

The Passageways of Paris: Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* and Contemporary Cultural Debate in the West

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A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned.

Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940)¹

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I

The arcades of Paris should need no introduction to the contemporary scholar. As a social, historical and cultural phenomenon they have been immortalised by the celebrated German-Jewish writer Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), in his immense unfinished study of nineteenth-century Paris entitled *Das Passagen-Werk* [*The Arcades Project*], which occupied his attention across the 1930s and today appears to many as one of the key books of the twentieth century².

Drafted between 1927 and 1940, this monumental work finally saw German publication in 1982,³ over four decades after its author's death: the English version did not appear until 1999. *The Arcades Project* is, then, a posthumous work; its enormous bulk (the English edition runs to 925 pages, editorial matter excluded) contrasts with the nature of Benjamin's published output in his lifetime, which consisted for the most part of essays and fragments. He is remembered as a

member of the Institute for Social Research (also known as the Frankfurt School), alongside Theodor Adorno (1903-1969), his collaborator and fellow philosopher who outlived him by three decades and helped establish his posthumous reputation. The manuscripts of *The Arcades Project* are the collected fruit of Benjamin's painstaking investigations, financed in the later years by the Institute for Social Research, in the National Library of Paris in the very heart of the arcades quarter itself. They form the draft of the book that would have crowned his life's work; at the same time, however, they consist of a long sequence of fragments, albeit interconnected and organised according to a master plan. The volume as we have it appears as a compromise between two opposite concepts of writing - the finished work and the discrete fragment. A large part of Benjamin's text actually consists of blocks of quotations from other writers, mostly nineteenth-century, in either French or German; these quotations, generally brief, are arranged in sections, and are interspersed throughout with segments of critical commentary, again for the most part brief, by Benjamin himself.

History decreed that the project would never attain its final form. Forced by the rise of fascism to flee Germany in 1933, Benjamin based himself in Paris until the second world war and its consequences made his presence there untenable.⁴ The Gestapo, alerted to the anti-fascist tenor of his writings, asked for Benjamin's expatriation in February 1939; on 3 September of that year France declared war on Germany, and that month Germans living in France were interned. Benjamin was sent to an internment camp in the small Burgundian town of Nevers, but was released at the end of November thanks to the intercessions of friends. He provisionally returned to his researches and to Paris, where he remained until June 1940, when he had to abandon the French capital, leaving his precious manuscripts behind as Hitler's troops closed in on the city of the Enlightenment. Benjamin concluded that safety lay in emigration to the US, via fascist but neutral Spain and Portugal, and crossed the Pyrenees on foot, as a clandestine migrant but with an official US visa in his passport, in the hope of reaching Spanish territory in safety. On the night of 26 September 1940, in the Catalan locality of Portbou just over the Spanish side of the border, Benjamin, who had been stopped in his tracks by General Franco's border guards, was found dead in Room No 4 on the second floor of the Hotel de Francia, a cheap *pensión*. Most, though not all, commentators believe that he committed suicide by swallowing morphine: be that as it may, two days later Walter Benjamin's remains were buried in Portbou's cemetery⁵.

Despite this tragic finale, it is usually thought that the finished *Arcades Project* would have had much the same appearance - a mosaic of fragments, quotations and commentaries - as the draft that has come down to us, reconstructed from the manuscripts. The text that we have, although written in the first half of the twentieth century, has, paradoxically, to be seen as a recently released cultural phenomenon that still needs to be absorbed by historians, literary critics, art critics, philosophers and sociologists: if the German edition did not appear till well into the twentieth century's second half, the book burst on the English-speaking world only as the century was in its death-throes. In the brief time of its existence so far, the English version, published by Harvard University Press, has been received with near-universal enthusiasm and admiration by readers and critics;⁶ nonetheless, in view of the short time-lapse involved, it will be useful, before examining the wider theoretical dimensions of Benjamin's enterprise, to introduce and explain its central image in some detail.

II

What is an arcade? In its classic sense, the term denotes a pedestrian passage or gallery, open at both ends and roofed in glass and iron, typically linking two parallel streets and consisting of two facing rows of shops and other commercial establishments - restaurants, cafés,

hairdressers, etc. "Arcade" is the English name: in French the arcades are known as "passages", and in German as "Passagen".⁷ The modern arcade was invented in Paris, and, while the concept was imitated in other cities - there are particularly fine mid-nineteenth century examples in Brussels - the Parisian arcades remain the type of the phenomenon. Benjamin quotes a passage from the *Illustrated Guide to Paris*, a German publication of 1852, which sums up the arcades' essence: "These arcades, a recent invention of industrial luxury, are glass-roofed, marble-panelled corridors extending through whole blocks of buildings, whose owners have joined together for such enterprises. Lining both sides of the corridors, which get their light from above, are the most elegant shops, so that the arcade is a city, a world in miniature, in which customers will find everything they need".⁸

The construction that is generally accepted as the first example of the Paris arcade proper was the Passage des Panoramas, opened in 1800 when Napoleon Bonaparte was First Consul, and still in existence.⁹ There had been earlier partial precursors in Paris. The "Galeries de Bois" or Wooden Galleries inside the Palais-Royal - the former Royal Palace and residence of the Orléans branch of the royal family - offered, from 1790 until their demolition in 1828, a traffic-free space where a multitude of traders served thronging crowds under a wooden roof, and which, in literature, is the subject of a celebrated description in *Illusions perdues (Lost Illusions)*, Balzac's classic fictional exposé of Parisian society published in 1843.¹⁰ However, the Passage des Panoramas was certainly the first of the purpose-built glass-roofed arcades, and, therefore, of the arcades proper. This arcade, situated just off the rue Vivienne near the Bourse or Stock Exchange, to this day contains a multitude of small shops and restaurants, and culminates in the back entrance to the Théâtre des Variétés. Most of its successors were constructed between 1800 and 1830, i.e. through the Napoleonic period and under the post-1815 Bourbon monarchy, as restored after Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo; a further handful saw the light during the "bourgeois monarchy" of Louis-Philippe and the Second Empire under Napoleon III, the last being built in 1860. All these arcades - in their heyday they numbered between twenty and thirty - were located within a relatively small area of the city, on the right bank of the Seine. In the process that gave rise to them, landowners - aristocrats, bankers or large-scale traders - bent on speculation bought up and demolished old or empty properties, thus creating substantial vacant lots between streets, on which the arcades were constructed. In many cases the empty properties had earlier been private residences, but certain sites had been occupied by former convents, dissolved at the Revolution.¹¹ The latter connection allows the arcades to appear as a product and manifestation of secularisation from one angle, but from another as a locus for the displacement of one religion by a second one: to compulsory Christianity there succeeds the worship of the commodity.

