Interrupting Progress: Ruins, rubble and catastrophe in Walter Benjamin's History

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CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY

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Abstract

This thesis investigates abandoned and obsolete sites of contemporary modernity as "modern ruins" of a recent past, which present the potential to interrupt notions of assumed progress and linearity. This investigation is undertaken through the use of a Benjaminian approach to history and perception in the city, as well as fieldwork involving subjective and experiential encounters with modern ruins from 2009 to 2011.

This thesis examines modern ruins in three cities—Paris, Berlin, and Detroit—in relation to Walter Benjamin's recurring references to ruins, rubble and catastrophe, and his use of dialectical configurations as a means to salvage and evaluate the lost and threatened aspects of a recent past.

In Paris, the shopping arcades of Benjamin's Arcades Project and the ruins of the Paris Commune of 1871 are examined as case studies of mass-ruin and dereliction in an urban setting, with an emphasis on allegorical perception, interpenetration of past and present, and the energy to be detected in the recently outmoded. In Berlin, urban remnants from the Second World War to the present are considered in relation to Benjamin's writings on Berlin, and the notion of catastrophe. In Detroit, modern ruins are framed as dialectical image spaces that offer an experiential dialectic and critical potential.

With particular reference to The Arcades Project and Benjamin's short essay 'On the Concept of History', this thesis assesses ruins as spaces in which a different kind of history might be located—locations where the force of progress is both embodied, in terms of its destructive nature, and suspended, in terms of the persistence of the rejected and outmoded remnants of prior eras.

This thesis concludes that modern ruins, as tangible remnants of the recent past, offer the potential to transport us radically beyond the experience of the everyday city, to a unique and inhabitable space of transition between past and present. The physical presence of modern ruins, fragmenting and ultimately crumbling into rubble, can be likened to the more abstract force of progress, which obliterates much of the past in the pursuit of constant development and investment in the future, framing recent history as something to be moved beyond. However, in their persistence, modern ruins also interrupt this force, standing against progress and exemplifying Benjamin's dialectical approach to history that can bring past and present together in a moment, allowing for the temporary rescue of the detritus of history from oblivion.

List of Abbreviations

The following terms, acronyms and abbreviations are used throughout this thesis

AP	(1999), *The Arcades Project*, in Tiedemann, R. (ed.) trans. H. Eiland & K. McLaughlin, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England. (also titled *Passagenwerk* and *Passagen-Werk*)
Origin	(1998) *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, (1998), trans. P. Osborne, Verso (also *Trauerspiel*)
OTCH	On The Concept of History (In Selected Writings, Volume 4) (also titled Theses on the Philosophy of History).
Chronicle	Berlin Chronicle (In Selected Writings, Volume 2, part 2)
BC	Berlin Childhood Around 1900 (In Selected Writings, Volume 3)
OWS	One-Way Street (In Selected Writings, Volume 1)
CP	Central Park (In Selected Writings, Volume 4)

Selected Writings

SW 1	(1996), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 1, 1913-1926*, Bullock, M. and Jennings, M.W., (eds.), The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England.
SW 2:1	(1999), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 2, Part 1, 1927-1930*, Jennings, M.W., Eiland, H., and Smith, G. (eds.), trans. Jephcott, E.F.N, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England.
SW 2:2	(1999), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 2, Part 2, 1931-1934*, Jennings, M.W, Eiland, H., and Smith, G. (eds.), trans. Livingstone, R., Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England.
SW 3	(2002), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 3, 1935-1938*, Eiland, H., and Jennings, M.W., (eds.), trans. Eiland, H., and Jephcott, E.F.N., Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England.
SW 4	(2003), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 4*, *1938-1940*, Eiland, H., and Jennings, M.W., (eds.), trans. Jephcott, E.F.N., Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England.

Introduction

> The concept of mankind's historical progress cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such a progression must underlie any criticism of the concept of progress itself. (Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', Thesis XIII, *SW 4,* pp. 394-395)

> The debris of industrial culture teaches us not the necessity of submitting to historical catastrophe, but the fragility of the social order that tells us this catastrophe is necessary. The crumbling of the monuments that were built to signify the immortality of civilization becomes proof, rather, of its transiency. And the fleetingness of temporal power does not cause sadness; it informs political practice. (Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 170)

> There is a picture by Klee called Angelus Novus. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned towards the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at 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 and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is this storm. (Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', Thesis IX, *SW 4,* p. 392)

'Interrupting Progress: Ruins, rubble and catastrophe in Walter Benjamin's history', is primarily concerned with Benjamin's writings on history, memory, assumed progress; and the ruins and remnants of the recent past. This thesis explores locations of contemporary mass ruin and decay as sites of a fragmented yet tangible past in light of Benjamin's critique of progress and historicism, which he outlined in 'On the Concept of History'[1]. Benjamin famously used the image of the angel of history as an allegorical representation of the fundamentally destructive nature of universal history and material progress. The angel "sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet" (*SW 4,* p. 392). However, though the angel wishes to linger and "make whole what has been smashed" (*SW 4,* p. 392),

[1] Also published in *Illuminations* as 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (1970). Throughout this thesis I will refer to the numbered sections of this piece as "theses" and Benjamin's ideas from this time as a "philosophy of history".

progress itself—in the form of a storm that drives him toward an unseen future—prevents him from awakening the dead, or stopping the perpetual catastrophe that is generated by a teleological and progress-driven historical framework. (*SW 4,* p. 392).

In reference to Benjamin's expression of history as catastrophe, and progress as a destructive storm, this thesis considers contemporary sites of ruin—or, modern ruins—as products of a problematic pursuit of newness and growth that anticipates historical succession and looks ahead in triumph, rather than behind at the ruins. In this thesis, I explore the real ruins of an abstract configuration of history, framing modern ruins in terms of the tangible persistence of the recent past that can be detected in the fragmentary remnants of any era.

A modern ruin might be an abandoned factory that was built for an assembly-line of human workers, and in which the majority of parts were made and fitted to a complete and finished product; a place built for a specific purpose, now superseded by capable robotic workers and a global workforce; the industrial obsolete of late modernity.

1. Processing plant remnants, Chicago (2009)

A modern ruin might, alternatively, be a burnt-out or half demolished building that sits behind a fence, unnoticed and awaiting reconstruction, worthless and incomplete. It might be an expansive civic building—a school, a library, a hospital—which no longer serves the needs of the local population. A modern ruin might also be a power station or steel mill too large to be demolished easily.

2. Abandoned Church, Gary (2009)

Where a modern ruin emerges in a declining city, it exists as one of a number of urban ruins in a landscape of decay, a landscape most often viewed as shameful and sad. In this case, the ruin can be expected to stand for decades, open to squatters and arsonists, local youth and "salvagers", who collectively pick it apart (or help it fall to pieces); a space of rejection and decay that transports the visitor to earlier times, but also stands as a reminder of the surrounding mass of jettisoned buildings—

piles of rubble subject to catastrophic decline because they are economically or culturally unviable.

Where a modern ruin is located on the outskirts of an otherwise bustling city, or in the midst of a gentrifying industrial estate, it is equally unviable, but will eventually be renovated or demolished; the valuable space it takes up will be 'reused'; it will re-enter the cycle of development and ruin that has directed every moment of its existence.

3. School building stripped by salvagers, Detroit (2009)

Such a cycle of rise and fall comes about with the investment in constant development, yet the resulting repetition of decline and collapse brings to mind an equally destructive (rather than wholly productive) historical force. A swirling and destructive energy manifests in each ruin—the actual jumble of rejected and abandoned objects, and empty and collapsing buildings, echoes the abstract image of history (and progress) as forces which leave the past in disarray. Modern ruins are the forgotten and fading obsolete of an era, left behind in untold piles of rubble and ruin—the useless debris of a storm that breaks up and scatters everything in its path.

The destructive and polarising nature of material progress is strikingly evident in modern ruins, whether on the point of collapse, or even in the moment of regeneration. The experiences of modern ruins that are presented throughout this thesis take place in the historical wreckage of the recent past—the abandoned, decaying, forgotten or overlooked spaces which endure unremarkably in every city.

One such experience, which took place as I walked past the back of a derelict tram workshop near my home, was the result of both decay and urban renewal. Construction workers had begun the regeneration (demolition) of a rambling and iconic industrial site and sports ground. Peering through the mesh-covered fence, I was struck by two things. The first was the familiarity of the smell of decay that transported me, abruptly, to places I had been before and, most particularly, certain sites I only visited once—places I wandered for an hour or two at most but which made a lasting impression as a sensory experience. The smell of the tram sheds in a state of hopeless decay was simultaneously the smell of the interior of every dank, damp building I had ever set foot in. In that moment, every unloved and mouldering place I'd entered hovered for a moment in my mind. The second thing which struck me was that over all the years I had lived nearby, walking past the overgrown palms and unchecked ivy that had established a wild garden around the sheds, it had seemed such a static thing—though decaying, quite solid. I could (and would) wander in whenever the fence was conveniently open, keeping a directionless lists of things that were the same (the smell, the green growth on the walls, the trams up on blocks) and things that had changed (the graffiti, the half-patched holes in the roof, the random ephemera scattered about). There were always new things I noticed (reflections in puddles after rain, the precarious lean of the tall corrugated doors, large enough to admit the now-rusting trams that had come in on rails, but would leave on trucks—obsolete now that the tracks had all been torn up or covered over in their wake). Each time there were things I had forgotten (the inevitable mud and the least obtrusive entry point). In my repeated visits to this ruin, there had been a sense of permanence, even in the precariousness that defined the entire place. To walk past and see that someone, in less than a week (maybe even in a day) had torn up vast sections of the garden—a garden so established that it very-nearly hid the building from sight—and

left a dirt-covered mess that provided no clues as to what had *just been,* was unsettling.

4. Tram Sheds, Sydney (2010)

What was also unsettling was that once the dirt piles wholly take over, I probably won't care very deeply for this place. The erasure of the physical remnants was also the erasure of the material link to that location—and the obliteration of a point of interest for me (in this case, an accessible and familiar urban ruin; a locally significant landmark; an impromptu and uncared-for tram-sanctuary; a whole history evident in tell-tale ruins that exposed decades of neglect and illustrated something vital about our investment in constant development). Around the corner, the rest of the site already failed to keep my attention. Weeks before, I had paused, fascinated, to take inadequate pictures with my camera phone, chronicling the violent semi-demolition of a paceway and its spectator stands, which looked as if some great monster had torn them in two, raggedly chopped at one end, still-functional on the other. All I saw now was a pit-to-be, a mountain of dirt, and some passingly interesting debris piled beyond the reach or myself or my camera.

5. Rubble from demolitions, Sydney (2012)

A material view of history as catastrophe understands this debris to be the redundant wreckage churned out by a force of progress, made powerful by an ideology that values newness and demands the disconnection of past and present, resulting in obsolescence, decay and ruination of the material vestiges of prior eras. In this reading, the rejected remnants of the recent past are the physical manifestation of a theoretical conception of history; modern ruins are the desolate but still-accessible spaces of the wreckage of history and the storm of progress.

In this thesis, reclaiming the lost ephemera of the recent past involves a series of encounters that generate an interruption of everyday experience in the city, via the examination of ruins in urban spaces, and the development of a particular kind of perception figured in contemporary or recent ruination. This thesis considers urban spaces in a state of decay and abandonment as potential sites of an alternative experience in the city, and argues that decay is one of many observable features of urban modernity (rather than a deviation, an abnormality or an invidious contrast with an ordered urban ideal). The redundant urban spaces that are the focus of this thesis

challenge conceptions of the city and provide for a different kind of historical, collective and biographical experience in (and of) urban spaces.

Structure

This thesis is divided into three sections: Paris, Berlin and Detroit. The particular emphasis on Paris and Berlin as cities in which Benjamin isolated currents that resisted more traditional historical conceptions is complemented in this thesis by the positioning of Detroit as a logical conclusion to Benjamin's work on the detritus of modernity.

Paris

This chapter has two main concerns: Paris in ruins after the battle of the Paris Commune of 1871 (to which Benjamin dedicates 'Convolute k' of *The Arcades Project*), and the arcades themselves. The chapter considers the urban space of Paris (and particularly the remaining arcades) as they appear in the present (based on field research undertaken in 2009), alongside Benjamin's own extensive writings, building an argument for the understanding of modernity through ruin, via a consideration of the notion of allegorical perception.[2] Adapting both Baudelaire's allegorical perception of modern urban experience as ruin and Benjamin's concern with the destruction of experience in modernity, this chapter examines what possibilities Benjamin and Baudelaire offer to counter such modernity, before applying these tactics to modern ruins.

The possibility for interruption posed by modern ruins is explored more thoroughly in relation to Benjamin and the arcades in this chapter, where spaces of decline are presented as "thresholds" which lead to a vanishing past. Of Benjamin's focus on the arcades, Susan Buck-Morss states that "…the Arcades project would present collective history […] not "life as it was," nor even life remembered, but life as it had been "forgotten"."(Buck-Morss 1989, p. 39) Of import here is the idea that

[2] As will become clear, rather than the Baroque perception that is the focus of *Origin*, this is a reference to Baudelaire's attempts to confront and capture modern life and is expanded throughout Chapter 1 'Ruin perceptions: Paris in allegory, revolution and ruin'.

the past cannot be reconstructed in a linear fashion, but rather recovered in the material remnants[3], that it is subject to a destructive forgetting. Buck-Morss goes on to say that, for Benjamin, "urban objects, relics of the last century, were hieroglyphic clues to a forgotten past." (*ibid.*) This forgotten past is sought by Benjamin in sites that were themselves forgotten and neglected and which, as enduring remnants, offered a particular experience to the wandering critic.

6. Palace of the Tuileries (1871) and 7. Passage des Panoramas, Paris (2009)

Berlin

Using Benjamin's writings on Berlin and particular discussions around ruin and remnant sites of the city between 1945 and the present, this chapter considers the relationship between Benjamin's remembered and imagined Berlin, and the current city undergoing change and renewal, contrasting different perceptions and responses to the city in various states of ruin: destruction, decay, decline and critical reconstruction.

As a city subject to catastrophic ruination, Berlin in the years between World War II and reunification also provides a unique space of *lived* catastrophe, posing the question of whether such a space can be considered as "the tiny fissure in the

[3] See [N1a7]: That there is an "expressive character of the earliest industrial products" and that these bear a "causal connection" between ideas and material of an era. (*AP* p. 460).

continuous catastrophe" (*SW 4*, p. 184-185) that may allow for a moment of redemption.


8. Derelict hospital, Berlin (2011) and 9. Abandoned fun park, Berlin (2011)

Detroit

In this section the focus on obsolescence and the modern city that is built around Paris and *The Arcades Project* in the first chapter, is applied to the contemporary city of Detroit in much the same way that Benjamin located origins or Ur-forms of modernity in the derelict Arcades and the objects he found in them. As Buck-Morss states in *The Dialectics of Seeing*:

> This "Ur-history of the 19th Century […] broke radically with the philosophical canon by searching for truth in the "garbage heap" of modern history, the "rags, the trash", the ruins of commodity production that were thoroughly tainted with the philosophically debased qualities of empirical specificity, shifting meanings, and above all, transiency. (Buck-Morss 1989, p. 218).

The large-scale ruins of Detroit are very much the "ruins of commodity production", spaces in which one might "discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event" (*AP,* [N2, 6] p. 461). Here, frameworks from the second chapter, Berlin, are also adapted to view Detroit as a site of lived catastrophe, with particular reference to dialectics and criticism as a means to confront past and present, which are particularly polarised in urban ruins.

10. Harbor Light Centre, Detroit (2009) and 11. Abandoned houses Detroit (2009)

Conclusion

The final chapter concludes the discussion on the experience of spaces of the past and the role of ruin-spaces in framing an understanding of history as a process of fragmentation, decay, neglect and forgetting which *does not have to be* negative, melancholy, gothic, or nostalgic, but encounters the ruin as a "stage of its fate", as Benjamin, the collector, encounters old books in a way which "does not emphasise their functional, utilitarian value" but instead sees "through them, into their distant past."(*SW 2:2,* p. 487). That is: rather than a dead and meaningless wreck, the modern ruin is just as much a site in which history is played out as any house of parliament or mainstream newsroom. Further, history need not be the dominion of those things and people that speak loudly and clearly—it is equally constituted by boundless, amorphous, liminal, discarded, rejected, silent things—in this case, ruined buildings of a recent, remembered and accessible past.

Benjaminian Framework

This thesis addresses Benjamin's use of image, dialectics and redemption[4]; experience in terms of spatio-temporal configurations of lived experience and memory in city space[5]; and history in relation to what Anson Rabinbach terms Benjamin's "catastrophic antihistoricism" (1997, p. 8), which values the outmoded and fragmented over the investment in newness, progress and teleological history. The forgotten and neglected spaces of the recent past provide an experience and understanding through which the notion of progress can be overcome; and by association the dominance of renewal, consumption, commodification, linear histories (and the attribution of value within this framework) might be acknowledged and—at least temporarily—suspended in a moment of lived salvage.

This suspended moment is grounded in Benjamin's conception of the dialectical image as both a model for historical thinking and a redemptive intervention in the present, made possible in a moment, configured in traces. As Rolf Tiedemann suggests in his essay 'Dialectics at a Standstill', "Benjamin devised his dialectic at a standstill in order to make such traces visible, to collect the "trash of history", and to redeem them for its end" (Tiedemann in *AP,* p. 945) For Benjamin, it is through "the dialectical contrasts" in all things "that life is always born anew" (*AP,* [N1a, 4] p. 459), and such rebirth is achieved "[a]gainst the prognosticators of decline" (*ibid.*). Here, decline is the direct result of an attitude that casts the recent past in particular as old-fashioned and out-of-date—it is the investment in progress that allows things to fall to ruin and disappear from the world, and it is this decline that Benjamin wishes to oppose through rebirth and redemption.

Dialectical Image

[4] For example, see Richard Wolin's *Aesthetic of Redemption* (1994) or Sigrid Weigel's reading of "body-and image-space" (1996).

[5] For example, Stephanie Polsky's experimental conjectures on landsurveying of history in *Walter Benjamin's Transit* (Polsky 2010, pp. 1-29), and Graeme Gilloch's *Myth and Metropolis*, particularly Chapter 2 'Urban Memories: Labyrinth and Childhood' (Gilloch 1996, pp. 55-94)

As a redemptive contrast, the dialectical image provides a historical and transfiguring approach to both progress and decline. In 'Convolute N' of *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin proposes a method for a "cultural-historical dialectic" which, instead of viewing an epoch "such that on one side lies the "productive", "forward-looking", "lively", "positive" part of the epoch and on the other side the abortive, retrograde and obsolescent" (*AP,* [N1a, 3] p. 459), attempts to reconfigure the perception of the excluded so that "the entire past is brought into the present in a historical apocatastasis". (*AP,* [N1a, 3] p. 459)[6].

The "historical apocatastasis" that brings the past into the present is made possible via the temporal and redemptive dimensions of a dialectical approach, but takes place only in that moment. As Benjamin states, "[t]he dialectical image 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. The rescue that is carried out by these means—and only by these—can operate solely for the sake of what in the next moment is already irretrievably lost." (*AP,* [N9, 7] p. 473)

The dialectical image takes on an additional—bodily—dimension in Benjamin's writings on Surrealism, where he considers the possibility of an image *space*. The dialectical image space is a dialectical mode of action in which "no limb remains untorn" (*SW 2:1,* p. 217); a destructive space that is riven by dialectical thinking (both movement and cessation)[7] (*SW 2:1,* p. 217). "Nevertheless—indeed, precisely after such dialectical annihilation—this will still be an image space and, more concretely, a body space", states Benjamin (*SW 2:1,* p. 217), indicating a

[6] Peter Buse and Ken Hirschkop (et al.) agree, stating that "The aim of the dialectical image is to retrieve an object, practice or figure from obscurity. Its rearrangement in a new constellation offers the possibility of its transfiguration". (Buse et al. 2005, p. 31)

[7] This thinking engagement is important, for it is in thought—specifically the moment of stilled motion—that the image takes form. Benjamin says that "[t]o thinking belongs the movement as well as the arrest of thoughts. Where thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions—there the dialectical image appears. It is the caesura in the movement of thought" and "is to be found where the tension between dialectical opposites is greatest". Further the dialectical image allows for the historical object to be wrested from "the continuum of historical process". (AP, [N10a, 3] p. 475).

concreteness to the dialectical image that situates it beyond thinking alone, in a corporeal space of experience. This body space represents a transcendent constellation, a "metaphysical materialism" (*SW 4,* p. 217) that identifies political action (and collective revolutionary awakening) in the "poetic politics" (*SW 4,* p. 216) and activities of the Surrealists, and particularly in their work on the city of Paris, and in the experience of the city itself (as discussed in the following chapter). In short, a dialectical image-space opens up the potential of both dialectic and revolutionary approaches to the everyday via a real and tangible experience, demanding a private and collective engagement with the world.

Though the multiple dimensions of Benjamin's dialectical image are complex, "we can grasp his more abstruse formulations only if we understand how the detritus of the past might be redeemed." (Buse et al., 2005, p. 31) Such redemption is linked to dreaming and historical rescue for "[i]f the experience of the nineteenth century was that of a dream, the dialectical image for historical recovery in The Arcades Project is awakening" (Buse et al., 2005, p. 31). A dialectical mode of engagement opens up the possibility for awakening from the dreams of an era, or at least the recognition of those "dreams as such", as Benjamin states:

> In the dialectical image, what has been within a particular epoch is always, simultaneously, "what has been from time immemorial." As such, however, it is manifest on each occasion only to a quite specific epoch—namely, the one in which humanity, rubbing its eyes, recognizes just this particular dream image as such. (*AP,* [N4, 1] p. 464).

Interrogating the material space of ruin—and the abstract space of obsolescence and failed progress—the approach in this thesis considers Benjamin's use of the dialectical image as a true image that flashes up, is seized for a moment, and then dissolves; an "image" that contains a tension between two polarities; an image which is also a space and site of action; a historical image that is a reconfiguration and a constellation; an image which is temporal in form (ever in the moment), yet primal in content (shot through with both hope for messianic redemption, and apocatastasic yearnings for the primordial past). Inherent in the image is also the hope for reclaiming the lost, for awakening from the collective dream, and for interrupting the ceaseless march of progress.

Modernity and Experience

This thesis explores the relationship between modernity and ruin, in its many manifestations throughout Benjamin's work. From remnant Ur-forms of early capitalism in Paris, to the lingering traces of the past in Berlin and the physical decay of a new kind of modern city in Detroit, each chapter argues that there is a correlation between the force of progress, traditional historical accounts of the past and the material remnants of that past as they persist in the present. These remnants can be viewed within a Benjaminian framework that emphasises individual and collective experience in urban spaces; the destructive nature of assumed progress; and the detritus of capitalism generated by investment in perpetual growth and change and the associated detachment from the recently outmoded (as evidenced in the dusty and desolate arcades—deserted as they fell out of style).

