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## Method and time: Benjamin's dialectical images

It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on the past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. – Only dialectical images are genuine images (that is, not archaic); and the place where one encounters them is language.

“Awakening” (*Arcades*, 462; N2a, 3)

Reading this well-known entry from the “N” convolute of Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, even the most seasoned Benjamin expert might be forgiven a feeling of helplessness in the face of such a powerful and enigmatic array of claims. The breathtaking evocation of an alternative temporality that this quote contains in characteristically elliptical and compacted form, the glimpse at an entirely new conception of historiography that breaks with previous categories of interpretation, the notion of an image-based historical sensibility as the genuine mode of historical interpretation – these are as fascinating and compelling as any moment in modern philosophy. But, at the same time, one cannot avoid the feeling that this quote, and others like it in Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, is a theoretical promissory note that would prove difficult if not impossible to redeem. What possible philosophy of history could explicate the difference between the past and “what-has-been,” between the present and the “now”? What could it mean to claim that an alternative version of historical happening depends on a “flash” of synthesis between what has been and a now: what role does such a claim leave open for the historical researcher? Why should we prefer a “constellation” to a solid work of critical historiography? Why should we understand a categorical distinction between “ordinary” temporal relations familiar to academic historiography, relations that appear indispensable for the invaluable work of historical interpretation, versus “dialectical” relations?

Seventy years after they were written, and over thirty years after they first became the object of Benjamin scholars, these claims retain the power to shock. Along with other texts in the “N” convolute, in the exposés and sketches of the *Arcades Project*, and in the “On the Concept of History,” this entry extends a claim for the “dialectical image” as the methodological cornerstone of the *Arcades Project*. The problem, of course, is that the *centrality* of dialectical images for Benjamin’s own understanding of the specifically new methodological foundation of the work is matched by the *obscurity* of the notion of dialectical images. Hints, clues, summations of nonexistent treatises, elliptical remarks, and a very small number of tightly packed and often hermetic doctrinal statements, such as the one above, do not add up to anything approaching a “theory” of the dialectical image, or certainly not one elaborated enough to serve as a perspicuous guide to how the thousands of pages of excerpts and citations of the *Arcades Project* were to have been used.

Benjamin regarded the dialectical image as the methodological heart of the *Arcades Project*. Yet he was unable to offer a coherent, intelligible account of what dialectical images were, what their precise methodological role should be taken to be, how they were to be related to the agency of the critical historian, what sorts of meta-theoretical and meta-methodological (in other words: theological) postulates they might imply, or indeed how, and under what conditions, dialectical images were possible at all. The dialectical image has been the subject of a good deal of dedicated scholarship.<sup>1</sup> Yet, at the heart of the *Arcades Project*, the “lightning flash” of the dialectical image has, to this day, remained far more a dark star, indeed a kind of theoretical and methodological black hole, a “singularity” following its own extraordinary laws and capable, apparently, of absorbing any number of attempts at critical illumination.

There are certainly two (not incompatible) explanations for this state of affairs: we may simply not yet have gotten the interpretation of the dialectical image that we need. Or, there simply may not be such a thing as a “doctrine” or “theory” of dialectical images that could serve as the object of explanation. Susan Buck-Morss, whose reconstruction of a “theory” of the dialectical image is surely the most complex and thorough to date, rightly points out that the term is simply “overdetermined” in Benjamin’s own work, meaning that Benjamin tended to invoke it as often as explain it. Rolf Tiedemann, one of the editors of Benjamin’s collected works, has argued that the term “dialectical image,” notwithstanding its centrality for Benjamin’s mature work, “never achieved any terminological consistency.”<sup>2</sup> Are we dealing with an overly rich theoretical legacy that is still awaiting its definitive interpretation? Or does the dialectical image rather denote the failure

of Benjamin's mature cultural theory? Is the legacy of the dialectical image the guarantee of Benjamin's continuing relevance, or of the limits of his relevance?

I cannot hope to offer definitive answers to these questions here. The purpose of the present chapter is the far more modest one of offering an introductory account of the salient features of the dialectical image – to summarize what Benjamin appears to have meant by the term – and to offer a brief appraisal of the role of the dialectical image in determining the continuing relevance of Benjamin's thought. In so doing, I shall organize this chapter around two intertwined perspectives on the dialectical image: the dialectical image as a radically new *method* for the conduct of a new mode of critical materialist historiography, on the one hand, and the dialectical image as part of the description of a radically alternative conception of *time* and of historical experience, on the other. As we shall see, much difficulty with the doctrine of the dialectical image arises from the attempt to reconcile these two perspectives.

Clearly, any attempt to wrestle with these questions begins with the curious construction “dialectical image” itself, which conjoins two otherwise opposed terms. “Dialectical” normally refers to the relationship of concepts or arguments to one another; “images” are, on the contrary, normally considered in terms of immediacy and singularity. Benjamin's coining of the term was meant, among other things, as a critique of available modes of historical interpretation. “Dialectics” as the Hegelian mode of analysis of the historical unfolding of Spirit devolved into a historicist fantasy: what appeared as the fated progression of historical time could be shown to be the phantasmagoric appearance of eternal repetition, mythic time, under conditions of capitalism. Images, at the same time, needed to be rescued from aesthetic discourses and endowed with a shocking, that is to say a politically effective power. Thinking in images rather than concepts is, of course, a hallmark of Benjamin's work from its very beginning. Unlike concepts, the claim to immediacy inherent in the graphic image contains the potential to interrupt, hence to counteract modes of perception and cognition that have become second nature. The primary locus of the term “dialectical image” is thus itself the establishment of a (eminently dialectical) tension between two terms which, developed to their extreme, suddenly overcome this opposition.

Hegel always made sure that appearances conformed to the logic of the concept; his method was at heart logical, and hence the phenomenology of history – what shows itself, concretely, to the gaze of the dialectical historian – is derivative of the logic of development of Spirit from which history draws its shape and meaning. Benjamin, on the contrary, begins with phenomenology, with the factual appearance of historical shapes and

instances, and refuses to allow the logic of development any role except as just one of these instances. Hence, “development,” the *ideal* of historical progress, is one of many different forms of appearance for the history of the rise of industrial capitalism over the course of the early nineteenth century.