The evocative list of their names includes the Passage Jouffroy, the Passage Verdeau, the Galerie Vivienne, the Galerie Colbert, the Galerie Véro-Dodat and the Passage Choiseul (the last-named, which is considered the best-preserved, is the home of the comic-opera theatre known as the Théâtre des Bouffes). The great majority, including all the above-named, still exist and are still used for their original purpose, the most significant exception being the Passage de l'Opéra, pulled down in 1925.¹² Running between and parallel to the visible world of the streets, and in some cases virtually abutting on one another, the arcades offered the Parisians of the nineteenth century an alternative universe of consumption, in which they could walk free from the deafening noise of horse-drawn carriages and the discomforts of rain, snow or mud outside. As one commentator, Amédée Kermel, put it in 1831, the arcades were "a shelter from showers, a refuge from winter wind or summer dust, a comfortable and seductive space to wander through", and also "a route that is always dry and even, and a sure means of reducing the distance one has to walk".¹³ The presence from the early days of theatres, in more than one

arcade, is no accidental detail, for the arcades themselves created a new form of spectacle. Idling, window-shopping and observing became an art, summed up in the French verb "flâner", meaning to stroll, which, with its derivatives "flâneur" (stroller) and "flânerie" (the activity of strolling), became inextricably bound up with this special form of urban space. The arcade was a paradise for - again in Kermel's words - the race of "determined 'flâneurs', ... sheltered from the caprices of the weather under an all-protecting vault".¹⁴ In our own time, the arcades are, while not the most obvious of Paris' tourist attractions and, indeed, frequented more by Parisians than by outsiders, a subject of discreet attention to the more discerning of international visitors to the French capital, who may window-shop and browse to their heart's content among the milliners', jewellers', stamp-dealers, vendors of antique dolls, second-hand bookshops and traditional bistros, thanks to which the nineteenth-century structures have preserved (or re-created) their highly particular character. As in the past, organised diversion is not lacking: the Passage Jouffroy even houses the Musée Grévin, the city's waxworks museum. The arcades' contemporary fame is, in no small measure, due to the impact of the remarkable work of Walter Benjamin. Today, as the German architectural historian J.F. Geist wrote in 1987, "following the publication of Benjamin's significant fragments on the arcades, bringing in their wake interpretations and, already, a whole series of colloquies", we are living in a time when "the arcade is seen not only as a historical object but also as a contemporary possibility".¹⁵

III

Arguing that the arcades constitute "the most important architecture of the nineteenth century",¹⁶ Benjamin reads them as a phenomenon of extreme cultural ambivalence. All history, he believed, is double-faced, and in this connection he quotes an aphorism from the nineteenth-century writer Maxime du Camp: "L'histoire est comme Janus, elle a deux visages" ["History is like Janus: it has two faces"].¹⁷ For Benjamin, the arcades, as significant historical object and "dream- and wish-image of the collective",¹⁸ are Janus-faced too: what he calls the "ambiguity of the arcades"¹⁹ constitutes them as, in the suggestive term employed by his associate and commentator Adorno, a "dialectical image",²⁰ pointing in two directions at once and expressive of both oppression (by the ideology of consumption) and liberation (into a utopia of plenty).

The arcades are, certainly, a "primordial landscape of consumption"²¹ - temples of the commodity, with their seductively displayed, endlessly varied wares: "binoculars and flower seeds, screws and musical scores, makeup and stuffed vipers, fur coats and revolvers".²² They were created for purposes of profit, or indeed sheer speculation, offering the buildings' owners unrivalled financial opportunities by concentrating so many rent-paying undertakings within a small space.²³ Seen from one point of view, then, they are archetypal manifestations of the expanding market economy - creations of private enterprise and sources of profit, and most certainly not part of any public works project. The goods displayed are commodities - objects existing for profit above utility, manifestations of exchange value rather than use value: for Benjamin, they participate in the "fetishism of the commodity", the mystificatory conversion of human-made products into objects of irrational worship, which Marx classically analysed and denounced in the first volume of *Capital*. Benjamin speaks of the commodity in terms very close to those of Marx: "The property appertaining to the commodity as its fetish character attaches as well to the commodity-producing society ... as it represents itself and thinks to understand itself".²⁴ He also cites Adorno's uncompromising definition of the commodity as "a consumer item in which there is no longer anything that is supposed to remind us how it came into being".²⁵ Seen from this vantage point, the arcades and the goods in them would do no more than prostrate the consumer before the idol of consumption.

And yet the arcades have their other face. In their glass and steel design, they both reflect and inspire the utopias projected by the social visionaries of the nineteenth century, embodying the "anticipation and imaginative expression of a new world".²⁶ In that last formulation - the notion of a "new world" - Benjamin is actually quoting Marx, who used that phrase in a letter of 1866;²⁷ and this reference opens up the utopian dimension of the arcades - their other face, contrary to the face of the commodity whose contours Benjamin also found in the pages of Marx. The existence of a utopian element in Marx's thought is evident enough, as in his critique of alienation in the early *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844 and in the famous passage of *The German Ideology*, co-written with Engels in 1846, which rather lyrically sketches out the communist future where "society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind".²⁸ It would, however, be a mistake to limit consideration of the nineteenth century's utopian visions to those of Marxism alone, and indeed Benjamin also gives considerable space to the very different utopian vision of Marx's decidedly non-materialist predecessor, the French political writer Charles Fourier (1772-1837), whose dreams of a new world are placed in significant conjunction with the arcades. Fourier's projections of the future centred round what he called the "phalanstery", the model of a self-sufficient ideal community. Actual attempts to create such a community were made by his followers, notably in the US at Brook Farm in Massachusetts - an experiment which lasted from 1841 to 1847, and left its mark on literature in the ironic chronicle offered by Nathaniel Hawthorne in his novel of 1852 *The Blithedale Romance*.

The utopian dimension of the arcades is implicit in the womb-like protection which they offered to the pedestrians who used them. The glass roofing and the insulation from the discomforts of the street created the sensation of an ideal, fairy-tale world existing in parallel to the muddy and noisy world outside. The shop-windows with their agglomerations of discrete objects on one level represented the apotheosis of the commodity as fetish, yet at the same time offered the passer-by images of a dream-world beyond the confines of the existing society: as one of Benjamin's interpreters, Susan Buck-Morss, has put it, in the arcades the "desire for pleasure" becomes a "form of resistance".²⁹ The glass-roofed passages conjure up visions of utopia. Fourier took the utopian connotation of the glass medium further, imagining entire future cities that would be built on rational principles of social organisation and would be protected from the elements under a single, overarching glass covering. He could thus write of the ideal phalanstery, in a passage quoted by Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*: "Les rues-galeries sont une méthode de communication interne, qui suffirait seule à faire dédaigner les palais et les belles villes de civilisation ... La Phalange n'a point de rue extérieure ou voie découverte exposée aux injures de l'air; tous les quartiers de l'édifice nominale peuvent être parcourus dans une large galerie, qui règne au 1er étage et dans tous les corps de bâtiments" ["The street-galleries are a mode of internal communication which would alone be sufficient to inspire disdain for the palaces and great cities of civilisation ... The Phalanx³⁰ has no outside streets or open roadways exposed to the elements. All portions of the main edifice can be traversed by means of a wide gallery which runs along the second floor of the whole building"].³¹ What the phalanstery was in Fourier's dream of a new world, the arcades at least part-anticipated in reality.

IV

Marx and Fourier preside over *The Arcades Project* as its twin philosophical deities, opposed yet parallel. The section on Marx runs to 21 pages, that on Fourier to 31, and both are repeatedly cited in passing. Around the central metaphor of the arcades, to which the text inevitably returns, gravitate other themes and images - exhibition halls, railway stations,

panoramas - and figures presented as social archetypes - the gambler, the "flâneur", the collector. Also highlighted throughout - for Benjamin was, be it not forgotten, not only a philosopher and historian but also a literary critic - is the literature of the nineteenth century, and, notably, the three figures who may be considered the most important French writers of their time: Balzac, Hugo, and, above all, Baudelaire.

