
The Dialectics of Seeing

Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project

Susan Buck-Morss

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Preface

This is an unorthodox undertaking. It is a picture book of philosophy, explicating the dialectics of seeing developed by Walter Benjamin, who took seriously the debris of mass culture as the source of philosophical truth. It draws its authority from a book that was never written, the *Passagen-Werk* (Arcades project), the unfinished, major project of Benjamin's mature years. Instead of a "work," he left us only a massive collection of notes on nineteenth-century industrial culture as it took form in Paris-and formed that city in turn. These notes consist of citations from a vast array of historical sources, which Benjamin filed with the barest minimum of commentary, and only the most general indications of how the fragments were eventually to have been arranged.

I have in the present study remained scrupulously close to the fragments of this never-written work. And yet it will be clear to anyone familiar with the *Passagen-Werk* that I have not reproduced it here but, rather, proceeded mimetically, extrapolating from it in order to illuminate the world that Benjamin experienced and described. I would be hard put to say whether this form of scholarship is a process of discovering the Arcades project, or inventing it. The reader is thus forewarned. What is given here is not an English language summary of the original German and French manuscript. It is a different text, a story (of nineteenth-century Paris) told within a story (of Benjamin's own historical experience) with the goal of bringing to life the cognitive and political power of the *Passagen-Werk* that lies dormant within the layers of historical data of which it is composed.

But perhaps most of all, this is the story of the interpretive process itself. The meaning of Benjamin's commentary in the *Passagen-Werk* is cryptic. It provides the reader with few answers as to Benjamin's intent but many clues, and these point ineluctably beyond the text. Benjamin has simply not allowed us to write about his work as an isolated literary product. Rather (and this is no small part of its political power), the *Passagen-Werk* makes of us historical detectives even against our will, forcing us to become actively involved in the reconstruction of the work. It is only by acceding to the fact that his brilliant writing, which we are so predisposed to canonize, is really only a series of captions to the world outside the text, that we are able to make headway in penetrating the *Passagen-Werk*. He compels us to search for images of sociohistorical reality that are the key to unlocking the meaning of his commentary—just as that commentary is the key to their significance. But in the process, our attention has been redirected: Benjamin has surreptitiously left the spotlight, which now shines brightly on the sociohistorical phenomena themselves. Moreover (and this is the mark of his pedagogical success), he allows us the experience of feeling that we are discovering the political meaning of these phenomena on our own.

Benjamin described his work as a "Copernican revolution" in the practice of history writing. His aim was to destroy the mythic immediacy of the present, not by inserting it into a cultural continuum that affirms the present as its culmination, but by discovering that constellation of historical origins which has the power to explode history's "continuum." In the era of industrial culture, consciousness exists in a mythic, dream state, against which historical knowledge is the only antidote. But the particular kind of historical knowledge that is needed to free the present from myth is not easily uncovered. Discarded and forgotten, it lies buried within surviving culture, remaining invisible precisely because it was of so little use to those in power.

Benjamin's "Copernican revolution" completely strips "history" of its legitimating, ideological function. But if history is abandoned as a conceptual structure that deceptively transfigures the present, its cultural contents are redeemed as the source of critical knowledge that alone can place the present into question. Benjamin makes us aware that the transmission of culture (high and low), which is central to this rescue operation, is a political act of the

highest import—not because culture in itself has the power to change the given, but because historical memory affects decisively the collective, political will for change. Indeed, it is its only nourishment.

Now, writing about the *Passagen-Werk* is exemplary of just the act of transmitting culture which Benjamin has problematized. This locates the present project in a highly charged conceptual space, one that will not tolerate too great a contradiction between form and content. And yet, I have found a certain degree of tension unavoidable. In form, this study is scholarly, adhering quite rigorously to the mandates of academic research, even as its content is a protest against academia's very understanding of culture. But I can see no politically justified reason for ceding to the latter a monopoly of philological rigor. Moreover, as the *Passagen-Werk* itself makes clear, the option of a short and popularly marketed summation of the *Passagen-Werk* would have in no way avoided the dangers of which Benjamin warned.