Modern ruins are very much the product of earlier conceptions of the modern metropolis. The significance of this symbolism is multitudinous: in one way, Benjamin considers capitalism (and progress) as historical forces which generate literal and figurative ruins, destroying the past on which such progress is founded. His 'Thesis on the Philosophy of History' in particular attests to this, as do *One-Way Street* , 'Central Park', 'Berlin Chronicle' and *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*. In another way, the city itself, as a site of consumption and obsolescence, is also a haven for the forgotten and discarded miscellany of that culture. The (unfinished) *Arcades Project* is, in subject and form, a testament to the notion that the past resides in the outmoded, dusty and fragmenting sites that persist in contrast to the perceptions of the city in terms of newness and wholeness, progress and renewal. Together, the abstract notion of history as a pile of rubble or refuse, and the city as a repository for objects and sites that hold the secret index to the past by virtue of their persistence against that process of ruination, provides the possibility to at once redeem the past through the investigation of the rejected and lost, and to redeem modern ruins as important sites of urban experience. The investigation of modern ruins as rejected sites of alternative urban experience sets up the possibility for a redemptive practice within which teleological histories, materialist emphases, and reductive urban planning

assessments can be reconsidered through the re-evaluation of what constitutes both a ruin and urban experience.

When arguing for the potential of alternative experience in modern ruins, I propose an active rejection of the experiences engendered by particular ways of seeing and existing that allows for a kind of salvage of that which is rejected and threatened by the drive of a fracturing modernity[8]. Benjamin's experiments with hashish in Marseilles, for example, and his short pieces on Moscow and Naples, were aimed at altering the usual perceptions of the city, both as experience and as representation[9]. Graeme Gilloch's reading of Benjamin's city portraits suggests that:

> The fragmentary style pursued by Benjamin in his writing on the city is in keeping with his understanding of the modern urban complex as the locus of the disintegration of experience and with his recognition of the need to salvage the disregarded debris of contemporary society. The city is a vast ruin demanding careful excavation and rescue. (Gilloch, 1996, p. 23)

Although my personal mode of engaging with ruin spaces borrows from several practices and approaches, Benjamin's critical framework of the city as a site of excavation and inherent ruin and decay is fundamental to my argument that ruins are vitally important sites of alternative experience.

The term "modernity" is used in this thesis to emphasise both urban development and contrast[10]. Where modernity is often categorised by movement and change, the stagnant impression given by ruins directly opposes the most enduring sense of modernity as growth and development. Further, as this thesis includes the

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[8] For example, several passages on rescue in convolute N of *AP,* particularly [N9, 3], [N9, 4], [N9,7] and [N9a, 3] on p. 473

[9] See, for example 'Hashish in Marseilles' (*SW 2:2*, p. 673), or the volume compiling Benjamin's experiments with Hashish titled *On Hashish* (Benjamin 2006). For Benjamin's city portraits, see 'Moscow' (*SW 2:1*, p. 22), 'Naples', (*SW 1*, p. 414) and 'Marseilles' (*SW 2:1*, p. 232). The piece 'Myslovice—Braunschweig—Marseilles' considers both the city and experience, and is subtitled 'The story of a Hashish Trance' (*SW 2:1*, p. 386).

[10] The relationship between different periods of modernity and Benjamin's work on the Arcades in particular is investigated in relation to ruins and rubble in Esther Leslie's 'Ruin and Rubble in the Arcades' (Leslie in Hanssen 2006, pp. 87-112). Benjamin's understanding of modernity is also considered throughout Buck-Morss's *The Dialectics of Seeing* (1989), particularly p. 261 and p. 278, and the introduction.

period of "high capitalism" (Paris of 1871 onward); Berlin from "around 1900" to the present; and Detroit as a post-industrial city in a period of "late capitalism"[11], a general concept of modernity most easily encompasses these eras, as well as the potential for "interruption" that I argue is presented by modern ruins.

Marshall Berman's consideration of the modern and modernity together summarises both the relationship between these two concepts, and the contrast between modernity or the modern, and decay and decline, which is implied by "modern ruins" (as opposed to "ruins of modernity"[12]):

> 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. (Berman 1988, p. 15)

[11] A term used by Theodor Adorno (for example, 'Late Capitalism' in *Can One Live After Auschwitz*? (2003)), but more specifically in relation to the work of Frederic Jameson (Jameson 1991). Related concepts include Zygmunt Bauman's liquid modernity (Bauman 2000) (and resulting uncertainty), and Marshall Berman's concept of modernity (detailed in *All That is Solid Melts into Air* (Berman 1988)). Mike Davis's *City of Quartz* (Davis 1990) and Anthony Giddens' understanding of late modernity (Giddens 1991) are also of significance here.

[12] A distinction is necessary because Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle's "ruins of modernity" encompasses a variety of engagements with real and imagined ruins, and the ways in which we understand such ruins in a contemporary context (2008). A more basic term, "modern ruins" contains a seemingly impossible contrast, as well as a significant accord between the present and the recent past, evidenced in persistent relics of that past. This term avoids some of the complexities of "modernity" and ruin (for example, the conceptual frameworks around ruins of antiquity; work such as that of W.G. Sebald on the ruins of war (2003); colonial or imperial politics of "ruin gazing"; and other aspects that cannot be examined here, but are addressed extensively in *Ruins of Modernity*). The use of "modern ruins" therefore is an intentional simplification, intended to describe the physical spaces themselves, and their status as *recent* ruins, somewhat disinvesting the emphasis on ruin itself (as a loaded concept). This disinvestment makes room for Benjamin's work on the obsolete, discarded and fragmented, which is then applied to the selected case studies of this thesis as a means to ground and narrow an impractically expansive field.

This contradiction is evident in the emphasis that Benjamin places on a fragmented and figurative perception of modernity as both a process of ruination and disintegration of experience, which seeks to redeem the past via a re-evaluation of the ways in which we recall, preserve and inhabit a space of "what has been". Seeking these traces in actual ruins may seem to be an excessively literal, even blunt reading of Benjamin's work, however Benjamin certainly located the past in the physical traces of the nineteenth century that persisted in the arcades: he identified forgotten and neglected objects as the refuse of a churning, destructive modernity. Steinberg views "the presence of history in Benjamin, not as a trope but as a confrontation with a material object-world". (Steinberg 1996, p. 5). In modern ruins, I have identified sites that I consider to be rejected, ephemeral refuse—this selection is less a reflection of Benjamin's repetition of the ruin motif, than a reference to the relationship between ruins and a culture of consumption or history-as-progress—whether cities ruined by war and revolution or the abandoned remnants of obsolete industries or outdated fads. I could have chosen almost any category of remnant—dumped cars, discarded electricals, collectable vinyl, books or toys, second-hand clothing, aging machinery. However, by emphasising ruined architecture, the notion of interruption can be directly related to everyday life in the city—to oppose the modern means to oppose the new; to oppose the mass of urban culture is to seek the quiet spaces of the city; to oppose constant change is to revel in a landscape the is defined by both stasis and transience. Modern ruins present alternatives to progress in a very real and inhabitable way.

12. Michigan Central Station, Detroit (2009)

Historical Materialism and Catastrophe

For Benjamin, "truth content" must be revealed in a world of false dreams, wish images, fetishised commodities and churning destruction which makes the present unreadable in two senses: The valuing, or "fame"[13] of some accounts over others which renders forgotten or vanquished pasts unknowable (the figurative refuse of the quest for supremacy); while the material ruin of objects and sites produces literal detritus as a marker for the rejected and outmoded. History as a linear continuum tends to deny the constantly shifting nature of material and socio-cultural phenomena, presuming instead that there is a status quo to be maintained, and that catastrophe is an avoidable anomaly in a generally stable trajectory. For Benjamin, however, "[t]he course of history, seen in terms of the concept of catastrophe, can actually claim no more attention from thinkers than a child's kaleidoscope, which with every turn of the

[13] The concept of historical "fame" is used several times throughout this thesis and is derived from the following quote which also supports criticism as a major mode of reading the past: "Historical "understanding" is to be grasped, in principle, as an afterlife of that which is understood; and what has been recognized in the analysis of the "afterlife of works", in the analysis of "fame" is therefore to be considered the foundation of history in general". (*AP* [N2, 3] p. 460)

hand dissolves the established order into a new array." (*SW 4*, p. 164). "There is profound truth in this image", Benjamin says of the changing kaleidoscope, which displays truth as both the reality of historical contingency and perpetual catastrophe, but also the unravelling of the phantasmagoria that presents the world in a manner that is favourable to the desires of a ruling class: "The concepts of the ruling class have always been the mirrors that enabled an image of "order" to prevail.[*sic*]—The kaleidoscope must be smashed." (*SW 4*, p. 164) [14] Whether the angel of history who cannot make the past whole, or the smashed kaleidoscope that will undo the illusion of the status quo, the relationship between progress as a force of ruin and history as a pile of rubble to be sifted through is made clear in the notion of catastrophe.

The concept of historical catastrophe is related directly to Benjamin's historical materialist who empathises with the past and makes it speak without valuing one account or prevailing order over any other, aware that this constant shift and degradation renders anything other than a fleeting conception of the past to be a false conception[15]. Benjamin's historical materialist "regards it as his task to brush history against the grain" (*SW 4*, p. 392), to oppose the forces which perpetuate history as a "triumphal procession in which the current rulers step over those who are lying prostrate" (*SW 4*, p. 391). In section VII of 'On The Concept of History', Benjamin argues for the materialist who engages in "a process of empathy" by directly acknowledging the "anonymous toil" of the vanquished who have delivered the (supposed) "treasures" of the past, "[f]or in every case these treasures have a lineage which he cannot contemplate without horror." (*SW 4,* p. 392) Progress, particularly as the pursuit of supremacy and triumph, generates as much disorder as it strives to contain.

[14] For more details on Benjamin's image of the smashed kaleidoscope, See Irving Wohlfarth in Steinberg (Steinberg 1996) *Smashing the Kaleidoscope: Walter Benjamin's Critique of Cultural History.*

[15] Details on Benjamin's reading of Marx's historical materialism can be found in convolute N *On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress*. Benjamin did not subscribe to Marx's approach to history, which was primarily teleological in nature; instead, his reading provides the possibility for perceiving the past without falling prey to the phantasmagoria of the present. See [N2,6] (*AP*, p. 461), which is labelled "refuse of history".

Benjamin's consideration of the relation between perceived stability and catastrophe emphasises the ruinous nature of progress. As Benjamin states, "[t]he concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are status quo is the catastrophe. It is not an ever-present possibility, but what in each case is given."[16] (*SW 4,* pp. 184-185)

Critique and Ruin Perception

The focus on modern ruins as those of the recent past is also driven by a perceived absence in studies of Benjamin's work: that despite the fact that *The Arcades Project* is centred around semi-abandoned arcades in Paris, Benjamin's preoccupations with ruins and rubble are not often considered alongside contemporary sites which share the qualities of the arcades, or might fulfil a similar role for the contemporary researcher.

It is in Benjamin's wanderings in the arcades, and his discoveries of the hidden parts of cities (like the waterfront and back lanes of Marseilles) that physical ruin in the city is most directly addressed. Generally, however, he made few references to what could be considered modern or urban ruins.[17] While Benjamin showed an interest in architecture and the built environment (perhaps best demonstrated in his work on Haussmann, "iron construction" and "the streets of Paris" in *The Arcades Project*[18]) the majority of references to that which is shattered, destroyed, or ruined are conceptual discussions around works of art or literature, film and photography, theatre, allegory and also truth content that may be discerned on the point of oblivion[19].

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[16] Adorno would later propose "What has recently happened always presents itself as if it were something destroyed by a series of catastrophes" (Adorno et al. 1999, p. 94). The quote is repeated by Benjamin in [K4, 3] (*AP* p. 397).

[17] Despite the fact that he rarely mentions contemporary sites of ruin as such, it is implicit in Benjamin's work on urban spaces, especially Paris, that architecture is of significance (in terms of living and dwelling, as well as the interpenetration of past and present in urban space). See the edited volume *Walter Benjamin and Architecture* (Hartoonian 2009), and also convolutes I, K, and L in *AP*.

[18] See convolutes E, F and P in *AP*.

[19] Benjamin refers to truth content and its role in criticism in his Goethe essays ('Goethe's Elective Affinities', (*SW 1*, especially p. 297) and 'Goethe', (*SW 2:1* p.

The concept of critique is most clearly addressed by Benjamin in his pre-Arcades work, specifically *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (hereafter *Origin*), but also several (mostly fragmentary) pieces composed around 1930[20]. Although *Origin* is the primary source for Benjamin's work on allegory, this thesis makes use of what Benjamin calls Baudelaire's "allegorical perception" of Paris as a city of fragmentation and decline, as well as intense alienation. (*AP,* p. 895) This allegorical perception relates to the impression of history as ruin that Benjamin recognised in his work on German *Trauerspiel*, and it is the latter that is often cited as a major source of content on Benjamin and ruins[21]. However, the value of *Origin* to this project is in its significance to Benjamin's development of criticism in relation to earlier eras, (rather than the many passages that speak of decay and ruin) The role of the critic: as Benjamin states is to ensure the survival and truth of a work. For example, "[t]he theory of the ruins created by time should be complemented by the process of deconstruction [*Abmontieren*], which is the task of the critic" (*SW 2:2,* p. 415), who reads the hollowed remnant more clearly in its continued life (*SW 2:2,* pp. 415-416). Further, Benjamin champions "…a criticism whose sole medium is the life, the

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161)); throughout 'Central Park' (*SW 4,* p. 161) and 'The Rigorous Study of Art' (*SW 2:2* p. 666); and in 'Karl Kraus' (*SW 2:2* p. 433), and 'Commentary on Poems by Brecht' (*SW 4*, p. 215); and elsewhere in less detail. In each of the above, he frames a relationship between truth and material content that emphasises the readability of works in relation to their perceptibility on the point of disappearance, but also temporal distance from their original context.

[20] In 'Karl Kraus: dedicated to Gustav Glück', Benjamin writes that "Only when despairing did he discover in citation the power not to preserve but to purify, to tear from context, to destroy; the only power in which hope still resides that something might survive this age—because it was wrenched from it." (*SW 2:2*, p. 455); similar discussions can be found in 'Theological Criticism' (*SW 2:2,* p. 428), 'May-June 1931' (*SW 2:2*, p. 469), and more generally in the two sections of *Selected Writings* titled 'The Destructive Character' (*SW 2:2,* p 413- 553) and 'Ibizan Sequence' (*SW 2:2*, p553-687).

[21] For example, Dylan Trigg's expansive work *The Aesthetics of Decay* lists *Origin* and "Benjamin's study of the allegory of ruins" in reference to decaying and abandoned buildings (Trigg 2006, pp. xxvii-xxviii); Hell and Schönle in their introduction to *Ruins of Modernity* echo a quote from *Origin* in stating "Benjamin drew a parallel between the ruin in the realm of things and the allegory in the realm of thought…" (2008 p. 7); while Anca Pusca directly quotes *Origin* in 'Industrial and Human Ruins of Post Communist Europe', in a discussion on history and erasure in modern ruins (2010, p. 244)

ongoing life, of the works themselves" (*SW 1*, p. 372). Thus, rather than focusing on the allegorical images of ruin presented in *Origin*, this thesis adopts the position that it is, paradoxically, in a state of decay and fragmentation that the endangered relics of earlier eras can be intercepted and rescued.

This thesis does, however, draw on Benjamin's adaptation of Baudelairean allegory to argue for a fragmented perception of the modern that can be used to evaluate and situate urban ruins within his understanding of modernity. Anson Rabinbach states that "[i]n his allegory of the angel of history, Benjamin conceived of modernity as an apocalyptic tempest roaring toward the present." (Rabinbach 1997, p. 10). In this vision, modernity is a shattering and fracturing force in terms of the speed of change and development, the destruction of traditional forms of experience, and the dislocation between a recent past and an ever-renewing present[22].

Core Questions

This thesis is focused on the following questions: What practical applications can Benjamin's work have on the private and collective action that can be taken against forces which simultaneously consign the past to tangible ruin; devalue such ruins in their immediacy, and then renovate them in the process of urban renewal? What approaches can be taken to consider the past via the experience of architectural remnants—modern ruins—using Benjamin's theory?

If Benjamin's wanderings in obsolete and disappearing arcades provided him with the insight necessary to comprehend the myths of the nineteenth century (and potentially the "awakening" of the masses in a present and future epoch; the rescue of the lost and threatened; the redemption of the condemned) can experiences in ruins elicit the shock required to "burst this prison-world asunder", in the same way that film interrupts the everyday world, "so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go travelling" (Benjamin, 1970, p. 238)? Benjamin's description of the fragmentary form of cinema as rubble reveals the

[22] See Rabinbach (1997), especially the Introduction, and the chapter 'Between Apocalypse and Enlightenment' (pp. 27-65).

potential of ruin, abstractly, to transport and transform. The potential of film is similar to the potential of ruins: "by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring commonplace milieus", Benjamin suggests, film "extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives" and "manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action." (*ibid*) Such a "field of action" is also made possible in ruins, specifically modern, urban ruins, which can both augment and problematise urban experience by presenting a contrast to "commonplace milieus" (*ibid*), and the chance to explore hidden dimensions of the familiar city.[23]

If ruins are problems generated by consumption, historical and material progress, and the pursuit of newness, they are also potentially productive catalysts for the interruption of those practices and forces. Can the answer to ruins be found in ruins? Can the counter to perpetual catastrophe be temporarily located in a stilled moment of lived catastrophe—the experiential equivalent of Benjamin's dialectical image?

Further, could the kind of salvation expressed in Benjamin's writings on his childhood, for example, be enacted in writing about my own experience of abandoned, decaying, or even disappearing or renewed spaces? How does the notion of renewal or redemption in Benjamin's writing, as well as the idea of the dialectical image in relation to illumination, connect with rubble, catastrophe, and history? Benjamin states that "The past carries with it a secret index by which it is referred to redemption" (*SW 4,* p. 390)—but is it possible that the redemption of the salvageable fragments of a monadological historical constellation is unachievable in terms of the extent to which a concrete moment of bringing the past into the present can take place in any measurable way?

One approach to understanding the past in the present moment might be to view Benjamin's redemption as a constant but not eternal—not lasting—renewal. The possibility for temporarily conferring value on what is otherwise deemed worthless

[23] The fragmentation of the everyday made possible in film is discussed by Howard Eiland in relation to Benjamin and the work of Siegfried Kracauer in Eiland's article 'Reception in Distraction' (2003).

generates a Benjaminian space of collective, dialectical images—flashing up in the moment of experience, salvaging the disappearing spaces of the past—if only in the present moment in which they are encountered as fragmented, deconstructed constellations of an earlier era, which illuminate the possibilities of the past. This method simultaneously provides a framework within which to study and write about sites of recent ruin; an approach that accounts for personal experience and validates the study of ruins as sites of culture and experience; and a suitable poetic prose style that represents the specifics of such an experience.[24]

13. Workshop, Packard Plant, Detroit (2009)

Literature Summary

In addition to both empirical fieldwork and a close reading of Benjamin's theory, this study incorporates notions of space and place (see below); the production of and our relationship to history and what constitutes the past; and contemporary discourses of decay, destruction and ruination. Accounts of ruin spaces are contrasted against the experience of the regulated and lived city, and augmented by spatial, cultural and philosophical responses to modern ruins. This approach is supported by a body of literature that revolves around scapes, topias, and temporalities, states and practices, and which places urban ruins in particular on the periphery of urban experience.

[24] For a discussion of the relationship between space and image in relation to Benjamin's dialectics, see Weigel (1996), particularly pp. 22-27.

The practice of exploring ruins as outlined in this thesis bears a relationship to a number of approaches and practices. This includes the Surrealists and Situationists[25], Urban Exploration (Urbex) and contemporary archaeology[26], as well as more specific practices like Tim Edensor's walking in ruins[27]. The practice of visiting ruin spaces also, somewhat poetically, allows Benjamin's writing to undergo its own transformation; to wander the ruins; to impose itself upon a complex landscape; to be found again in ruined, stabilised and half rebuilt buildings. Benjamin's writing can impress and affect the space, in recognising the link between the present and its many pasts, and informs the approach and style of this thesis throughout.

The privileging of Benjamin's methodology in this thesis decentres frameworks around urban renewal, embodiment, affect and other notable approaches to the built environment and its decline. However, such approaches tend to place the individual at the centre of the ruin (this is particularly true of analyses of "Urbex" culture[28]); or account for ruins in terms of broad social and cultural contexts[29]. Conversely Benjamin's theory presents the possibility to return potential and value to that which has been rejected in some way by evaluating the experience and the phenomena together. Benjamin's work provides a theoretical space for the rejected and obsolete, and for personal encounters with the detritus of the recent past, with the

[25] See, for example *The Situationist City* (Sadler 1998), the Surrealist work *Paris Peasant* (Aragon 1994), and Benjamin's essay 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia' (*SW 2:1* p. 207).

[26] "The archaeology of the recent and contemporary past—that is, the archaeology of places and events that relate to the period of recent or living memory—is a dynamic new field which engages critically with what it means to be 'us', with the politics of late-modernity, and with the nature, shape and relevance of archaeology as a contemporary research practice." (Harrison & Schofield 2009, p. 1)

[27] See Edensor's 'Walking Through Ruins' (in Ingold and Vergunst 2008). See also Edensor's expansive volume *Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics and Materiality* (2005)

[28] See, for example, *Invisible Frontiers* (Deyo & Leibowitz 2003); *Access All Areas* (Ninjalicious 2005), and *The Art of Urban Exploration* (Paiva & Manaugh 2008)

[29] Such texts include *Reimagining Detroit, Corporate Wasteland* and *Polluted and Dangerous* (Gallagher 2010; High & Lewis 2007; Hollander 2009)

argument that "[o]vercoming the concept of "progress", and overcoming the concept of "period of decline" are two sides of one and the same thing" (*AP,* [N2, 5] p. 460).

Modern ruins

In marking an argument for valuing the rejected spaces of the city, I favour the terms "modern ruins" and "urban ruins" or "urban decay" [30]. Both "modern ruin" and "urban ruin" connote a contrast between inhabited and abandoned urban space, and also (in relation to traditional (classical, romantic, governmental) conceptions of ruin) tend to give weight to the argument that these sites do retain value (if not economic and social, then cultural and historical), despite their presence as ruins[31].

There are shared qualities of most modern ruins: the apparent absence of people and the subversive practices that this absence attracts; the pervasiveness of decay in the form of rust, mould, mildew (and the sensory experience of this decay as smell, temperature, even the tactility of broken and crumbling surfaces); the plant life that takes hold; and the peculiar objects and manifestations of fragmentation and decline that populate ruins (collapsing ceilings and floors; broken windows, missing doors; old cars and machinery, scattered personal items, and piles of general waste).