In his commentaries on all this diverse subject-matter, Benjamin endeavours to make sense of the collective dreams of the nineteenth century. On one level, he is convinced that the arcades are a source of deceptive illusion: "houses, passages having no outside. Like the dream"³² - of a collective alienation that seeks to deny history, reducing it to a bland continuum: "The dreaming collective knows no history. Events pass before it as always identical and always new".³³ Yet on another level, the arcades are an eminently material reality whose study holds the key to authentic historical understanding, to the interpretation of the dream: "In order to understand the arcades from the ground up, we sink them into the deepest stratum of the dream".³⁴

The arcades also have an essential formal role to play in Benjamin's imaginative reconstruction of their century. They are not just the core subject-matter of the book: they are also the expression of its organising principle. The material that makes up *The Arcades Project* is arranged not as a sustained discursive argument but as a series of fragments, be they quotations from Benjamin's sources or his own commentaries. It is for the reader to place the fragments in a broader context by linking up one to another, and not necessarily in the sequential order in which they appear in the book's pages. Benjamin declares of his own method: "To write history thus means to *cite* history. It belongs to the concept of citation, however, that the historical object in each case is torn from its context",³⁵ and one of his more perceptive readers, Hannah Arendt, goes even further when she evokes "Benjamin's ideal of producing a work consisting entirely of quotations, one that was mounted so masterfully that it could dispense with any accompanying text".³⁶ This mode of construction has the effect of aligning Benjamin's text with the arcades themselves. The fragmentary, piecemeal arrangement of the textual material is analogous to the arrangement of the diverse goods of multiple origins, thrown together pell-mell and cheek-by-jowl, in the windows of the shops in the arcades; and again, on the next level up, to the heterogeneous succession of shops and businesses encountered by the "flâneur" who perambulates through an arcade. As the frequenter of the arcades perceives things object by object and shop by shop, so Benjamin's reader assimilates the book's contents piece by piece, fragment by fragment, to be inducted en route into new forms of historical and cultural awareness by the shocks and flashes of unexpected juxtapositions and connections.

Benjamin believed the past is of use to us if we can make it illuminate the present. In this spirit, it will now be of interest to consider some of the ways in which his book can shed light, not only on the nineteenth-century universe which is its declared subject, but also on some of the cultural phenomena and associated debates of our own time. It will also be useful at this point to place *The Arcades Project* in its relation to some of the most significant of Benjamin's other writings; and here too, we find that across his work, considered as a totality, one text enters into dialogue with another, sometimes in unexpected ways - even if not all of the ideas always point in quite the same direction.

V

One dimension of Benjamin's work on which critics have signally failed to agree over the years concerns his relationship to Marxism. This polemic is unlikely ever to be resolved to the

satisfaction of all: apart from anything else, Benjamin's Jewishness and his close friendship with the Jewish theologian Gershom Scholem are invoked to justify the position that his work contains an irreducible element of Jewish esoteric and messianic thinking that cannot simply be assimilated to the Marxist-materialist world-view. Commentators as distinguished as Hannah Arendt and Susan Sontag have sought to downplay the Marxist element in Benjamin's thought. Arendt calls him "probably the most peculiar Marxist ever", and finds large parts of his writings "remote ... from dialectical materialism",³⁷ while Sontag argues that his work should not be tied down to any one ideological position: "It was important for him to keep his many 'positions' open - the theological, the Surrealist/aesthetic, the communist ... he needed them all".³⁸ Conversely, Terry Eagleton, in a study published in 1981, assimilated Benjamin's more vanguardist notions to the politics of Trotsky and the theory of permanent revolution; while, more recently, Lloyd Spencer has firmly stressed the consistent "militancy of Benjamin's thinking".³⁹ Adorno, himself a Marxist, praised Benjamin for "his capacity to reveal incessantly new aspects of things ... by linking straight to their internal organisation", and claimed that, thanks to this revelatory method, "through the power of his words, everything he touched became radioactive".⁴⁰ Whether Benjamin's method of illumination, of making things radioactive, may be assimilated to the classical Marxist model of causation is, however, open to question: with hindsight, it seems by no means certain from the text of his magnum opus that Benjamin - for all that he quotes Marx in generous proportions, both as a nineteenth-century source writer and a methodological precursor - was always or necessarily a Marxist in any conventional sense. Certainly, his method cannot be assimilated in any pointblank or unqualified fashion to the classical Marxist base-and-superstructure model, according to which the economic base determines the ideological and cultural productions of a society.⁴¹ Benjamin writes in *The Arcades Project*: "It is not the economic origins of culture that will be presented, but the expression of the economy in its culture",⁴² and, again: "The economic conditions under which a society exists not only determine that society in its material existence and ideological superstructure; they also come to expression".⁴³ It seems that for Benjamin the relationship between the economic and the cultural was less one of **causation**, as in classical Marxism, than one of **expression** - a concept which, surely, points towards a model grounded in the notion of interrelation, in a world where all objects are related to all others and stray details can, when the moment calls, suddenly flare up into significance.

This still-open debate raises the question of the status within Benjamin's oeuvre of his most engagedly "Marxist" texts, notably "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936). That essay was written under the influence of Brecht and his theory and practice of socialist theatre. It takes the form of a critique of nineteenth-century aestheticism and an exploration of the possibilities of film as they appeared in the 1930s, and is the most famous of Benjamin's productions in his ultra-materialist mode: indeed, it has been described, as recently as 2000, as the text for which Benjamin "remains best known".⁴⁴ To it may be linked the texts collected (in English) under the title *Understanding Brecht*, notably the essay "The Author as Producer", and a number of other writings focusing on visual technology and/or progressivist artistic movements, such as "Surrealism" and "A Small History of Photography". This fistful of essays has gained Benjamin a widespread reputation - it may be, especially among those who have not read him or have read only those texts - as an ultra-left ideologist of mass culture. A comment from a representative reference book, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (1992 edition), may be cited as an example of this view: "Benjamin surveyed the importance of technology in 19th and 20th-century urban and industrialised society, and also the enormous development of the media. As a Marxist he is interested in 'mass culture' and in the way in which culture is packaged and consumed by the masses. In his view the media ... has the power to eliminate the ritual and bourgeois elitism of art and literature ... In his essay 'The Work

of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' he suggests that modern technical innovations ... have radically transformed the whole idea of a work of art".⁴⁵ These comments are typical of a whole vein of Benjamin criticism, albeit often of the potted variety. Quite how representative the handful of "Brechtian" writings are of Walter Benjamin's work as a whole is another matter.

In the "Work Of Art" essay Benjamin argues that the incursion of the technology of reproduction into the sphere of art, first through photography and then in the film, has radically changed the nature of the artwork and eliminated its false autonomy - or, in the arresting image he uses, *destroyed the aura*. The "aura" is Benjamin's metaphor for the alleged self-sufficient, self-referential character of the artwork, conceived by nineteenth-century idealism as the object of a quasi-religious devotion. He defines the aura as "the unique phenomenon of a distance", and declares: "That which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art".⁴⁶ By contrast, he affirms the positive value of film as a new and demystificatory form of art, grounding his argument in two features of cinema: its piecemeal production and its collective consumption. On the making of films, he writes: "The camera that presents the performance of the film actor to the public need not respect the performance as an integral whole. Guided by the cameraman, the camera continually changes its position with respect to the performance. The sequence of positional views which the editor composes from the material supplied him constitutes the completed film".⁴⁷ The technical process of film-making would thus tend to destroy the illusory unity of the finished product. On the circumstances of cinematic consumption, he argues that watching a film in the picture house is a "simultaneous collective experience" which should favour the awakening of a radical mass consciousness: "individual reactions are predetermined by the mass audience response they are about to produce, and this is nowhere more pronounced than in the film"⁴⁸.