This book is long, and its argument is intricate. It demands effort on the part of the reader. Yet I have tried to ensure that such effort is not compounded by intellectual jargon that speaks only to those already initiated into the world of academic cults (among which the Benjamin "cult" now plays a leading role). The book requires no specialized disciplinary knowledge. It presupposes no particular philosophical background. It presumes only an openness to the proposition that the common, everyday objects of industrial culture have as much of value to teach us as that canon of cultural "treasures" which we have for so long been taught to revere.

I am grateful to the Andrew D. White Society for the Humanities of Cornell University for a fellowship that allowed me to begin this study of the *Passagen-Werk* in 1982-83. The *Deutsche Akademische Austauschdienst* generously provided support for research in Frankfurt am Main during the fall of 1984. Jürgen Habermas and Leo Löwenthal gave me encouragement when I needed it most. I have benefited immensely from discussions with friends in the United States, Germany, France, and the USSR: Hauke Brunkhorst, Jacques Derrida, Miriam Hansen, Axel Honneth, Claude Imbert, Martin Jay, Dmitri Khanin, Grant Kester, Burkhardt Lindner, Michael Löwy, Kirby Malone, Pierre Missac, Valery Podoroga, Gary Smith, Rolf Tiedemann, Heinz Wismann, and Irving Wohlfarth. Readings of the manuscript by Seyla

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A note on translations: Even when English translations of Benjamin are available, I have made my own, not always because I found the former to be lacking, but because in every case I have felt it necessary to make that judgment, and to benefit from the associations of meanings that come through more clearly in the original. Sometimes, however, the English translations are so artful that, out of respect for the talents of the translators, I have adhered strictly to their wording, and credited them by name.

PART I

Introduction

"We have," so says the illustrated guide to Paris from the year 1852, [providing] a complete picture of the city of the Seine and its environs, "repeatedly thought of the arcades as interior boulevards, like those they open onto. These passages, a new discovery of industrial luxury, are glasscovered, marble-walled walkways through entire blocks of buildings, the owners of which have joined together to engage in such a venture. Lining both sides of these walkways which receive their light from above are the most elegant of commodity shops, so that such an arcade is a city, a world in miniature."¹

Comments Walter Benjamin: "This quotation is the *locus classicus* for the representation of the arcades [*Passagen*]," ² which lent their name to his most daring intellectual project. The *Passagen-Werk* was to be a "materialist philosophy of history," constructed with "the utmost concreteness"³ out of the historical material itself, the outdated remains of those nineteenth-century buildings, technologies, and commodities that were the precursors of his own era. As the "ur-phenomena" of modernity, they were to provide the material necessary for an interpretation of history's most recent configurations.

The Paris Passages built in the early nineteenth century were the origin of the modern commercial arcade. Surely these earliest, ur-shopping malls would seem a pitifully mundane site for philosophical inspiration. But it was precisely Benjamin's point to bridge the gap between everyday experience and traditional academic concerns, actually to achieve that phenomenological hermeneutics of the profane world which Heidegger only pretended.⁴ Benjamin's goal was to take materialism so seriously that the historical phenomena themselves were brought to speech. The project was to test "how

'concrete' one can be in connection with the history of philosophy."⁵ Corsets, feather dusters, red and green-colored combs, old photographs, souvenir replicas of the Venus di Milo, collar buttons to shirts long since discarded—these battered historical survivors from the dawn of industrial culture that appeared together in the dying arcades as "a world of secret affinities"⁶ were the philosophical ideas, as a constellation of concrete, historical referents. Moreover, as "political dynamite,"⁷ such outdated products of mass culture were to provide a Marxist-revolutionary, political education for Benjamin's own generation of historical subjects, currently the victims of mass culture's more recent soporific effects. "[N]ever," wrote Benjamin to Gershom Scholem in the early stages of the project, "have I written with so much risk of failure."⁸ "One will not be able to say of me that I have made things easy for myself."⁹

The Arcades "project" (as Benjamin most commonly referred to the *Passagen-Werk*),¹⁰ was originally conceived as an essay of fifty pages.¹¹ But the "ever more puzzling, more intrusive face" of the project, "howling like some small beastie in my nights whenever I haven't let it drink from the most remote sources during the day,"¹² did not let its author off so easily. In order to bring it to the light of day—and "out of an all-too ostensible proximity to the Surrealist movement which could be fatal for me"¹³—Benjamin kept extending its ground and deepening its base, both spatially and temporally. Ultimately all of Paris was drawn in, from the heights of the Eiffel Tower to its nether world of catacombs and metros, and his research spanned more than a century of the city's most minute historical details.

