen as progressive, but others were seen as 'regressive'; the concept of 'progressiveness' was used to distinguish between the two.

When the middle class gained power in the 19th century the term lost much of its critical force, especially after the popularization of the doctrine of Darwinian natural selection which portrayed progress as something that happened _in_ nature; various species gradually perfecting themselves, moving to higher and more complex forms. This encouraged the belief that society was progressing in the same ways, no matter how much life in the coal mines and the factory towns seemed to belie the fact[10].

Benjamin's goal was to rehabilitate the early Enlightenment view of progress, and thus to remove the confidence in history that tended to incline Marxists of his time to a paradoxical inaction, or reformism.[11] Given his view of progress, it is easy to see why theology became such an important model for him. Marxism could only take natural science as its model if there really _was_ a progressive movement in the economic life of

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[10]One might be tempted to ask what is mythical about this, since it is based on the very opposite of cyclic return, i.e. since progress theorists believe that there is some meaningful movement forward in history.

For Benjamin, this view of progress as a sort of escalator operating in history is mythical because it is counterfactual. History really _is_ cyclical for Benjamin, (at least until we make some real break with it) and portraying it as leading somewhere on its own just misleads us about our need to change it.

[11]Under the apprehension that they were on history's side and that they would thus triumph eventally, politicians such as Korsch were willing to take a reformist stance. They might have been more dubious if they had not thought they were moving with history's stream.

society. If there were economic laws, akin to the laws of biology, that determined the growth and development of capitalist societies towards free-er and more just forms[12], then a Marxist could just find out what these laws were and help people adapt their behavior to them.

But if there are no such laws in history, only cycles wherein the same forces reappear in different patterns, then materialism could no longer put any trust in nature. Theology steps in as the science that is oriented towards preserving hope in the face of a nature which cannot be trusted to satisfy human longing for a just life. In spite of the grimness of the world, Jewish mysticism shows that the Messiah may enter at any moment;

> Den Juden wurde die Zukunft aber darum noch nicht zur homogenen und leeren Zeit. Denn in ihr war jede Sekunde die kleine Pforte, durch die der Messias treten konnte."[13]

Likewise, the historical materialist can orient herself to showing how every era offers opportunities for practices of freedom, for some sort of break with history as it stands.

Revolution?

One might well ask whether what Benjamin is talking about here is revolution in the Marxist sense, or something else altogether. Although Benjamin pays a great deal of attention to the revolutions of his own day and has two deft articles on

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[12]Marx claims, in the 1867 Preface to _Capital_ to have discovered "the natural laws of capitalist production...these tendencies working with iron necessity towards inevitable results." from _Selected Writings_ D. McLellan (ed.) (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1977,) p. 416.

[13]'Uber den Begriff der Geschichte' op. cit. p. 261.

revolutionary art[14] the examples that he gives of breaks with history generally tend to refer to _momentary_ breaks with mythic time, rather than the definitive breaks that we usually think of as the goal of revolution. In a move more common to anarchists that to Marxists, Benjamin portrays these _momentary_ breaks as the goal of revolution.[15] It is in these moments that mankind experiences a redemptive order, what life could, ideally, be like, and this makes the old order intolerable. This momentary break from history is seen in terms of a sudden opening into a heightened time beyond everyday existence;

> Die Geschichte ist Gegenstand einer Konstruktion, deren Ort nicht die homogene und leere Zeit sondern die von Jetztzeit erfullte bildet.[16]

A break similar to this occurs when the historian manages to gain access to historical time and places it in relation to the present, thus freeing himself from the spell of his time. As an intellectual practice this makes a great deal of sense, and whereas the _political_ examples that Benjamin gives in his essays seem to necessitate a bit of theoretical stretching (such as

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[14]The essay on surrealism and 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit'.

[15]I am referring here to the emphasis that Bakunin and Kropotkin put on revolution being a training towards freedom. In the high point of revolutionary action people break free from their life of training in obedience and servility and rediscover their true nature. It is then impossible for them to be subjugated in the same way that they were before the revolution, even if the conservative order is restored. This is one of Bakunin's principle points in 'Statism and Anarchy' (In S. Dolgoff (ed.) _Bakunin on Anarchism._ (Montréal; Black Rose Books, 1980) pp.323- 350, esp. pp. 333-36.)

[16]'Uber den Begriff der Geschichte' op. cit. p. 258.

Robespierre's use of Roman symbols as a meeting with the 'Jetztzeit' of the ancient world, blasting open the historical continuum[17]) the examples which refer to scholarly practice tend to be quite convincing.

But it is hard here not to come back to reservations similar to those I mentioned in Chapter II; the difficulty in imagining what sort of political action could ever come forth from Benjamin's writings. This is not a question one would _always_ want to ask of a political theorist, (since the values of a thinker's ideas may well lie apart from their immediate political pay-off). But in Benjamin's case it is important, since he comes back over and over again to the idea that his philosophy must lead to a break with history, that it must come to fruition in action.

We can see how Benjamin's philosophy _might_ serve as a springboard for action. _Das Passagen-Werk_ if it had been completed, would have given people (not necessarily the proletariat) a vision into the nineteenth century that would allow them to see at least some elements of their own time without mythic blinders. This would serve as the shock which would counteract that of modern urban life (see Chapter V), and form the basis of a counter-experience that would lead people to perceive the necessity of making a definitive break with history -- it would produce a moment of destruction in which people would lash out to change the world around them.

The resulting political action might be a revolution, but it

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[17]Ibid., p.258.

would seem to have very little to do with the <u>Marxist</u> conception
of revolution. Marx saw revolutions as a political actions in
line with historical development; they allowed the social
relations of a culture to be brought into line with its
technology and economic development. But in Benjamin's writings
the revolution is an end in itself. Instead of being an
instrumental moment that brings about justice through the sounder
organization of the society and the economy Benjamin's revolution
would be a moment of cathartic destruction. In spite of his
frequent references to Marx's writings, Benjamin holds a theory
of spontaneous non-instrumental political action that is much
closer to the views of nineteenth century anarchism than it is to
traditional Marxism.

If this is indeed Benjamin's view of political action it is
hard not to have reservations about it, and hard not to suspect
that Benjamin's theological model of experience has here led him
astray. Although we can be sure that if the Messiah someday comes
it will be a just reign that is created, and an Edenic language
restored, we cannot have the same assurance about revolution,
particularly one with the primarily destructive aims that
Benjamin describes. It is hard to imagine a jump that would get
us outside of history, that would allow us to escape domination
and the thrall of mythic time. This seems like a comparatively
injudicious position for a thinker such as Benjamin, who saw so
clearly the immense difficulty in gaining even the slightest
freedom from the mythological weight blinding him to his own

time. It hearkens back to another form of melancholy, that of the nineteenth century anarchists such as Bakunin and Kropotkin, who were so throroughly disgusted with the societies of their own time that they longed to see them razed, because almost anything would be better than what was standing.