Recently, there has been a growing fascination with urban and industrial decay, and such ruins are increasingly acknowledged as a contemporary phenomenon. Images from Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre's *Ruins of Detroit* featured in a 2009 *Time* article on the decay of the city (2009). Troy Paiva and Geoff Manaugh's *The Art of Urban Exploration* (2008); Shaun O'Boyle's *Modern Ruins* (2010), and

[30] These three terms are chosen in contrast to phrases such as urban blight and slum, because they tend to have fewer negative connotations, and do not imply a need to fix or recover the site (as blight and slum in particular tend to do). For a discussion of such terms, see Beyond the Ruins (Cowie & Heathcott 2003), pp. 46-47

[31] For examples of other approaches to ruins, see Christopher Woodward, *In Ruins,* 2002. This includes imaginings of potential ruins (Doré's *The New Zealander*, 1873, p. 2; Joseph Gandy's painting of the Bank of England in ruins, 1798, p. 162; John Martin's *Fall of Babylon*, 1819, p. 179; Hubert Robert's vision of the Louvre in ruins, 1796, p. 157), meditations on ruins (Hardy's *Rome: Building a New Street in an Ancient Quarter*, p. 26), and ancient ruins as inspiration (to Hitler and Speer, p. 30; Le Corbusier, p. 175). (Woodward 2002)

Drooker, Woodward and Brinkley's *American Ruins* (2007) also depict modern ruins. These recent titles complement earlier publications such as Camilo José Vergara's *American Ruins* (1999); Harry Skrdla's *Ghostly Ruins* (2006); Seidel, Sack and Klemp's *Underworld* (1997), and Hamm, Steinberg and Jungk's *Dead Tech* (2000), each concerned with relatively contemporary sites of recent ruin, as well as obsolescence. Polidori depicts the decay of Pripyat and Chernobyl in his *Zones of Exclusion* (2003).

14. Pripyat, Chernobyl (2009)

These various investigations and aesthetic representations inform many of the assumptions that are made in this thesis regarding the material presence of modern ruins and the ways in which they are commonly perceived, and underpin the suggestion that contemporary ruination provides the opportunity to oppose or interrupt typical urban experiences.

A redemptive appreciation of ruin spaces resides in the growing body of academic literature on contemporary ruins, and considers decay and abandonment in a way that is not reactionary. That is, rather than attempting to mute or repair ruins, many people are beginning to advocate for their worth in a state of ruin. Some assess each site on aesthetic, historical and cultural grounds, but most assess modern ruins

collectively as a particular product of recent history and a bellwether for a post-capitalist or even apocalyptic future[32].

Can we, as suggested by Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle in the introduction to *Ruins of Modernity*, have an ontology of ruins[33]—is this what Benjamin was seeking? To include that which is naturalised as outcast as a mode of being in itself? For example: does Detroit cease to exist, cease to be a city, in ruins? If the answer to that question is no, then what has this city become—what status can we give to the modern city in ruins, and how can such a ruin ontology be read or experienced?

15. and 16. Remnants and interior, abandoned hospital, Staten Island (2009)

[32] For example Dylan Trigg concludes that "just as we are able to appreciate the lost grandiloquence of a Nineveh of a Syria by their artificial preservation, the same quality emerges in the midst of a factory no longer in operation" (Trigg, 2006 p. 139). Both Steven High and David Lewis (2007) and the collection edited by Cowie and Heathcott (2003) consider industrial ruins as a sign of the decline of American capitalism and culture, while John Gallagher (2010) considers Detroit as a typical shrinking city whose conditions are representative of both current and future cities in decline.

[33] The question posed is: "Do we need an ontology of ruins?" (Hell & Schönle 2008, p. 5), and also, "Can we make sense of ruins only by granting them an exclusive ontological status?" (*ibid.*)

The City

The alternative or different kind of experience to which I refer in this thesis is founded on two particular assumptions: one is that there is a certain, dominant conception of the city as a space of order, newness and progress. Early intimations of this idea might be found in Haussmann's work in Paris, in the writings of Lewis Mumford and criticisms of Georg Simmel and, significantly, in Le Corbusier, who derides "those who cultivate dust and filth" as the enemies of "true culture" (Le Corbusier (in Kasinitz 1995, p. 100))[34], ideas that continue to dominate desires and plans for the ideal city. The second assumption that serves to ground the possibility of alternative experience, then, is that we do tend to collectively ignore such spaces—it is not a generalisation to note that that these sites don't often figure in conceptions of the city overall.

The persistence of sites of modern ruin is at odds with how we see the city and ourselves. Urban ruins in particular are so often within, but not of, the city; rejected once, they are not admitted into the urban fabric as anything other than aberrations—they have no place there. Instead, they come to occupy borderlands, temporary exceptions to the ordered city. As sites that are perceived to deviate from a norm, modern ruins reveal the influence of our obsession with newness and progress as it manifests in urban spaces in particular, which is reflected in a diverse variety of literature on urban ruins as deviance [35].

So often, we call on a conception of the ideal city—clean, safe, new—as if this conception *is* the city, but the reality of the abandoned, obsolete and decaying as an

[34] Lewis Mumford suggests that cities are an "emblem of settled life", signs of stability and permanency, and sites of the movement of human culture from a peasant origin (in Kasinitz 1995, p. 21). In the essay 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', Georg Simmel identifies the city as a space of extreme sensory stimuli, rational intellectual thought, economic and productive forces, development and technology, and the place where individualism has developed. (Simmel in Bridge and Watson, 2010 p. 203-210)

[35] Some practitioners of Urbex are mentioned in note 28. For others who write of modern ruins, particularly as sites of personal experience, see *Arts of Urban Exploration* (Pinder 2005), *The Dead Zone and The Architecture of Transgression* (Doron 2000), *It Was What It Was: Modern Ruins* (Williams 2010), as well as Trigg's *Aesthetics of Decay* and Edensor's *Industrial Ruins* mentioned elsewhere in this chapter.

unavoidable part of urban life exposes the city as a place of ruins as much as a place of advancement, development and human achievement. Detroit is an example of a city much-lauded in its heyday, and much lamented in ruins as a failed urban space. The city is also a place of endings and chaos and disorder; a place where things are torn apart, and scattered, and forgotten and left behind because of the relentless forces that push (things and people) ever onward.

The ordered city, so different from the bustling metropolis of other accounts, is the aim of urban planners, city councils and governments, but also of the dream of those who wish to address the traditionally negative impact of rapid urbanism. This "new" city ideal is also referred to by many who wish to oppose what they consider to be approaches that homogenise urban experience. In support of the new city, so many types of "old" city have been proposed—for Le Corbusier, the old city was Paris, with its medieval backstreets[36]. For Jacobs, it was the more organic form of the city prior to active planning[37]. According to Robert Fishman, Frank Lloyd Wright foresaw the "death" of the modern city in urban sprawl, making what was a new city to those like Le Corbusier a rapidly declining "old" city.[38] More recently, the (Western) industrial city has become old, even endangered (Fishman, in Kasinitz, p. 407). In the context of postmodern or global conceptions of the city, as well as digital technologies, we have also begun to move beyond local and particular conceptions of urban space, making the current "old" city an isolated hub of local activity, rather than part of a network or series of entwined loci.

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[36] "First get the city plan out of your drawer and look for the route. It is a task. Old gentlemen will pretend to discover in that the charm of Paris. I do not agree; nevertheless, I accept the inconvenience imposed by the very history of the city; on my way I thank Louis XIV, Napoleon, and Haussmann for having cut through the city with sharp and intelligent axes." (in Kasinitz 1995, p. 101).

[37] "Under the seeming disorder of the old city, wherever the old city is working successfully, is a marvellous order for maintaining the safety of the streets and the freedom of the city… The order is all composed of movement and change, and although it is not life, not art, we may fancifully call if the art form of the city and liken it to the dance…" (Jacobs 1993, p. 50).

[38] "Wright and a few other thinkers of his day understood the fragility of the great behemoth—the centralized industrial metropolis—which then seemed to embody and define the modernity of the 20th Century." Fishman (in Kasinitz 1995, p. 395). According to Fishman, Mumford, too, foresaw this (in Kasinitz 1995, p. 408).

"The city is a lost and found place… which always contains something hidden" states Nigel Thrift "…it is a place in which it is possible to press the bounds of experience, find redemption, make new dreams." (Thrift 2000, p. 399) Like Thrift, contemporary urban theory often tends towards uncovering or revealing the hidden and oppressed city via private encounters and reconfigurations of the ways we see urban spaces. This is particularly notable in the field or urban or modern ruin studies, with the work of Trigg, Edensor and others emphasising the importance of urban decay and decline in revealing the unseen or rejected parts of the city, while concepts such as *Terrain Vague* ("a place in the city that is empty and unoccupied, vague or uncertain, imprecise or unbounded." (Solà-Morales in Kamvasinou 2006, p. 255)) and Shrinking Cities (Oswalt, Bittner & Fishman 2005) emphasise the peripheral and uncertain nature of transient spaces.

17. Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. View from derelict factory, Staten Island (2009)

Space and Place

Throughout this thesis, I refer to urban ruins generally as "spaces". The use of a collective term for modern ruins reflects both a certain unity (temporal, experiential and physical) between ruins of a recent past, but also their transitionary status somewhere between typical understandings of place, and total absence (as in a wasteland, or after demolition). It is also necessary to touch on ideas of space and place in order to build a vocabulary for speaking about the *end* of (a) place, and to pinpoint the significance of such theory as it has informed core arguments throughout.

Inherent in many of the arguments made in this thesis is the idea that modern ruins do not currently occupy any agreed position in relation to what they were or what they might become. That is: is a modern ruin a place, or not? If it isn't a place any more, must it then be an unstructured "space", or is it something else again, something more specific—a dead zone (Doron, 2000); an interstitial space (Edensor in Ingold, 2005) or a liminal space (Turner & Bruner 1986); a scape (ruinscape (Hell and Schönle, 2008), drosscape (Berger 2007), invisible landscape (Cowie and Heathcott, 2003)); a post-scape (postmodern/post-industrial) or a de-scape (decentralised, deindustrialised); and so on.

Although Benjamin's work grounds this thesis, it does not fully provide for the production and definition of modern ruins, or their presence as collective, cultural phenomena. To counter this, I introduce a brief framework in this introduction which is based on key theoretical approaches to space and place that underpin this thesis (particularly the language used to describe ruin spaces collectively). This framework is central to the question of what constitutes a modern ruin—is it the presence or absence of human culture; its origin (or production); its past (what it was); its future (what it might become); or the moment of encounter (my presence in the ruin, a spatial practice, or a deviance from the norm)?

To begin with "space" is socially produced, as outlined in Henri Lefebvre's seminal work *The Production of Space* (1991). Spaces of decay have generally moved beyond active inhabitation, yet they are still the result of particular aspects of the production of space. As Andy Merrifield states (in his own words, and in Lefebvre's), "space, like other commodities, is *itself actively produced:* it isn't merely the staging

of the theatre of life as a paid-up member of the cast… Each mode of production has its own particular space, "the shift from one mode to another must entail the production of a new space"… late capitalism has produced—goes on producing—its historically specific urban and industrial forms, continuing to colonize and commodify space, to buy and sell it, create and tear it down, use and abuse it, speculate and war over it." (Merrifield 2006, p. 107). Ruin space falls within the realms of this cycle of production and decline, despite the fact that Lefebvre rarely makes direct reference to ruins, particularly not those of the recent past[39].

Another seminal theorist, Edward Casey, identifies "place" as an ontological condition—the experience of place is vital to our existence, to knowing ourselves in the world. "We are surrounded by places. We walk over and through them. We live in places, relate to others in them, die in them. Nothing we do is unplaced. How could it be otherwise? How could we fail to recognise this primal face?" (Casey 1997, p. ix)[40] For Casey, place is socially and personally vital—we cannot understand ourselves (collectively or individually) without the fixed notion of place.

By contrast, the concept of spatial or cultural poetics supports a more intimate and fluid relationship to individual locations. For Gaston Bachelard (1964) and Kathleen Stewart (1996), space and place are also so intensely personal as to be poetic or affective—they cannot be divorced from our presence and experience. Stewart emphasises the everyday, and familiar places and objects. She speaks directly of ruins as sites that are no longer the places they once were. She immediately accepts the blur between any sense of the "real" or observable social space and a landscape criss-crossed with memory, where the past is palpably present. Place isn't just made by people and structures, but of remainders and reminders. Significantly, places *and* ruins are also defined by cultural artefacts: "cigarettes, soda pop, candy, cakes, and the canned milk for the endless pots of coffee." Other palpable reminders include cabins, coins, trucks and cars; kitsch figurines, and plastic pools. (1996, p. 17).

[39] Lefebvre does mention "spaces given over to voluptuousness or death" (1991, p. 140), but does not expand on this.

[40] It is worth noting that Casey considers Benjamin to be a writer on place, stating of Benjamin (and others, including Hannah Arendt) that "Each of these figures has succeeded in fashioning a new face for place" (1997, p. 286)

Another theorist linked to space and place theory is Michel de Certeau. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), de Certeau posits a "spatial practice"[41] based on the theory of Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault. de Certeau's spatial practice neatly contains almost all of the theories mentioned above within a set of possibilities outlining what we might be able to *do* in and with ruins as sites of deviation from an urban norm. Of particular interest is the concept of walking in the city, which de Certeau makes use of as a form of resistance to political and social regulations that impact how we occupy spaces. In relation to what he terms the "concept-city": a space of "disquieting familiarity" (1984, pp. 95-96) de Certeau also states that "[t]ravel (like walking) is a substitute for the legends that used to open up space to something different." (1984 p. 107) Walking (and travelling), in this context, are both "practices that invent spaces" (*ibid.*), which resist the known and dominant ideals of city and space, creating possibilities and in turn alternatives to the dominant discourses that shape the way we see modern (especially urban) spaces, the chance to perceive "something different".

It the readable text of the everyday city against which de Certeau pits his "spatial practice", which is migrational and mobile. Within this notion of the everyday, de Certeau posits a challenge to the administrative power of the concept city. Vitally, the "networks of order" dominate this concept city, in which "there is a rejection of everything that is not capable of being dealt with in this [ordered] way and so constitutes the "waste products" of a functionalist administration (abnormality, deviance, illness, death, etc.)" (de Certeau 1984, pp. 94-95). Modern ruins are such "waste products", excluded from order and network, and in de Certeau's argument, these products (if not reintroduced and transformed via the force of progress) can manifest "effects contrary to those at which it aims" (de Certeau 1984, p. 94). Thus, ruins, like unpredictable articulations of walking in the city, facilitate tactical resistance that cannot be accounted for in the organisational principles of an idealised

[41] Lefebvre makes use of the term "spatial practice" in reference to the variety of abstract and ill-defined spaces, particularly in a political and social sense (1991, pp. 288-89).

built environment, allowing for myriad possibilities that are often unseen within the constructed order.

The approaches summarised above are only partly concerned with physical inhabitation, however, because space is also imagined—a notion addressed by Lefebvre, but also considered by Doreen Massey in *For Space* (2005). For Massey, the idea of place is local, private and contained. Space, by contrast, is the site of global, general, transitory and shifting relations between individuals and locations. (Massey 2005, pp. 4-8)

Massey's approach determines that concepts and experiences of space and place are intuitive, and embedded in practice. Like Casey, space and place, respectively, are about "being in the world" (Massey 2005, p. 8), and (also in common with Casey), place is defined as a more concrete mode of locating the self, whereas space is more widely encompassing, but also less distinct. Space, the primary concern of Massey's work *For Space*, is multiplicitous, simultaneous, and never closed. (Massey 2005, p. 9) In many ways, as a "product of interrelations" (Massey 2005, p. 10) this notion of space accounts for the transitions in ruins, severing and redeveloping connections and relations between other sites, between people, between past and present. Read in relation to Massey's call to "liberate" space through opening up imaginaries and alternatives (rather than closed, or finished sites), ruins-as-spaces remain open for possibility—they are not the dead-end wrecks so often (and conveniently) posited in commonplace accounts of abandonment and dereliction.

To summarise, Bachelard, emphasises a poetics that attaches phenomenological value to buildings (1964 p. 11). Similarly, Stewart explicitly values ruins as locations of personal and local histories, which still hold significance, despite no longer possessing all the qualities of a local and inhabited place (1996, p. 16). However, in the event of a personal encounter or direct relationship to a ruin, the site becomes a kind of place in the sense that both Bachelard and Stewart consider memory and individual encounter to be inherent in either place or space making. However, because Casey and Massey in particular insist that place is local and inhabited (even if it is mentally constructed), and Lefebvre makes only select few

references to transitional spaces, I consider ruins to be at least a deviation from place, in particular.

Within this broad framework, a category of "ruin space" encompasses the precariousness the position that such ruins occupy, between place and void, but also acknowledges their significance as one of many kinds of space within the wider framework of a built environment and an imaginary that is profoundly (if not totally) influenced by human culture.

This approach, most importantly, suggests that recent ruins are not just transitional, not just aesthetic, not only political or historical, but important in their physical presence as sites which are personally experienced by individuals, while simultaneously being the product of a collective and cultural response to that which is incomplete, uninhabited and deviant. They are unique precisely because they are contradictory—shifting (materially) and static (lacking human activity); present (in the landscape) and absent (no longer included in the life of a community). A definitive way to demonstrate their impossibility is through their uncomfortable fit with the body of space and place theory that aims to explain, in detail, how we interact with all of the places we build, yet does not make a great deal of room for encountering the ruins of those places.

Walter Benjamin

I have made a conscious choice to direct my focus at particular aspects of Benjamin's work over others. The key texts that inform this thesis (in an approximate order of influence) are: *The Arcades Project*[42](1999) and 'On the Concept of History'[43] (*SW 4,* pp. 389-401)*;* 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire' (*SW 2:1*, pp. 32-50), *Berlin Childhood Around 1900* (*SW 3,* pp. 344-413) and 'Berlin Chronicle' (*SW 2:2*,

[42] Particularly convolutes N, J, k, K, C and E; the Paris Exposés of 1935 and 1939 (and the associated 'materials' included in the 'Addenda' (*AP* pp. 893-925)); as well as the 'First Sketches' from Benjamin's notes (*AP* pp. 827-868) and the 'Early Drafts' (*AP* pp. 871-887).
[43] This includes 'Paralipomena to 'On The Concept of History'' (*SW 4,* pp. 401-411)

p595-637)[44]*;* 'Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian' (*SW 3*, p. 260-302)[45]*; One-Way Street* (*SW 1*, pp. 444-488) and 'Central Park' (*SW 4*, pp. 161-199) and the correspondences between Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, and Benjamin and Gershom Scholem in particular (Adorno et al. 1999; Benjamin 1994; Scholem 1992)

Benjamin's ideas developed a great deal over the period between 1924 and 1940, and so I have chosen not to rely too heavily on his earlier works. Thus, *Origin*, 'The Life of Students' (*SW 1*, p. 7), 'On The Program of the Coming Philosophy' (*SW 1*, p. 100), and other works from the 1920s do not feature strongly in this study, although they are related generally to ruins and decay.

Approaches, Method and Style

This thesis, though concerned with ruins, is equally occupied with the application of Benjamin's work as a theory, as a kind of methodology and as a portal to understanding the past. A modern ruin is the ideal site, object, and moment in which all of Benjamin's work might come together—in fragments, in remnants, in ruins; in decay and destruction; in remembering and forgetting; in silence and insistence; in dialectical opposition and allegorical perception. Collectively, modern ruins are the living manifestation of history's piling wreckage: the crumbling and outmoded spaces of modernity.

[44] For the Berlin chapter, I rely less heavily on *Berlin Childhood* than the earlier version 'Berlin Chronicle' from which it was partially developed. The contrast between the two is particularly useful to demonstrate Benjamin's use of the *Denkbilder* (fragmentary "thought-images") in *Berlin Childhood* to draw out ideas in a more productive way than the prose form of 'Berlin Chronicle', which is somewhat bleaker, and more clearly connected to (rather than intentionally distanced from) the conditions of the period.

[45] In addition to the 1937 essay 'Eduard Fuchs Collector and Historian', Fuchs features periodically throughout *AP*, generally in relation to his readings of materials and objects, i.e.: crinoline. Benjamin's work on Fuchs, however, was somewhat personal: he wrote the piece at the request of Horkheimer, after some resistance and was not necessarily supportive of Fuchs' approach (see Steiner & Winkler 2010, pp. 110-111). Nevertheless, his later work on *AP* and *OTCH* demonstrates the influence of the historical materialist's approach to the past.

As a project, this thesis takes on a somewhat auto-ethnographic approach in which my embodied—lived—experience of contemporary cities and their ruins is a form of auto-ethnography that presumes a commonality between urban experiences (and particularly those of ruination) throughout developed (Western) cities in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries—an argument which I have supported through my consideration of urban modernity, and the foregrounding of modern city space that is covered in my first chapter.[46] This approach also makes use of a "Benjaminian" methodology, adapting personal experience to Benjamin's own approaches (in terms of theory and style) as a means to engage with the personal and collective, and to counter other approaches that tend to erase dynamic experience in favour of either quantitative data or certain historical frameworks (or, just as often, absence and silence, as if buildings cease to exist when they fall into disuse and disorder). This approach is not intended to ignore the depth of local connection and feeling that is attached to any of these sites, but rather to provide a way in which all such spaces can stand as equals in any account, none valued over another due to perceived historical value, economic viability and so on. This is again a somewhat Benjaminian conception, in that "nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history" (*SW 4*, p. 390). His work on Baudelaire as a "lost" poet; on the writings of the "little known" Carl Gustav Jochmann (*SW 4,* p. 356); on 'Old Forgotten Children's Books' (*SW 1*, p. 406) or 'Old Toys' (*SW 2*, p. 98), and so on[47], demonstrates that he was constantly seeking those things that, due to changing tastes and fashions, politics, and economics, were little-known or under-recognised; things that did not figure in popular accounts, or were not given attention or credibility in academia or politics.[48]

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[46] For a discussion on auto-ethnographic research methods see Paula Saukko's *Doing Research in Cultural Studies* (2003). My approach displays a limited auto-ethnography, in that my personal, empirical experience features, but my socio-cultural and biographical subjectivity is not directly interrogated.

[47] For an excellent insight into the variety of lost and neglected oddities that filled Benjamin's collections and writings, see *Walter Benjamin's Archive* (Benjamin & Leslie (trans), 2007). For example, the section 'Physiognomy of the Thingworld', which includes numerous photographs and written fragments on "Russian Toys"; dolls; wooden horses; a model of "the earth on three whales", and so on (pp. 74-107).

[48] The incorporation into popular or mass recollection is significant to the work on decay in this thesis for, as Benjamin states in the introduction to 'The Regression of Poetry, by Carl Gustav Jochmann': "[p]opular memory [*Gedächtnis der Völker*]

The inclusion of my personal experience in this thesis brings the absences of other people into relief. I have not included the personal stories of those for whom the ruins of this study could be of particular significance—that is, I seldom consider the homeless, or squatters; I don't speak of the social impacts of the destruction of Berlin during World War II; I don't focus on the human toll of urban decay and decline on workers, business-owners and locals whose lives were changed by deindustrialisation.

