

'CONSTRUCTION SITE': ON READING BENJAMIN'S *ARCADES*

Merrick Burrow, Gary Farnell and Mick Jardine

'This much is certain: the constructive moment means for this book what the philosophers' stone means for alchemy'.¹ In this remark Benjamin seems to capture the very essence of the problem that faces the contemporary reader of *The Arcades Project*. Most obviously, there is the fact of the sheer un-constructed – or at best part-constructed – character of the manuscript, the history and mixed fortunes of which are well documented elsewhere.² We might begin by asking how we should respond to Benjamin's declaration of the decisive importance of the 'constructive moment' when the text as it arrives before us shows – in the most blunt, empirical way – that, for Benjamin, this moment did not finally arrive.

The question is not a simple one. Benjamin's thought does not allow the possibility of a 'constructive moment' that could transcend its own historical – or, more precisely, its own *dialectical* – situation. The empirical incompleteness of the text is comparatively insignificant when weighed against this theoretical point. In fact, we either know about or can supply informed speculations as to the nature of Benjamin's intended structure by excavating the foundations of the project in the various drafts and Convolutes of notes: 'This work has to develop to the highest degree the art of citing without quotation marks. Its theory is intimately related to that of montage'.³ However, a far more profound problem faces the contemporary reader of *The Arcades Project* than that of determining its structural principle. The 'alchemical' element of Benjamin's critical method lies not in its structure alone but in the particular temporal rhythm of the 'dialectical image', which entails the becoming-structure of time itself: the sudden explosion of linear temporality into a unique 'constellation' of dialectical consciousness.

It follows from this that what is most crucial about the 'constructive moment' is the relationship between the structural principle and the moment of its actualisation; and at this point we, as contemporary readers, must take full account of the passing of Benjamin's moment. We lack direct access to Benjamin's time of writing, between the two World Wars, when he envisaged a messianic hope for *The Arcades Project* to clear 'the terrain of the nineteenth century' of 'the undergrowth of delusion and myth'.⁴ This particularity is determined by the coming together of images of the past with concerns that were present at hand 'in the constellation of a single moment'.⁵ For Benjamin, such moments of dialectical recognition are monadic constellations: windowless worlds inaccessible to or from any position outside. Their

1. Walter Benjamin, letter to Gretel Adorno, 16 August 1935, C, p507.

2. See Rolf Tiedemann, 'Dialectics at a Standstill: Approaches to the *Passagen-Werk*' and Lisa Fittko, 'The Story of Old Benjamin', in *AP*, pp929-45 and 946-54.

3. *AP*, N1, 10.

4. *AP*, N1, 4.

5. *SW4*, p.403.

‘messianic’ potential derives from the way this monadic structure binds together time and perception/knowledge in a non-repeatable ‘constructive moment’. It is surely because of this emphasis upon the non-repeatable structure of experience that Benjamin speaks in terms of images rather than signs and why photography proved to be such a suggestive medium for him.

The concerns that Benjamin highlights as thematic correspondences between his own time and the heyday of the Paris arcades relate to a series of decisive shifts in the field of aesthetic experience and its relation to everyday life, particularly as these are mediated within evolving relationships between modes of technology and perception in the context of capitalist modernity. In this context, the need for a demystification of fascism in the 1920s and 1930s went hand-in-glove with the possibility of an awakening from the dreaming of the consumer culture to which the nineteenth century gave birth and which Benjamin perceived to be in some ways complicit with the aestheticisation of politics that he detected in fascism.

6. *AP*, N3, 1.

It is this sense of particularity – ‘the relation of the what-has-been to the now ... the image in the now of its recognizability’⁶ – that constitutes the basis of Benjamin’s historical materialism and its methodological core: the dialectical image. For Benjamin, the historical image acquires a revolutionary (or, as he sometimes puts it, ‘messianic’) character only at the point where it enters into a dialectical correspondence with the (inevitably transient) concerns of the time in which it is encountered.