The *Arcades Project* was to have been a radically new mode of materialist critical historiography: the work proposed to construct a series of images representing the philosophical truth content of the rise of capitalist culture and capitalist consciousness over the course of the nineteenth century. The vast collection of historical material that Benjamin assembled was meant to serve as a reservoir of raw materials for the construction of images: images, that is, that would “spring forth” from constructions of the historical material itself. But how should the materialist critic assemble these fragments in such a way that images would “spring forth” from them? Renouncing the formative, meaning-giving commitment to dialectical logic, however, and renouncing the commitment to the narrative of historical development that this logic made possible, Benjamin’s phenomenology of the material culture of the nineteenth century clearly required some way to structure the mass of assembled material, some way of *making* a materialist historiography out of recovered bits of historical appearances. One might naturally think of a theory that would offer an account of how, and why, to make sense of the historical material; Marx’s dialectical reversal of Hegel’s philosophy of history, or Lukács’s theory of the reification effects of the commodity form suggest themselves.

Benjamin, however, grew increasingly unwilling to commit his project to a theoretical justification. He was convinced that theories in general remained too dependent upon the intentions of the theorist. All dialectical inversions notwithstanding, Benjamin was convinced that the historical truth of the nineteenth century was *objectively* present in his assembled fragments, and that this truth would be lost, not recovered, by the imposition of a theoretical superstructure upon them. Historical truth, Benjamin came to believe, is not simply available to any theorizing subject at any given historical moment; rather historical truth becomes “legible” or “recognizable” only at specific points: “The dialectical image,” he maintains, “is an image that emerges suddenly, in a flash. What has been is to be held fast – as an image flashing up in the now of its recognizability” (*Arcades*, 473; N9, 7). Under conventional terms “past” is a narrative construction of the conditions for the possibility of a present which supercedes and therefore comprehends it; Benjamin’s sense, on the contrary, was that “past” and “present” are constantly locked in a complex interplay in which what is past and what is present are negotiated through material struggles, only subsequent to which the victorious parties

consign all that supports their vision of the world to a harmonious past, and all that speaks against it to oblivion. Strategizing against just this approved notion of historical time, Benjamin was convinced that behind the façade of the present, these otherwise forgotten moments could be recovered from oblivion and reintroduced, shoved in the face of the present, as it were, with devastating force: "The materialist presentation of history leads the past to bring the present into a critical state" (*Arcades*, 471; N7a, 5). But this view implied that the materialist critic could not simply *will* the subversive recovery of elements of an otherwise forgotten material culture; rather, the task was to cultivate a particular capacity for *recognizing* such moments.

Beyond the methodology of hermeneutics, in which past is recovered from the perspective of a present that finds its own self-understanding only in the horizon of a recovered tradition, Benjamin sought a way to actualize historical material that would *uproot* and shock what has been constructed as "the present," that would disrupt the very relationship between past and present that hermeneutics assumes. Theory, for Benjamin, in general always requires the stability of a (theorizing) subject and the imposition of subjective intention on the structure of historical time; the invariable effect of even the best-intentioned theory is a certain pacification of history and hence the loss of the capacity for recognizing sites where past and present lose their familiar contours. Hence theory for Benjamin must be replaced by method. Benjamin was convinced that only in this way could the subjective element be removed from the construction of images; an element that he had already described in *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama* as an impediment to the revelation of truth. The claim to the objective truth of dialectical images, and the need to articulate this claim while nevertheless explaining the role of the materialist critic, was a consistent problem for Benjamin and one that his notes on the dialectical image never entirely resolve.<sup>3</sup>

The elimination of theory in favor of method, a project that is utterly distinctive of Benjamin's intellectual trajectory over the course of the *Arcades Project*, has more behind it than Benjamin's views on the objective nature of historical truth and his distrust of the distorting effects of the intentional subject. There is, of course, no real method without theory; no possible rule for proceeding with the historical material without some intellectual commitments that determine in advance the overall significance of the historical material, the possibility of their recovery, the purpose of their construction into images, and the shocking effect that images are intended to deploy. In fact the "theory" that Benjamin had in mind, and that he was anxious to conceal behind the historical material itself, was in fact "theory" in its oldest sense: theology. Benjamin's insistence on *not* providing an adequate theoretical justification for how dialectical images both could be constructed by

critical agency and could “emerge,” with a shocking force, from the assembled materials – that is, how dialectical images were both made and recognized – was to become Adorno’s central criticism of Benjamin’s earliest, most imagistic drafts of the *Arcades Project* (CA/B, 104–5).

The *Arcades Project*, as anyone who has strolled its halls knows, contains an astonishing number and variety of different theoretical orientations and resources. But if we are to get a sense of how the dialectical image was to have worked as a methodological innovation for a new mode of cultural criticism, we must turn to Benjamin’s eccentric and distinctive appropriation of Marx. To an extent that is often pushed to the background in current readings of Benjamin as a literary critic, the *Arcades Project* was, centrally, a Marxist, or at the very least a Marxist-inspired, work of cultural critique. The analysis of the material conditions of the emergence of high capitalism in the Paris of the nineteenth century was intended to reveal, in microscopic detail, the gradual insinuation of a deeply oppressive form of cultural life in conformity with the economic and political imperatives of a nascent capitalist system. The work deals, fundamentally, with a form of injustice that is all the harder to grasp since it infiltrates the tiniest capillary of consciousness from the highest forms of cultural expression to the level of everyday *habitus*. For Benjamin, Marx had understood that the hegemonic character of capitalism was, like all essentially mythic modes, both all-encompassing and, for that same reason, oddly fragile. In its ignorance of authentic human needs and its blindness to the cost in human suffering it exacts, it not only requires the disenchantment of old religious–metaphysical forms of consciousness and sources of motivation, but also, in its advanced form, compels a new form of rechantment that classical liberal political economy could not even register, let alone explain. Much of the *Arcades Project* describes this new enchantment as “sleep,” and the ideology of endless newness and guaranteed progress that capitalism depended on for a new motivational basis as a form of dreamlife. “Capitalism,” Benjamin writes in an unusually terse formation, “was a natural phenomenon with which a new dream-filled sleep came over Europe, and, through it, a reactivation of mythic forces” (*Arcades*, 391; κ1α, 9). Awakening from this sleep is the principal task of materialist historiography, and dialectical images are, for Benjamin, the moments of waking from this collective dream.