The view of political action in Benjamin's last works cannot but seem unsubtle beside the painstaking project of rescue outlined in Das Passagen-Werk.

The main focus of the rest of this paper will be on the other side of Benjamin's thought, the work of rescue and recovery, the part of his project aimed at demystifying and rescuing the past. But it always should be remembered that he considers this as only half his work; profane illumination and the expansion of experience need to find their completion in some form of definitive break with history, whatever the form of that break may be.

Chapter V
Urban Experience

For Walter Benjamin the city is not a focus but a field; a field which shapes a set of practices and spaces, encourages certain patterns of behavior, allows some political actions, renders others irrelevant, and in general gives definition and form to the way of life we call modernity. The city cannot be analyzed directly, but only across this field of elements that it influences.

In earlier chapters I tried to show some of Benjamin's strategies for analysing these objects, cities, which are so close to us, and yet so elusive and untouchable. On the one hand, I showed that he developed strategies of experience, where the goal was to find experiences that would break us out of our usual ways of seeing (such as Aragon's surrealist trances of metaphor, or the historian's stereoscope). On the other hand, I showed his attempt to develop strategies of criticism to refine the intuitions gained from these experiences, and to bring them over into philosophy.[1]

Nonetheless, all that is just one side of Benjamin's view of the relation between cities and experience. For he realizes that the city is not just a text that we can look at with varying

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[1] With the goal throughout being to gain freedom from the present. This is taken in two senses: freedom from the present time, with its welter of habits and practices into which we are frozen; and also freedom from the dull weight of present things as they reveal themselves to casual consciousness. Thought has the power to estrange us from the present and open a path to the secular illumination of objects through attention.

degrees of care and canniness, with combinations of open attentiveness and theoretical rigor. We may attempt to approach the city as a text, but at the same time that we are reading it, it is reading us, molding us into a certain forms. The city invades and shapes us even as we are attempting to decipher it.

One of the ways that Benjamin examines the city's influence on modern experience is through an analysis of the traces of this influence in the works of Baudelaire. He sees Baudelaire as the first poet of modernity, the first poet to take stock of the new basis of experience and to try to formulate a poetic strategy that would encompass it. Baudelaire, more than any other writer of the nineteenth century, recognized his new place within society (i.e. as a writer unprotected by the patronage system) and the fact that this society was grounded in a dubious experience.

Baudelaire, introduced Les Fleurs du Mal with an address to his audience, in which he described the experience that he believed had formed them: one in which they are all subject to a fatal detachment from their own sensations; caught on a spiral which makes them ever more jaded and forced to seek ever stronger pleasures. The fatal end of modern experience is boredom. It is the fate of most of Baudelaire's readers, and Les Fleurs du Mal is aimed, as Benjamin points out[2], at a generation that will find

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[2]'Uber einige Motive bei Baudelaire in Illuminationen. pp. 185 - 229 p. 185.

the reading of poetry <u>difficult</u>;

[Parmi les vices] Il en est un plus laid, plus méchant, plus
immonde!
Quoiqu'il ne pousse ni grands gestes ni grands cri,
Il ferait volontiers de la terre un débris
Et dans un bâillement avalerait le monde;

C'est l'Ennui! -- l'oeil chargé d'un pleur involontaire,
Il rêve d'échafauds en fumant son houka.
Tu le connais, lecteur, ce monstre délicat,
--Hypocrite lecteur, -- mon semblable, -- mon frère![3]

In the nineteenth century, Paris had a reputation as the
world's most grippingly modern city. In spite of this, boredom is
talked about constantly in novels and poems of the period, in
accounts of the life of high society, and even in the travelogues
written about the city by foreigners[4]. Baudelaire uses the term
'Spleen' to refer to the specifically modern form of boredom that
dooms his audience to an angry and weary detachment from the
world and their lives in it, one that "kills interest and open-
ness"[5]. It is basically this form of bored detachment that
prevents moderns from connecting with lyric poetry. The audience
to which lyric poetry was formerly aimed has now become used to a
different way of experiencing the world and time, and can no
longer be effected by the usual poetic tropes and figures.

This concern with boredom/spleen is the basis of one of the
deepest affinities between Baudelaire and Benjamin. Melancholy
and ennui -- two modes of being in which the individual feels cut

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[3]From <u>Les Fleurs du Mal; édition de 1861</u> (Paris; Editions
Gallimard, 1972) p. 32.

[4]<u>Das Passagen-Werk</u> Konvolut D, 'Die Langeweile'.

[5]Ibid.

off from the world -- are among Benjamin's most often-recurring concerns, largely because they form the reverse side of the illuminatory moments that he takes as the ideal of experience. His first major work uncovered melancholy as the guiding sensibility of the seventeenth century baroque Trauerspiel. The arcades project finds it again in the nineteenth century, no longer as the territory of monks or Lutheran dramatists, but of the urban mass as well. If melancholy centred in earlier centuries around a longing for God, in modern times it comes forth as a frustrated need to touch reality and have some full experience of it. In Benjamin's theory of modernisation, which obviously mirror's Weber's, it is not just the gods who have vanished from the world, it is the world itself which has disappeared.

Memory and Remembrance, 'Erlebnis' and 'Erfahrung'

For Benjamin this has a great deal to do with modern rationality, which is intent on the immediate analysis of phenomena in a way that converts them quickly into useable knowledge at the expense of allowing them to become part of personal experience. The argument which Benjamin constructs around this point serves as a lynchpin to much of his later work so it deserves close examination.

Benjamin looks at Baudelaire's work, and at the works of a group of early twentieth century thinkers who were reflecting about aesthetics, perception and modern life. He found, in the works of Proust, Freud, Valery and Bergson, a general recognition

that there was something new and problematic about the way that we moderns experience the world. The perception that the writers shared was that there had been a some basic change in the passage from folk (premodern) societies to our modern one, some basic rearrangement of the ground rules of every day experience.