Benjamin's analysis in this essay has been fervently taken up by media evangelists and proponents of popular culture, but Adorno was less enthusiastic, viewing it as excessively marked by Brecht and his avant-garde-cum-didacticist performance theory. In his comments to Benjamin on the "Work of Art" essay, Adorno warns against an excessive faith in the transformational potential of cinema, arguing that "reification has no more disappeared from the cinema than it has from the great works of art". Doubting whether the conservative spectator will become avant-garde "solely by the skills acquired while watching a Chaplin film", he cautions against Benjamin's uncritical embrace of the notion of piecemeal construction, noting that when he actually spent a day observing what went on in a film studio, "what struck me the most was to discover how little they care about montage or about the state-of-the-art techniques which you point up in your essay; instead, reality is constructed mimetically in a jejune fashion and then 'photographed'".⁴⁹ Balancing Adorno against Benjamin, it may indeed appear reasonable to side with Adorno and conclude that the positive value attributed by Benjamin to the fragmentary production technique of film is in practice cancelled out by the conditions of illusory coherence and continuity under which the medium is typically consumed. It may be true that the piece-by-piece composition process undercuts the autonomy of the film as artwork from the production end, but the consumer sitting in the cinema generally perceives the film in its formal aspect as the illusion of a seamless and unproblematic totality, seemingly three-dimensional and unfolding in a deceptively "natural" linear sequence. The aura destroyed in production is re-created in consumption. Equally, the collective consumption celebrated in Benjamin's texts does not necessarily have any kind of progressive result: the collective mass-cultural experience can quite as easily lead to the imprisonment of the masses in cliché, stereotype and conformity as to their creative awakening. In this connection, it is interesting to note that the stray references to film in *The Arcades Project* lack the Brechtian-evangelical fervour of the "Work of Art" essay, as in this rather ambiguous statement: "Film: unfolding result of all the forms of perception, the tempos

and rhythms, which lie preformed in today's machines".⁵⁰ A art-phenomenon which replicates the rhythms of machine production may offer either the transcendence of the machine or a new form of enslavement to it.

The publication of *The Arcades Project* in English may in fact serve as a corrective to those who would unhesitatingly enlist an imperfectly understood Benjamin as a paid-up member of the pro-audiovisual, anti-literature cultural tendency. The voices of Baudelaire, Hugo, Balzac and others that resonate across the *Arcades Project* do not sound like the siren songs of a fraudulent or burnt-out high culture. Indeed, if Benjamin's book has a hero, it is neither Marx nor Fourier, but Baudelaire, to whom he devotes his longest section (all of 160 pages), and who himself wrote of the "heroism of modern life" as he observed it on the streets of Paris.⁵¹ The Baudelaire section of *The Arcades Project* was, in fact, the only part of the project which Benjamin developed in more conventional form in other published work. This material forms the basis of the essays on Baudelaire - pieces of sustained criticism rather than fragments - which appeared in English in 1973 as a single volume, under the title *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*.⁵² In that book, Benjamin defines the nineteenth century as an era when "the shock experience has become the norm",⁵³ and concludes that Baudelaire placed that experience "at the very centre of his artistic work".⁵⁴ From both the organised argument of this volume and the juxtaposed fragments in *The Arcades Project*, it is clear that Benjamin affirms Baudelaire, as lyric poet, prose-writer and art critic, as a new type of modern-day hero, thanks to the strategies developed in his writing for resisting and surviving the disorienting pressures of modern life. This presentation of the artist, while it certainly centres, here too, on the death of the aura, by no means rings the requiem bells for traditional high culture.

Benjamin sees the central theme of Baudelaire's work as "the disintegration of the aura in the experience of shock",⁵⁵ and shows how this is unforgettably dramatised in the short prose piece "Perte d'Auréole" ("The Lost Halo"). In this text, a poet complains of the loss of his halo, blown off his head as he ran to avoid a carriage when crossing the boulevard: "Mon auréole, dans un mouvement brusque, a glissé de ma tête dans la fange du macadam. Je n'ai pas eu le courage de la ramasser" ["In a brusque movement, my halo slipped off my head into the mud of the tarmac. I didn't dare pick it up"].⁵⁶ The loss of the halo is, indeed, the falling-off of the aura; but Benjamin also makes it clear that Baudelaire, in his poems and prose writings, evolved new aesthetic instruments to enable the modern writer to "parry the shocks"⁵⁷ that rose up from the streets to destroy the aura. Impelled by the struggle to survive, the Baudelairean city artist creates new personae such as the poet-fencer who, in the poem "Le Soleil" ("The Sun"), defiantly proclaims: "Je vais m'exercer seul à ma fantasque escrime" ["I go out alone to fence fantastically"], affirming writing as a mode of struggle.⁵⁸ In *Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne*, his key essay of 1863, Baudelaire calls, as art critic, for new urban forms of aesthetic expression which will reflect the rhythms of modern life: "La modernité, c'est le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent" ["Modernity is the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent"];⁵⁹ as poet, he evolves a new lexicon of imagery drawn from the modern urban environment, in a heroic endeavour to make sense of that battery of "transitory" and "fugitive" sensations which confusedly constitute the modern. The great achievement of Benjamin's reading of Baudelaire is, precisely, to show how art throws up new strategies of survival to adapt to the changed conditions imposed by industrial society.

If we take *The Arcades Project* and the Baudelaire book and balance them against the "Work of Art" essay and the other "Brechtian writings", it should emerge that Benjamin, in his work as a whole, is not advocating replacing high culture by mass culture as an object of study - but, rather, that his aim is to seek out the hidden connections that would raise certain phenomena

of popular culture (as exemplified by the arcades) to the same level of significance and seriousness as is traditionally associated with high-cultural artefacts. In this connection, the essay entitled "Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian" appears as an interesting pendant to the *Arcades Project*. This text, written in 1937, starts out from the figure of Fuchs, a German art collector who would be little-remembered today were it not for Benjamin's tribute. Benjamin concludes that, as the collector redeems the objects he accumulates from the weight of history, so it is the task of the radical critic of culture, not to destroy or marginalise the existing products of high culture, but to absolve them from their past exclusive ownership by society's rulers by making them accessible to everyone: "Cultural history ... may well increase the burden of the treasures that are piled up on humanity's back. But it does not give mankind the strength to shake them off, so as to get its hands on them".⁶⁰ These words of Benjamin's can be read today as implying the proposition that, whatever the failings of the conventional "cultural history" which he criticises, there *are* ways of creating universal access to the time-honoured objects of the cultural heritage, of enabling the mass of the population to "get its hands on them", rather than iconoclastically destroying the objects as the Taliban smashed the Buddhas of Bamiyan.

VI

If we are to seek Benjamin's traces in today's Western society in a more general sense, we may conclude that his true inheritors are in fact not the McLuhanite high priests of the image and detractors of the book, nor those who would drive high culture out of universities in the name of mass culture. Nor are they the deconstructionists and postmodernist theorists who, to quote the dissident US academic Morris Berman from his polemical book of 2000 *The Twilight of American Culture*, promote "a philosophy of despair masquerading as radical intellectual chic", while generations of students are taught that canonic literature "has no intrinsic meaning and is nothing more than the cultural expression of a wealthy class of dead, white, 'colonialist' males" - at a time when, in today's officially literate US society, "we cannot expect ... to make a mythological allusion any more, or use a foreign phrase, or refer to a famous historical event or literary character, and still be understood by more than a tiny handful of people".⁶¹ Benjamin should in no way be held responsible for any such cultural wasteland of semi-literacy and half-baked dogma. His authentic heirs are, rather, those cultural critics who have developed and systematised his dynamic concept of modernity, or else pursued his strategy of taking up stray objects from popular culture and coaxing out their wider cultural significance.