Two quotes will help to set the parameters of Benjamin’s eccentric and distinctive reception of Marx:

Marx lays bare the causal connection between economy and culture. For us, what matters is the thread of expression. It is not the economic origins of culture that will be presented, but the expression of the economy in its culture. At issue,

in other words, is the attempt to grasp an economic process as perceptible Ur-phenomenon, from out of which proceed all manifestations of life in the arcades (and, accordingly, in the nineteenth century).

(*Arcades*, 460; N1A, 6 [cf. also 391; K2, 3])

This quote surprisingly appropriates what must count as the least promising aspect of Marxian cultural criticism – the economic determinism implicit in Marx's view of culture, and Marx's own consequent underestimation of the importance of symbolic or cultural reproduction processes, as opposed to material reproduction. By regarding the relation between material and cultural production as *expression*, rather than *determination*,<sup>4</sup> Benjamin claims that the distinctive cultural expressions of an epoch are simultaneously material *and* symbolic, economic *and* cultural, such that the collective consciousness of nineteenth-century European culture expresses itself in a double manner. The imperatives of capitalism are expressed both in the conscious attempts of its apologists, literary and aesthetic heroes, and statesmen to generate a dominant culture that expresses the triumphs of capitalist modernity, and in the largely unconscious *reactions* to the hellish consequences of this same modernity, which are expressed, in encoded form, in a thousand inadvertent, overlooked, or otherwise worthless cultural forms. These include: fashion, advertising, the endless ebb and flow of commodities, commercial ventures, consumer fads, popular literature, journalism and feuilletons, new building forms and materials, architectural embellishments, changes in design, and the inconspicuous emergence of new forms of bodily comportment, dress, and affect that emerge as a population finds itself obliged to accommodate new productive and commercial technologies.

Marx himself, of course, had already noticed the particular dialectical structure of the industrial commodity, and described the “fetishism” of the commodity, scornfully, as a reintroduction of pre-modern religious consciousness into the modern. As it alienates actual human beings from their own nature as free producers, the commodity at the same time assumes human qualities – hence the commodity is in itself a dialectical construction, inasmuch as it is the graphic expression of the moment where two opposed concepts, subject and object, reverse. Subjects become transformed into objects through alienated industrial labor; objects, through the same process, are transformed into subjective beings. In this sense, commodities are both nature and culture, both economic and symbolic forms, or better, are the concrete appearances of the intersection of these dialectical poles. For this reason they are sites for the disclosure of a kind of historical truth about modern capitalism. Marx, who had in mind primarily manufacturing goods and raw materials, regarded this expressive function of the commodity predominantly

in terms of the alienation of free labor, and the unconscious reactivation of superseded moments of collective religious consciousness necessary to make this alienation seem natural and inevitable. In this sense “the commodity” was for Marx a general concept.

Benjamin, on the other hand, recognized that commodity fetishism appeared most clearly in objects of consumption, not of production – which register and express collective consciousness of historical experience in a far more powerful and poignant manner than industrial wares. This reveals how the dialectic of commodities remained incomplete in Marx. One could say that Marx grasped the theological complexity of the commodity, but not the commodity’s status as a *phantasmagoria*; that is, as a delusional expression of collective utopian fantasies and longings, whose very mode of expression itself, as delusional, ensures that those same longings remain mere utopian fantasies. In their concentration, and reversal, of the dialectical poles of subjectivity and objectivity, commodities express *both* the hellish *and* the utopian sides of human consciousness: the transmutation of humans into objects can also be figured as the dream of a reunion with an alienated nature; the transmutation of objects into subjects recalls the religious vision of a nature endowed once again with the ability to signify. As ciphers of equivalence, “meaningful” only in the language of exchange value, commodities are expressions of the theological vision of meaningless nature, or Hell. But as markers for a continuum of unfulfilled utopian expectation, commodities also point simultaneously back toward a paradisiacal pre-history and forward toward a revolutionary interruption of the continuum that perpetuates them. As expression, commodities are phantasmagoria: Benjamin saw this point very precisely, and was thus drawn to those moments in the material culture of nineteenth-century Paris where the phantasmagoric aspect emerged most vividly – the drive toward incessant novelty with which people outfitted themselves and their city constantly, and largely unconsciously, ended up quoting the primal or the prehistoric. As Benjamin wrote in the 1935 exposé on “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century”:

Corresponding to the form of the new means of production, which in the beginning is still ruled by the old (Marx) are images in the collective consciousness in which the old and the new interpenetrate. These images are wish images; in them the collective seeks both to overcome and to transfigure the immaturity of the social product and the inadequacies in the social organization of production. At the same time, what emerges in these wish images is the resolute effort to distance oneself from all that is antiquated – which includes, however, the recent past. These tendencies deflect the imagination (which is given impetus by the new) back upon the primal past. In the dream in which each epoch entertains images of its successor, the latter appears wedded to

elements of primal history – that is, to elements of a classless society. And the experiences of such a society – as stored in the unconscious of the collective – engender, through interpenetration with what is new, the utopia that has left its trace in a thousand configurations of life, from enduring edifices to passing fashions. (Arcades, 4–5).

However, the collective *expression* of these archaic wish images, in order to become effectively reversed into a politically shocking force, must be *represented*, and recognized, precisely for what they are; and it is this representation and recognition that the dialectical image constitutes.

We can now turn to the second of the two Marx quotes mentioned above, as Benjamin moves decisively beyond Marx to solve the problem of how this graphic representation can transform wish images into dialectical images:

A central problem of historical materialism that ought to be seen in the end: Must the Marxist understanding of history necessarily be acquired at the expense of the perceptibility of history? Or: In what way is it possible to conjoin a heightened graphicness [*Anschaulichkeit*] to the realization of Marxist method? The first stage in this undertaking will be to carry over the principle of montage into history. That is, to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moments the crystal of the total event.