For the historical index of the images not only says that they belong to a particular time; it says, above all, that they attain to legibility only at a particular time. And, indeed, this acceding “to legibility” constitutes a specific critical point in the movement at their interior. Every present day is determined by the images that are synchronic with it: each “now” is the now of a particular recognizability. In it, truth is charged to the bursting point with time. (This point of explosion, and nothing else, is the death of *intentio*, which thus coincides with the birth of authentic historical time, the time of truth.)⁷

7. *AP*, N3, 1.

From this we can see that Benjamin’s messianism is not of a once-and-for-all variety: quite the opposite in fact. The *moment* is always singular and unique; but there is no end of such moments, each with its particular (albeit weak) revolutionary possibility. He comments in a late text that ‘there is not a moment that would not carry with it *its* revolutionary chance – provided only that it is defined in a specific way, namely as the chance for a completely new resolution of a completely new problem’.⁸

8. *SW* 4, p402.

The passing of Benjamin’s ‘constructive moment’ should not therefore be dwelled upon with monumental pathos, which could only be a fundamentally conservative, canonising and non-dialectical response to the residual energies and after-effects of *The Arcades Project*. The ruins of Benjamin’s grand design are, of course, included within the ranks of

historical objects and images that have the potential to take on significance for 'a completely new resolution of a completely new problem'. Whether it is legible as such for our own time, and indeed whether Benjamin's theoretical armature retains its validity for contemporary culture and critique, are questions that remain open. But, as the essays in this collection show, at the very least these are questions that offer rich material for debate. In this sense it has been possible to approach reading Benjamin's *Arcades* with a degree of optimism that has sometimes seemed difficult to muster in assessments of his legacy for radical thought and action. Several contributors to an earlier issue of *new formations* devoted to 'The Actuality of Walter Benjamin' emphasised the limitations of Benjamin's work for radical politics in the context of triumphant global capitalism and the popularisation of its philosophical and aesthetic correlatives.⁹ The essays collected here seek to explore in various ways the 'legibility' of the *Arcades* and in particular the ways in which it might still help us to actualise some liberatory potential within the totalising configurations of contemporary politics and culture.

9. Laura Marcus and Lynda Nead (eds), 'The Actuality of Walter Benjamin', *new formations*, 20 (Summer 1993).

There could scarcely be a better backdrop against which to highlight the significance of Benjamin's affirmation of the permanence of revolutionary possibility than Fredric Jameson's recent comment in a discussion of the utopian imagination that 'most of human history has unfolded in situations of general impotence and powerlessness, when this or that system of state power is firmly in place, and no revolts seem even conceivable, let alone possible or imminent'.¹⁰ Benjamin's contemporary relevance can be grasped immediately within this context. The tenacity of Benjamin's critical perspective, in spite of its acknowledged precariousness, renders it especially valuable in our own times, when the 'cultural logic of late capitalism' is perceived as having forestalled the possibilities of radical progressive transformation, and in which we must indeed find new resolutions for new problems as well as for some very long-standing ones.

10. Fredric Jameson, 'Politics of Utopia', *New Left Review*, 25 (Jan/Feb 2004), 45.

It was to the prospect of rendering revolutionary possibilities conceivable that *The Arcades Project* was to have been devoted in its attempt to foster dialectical consciousness. In this light, Benjamin's remark upon the crucial significance of the 'constructive moment' in the end leads away from the problem of a merely contingent failure of his authorial intention to complete *The Arcades Project*, moving instead towards two predominant questions for our own (re)constructive moment. Firstly, what is the relevance of Benjamin's theory of the dialectical image and its 'historical index' within the context of our contemporary technological, epistemological, cultural and political formations? Secondly, what within *The Arcades Project* might accede to 'legibility' or 'recognizability' in relation to the concerns of our own 'now-time'?

The essays in this collection all, at some level and from a variety of perspectives, seek to respond to these questions as they have arisen within the historical texture of a certain field within critical and cultural studies that we might, for convenience, designate as Benjamin Studies. The current volume emerged from a conference that took place on a sunny day in July

11. See also Kevin McLaughlin and Philip Rosen (eds), 'Benjamin Now: Critical Encounters with *The Arcades Project*', *boundary 2*, 30 (Spring 2003).