Freud, for example, saw the change as centring around the mind's increasing ability to protect itself against stimuli. Freud's idea was that there is some basic difference between the conscious memory of events and those memories which do not come to full consciousness. For Freud, the mind is a fragile organ, and needs to be protected from sudden stimuli. The intellect has an important role to play in parrying shocks from the world so that they do not reach the brain without first being worked over and rendered assimilable by consciousness:

> Es wäre also durch die Besonderheit ausgezeichnet, daß der Erregungsvorgang in ihm nicht wie in allen anderen psychischen Systemen eine daurnde Veränderung seiner Elemente hinterläßt, sondern gleichsam im Phänomen des Bewußtwerdens verpufft.[6]

Consciousness thus serves to protect us against stimuli, shielding the mind from the shocks that it would get from the world, and preventing any traumatically strong experiences from reaching the mind and memory;

> Für den lebenden Organismus ist der Reizschutz eine beinahe wichtigere Aufgabe als die Reizaufnahme; er ist mit einem eignen Energievorrat ausgestattet und muß vor allem bestrebt sein, die besonderen Formen der Energieumsetzung, die in ihm spielen, vor dem gleichmachenden, also zerstörendem Einfluß

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[6]Sigmund Freud, Jenseits des Lustprinzips. 3. Aufl., Wien 1932. S. 31/2. Quoted in 'Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire,' op. cit. p. 190.

der übergroßen, draußen arbeitenden Energien zu bewahren.[7] Our consciousness does this by zeroing in and intellectually fixing events and perceptions, removing them from the tissue of signs in which they are embedded, and thus dulling the intensity of our experiences. In our childhood, when the defensive mechanisms of our mind are less efficient, we are likely to receive experiences with an intensity that makes them return in our dreams and actions for the rest of our lives. But as we grow older we learn to block shock experiences more and more; our minds break up experiences through analysis so that they can be put at the disposal of our conscious rationality. We gain voluntary recall and control over our past but at the same time prevent our experiences from setting down the deep traces within us that events still could exert in childhood. Freud saw this in a positive light, the ego gaining autonomy; but Benjamin sees it as leading to a state in which we become fundamentally cut off from having meaningful experience of the world.

This sort of argument cannot help but arouse our post-structuralist and post-Wittgensteinian scepticism about internal selves and 'meaningfulness'. But 'Meaningful' in this sense is not a metaphysical term. It simply refers to the body of traces that is set down within the mind of the subject, which are not entirely conscious but which nevertheless exert a lasting influence, in the same way that childhood memories may be 'forgotten' in some sense (i.e. not accessible except through

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[7]Ibid.

some long and difficult process such as Freudian analysis) yet

may still exert an influence on later life.

Benjamin uses these ideas of Freud to cast light on the

belief of Proust and Henri Bergson that there are two types of

memory. One of them 'Erinnerung' (mémoire volontaire) is

voluntary and demystifying. It is the sort exemplified by the

process of analysis, where the intellect is sent back through

former experiences in at attempt to remove the influence of

unacknowledged events which have a negative effect on later life.

The other form of memory is remembrance [Gedachtnis] which calls

up past events, but in such a way as to preserve their strength

and effect. This is Proust's notion of the mémoire involontaire[8]

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[8]The narrator of A la Recherche du temps perdu attempts to touch his childhood by making an effort of conscious reconstruction, but all his mind can recall are lifeless details; a series of mental snapshots to which he feels no great attachment. It is only when a cluster of chance sensations remind his body of similar feelings in the past that the deep recesses of his mind release the feelings and ideas and impressions of the events which had most marked him. The snapshots begin to move in a snow of refound signs and the work of rememberance begins. Instead of destroying the narrator's oldest memories the work of rememberance only enhances and increases their power.

Proust's work of rememberance is the opposite of Freud's but the two projects are theoretically complementary. Where Freud is attempting to banish the ghosts of the past so that the subject can participate in normal work and love, Proust aims to give the subject fuller access to and familiarity with all the various ghosts that work together to make him up. The goal is not a self which will fit into normalized work practices, but one which will have access to all of its past.

The goal of Proust is the overcoming of detachment. The narrator constantly feels detached from the world, as if it was just beyond his reach in spite of all his attempts to think his way towards it [see (for one example among hundreds) A la recherche du temps perdu I p. 717-18]. It is only when he discovers the way that his body stores up memories in spite of his intelligence that he is finally able to gain full access to the world.

but also a distinction developed by Freud's pupil Theodor Reik.

That which is stored in the voluntary memory is much more accessible but it does not have the tissue of resonant interconnections and the long lasting effect of the mémoire involontaire. Benjamin believes that this is true not only of people but also of cultures; with our newspaper archives, our libraries and our mountains of photographs we have gained great control over the data of our past and can call any of it up at will. But cultural remembrance -- which creates tradition and allows people to make sense of the things which happen to them-- is rapidly disappearing.

This is in part due to the fact that our conscious minds have to work overtime to protect us from the shocks of the modern city. We are buffeted by traffic, jostled by crowds, surrounded by cunning advertisements; our senses bombarded by a thousand shocks. Our minds become very efficient at filtering them out, parrying the various thrusts of urban life, so that decreasing amounts can reach us past the fortress of our intelligence;

> Die Chockrezeption wird durch ein Training in der Reizbewaltigung erleichtert, zu der im Notfall sowohl der Traum wie die Errinerug herangezogen werden konnen....Daß der Chock derart abgefangen, derart vom Bewußtsein pariert werde, gabe dem Vorfall, der ihn auslost, den Charakter des Erlebnisses im pragnenten Sinn. Es wurde diesen Vorfall (unmittelbar der Registratur der bewußten Errinerung ihn einverleibend) fur die dichterische Erfahrung sterilisieren.[9]

Implicit in this passage is the a distinction Benjamin gets from Freud between 'Erfahrung' and 'Erlebnis'. 'Erfahrung'

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[9]'Uber einiger motive...' p. 192.

refers to those experiences which leave some trace upon the participant, where the mind has not been able to parry the experience completely with it as own protective apparatus, with its habits and predictive pictures. 'Erlebnis' on the other hand, is a mere living-through of the stimuli, without them leaving any meaningful trace for rememberance, affecting no deep change in the subject. The increasing degree of shock in urban life leads to the gradual replacement of Erfahrung with Erlebnis, where we become very intent on pinning down the things that happen to us, assigning them to a place on a spatial and temporal grid and thus prevent them from having any major effect on us.

> Je großer der Anteil des Chockmoments an den einzelnen Eindrucken ist, je unblassiger das Bewußtsein im Interesse des Reizschutzes auf dem Plan sein muß, je groser der Erfolg ist, mit dem es operiert, desto weniger gehen sie in die Erfahrung ein; desto eher erfullen sie den Begriff des Erlebnisses. Vielleicht kann man die eigentumliche Leistung der Chockabwehr zuletzt darin sehen; dem Vorfall auf Kosten der Inetgritat seines Inhalts eine exakte Zeitstelle im Bewußtsein anzuweisen.[10]

For Benjamin it is modern urban life that has led people to be cut off from meaningful experience. The modern sensation of spleen which was so widely felt in Paris of the ninteenth century, (and is there in a particularly self-aware way in Baudelaire's work) is the angry disattachment of the man "der keine Erfahrung mehr machen kann."[11] The modern realizes that his consciousness, developed to an extreme vigilance by the reactions necessary within the modern city, is ever ready to parry the

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[10]Ibid. p. 193.

[11]Ill. p. 218. "... who can no longer experience."

shocks of sensation and perception, to sterilise both so that they leave no mark on his soul.