(Arcades, 461; N2, 6)

Here the question of method is the question of retaining graphicness against the blurring effects of a philosophy of history. Even in its inversion of Hegel's idealism, Marx's materialist historical theory preserves Hegel's insistence on the logical structure of development, and therefore generates the significance of historical appearances without any real engagement with those appearances themselves. To realize the critical power of Marx's basic insight – the primacy of the material dimension of history, and the ideological occlusion of just this fact in capitalist modernity – Benjamin proposes a methodology entirely alien to Marxist political economy. "To carry over the principle of montage into history" means, initially, to borrow an aesthetic technique of the literary avant-garde, the French Surrealists, and to apply that method beyond the aesthetic sphere, into the practice of critical historiography.

Much reading and much interpretation of Benjamin's work has had the inevitable effect of dulling this extraordinary proposal. While the Surrealists surely desired a political effect from their projects, the technique of montage was surely one that made most sense when seen as the logical outcome of an institutionally structured history of painting: rejecting the model of the solitary creative genius, the method stuck together otherwise useless or discarded found objects – paper scraps, portions of painted canvas, newspaper, ticket

stubs, cigarette butts, buttons – in a construction whose power to disorient and to shock lay to a large degree in the defamiliarization effect of seeing otherwise meaningless material objects suddenly removed from the context that determines their meaninglessness. To be sure, the shocking aspect of Surrealist montages presupposes the capacity of the audience to reflect upon the very activity of aesthetic reception and appreciation: montages “mean” in the sense that they reveal something of the essentially arbitrary nature of material signification, and the capacity of aesthetic framing to render just that arbitrary quality itself as an object of aesthetic experience, hence (as an artwork) meaningful. Moreover, despite their repeated attempts to eliminate the role of subjective intention from the constructive act of montage-building itself (often with the aid of quite extravagant notions of “objective chance,” automatic writing, intoxication, dream-states, and so forth) it remains clear that the Surrealist montage, like virtually all its cognate artistic products of the aesthetic and literary avant-garde, requires rather a lot of authorial intention. The “principle of construction” – the series of decisions of what is to count as a fragment, how it is to be secured, whether and in what way it is to be mounted, and above all what other fragments it is to be juxtaposed to – conforms in the final analysis to a recognizable narrative of aesthetic innovation, negation, and judgment; in short, of art history from the rise of representational painting through its negation in aesthetic modernism (and subsequent rebirth in postmodern realism).

Finally, it should be remembered that the Surrealist montage still leaves undecided the *imagistic* nature of the final artistic product: the shock effect of decontextualized and recontextualized material objects does not, for the Surrealists, depend upon the construction of an image from out of the assembled fragments; rather, it arises from the tension inherent in the relationship of the mounted fragments to one another.<sup>5</sup>

Benjamin’s decision to carry the montage principle over into critical historiography implies that *historical* fragments, like the actual physical stuff of the Surrealists, can be constructed by removing them (via historical research) from their embeddedness in a particular context (in which they are recorded only insofar as they are insignificant, the “trash of history”), and “mounting” them in a series of textual juxtapositions – informed by a so-far missing principle of construction – such that the juxtaposed fragments constitute a constellation. And this constellation, in turn, forms an image, not in the intuitive sense of a visual image (which would be, in the field of art, a mosaic and not a montage), but precisely in the sense of a new, *necessary* interpretation of the fragments’ relationships with one another. Finally, this interpretation would also have the shocking consequence of obliging an entirely new interpretation of the material culture from which they were wrested, and the

relationship of that material culture to the present moment. The formerly insignificant fragments, rescued and redeployed in a critical text, would shatter the "philosophy of history" that determined them as insignificant.<sup>6</sup>

The methodology of "constructing" dialectical images, then, stands at the crossroads of a Marxist-inspired insight into the dialectical nature of the commodity structure, on the one side, and a notion of montage and its implicit revaluation of the world of the devalued material object on the other. The materialist critic scavenges the detritus of history for those objects that resist incorporation into a triumphal story of capitalism as endless progress and that therefore express (in their very quality as trash) the frustrated utopian fantasies of a particular generation. This detritus consists of a wide range of "commodities" taken in the broadest sense: commercial articles remembered, or half-remembered, or remembered only insofar as their use-value has drained out of them; the gadgets and "furnishings" that fade into a distinctive, faintly disreputable quaintness as they make their way from the great department stores and fashionable boutiques to the discount tables and third-rate antique shops. These things are united in their status as commodities for which the status of phantasmagoria has decayed, and which, released from the cycle of economic exchange, are available as material for construction. But Benjamin's attention was just as much focused on the "detritus" of literary experiments, popular novels, pamphlets, and feuilletons, as on contemporary accounts of rapid cultural change and innovations in architectural style and ornament. This range of poor, slightly out-of-date things is the natural medium for the materialist critic who then, in a second, destructive procedure, removes these objects from the "natural" medium in which they exist – the history of endless newness and of endless progress that capitalist modernity endlessly deploys. Violently removed from this context, the detritus can then be reconfigured into a constellation such that the *truth* of the fate of these objects, what has happened to them and what this fate says about capitalism, springs forth in a sudden, shocking image. The image is "of" the commodity: but now the commodity no longer simply "expresses" the collective hopes and fantasies of a collective. It now *represents* that hope, and the expressive quality of the commodity itself, in a reversed context: as the very fate in which collective hopes are consistently, necessarily, and brutally suppressed and denied. Represented as the medium in which collective fantasies are denied, the commodity now "means" its opposite. The fantasy world of material well-being promised by every commodity now is revealed as a Hell of unfulfillment; the promise of eternal newness and unlimited progress encoded in the imperatives of technological change and the cycles of consumption now appear as their opposite, as primal history, the mythic compulsion toward endless repetition.<sup>7</sup> The slight

aging of the “failed” commodity, through criticism, reveals capitalism’s darkest secret: the allure of the brand-new hides the essence of capitalism as an endless compulsion to repeat. Stripped of their gleam, and reconfigured, cultural goods revert to their true status: as fossils unearthed from an ongoing history of compulsion, violence, and disappointment.