2002 at King Alfred's College, Winchester (now University College Winchester). These essays, like those contributions from other participants at the conference, attempt to address the unsettling effect upon the field of Benjamin Studies of the appearance in 1999 of the Belknap/Harvard Press English translation of *The Arcades Project*.¹¹ The title of the conference and of this issue of *new formations* both emphasise the implications and the problems of *reading* Benjamin's *Arcades Project* – some of which we have just laid out – thereby seeking to raise the question of how we should respond to its publication in our own particular moment – one that makes of it, for example, a partner to recent critiques of global consumer capitalism such as Naomi Klein's *No Logo* or Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire*.

The publication in English of *The Arcades Project* formed part of a wholesale millennial expansion of the availability of Benjamin's writings in English translation, with the Belknap/Harvard Press publishing in addition a four-volume edition of his *Selected Writings* between 1996 and 2003. The full cumulative effect of this on the field of Benjamin Studies has yet to unfold, but the current collection marks out some points of departure for the sorts of discussions that seem worth having given the changing and unchanging face of politics and culture in the post-Benjamin period. The idea of this collection, then, is to put into the public domain the reading activity that has been taking place in the recently disturbed field of Benjamin Studies, together with the forms of discussion to which it has given rise, which thus enacts or appropriates the vital political implications of Benjamin's work.

At the time of the Winchester conference the first two volumes of the Harvard/Belknap *Selected Writings* were already published, as can be seen from the source references of several essays in this collection. However, the third and fourth volumes were at that time not yet available, so that contributors to the conference were still in the main working with the 'pre-Belknap/Harvard' Benjamin of *Illuminations*, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, and so on as companion texts in the process of reading *The Arcades Project*. These established sources have for a long time offered a distorted view of Benjamin's writings, both in terms of selection and translation, in relation to which the Belknap/Harvard *Selected Writings* acts as a welcome corrective influence and will henceforth become the standard edition. However, this distorted impression was nevertheless the Anglophone actuality into which *The Arcades Project* irrupted as an intellectual and publishing event, and its influence will undoubtedly have shaped the contributors' responses.

The impact of this irruption into the field of Benjamin Studies as then constituted was precisely what the conference sought to explore and articulate, and it is from the ensuing dialogue that the current collection emerges. The essays here can therefore be seen as lying on a fault-line within Benjamin Studies, a 'constructive moment' of dialectical recognition and discovery. In order to preserve the traces of this process we have made an editorial decision to maintain the variety of source references, rather than

retrospectively standardising all sources to conform to the Belknap/Harvard editions and thereby imposing a kind of ideal order upon what has in fact been a messy, surprising and exciting process.

In the first of the essays, Esther Leslie seeks to produce a way of reading *The Arcades Project* which offers hope for a better world, following Benjamin in finding in unlikely materials from the past an awakening from the 'dreamsleep of capitalism', with its false forms of relationship. Here there is a strong sense of challenge facing any reader who wants to wrest such a utopian interpretation from Benjamin's *Arcades*, while registering the forcefulness of the appeal of a writer and a text that offer the positive against all odds. Like Leslie, Derek Bunyard takes a timely look at the possibility of hope arising out of ruins, in a paper which ranges suggestively across Boltanski, Brecht and Jameson. While grimly conscious of the failures of art, philosophy and critique in the sphere of political action, Bunyard seeks to develop a way of reading Benjamin's *Arcades* that would release its potential for translating ruin into creative action.

Adam Chalmers questions 'what impulse could possibly underlie Benjamin's near pathological "scrivening" effort that was to make the *Arcades* a virtual encyclopaedia of nineteenth-century Parisian culture'. He argues that Benjamin's claim for the historical materialism of the dialectical image as a 'Copernican revolution' marks a turn away from the identity thinking of Western metaphysics towards an engagement with the aesthetic as a more fundamental category of experience. Bram Mertens' essay examines the theological, and specifically Jewish, resonances of *The Arcades Project*, arguing for a reading of the text as a 'surreal Talmud for our times'. Mertens adopts an approach to the dialectical image in which 'insight would not be created by a structured enumeration of arguments, but generated within the tension between two concepts'. Benjamin's controversial claim for such insight as 'truth' (understood here as 'the death of intention') is explored as an essentially theological concept in which 'the desire to explain, communicate or *grasp* this concept as *Begriff*, seems already to be a step in the wrong direction'.