Benjamin sees even the increasing comfort of modern life as adding to this deadness. It also leads to a removal of our feeling of solidarity with other people. The feeling of need that we had in other eras made us realize that we could only lead full lives with the aid of others. Modern technological advances which make life increasingly more comfortable tend to hide this interdependence, and make us less aware of the cultures in which we are embedded;

> Valéry, der fur den Symptomkomplex >Zivilisation< einen scharfen Blick hat, kennzeichnet einen der einschlagigen Tatbestande. >>Der Bewohner der großen stadtischen Zentren<<, schreibt er, >>verfallt wieder in den Zustand der Wildheit, will sagen der Vereinzelung. Das Gefuhl, auf die anderen gewiesen zu sein, vordem standig durch das Bedurfnis wachgehalten, stumpft sich in reibungslosen Ablauf des sozialen Mechanismus allmahlich ab. Jede Vervollkommnung dieses Mechanismus setzt gewisse Verhaltungsweisen, gewisse Gefuhlsregungen...außer Kraft.<< Der Komfort isoliert.[12]

Contra Marx

I think that this is a key passage -- it gives a key insight -- for understanding how Benjamin is using his theory of modern experience. In emphasizing the way that modern experience detaches us from our traditions and from other people, destroying solidarity in general, Benjamin is attempting to correct Marx's idea about the function of the modern city. This forms the ground for Benjamin's counter-narrative of modernity and for his attempt to explain why Marx's predictions about the fate of capitalism

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[12]Ibid., p 207.

didn't pan out.

Marx saw the practices set up in the modern city as pushing mankind towards emancipation. Capitalism gradually levels social differences, dividing people into owners and the workers. The class of workers grows as intense competition among the capitalists drives more and more people out of business. A key step is reached when the mass of men (which at first is spread out over the industrialising country), finally finds itself concentrated in a urban centres. It is when people are brought together in cities that the movement towards class consciousness truly begins. The city produces a liberating consciousness because it grounds the practices which make people experience their interconnectedness. Crushed into the same neignbourhoods, forced to work together on assembly lines, people are eventually forced to see that their interests lie with each other, and they develop a sense of class solidarity.[13] The extreme complexity of modern industry forces people to recognize that they cannot exist on their own, but are rather locked within relations of interdependence, that man "in his most individual existence is at the same time a communal being."[14] People are thus able to build up a form of experience through industrial work and urban life that pushes to join together and change the system they find

[13]Karl Marx, 'The Communist Manifesto,' in David McLellan, Karl Marx; Selected Writings. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977) pp. 228-231.

[14]Karl Marx 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts' in McLellan, p. 88.

themselves in.

But Benjamin examines the industrial work process of the late nineteenth century and is less optimistic. Although it could be said of the early stages of capitalist production -- of the stage of manufacture for example -- that it allowed the workers to gain some sort of experience, (in that they had to gain certain skills and perfect them) the later stages of capitalism which depend increasingly on unskilled workers and a reserve army of the unemployed, no longer encourage this;

> Der ungelernte Arbeiter ist der durch die Dressur der Maschine am tiefsten Entwurdigte. Seine Arbeit ist gegen Erfahrung abgedichtet. An ihr hat die Ubung ihr Recht verloren. Was der Lunapark in seinen Wackeltopfen und verwandten Amusements zustande bringt, ist nichts als eine Kostprobe der Dressur, der der ungelernte Arbeiter in der Fabrik unterworfen wird (eine Kostprobe, die ihm zeitweise fur das gesamte Programm zu stehen hatte; denn die Kunst des Exzentriks, in der sich der kleine Mann in den Lunaparks konnte schulen lassen, stand zugleich mit der Arbeitslosigkeit hoch im Flor).[15]

Thus the deterioration of experience actually _begins_ in the factory with industrial work discipline and is then exacerbated by life in the city.

Deeply implicated in the destruction of _Erfahrung_ are the new methods of information circulation. The modern commercial information system, which was founded in the mid- to late nineteenth century, encouraged and preyed upon the distracted urban masses. Newspapers presented information broken up into little bits that are impossible to assimilate into personal experience. Whereas journals at the beginning of the nineteenth

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[15]'Uber einige Motive...' p. 209.

century still attempted to bring together the various elements of urban life and explore what they meant, putting them within a critical perspective, the growing commercialisation of the press menat that criticism was replaced by information circulation.

Without remembrance either in a public or personal form, life in the modern city becomes a series of extremely rapid reactions to the various forms of shock that we are exposed to. Without some form of personal experience as ballast, forming a pressure from within to counter the forces pushing from without, the individual becomes a puppet to exterior forces; shaken about by whatever situation she finds herself in, be that an urban crowd, the assembly line or the blackjack table.

> ...die Vergeblichkeit, die Leere, das Nicht-vollenden-durfen, welches der Tatigkeit des Lohnarbeiters in der Fabrik innewohnt. Auch dessen vom automatischen Arbeitsgang ausgeloste Gebarde erscheint im Spiel, das nicht ohne den geschwinden Handgriff zustande kommt, welcher den Einsatz macht oder die Karte aufnimmt. Was der Ruck in der Bewegung der Maschinerie, ist im Hasardspiel der sogenannte coup. Der Handgriff des Arbeiters an der Maschine ist gerade dadurch mit dem vorhergehenden ohne Zusammenhang, daß er dessen strikte Wiederholung darstellt. Indem jeder Handgriff an der Maschine gegen den ihm voraufgegangen ebenso abgedicht ist, wie ein coup der Hasardpartie gegen den jeweils letzten, stellt die Fron des Lohnarbeiters auf ihre Weise ein Pendant zu der Fron des Spielers. Beider Arbeit ist von inhalt gleich sehr befreit.[16]

Benjamin thus traces a filigree of similarity threaded through modern experiences: the worker at the machine, the gambler at the table, men guiding their way through traffic, people being

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[16]Ibid., p.210. Thus for Benjamin the eternal return of the same, with all its threat of meaninglessness, is not just some abstract concept cooked up in Sils-Maria, but a description of the daily existence of the majority of Europeans.

buffeted by the machines in an amusement park; all are guided by very sudden signals, to which they have to react. The advanced capitalist mode of production as it is revealed in the modern city determines a cluster of practices which tend to hollow people out, leaving them highly manipulable and deeply reactive to modern power. It cuts them off from any experience of class solidarity that would allow them to form a viable counter-practice and fight back. The gambler and the assembly line worker are thus archetypal moderns in Benjamin's eyes, in that their movements are entirely controlled by the machine or the vice which they serve. Rather than forging people together, as in Marx's writings, the practices of city life actually break people apart and dampen any latent revolutionary force. It is thus not particularly surprising that the main figure in Benjamin's essays on the city is not a class, as in Marx's writings, but a crowd, a disaggregate mass.[17]

If the factory floor and the worker neighbourhoods will not produce the consciousness necessary to free people, then freedom must be sought elsewhere. If people in modern cities, fatally detached from their everyday lives, do not naturally gain the forms of experience that will allow them to resist the forces that press in on them, then some such experience must be created artificially.