These absences are partly due to the fact that they fall beyond the scope of this thesis. However, it is also particular to this focus to look beyond typical impressions of each of the cities I am investigating, and to emphasise the fact that the urban masses are definitely absent from such sites. In the case of Paris, both the Commune of 1871 and the arcades have been scrutinised in very particular ways, which I hope to move away from by directing my scrutiny only at modern ruins; this also provides the opportunity to reconsider Benjamin's work on ruin and modernity in a new way. In the case of Berlin, the account of post-war ruination is absolutely dominated by a distinct mode of reflection that emphasises the impact on the population, and the acts of the National Socialist regime. Finally, though Detroit is almost exclusively framed in terms of ruin in both mass media and academia as a highly iconic "ruined" city, accounts are restricted by the complexity of the social and economic aspects of the city's decline. In all cases, there is little I can add to the dominant accounts of these cities and their various modes of ruin.

The style in which this thesis is written reflects both Benjamin's own writing practice (particularly evident in his travel writing)[49], and my encounters with the sites

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tends to classify the material handed down to it in groups. Such groupings are fluid, and their components also change. But anything that does not become a lasting part of them is consigned to oblivion." (*SW 4,* p. 356)

[49] For example, 'Moscow' and 'Marseilles' (*SW 2:1*). While the former is concerned generally with coming to know an unfamiliar urban space (and, through it, the familiarity of urban forms of known cities) and the latter with perception, the writing style is of most significance to this work. *One Way Street,* 'Berlin Chronicle' and *Berlin Childhood Around 1900* are also exemplars of a fragmentary style, whether as *Denkbilder* ("thought-images") or simply the non-linear construction of miscellanea.

concerned. My personal experience is assessed through multiple site-analysis in each city and in many specific ruinscapes.[50]

18. Factory, Staten Island (2009)

The core significance of Benjamin's body of work is not just his mode of writing; his philological critique; his reading of dialectical materialism; his collection of treatises against universal history, and so on. What each aspect shares is that quality of his work that gives rise to—as Susan Buck-Morss (1989) suggests—something like a way of seeing; as Sigrid Weigel (1996) states, a way of thinking and writing; as Peter Buse (et al., 2005) suggests, an experiential archaeology. In Benjamin's work, a mode of critique emerges which, in many (sometimes disparate and fractured) forms, opens up a temporal, personal and collective space in which to challenge the extremes of the modern world—catastrophe and status quo—through encounters which consciously reverse the dominant mode of perception.

[50] Here I use "scape" in direct reference to methodology, where, as Saukko states, "…the notion of scape also clarifies what areas of life the study is not focusing on, or what areas of life might be left in the shadow… the idea of scapes makes research more conscientious of its partiality" (2003 p. 185).

Benjamin achieved his aims by interrupting that which was given in a particular case: catastrophe in history, destruction in progress, and collective recollection in personal perception. The crowd of the modern city was opposed by empty arcades; the amassed new commodities were countered with dusty collections, and historical progression became a process of ruination, a steady churning which the angel of history and the historical materialist only perceive with horror.

The key concerns of this thesis comprise an interruption in a similar manner – an attempt to overcome the force of progress and teleological histories, in the form of a ruin-perception and experience which offers the potential to both confront and, vitally, inhabit, the possibilities for opposition which informed Benjamin's work.

19. Processing plant under demolition, Chicago (2009)

Chapter 1 **- Ruin perceptions: Paris in allegory, revolution and ruin**

> To construct the city topographically—tenfold and a hundredfold—from out of its arcades and its gateways, its cemeteries and bordellos, its railroad stations and its…, just as formerly it was defined by its churches and its markets. And the more secret, more deeply embedded figures of the city: murders and rebellions, the bloody knots in the network of the streets, lairs of love, and conflagrations. (Walter Benjamin, incomplete fragment from *The Arcades Project* [C1,8], p. 83)

> Above all, it is the arcade itself that serves as Benjamin's model: constructed from thousands of tiny, precise iron components, covered by glass to permit illumination from above, it is a ruin filled with the outmoded and the despised, and frequented by the shabby outcast. (Graeme Gilloch, 1996 *Myth and Metropolis*, p. 116)

> I tell myself it had to be in Paris, where the walls and quays, the asphalt surfaces, the collections and the rubbish, the railings and the squares, the arcades and the kiosks, teach a language so singular that our relations to people attain, in the solitude encompassing us in our immersion in that world of things, the depths of a sleep in which the dream image waits to show the people their true faces. (Walter Benjamin *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, *SW 3* pp. 614-615)

This chapter frames several approaches to modern ruins in terms of their possibilities for providing an alternative[51] to typical urban experience[52], particularly in relation to progress as both the pursuit of material growth, and a problematic historical formation that Benjamin sought to critique. In the following quote (which also features in Introduction and Conclusion of this thesis) Benjamin writes that the idea of

[51] For a summary of a "different" experience in relation to Benjamin's work, see *The Politics of Imagination*, by Tara Forrest (2007) in which the work of Baudelaire and the Surrealists is assessed for its capacity to bring the past into the present and "serve as a catalyst for the creation and sustenance of a desire for a different kind of existence" (p. 63), which is contrasted against "the highly circumscribed character of modern existence" (p. 48).

[52] A different mode of particularly urban experience is grounded in the work of Michel de Certeau, in which the spatial practice of walking in the city is proposed as a means to defeat a perceived urban order. Further, in association with Surrealism the disruptive practices of the Situationist International (*SI*) from 1957 to 1972 also propose a different interaction with the city, a "revolution of everyday life" (Sadler 1998, p. 161) that is related by Simon Sadler to Benjamin, Baudelaire and the flâneur (1998, p. 160), and demands a questioning and interrogation of the architecture and space of the modern city through action (exploring hidden spaces such as catacombs, or undertaking aimless wanderings, for example). Both Certeau and the *SI* sought to counter hegemonic control of urban space, which reduces our capacity to experience diversity in the built environment of the city.

progression embedded in the concept of progress must be subject to critique, stating that:

> The concept of mankind's historical progress cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such a progression must underlie any criticism of the concept of progress itself. (*OTCH*, Thesis XIII, *SW 4,* pp. 394-395)

Here, progress is framed as a perception rather than a given condition of historical advancement[53]—the empty time to which Benjamin refers is the inevitability of progress as "something that automatically pursued a straight or spiral course" into a future void, and was concerned with the "infinite perfectibility of humanity" (*SW 4,* pp. 394). The notion of progress as something open to question—even, in need of opposition—is central to Benjamin's theses from 'On the Concept of History', and also features throughout Benjamin's work on Paris of the nineteenth century (and, in traces, the Paris of the twentieth century) as a study in the possibilities for interruption or cessation of unquestioned progress.

The significance of Paris to a discussion of Benjamin's critique of progress is partly derived from the significance of Paris to his work more generally, and his emphasis on the relationship between this city and the development of capitalism, modernity, and cultures of consumption—for example, 'Convolute N' of *The Arcades Project*, 'On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress' links Paris to modernity, progress, and history (a significant proportion of the material for 'On The Concept of History' is included in this convolute, particularly that concerning the dialectical image). It is also significant, however, as the city of Benjamin's exile from Germany and the place where many of his key ideas were formed. Finally, the city is the spiritual home of *The Arcades Project*—a twelve-year undertaking that centred on the semi-abandoned Parisian arcades of Benjamin's time. *The Arcades Project* was never completed, and as the product of Benjamin's attempt to undertake an ur-history of the nineteenth century[54], was filled with images of fragmentation and ruin, illumination

[53] Benjamin defines progress in a number of ways, particularly through the work of Blanqui. The notion of progress comes to be associated with historical time in *OTCH*, but is also defined in *AP* as the belief "in an infinite perfectibility understood as an infinite ethical task" (*AP* [D10a, 5] p. 119).

[54] Buck-Morss states in *The Dialectics of Seeing* that *AP* is a "double text" that is both a history and a political treatise on Benjamin's own era. "It is an "ur-history", a

and redemption that formed the basis of many of the complex interrelations of Benjamin's other work.

Paris in Ruins

The city of Paris, as Benjamin found it in the 1930s, was materially one of ruin and decay. During the First World War many buildings were boarded up and abandoned, and remained that way well into the 1930s.[55] This dilapidation contributed to the ongoing decline of the arcades (as well as many once-opulent Parisian streets), and in the period after the First World War (as with post-Weimar Germany) such decay impacted even the wealthy (after a brief period of relative prosperity and stability that echoed earlier patterns of rise and fall).[56]

This was not the first period of decline, or the first era of decay in modern (post-industrial) Paris. Alisa Luxenberg, in her fascinating discussion of J. Andrieu's photography of the ruins of the *Paris* Commune uprising in 1871, suggests that both the reconstruction of the city by Georges-Eugene Haussmann, and the conflagrations of the Franco-Prussian war and the uprising of the Commune that followed, were examples of the earliest modern urban ruins (Luxenberg 1998) reflected in the urban photography of the period which contrasted city scenes and industrial architecture with ruins which resembled those of antiquity.

The images of early urban ruins of Paris include demolished *quartiers*, torn up cobble-stones (to be used for barricades, and to make way for Haussmann's boulevards), and the toppled Vendôme Column, shattered and laying on the ground. The ruins of the Commune (which cannot always be separated from those of the

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history of the *origins* of that present historical moment, which, while remaining largely invisible, is the determining motivation for Benjamin's interest in the past." (1989 p. 47)

[55] Louis Chevalier writes in *The Assassination of Paris* that Bourgeois property owners in the inner city received little, if any rental income (and certainly no increases) from at least 1920 until after the Second World War. "In places the Marais looked like an urban ruin" during this time (Chevalier 1994, p. 24)

[56] As Chevalier notes: "In the first heady years after World War I these town houses were much sought after…they were let at an enormous rent, almost for amusement." Furthermore "These stately mansions had seen similar inhabitants, under the frivolous Regency after the death of Louis XIV and during the carnival that was the Second Empire." (1994, p. 25).

Franco-Prussian war, due to the proximity and destructive nature of both events) are most often depicted in the burnt-out shells of *Tuileries* palace, the ministry of finance, *Hotel de Ville* (city hall), and the Palace of Justice[57] whose expansive facades, gaping windows and absent roofs reveal a scale of devastation that was often compared to the desolation of Rome.

20. Hotel de Ville in ruins following the Paris Commune (1871)

These ruins, as modern and urban, are relevant to Benjamin's work in several ways that will be expanded on in this chapter. Firstly, the response to the ruin of Paris in this era relates to Benjamin's work on antiquity in modernity, and the importance

[57] The majority of detail on the ruins of the Commune is gathered from *Paris Incendie, Pendant La* Commune – *1871* (de Bleignerie & Dangin 2009), a volume that combines images from several archival albums and publications. However, I have also consulted the digital image collections of Northwestern University Library; spent time in the archives of the *Biblioteque Nationale* in Paris, and made use of the *Gallica* digital collection; reviewed the contemporaneous writings of Prosper Olivier Lissagaray, W. Pembroke Fetridge, John Leighton and Karl Marx (Fetridge 1871; Leighton 2010; Lissagaray 1886; Marx & Engels 1971); and browsed hundreds of collectible images of the ruins offered by *cartes postales* sellers (mostly in the arcades, but also from the stalls along the Seine. For example, image 28 (below) is from a postcard purchased from a stall in Paris in 2009)

of the image of modern Paris as a city of decay and ruin. It was not unusual to consider Paris during the Second Empire (1852-1870) in a state of decrepitude—as Benjamin's writing on Baudelaire in particular attests, the urban experience as ruin, and the vision of a great city in decline, has been associated with Paris since its emergence as "the city of light" during the nineteenth century (when Haussmann transformed its dark and narrow streets into wide, well-lit boulevards).[58] This notion of the modern as ruin in turn relates to Baudelaire's allegorical mode of comprehension, and Benjamin's adaptation of the allegorical for an understanding of both historical and urban experience throughout his later work.

The ruins of the Commune also possess another crucial dimension in relation to Benjamin's work. They are the product of failed class uprising[59], an attempt to momentarily intercede in historical and temporal progress, an "anarchistic impulse which tries to stop history during revolutions." (Tiedemann in *AP,* p. 944) Here, the ruins become the reversal of progress, a reversal Benjamin sought in the decaying arcades of Benjamin's era, which, on the point of disappearance, come to possess revolutionary potential that is related to Benjamin's dialectical method[60].

The two case studies of this chapter, therefore—the arcades and the Paris Commune of 1871—posit an argument for two approaches to interrupting progress via modern ruins, each concerned with revolutionary action as a means to oppose a destructive modernity; each manifested in some way in physical, modern ruins; each a means of critique of the concept of progress and progression, which are entangled with myths of newness and teleological history[61].

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[58] Benjamin uses the term "city of light" in [Q3, 2] of *AP* (p. 533). His convolutes E (Haussmannization), P (The Streets of Paris) and T (Modes of Lighting) in *AP* support this summary. The "decrepitude" of Paris features also in Benjamin's work on Hugo ('Convolute d'), and particularly 'Convolute C' (Ancient Paris, Catacombs, Demolitions, Decline of Paris).

[59] Though class-based, the Commune was unique amongst Parisian revolutions, heavily supported by a contingent of intellectual and literary elite, some of whom joined the fighters at the barricades (Seigel 1987, p. 182).

[60] See [Dº,6] and [Dº,7] of *AP* (p. 834), and the discussion of the *Passage des Panoramas* in this chapter. The notion of reversal is crucial to the argument that in decay and decline, a redemptive potential might be fulfilled.

[61] See Adorno's 'Progress' in Smith's *Benjamin: Philosophy, history, aesthetics*, (1989, p. 86) in which Adorno frames Benjamin's conception of progress as a myth,

In the case of the Commune, it is the "test of the revolutionary legend" (*AP,* 904) that generates some of the earliest examples of modern ruins as a direct response to the construction of the "new" Paris under Haussmann and exemplary of the "struggle whose outcome is good for the victor and bad for the vanquished." (Benjamin, *OWS*, *SW 4,* p. 468)[62].

In contrast, the arcades are considered as sites in which the "revolutionary energies of the outmoded" (*SW 2:1*, p. 210) can be detected and in which encounters with the recent remnants of the past present the possibility to undo the illusions of modernity that are perpetuated in newness, and made visible in obsolescence and decay[63]. This is discussed by Benjamin in relation to the Surrealists, who perceived "the relation of these things to revolution" in the outmoded ephemera of modernity, so much so that "no one can have a more exact conception of it than these authors." (*ibid.*) Benjamin specifies that they detected these "revolutionary energies" in architectonics, interiors and objects, attaching this revolutionary potential to the material—not just social—destitution of a corrupted modernity.

Interrupting Progress

Key to the interruption of progress is an understanding of modern, urban experience as Benjamin considered it, which is influenced by the pursuit of newness engendered

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an idea that perpetuates universal history and an unfulfillable hope for the future that cannot ever be realized, because the moment of completed progress cannot exist, it is an "immanent-transcendent concept" (p .87)—progress relates to an unfillable future abyss. Adorno here identifies Benjamin's redemptive view of history as an opposition to presumed progress, a means of critiquing the *telos* of progress (p. 88). Adorno also states that progress is entangled in myth (p. 100), and is fundamentally deceptive (p. 101).

[62] The distinction between new and old Paris is not mine, but rather a repeated theme throughout Benjamin's work on Baudelaire, derived from the general sentiment around the time of the Commune and Haussmann's reconstructions that the old or ancient city was being replaced by a new city of modernity (see convolute J of *AP*). This idea is expanded later in the chapter.

[63] In considering newness and modernity, Benjamin wrote of commodities, mass production, and fashion. In convolute S 'Painting, Jugendstil, Novelty', Benjamin identifies "novelty and the depreciation that befalls it, with a shock" (*AP* [S10, 3] p. 560) as increasingly pernicious, from the nineteenth century, into *Jugendstil*, and almost all pervasive with modernism. Benjamin notes the increased investment in novelty (in art, in fashion) as the "Cult of Novelty" and as a poison (see *AP* p. 560).

by constant progress. To arrive at a precise definition of experience, which will inform the rest of this chapter (and the framework of this thesis more generally), the concept will be most closely related to Benjamin's studies of Baudelaire and the city of Paris during the nineteenth century.

In Baudelaire's poetry, experience is linked directly to the devaluation preceded by mass production and the associated economic conditions, particularly an obsession with consumption and newness, notions which are explored in the Exposés of 1935 and 1939 (*AP*, p. 2-3) and 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire' (*SW 4*, pp. 5-98)[64], as well as the fragmentary 'Central Park' (*SW 4*, p161-199)). According to Benjamin, these developments had myriad effects on everyday, urban life, particularly in relation to commodification that impacted not only objects, but also human behaviours and values, which were also the concern of Baudelaire's poetry. Baudelaire's work influenced Benjamin's view of Paris, which he perceived as the locus of changing experience from the beginning of the Industrial Revolution[65], and provided a platform for critiquing the nineteenth century.

In adapting Baudelaire's work to a methodological approach for comprehending the modern, Benjamin saw the modern as ruin (allegorically, and in terms of a fractured historical and lived experience); progress as catastrophe (an idea expanded with Benjamin's angel of history), and growth as decline (the advancement of modernity in terms of culture and urban expansion, which lead to a reduction in the depth and possibility of experience, and also generated the physical ephemera of obsolescence). This reading of Benjamin's work on Baudelaire's allegory is derived from Max Pensky's *Melancholy Dialectics*, where, for example, Pensky suggests that the allegorical mode of Baudelaire influenced Benjamin's dialectical conception of history and criticism, but also fundamentally informed the collage-like construction of

[64] See especially section III 'Modernity' (*SW 4* p. 39).
[65] Although not discussed at length in this chapter, the significance of the origin of capitalism is to be found in Benjamin's belief that fore history and after history dialectically constellate as revelatory images (See, for example, *AP* [N2, 3] p. 460, and 'Convolute N' more generally). That is, the Arcades, in their decline in the 1930s, held truths about both the nineteenth century, and Benjamin's own era. Thus the importance of identifying the origin of modern urban experience. Benjamin referred to *AP* as the Ur-history of the 19th Century (Benjamin 1994, p. 490) This is expanded somewhat in the chapter on Detroit in this thesis.

images and fragments that appeared in Benjamin's work on Baudelaire himself, and *The Arcades Project* more generally. A collage-like and dialectical approach is a model of taking the wreckage of the past, blasting it out of the continuum of history, and then reconfiguring it through illumination and redemption to reveal a truth about the present era (Pensky 2001, pp. 153-56).

The methodology that takes the ruined and rejected as form as well as content, which Pensky refers to also as a "disruptive-constructive strategy" (2001 p. 154), *is* allegorical "insofar as it consists of the wilful wresting of fragmentary images and textual elements from their place in the history of literary reception and the construction of montages or constellations from these fragments, montages that are intended to illuminate the object truth of contemporary social reality." (2001 pp. 154-155). Moreover, the strategy itself "Seeks to blast out the image of Baudelaire as a moment of resistance to the phantasmagoric power of capitalism" (Pensky 2001 p. 154).[66] The understanding of modernity that perceives rubble and fragmentation was adapted by Benjamin as an imagistic and experiential approach to ephemera and marginalia that provokes a questioning critical reflection on our relationship between past and present, with a view to continuing the salvage work and interruption that Baudelaire could not ever complete.[67] For Benjamin, phantasmagoria transfigures material and historical content into a deceptive form that obscures truth and operates in the interests of the ruling powers of any era, perpetuating an "illusory sense of security" (*AP,* p. 15) about commodity production and its associated "pomp and splendour" (*ibid.*). As an example, Benjamin cites Haussmann's reconstructions as "the phantasmagoria of civilization itself" (*AP,* p. 14); he also suggests that progress is a phantasmagoric construction—a notion borrowed from Blanqui (and discussed in more detail later in this chapter). As Tiedemann notes, the spectacle of the new "that the century liked to show off as modern par excellence was consummated in its highest concept, that of progress, which Blanqui denounced as a "phantasmagoria of

[66] For a reading of Benjamin's phantasmagoria that informs this thesis, see Margaret Cohen's 'Walter Benjamin's Phantasmagoria' (1989, pp. 87-107).
[67] Baudelaire's salvage work could not be completed in his own time because he used an allegorical form that was perceived to be out of date, and because the content of the work was unable to resonate until it had passed the moment of its inception, as discussed by Pensky in his chapter on 'Melancholia and Modernity' (2001, pp. 155-57).

history"…" (Tiedemann in *AP,* p. 939). Although the concept of phantasmagoria is most familiar in relation to commodity forms, Benjamin describes the "reifying representation of civilization" which develops from the nineteenth century "viewpoint according to which the universe is an endless series of facts congealed in the form of things" (*AP,* p. 14) as a way of thinking about the past that generates phantasmagoria.

Benjamin's intention, therefore, in the study of Baudelaire and in *The Arcades Project* is to counter the dominance of such illusory ideologies. As Pensky makes clear, "it appears that the Baudelaire book and the *Passagenwerk* are two different forms expressing the same intent: the illumination through the montage of juxtaposed fragments of the nineteenth century, that is, the reconstruction of the process in which capitalist modernity in general, and the commodity form in particular, came to exert a mythic domination over European culture." (Pensky 2001, p. 153)

The undoing of myth[68] and phantasmagoria[69] in the decay of the arcades, and the critical alternatives to the shattering and fractured experience of modernity are contained in Benjamin's two conceptualisations of experience, *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*. The latter is experience that is lasting and deeply contextual, while the former generally designates a fragmented and jarring experience that is native to modernity, and the city in particular. This complex delineation of different modes of experience relates to memory and recollection, as well as historical and temporal

[68] For the purposes of this discussion I refer to Graeme Gilloch's discussion of myth in *Myth and Metropolis* (1996) "The metropolis is the principal site of the phantasmagoria of modernity, the new manifestation of myth" (p. 11); and interpret it broadly as the perpetuation of illusions that have ties to antiquity and totemic origins. Myth incorporates commodity fetish and wish-image, history-as-progress, and utopian dreaming. However, there is potential in myth, in "the positive moments lodged within the modern" (p. 174). Benjamin's intention is to destroy myth "from within", (*ibid.*), a task ideally undertaken in the modern city as awakening, as dialectical illumination (p. 176), and as an "immanent critique" that confronts the inherent contradictions of modernity (p. 174).