Among these continuators is another US academic, Marshall Berman (no relation to his namesake Morris Berman), the author of *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* (1983), a remarkable study of the nineteenth-century roots of twentieth-century modernity which, consciously following in Benjamin's footsteps, evokes Marx, Baudelaire and Nietzsche as founding fathers of the restless, dynamic, open-ended way of being which he believes to be the essence of the modern. In his words: "To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world - and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. Modern environments and experiences cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology: in this sense, modernity can be said to unite all mankind. But it is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, 'all that is solid melts into air.'"⁶²

Also worthy of mention as an inheritor of Benjamin is Eric Lott, lecturer at the University of Virginia and author of the remarkable study *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1995), which, in a sense, follows the trail blazed by *The Arcades Project* by teasing out the contradictions and ambiguities of what might seem a trivial or contemptible manifestation of popular culture, namely the nineteenth-century American "blackface" shows in which white performers "blackened up" and imitated African-Americans on stage. In Lott's words, "it was cross-racial desire that coupled a nearly insupportable fascination and a self-protective derision with respect to black people and their cultural practices";⁶³ this identification of a dialectic of "fascination" and "derision", utopia and reification, using a method that seeks to restore meaning to cast-off cultural products, clearly bears Walter Benjamin's seal. Equally, the writings of one of today's foremost American essayists, Greil Marcus, are impregnated with the spirit of Benjamin's endeavour to establish links between objects from both popular and elite cultures (ranging, in Marcus' case, from the Mississippi blues to seventeenth-century Puritan sermons) in a form that raises up the one without destroying the other - seeking out the hidden, non-official sense of history's discarded shards and fragments, pointing up their connections and redeeming them from oblivion for appropriation by the future. In the introduction to his book of essays *The Dustbin of History* (1995), Marcus writes: "There are those moments in history when possibilities quickly lost to us, if we acknowledge only the official record, once loomed up; there are those moments when, as we reconstruct a place and time, things that truly did happen, that have irrevocably shaped us, nevertheless seem like impossibilities". Such significant, isolated moments are, for Marcus as for Benjamin - whose presence is clearly acknowledged in his pages⁶⁴ - illuminated and connected through the "impulse to reveal what seems to lie beneath the surface of ordinary history".⁶⁵

VII

If these transatlantic appropriations of Benjamin's work have been striking, it is also worth drawing attention to another facet of the *Arcades Project*, namely its exemplary Europeanness. This characteristic is unfortunately somewhat obscured in the English edition by comparison with the original. It is customary to speak of the "German original", but in fact a good half of Benjamin's text, as published for the first time in Germany in 1982, is not in German at all but in French. The majority of Benjamin's sources are French originals (the rest are mostly from German-language writers), and in the manuscripts he almost invariably quoted his sources in the original. This practice is respected in the published German version, and the result is what might be called a linguistically bi-coloured or piebald text, with abundant passages in French interleaved with others in German. Benjamin's original is, then, **not** a bilingual text. It should, rather, be called a macaronic text - that is, one which operates on the lines of the medieval carols which alternate Latin and English (as in the well-known *In Dulci Jubilo*: "Ubi sunt gaudia/If that they be not there?", etc). This striking characteristic of Benjamin's text is, however, not reproduced in the English - or, rather, American - version, which, no doubt in deference to the limited foreign-language knowledge of its presumed Anglophone readership, translates everything into English. The English version consequently appears as both more homogeneous and less European than the original. The latter remains, in its material aspect, an exemplary instance in practice of Franco-German collaboration and, therefore, a tribute to the interrelated character of the common European cultural heritage. *The Arcades Project*, working against the grain of the dark period of Europe's history in which it was written, in this sense anticipates the post-war movement of European cooperation, guided by the likes of Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman, which led to the placing of the French and German coal and steel industries under a common authority, and subsequently to that much broader and deeper process of European integration which has only this year borne its latest fruit in the material emergence

of a single European currency. This pan-European dimension of Benjamin's text today seems more evident with hindsight, and may seem particularly appropriate if we recall the presence in his pages, not only of visionary utopians like Fourier but also of Victor Hugo, whose bicentenary marked 2002, the year of the euro, and who is today seen as one of the spiritual fathers of today's European Union. Hugo, indeed, in an essay of 1867 entitled *Paris*, written for the world's fair held in that year, expressed his vision of a United States of Europe, with a single currency to boot, whose spiritual nerve-centre would be the French capital: "Au XX^e siècle, il y aura une nation extraordinaire ... Elle sera illustre, riche, pensante, pacifique ... Elle s'appellera l'Europe" ["In the twentieth century, there will be an extraordinary nation ... It will be illustrious, rich, thinking, peaceful ... It will be called Europe"].⁶⁶

VIII

Utopias, then, can crop up in unexpected places. However, despite Benjamin's palpable empathy with diverse dreams of a visionary future, whether those of Marx or Fourier or those imprisoned in the glass and steel of the arcades, he was most certainly no acolyte of the doctrine of progress. This doctrine was, as is well-known, an article of faith for the triumphalist ideologies of the mid-nineteenth century. The literature of Victorian England contains a classic exposition in Tennyson's poem "Locksley Hall", published in 1842, with its celebrated lines: "Forward, forward let us range,/Let the great world spin for ever down the ringing grooves of change".⁶⁷ Of the writers who feature most prominently in *The Arcades Project*, Baudelaire, despite his call on artists to embrace the modern, openly repudiated "la loi fatale, irrésistible du progrès" ["the fatal and irresistible law of progress"], seeing it as no better than a "grande hérésie" [an "enormous heresy"].⁶⁸ Both Marx and Hugo, however, in their different ways embraced a certain concept of linear or ultimate progress. For Marx, capitalism represented a linear progression over feudalism, to be superseded in its turn by socialism;⁶⁹ for Hugo, history was a "vaste évolution humaine vers la libération universelle" [a "great human evolution towards universal liberation"],⁷⁰ in accordance with an obscure law which he claimed to bring to light in such visionary lines as: "Le jour où nos pillards, nos tyrans sans nombre,/Comprendront que quelqu'un remue au fond de l'ombre" ["The day when those who pillage us, our numberless tyrants, will realise that in the depths of the darkness there is someone stirring"].⁷¹

Benjamin, by contrast - writing in the 1930s and under the looming shadow of Nazism - draws a firm line under this nineteenth-century concept of progress, and, indeed, rejects the whole notion of linear development: as his editor Rolf Tiedemann has suggested, "the concept of progress ... must have appeared untenable to Benjamin in the light of the experience of the twentieth century".⁷² What Benjamin wishes to formulate is, he says in *The Arcades Project*, "a philosophy of history that at all points has overcome the ideology of progress".⁷³ He declares: "In the course of the nineteenth century ... the concept of progress would increasingly have forfeited the critical functions it originally possessed ... the doctrine of natural selection ... popularised the notion that progress was automatic";⁷⁴ and, again: "As soon as it becomes the signature of historical process *as a whole*, the concept of progress bespeaks an uncritical hypostatisation rather than a critical interrogation".⁷⁵