This is why culture is so important. This is why Benjamin

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[17]This is pointed out in Susan Buck-Morss, The Origin of Negative Dialectics (New York; The Free Press, 1977,) p.160.

switches the focus of materialist analysis from production to consumption, from the practices of labour and making, to strategies for structuring experience. Benjamin is asking what the modern practices are which we can use to gain the forms of experience that will let us free ourselves.

We could describe his strategy as cutural reconstruction; an attempt to show how we can recreate experiences that will allow us to resist the forces of the modern city. The way he pursues this project in Das Passagen-Werk is to search back through some of the practices of urban life in the generations before he was writing, and find those which managed to stand above the fray, to preserve some form of independence. He is not just concerned with exposing the forms of life that exhaust people and prevent them from resisting power. He also finds various ways in which people at the dawn of the modern age managed to make sense of the changing forms of experience; the way they attempted to convert 'Erlebnis' into 'Erfahrung' and maintain a steadiness amidst the shocks of an increasingly kaleidoscopic experience. At the beginning of modernity he finds a body of counter-practices that set up new models of experience, and it is these that he sets out to save. It is thus, as Habermas puts it, a rescuing criticism

Benjamin chooses several forms of life that flourished in the crucial years of change in Paris and zeroes in on them. He sets out a description of the various (useful) strategies that made up these urban practices, but also attempts to show the points where their strategic weakness led them to be vulnerable

to the increasingly virulent social conditions of modernity.

He looks, for example, at the great bourgeois collectors of the nineteenth century such as Pachinger and Edward Fuchs, and finds in them a model modern relation to the object-world. Collectors resist the tide of commoditization by breaking objects out of the constant flow of new goods. They are unaffected by the phantasmagoria of society because their interests lie elsewhere, in the various objects that go unappreciated and which they must rescue and restore to their true place. They do this by putting the objects into a new context, that of the collection. Since things are given meaning by that which surrounds them[18] the collection reveals a new side of the object; it is lifted up from its fallen state and given the attention that marks the beginning of true knowledge. Benjamin shows how Fuchs was led by his habits as a collector to rethink the relations between art and time, and to develop a proto-materialist aesthetics.[19]

The collector who breaks things out of their original situation and puts them in a new constellation to reveal their meaning stands as one of Benjamin's models for critical practice. The task of the critic was "to wrest the elements of a work from their false context and to reconstruct them in a new one in such

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[18]A Victorian hat has quite a different meaning when it is found in a pile of hats at a bazaar than when it is set in a display devoted to the influence of Art Nouveau on 19th century fashion. One sees different details and imagines different uses in each context.

[19]"Fuchs the collector taught Fuchs the theoretician to comprehend much that was barred to him by his time." 'Edward Fuchs: Collector and Historian.' op. cit. p. 234

a way that the original, hidden truth of the work is revealed."[20] This is Benjamin's method in <u>Das Passagen-Werk</u>, which is a collection of 'treasures' saved from the oblivion of forgotten and unread books in the <u>Bibliothèque Nationale</u>. Benjamin believed that just by putting them together in the proper order (i.e., within a proper collection) that their truth meaning and value would show.[21]

The figure of the collector blends, in Benjamin's works, with that of the <u>chiffonier</u>, the rag-picker who moves through Paris picking up the refuse of the city, sorting it and finding new uses for it. As Irving Wohlrath points out[22], this stands as a model for a history such a Benjamin's that looks not to the great texts but to the <u>Abfall</u> of history, to that which has fallen aside of the great historical narratives, and which holds within it in monadological form, the reflections of the life of

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[20]J.M. Gagnebin, 'Zur Geschichtsphilosophie Walter Benjamins', Erlangen 1978, p. 38. Quoted in Frisby (1986) p.226.

[21]This figure of the collector represents a temptation and a tension in Benjamin's works. For unlike the Marxist historian as Benjamin portrays him, the collector does not <u>use</u> his collection. The collector has a non-instrumental attitude towards objects in his collection; they are just there to be appreciated. Likewise, much of the material in <u>Das Passagen-Werk</u> appears to be there because of Benjamin's sheer delight in the witty or grotesque or highly representative. The antiquarian side of Benjamin, which is intent on rescuing the past, tends to do battle with the Marxist side which wants to make the past work on the present. Benjamin's historiography, which I outlined in chapter IV, is an attempt to bring the two sides together.

[22]In 'Et Cetera? The Historian as Chiffonier.' In <u>New German Critique</u> (Fall 1986) pp. 143-168.

the time. Plucked from the dusty masses of old tourist guidebooks Benjamin's quotations reveal a whole hidden life of the nineteenth century, one that doesn't show up in the pages of Marx or Asa Briggs.[23]

In his attempt to think through modern experience by looking at modern practices, Benjamin examines several other figures, such as the urban poet who becomes a sort of fencer with the shocks of modernity, the storyteller who tries to preserve remembrance, and the bohemian conspirators who represent political action in the age of dictatorship and the vanishing public sphere. But for Benjamin the most important of these modern figures was that of the _flâneur_.[24]

The Flâneur

The _flâneurs_ were aristocratic gentlemen of the mid-century who saw themselves as standing free from the market and who looked with disdain on the petty instrumental rationality of their society. Against the growing speed of modern life they opposed an aristocratic leisure; "In 1839 it was elegant to go walking with turtles; this gives some idea of the tempo of _flânerie_." [M 3,8] They saw the passages as extensions of their

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[23]The rag-picker also serves as a model for the modern cynical reasoner, who sees through bourgeois phantasmagoria, perceiving it as a junk pile because he knows that it will all end up in his hands eventually. (Wohlrath, p. 155) The best modern portrayal of the chiffonier in his role as cynic is in the surrealist-influenced film _Les Enfants du Paradis_.

[24]Benjamin devotes an entire section of 'Das Paris des Second Empire bei Baudelaire' (_GS_ I.2, pp.509-604) to 'Der Flaneur'.

salons, and they wandered around distractedly observing what went on, seeing the crowd as the ultimate remedy to boredom.

The flâneurs represented an attempt to resist the speed and shocks of modernity; their snail's pace slowed them down so that they could once again open themselves to meaningful experience. In this they were precursors of surrealist city-readers like Aragon, and of course to Benjamin himself, in his own attempts to understand Berlin. The flâneurs gave real attention to the most minute details of urban existence.