[69] Phantasmagoria is referred to in its historical and material dimension as something to be unearthed, its foundations revealed in an archaeology of the modern undertaken in the city. "This archeology of modernity as urban experience was to be illuminated through the central category of the "phantasmagoria", which was for Benjamin the historical moment in which the commodity entered consciousness as a "hallucination", as novelty, as "the eternal recurrence of the new." (Rabinbach, 2007 p. xxi)

experience and the awareness of the past as it manifests in the present .[70] Karen Lang's summary of Benjamin's concept of experience suggests that:

> If the pastness of the past announced itself to him though a disjunction in the experience of time, then the time of experience appeared to him as divided between an older, authentic mode of experience (*Erfahrung*) and the lived experience (*Erlebnis*) of contemporary life. (Lang 2006, pp. 140-41)

A basic definition of *Erfahrung* as real or authentic experience and *Erlebnis* as the lived experience of modern life can be expanded using any of the multiple fragments on experience and memory from *The Arcades Project*[71], but is also expanded on in Benjamin's work on Baudelaire, for whom the modern world was framed by the mass of the crowd and a tempest reminiscent of the "storm of progress" from Benjamin's 'On The Concept of History'—a storm met with rage by Baudelaire, and countered by a reconfiguration of the modern through experience:

> Baudelaire battled the crowd—with the impotent rage of someone fighting the rain or the wind. This is the nature of the immediate experience [*Erlebnis*] to which Baudelaire has given the weight of long experience [*Erfahrung*]. (*SW 4,* p. 343)

In the context of engaging with or responding to the mode of experience[72] generated by urban modernity, immediate experience can be adapted for use—whether as poetic experience, long experience or appropriated memory or temporality that is consciously placed into a continuum. According to Benjamin, Baudelaire makes use of a conscious and poetic approach to a fragmentary urban experience, by confronting shock and incorporating it into memory, as Benjamin here suggests:

> That the shock is thus cushioned, parried by consciousness, would lend the incident that occasions it the character of an isolated experience [*Erlebnis*],

[70] For further discussion on the possibilities of experiencing the past in the present, see also Forrest (2007), particularly pages 46-57 in relation to memory and intoxication, which cannot be expanded here.

[71] See, for example, Convolute J (Baudelaire) and specifically [J66, 2] (*AP* p. 346 (on experience and commodity)); [J67, 4] (*AP* p. 348 (on allegory and ruins)); or [J79, 6] (*AP* p. 388 (on memory)).

[72] Benjamin's work on experience was somewhat changeable, depending on context (for example, art criticism or historical perception, memory and intoxication). I have chosen to emphasise the work on Surrealism and his later conceptions of experience, with a particular focus on Baudelaire. For a similar approach see Margaret Cohen's *Profane Illumination* (1993, pp. 186-219).

> in the strict sense. If it were incorporated directly in the register of conscious memory, it would sterilize this incident for poetic experience [*Erfahrung*] (*SW 4,* p. 318).

Benjamin suggests that Baudelaire's work was just this—a conscious effort, in the form of lyric poetry and allegorical appropriation, to relate the shock of modernity to more enduring forms of experience. "One wonders how lyric poetry can be grounded in experience [*einer Erfahrung*] for which exposure to shock [*Chockerlebnis*] has become the norm." (*SW 4*, p. 318). The answer appears to be in restoring that which is lost in the shattering impact of modernity—"the price for which the sensation of modernity could be had: the disintegration of the aura in immediate shock experience [*Chockerlebnis*]." (*SW 4*, p. 343) A similar notion is found in Benjamin's writing on Atget's photography of Paris. In seeking "what is unremarked, forgotten, cast adrift" in the modern city, Atget is able to counter the transience of a shallow obsession with reproduction in the wilful disintegration of aura, fighting for the unique in the constantly renewing ephemera of mass production and city life by revealing its very transience. "The peeling away of the object's shell, the destruction of the aura, is the signature of a perception whose sense for the sameness of things has grown to the point where even the singular, the unique is divested of its uniqueness." (*SW 2:2*, p. 519). Thus Baudelaire attempted to grasp the devalued world of modernity by readmitting its fragmented character into a grounded framework—in this case the melancholy allegorical perception of the modern as the ruin of antiquity.

As Benjamin observes, this is as much a mode of historical intervention as it is related to modernity and Baudelaire's contemporary experience. Benjamin notes that for Baudelaire (writing on the work of Meryon[73]), "the archaeological view of future catastrophe….was not the really moving one. He envisioned antiquity as suddenly springing from an intact modernity… Meryon had brought out the ancient face of the

[73] "Baudelaire was virtually the only person who championed Meryon in the latter's lifetime…. In his treatment of Meryon it pays homage to modernity, but it also pays homage to aspects of antiquity in modernity. For in Meryon, too, there is an interpenetration of classical antiquity and modernity, and in him, too, the form of this superimposition—allegory—appears unmistakably" (*SW4* p. 54). Further, "Meryon reproduces Paris—a city that was soon to be pocked with mounds of rubble." (*ibid.*). Finally "The etchings of Meryon (around 1850) constitute the death mask of old Paris." (*AP,* p. 23)

city without abandoning a single cobblestone." (*SW 4,* p. 52). Through a destructive gaze that generates antiquity, modernity could be interrogated, ruined without having to be subjected to the real destruction of the modern. Though melancholic, "Baudelaire's destructive impulse is nowhere concerned with the abolition of what falls prey to it." (*SW 4,* p. 169). Baudelaire does not wish for eternal transience—instead, he uses the *image* of eternal transience to reflect on the character of modernity and retrieve lost things from the abyss that is the destructive nature of modern life. "It is now possible to address the abyss, whose nearness Baudelaire felt throughout his life. Blanqui saw the eternity of the world and of human beings—the eversame—as guaranteed by the order of the stars. Baudelaire's abyss is starless." (*SW 4,* p. 97). As Benjamin observes, this is as much a mode of historical intervention as it is related to modernity and Baudelaire's contemporary experience. Baudelaire's approach had the potential to break the dominance of technological progress in its refusal to invest in perpetual newness, instead revelling in the rejected, neglected or downtrodden, and combating the loss at the heart of modern experience.

The cyclical loss embedded in the modern must be opposed by redemption, and the allegorical mode is potentially redemptive, even in ruin, as Gilloch suggests:

> The allegorical gaze, like the magical gaze of the child-as-collector, is the salvation of the thing. Ruination and redemption—these are the janus-faces of allegory. The allegorical vision as the overcoming of myth and the moment of historical redemption contains within it the qualities of the dialectical image, and hence becomes the fundamental basis of Benjamin's critical historiography. (Gilloch 1996, p. 138)

Success in readmitting the devalued and fractured into a lasting conception of human experience and history was only to be gained by offering up this refuse as allegorical representation, detached from its context, to speak in fragments, and this is the vital influence of Baudelaire's work on Benjamin.

To what extent Baudelaire was able to successfully counter modern experience in this way is questionable, but Benjamin does state in 'Central Park' that "Allegory should be shown as the antidote to myth" (*CP*, *SW 4,* p. 179). Benjamin concluded that Baudelaire "sought to recall the experience of the commodity to an allegorical experience." but was not successful—the pace of the modern eventually

defeated Baudelaire's drive to oppose it, both in its unceasing changeability and in rendering his allegorical mode unfashionable in his own era. (*AP,* [J67, 2] p. 347)

However, an aspect of his approach that may successfully contribute to a theory of ruin perception and experience in a modern context is the notion of converting immediate experience (*Erlebnis*) and shock experience (*Chockerlebnis*) into long experience (*Erfahrung*)—or at least into a more functional form of shock experience (like the proto-shock of "*One-Way Street* ", as "social intervention" (Cohen 1993, p. 185)), to aggressively oppose the myth and phantasmagoria of modernity. For Benjamin reading Baudelaire, the conversion of the fleeting *Erlebnis* into a deeper and historically grounded *Erfahrung* is the means by which to embrace the sensation of modernity—to expose the contemporary world, so immediate yet so fleeting, to a kind of perceptive scrutiny that might undo the illusions of wholeness and emphasis on newness that dominates the conception of both modern life, and the historical framework of contemporary urban experience. In lamenting the destructive force of newness, Baudelaire "makes the phantasmagoria of Modernity the subject of his poetry, using images in which the modern metropolis is suffused with those of decay and ruin." (Steiner et al. 2010, p. 151-52). Such images require the conscious assemblage of the fragmented, and particularly an investment in the outmoded or unseen. Baudelaire turns his allegorical vision to the modern city in order to reveal the dislocation and alienation of modern experience from the authentic or continuous experience of *Erfahrung*. Benjamin records in his incomplete notes for the 'Exposé of 1935': "Baudelaire's genius, in its affinity for spleen and melancholy, is an allegorical genius… Paris as object of allegorical perception. The allegorical gaze as gaze of the alienated." (*AP,* p. 895)[74] Thus the fragmentation of allegorical perception intercedes in the modern world in an attempt to counter fragmentation itself, which, with the advent of commodity capitalism, comes to infiltrate everyday experience as a damaging commodification that renders everything an empty object of consumption: "more and more relentlessly, the objective environment of human beings is coming to

[74] Weigel identifies in the *AP* a "'distortion into allegory' which takes place—in analogy with the language of the unconscious—in Benjamin's project on an 'ur-history of modernity'" ((Weigel 1996, p. xvii), which, she suggests, emerged from *Origin*, and in reappearing in Benjamin's later work reflects a process of repetition and similitude which allows for allegorical perception to "return in distorted form central significance for modernity: as distorted similitude." (*ibid.*)

wear the expression of the commodity." (*SW 4*, p. 173)[75] This is nowhere more obvious than the modern city, the most densely populated environment of both humans and commodified objects. Benjamin concludes that "[t]his devaluation of the human environment by the commodity economy penetrates deeply into the poet's historical experience. What results is the "ever-selfsame". Spleen is nothing other than the quintessence of historical experience." (*SW 4,* p. 97). What Benjamin detects in Baudelaire's work is the possibility to arrest the melancholic historical experience of abjection, an experience which Baudelaire withstands by rejecting historical progress and transforming modernity through the destructive drive of his poetry, while simultaneously embracing the new by deploying it against melancholy.[76]

A historical experience that does not invest in eternal sameness requires the assemblage of the recent past in the present, distanced from its linear progress and immediate context—"In order for a part of the past to be touched by the present instant <*Aktualität*>, there must be no continuity between them." (*AP,* [N7, a7] p. 470). The distance acquired by the destructive tendencies of allegory is one that withdraws things from the world, rather than clustering them with false associations, thereby bringing them into the present instant, even as they are lost and detached.[77]

Benjamin seeks in Baudelaire's work, and in his epoch, "a medium for a critical understanding of that century." (*SW 4*, p. 383). This critical understanding is gained via a destruction of the apparently "harmonious" constructions of that era,

[75] Benjamin also suggests that this commodification of the world, particularly in terms of advertising, is in its own way allegorical. But where commodification allegoricises nature and naturalises the process of commodification, Baudelaire's approach does away with the aura and brings commodities closer for inspection, hollows them out, and perhaps prepares them for their role in opposing myth and phantasmagoria in decline as reversal, in monadological configurations and dialectics, a process of tearing an object from its context that is related to Benjamin's approach to history. See for example 'Central Park' (*SW 4,* p. 172-174) and *AP* [Dº, 6] p. 834; [N10, 3] p. 475 and [N11, 4] p. 476.

[76] See 'The Influence of *Les Fleurs du mal*' (*SW 4,* p. 95-98), which summarises Baudelaire's poetry thus: "In its destructive energy, not only does it break, through its allegorical conception, with the nature of poetic inspiration, and, through its evocation of the city, with the rural nature of the idyll; but through the heroic resolution with which it makes lyric poetry at home in the heart of reification, it also breaks with the nature of things." (*SW 4*, p. 97)

[77] See 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire' in *SW 4,* particularly p. 337

destroying the illusions of commodity culture and opposing progress, eternal renewal and the ever-selfsame. "The Baudelairean allegory—unlike the Baroque allegory—bears traces of the rage needed to break into this world, to lay waste its harmonious structures." (*SW 4*, p. 174)

The practical application of the Baudelairean allegory in a contemporary context is summarised by Naomi Stead, who suggests that destruction open up "a field of possibilities to the allegorist", stating that:

> For Benjamin, it is the rubble left in the aftermath of destruction that unmasks the present and provides a field of possibilities to the allegorist. It is only through an examination of these melancholy traces, the detritus left after the 'catastrophes' of history, that the allegorist or historian can critically approach the present. In his conception, the act of destruction places everything in new juxtapositions, shatters old relationships, and opens history up for examination. (Stead 2000, p. 11)

Similarly, in his work on Surrealism, Benjamin speaks of open graves that expose the dead to intimate scrutiny, an invitation to the obsolete to rejoin the world of the living (*SW 2:1*, pp. 210-211), and relates this image (attributed to Apollinaire) to the Surrealist philosophy that generates revolution through the world of things and in lived experience: "At the centre of this world of things stands the most dreamed-about of their objects: the city of Paris itself. But only revolt completely exposes its Surrealist face (deserted streets in which whistles and shots dictate the outcome)" (*ibid.*). Benjamin speaks here of the revolutionary potential of Surrealist techniques of engaging with the city, as much as the revolutions which have taken place in the streets of Paris. Benjamin goes on to describe the Surrealist city as "a 'little universe'" (*ibid.*), a space of ghost images and fading signals from the past. The Surrealist approach that seeks the rejected and outmoded is an attempt to capture a particular atmosphere in decay and collapse[78], a profane illumination, a revolutionary energy of the outmoded. Benjamin suggests in his essay on Surrealism that "only the Surrealists have understood" the necessity for an experiential revolutionary technique

[78] This summary is that of Michael Taussig, who states that "It is one of the great signs of the recently outmoded, shrouded in a mysterious atmosphere. This atmosphere is testimony to the Surrealist insight regarding the power of the ghosts embedded in the commodities created by yesteryear's technology—the whole point of modernity and capitalist competition being that technology and manufactured products are made obsolescent by progress' forward march." (1993, p. 232).

for comprehending urban space and history, a technique that most promisingly offers the possibility for awakening of the masses, and rupture of the phantasmagorical spaces of modernity—the revolution that is achieved "by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday is impenetrable, and the impenetrable as everyday" (*SW 2:1*, p. 216).[79]

The Arcades

In the 'Exposé of 1935', Benjamin states "Balzac was the first to speak of the ruins of the bourgeoisie. But it was Surrealism that first opened our eyes to them." (*AP,* p. 13) Furthermore in the notes for the 'Exposé of 1935' "Balzac was the first to speak of the ruins of the bourgeoisie, but he still knew nothing about them. It was Surrealism which first got a glimpse of the field of debris left behind by the capitalist development of the forces of production." (*AP,* p. 898)[80]. This field of debris (which includes the Arcades, as I will argue, but can be extended to all of the cast-off ephemera of capitalist production and consumption), is a vital site for the interruption of progress, as a means to mount a critique. An earlier conception of this idea, in relation to the work of Breton, can be found in Benjamin's essay on Surrealism:

> Nothing could reveal more about Surrealism than their canon. Where shall I begin? He can boast an extraordinary discovery: he was the first to perceive the revolutionary energies that appear in the "outmoded"—in the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings, the earliest photos, objects that have begun to be extinct, grand pianos, the dresses of five years ago,

[79] A clear discussion of profane illumination in relation to the outmoded doesn't exist in Benjamin's own work, but is most clearly dealt with in 'Surrealism The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia' (*SW 2:1*, especially pp. 216-218, and pp. 208-209). It is related to the idea of intoxication "…a materialistic, anthropological inspiration to which hashish, opium or whatever else, can give an introductory lesson" (*SW 2:1* pp. 209). The concept is considered particularly by Margaret Cohen in *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution*, which informs many of the discussions in this chapter, particularly those on Surrealism. The term also features in *Walter Benjamin's Grave*, as the subtitle to one chapter, and in relation to Surrealist practice in particular (Taussig 2006). The article ''Old Paris is no more': Geographies of spectacle and anti-spectacle' briefly argues that Breton's "uncanny wanders in Paris" are a form of Profane Illumination (Pinder 2000) (the reference to "old Paris" in Pinder's title is adapted from Baudelaire's poem, 'The Swan', specifically the line "The old Paris is gone (the form a city takes/more quickly shifts, alas, than does the mortal heart)" (1993, p. 175)).

[80] A third iteration of this quote is to be found at the end of this chapter.

> fashionable restaurants when the vogue has begun to ebb from them (*SW 2:1*, p. 210)

Benjamin identifies in both Surrealism and the outmoded a revolutionary possibility, for it is in the obsolete that the dreams of the collective become apparent as illusory, yet foundational, elements of any era. In 'Convolute K' (Dream city), Benjamin insists that:

> It is not only that the forms of appearance taken by the dream collective in the nineteenth century cannot be thought away; and not only that these forms characterize this collective much more decisively than any other—they are also, rightly interpreted, of the highest practical import, for they allow us to recognize the sea on which we navigate and the shore from which we push off… (*AP,* [K1a, 6] p. 391)

The work of the Surrealists shows the potential to embark on a new approach to history, particularly in urban space. Where the dreaming collective is bound to the phantasmagoria of perpetual newness, contemporary experience is always that of eternal sameness. "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." (*AP,* [S1, 5] p. 544). However, the interest in the obsolete, in the ruins of the modern, can be reactionary, revolutionary, and redemptive. "The new historical thinking that, in general and in particulars, is characterized by higher concreteness, redemption of periods of decline, revision of periodization" can be utilised in a "reactionary or a revolutionary sense"". (AP, [S1, 6] p. 544-555) The only way to comprehend the mass of the new and ever-the-same is to conduct the "archaeology" that Benjamin spoke of—to arrest constant development by salvaging its remnants (its most destructive power being obsolescence) from the abyss.

The second half of [K1a,6] concludes that:

> It is here, therefore, that the "critique" of the nineteenth century—to say it in one word—ought to begin. The critique not of its mechanism and cult of machinery, but of its true historical existence, one which the Surrealists were the first to pick up. To decipher its signal is the concern of the present undertaking. (*AP,* [K1a, 6] p. 391)

To decipher such a signal of "true historical existence" (and on the trail of the Breton and others), Benjamin isolated the unfulfilled dreams of the nineteenth century in the fragmenting arcades, as "almost forgotten topographies" of the past (Hanssen

2006, p. 2). Writing of *The Arcades Project* to Scholem Benjamin states: "The work represents both the philosophical application of Surrealism—and thereby its sublation [*Aufhebung*][81]—as well as the attempt to retain the image of history in the most inconspicuous corners of existence—the detritus of history, as it were". (Benjamin 1994, p. 504). The "application of Surrealism", therefore, was not only central to Benjamin's project, but also directly concerned with seeking the past—and, crucially, an understanding of the past—in the detritus of earlier eras, that which persisted in forgotten and out-of-the-way places.

Louis Aragon, in his Surreal semi-fictional work *Paris Peasant*, suggests that the unusual, "the unthought of" (1994, p. 11) can be mediations on the mythologies of an era. Aragon's writing on the arcades influenced Benjamin's work significantly, particularly in terms of the relationship between ruin, history, and the contemporary moment of contemplation. As Tiedemann notes in his essay on *The Arcades Project*:

> The nearly depopulated *aquarium humain*, as Aragon described the Passage de l'Opéra in 1927, two years after it had been sacrificed to the completion of the inner circle of boulevards—the ruins of yesterdays, where today's riddles are solved—was unmatched in its influence on the *Passagen-Werk*. (Tiedemann in *AP,* p. 933).

Aragon gives credence to the personal experience of spaces of decline as destinations that reveal something about the present—in his case Paris of the 1920s—but also something about the past, and something about the city itself. With its demolition pending, the Passage de l'Opéra became such a ruin, for "Future mysteries will arise from the ruins of today's." (Aragon 1994, p. 15). Today's mysteries, in this context, might include the material proliferations of modernity and progress, mythologies of a recent past which only become clear to the observer as that past begins to fade away. Aragon suggests that these ruins are reservoirs for modern myths, but are also sanctuaries for the rejected ephemera and practices of their time—

[81] This notion of sublation may refer to Hegelian dialectics, or Marx's reworking of Hegel, as sublation of theory into practice. (For a discussion of both see Marx's Sublation of Philosophy into Praxis (Caton 1972)). The inclusion of the German *Aufhebung* might suggest the former, although Benjamin's letter to Adorno on the 9th of December, 1938, states that "[i]n other words, the author's philological interpretation is to be sublated by dialectical materialists in the Hegelian manner." (*SW 4*, p. 108)

an idea Benjamin adapted extensively for *The Arcades Project*—imbuing various spaces of Paris with an otherworldly sense of being stranded between life and death:

> Although the life that originally quickened them has drained away, they deserve, nevertheless, to be regarded as the secret repositories of several modern myths: it is only today, when the pickaxe menaces them, that they have at last become the true sanctuaries of a cult of the ephemeral, the ghostly landscape of damnable pleasures and professions. Places that were incomprehensible yesterday, and that tomorrow will never know. (Aragon 1994, p. 14 (also quoted by Benjamin in *AP,* [C2a,9] p. 87))

In transience, the myth of the modern is revealed, but it is a short-lived revelation. When Benjamin sought out the remaining arcades (following the demolition of the *Passage de l'Opéra*) he found in those that still existed, an "old Paris" that was quickly disappearing in Benjamin's time—sites that like Aragon's *Passage de l'Opéra*, which "tomorrow would never know". As Benjamin states in *The Arcades Project*:

> Not long ago, a piece of old Paris disappeared—the Passage de l'Opéra, which once led from the boulevards to the old opera theatre. Construction of the Boulevard Haussmann swallowed it up. And so we turn our attention to the arcades that still exist, to the brighter, livelier, and in some cases renovated arcades of the opera district, to the narrow, often empty and dust-covered arcades of more obscure neighbourhoods. (*AP,* p. 923)

For Benjamin, the idea of being outmoded or old fashioned is exemplified in the arcades. The outmoded contents of the past did not simply consist of dusty, untouched things but their sense of being beyond the present, yet within the moment of experience. "They work, the arcades—sometimes in their totality, sometimes only in certain parts—as past become space." (*AP,* p. 923) Not only do the arcades physically manifest the past in the present, they also contain a configuration of past-present relations. They hold outmoded objects and dreams from a recent past, appearing "old-fashioned in comparison to the new" (*AP,* [H1,5] p. 204). In fashion, which generates newness and in doing so obliterates whatever has gone before, the arcades (and indeed anything contemporary) are set to be excluded from the present moment, once their currency and popularity fades.

Furthermore, the architecture of the arcade itself, as a construction in iron and glass, evidenced a sense of the archaic or obsolete. In the urban obsolete—the once

popular and fashionable spaces of consumption, for example—the process of decay and obsolescence embodied in rejected objects and places stands for the more abstract ruin of the collective past, bringing into being a revolutionary mode of comprehending that past, through things and places that are in the process of "being no more", as Benjamin suggests in the following:

> Being past, being no more, is passionately at work in things. To this the historian trusts for his subject matter. He depends on this force, and knows things as they are at the moment of their ceasing to be. Arcades are such monuments of being-no-more. And the energy that works in them is dialectics. The dialectic takes its way through the arcades, ransacking them, revolutionizing them, turns them upside down and inside out, converting them, since they no longer remain what they are. (*AP,* [D°,4] p. 833)

Within this moment, however, is the critical instant of reading, one that allows the past and present to constellate—in "past become space"—dialectically. "For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal one, the relation of the what-has-been to the now is dialectical." (*AP,* p. [N2a, 3] p. 462). This relation, as a dialectical figuration, means that the arcades are historically charged, linking past, present and future in an experience to be read in a moment of immanence. The dialectical model of reading a multiplicity of temporalities in a single moment is employed most decisively in the dialectical image, which is read and re-read in any moment, and relates to "that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation". (*AP,* p. 463). "The now" is the contemporary moment of the present day, the moment in which any past is read in any present, forming a dialectical configuration of history. This configuration is a genuine conception of history, for "[o]nly dialectical images are genuinely historical—that is, not archaic—images. The image that is to be read—which is to say an image in the now of its recognisability—bears to the highest degree, the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded." (*AP,* [N3, 1] p. 463).[82]

The arcades are dialectical in their presence as transitory and transitionary spaces, as modern and antiquated, as material and symbolic, they hold within them a

[82] The significance of a dialectical space of decay is expanded on in the Detroit chapter using this quote, but also in relation to a body-and-image space, with an emphasis on the actuality of the image in Benjamin's work, as something concrete and tangible.

stilled space of contemplation, critique and recollection. This is both an antiquated prehistory of decay and transience (like the world of forms to which the romantics digressed), and a new critical potential revealed in the actually ruined sites of a capitalist modernity, the rejected and the obsolete.