The peculiar fusion of the primally old within the very heart of the most fashionably up-to-date – what Baudelaire had diagnosed as the essence of modern beauty and indeed of modernity itself – is now revealed as the dialectical explosive at the heart of the commodity itself. To ignite this charge, the dialectical image “pictures” the commodity *no differently*, in one sense, than a predominant culture does. It merely shifts the context. The dialectical oppositions or force-fields at whose frontier the commodity is forged – subject and object, history and nature, consciousness and material being – are developed into their most extreme form: at the intersecting axes of subject and object, nature and history, time and repetition, the dialectical image springs forth as a “stop” or a freeze, as the monadic crystallization of the supposedly implacable progression of historical time.<sup>8</sup>

Hence the *dialectics* of the dialectical image is precisely the fact that the image represents the commodity *as it truly is*, and this representation, Benjamin believes, derives its distinctive shocking quality precisely insofar as it has the capacity to awaken a collective subject from a dream-state in which it has fallen. The awakening from dream, then, is for Benjamin the quintessence of dialectical thought as such. And insofar as Benjamin is convinced that such an experience of awakening is, in dialectical terms, most intimately related to a form of remembrance,<sup>9</sup> we see that the method of constructing dialectical images is itself also to be understood as the development of a new form of critical memory and a new conception of the images of historical time.

The close of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* contains a famous invocation of historical time at the moment of its culmination: at the climactic moment of its self-return and full self-knowledge, Spirit remembers or “recollects” [*erinnern*] into itself the mass of historical moments that otherwise remain contingent and unrelated, dispersed through time. By bringing back within itself what had otherwise remained externalized content, Spirit annuls the distinction between past and present. It stages this recuperation of the historically contingent in a final, majestic panorama, a historical review of the images of its own self-development, presented as “a slow movement and succession of spirits (*Geistern*), a gallery of pictures, each of which, endowed with the entire wealth of Spirit, moves so slowly precisely because the Self must permeate and digest all this wealth into its substance.”<sup>10</sup>

Time for Hegel is equated with history, and history is fully disclosed in the retrospective gathering of otherwise discrete historical images under the

sovereignty of a Self, one for whom these images can now be recollected as part of a narrative drama of self-creation. Those historical moments or images that otherwise were threatened with annihilation are saved from oblivion, but saved only insofar as their significance, their correct interpretation, is produced as they are “digested” by absolute Spirit. Each of these moments, recollected and incorporated, are no longer simply images of a particular historical event, stage, or epoch; they no longer *mean* what they simply *show*. Rather, the members of this “gallery of pictures” mean what they mean insofar as they are admitted to the gallery, related to one another through their recuperation in Spirit. And this is the condition for the claim that each image contains, in microcosm, the entire wealth or Spirit or the entire span of historical time coiled within it, each from a slightly different perspective. One would also expect that a very great number of “spirits,” concrete historical images, would ultimately be incapable of contributing to the goal of “the revelation of the depth of spiritual life,”<sup>11</sup> and would not be recollected and interiorized, and thus be irretrievably lost to memory, obliterated. Hence the imperative of full self-knowledge replicates in metaphysical language the Christian vision of a final judgment, wherein some spirits are endowed with the full richness of the historical adventure, thereby becoming not just “slow” but in effect timeless. The others receive the judgment of oblivion.<sup>12</sup>

The “gallery of pictures” Hegel describes at the close of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is a vision of dialectical images – images of moments of concrete historical experience which, removed from their embeddedness in an uninterpreted and unintelligible historical medium, rescued through a fantastic memory, become capable of bearing the whole of historical time within them. This celebration of the redemptive power of memory to cancel the contingent and fleeting character of historical particularity, to bear within memory the wounds of historical suffering by rendering concrete historical moments into representations of history itself, is, as Marcuse described it in *Eros and Civilization*, “one of the noblest tasks of thought.” Marcuse saw Hegel groping, with limited success, toward a radical and emancipatory vision of collective critical remembrance.<sup>13</sup> But Hegel’s dialectical images are also encoded with a violent will to eradicate, and not merely redeem, the historically contingent. The “gallery of pictures” at the end of Spirit’s “highway of despair” replicates, oddly, what Benjamin had described as the “antinomies of the allegorical” in *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*: subjective intention seeks to redeem the contingent dimension of human experience, which otherwise remains “mere” nature, profane, horrible, but it does so only by inflicting violence upon that dimension far greater than historical time ever could have.

The *Phenomenology's* evocation of the languid, twilit, "slow motion" of meaning-laden historical images anticipates (by only a few years) the innovation of the panorama, whose popularity in the Paris of the 1820s and 1830s Benjamin meticulously documented in the *Arcades Project*. To get a sense of how Hegel's vision of historical imagery would receive a treatment on Benjamin's terms we could do worse than image his gallery of pictures installed in a gas-lit Parisian arcade, a refuge for shoppers eager for a diversion and a rest on a rainy weekend afternoon. The capacity to remain comfortably seated while the momentous and exotic rolls gently by, framed for observation, anticipates the long railway journey that would emerge as the paradigm for the visual culture of the exotic, and offered a first rehearsal for the experience of cinema-going at the mall multiplex.<sup>14</sup> The panoramas allowed spectators to witness a momentous historical event, a military victory, or a famous or exotic cityscape, painted on an enormous circular wall that trundled slowly around the audience seated comfortably within.<sup>15</sup> The rain drums steadily on the plate-glass above, the gaslight flickers, the wooden wheels rumble gently on their tracks. The audience murmurs and exhales softly as the images roll slowly on and on, lulled by the peculiar admixture of fascination and lethargy distinctive of mass entertainment on a rainy day.

Hence a secret mechanism comes into play to ensure, through the construction of a phantasmagorical utensil for collective amusement and distraction, that the comforting vision of a progressive history (first one event, then the next following from it, then the next) is maintained precisely by not being progressive at all. The panorama revolves endlessly; its history is precisely repetition, the absence of real change.