On the other hand, they only achieved this by constructing a fantasy world around themselves. They attempted to make the arcades and streets into their intérieurs, glorified extensions of their own private space. They attempted to raise a bulwark against modernity by taming the city, ignoring its wildness and glossing over the threat posed, among other things, by the class differences increasingly visible in a mobile urban population. This was done by reducing the entire experience of the city into an aesthetic one.[25] The flâneurs produced urban physiognomies,

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[25]The aesthetic doctrine that they developed was in fact an extremely sophisticated one. For it was amongst the flâneurs that the idea first developed that the great nobility of modern art stemmed from its focus on the transitory, the fleeting, and the ephemeral. Since the object of the modern painter was the city, thus something in a constant state of flux, the artist's goal was to capture the eternal as it showed up in the momentary and fleeting.

This view was, if taken by itself, deeply mythological. For this increasing instability, this whirl of signs, was just one side of life in the nineteenth century. It is a possible narrative, it describes certain elements in the public sphere quite well. But this era also saw a great stiffening and regularization in other areas. Work discipline was tightened, the city was increasingly segregated by class, and standards of

guidebooks which classed the people of Paris according to type, so that people who read the guidebooks would feel more familiar with the people that they met. Benjamin points out that the main goal of the books was to make people feel that the members of other classes were merely "harmless oddballs" [26] and that the city was a tame space, innocuous and picturesque.[27]

But this purely aesthetic view of the city was mistaken, as the _flâneurs_ soon found out. The age of _flânerie_ was that of the passages, and once the vogue for arcades had passed the _flâneur_ was forced out into the street to compete with traffic and with other classes. They were also increasingly forced to face up to the economic relations in the city, and to their own relations to the market. More and more _flâneurs_ were forced to support themselves by working for the popular press; swamped by the crowds which they disdained.[28]

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education were normalized. As T.J. Clark shows, more and more of the peripheral areas of the city (both its physical areas and its social life) were being brought under bourgeois norms.(T.J. Clark, _The Painting of Modern Life_ pp. 259-268). Benjamin's project was largely aimed at showing how elements of the second narrative show up beneath the surface of the first, and give lie to it.

[26]Benjamin, 'Der Flaneur' op. cit., pp. 537-541.

[27]More realistic writers, like Baudelaire, saw the city in a different light. He wrote "...was sind die Gefahren des Waldes und der Prarie mit den täglichen Chocks und Konflikten in der zivilisierten Welt verglichen? Ob der Mensch auf dem Boulevard sein Opfer unterfaßt oder in unbekannten Wäldern seine Beute durchbohrt -- bleibt er nicht hier und dort das vollkommenste aller Raubtiere?" Quoted in 'Der Flaneur' op. cit. p. 542.

[28] The _flaneurs_ were the fore-runners of the modern journalist class which has experiences in order to sell them.

But Benjamin believes that as a form of experience, _flânerie_ can still give us valid insight. For Benjamin, the _flâneur_ serves as a 'dialectical image', a window into history that allows us to touch the contradiction and complexity of another time. The goal of his later philosophy, especially the proposed book on the pasages, was to create a series of these dialectical images, a gallery of though-pictures that would sum up the tensions running through nineteenth century Paris, and beneath modernity itself.

Dialectical images work on the same model as the constellations I examined in the second chapter of this study. A body of details (in Benjamin's case the quotations, descriptions, poems, and _aperçus_ about the _flâneurs_ that he found in the Bibliothèque Nationale) is collected and arranged by the critic. The philosophical collage that results allows the historical image to appear. It is not in any one detail or description that the image shows but in the order of all the details together (in the same way that the Idea in Benjamin's work on _Trauerspiel_ appears from a constellation of its various propositions). The dialectical images point beyond the facts and details represented to a body of tensions existing in the world.

Because they hold within themselves tensions which they do not attempt to resolve, dialectical images break us away from our tendency to see history as innocuously simple.[29] They force us to

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[29]Thus he shows how the flaneur sums up both the difficulties and potentials within a certain attitude towards culture and experience in the modern world. On the one hand, the flaneur attempts to reduce all cultural phenomena to a harmless _spiel_, and thus misunderstands the nature of culture, dooming the

see it with the complexity of our own time. Creating such images is the general goal of Benjamin's analyses in _Das Passagen-Werk_, whether he is looking at technologies, fashions, or (as in the case of the _flâneur_) urban practices.

This is why Benjamin saw his work as 'rescuing' history. In analysing something like the practice of _flânerie_ he is attempting to rescue something that has been forgotten; this form of life from the beginning of modernity.[30] He tries to determine what it could mean for us, how the practice could show us things that we can use. He doesn't look at the _flaneur_ as an interesting historical curiosity, rather, he sees it as a position that can be opened up within modernity -- a way of scanning the city, a model of knowedge based on an extreme attachment to particular territories. But also as a practice which brings with it a cluster of dangers. Showing these requires a destructive analysis, a destruction of the original unity of the practice so that the paths it opens up are separated from its insufficiencies and dangers.

The collection of such historical studies, the gallery of these dialectical images, is meant to cast light on the whole of

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existence of his practice. But on the other, the figure does offer a very useful attitude towards the city, an attention to minutiae, and inkling that the city should somehow be our main focus of concern.

[30]His method with regard to flanerie as a practice is to work through texts from the nineteenth century for references to flaneurs, and then painstakingly reconstructs the practice through a montage of the various descriptions he finds.

the nineteenth century (since truth is monadological, with a whole universe being reflected in each object). It will also allow us to understand the twentieth century practices which are in some way similar to that of the _flaneur_.[31]

This is how Benjamin pursues philosophy in his later work; through a painstaking construction of dialectical images. It is a way of inserting the life of the cities around him directly into philosophy; making theory into a way of presenting and experiencing the world. He thus leaves behind the canonical philosophical terms of his day and explores instead such ideas as 'flânerie' 'urban shock' and 'boredom'.[32] The reason that analyzing experience is so important to him, and the reason that he puts such an emphasis on means of perceiving and coming to knowledge, is that the focus of the last works is on that which

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[31]Dialectic images are meant to work in many contexts within modernity, to enter into a constellation with the experience of the reader, to serve as a means of understanding practices in which the reader is involved and allow him to gain perspective on them. In this, flanerie is like an ur-form of modernity, a particular mode in which we moderns can relate to our culture. For example, in the 1980's we might use the dialectical figure of the flaneur to allow us to gain a perspective on our often passionate attachment to the cultural forms around us, a cultural phantasmagoria that can veil from us the fact that we are living in an economy that is set up around war-preparation. Or it can help us to understand the practices of various post-critical critics such as Jean Baudrillard, who want to understand all modern life as a free play of signs, and to label any attempt to see behind it as a mere nostalgia for a reality we can no longer gain access to.

[32]For more on this see Winfried Menninghaus, 'Science des seuils; La théorie du mythe chez Walter Benjamin.' In _Walter Benjamin et Paris_. Wismann, H. (ed.). (Paris; Les Editions du Cerf, 1986,) pp. 529-557, p. 529.

is closest to us, and thus -- due to the inexorable work of habit
and myth -- most hidden.