In 'Convolute N', which deals with progress, Benjamin builds on the notion of the dialectal tension between past and present in the form of fore and after histories that are present in material remnants. Of the arcades he writes:

> The fore- and after-history of a historical phenomenon show up in the phenomenon itself on the strength of its dialectical presentation. What is more: every dialectically presented historical circumstance polarizes itself and becomes a force field in which the confrontation between its fore-history and after-history is played out. It becomes such a field insofar as the present instant interpenetrates it. (*AP,* [N7a, 1] p. 470).

As spaces of multiple histories and pasts, the arcades—like the ruin-spaces of Detroit in the final chapter—are read in the critical moment of interpenetration of past and present. Dialectically, they provide the experiential space of such reading. The extent to which they continue to embody such experience is contrasted in the differing states of the arcades today—restored as nostalgic or historic space of Paris' modern history, or stuck in a perpetual cycle of decay that continues to attract the unwanted, outmoded and bizarre artefacts of fading and regenerating object-worlds[83].

Like the spaces that Benjamin encountered over seventy years ago, the present-day arcades notably share several engaging qualities. As *passages* they traverse from one block to the other, a secret pathway through an otherwise unknowable interior. Each has something like an arch—if not a vast arcing entry, then a domed glass or tiled roof, or a shop front with a modest, narrow arch, suggesting an aspiration to something more extravagant. A proliferation of clocks. Light filtered through glass roofs. They continue to posses the qualities of Aragon's recollected (now demolished) Passage de l'Opéra, with the emphasis on suffuse light and the transitory nature of an architecture that encourages one to simultaneously linger and pass through; both interior and exposed to the outside, a passage and a destination.

[83] This term is borrowed from Steinberg (see the introduction to this thesis, p. 18).

The arcades that still stand today missed the cull brought on by the continuation of Haussmann's plans and survived later tendencies toward department stores and urban development to stand at least *where* they were (if not as they were) in the 1930s. Though obsolete, they endured.

In 2009, I visited the remaining arcades, and of those I visited[84], the following are mentioned in *The Arcades Project*: *Galerie Véro-Dodat, Galerie Colbert*, *Passage du Caire*, *Passage des Panoramas*, *Galerie Vivienne*, *Passage Choiseul*, *Passage du Grand-Cerf*, *Passage Lemoine*, *Passage du Prado*, *Passage des Princes* and *Passage Brady*. Several others which are no longer standing also are mentioned, and two—*Passage des Deux-Pavillons*[85] and *Passage du Saumon* (*Passage Ben-Aïad*)—are extant but were inaccessible when I visited.[86] The remaining extant arcades that Benjamin didn't make note of are: *Galerie de la Madeleine*, *Passage du Bourg-l'Abbé*, *Passage du Havre*, *Passage du Ponceau*, *Passage Jouffroy*, *Passage Puteaux*, *Passage Vendôme*, *Passage Verdeau.*[87] In *Quiet Corners of Paris* Jean-Christophe Napias states that "Paris' historic covered galleries are threatened in equal measure by neglect (for instance the Passage Ben-Aid [*sic*] in the second arrondissement) and a deadening gentrification (the Passage des Princes, also in the second arrondissement)." (Napias & Lefébure 2007, p. 18). This observation, made in 2006, correlates with the arcades as I found them in 2009—a combination of the run-down and thoroughly renovated—but also relates back to Benjamin's own trips through these passages in their various states of disuse, as a selection of businesses that tend to gather peculiar things, trades, and services.

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[84] The majority of detail on the extant arcades was gathered during field-work in Paris in 2009. For further details and a chronology of arcade construction see *Passages couverts parisiens* (Delorme & Dubois 1996). Some detail can also be found in *Benjamin's Arcades an unGuided Tour* (Buse et al. 2005), especially pages 13-27.

[85] I have used the spelling from *AP* (1999, p. 42), although an alternative spelling is sometimes used: *Passage des Deux-Pavilions*

[86] The remnants of *Passage du Saumon* exist in what is now *Passage Ben-Aïad*. *Passage du Saumon* the site of an 1832 rebellion, also featured in Hugo's *Les Misérables* (Hugo 1982, p. 899). Privately owned, this arcade is rarely open to the public.

[87] There is also *Passage du Lido* on the Champs-Élysées, which was constructed in 1926—after *Passage de l'Opera* was torn down, as lamented by Aragon and Benjamin.

The remarkable array of odd objects that Benjamin encountered in the 1930s similarly linger in the arcades, though often as nostalgic commodities—"retro" fashions, "amusing objects" and "games and toys" find a place amongst women's designer shoes and fashion, watchmakers and jewellery stores, sellers of fine food and wine[88]. There are also consignment shops, bookstores, and archives of photographic prints that occupy nearly every arcade, conjuring images of Benjamin's wanderings.

Many of the arcades provide spaces for reflection on decline and obsolescence. Of coiffures observed in a swiftly declining arcade, Benjamin notes: "If these latter are petrified, the stonework of the arcades, by contrast, often has the effect of crumbling papier-mâché." (*AP*, p. 921) In 2009, *Galerie Véro-Dodat* was similarly crumbling (see image below)—endangered rubble in contrast to the "petrified" and just-out-of-date goods and trades that continue to occupy many sections of the Arcades today[89]. The arcades *Passage du Bourg-l'Abbé* and *Passage Puteaux* were similarly neglected, with boarded up windows and shops that had long closed or were rarely open, though their wares and signs remained.

21. Galerie Véro-Dodat, Paris (2009)

[88] These phrases are from the English language version of the *Galerie Vivienne* website (Richoillez, Bourg & Mory 2009)

[89] Napias speaks of *Véro-Dodat* as worthy of a visit, despite the fact that "There are few crowds nowadays, however—just the rare, lost tourist and curio-hunting stroller." (2007, p. 18). In this arcade, he found "curiosities", "antique books" and "the little old-fashioned restaurant with a menu as modest as it is affordable." (*ibid*.).

Now, the "petrified" fashions consist of a selection of the obsolete commodities of a recent past: video and cassette tapes stacked floor to ceiling; rooms of dismembered electronics (cables, chips, consoles, broken appliances, CRT TV's and computer monitors); stalls selling well-thumbed comic books; back shelves loaded with encyclopaedia sets, dictionaries and cold-war era atlases. There were also the expansive bookshops of Benjamin's time, the confectionary stores, the cafes and restaurants, as well as specialty shops—painting restoration, an eerie district populated by dozens of mannequins, and stockists of memorabilia of the arcades themselves.

22. Galerie Vivienne, Paris (2009)

Although many retained features recognisable from Benjamin's descriptions, some arcades were renovated almost beyond recognition. The *Passage du Havre* possessed a completely remodelled interior complete with escalators, advertising

banners and a branded logo at odds with the extant exterior. It has become a boutique shopping centre tenanted by international brands (H&M, GAP, Levi's, Zara, Fossil), and is indistinguishable inside from any other modern shopping centre. The *Galerie Vivienne* was equally renovated, but to the original nineteenth century interior.

23. Passage du Havre (2009)

Despite the transformation of *Passage du Havre* into a typical late-twentieth century shopping mall, other arcades (*Passage du Caire, Passage du Prado, Passage Choiseul, Passage du Ponceau*) hovered between restoration and dereliction—altered out of necessity, rather than profit or aesthetic drive. Scuffed pavers, concrete and vinyl had been laid over and in place of tessellated tiles. Pigeon spikes sat atop the iron-work and groining. Perspex and corrugated plastic replaced long-shattered glass skylights. New, back-lit signage advertising sushi and pizza illuminated the passages where gas lamps must once have cast their light. The original balconies and screens

above were replaced or obscured with heavy grills and security bars. Boxes of goods trundled in and out, stacked in side-passages and doorways—here there were few stalls and little seating. The smell of spices and an Asian food market lingered, perhaps like the fish and garlic, "exotic plants, spices and fruits" of the *Passage du Saumon* as it was encountered in 1836 (Lucas-Dubreton in *AP,* [A6a, 1] pp. 46-47). The original features—plaster mouldings, colourful tiles and windows, mirrors, clocks and figures set into either end of the passages, rows of wrought iron fixtures, and the glassed-in roof in various states of disrepair—were cracked, missing pieces, water-damaged, peeling, rusting and generally in poor condition.

24. Passage du Prado (2009)

Finally, there were some arcades that gave the impression of never having changed from the moment of their construction. Those like *Jouffroy* (with the *Museé Grévin* and stores filled with hand-made and painted toys of cloth and wood) and *Verdeau* (most notable for its book shops selling rare and second-hand books, whose goods spill out onto tables that fill the passageways) seemed the most closely related

to their nineteenth century origins, and—just as Benjamin experienced in the 1930s—stepping into these arcades was like crossing a threshold to an earlier time. These two passages are situated on either side of *Rue de la Grange Bateliére* with a *Histoire de Paris* marker in between that mentions Benjamin and Aragon by name (see image below) Presumably, they are considered to be the most "authentic" arcades that still exist in Paris, architectural remnants of a distant era.

25. Passage Verdeau (2009)

It was in the *Passage des Panoramas* that I found the most compelling traces and configurations of past and present. This arcade, "the most famous" in its heyday (*AP,* [A3a,1] p. 41), was named after panoramas that once featured in the arcade, but were destroyed by fire in 1831. Benjamin had a special interest in this arcade as both the residence of the spectacle of the panorama, and possibly the first arcade to possess gas lighting—both vitally important developments in the history of Paris in that era,

and the arcades themselves[90]. In relation to the Passage du Panorama, and its name as a homage to the lost panoramas, Benjamin writes: "…in the innermost recesses of these names the upheaval is working, and therefore we hold a world in the names of old streets, and to read the name of a street at night is like undergoing a transformation <?>" (*AP,* p. 833). This transformation is borne of the interrelation between fore-and after-histories–the ruined and absent panoramas persists in this arcade today, just as they persisted for Benjamin, and stand for the persistence of the past in space, but also the loss of that past. The retreat of the era in which panoramas held sway as contemporary attractions is one example of the swiftness of historical change and progress.

These are places whose magic has disappeared—whose hold as "fairy palaces" has long weakened—the arcades of today are reversals of their (now distant origins), particularly in decline, as Benjamin suggests in his discussion of gas lighting, and its impact and significance in the arcades. Their mystical hold fades as they pass their heyday:

> So long as the gas lamps, even the oil lamps were burning in them, the arcades were fairy palaces. But if we want to think of them at the height of their magic, we must call to mind the *Passage des Panoramas* around 1870… On one side, there was gaslight; on the other, oil lamps still flickered. The decline sets in with electric lighting. Fundamentally, however, it was not a decline but properly speaking a reversal. (*AP,* [Dº, 6] p. 834).

In a similar, fragmentary quote, Benjamin frames this reversal as an awakening from the dreams, the mythologies, of an era, citing "[a]rchitecture as the most important testimony to latent "mythology'. And the most important architecture of the nineteenth century is the arcade. –The effort to awaken from a dream as the best example if dialectical reversal." (*AP,* [Dº,7] p. 834). Here is the idea of a dialectical reversal made possible by the state of decay and transition, and embodied in the traces that remain, "like a filter which let through only the most intimate, the bitter essence of what has been." (*ibid*.). Though there is loss at the heart of this change, there is also transformative power, the possibility to reverse the ideas that held sway in the arcades as "fairy palaces" of consumption, to awaken from the

[90] See 'Convolute T' (Modes of Lighting) and 'Convolute Q' (Panoramas), in *AP*.

dreams of the nineteenth century through the decline of the arcades. Benjamin states definitively: "It was not decline but transformation. All at once they were the hollow mold from which the image of "modernity" was cast" (*AP,* [aº,2] p. 874)[91]

The arcades as hollow moulds from which modernity emerged present, in their decline, a sudden possibility to undo the forces (ideologies, mythologies, dreams) that built them. Significantly, if read in the present moment, "everything past (in its time) can acquire a higher grade of actuality than it had in the moment of its existing" (*AP,* [K2, 3] p. 392). This concretisation is precisely what is achieved by the dialectical method—but only where the ideology of progress itself can be overcome, just as it can be in the revolutionary possibilities presented by places and things on the point of oblivion.

The Commune

The Paris Commune was declared in March of 1871, following a tense period of battle, siege and political upheaval in the wake of Napoleon III's loss to the Prussians at the Battle of Sedan and the subsequent end of the Franco-Prussian War[92]. It was, as Friedrich Engels stated in his Introduction to Karl Marx's 'The Civil War in France', "dictatorship of the Proletariat." (Marx & Engels 1971, p. 35), and the first worker's uprising of the industrial era. It was also, conversely, an "orgy of wine, women and blood, known as the Commune." (Louandre in *AP,* [k4,8] p. 795)[93]

The declaration of the Commune followed weeks of serial unrest in the capital, which itself was the result of unresolved tensions of recent French history, including the revolutions of 1830 and 1848; the harsh rule of Napoleon III; the four-

[91] Another version of this quote appears in 'Convolute S': "No decline of the arcades, but sudden transformation. At one blow, they became the hollow mold from which the image of "modernity" was cast. Here, the century mirrored with satisfaction its most recent past". (*AP* [S1a, 6] p. 546).
[92] Also known as the Fourth French Revolution, and distinct from the Commune of the first French Revolution in 1789. The declaration of the uprising of 1871 as a "Commune" was one of many references to the revolutionary history of Paris made by the Commune government to align themselves with earlier revolutions.
[93] Interestingly, the emergence of the German state (and by association the events of the First and Second World Wars that were of such significance to Benjamin) is grounded in the Prussian victory of this era.

month-long siege of Paris from September 1870, and the popularly resisted capitulation to the Prussians which followed on the 28th of January, 1871. Furthermore, with Haussmann's reconstruction of Paris, the people of Paris harboured resentment over the loss of large parts of their native neighbourhoods and rebuilding of their city without their consultation or consent. (*AP,* p. 12).[94]

These conditions culminated in an initially nearly bloodless revolution, with the Commune claiming self-governance and democratic rule for each of the twenty-two *Arrondissements* of Paris, on the 18th of March. This claim was made possible by the support of the civilian National Guard, who had successfully rebuffed the attempts of the official government[95] to recover canon that had been amassed at strategic points during the defence of the city in the earlier siege against the Prussian army.

With the people armed and resisting the National Assembly government, the leaders evacuated to Versailles, leaving the Commune in power in Paris from the 18th of March to the end of May, 1871. As well as mass human casualties (the final week of the conflict is referred to as *La Semaine Sanglante*—The Bloody Week), the suppression of the Commune saw the damage and destruction of numerous Parisian icons (particularly seats of power in the oldest parts of the city).[96] Much of the

[94] For an in-depth summary of the causes of the uprising see contemporaries: Marx and Engels (1971), Lissagaray (1886), Leighton (2010), and Fetridge (1871). The destruction of many buildings during the commune indirectly led to the realisation of some of Haussmann's incomplete plans, providing open spaces, room for wider boulevards, and demolition of buildings that did not conform to his aesthetic.

[95] The Government of National Defence (GND) was formed after Napoleon III was captured by Prussian forces, bringing the Second Empire to an end. The members were primarily middle-class, with strong military ties, and it was under the governance of the GND that Paris came under siege from Prussian armies, and eventually surrendered, making their government deeply unpopular with the general public, and particularly the emerging urban working class. The GND was replaced by the elected National Assembly government of Adolph Thiers, which was also unpopular among the working class, and equally distrusted by the National Guard, who formed a committee primarily consisting of middle-class workers who supported the increasing calls of the working-class for control of the city (Lissagaray 1886, p. 59).

[96] Most of these sites also withstood some shelling from the Prussian army during the earlier siege, but records do not indicate, in most cases, which battle caused most of the damage. The battle of the Commune was by far the most destructive overall, however, and left The Tuileries Palace, the Hotel de Ville and the ministry of finance in ruins (some, for decades). Fragments of the ruins from *Tuileries* and *St Cloud* have

destruction within the city walls (*enciente*) was caused by the burning of buildings during street battles and as the Commune forces retreated. The rest of the destruction was the result of unrelenting attacks on the city by the National Assembly government—led from Versailles by Adolphe Thiers—who hopelessly outnumbered and outgunned the armies of the Commune, disadvantaged by poor organisation, lack of leadership and badly utilised resources. For weeks, the city was bombarded at key strategic sites (forts and bridges in particular), which were often defended by only a handful of National Guard troops.[97]

The significance of the events of the Commune to this research lies in the destructive nature of the uprising, which left many landmark sites in the city in complete ruin, and fundamentally altered the topography of modern Paris. Of equal significance is the urban context in which the conflict itself was shaped by the emerging struggles of capitalism and urban, public and private space, and particularly the rhetoric of class war and revolutionary destiny employed by supporters of the Commune.[98]

As the last of the great uprisings in Paris, and one of the first socialist revolutions, the Commune was also an opposition to the tide of industrial modernity (Billington 2002, p. 346). Also of significance to Benjamin and the development of urban culture, is the commodification of these ruins in the months following the

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been preserved—some feature in the gardens on Rue Payenne, and elsewhere (Napias, 2007, p. 29). The *Tuileries* was in ruins until 1883—standing at the end of the *Champs-Élysées*, it was once considered the proper end to the grand boulevard, its ruin thus all the more symbolic and confronting. Recently, arguments have been made to rebuild the palace—akin to those for rebuilding the Schloss in Berlin, to restore an aesthetic intention of earlier eras (discussed in the following chapter on Berlin).

[97] Prosper Oliver Lissagaray, the official journalist of the Commune government, suggests in his 1886 reflections on the Commune that in-fighting, idealism, disorganisation and naiveté resulted in the loss of Paris by the Communards, despite their inheriting an ultimately defensible city. (Lissagaray, 1886).

[98] Eleanor Marx, for example, writes in the introduction to Prosper Olivier Lissagaray's *History of the Paris* Commune *1871* that "[i]t is time people understood the true meaning of this Revolution; and this can be summed up in a few words. It meant the government of the people by the people. It was the first attempt of the proletariat to govern itself. The workers of Paris expressed this when in their first manifesto they declared the "understood it was their imperious duty and their absolute right to render themselves masters of their own destinies by seizing upon governmental power." (Marx, E. in Lissagaray 1886, p. 16)

uprising, their role as marketable spectacles which evidenced that barbarity of the Communards, their representation in an emerging media sphere, and the simultaneous suppression of the Communard's version of events and romanticisation of the ruins.

The Commune itself is rarely mentioned in Benjamin's work, although 'Convolute k' of *The Arcades Project* is titled 'The Commune'. This series of short notes on the Commune indicates that the perceptions of the uprising are surrounded by "illusions" (*AP,* [k2a, 1] p. 791), and both civil war and the "ideology of class struggle" are described by Benjamin as "retrograde" (*AP,* [E1a,6] p. 123). Another convolute in the Arcades titled 'Haussmannization, Barricade fighting', acknowledges the Commune as a response to Haussmann's work of "destruction", but Benjamin sometimes attributes comparative destruction to the Commune forces: "The burning of Paris is the worthy conclusion to Haussmann's work of destruction." (*AP,* p. 13) This coupling of Haussmann's acts under "the title of "demolition artist"' (*AP,* p. 23), and the subsequent burning of the city, marked a break from the past, a line between an old and a new version of the city of Paris.

As Benjamin read in Baudelaire's poetry a radical opposition to emerging modernity, the ruins and press generated by the events of the Commune exhibit a similar momentum. Benjamin linked Baudelaire and the Commune in terms of a shared revolutionary desire, a "grim rage" behind a destructive, conspirational will. These *conspirateurs* (so named by Marx) lead the revolutionary charge, perhaps somewhat indiscriminately as Benjamin suggests by assessing the sentiments of both Baudelaire and the "professional conspirators" in the statement "their expression remains unmediated and their foundation fragile." (*SW 4*, p. 4.)

The shared politics of Baudelaire and those agitating for revolution manifests in the destructive power of revolution, but Benjamin was more interested in the strange tradition of street barricades common to Parisian rebellion: "The barricade was indeed at the centre of the conspirational movement. It had revolutionary tradition on its side." (*SW 4, p*. 5). Here Benjamin refers to both the political machinations of key revolutionaries (such as Blanqui, who is a major figure in his work on the arcades), and the history of bloody revolutions in the streets of Paris (the French revolution of 1879, the July revolution of 1830 and the revolution of 1848 all

belong to this heritage.) Rather than the communards themselves, the barricades symbolised the rebellion of the people, who took to streets of the city and invested in Paris a revolutionary energy that impacted the physical city as dramatically as its people.

But if the barricades were signs of a revolutionary tradition, then the ruins were equally of this heritage; however, Benjamin makes little reference to them in either *The Arcades Project* or 'On The Concept of History'. Aside from his emphasis on the barricades (which reflect the commonly held belief that one of Haussmann's purviews was to prevent future revolutions in his manipulation of urban space), and an occasional acknowledgement of the uprising as a proletarian movement, Benjamin makes little reference to the Commune at all outside 'Convolute k' of *The Arcades Project* 'The Commune', often choosing to speak of urban revolutions in general terms, where they feature in reference to Haussmann and Marx.