Benjamin's recognition of the panorama as a crystallization of the commodification of the myth of historical progress is characteristic of his unique interpretation of the dynamics of historical time in the *Arcades Project* and elsewhere. Even if Hegel does not figure prominently in Benjamin's philosophical speculation on the nature of historical time and historical experience, his figure looms large in the background, and his version of "dialectical images" (not a term Hegel would have used, naturally), and the philosophy of history and the dialectic they rest upon, are the foil against which Benjamin developed his own views.<sup>16</sup> Benjamin was certainly aware of this context, as the following passage illustrates:

On the dialectical image. In it lies time. Already with Hegel, time enters into dialectic. But the Hegelian dialectic knows time solely as the properly historical, if not psychological, time of thinking. The time differential [*Zeitdifferential*] in which alone the dialectical image is real is still unknown to him. Attempt to

show this with regard to fashion. Real time enters the dialectical image not in natural magnitude – let alone psychologically – but in its smallest gestalt. All in all, the temporal momentum [*das Zeitmoment*] in the dialectical image can be determined only through confrontation with another concept. This concept is the “now of recognizability.” (Arcades, 867; Q° 21)

The transmutation of wish images into dialectical images is only possible through a temporal arrest in which the dreamlike illusion of historical progress is shattered, and revealed as the hell of repetition. Sites where Benjamin was drawn to collect material for the *Arcades Project* are those where this dreamlike illusion has begun to wear thin, where “time differentials” become murkily perceptible under the surface bustle of a capitalist culture. These are sites that demand a dialectical image to be constructed: “The realization of dream elements in the course of waking up is the canon of dialectics. It is paradigmatic for the thinker and binding for the historian” (Arcades, 464; N4, 4).

The fading arcades themselves are, of course, the primary site, where once-fashionable shops, wares, and building styles hang on, briefly, before their destruction for Hausmann's new Paris. But Benjamin is also drawn to a fascinating range of sites where time, contra Hegel, seems to stop its steady forward flow: overheated middle-class parlors, whatever is dim, poorly lit, or rained on; boredom, waiting, idling, and distraction; the flâneur's slow tracings of the labyrinth of Parisian streets,<sup>17</sup> the gambler's intoxication with repetition, the endless ebb and flow of fashion. In particular Benjamin did not fail to notice that the mid-nineteenth-century figures such as Baudelaire, Nietzsche, and Blanqui speculated on the structure of an endless historical repetition or eternal return precisely as the reality of a commodity economy descended upon them. Such places and affects are invitations for interruption, and Benjamin is convinced that interruption is the truest revolutionary act.

Benjamin's work as a whole can be said to proceed from a distinctive if underdeveloped conception of an alternative temporality or historical time. His very earliest writing, as has often been noted, explores this alternative conception of historical time or historical experience in relation to the youth movement. The essay on “The Life of Students,” written in 1914–15 when Benjamin was still in his early twenties, begins by dismissing a predominant conception of progressive, linear historical time, and instead advocates “a particular condition in which history appears to be concentrated in a single focal point, like those that have traditionally been found in the utopian images of the philosophers” (SW I, 37). This vision of historical time distilled to one single fulfilled moment, familiar from theological

discourse, was, for the young Benjamin, not to be thought at all under the idea of historical progress, but rather in light of a profoundly anti-Hegelian, indeed a subversive, subterranean awareness of historical time, according to which “the elements of the ultimate condition [*Endzustand*] do not manifest themselves as formless progressive tendencies, but are deeply rooted in every present in the form of the most endangered, excoriated, and ridiculed ideas and products of the creative mind.” This notion that the “trash of history”<sup>18</sup> – small pieces of historical experience otherwise dismissed as insignificant, beneath attention, unassimilable – is precisely the material for images of the utopian “ultimate condition,” an arrest of historical time and an insight into the structure and condition of historical time as such, remained intact throughout Benjamin’s career, through the widest swings of Benjamin’s literary, political, and philosophical interests (*SW I*, 37).

Hence, three elements of this alternative temporality should be distinguished. First is the notion that an alternative temporality emerges, against the predominant version of continuous, chronological time, as interruptions, discontinuities, unassimilable moments, repetitions, lags, or disturbances; as unplanned or uncanny repetitions or recapitulations, in short, as “time differentials.” Second and no less important is the idea that these time differentials are contained in (or expressed by) concrete historical moments or even objects that, in the “normal” context of historical time, would be dismissed as immemorable, worthless, as not candidates for meaning. Third, and more difficult, is the notion that the “trash of history” can be revealed to be a time differential only insofar as it is removed from – “blasted out of” – its embeddedness in a dominant, approved tradition of interpretation and reception, and reconfigured, rescued from the history that consigns it to oblivion, yet in such a way that it shockingly reveals just that history for what it is: Hell, a history of catastrophe.

As a collective undergoes its own history, sites emerge where an alternative history attempts to break through its oppressive surface. This alternative history is, in this context, an experience of pre-history, a history of unfulfilled wishes for a collective life free of violence, injustice, and want. These wishes are expressed as wish images sedimented in a society’s material culture; in its commodities, its institutions of consumption and distraction, its building styles and architectural fashions, its popular literature. Wish images, figuring a proximate future of fulfillment, reassuring a collective of perpetual novelty in the form of a meliorist history, invariably end up quoting the ancient past. Wish images are phantasmagorical demands for release from a cycle of repetition that has grown to appear as second nature. And these wish images, under the gaze of the materialist historian, offer sites where what is

expressed in the collective dream-time of capitalism can be ripped from its context and reassembled in a constellation that represents material elements in their true relation to their own mythic history. Nowhere is this dialectic of time more evident than in those commodities, places, and styles whose own fashion has waned: their exile from the cycle of consumption, their "ruining" by a commodity economy, renders their relation to the slumbering collective more visibly tense, and qualifies them as material for construction. This transformation of wish images to dialectical images serves both the redemption of the reviled object and the shocking deployment of the truth-content of commodities – their Hellish *and* their utopian core. Such a deployment marks a moment of awakening, the transformation of a "time differential," lag, discontinuity, or uneven spot in the collective experience of time into a moment of collective awakening, a "Now of recognizability": a "dialectics at a standstill." The image produced will, monadically, compact the entire span of historical time within it: the represented commodity, the "object of history" itself, contains in monadic form both the mythic history of capitalism and the tradition of the oppressed that hides beneath it.<sup>19</sup>