Chapter VI
Conclusion; Experience and Disenchantment

> Mit wechselndem Schlüssel
> schließt du das Haus auf, darin
> der Schnee des Vershwiegenen treibt...
>   Paul Celan

The Eleatic Parmenides located the truth far away from everyday life, away "from all the cities."[1] Benjamin reverses this, brings truth back into the city, shows us means by which we can become reconciled with everyday life. Philosophy, he claims, must be reformulated, recentred around the experiences that bring true reconciliation with the world around us; it must become a means of healing our fatal detachment from our practices. In order to do this it must release itself from its tutelage to scientific models, which treat knowledge as instrumental and the world as a manipulable mechanism.

It must, above all, work on recapturing the forms of experience that are gradually being eroded within modernity. Benjamin thus proposes a model of philosophy in which experience is unpolluted by the critical moment that will later purify and preserve it. Being lost in the city or in moments of passionate memory, walking through the city with the attentiveness of a flaneur, even doing certain forms of historical research; all can temporarily deseat rationality and let the thinker be taken over

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[1] Quoted in M.C. Nussbaum, 'Saving Aristotle's Appearances' in The Fragility of Goodness (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986,) p. 241.

by the object she is experiencing. This shows the thinker a way out of the relentless grid of the already-known. Only then does the rational consciousness move back in, to decipher, recode, reconstruct the elements in such a way that this moment of truth will be bodied forth for the reader.

These two paragraphs sum up Benjamin's project (or at least one of Benjamin's projects) more or less well. But they hide a tension that has become increasingly visible, and increasingly pressing, in the course of the last few chapters. On the one hand I have shown that Benjamin portrays us as being fundamentally cut off from the world, because of our everyday experiences at work and in the streets (as we saw in Chapter V), and because of an even more basic lack of fullness in the world (Chapter II). Yet, on the other hand, I have also claimed that Benjamin's goal is to show us that this everyday world is a proper focus for a full human life. The materialist aim of demystification and the theological aim of reconciliation seem not only to be opposed, but to be heading in altogether opposite directions. There seem to be two incompatible views of the ends of philsophy and of the full human life.

Taking this contradiction from a slightly different angle, we can see it as being the result of two different drives within modernity which are pulling Benjamin in opposite directions. The first is the modern concern with not being deceived or taken in by appearances. This is what leads Benjamin to elaborate his wide repertoire of demystifying critical strategies. The goal is to

overcome illusion and the process involved is described with metaphors of burning, immolation, cutting, chopping away, ground-clearing. The idea is that we are systematically deceived and that the philsopher's goal is to wake us up from these deceptions, allow us to see things three-dimensionally.

Benjamin occasionally wrote of this process as the overcoming of the aura that seems to hover around objects in capitalist society.[2] He saw the great benefit of materialist views of language to be that they eliminated the 'magic' of much modern language[3] and he approved of Brecht's theater pieces, which self-consciously attempted to break down any auratic presentation of the actors.[4]

So there is a great concern in his work for demystifing the world, and getting rid of various forms of enchantment. Anybody familiar with the various other modern projects of this type would expect Benjamin's goal then to be to get a firm grasp on the world, in order to control it. Demystification would then be the familiar first step in a process leading to rational control of the world.

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[2]This, for example, is the idea of his essay 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit' <u>GS</u> II.2 pp. 473-508.

[3]Scholem op. cit., p.208

[4]Likewise, the goal of his own works was to cut through the myths of the nineteenth century, reveal what was really going on. He criticized the <u>flâneurs</u> for being duped by the mythology of modernity and he attacked Aragon for not unpacking his myths in order to get beyond them, to a real understanding of Paris.

But this is not the case. Benjamin is also influenced by another movement within modernity; that which aims for some sort of reconciliation and attachment to a world where experience seems increasingly groundless. He rejects the idea of the world as a totally meaningless order, and writes of the need for philosophy to orient itself towards a truth which exists in the world.

The form of this experience is described in various ways at various stages in Benjamin's works. In the _Trauerspiel_ book it is the momentary constellation of disparate elements that creates a window-like opening into the realm of the Names. In his essay on Marseilles it is described as a relation with the world where objects are seen to be as independent and as alive as human beings.[5] In 'Uber einige motive bei Baudelaire' it is portrayed as relation in which the looker goes to the object as if she expected her gaze to be met. In 'Geschichtesphilosophischen Thesen' the goal shown to be a connection with the now-ness (the 'Jetzt-zeit') of past times.

These states have several characteristics in common. They all describe non-instrumental relations to experience. The experiences do not give knowledge (as Benjamin shows in the _Trauerspiel_ introduction) and cannot even be described as _thinking_ as such. They are moments in which thinking has come to a standstill, where it has frozen in all its tension. Any

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[5] 'Haschisch in Marseilles' in _Illuminationen_ op. cit. pp. 325-332.

predictive grid which somehow pre-forms experience, such as the Kantian synthesizing concept, of the Heideggerian 'world-picture" is absent, and the object exists in some sort of absolute autonomy. The wholeness of these experiences is such that they set down the basis for mémoire involontaire; they are unlike other experiences which we fix in a place and time, pin down conceptually and thus prevent from influencing us. These experiences also somehow redeem the objects that they focus on so that they receive the proper attention and are seen for the first time.

So, instead of the totally demystified, controllable world that one might expect to be Benjamin's goal, we get an idea that the goal of philsophy is to put us in contact with radical otherness, with a reality that exists entirely outside human conceptual knowledge.

The question, of course, is how Benjamin can possibly hold such conflicting positions. It is an important problem, and it accounts for much of the bepuzzlement that Benjamin's work elicits.[6] The question is how the world can be both a profane order, where to see a symbolic fullness (as the Romantics did) is a sign of bad faith, yet at the same time exist as a proper focus of our search for wholeness? Does this not stand as a massive

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[6]The latter chapters of Gershom Scholem's Story of a Friendship, for example, portray Benjamin as floundering in contradiction, and explain it by reference to his various financial entanglements in in the last years of his life -- his need to balance off his own (theological) interests with those of the Marxists at the Institut fur Sozialforschung, who were his main financial supporters.

contradiction that invalidates, or at least put into doubt, Benjamin's entire work?

I would like to argue not only that Benjamin resolves this tension, but also that the fact that he does so is what makes his work so important. He succeeds in making the demystifying critique compatible with and complementary to the drive for meaning and connection, and thus sets out one way of resolving a central tension in modern culture; the conflict between the need for attachment to the everyday, surrounding world, and our paradoxical mistrust of that same world.

The whole theory hinges, I think, around two of Benjamin's ideas that I introduced in the first chapter of the thesis; in the first place, the idea that the world is in some fundamental way 'fallen' (thus opening up a gulf between appearance and truth) and second, the idea that our strategies of knowing have to be based on a theological model, a perception that God's truth is buried in this profane world.