26. Destroyed Buildings and Barricade (c. 1871)

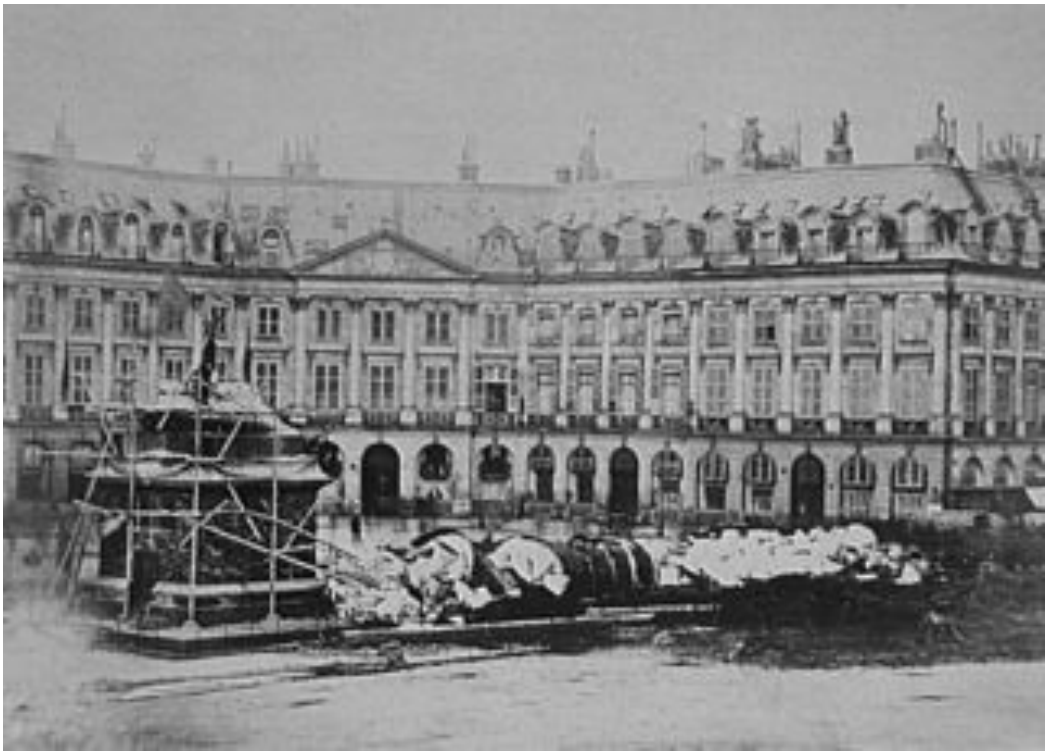
Benjamin acknowledges some aspects of Haussmann's demolitions as reconstructions, with the city referred to variously as derelict, in a state if dilapidation (*AP,* [E4, 3] p. 129), and uninhabitable during the first half of the nineteenth century. Though claims that Haussmann modernised a city desperately in need of sanitation, space and adequate roads are probably well founded, it is also true that the reconstruction of the city removed many ancient streets (and in some cases whole neighbourhoods) that had formed the oldest parts of the Parisian cityscape, and had remained unchanged for centuries. Vitally, many of the sites marked for demolition were known trouble spots, where earlier revolutions had been fostered and where some of Paris's most marginal populations resided. It seems probable that Haussmann's widened boulevards served a more than an aesthetic or immediately practical purpose. While they significantly improved traffic flows, they were difficult to barricade and afforded any military presence easy access to the inner city, making large-scale rebellion far more difficult than in the past. As Benjamin notes, there was a "[s]trategic basis" (*AP,* [E1, 4] p. 121) for reconstruction, which might ensure that revolution cannot take place. This directly places the possibility for revolution in the built environment, a notion that is corroborated by the work of Tim Cresswell on spatial order and transgression in relation to the destructive intervention of the Commune as a response to "social and spatial engineering that excluded the urban proletariat from the public spaces of central Paris. The Communards repossessed and transfigured this deliberate spatial order" (Cresswell 1996, p. 175).[99] Benjamin himself states that "only the revolution creates an open space for the city" (*AP,* [M3,3] p. 422)

There is little evidence of Benjamin's familiarity with the extent of the ruination after the Commune, however, or anything to indicate that he was aware of the distribution of images[100] of ruins in the months and years following. It is

[99] For example, [E1,6] (*AP,* p. 121) underlines the notion that Paris itself, the entire character and thus being of the city, was under threat from such a "radical transformation".

[100] These images began to function like post-cards; have been reproduced since as post-cards; and the originals are often sold as post-cards. However, while the distribution of Paris Commune images as tourist objects is well documented (see the discussion on Colette Wilson in coming pages), they were produced around the time

interesting because his awareness of Blanqui's work and knowledge of French literature from that era would presumably have given him an insight into the state of the city after the fall of the Commune. It is perhaps even strange that Benjamin missed an opportunity to study the photography of the Commune, which bears at least a passing relationship to later photography of Paris (which is the focus of Benjamin's study 'Little History of Photography')[101].



27. Toppled column on the Place Vendôme (1871)

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of the early development of post-cards in Europe, Britain, and America, and might more correctly be referred to as *carte de visite*, (in the case of Disdéri's patented format of small, tradable cards), or cabinet cards, in terms of slightly larger prints. Reproductions of these images appear on modern postcards (see image 28, below)

[101] That Benjamin may not have spent a great deal of his time studying the Commune is attested to in the following translator's note from *AP* in relation to an image of Courbet: "It appears to have escaped Benjamin's notice that Courbet… is not standing on the remains of just any broken column but on the remains of the Place Vendôme column…" (*AP,* p. 1006) which was famously torn down during the Commune (see image 27, above). Benjamin knew the image, and the plans of the Commune to erect a new monument in place of the column, but as the above suggests, had apparently not connected the two.

Much of the information published in the aftermath of the Commune was heavily censored; publications supporting the uprising were not published in French, and rarely in German, due to political pressure and because they were often produced for British and American markets. Benjamin may not have had access to such sources, particularly not in Paris, where an enduring antipathy to the Commune government no doubt impacted the availability of texts, even in the 1930s[102].

For the viewing public, for travellers, for archivists and researchers, these images of Paris in ruins simultaneously evoke a Piranesian vision of a great city in decline, and an alternative to both the new city and its notably modern facades. By association, the suspension of order that took place during the Commune, the interruption of rapid modernisation could be seen in these ruins: they provided an alternative to the status quo, an escalated state of emergency in which the alternatives for past, present, and future were made apparent (if not viable).

The necessary opposition to such a force of progress is a destructive tendency. Benjamin's historical materialism, informed by Baudelaire's destructive allegorical perception, argues for a view of history that does not invest in progress or linearity: "A conception of history that has liberated itself from the schema of progression within an empty and homogenous time would finally unleash the destructive energies of historical materialism, which have been held back for so long." (*SW 4,* p. 406). A similarly destructive intention is to be found in Baudelaire's work: "To interrupt the course of the world—that was Baudelaire's deepest intention…From this intention sprang his violence, his impatience, and his anger." (*SW 4*, p. 170)[103].

[102] Even so, Marx and Engel's writing on the commune ought to have been accessible to Benjamin, but the notes from 'Convolute k' only make sparse reference to the work of Engels, usually in the form of a block-quote. In terms of the (generally more sympathetic) sources in English produced at the time of the uprising, Benjamin's attempts to learn the language were mixed, though he reports taking lessons as late as May 1940 (in a letter to Adorno, see Benjamin 1994, p. 634). Presumably, the deteriorating situation in the later 1930s may have had an impact on the accessibility of sources outside of Paris.

[103] In the 'Paralipomena' to *OTCH,* thesis XViia similarly suggests that attempts to bring about a classless society are also an interruption, "Classless society is not the final goal of historical progress but its frequently miscarried, ultimately [*endlich*] achieved interruption" (*SW 4*, p. 402)

What is also significant about the events of 1871, particularly in relation to Benjamin's work, is the representation of the circumstances following the violent, and by most accounts, brutal, defeat of the Commune. On one hand, the often-striking ruins were widely depicted photographically and artistically, valued for their confronting aesthetic and as tourist destinations, while reportage of the events of the Commune was subject to heavy censorship, and in many cases active suppression[104]. Colette Wilson states in her work *Paris and the Commune* that the victors engaged in a "process of state obliteration of the memory of the Commune" (2004, p. 1) in which "the governments of the early Third Republic attempted to efface the memory of May 1871 by means of strict censorship in all matters concerning the Commune and through the reinvention of Paris as a modern, healthy, hygienic and regenerated metropolis" (2004, p. 2)[105]. In this context, Paris's past and present became a battleground upon which the supremacy of one political vision was pitted against the depicted barbarity of another. Paris, as a city, had long been a site of fierce class conflicts, and was a space in which such conflict came to be evidenced on the streets, in the press and amongst the people.

The significance of the events of the Paris Commune is hardly clarified by Benjamin—it is his work on history and Social Movement ('Convolute a' of *The Arcades Project*) that deals most explicitly with revolution in Paris. Much of the material for 'Convolute k' comes from an exhibition attended by Benjamin, and a small selection of writings (mostly in German)[106]. Of interest are [k1,4]: "The passage in Hallays-Dabot, p.55 <cited in k1, 2> is very important for the connection between colportage and revolution" (*AP,* p. 789); and [k2,1] which refers to the intention of the Commune government to erect a "Monument to the Accursed" which would effectively name and shame earlier rulers who the Commune deemed to have

[104] Numerous collections of such photos exist and are exhibited periodically. For example, the MOMA has collections of Alphonse Liebert from this period.
[105] Also of interest is Wilson's discussion of the ruins of *Tuileries* and Soulier's images of the palace after the Commune, in which she argues that the demolition of the ruins of the palace indicated the desire to erase the memory of the Commune from the city, and the national consciousness (2004, pp. 205-206)
[106] Benjamin also consulted Georges Laronze's *Histoire de la* Commune *de 1871* and a number of French newspapers, however, finished or otherwise, this convolute doesn't show the kind of rigor displayed in more substantial sections (such 'Convolute J' on Baudelaire). 'Convolute k' is short (less than 8 pages long) and mostly consists of quotes regarding the events of the commune.

wronged the populace while in power. This monument would be contrasted with a war memorial. Benjamin says little about this proposed project, other than framing it as an "infernal history", in summary of a printed placard describing the plans.

A speculative consideration of this particular convolute might emphasise the perceived need to reclaim the past from powerful victors and dictators, an idea which bears a direct relation to Benjamin's proposal to oppose fascism and "bring about a real state of emergency" (*OTCH,* Thesis VIII, *SW 4,* p. 392). In terms of Benjamin's oeuvre more generally, he does not directly address the fact that Paris was in ruins multiple times during the formative years of its modernity—although Victor Hugo, Arthur Rimbaud, Louis Auguste Blanqui, and others considered by Benjamin to be key figures wrote of the ruins[107], and Benjamin clearly identifies the image of Paris in (apocalyptic) ruins as a particularly prevalent motif.

If Benjamin largely ignored the ruins of the Commune (at least in his early research), Karl Marx certainly regarded the ruin of the city to be highly symbolic, infused with real potential to impact the ruling classes, and the prevailing order:

> The working man's Paris, in the act of its heroic self-holocaust, involved in its flames buildings and monuments. While tearing to pieces the living body of the proletariat, its rulers must no longer expect to return triumphantly into the intact architecture of their abodes. The Government on Versailles cries, "Incendiarism!" and whispers this cue to all its agents, down to the remotest hamlet, to hunt up its enemies everywhere as suspect of professional incendiarism. The bourgeoisie of the whole world, which looks complacently upon the wholesale massacre after the battle, is convulsed by horror at the desecration of brick and mortar! (1971, p. 92)

Here Marx identifies the significance of the "incendiarism", as a response to the massacre of the people, this action was the last refuge of the Communards, seeing their comrades slaughtered. In a fiercely class-based conflict, the city itself became the battleground over competing interests and ideologies. Setting fire to the *Tuileries*, *Hotel de Ville*, Palace of Justice and other sites was a political act, as indicated by Marx's observation that the Bourgeoisie was sad for the bricks and mortar, but not for the people. Marx indicates with no ambiguity that these are the ruins brought about through the necessity of a class struggle, such necessity being the consequence of the

[107] See 'Convolute d' of *AP* (Literary History, Hugo)

oppression of workers under the Second Empire, the defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, and increasingly poor conditions for workers in an industrialising city.

In this context, as modern ruins, the burnt-out buildings left in the wake of the Commune become material manifestations of the destructive opposition to an equally destructive modernity, an attempt to challenge the status quo that resulted in physical ruin and lived destruction of the institutions of power, and the quintessential modern city that was Paris of that era. However, as the Commune was suppressed, and publications of the time heavily censored, the ruins were quickly incorporated into a new visual regime via the production and distribution of images as a new modern spectacle.

Luxenberg notes the censorship related to the Commune, and states that "[p]hotographs of the ruins were not implicated under the 1871 censorship law; evidently, they did not pose a threat to public order." (1998, p. 116). It is Luxenberg also who makes an argument for the ruins of the *Paris* Commune as the first "urban ruins" of this type (1998, p. 120), relating the experiences of Paris in this era back to earlier scenes of ruination (including the work of Haussmann and previous revolutions), proposing that a photographic form of ruingazing in a contemporary urban environment developed from the popularity of the ruins of the Commune. [108]

Luxenberg also considers the depiction of ruins as visual metaphors for the city of Paris as a construction site from the 1830s onward. Wilson (2004), on the other hand, considers the obsession with ruins to be related to Paris's character as a city, but in relation to an apocalyptic vision common to the era, in which Paris was struck down (like London during the Great Fire, or Rome being sacked by the barbarians), following an age of decadence. This vision was replicated in numerous motifs, often printed in mainstream newspapers, which contributed to a "Romantic" spectacle of

[108] As Luxenberg states: "French and foreign tourists flocked to see the ruined city, whose burned-out buildings were reportedly still smoking months after the last armed confrontations. Residents and visitors purchased printed images to memorialise, even substitute for their experiences of the events or of the city in ruins." (Luxenberg 1998, p. 115) and "By mid-June, photographs of the ruins were on display in Parisian shops, selling to residents and tourists." (*ibid.*)

Paris in ruins. The photographs and postcards of the era are just one of many forms of representation around the idea of Paris in ruins or Paris aflame (*incendie*).

In the literature of Paris in the nineteenth century, Benjamin identifies a tendency to "[show] modernity in its interpenetration with classical antiquity" (*SW 4*, p. 50), particularly Baudelaire's 'Le Cygne' (The Swan) in which he despairs over the rapid changes in the city of Paris, and casts them as the destruction of the city—a poem dedicated to Victor Hugo, which presents the old city as lost, and calls on Greek mythology and the destruction of Troy by its own citizens to express the ruin of Paris through reconstruction (Baudelaire, 1993, p. 173). As the poem itself states, Baudelaire achieves the interpenetration of ancient (or historical) and modern (new and destructive) through the use of allegory, reflecting that "[o]ld neighbourhoods are allegorical for me" (Baudelaire 1993, p. 175), and Benjamin relates such interpenetration to the use of the image of decrepitude as a revealing symbol, stating that:

> It is allegorical. The ever-changing city grows rigid. It becomes as brittle as glass—and as transparent, insofar as its meaning is concerned….The condition of Paris is fragile; it is surrounded by symbols of fragility…In the final analysis, this decrepitude constitutes the closest link between modernity and antiquity. (*SW 4,* p. 50).

The significance of this link between modernity and antiquity is reflected in large portions of 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire', 'Central Park' and *The Arcades Project* that are dedicated to visions of antiquity in modernity. Baudelaire also made use of codes and images of antiquity to understand modernity, and in referring to the work of Hugo (and indirectly, that of Balzac, von Raumer, Daudet, du Camp, Bourget, and other well-known literary figures of the time) Benjamin notes a preoccupation with motifs of ruins, decay, and death in relation to urban modernity—a focus which relates directly to earlier ways of understanding the world, and which both Hugo and Baudelaire adapted. In Hugo's 'A l'Arc de Triomphe', for example, Benjamin identifies "the same inspiration that became decisive for Baudelaire's idea of modernity" (*SW 4,* p. 53), an idea which related directly to antiquity: "The great significance of this cycle in Hugo's work derives from its role in the genesis of a picture of Paris in the nineteenth century which is

modeled upon classical antiquity. Baudelaire undoubtedly knew of this cycle, which was written in 1837." (*SW 4,* p. 51).

The significance of a link between modernity and antiquity lies in the shared power of an allegorical intervention, a poetic rebellion that renders the city a vast ruin, a space of decay. Similarly, the spectacle of Paris after the Commune—in actual, material ruin—made use of the link between an extinct antiquity and a hellish modernity, an image that became increasingly common to the era.

The attempt to evoke an apocalyptic vision of the city was embedded in the perception of Paris as one of the great cities of antiquity—a tendency that was embellished in modernity (as reflected in Benjamin's work on Baudelaire). The photography of the Commune ruins is particularly interesting, however, in terms of the development of modern photography in general. There is an argument, elaborated at length by Jeannene Przyblyski, that the contribution of the Commune to the development of both photography and perceptions of modernity was significant because "photographic cues and representational codes were still in formation in 1871" (Przyblyski 1995, p. 254). Przyblyski also notes that:

> Such photographs of "ruined Paris" circulated widely after the Commune fell. Meant in part to support the government's claims that the Communards were little more than common criminals—vandals, arsonists, and murderers—they also lent the city's significant architectural landmarks a satisfyingly antiqued look, perversely attractive to a sophisticated viewer well schooled in the aesthetics of French neoclassicism, who might be expected to make a connection between the fall of Rome and the situation of post-Napoleonic Paris. (1995, p. 255-56).

The "perverse attraction" to the images of the ruins of the Commune marks a departure from early portraiture, which Benjamin suggests was free of the "hidden political significance" which characterised later forms. Benjamin observes: "…the portrait is central to early photography. In the cult of remembrance of dead or absent loved ones, the cult value of the image finds its last refuge." (*SW 4,* pp. 257-58). As a counter to early photography and depictions of the urban environment, Benjamin identifies in Atget's photography of empty Paris streets the "demand [for] a specific kind of reception. Free-floating contemplation is no longer appropriate to them. They

unsettle the viewer; he feels challenged to find a particular way to approach them." (*SW 4,* p. 258).

With the exception of Disdéri's photographs of the dead of the Commune, the photography in the aftermath of the Commune shared the qualities Benjamin admired in those of Atget (taken thirty years later, and including slums and demolitions). Benjamin attributed great significance to Atget—concluding that his "Paris photos are the forerunners of Surrealist photography" (*SW 2:2*, p. 518), which Benjamin suggests provides a means of "estrangement between man and his surroundings" (*ibid.*) as a way to counter the impact of infinite reproduction, and the romanticised landscapes which perpetuated false images of modern life.

28. **Postcard: Ruines des Greniers d'Abondance (1871)**

The Commune ruins are also images of empty streets and not the portraiture common to the era; they are not "picture postcards" showing "pretty town views" (*ibid.*); they depict a startling image of modernity in that period, which was precisely what Benjamin sought. Perhaps it was in their mass-production, the attainment of cult-status for the ruins as tourist destinations, or their origin as yet another commodification, another spectacle of modernity, that they did not appear to him as a

means to counter the impact of the modern on experience[109]. Perhaps it was also the nature of such experience as yet another commodification, postcards as shallow souvenirs which implied genuine experience, but was just another dislocated image with no real link to any actual experience. "The souvenir is the complement to "isolated experience". In it is precipitated the increasing self estrangement of human beings whose past is inventoried with dead effects." (*SW 4*, p.183). There is a difference between a melancholic revelling in ruin, and a destructive gaze that revives the ruin of the modern. "The relic comes from the cadaver; the souvenir comes from the defunct experience [*Erfahrung*] which thinks of itself, euphemistically, as living [*Erlebnis*]."(*ibid*.) In this reading, however, the images are souvenirs—empty, but constantly renewed representations of a perceived historical continuity—whereas the ruins themselves could be perceived as relics; real, not representations. One, a shallow commodification of the recent past, the other the enduring remnants of the struggle against the "status quo".

The reinstatement of order following the uprising, as evidenced by the propaganda in particular, demonstrates the usual state of things was quickly re-established. This uprising—a people's ruination of the city—is one of a collection of events with similar possibilities and actions, but was fundamentally unsuccessful. In his sketch for the Exposés, Benjamin implies a lost potential for the Commune to impact the new conditions of modern life, (*AP,* p. 904), and later laments that "[t]he century was incapable of responding to the new technological possibilities with a new social order." *(AP,* p. 26).

The necessity for such a response, for Benjamin, is grounded in his historical materialism, which he adapted from Marx. The Commune was not successful, either in its aims to establish a new social order, or to stop the force of progress—the apparent aim of such revolution as far as Benjamin's conception of history is concerned. "Marx says revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it

[109] This is contrary to Luxenberg's observation that "[b]y omitting figures altogether from his large prints, Andrieu allowed collectors or viewers to visit and claim such disaster and destruction for their own." (1998, p. 117), suggesting an experiential or at least uncontrived dimension to such photography.

is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train—namely, the human race—to activate the emergency brake." (*SW 4*, p.402)

The image of passengers on a train, attempting to activate the emergency brake, is one of many used by Benjamin to describe the rush of modernity (also the force of progress) as historical forces to be opposed. A section from 'On The Concept of History' suggests that "[t]he tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule." (*SW 4,* p. 392). The task of the oppressed, then is "to bring about the real state of emergency"[110] (*ibid.*), achieved through revolutionary means.

There are many ways in which revolution is related to history, but for the purposes of this chapter, it is the danger that the ruling classes will appropriate the image of the past to their own ends that is of most significance. Revolution—the attempt to "activate the emergency brake"—is a "leap in the open air of history" (*SW 4* p. 395), a dialectical configuration of past and present which opens up the possibility to re-set the course of history[111].

This dialectical approach is the subject of much of Benjamin's work on history, and holds within it the implication of a cessation, a standstill. This is particularly true of revolutionary, oppositional means for engaging with history and progress. For example, Benjamin cites a rhyme about the July Revolution, in which clock-towers under attack "make the day stand still" (*SW 4*, p. 395). In standing still, the continuum of history is ruptured by revolutionary action: "What characterizes the revolutionary classes at their moment of action is the awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode." (*SW 4,* p. 395).

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[110] In the context of this passage, bringing about a real state of emergency would aid the "struggle against fascism". However, in the broader context of Benjamin's sketches on history, this is always the concern of the "historical materialist", to seek ways in which to oppose the barbarism of victory and defeat, and acknowledge "the anonymous toil of others" that is overshadowed by historicism, fame, conformism, and universal history. See passage VII in particular (*SW 4,* p. 391), and the Berlin chapter for more detail.

[111] See also [N9, 6] (*AP* p. 473), in which Benjamin notes that the dialectician can reconsider the past depending on how he sets the sails to catch the wind of history.

Where the dialectical configuration and explosion of a continuum relate to revolution is in the consideration of time, and the relation between past and present evidenced by revolutionary thinking. "History is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time [*Jetztzeit*][112]. Thus, to Robespierre, ancient Rome was a past charged with now-time, a past which he blasted out of the continuum of history." (*SW 4,* p. 395) What is most problematic about assumed progress is its link to a perceived future void, as if historical imperatives must focus on occupying that void, rather than a consummate interrelation of different temporalities and earlier eras. The relationship between Benjamin's work on the arcades and his reflections on the construction of history is thus made evident in his two different conceptions of catastrophe: one, the shattering revolutionary fragmentation that blasts events from their contexts and attempts to destroy the dominant order altogether; the other an insistence on perpetual progress that generates catastrophic ruination, failed revolution, and a constant reconfiguration of power that fails to really change anything. These two perceptions are summarised in the following:

> The course of history, seen in terms of the concept of catastrophe, can actually claim no more attention from thinkers than a child's kaleidoscope, which with every turn of the hand dissolves the established order into a new array. There is profound truth in this image. The concepts of the ruling class have always been the mirrors that enabled an image of "order" to prevail.—The kaleidoscope must be smashed. (*SW 4,* p. 164)

If this prevailing order is a revolving array, constructed and reconstructed, yet never really dissolved, the Commune is significant in its attempt to overturn this order only to generate and meet with catastrophe—the profound truth of history. Smashing the kaleidoscope is not the act of revolution that replaces the current order with a new one—it is the destruction of any expectation of investment in the illusion of order itself—an order that is in fact, perpetual catastrophe.