Recalling the quotation from the "N" convolute with which we began, we see how the "doctrine" of the dialectical image requires this wholly distinctive understanding of the dynamics of time: cutting through the narrative surface of past, present and future, "what-has-been," in its sudden reactualization, "crystallizes with the Now to form a constellation. For, while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the Now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent." Hence dialectical images are things that one "encounters" in the linguistic sediment of the material culture of the nineteenth century. They are the perceptible "ur-phenomena" of history, heterogeneous moments of truth.

The time of the dialectical image, understood in this way, is in fact Messianic time, the time of the redemption of the world and the demand for the end of history understood as history's stop, rather than its culmination. This notion of dialectical images as Messianic moments of arrest, usually downplayed in the "N" convolute and in the exposés, rises to prominence in Benjamin's last "On the Concept of History." There, dialectical images are interpreted in the context of an openly theological vision of Messianic time, as the famous image of the first thesis, in which theology is pictured as a hidden dwarf pulling the strings that allow the puppet, "historical materialism" to appear to play brilliant chess (*III*, 253).

Clearly, a distinctive tension emerges here, between the dialectical image understood as a unique site marking the interruption of the truly

heterogeneous into the continuum of repetition, that is, the dialectical image as an *event* of a new time, on the one hand, and the dialectical image as the *production* of a materialist critic who has mastered a methodology, however occluded, for the removal and recombination of recovered historical material, on the other. This tension between the subjectivity and the objectivity of the image is, of course, the repeat of the dialectics of subject and object that constitutes the possibility of the image in the first place. The Messianic conception of an alternative temporality and the notion of the dialectical image as a “Now” that “springs forth” into profane time proves difficult to reconcile with the notion of the dialectical image as the product of the painstaking application of historical method.

Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History” seem to address this problem, at once drastically increasing the importance of the Messianic dimension of the dialectical images, while at the same time describing them, and indeed dialectics as such, more as a set of heuristic principles to guide the work of the historical materialist than as a historical event in its own right. “Materialist historiography” now emerges as a competing method of historical interpretation contrasted again and again to historicism. “Thinking” – a term halfway, as it were, between the passive reception of objective historical truth and the active construction of images through subjective agency – now appears as a discipline or practice that mediates between the Messianic emergence of “what-has-been” and the political demands of the present, as in this distinctive passage:

Historicism rightly culminates in universal history. Materialist historiography differs from it as to method more clearly than from any other kind. Universal history has no theoretical armature. Its method is additive; it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time. Materialist historiography, on the other hand, is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. He takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history – blasting a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework. As a result of this method the lifework is preserved in this work and at the same time cancelled; in the lifework, the era; and in the era, the entire course of history. (III, 262–63)

It is certainly not clear how this passage “solves” the dialectic of subjectivity and objectivity, of method and time, that lies at the heart of the dialectical

image. Benjamin's final strategy was, as I have suggested, a dual one; emphasizing both the Messianic dimension of the dialectical image as a "Messianic cessation of happening" while simultaneously reformulating this dimension as part of a heuristic description of the distinctive mental features of the "materialist historian." How successful this strategy ultimately was is a question that depends on what our criterion for success is, of course. It is perhaps no accident that here, in one of Benjamin's most comprehensive (and baffling) statements of his late method, the language of the dialectical image once again consciously reverts to Hegel, both as an acknowledgement and also, surely, as a final settling of accounts. Like Hegel's, Benjamin's dialectic necessarily can never finish with the historical context, just as it can never finally establish the monadic structure of the historical object, in its radical particularity, as independent and unmediated. *Aufhebung* or sublation, the methodological necessity of preserving-as-negating-as-transcending history in the construction of the genuine historical object, involves at its heart an intractable degree of indeterminacy in any attempt to resolve or stabilize the status of the object and the subject of historical knowing. Benjamin finally defers this question by appealing to a Messianic horizon of expectation (see Thesis 18; *Ill*, 264). Such a deferral may in the end be the most appropriate response to the demand to justify, through theory, the possibility of a "Now" of recognizability. But, it also renders a range of quite pertinent questions concerning the dialectical image – can anyone other than Benjamin find and/or make them, for example – more or less structurally unanswerable.

Very like Hegel, Benjamin found himself in a deeply paradoxical position in terms of the theoretical justification of his dialectics: solving the relation between subjectivity (method) and objectivity (time) would only be possible from a perspective that took the relation as an opposition that had already been resolved. But this would entail that history, too, would be always already conceived from the perspective of its culmination. Unlike Hegel, Benjamin refuses this option: he remains, stubbornly, on the side of the unassimilated and the heterogeneous. But this means that his own account of his critical agency must necessarily remain poised at the unresolved cusp of these oppositions. "Dialectics at a standstill" also characterizes Benjamin's own elaboration of the dialectical image, and, in this case, such a frozen dialectics places some severe limits on our ability, in the present, to think with Benjamin beyond Benjamin. If the dialectical image was the quintessence of his method, this fact both establishes the continuing attraction of an imagistic approach to radical cultural criticism, and the profound difficulties in appropriating such an approach in the present. Benjamin's dialectical images are, as he meant them to be, *sui generis*.