If the notion of "progress" appears as unsatisfactory because it supposes an "automatic", linear evolution towards an inevitable goal - thus encouraging that "uncritical" acceptance of reality from which Benjamin wishes to distance himself - then an alternative model of history is required. If "progress" can be likened to a straight line, that straight line may have to be replaced by a different image. Here Benjamin devises the arresting image of the *constellation*. This motif makes a number of key appearances in *The Arcades Project*, as symbol of the relationship which

emerges when the historian places a number of apparently unrelated historical events in significant conjuncture. The constellation links past events among themselves, or else links past to present; its formation stimulates a flash of recognition, a quantum leap in historical understanding. For example, the French revolutions of 1789, 1830 and 1848 and the Paris Commune of 1870 would all be placed in a constellar relation, as events separated in time but linked by a common insurrectionary consciousness. Thus Benjamin writes: "what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation",⁷⁶ and again: "the concern is to find the constellation of awakening ... the dissolution of 'mythology' into the space of history ... the awakening of a not-yet-conscious knowledge of what has been".⁷⁷ The constellar image marks the transition from "mythology", or illusion, into an authentic understanding of history. The task of the critical historian is, Benjamin argues, positioning himself against the ideology of "progress", "to root out every trace of 'development' from the image of history and to represent becoming ... as a constellation in being".⁷⁸

The critique of linear "progress" and the image of the constellation,⁷⁹ as present in *The Arcades Project*, are further expounded in the last text Benjamin ever wrote, the "Theses on the Philosophy of History" which he drafted in 1940.⁸⁰ This brief, cryptic but endlessly suggestive document systematises his radically non-linear model of history, grounded not in sequence but in interrelation. It may be seen, on one level, as Benjamin's reply to an even briefer text by Marx, the celebrated "Theses on Feuerbach" of 1845 which stake out the territory of the materialist reading of history in two pages of highly compressed argument. At the same time, however, Benjamin's "Theses", though generally read as a stand-alone text, were consciously planned as a methodological complement to *The Arcades Project*,⁸¹ and Benjamin himself stressed "the hidden but revealing relationship between these observations and my previous works - it [the "Theses" text] expresses itself concisely on the method of these".⁸² They are, furthermore, indelibly coloured by the urgency of the time when they were written, both for Benjamin the individual and for the collective victims of the period; as he wrote in one of his last letters, "Every line we succeed in publishing today - no matter how uncertain the future to which we entrust it - is a victory wrenched from the powers of darkness".⁸³

In the "Theses", Benjamin, breaking with "a conception of progress which did not adhere to reality but made dogmatic claims" and was "regarded as irresistible, something that automatically pursued a straight or spiral course", argues that "the concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous, empty time".⁸⁴ This is an anti-historical time that denies the possibility of linking up epochs or reconstituting authentically radical traditions. Benjamin counter-argues: "History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now (...) Thus, to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with the time of the now which he blasted out of the continuum of history. The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome incarnate".⁸⁵ This link between France in 1789 and ancient Rome is clearly a case of a historic constellation in the sense employed in *The Arcades Project*, and at the end of the "Theses" that image does indeed make its appearance. Benjamin affirms that a particular event may acquire dynamic historical significance only "posthumously ... through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one".⁸⁶

Lloyd Spencer comments: "A constellation is made up of some stars that are nearer, others further away. It is only from our perspective, that of the here (and now), that they appear to take on a significant configuration. Benjamin's use of the word 'constellation' ... expresses in a

precise and evocative way an aspect of a new kind of thinking about history".⁸⁷ Marx ended his "Theses on Feuerbach" with the celebrated aphorism: "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point is to *change* it".⁸⁸ Benjamin's theses change the form of that challenge by shifting it on to a non-linear plane. At a time when classical Marxism no longer exerts the influence and attraction it once did, and from the viewpoint of the applicability of Benjamin's ideas and images to our own day, I would wish to argue for the continuing value and utility of Benjamin's constellar model.

The image of the constellation can now be appropriated as a key element for the construction of a dynamic model of history that would stand in profound opposition to the crude and parodic versions of linearist progressivism which have in recent decades all too often taken over the collective mind. The notion of history as a continuum - what Benjamin calls "a sequence of events like the beads of a rosary", an irreversible and unstoppable linear flow - does not stand up to one minute's rational examination. Nonetheless, ideologists and publicists of diverse hues present whatever social or economic tendency they wish to promote as inevitable or irreversible. Examples here might include free-market deregulation, the global reach of Hollywood cinema or the exponential growth of road transport. Those who propound such ideologies typically cast their opponents in the role of Don Quixote tilting at windmills or King Canute trying to hold back the tide. In the world of education, this syndrome can produce situations such as that in which a "reform" of university humanities courses, implying contamination of the critical function of higher education via a lethal dose of compulsory vocationalism, would typically be presented in the language of "progress" and "modernity", with the imposition of positivist values served up as an allegedly necessary and inevitable "integration of arts faculties into the modern world". Linearist arguments of this kind are based on simplistic notions of history as a one-way pendulum and of the "modern" as an irresistible tide. To such intellectually and educationally dangerous reductionism may be opposed Benjamin's dynamic conception of the modern and his non-linear, relational interpretation of history as imaged in the constellation. Viewed through the prism of his extraordinary *Theses*, history ceases to be a continuum, and can reassume its authentic character as a battleground of contending forces in a world where all advance is provisional.

The model of history advanced in the "Theses" has the principle of interrelation at its core. Furthermore, the reader returns from the "Theses" to *The Arcades Project* with a heightened sense of how that principle infuses not only Benjamin's thought but the very structure of his magnum opus. *The Arcades Project* is organised on the relational principle, to the point where the book itself may be perceived as a great constellation of constellations. As Adorno observed, "his thought ... turns the fragment into a rule".⁸⁹ The fragments that make up the text appear on the page in linear sequence, but they generate their meanings through relations of dialogue and cross-reference across the entire book, illuminating each other in a complex and dynamic totality. One fragment lights up another fragment; one section, or collection of fragments, lights up another section. Conversely, no one fragment and no single section acquires its full potential for generating meaning unless placed in relation with the larger whole. What we find in Benjamin is not fragmentation for its own sake, not the reduction of the cultural heritage to a mass of rubble, but, rather, a breaking-down of history into fragments which it is for the reader to reassemble into a qualitatively new whole - a new constellation to illuminate the future.

IX

Benjamin's constellar model of history, based as it is on interrelation rather than linear flow, may also be viewed with hindsight as anticipating one of the more promising developments of our

time - namely that eminently non-linear phenomenon which is the Internet. The system of relations which he constructs bears, in its organising principles, a visible resemblance to the decentralised electronic network that came into being at the end of the twentieth century. Internet authorities such as the celebrated journalist Juan Luis Cebrián and the prestigious sociologist Manuel Castells have drawn attention to the non-hierarchical and dialogic nature of Internet communication. Cebrián, in the second edition (2000) of his *La red [The Network]*, a study commissioned by the Club of Rome, views the network world as activating "una especie de diálogo universal y multiforme" ["a kind of universal, protean dialogue"]⁹⁰, which favours "la creación de mosaicos culturales cuyas baldosas componen un conjunto pero guardan individualmente sus particularidades" ["the creation of cultural mosaics whose component stones make up a whole but retain their individual particularities"]⁹¹. Castells, in *The Internet Galaxy* (2001), describes the Internet as "a decentralised network structure" powered by "distributed computing power throughout the nodes of the network" and characterised by the "absence of a command centre"⁹²; and further argues that, as the new communications technologies develop, we are entering an age in which, in economic organisation, hierarchical top-down models yield place to the networking principle ("business adopts the network as its organisational form")⁹³. The dynamic trends identified by Cebrián and Castells - decentralisation, dialogue, the creation of disparate mosaics, "flat" networking instead of vertical hierarchies - could be seen as structurally analogous to the process by which, in Benjamin's model of history, determination gives way to interrelation.