The idea of a fallen world brings with it -- as we saw in the first chapter -- the idea that any attempt to present truth must in some way be allegorical. The central insight is that there is no direct access to truth through the world (as the Romantic symbolists would have it) but rather that truth requires some sort of critical work to burn off surface appearance (Benjamin speaks of it as 'mortification'). This allows the truth of things to be uncovered. Once this has happened the allegorist, or the critic who takes allegory as his epistemological model,

reconstructs the object again in a constellation which allows the truth of the object to show through.

This is what Benjamin is doing in the early work on Trauerspiel when he breaks down the works into their most minute details in order to build them back up again to reveal the truth of allegorical epistemology, of the non-immediacy of truth. We can see the traces of this as well in the early city essays where the emphasis is on the impossibility of describing the city straight on. And we obviously also find it in the essays of the passages project, where Benjamin breaks down the figure of the flâneur so that its false aura is dispelled and its epistemological usefulness is revealed.

The distinction between false and true aura is important. There is a magic that surrounds things in capitalist society, and in the world as it lies under the spell of myth. This has to be overcome so that objects can be seen in their profanity. The demystifying movement and the strategies of criticism that are used, are deeply important.

But this demystifying movement -- and this is what separates Benjamin from other writers -- can never disenchant the world completely. There is some real truth in the world, and a true aura in things. Once the false aura is stripped away we can recover it, in the same way that talmudic scholars could recover traces of God within fallen human history.

So the first step is de-mystification, the destruction of aura and myth, the second is the contemplation of the fragments,

and the third is their reconstruction within a new constellation that reveals the true nature of things, the true aura. This final "moment of truth" allows us to go back and understand the things that make up the constellation. They are the same things that we were dealing with before (our urban practices, the things around us in the city). We see them without myth, yet at the same time as worthwhile, worthy of our attention and trust.

So this is not a doctrine of transcendance, but of secular redemption, of saving the real world around us. Demystifying critique thus serves redemptive critique, it is a necessary first move that readies the material of the world for the critic's preservative project. And the goal is the re-creation of meaningful experience (Erfahrung).

Several things should be noted about this project:

1) Theory is used in the process as a primarily destructive force. It is designed to break down false experience, to chisel away mythic encrustations and thus open a path to a clear sight of the elements. Benjamin uses Marxism (for example) primarily as a critical tool, a way of X-raying the myths of capitalist economy. Benjamin's goal is not the creation of a Marxist theory, and he pays little attention to the positive points of Marxist doctrine (the theory of surplus value, the falling rate of profit, the exploitation of labor). He is more interested in using Marxism as a tool of destructive critique.

2) The goal of the critical process is not a body of knowledge, but a form of experience. It leads us to see things in

a better way. It is a philosophy aimed at realigning us with the world around us. It does not say something about the world, but points us to it, points us back to the world again.

3)There is an idea implicit in all this that we have to find our way artificially to experiences that other cultures are (or were) embedded in naturally. The (materialist) figure of the primitive community and the (theological) figure of the Garden of Eden both point to an era in which the relation to the physical world was immediate and ripe. Benjamin's theory of experience, like much of modern art, is based on the perception that this is no longer possible.

Proust, Kafka, Benjamin and Baudelaire all faced, in their different ways, the fact that meaning and experience are rendered problematic in the modern age, and that an immediate relation to the object-world is no longer possible. Benjamin shows that the exemplary modern _faces up to_ the destruction of aura.

Baudelaire, for example, gives up the mist and distance of early romantic art, the mountain tops and abandoned cathedrals, and makes do with the most profane articles from everyday urban existence, making of _them_ a new art form. Modern artists are forced to develop strategies that are similar to Benjamin's allegorical Lutheran dramatists, they are forced to find some way to recreate experience within a modernity that constantly tends to dissolve it.

Conclusion

Finally, looking at Benjamin's project in this way allows us

to understand how he could follow two strategies that seem to us so contradictory, without himself seeing any major contradiction. It also helps us understand what he meant when he called himself Janus-faced[7], and when he referred to the two projects he was involved in as really being one.

For what seems on the surface to be a contradiction in Benjamin's ideas is actually the great contribution of his work; this attempt to combine the two notions of truth that we work with, these two models of experience that ground so many of our modern discourses. On the one hand he remains true to the idea that truth is something that we approach with our tools and schemes, our clarity and experimental care -- the work of analysis we are familiar with from our scientific tradition. On the other hand, he is not willing to qive up the idea that the truth will always stand apart from all this, outside all of our pictures, yet somehow serving as the goal for all we do. He combines the truth of the scientific tradition with the notion of truth as _alethia_, as intentionless revelation (which has its own tradition which stretches back at least as far as the Eleatics).

And so for Benjamin we keep on doing what we are doing, continue with our practices of analysis, our insistence on precision and distinctness, our explanations and descriptions. But only as one half of our project. For his idea is that we must look farther, and orient ourselves to the truth that does after

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[7]In Scholem (1975), p. 220.

all exist in the world, even if hidden. If we do not keep this as our goal, and make realignment with it our aim, then we ignore our chance for human hope, and doom ourselves to a dead world.

The richness of this approach to our intellectual practices is that it matches up with so many of our contemporary perceptions and dilemmas. As we become increasingly aware that the world is something other than a dead machine to be manipulated, and as we realize that to continue thinking of it as such may lead to our extinction as a species, Benjamin's model comes to seem a useful one. It allows us to see the world around as as a source and site of meaning, without forcing us into a blind obedience to it. It shows us the benefit of a philosophy that is aimed towards a truth outside us and to an expansion of our experience to meet it. And it portrays the goal of our intellectual work not as control and domination of the world, but as the (secular) illumination of it, a reconciliation with its processes. These are insights which we can rescue from Benjamin's rescuing criticism.

Envoi

...There's the moment years ago in the station in Venice,
The dark rainy afternoon in the fourth grade, and the shoes then,
Made of dull crinkled brown leather that no longer exists.
And nothing does, until you name it, remembering, and even then
It may not have existed, or existed only as a result
Of the perceptual dysfunction you've been carrying around for
years.
The result is magic, then terror, then pity at the
emptiness,
Then air gradually bathing and filling the emptiness as it leaks,
Emoting all over something that is probably mere reportage
But nevertheless likes being emoted on. And so each day
Culminates in merriment as well as a deep shock like an electric
one,

As the wrecking ball bursts through the wall with the bookshelves
Scattering the works of famous authors, as well as those
Of more obscure ones, and books with no author, letting in
Space, and an extraneous babble from the street
Confirming the new value the hollow core has again, the light
From the lighthouse that protects as it pushes away.
        -John Ashbery, Down By the Station, Early in the Morning

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