## NOTES

1. The most sustained, sophisticated and compelling interpretation is to be found in Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989). See also Michael Jennings, *Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin's Theory of Literary Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).
2. Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing*, 67; Rolf Tiedemann, "Dialectics at a Standstill: Approaches to the *Passagen-Werk*," in *On Walter Benjamin*, ed. Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 284.
3. For explorations on the problem of the objectivity of the dialectical image see Max Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), ch. 6; Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing*, 228ff.
4. "On the doctrine of the ideological superstructure. It seems, at first sight, that Marx wanted to establish here only a causal relation between superstructure and infrastructure. But already the observation that ideologies of the superstructure reflect conditions falsely and invidiously goes beyond this. The question, in effect, is the following: if the infrastructure in a certain way (in the materials of thought and experience) determines the superstructure, but if such determination is not reducible to simple reflection, how is it then . . . to be characterized? As its expression. The superstructure is the expression of the infrastructure. The economic conditions under which society exists are expressed in the superstructure – precisely as, with the sleeper, an overfull stomach finds not its effect but its expression in the contents of dreams, which, from a causal point of view, it may be said to 'condition.' The collective, from the first, expresses the conditions of its life. These find their expression in the dream and their interpretation in the awakening" (*Arcades*, 392; κ2, 5).
5. For a full account of Benjamin's relation to the Surrealists see Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illuminations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), and also *Melancholy Dialectics*, ch. 5.
6. "Balzac was the first to speak of the ruins of the bourgeoisie. But it was Surrealism that first opened our eyes to them. The development of the forces of production shattered the wish symbols of the previous century, even before the monuments representing them had collapsed. In the nineteenth century, this development worked to emancipate the forms of construction from art, just as in the sixteenth century the sciences freed them from philosophy. A start is made with architecture as engineered construction. Then comes the reproduction of nature as photography. The creation of fantasy prepares to become practical as commercial art. Literature submits to montage as the feuilleton. All these products are on the point of entering the market as commodities. But they linger on the threshold. From this epoch derive the interiors, the exhibition halls and the panoramas. They are residues of a dream world. The realization of dream elements, in the course of waking up, is the paradigm of dialectical thinking. Thus, dialectical thinking is the organ of historical awakening. Every epoch, in fact, not only dreams the one to follow but, in dreaming, precipitates its awakening. It bears its end within itself and unfolds it – as Hegel already noticed – as cunning. With the destabilization of the market economy, we begin to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as

- ruins even before they have crumbled" ("Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century. Exposé of 1935" [*Arcades*, 13]).
7. "The 'modern,' the time of Hell. The punishments of Hell are always the newest things going on in this domain. What is at issue is not that 'the same thing happens over and over,' and even less would it be a question here of eternal return. It is rather that precisely in that which is newest the face of the world never alters, that this newest remains, in every respect, the same. This constitutes the eternity of Hell. To determine the totality of traits by which 'the modern' is defined would be to represent Hell" (*Arcades*, 544; SI, 5).
  8. The notion that the dialectical image springs forth at the crossing-point of dialectical axes is the central argument of Susan Buck-Morss's *The Dialectics of Seeing*: "The dialectical image is a way of seeing that crystallizes antithetical elements by providing the axes of their alignment. Benjamin's conception is essentially static . . . He charts philosophical ideas visually within an unreconciled and transitory field of oppositions that can perhaps best be pictured in terms of coordinates of contradictory terms, the 'synthesis' of which is not a movement toward resolution, but the point at which their axes intersect . . . His unfolding of concepts in their 'extremes' can be visualized as antithetical polarities of axes that cross each other, revealing a 'dialectical image' at the null point, with its contradictory 'moments' as its axial fields" (210).
  9. "There is a wholly unique experience of the dialectic. The compelling – the drastic – experience, which refutes everything 'gradual' about becoming and shows all seeming 'development' to be dialectical reversal, eminently and thoroughly composed, is the awakening from dream . . . The new, dialectical method of doing history presents itself as the art of experiencing the present as a waking world, a world to which that dream we name the past refers in truth. To pass through and carry out *what has been* in remembering the dream! Therefore: remembering and awakening are most intimately related. Awakening is namely the dialectical, Copernican turn of remembrance" (*Arcades*, 389; KI, 3).
  10. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1986), 590.
  11. *Ibid.*, 591.
  12. One way of imagining the mode of this judgment is hinted at in a passage of Hegel's *Reason in History*: "One may contemplate history from the point of view of happiness. But actually history is not the soil of happiness. The periods of happiness are blank pages in it. There is, it is true, satisfaction in world history. But it is not the kind that is called happiness, for it is satisfaction of purposes that are above particular interests." G. W. F. Hegel, *Reason in History*, translated and with an introduction by Robert S. Hartman (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953), 33.
  13. Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 232ff.
  14. On train journeys and the changed perception of time and visuality, see Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Geschichte der Eisenbahnreise: Zur Industrialisierung von Raum und Zeit im 19ten Jahrhundert* (Munich: Hanser, 1977), as well as Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).
  15. "Setup of the panoramas: View from a raised platform, surrounded by a balustrade, of surfaces lying round about and beneath. The painting runs along

- a cylindrical wall approximately a hundred meters long and twenty meters high. The principle panoramas of the great panorama painter Prévost: Paris, Toulon, Rome, Naples, Amsterdam, Tilsit, Wagram, Calais, Antwerp, London, Florence, Jerusalem, Athens. Among his pupils: Daguerre” (*Arcades*, 528; Q1A, 1).
16. In his autobiographical reminiscence of his friendship with Benjamin, Gershom Scholem recounts that, to his own surprise, Benjamin seemed very familiar with Hegel’s work, and sympathetic to significant elements of it, a stance highly unusual for the predominantly neo-Kantian philosophical culture of the time. See Scholem, *Friendship*, 30–31.
17. “The city is the realization of the ancient dream of humanity, the labyrinth. It is this reality to which the flâneur, without knowing it, devotes himself” (*Arcades*, 430; M6a).
18. For the reference to the “trash” or “refuse” of history see *Arcades*, 461; N2, 6 and N2, 7, passages I will return to later in the chapter.
19. “If the object of history is to be blasted out of the continuum of historical succession, that is because its monadological structure demands it. This structure first comes to light in the extracted object itself. And it does so in the form of the historical confrontation that makes up the interior (and, as it were, the bowels) of the historical object, and into which all the forces and interests of history enter on a reduced scale. It is owing to this monadological structure that the historical object finds represented in its interior its own fore-history and after-history” (*Arcades*, 475; N10, 3).