There is a curious convergence between certain technical characteristics of Charles Fourier's utopia, as relayed by Benjamin, and the Internet as we know it. According to Benjamin, "Fourier speaks of a *transmission miragique* which will make it possible for London to have news from India within four hours".⁹⁴ In this connection, he quotes both Fourier himself: "Tel vaisseau parti de Londres arrive aujourd'hui en Chine; la planète Mercure, avisée des arrivages et mouvements par les astronomes d'Asie, en transmettra la liste aux astronomes de Londres" ["A certain vessel from London arrives in China today; tomorrow the planet Mercury, having been advised of the arrivals and movements of ships by the astronomers of Asia, will transmit the list to the astronomers of London"],⁹⁵ and one of his commentators who, writing in 1901, saw Fourier as prefiguring radio broadcasting: "C'est là une anticipation extraordinaire. C'est précisément ce qu'il a voulu dire: la planète Mercure est là pour figurer une force, ignorée encore, qui permettrait de transmettre les messages, et qu'il a pressentie" ["We have here an extraordinary anticipation. For what he means to say is precisely this: the planet Mercury is there to represent a force, as yet unknown, which would enable the transmission of messages - a force of which he has had a presentiment"].⁹⁶ Taken a step further, this becomes a prefiguration of the modern-day "transmission of messages", via - not "the planet Mercury", but the human-made constellation called the Internet.

A further surprising anticipation of the Internet appears in the pages of another writer frequently cited by Benjamin, Louis-Auguste Blanqui (1805-1881). Blanqui, a political activist, wrote *L'Éternité par les Astres [Eternity Through the Stars]* (1872) when imprisoned following his involvement in the Paris Commune. Benjamin considered this little-known text to be a work of major philosophical significance, declaring in *The Arcades Project*: "This book completes the century's constellation of phantasmagorias with one last, cosmic phantasmagoria which implicitly comprehends the severest critique of all the others"⁹⁷. Blanqui's book is a piece of cosmological speculation which curiously prefigures the Borges of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius". It alternates rather restlessly between a dark vision of the universe as endless repetition - a series of "duplicata tirés à milliards" ["duplicates produced by the billion"]⁹⁸ - and a less oppressive notion of the cosmos as a set of elaborately gradated combinations and variations. Benjamin

reads this text as an overpowering nightmare or anti-utopia; other readings are, however, possible, and one approach could be to foreground Blanqui's incessant oscillation between the rival notions of standardisation (paralleling industrial mass-production) and variation (pointing to a utopian future). Today's Internet partakes in both phenomena: it permits the infinite reproduction of the same text and its diffusion to a potentially unlimited number of recipients, while also allowing multiple discourses to bloom worldwide. In an arresting passage that suggests a cosmic utopia of communication between like-minded beings over huge distances, and thus curiously foreshadows the Internet, Blanqui declares: "Il nous importe assez peu que nos sosies soient nos voisins. Fussent-ils dans la lune, la conversation n'en serait pas plus commode, ni la connaissance plus aisée à faire" ["It scarcely matters whether our doubles are our neighbours. Even if they lived on the moon, the conversation would be just as comfortable and it would be just as easy to get to know each other"].⁹⁹

A nexus, then, comes into being between the utopian dreams of the nineteenth century (Fourier and Blanqui) and the network technology of the twenty-first. If we recall the utopian dimension of the arcades themselves, we may further speculate that the "arcade-like" construction of Benjamin's text, where fragment speaks to fragment and the full sense of any given citation or commentary is created out of its relations with the rest, in certain aspects anticipates the architecture of the Internet.¹⁰⁰ The discrete blocks of text that make up *The Arcades Project* illuminate each other as the reader is jolted into awareness of their hidden connections: text connects to text as if through a hidden hyperlink.

It may be added that the *dialogic* arrangement of the text of *The Arcades Project*, with quotations from others alternating with Benjamin's own commentary, interestingly anticipates a certain type of email dialogue. I am thinking of the practice of carrying out a discussion by email where A quotes selected parts of B's message, interspersed with A's commentary. The British linguistic scholar David Crystal, in his book *Language and the Internet* (2001), calls this procedure "message intercalation", and identifies it as "a unique feature of e-mail language". He states: "It is possible for recipients to respond to an original message ... by editing the original text so that only those parts which require reaction to it are left"¹⁰¹ - a formula which would also well describe Benjamin's strategy of pertinent quotation.

In Benjamin's writing as on the Internet, no message ever reaches a final destination: the generation of meaning is as much a function of the relations between texts as of the texts themselves. The interconnection of Benjamin's fragments offers a formal anticipation of the mode of structuring of the World Wide Web, where page speaks to page within a site and site speaks to site across the network. The acquisition of knowledge becomes a continuous, never-ending process, based not on the straight line but the constellation; to the constellation of textual fragments in Benjamin's pages corresponds, on a larger scale, the constellation of texts that is the Internet. Benjamin's way of seeing in *The Arcades Project* here emerges with hindsight less as Marxist than as pointing, in an unexpectedly pioneering sense, to something after and beyond Marxism. The utopian discourse of classical Marxism, based on an essentially linear model of human advancement, gives way to an alternative utopian vision, enabled by technological breakthrough but not confined by technicist horizons, which permits the creation of new, dynamic forms of human intervention based on the principle of interrelation.

Every epoch creates its precursors: if Benjamin's greatest work has been revealed in English, the lingua franca of the new electronic networks, only at the very end of the twentieth century, that historic timing also points up the unexpected ways in which that same work now proves to anticipate the dynamic of that networking mode of being which offers the human race its best

hope for the twenty-first century. By reading Walter Benjamin, by retracing his steps through the arcades, by re-creating the constellations of meaning that he plotted, we can come to a clearer understanding of our own new and emergent way of seeing.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" IX/259-260.

² In this paper, 1) all fragments cited from the English translation of Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* are identified by both editorial reference number and page number, in that order; 2) the policy adopted regarding translations of non-English quotations, both for texts quoted by Benjamin himself and for those from other sources, is as follows: the original is given alongside the English translation in the case of citations of particular literary value, e.g. those from Baudelaire and Hugo; otherwise, only the English version is given.

³ Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1982.

⁴ For many of the details in this paragraph, I am indebted to Lloyd Spencer's article "On the Concept of History".

⁵ For full information and documentation on Benjamin's last days and the different theories surrounding his death, see Scheurmann and Scheurmann, *Pour Walter Benjamin, passim*. I have examined the subject myself in my article "Border Crossing, Resting Place" (cf. Works Cited; also on this site)

⁶ For representative reviews, see Lucas, "Parisian Dialectics", Mannes-Abbott, "Gone Shopping" and Nygren, "Life in the Jaws of the Crocodile".

⁷ A comprehensive multilingual definition is offered by Geist (*Le Passage*, 11-12).

⁸ The German title of the guide cited is *Illustrierte Pariser Führer* (Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* A1,1/31).

⁹ Those elements of factual information in this and the following paragraph which are not from Benjamin are taken either from Geist (op. cit.) or from de Moncan and Mahout, *Le Guide des passages de Paris*.

¹⁰ See Geist (305-309).

¹¹ For the convent connection, see Geist (297) and, for the Passage Choiseul, de Moncan and Mahout (122).

¹² See Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* section A [31-61], *passim*; Geist 318-323.

¹³ Amédée Kermel, "Les passages de Paris" (1831), quoted in Geist (298; my translation from French).

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ Geist 298 (my translation).