Benjamin began the *Passagen-Werk* in 1927. Although there were interruptions, he worked on it intensively for thirteen years. The project was still unfinished in 1940 when, unsuccessful in his attempt to flee from France, he committed suicide. But from the originally planned, fifty-page essay there had grown an ensemble of material which, when published for the first time in 1982, numbered over a thousand pages. They consist of fragments of historical data gleaned primarily from the nineteenth- and twentieth-century sources Benjamin found in Berlin's Staatsbibliothek and Paris' Bibliothèque Nationale, and which he ordered chronologically in thirty-six files, or *Konvoluten*, each entitled with a key word or phrase. These fragments,

embedded in Benjamin's commentary, comprise more than 900 pages. They are thematically only loosely arranged. To decipher their meaning we must rely on a series of notes (1927-29; 1934-35) that provide invaluable, if insufficient, evidence as to the overall conception that guided Benjamin's research, as well as the two "exposés" of the Arcades project (1935 and 1939) that describe briefly the contents of the intended chapters.

The posthumous publication of the *Passagen-Werk*, benefiting from the scrupulous editing of Rolf Tiedemann,¹⁴ is an astoundingly rich and provocative collection of outlines, research notes, and fragmentary commentary. It demonstrates clearly that the Arcades project was the most significant undertaking of this very significant intellectual figure. But the *Passagen-Werk* itself does not exist—not even a first page, let alone a draft of the whole. This nonexistent text is the object of the present study.

Intellectual biographies have commonly spoken of Benjamin's thought in terms of three developmental, quasi-dialectical stages, describing the first (to 1924, when his friendship with Gershom Scholem was strongest) as metaphysical and theological, the second (when in Berlin during late Weimar he came under the influence of Bertolt Brecht) as Marxist and materialist, and the third (when in exile in Paris he was affiliated with the *Institut für Sozialforschung* and intellectually close to Theodor Adorno) as an attempt to sublimate these two antithetical poles in an original synthesis. It was anticipated that the posthumous publication of the *Passagen-Werk* would be that synthesis, resolving the persistent ambiguities between the theological and materialist strands in his previously published works. The *Passagen-Werk* does indeed bring together all the sides of Benjamin's intellectual personality within one conception, forcing us to rethink his entire opus, including his early writings. It demonstrates, moreover, that he was not just a writer of brilliant but fragmentary aphorisms. The Arcades project develops a highly original philosophical method, one which might best be described as a dialectics of seeing.

Much of the secondary literature on Benjamin has been preoccupied with determining the influences (of Scholem, Brecht, or Adorno—or Bloch, Kracauer, even Heidegger) which were of most significance.¹⁵ This study purposely avoids the convention of academic hermeneutics that defines the

theories of one thinker in terms of the theories of another, as such a method ensures that the whole intellectual project becomes self-referential and idealist, hermetically sealed within precisely those musty corridors of academia from which Benjamin's work attempts to escape. It experiments with an alternative hermeneutic strategy more appropriate to his "dialectics of seeing," one that relies, rather, on the interpretive power of images that make conceptual points concretely, with reference to the world outside the text.

To the mind that would comprehend intellectual phenomena in terms of logical or chronological development wherein one thing leads to another, to use Benjamin's metaphor, "like the beads of a rosary,"¹⁶ his work offers little satisfaction. It is grounded, rather, on philosophical intuitions sparked by cognitive experiences reaching as far back as childhood. These "develop" only in the sense that a photographic plate develops: time deepens definition and contrast, but the imprint of the image has been there from the start. In spite of the metamorphoses that his writing undergoes in style and form of expression, he held onto his philosophical intuitions tenaciously because, quite simply, he believed them to be true.

Where, then, to begin?

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