Graham MacPhee's essay mounts a critical engagement with the reception history of Benjamin's understanding of technological appearance, taking issue with past assessments in which Benjamin is charged with placing a naïve faith in technological progress. MacPhee claims that Benjamin's approach to technology 'is inextricably bound up with the conception of convoluted time developed in his philosophy of history' and that 'the point of intersection between technology and time in Benjamin's thinking lies in his consideration of visual experience'. Benjamin's conception of technology is also addressed in Virginia Liberatore's essay, in which she argues that iron construction in *The Arcades Project* itself figures as a form of dialectical imaging in which 'the dematerialization and dissolution of bodily boundaries in Benjamin's dreamworld found its dialectical image in the body of iron construction'. The approach to Benjamin's text that emerges from her discussion is characterised as a practice of historical physiognomy in which

expressive form is understood as the key to grasping the relationship between objects and the historical formations of which they are the residual traces.

Merrick Burrow's essay explores the implications of Benjamin's suggestion that the dominance of the advertisement within the aesthetics of modernity gave rise to a dream-cosmology of the commodity form and, more recently, of the branded logo. By bringing these issues into relation with Benjamin's reflections on Surrealism and his conception of 'The Mimetic Faculty' and childhood experience, Burrow's essay concludes with a consideration of the relevance of Benjamin's concerns in *The Arcades Project* for contemporary politics and culture. Maeve Pearson takes up Benjamin's interest in childhood, arguing for an equivalence between Fourier's efforts to reconcile the rational and the absurd and Benjamin's dialectics of dreaming and awakening in childhood. She traces patterns of continuity and change in Benjamin's preoccupation with childhood from his early writings up to *The Arcades Project*. The same rhythm can be detected here as in Leslie and Bunyard, acknowledging the deep vein of pessimism in Benjamin while seeking a reading of *The Arcades Project* which unlocks his energising redemptive potential in the face of rampant global capitalism.

Graeme Gilloch and Tim Dant proffer an invitation to 'think in extremes, to realise the radical dialectical potential inherent in incongruous and incommensurable texts, objects and images' in their comparative discussion of Benjamin's *Arcades* and Jean Baudrillard's musings on the postmodern shopping mall. In so doing, they trace an historical trajectory of commodity culture in which the 'revolutionary' curiosity of the Surrealists' promenades through the Paris arcades gives way to the structured consumer experience of the drugstore, in which such curiosity has been re-appropriated for the commodity form as the injunction to browse. Janet McCabe's essay argues that *The Arcades Project* manifests a profound ambivalence about bourgeois discourse, which is 'of crucial importance for us to think anew about the difficulties and limitations of an established discourse coming to terms with the new'. This ambivalence, McCabe contends, is expressed most prominently in relation to the figure of the prostitute, who becomes emblematic of commodification in general in Benjamin's *Arcades*, to the extent that he 'recognises the prostitution metaphor but cannot conceive of it beyond his own deep-rooted belief in the value of the bourgeois discourse to explain it'. The great value of the *Arcades*, in her view, is in the way in which it lays bare this ambivalence, thereby extending 'our knowledge about the workings of a discourse in transition'.

The editors would like to thank the School of Cultural Studies at University College Winchester for supporting and hosting the conference from which these essays emerged. We would also like to give thanks to all those who gave papers, and in particular to the following who chaired panels: Derek Bunyard, Tim Dant, Stephen Dobson, Graeme Gilloch, Ken Hirschkop, Richard Lane, Esther Leslie, Justine Lloyd, Janet McCabe, Scott McCracken and Lloyd Spencer.