¹⁶ *The Arcades Project* D°,7/834. Kermel anticipates Benjamin in praising the arcades' architectural originality: 'I who, in my grateful imagination, have judged the person who first had the idea of the arcades and the audacity to construct them as being the equal of [the architects] Larochevoucault or Mansard' (loc. cit.; my translation).

¹⁷ *ibid.* S1,1/543.

¹⁸ *ibid.* "Materials for the Exposé of 1935, No 5"/905.

¹⁹ *ibid.* loc. cit. 903.

²⁰ For the "dialectical image", see Adorno, *Sur Walter Benjamin* 142-145, 148-152.

²¹ *ibid.* "First Sketches"/827.

²² *ibid.* "First Sketches"/828.

²³ see Geist loc. cit.

²⁴ *The Arcades Project* X13a/669.

²⁵ Adorno, "Fragmente über Wagner", 1939; quoted by Benjamin (loc. cit).

²⁶ *ibid.* W10a,1/637.

²⁷ Marx, letter to Ludwig Kugelmann, 9 October 1866 (see Benjamin, loc. cit.).

²⁸ Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology, Part One*, 54.

²⁹ Buck-Morss 64.

³⁰ "Phalanx" is an alternative name for "phalanstery".

³¹ Fourier, quoted by Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* A5,4/44.

³² *The Arcades Project* "First Sketches"/839.

³³ *ibid.* S2,1/546.

³⁴ *ibid.* H1a,5/206.

³⁵ *ibid.* N11,3/476.

³⁶ Arendt, "Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940" 47.

³⁷ *ibid.* 11, 12.

³⁸ Sontag, "Introduction" to Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings* 27.

³⁹ Spencer, "On Certain Difficulties".

⁴⁰ Adorno, *Sur Walter Benjamin* 9 (here and elsewhere I have provided my own renderings into English from the French versions of Adorno's texts [originally written in German]).

⁴¹ cf. Marx, "Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*" 425-426.

⁴² *The Arcades Project* N1a,6/460.

⁴³ *ibid.* M°,14/854.

⁴⁴ Mannes-Abbott, loc. cit.

⁴⁵ Cuddon 529 (entry: "Marxist criticism").

⁴⁶ Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* III/224, II/223.

⁴⁷ *ibid.* VIII/230.

⁴⁸ *ibid.* XII/236.

⁴⁹ Adorno, *Sur Walter Benjamin* 170, 172, 173.

⁵⁰ *The Arcades Project* K3,3/394.

⁵¹ See Baudelaire, "De l'Héroïsme de la Vie Moderne" [*Salon de 1846*, section XVIII], *Œuvres complètes* 949-952.

⁵² The larger part of this material (i.e. the essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire") was published in German in 1939.

⁵³ Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire* 116.

⁵⁴ *ibid.* 117.

⁵⁵ *ibid.* 154.

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- ⁵⁶ Baudelaire, "Perte d'Auréole" [*Le Spleen de Paris*, XLVI], *Œuvres complètes* 299-300 (my translation); cf. Benjamin, op. cit. 152-154.
- ⁵⁷ Benjamin, op. cit. 117.
- ⁵⁸ Baudelaire, "Le Soleil" [*Les Fleurs du Mal*, LXXXVII], in *Oeuvres complètes* (line 5; my translation); cf. Benjamin, op. cit. 68, 118.
- ⁵⁹ Baudelaire, *Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne*, *Oeuvres complètes* 1152-1192 (1163; my translation).
- ⁶⁰ Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian" 360-361.
- ⁶¹ Morris Berman, *The Twilight of American Culture* 63, 57, 55.
- ⁶² Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* 15; the quotation which gives his book its title is from Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (10).
- ⁶³ Lott, *Love and Theft*, 6. Lott's book avoids mentioning Benjamin by name, but it is impregnated by his influence: significantly, to figure the ambivalence of the minstrel shows he uses the Janus image, as employed by Benjamin for the arcades: "the early minstrel show was a Janus-faced figure for the cultural relationship of white to black in America, a relationship that even in its dominative character was far from self-explanatory" (ibid. 30; cf. note 16 above).
- ⁶⁴ Marcus twice quotes Benjamin's remark that "history is a matter of seizing 'hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger'" ("Theses on the Philosophy of History", VI/257), in *The Dustbin of History* (37, 143).
- ⁶⁵ Marcus, op. cit. 9, 8.
- ⁶⁶ Hugo, *Paris* 25, 33 (my translation).
- ⁶⁷ Tennyson, "Locksley Hall" lines 181-182.
- ⁶⁸ Baudelaire, "Notes nouvelles sur Edgar Poe" 180 (my translation).
- ⁶⁹ See Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*: "The weapons with which the bourgeoisie felled feudalism to the ground are now turned against the bourgeoisie itself ... Overthrow of the bourgeoisie lays the foundation for the sway of the proletariat" (12, 15). This sequential model can perfectly well be read as an embodiment of the doctrine of linear progress.
- ⁷⁰ Hugo, op. cit. 97.
- ⁷¹ Hugo, "La Caravane"; quoted by Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire* (64; the translation is mine). For an account of Hugo's concept of "progress", see Pena-Ruiz and Scot, "Une philosophie critique du progrès" *passim*.
- ⁷² Tiedemann, "Dialectics at a Standstill" 941.
- ⁷³ *The Arcades Project* O°5/857.
- ⁷⁴ ibid. N11a,1/476.
- ⁷⁵ ibid. N13,1/478.
- ⁷⁶ ibid. N2a,3/462.
- ⁷⁷ ibid. N1,9/458.
- ⁷⁸ ibid. H°,16/845.
- ⁷⁹ In relation to this text, Lloyd Spencer explains that "constellation" is a literal rendering of the German "Konstellation" (see his "On Certain Difficulties with the Translation of 'On the Concept of History'").
- ⁸⁰ Also known as "On the Concept of History". For the background to this text, see Spencer's two articles.
- ⁸¹ See Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin* (120).
- ⁸² Benjamin, letter to Gretel Adorno, 7 May 1940; quoted in Spencer, "On Certain Difficulties".
- ⁸³ Benjamin, letter to Gershom Scholem, 11 January 1940; quoted in Spencer, "On the Concept of History".
- ⁸⁴ Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" XIII/262-263.
- ⁸⁵ ibid. XIV/263.
- ⁸⁶ ibid. A/265.
- ⁸⁷ Spencer, "On Certain Difficulties".
- ⁸⁸ Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach" XI/423.
- ⁸⁹ Adorno, *Sur Walter Benjamin* 27.
- ⁹⁰ Cebrián, *La red* 84 (my translation from Spanish).
- ⁹¹ ibid. 282.
- ⁹² Castells, *The Internet Galaxy* 17 (N.B.: Castells' book is written directly in English).
- ⁹³ ibid. 66.
- ⁹⁴ W11a,3/639.
- ⁹⁵ Fourier, quoted by Benjamin, ibid. W9a,3/636.
- ⁹⁶ Charles Gide on Fourier [1901], quoted by Benjamin, loc. cit.
- ⁹⁷ *The Arcades Project* "Exposé of 1939"/25.
- ⁹⁸ Blanqui, *L'Éternité par les Astres* 123 (my translation).
- ⁹⁹ ibid. 123-124.
- ¹⁰⁰ The Benjamin/Internet link has, it seems, been posited by Irving Wohlfahrt, in a paper entitled "Awakening from the Twentieth Century", given at the International Walter Benjamin Society Conference held in Barcelona in

September 25-27 2000. This paper is summarised in Esther Leslie's report on the conference (see Works Cited), but her summary is too brief to give a clear idea of the nature of Wohlfahrt's analysis.

¹⁰¹ Crystal, *Language and the Internet* 118.