In Benjamin's work, progress, catastrophe and history are related by the constant pursuit of order and newness, which in fact generate constant destruction.

[112] "Now time" is a configuration of history set in the present, as outlined in *OTCH*, which opposes the presumption of a historical trajectory that necessitates perpetual progress and conditions of catastrophe. This is discussed elsewhere in this chapter and throughout this thesis.

For those who seek to oppose a destructive modernity, revolutionary means must be identified to see beyond the illusions of a historical consciousness that is blind to the cost of constant renewal. The illusions of modernity are aided by figures of historical semblance—Benjamin notes both phantasmagoria and progress to be such figures.[113] Any interruption of "course of the world" is an intercession, however temporary, into a realm of victors, universal histories and linear continuums. Therefore, such an interruption is ideally located in the fractured and fragmented, that which endured from the past and allows it to interpenetrate the present.

Thus, progress is entwined with obsolescence, and detritus with ever-renewing commodities. To oppose such progress requires the cessation of the constant destruction that is rendered by progress—whether in Baudelaire's destructive allegory, Benjamin's wanderings in the disappearing arcades, or the interruption of history attempted in revolution. The sense that one must consciously encounter alternatives to shallow novelty demonstrates the relationship between Benjamin's work on the commodity, on the arcades, and his history-focused dialectics, as well as the image of the angel of history, for whom progress is a storm that creates ruin and generates catastrophe. The direct relationship between catastrophe and progress is evident in the potential of any moment—not eternal transience, but pervasive catastrophic ruination.

In Benjamin's 'Exposé of 1935', (which concludes with the reference to the ruins of the bourgeoisie) he states that "With the destabilizing of the market economy, we begin to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins, even before they have crumbled." (*AP*, p.12). Again, a perception of the present catastrophe, rather than a projection of ruins, an allegorical perception sees the ruins to come, already in the present. In contrast, Benjamin concludes the 1939 Exposé with a critique of Blanqui who "strives to trace an image of progress that (immemorial antiquity parading as up-to-date novelty) turns out to be the phantasmagoria of history itself." (*AP,* p. 25). The distinction between the two is precisely the distinction between an image of eternal return (which Benjamin attributes to Blanqui "ten years before [Nietzsche's] *Zarathustra*" (*AP,* p. 25)), and an image of eternal transience; it is also the distinction between the monotony of endless repetition (as in Blanqui's eversame

[113] As is particularly evident in his notes on the 1935 Exposé (*AP,* p. 918 onward).

stars), and Baudelaire's intention which devalues, rather than reifies, the repetition of newness in modernity.[114]

If Baudelaire's approach, and the revolutionary attempts of the Communards, ultimately failed to interrupt the destructive forces of technological reproduction, commodification, and estrangement of the human being from their surroundings, it was not necessarily a fault in their method. What is vitally important about Baudelaire's use of an older form, particularly one that values the fragmented and outcast, is the insistence of the interpenetration of the old in the new, as a means to oppose the shock of modernity. Furthermore, Baudelaire's rage, seen also in the destructive turn of the Commune, returns again and again to counter the return of the new and ever-the-same, and the seeming impossibility of halting progress, even for a moment of contemplation. Finally, in its emphasis on salvation—even (or especially) in fragments—Benjamin's reading of Baudelaire relates directly to the dialectical conception that brings past and present together in a moment of recognisability. The material correlate for this image is the work of the collector and the rag-picker (allegoricists in their own way), but also the arcades as spatial iterations of the dialectical image.

The argument that I have put forward in this chapter is that a perception of modernity that emphasises the fragmented and ephemeral—like that of Baudelaire's allegorical perception, and Benjamin's related examination of the Paris arcades as revolutionary and revelatory in their decay and obsolescence—provides a model for encountering the ruins of the recent past in a modern urban environment. Further, the possibility of revolution in such an environment is linked to Benjamin's dialectical image and historical materialism, and grounded in a thoroughly experiential—lived and material—encounter with urban space, the outmoded, and the ruined and rejected. Thus, revolution in a political and historical sense is manifested in ruin; states and perceptions of fragmentation generate revolutionary action and experience, and yet such ruin is (figuratively and literally) a sign of the perpetual catastrophe that is history.

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[114] This understanding is clarified in a fragment in Benjamin's *Selected Writings* 'The Study Begins with Some Reflections on the Influence of *Les Fleurs du mal*. (*SW 4,* pp. 95-97, especially the conclusion).

Chapter 2 - **Ruin and catastrophe: The possibilities of multiple pasts in Berlin**

> …Berlin was primarily a memory space, haunted by the ghosts of its past: Berlin as the centre of a discontinuous, ruptured history, site of the collapse of four successive German States, command centre of the Holocaust, capital of German communism in the Cold War, and flashpoint of the East-West confrontation of the nuclear age. (Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, p. 77)

> There is no ideal ensemble of the past buried underneath the contemporary city, only infinite fragments. (Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p78).

> Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it "the way it was". It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger… The only historian capable of fanning the spark of hope in the past is the one who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious. And the enemy has never ceased to be victorious" (Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History' Thesis VI, *SW 4,* p. 391)

This chapter is concerned with the city of Berlin in its many incarnations throughout the twentieth century, and up to the present era. With an emphasis on Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood Around 1900* (hereafter *Berlin Childhood*) and 'Berlin Chronicle' (hereafter *Chronicle*), the purpose of this chapter is to consider memory and remembrance in the built environment, encountering the changing landscape of the city through Benjamin's writing on the city, and modern spaces of both ruin and regeneration.

This approach is adapted from Benjamin's writings on the city of his childhood, in form and content—particularly the fragmentary *Denkbilder* of both *Berlin Childhood* and *Chronicle*—and draws on Benjamin's formulation of catastrophe and status quo in relation to history as a means to make sense of the multiple versions of Berlin's past that manifest in the present-day city, and consider the possibilities presented by modern ruins in this context.

The emphasis is on fragmentation—both the material ruin brought about by destructive events and long-term neglect, and a perception of urban space that

constellates fragments of the past as a form of biographical and collective memory and historical understanding.

Using a series of brief case studies, this chapter reflects on traces as well as absences in relation to my own experiences in Berlin in 2009 and 2011, in which I frame the recent history of the city as a topography of memory, manifested in real and suggested remains that both persist and haunt the landscape, and attempt to encounter the contemporary ruins of the city using a Benjaminian framework.

Exploring Berlin in this way is a temporal and geographical navigation, which would not be possible without Benjamin's childhood recollections to work with—as triggers for my own experiences in an unfamiliar city, and as fragments that work upon the reader by opening up considerations of urban space, recollection, and the past that do not necessarily feature in contemporary Berlin.

This focus on Berlin has two origins: the first is the significance of Benjamin's work on Berlin while in exile (*Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, and 'Berlin Chronicle'), which displays his efforts to grasp a moment in time which was long gone (even prior to the active destruction of many of the traces that were vital to reawakening that particular remembrance and experience). The second origin is in the demolition and reconstruction of much of the city following large-scale ruin brought about by bombing and street-by-street fighting during the Second World War, and the later challenges of reoccupying the voids and extant ruins left in the wake of reunification in 1990[115]. These concerns also relate to the sections of 'On The Concept of History' pertaining to redemption and the image of the past (theses II, V), and particularly thesis VI (see epigraph, above), in which Benjamin suggests that the past is entirely influenced by the dominant perceptions of that past in any era.

In the last century, Berlin has been the site of multiple destructive happenings brought on by its status as both national capital and modern metropolis. The first

[115] This transformation is summarised in both Tony Le Tissier's *Berlin Then and Now* (1992), and Brian Ladd's *Ghosts of Berlin* (1998). These two texts are the source of the majority of details about the changing landscape of the city in this chapter, in conjunction with my own research in museums, archives, memorials and exhibitions in Berlin in 2009 and 2011.

changes were situated by Benjamin around the turn of the last century, described in his Berlin writings in terms of quickly outmoded technologies (the telephone in his parent's hall), increasing wealth (as well as the dearth of experience that came with his parent's comfortable middle-class lifestyle), and a selection of images of the (then modern) city: trains and railway stations, streets in various states of activity and use, stairs and alleyways, and popular cafes that faded in and out of existence as the pace of construction and renewal in Berlin obliterated landmarks as quickly as they could establish themselves as such.[116]

This process of obliteration and reconstruction has marked the city as a site of multiple histories and modern ruins, many of which have been valued for their links to a recent, but vanished, past[117]. Many of the remnants and traces with which I am concerned represent one particular kind of modern (and urban) ruin—that which has been consciously retained, is valued and sanctioned.

For over sixty years, Berlin has undergone a process of confronting, forgetting, adapting, embracing or rejecting its architectural and historical heritage. The approach to remembrance in Berlin during this period, though shifting, generally adhered to the assumption that the landscape itself was a repository of the events of the past—even where a building was demolished, some residue of its history remained on that site, imbued in the location itself, bearing a complex relation to surrounding places and earlier times. In some cases, the implication of a threatening past was employed to justify the demolition of primarily National Socialist architecture, particularly in the first years after the war (the Reich's Chancellery, for example); later, it came to inform arguments in favour of preserving or memorialising sites in remembrance of victims of the National Socialist regime, or retaining relics of questionable political and social significance to the German Democratic Republic

[116] These images are all taken from *Chronicle*.
[117] For a discussion of contemporary ruins, and particularly post-war ruin as memorial, see Svetlana Boym's 'Archeology of Metropolis' in *The Future of Nostalgia*: "As for the modern ruins, they are reminders of the war and the cities' violent past, pointing at a coexistence of different dimensions and historical times in the city. The ruin is not merely something that reminds us of the past, it is also a reminder of the future, when our present becomes history." (Boym 2001, p. 79).

(GDR) (for example, the Soviet War Memorial in Treptower Park)[118]. In some cases, one history was elevated above another, with arguments emerging between original use or design and recent (often problematic) functions or occupants (the *Stadtschloss*, for example, discussed later in this chapter).

In this context, terrible and exceptional histories asserted themselves over decades, (sometimes centuries) of prior existence. The course of action on many sites in central Berlin was thus rarely straightforward for either of the cities' two governments, and many buildings stood in ruins for thirty years or more—waiting to be saved or condemned by a convincing argument in favour of one course of action; waiting to be returned to one of several individuals or families who claimed original ownership; waiting for one of many architectural competitions to decide their fate[119] or, as with much of the former heart of Berlin, waiting for the day when the city would be reunited[120].

Most undeveloped sites in the centre of the city have undergone significant change since 1989—selectively left in ruins, renovated or demolished. Following reunification, the notion of preserving some elements of the recent past, whilst eliminating those that were less politically acceptable was expressed in "critical reconstruction"[121]. The notion of critical reconstruction, reflecting a return to

[118] For details on GDR relics, as well as various kinds of construction and reconstruction in the East both prior to and after reunification, see the article 'East Berlin Political Monuments in the Late German Democratic Republic: Finding a Place for Marx and Engels' (Ladd 2002)

[119] The Wertheim Department Store on Leipziger Platz was one such relic, acquired by the National Socialist regime in 1939, extensively damaged during the war, mostly demolished in the 1950s, and stranded in the borderland of the wall for decades. Following reunification, reparations to the original Jewish owners took place, but the site remained a wasteland (adjacent to the still-standing ruins of the Reich's Rail site) until redevelopment commenced in 2010, ongoing as of 2011. This is one of the last remaining stretches of modern ruin in the inner-city area of Berlin that is not a stabilised ruin, memorial or otherwise sanctioned space of decay.

[120] For a summary of the wasteland generated by the wall see 'The Voids of Berlin' in Andreas Huyssen's *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Huyssen 2003, pp. 49-71). This includes stranded sites, symbolic voids, and the location of the wall itself.

[121] "The official goal in the 1990s became the "critical reconstruction" of the inner city. This program began in Friedrichstadt, the old commercial center, whose eighteenth-century grid of wide streets and rectangular blocks established the pattern

traditional urbanism and a pre-war landscape. was the preferred approach for government planners and developers, as a means to value certain elements of the past, while disregarding others. As the official policy sought a return to a distant past, other engagements and tactical uses of the urban ruins in Berlin urged against forgetting or idealising aspects of the city's past.

Conducting this investigation via a Benjaminian portal to Berlin's past reveals the intricacies of place-making and unmaking, and ultimately sets the scene for an understanding of history as founded and embodied in undulating memory-landscapes and material histories. In the case of contemporary Berlin, this landscape was forged in destruction, demolition, decay and reconstruction, (later, in critical reconstruction), and continues to be acknowledged as the geographical location of happenings which are far beyond recollection or immediate experience. Berlin is a self-identified multilayered space of remembrance, consciously honouring conflicting and contrasting versions of many events and eras, representing a politics of memory that actively fights any attempt at a single historical perspective or overarching narrative[122].

29. Pariser Platz (1945)

later extended to the nineteenth-century districts." (Ladd, 1998, p. 108). For a further summary of Critical Reconstruction see p. 231-233 of Ladd (1998); Huyssen (2003, p. 61); and Claire Colomb on "Revanchist urban planning" (2007).

[122] The term "politics of memory" is widely used, but in this case is borrowed most directly from Mary Nolan's *The Politics of Memory in the Berlin Republic* (2001), which summarises the concept, and provides details of reconstruction over more than fifty years.

Benjamin's Berlin

Walter Benjamin conjured his *Berlin Childhood* and 'Berlin Chronicle' from a period of crisis—though he did not write the city as it was during the Weimar period or under fascist rule: the site of political upheaval and cultural, moral and social conformism. He instead attempted to grasp the remnants of an era that had long been receding, an era that, with the imminent personal danger to Benjamin and many of his generation, class and background, faced an immediate threat of obliteration[123]. In writing about the Berlin of his youth, Benjamin anticipated a catastrophe of private and collective significance, the cost of which would be more than individual possessions or identities, more than the burnt books and their irretrievable wisdom, more than those changes in the landscape or character of a city which are brought about by the passage of time. Crucially, Benjamin understood that he (and his remembered Berlin) could potentially become the vanquished in a conflict between powers whose mastery over the past, present and future possibilities of history would ensure the elevation or annihilation of particular visions of earlier eras.

As the National Socialists implemented increasingly hostile policies, Benjamin and his childhood in Berlin emerged as relics of a renegade past, toward which the politics of the regime were strongly reactive. His recalled childhood was an anachronism in a nation where an identity as German, Bourgeois and Jewish conflicted with the disseminated constructs of racial purity, militarism, empire building, and the ascendancy of the German worker.

Benjamin wrote the first iteration of *Berlin Childhood* between 1932 and 1934 (with some encouragement from Gershom Scholem among others) as the political situation in Berlin rapidly deteriorated[124]. That Berlin was undergoing tremendous

[123] In his 'Review of Sternberger', Benjamin clearly places the origins of National Socialism in a distant past, thus demonstrating his philosophy of history as well as the purpose of *AP* in terms of the illumination the past through perception in the present, and history as a series of foundational constellations. (see *SW 4,* p. 146-147)

[124] *Berlin Childhood* and *Chronicle* are closely related, and share many of the same passages. It is interesting to note that the influence of Benjamin's personal situation and the events in Germany from 1933 are more easily detected in the unfinished "Chronicle". For more details on the development of *Berlin Childhood* see *The*

changes at the time when *Chronicle* and *Berlin Childhood* were conceived was only part of Benjamin's concern. In relation to the period of change from the late nineteenth century and throughout the early twentieth century, Benjamin postulated that the connection to the recent past was reduced by the increasing churning of destructive forces, be they historical, material, or otherwise, particularly in relation to experience and memory, and according to Richard Wolin, his writing was an attempt to gather the remnants of "a Berlin childhood as it revealed itself to me around 1900, Berlin as it existed once upon a time, as it will never appear again." (Wolin 1994, pp. 3-4)

In identifying "Berlin as it existed once upon a time, as it will never appear again", Wolin situates the city of *Chronicle* and *Berlin Childhood* within a particular set of possibilities that conspired to bring this era into existence, and also led to the development of the conditions that prevailed as Benjamin set out to write his recollections. Benjamin here acknowledges Berlin as a modern metropolis in which the process of rise and fall, of progress and comparative obsolescence had a decisive impact on what remained of his childhood—evidenced particularly in the material disappearance of a receding past.

Benjamin's perception of the modern as inextricably linked to destructive change in experience culminated for him in the destructive energies of the First World War, revealing a profoundly altered world over a short period:

> A generation that had gone to school in horse-drawn streetcars now stood in the open air, amid a landscape in which nothing was the same except the clouds and, at its center, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body. (*SW 2:2*, p. 732)

These destructive elements encompass both the literally destructive forces of modern warfare, but also the nature of change, accelerated in Benjamin's lifetime by progress and development, in such a way that experiences of a recent past appeared impossibly dislocated from the present, even in personal remembrance. This phenomena is particularly evident in urban spaces, in "a landscape in which nothing was the same" (*ibid.*). Recalling his early adulthood in Berlin, Benjamin comments:

Correspondence of Walter Benjamin (1994, pp. 400 and 423); *SW 2:2* (p. 635), and *SW* (p. 407).

> If I chance today to pass through the streets of the neighbourhood, I set foot in them with the same uneasiness that one feels when entering an attic unvisited for years. Valuable things may be lying around, but nobody remembers where. And in truth, this dead district with its tall apartment houses is today the junkroom of the West End bourgeoisie. (*SW 2:2*, p. 606)

In using the image of the attic filled with lost and forgotten junk, Benjamin consciously locates more than discarded material objects, and more than his own personal recollections in the streets of his old neighbourhood. In the scattered jumble there are things to be brought to light, but Benjamin suggests that perhaps in abandoning the sites of recollection, and in forgetting, these spaces might transform and cease to be meaningful to those who made their history, and in whose history they played a part.

Benjamin perceived the city of his childhood in the living, contemporary city: "Here, I am talking of space, of moments and discontinuities."(*SW 2:2* p. 612). Scott McCracken similarly suggests a physically inhabited form of recollection, a "spatial model of the self" (2002, p. 150), which is also described by Max Pensky as "an experiential image" (1993, p. 215). For Benjamin in an era of tumultuous change, the process of remembrance is not the linear reconstruction of a knowable past. Neither is it a once-and-for-all account of personal experience. Rather, it appears like a distant dream, in a fragmentary flashing up of moments and images, sudden recollections of objects or places, that are not entire, yet, to reiterate part of a quote from the introductory chapter, hold within them "crystal of the total event" (*AP*, p. 461).

Writing about the city of his remembrance, as well as the act of recollection itself, Benjamin reflects that:

> Noisy, matter-of-fact Berlin, the city of work and the metropolis of business, nevertheless has more—not less—than some other cities of those places and moments when it bears witness to the dead, shows itself full of dead; and the obscure awareness of these moments, these places, perhaps more than anything else, confers on childhood memories a quality that makes them as once as evanescent and as alluringly tormenting as half-forgotten dreams. (*SW 3*, p. 613).

To adapt Benjamin's ideas to a contemporary attempt to negotiate such a landscape requires an approach that values remnants and does not attribute a singular

history to any site; a negotiation that makes use of "what remains" (Buse et al. 2005, p. 31; Presner 2001)[125] in order to comprehend what is an incomplete historical account in a space that was in ruin or transition for more than half of the last century.

While the experience of encountering the past in this space, and recollecting the past as if alive "is in neither case the stuff that life is made of"(*SW 3*, p. 612), to be dead is not to be gone. It is the act of salvage that is of vital importance here—an act that is made possible by reanimating the past from its remains: "So I have to make do with what is resurrected today—isolated pieces of interior that have broken away yet contain the whole within them, while the whole, standing there before me, has lost its details without trace." (SW *2:2*, p. 628). What is dead can be resurrected, and even where the whole is evident, the fragments speak.

Since reunification, in particular, Berlin has been a city that let the fragments speak. Left in ruins after the war (material but also social and cultural absences of what had existed prior to 1933), all that remained of the city was necessarily a survivor of a destructive past suspended in the moment of catastrophe. However, despite the material destruction inherent in both the harbingers of that destruction and that state of ruin or decay itself, it is possible that in an era of actively valued remnants, the possibility for suspension of such catastrophe might be (temporarily) located. Benjamin notes in 'Central Park' (and elsewhere in various forms) that "The concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are status quo *is* the catastrophe. It is not an ever-present possibility, but what in each case is given." (*SW 4*, p. 184-185). Another section of 'Central Park' suggests that "what is being irredeemably lost" might be recovered as an "image of what has been" (*SW 4*, p.183-184)—a passage that constitutes the early notes of Benjamin's later, slightly clearer conception of the dialectical image as that which emerges in a moment as a constellation of past and present[126]. This concept of the dialectical image serves many

[125] Presner uses this term in direct reference to Berlin remnants in an article titled 'Traveling between Delos and Berlin: Heidegger and Celan on the Topography of "What Remains"' while Buse (et al., 2005) use the term in relation to the remaining Parisian arcades in a contemporary setting (p. 31 and elsewhere).

[126] Henry Pickford, in 'Two Berlin Memorials', writes that "the incarnations of the *Neue Wache* amount to a dialectical image of the failed project to symbolically found a German national-cultural identity." (Pickford 2005, p. 139)

purposes (which are explored throughout this thesis, including the interruption and opposition of progress, phantasmagoria and commodification), but in this context, as a historical image, it is significant in founding a theory of the past as it persists in the present, and intersects the future.

This is, in turn, relates to Benjamin's conceptualisation of now-time (*Jetztzeit*), in which the present is charged with iterations of prior eras—there is a possibility to still, in the present moment, a sense of multiple temporalities—a monadological constellation that is directly related to the approach to history that Benjamin was working toward at the time of his death:

> Where thinking suddenly comes to a stop in a constellation saturated with tensions, it gives that constellation a shock, by which thinking is crystallized as a monad. The historical materialist approaches a historical object only where it confronts him as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a messianic arrest of happening, or (to put it differently) a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. (*OTCH*, XVII, *SW 4,* p. 396)

This "fight for the oppressed past" is obvious in Benjamin's writings on Berlin, but also in the various approaches to historical preservation and recollection in Berlin (discussed later in this thesis), particularly as a mass and collective attempt to salvage the past by confronting it in the moment. In terms of both a quality and the lived detail of events, what was lost in Berlin, though manifested in ruins, rubble, and voids, was hundreds of years of collected urban memory. Benjamin's work is not the lament of material decay and destruction alone, but rather the shocking destruction made possible by the march of history. Though in a slightly different (more melancholic) vein to Benjamin's poetic salvage work, Alfred Döblin, who wrote *Berlin Alexanderplatz* in 1929, showed a similar understanding of history as obliteration and fragmentation, speaking of the city in 1947 (quoted in translation by Brian Ladd):

> I've never loved this place. Here on the Palace Bridge, we schoolchildren were lined up in the cold on the Emperor's birthday, January 27… On the hot August days of 1914 I stood here wedged in the crowd in front of the palace that is now in ruins. The crowd sang one song after another. Then they pushed down Unter den Linden in the delirium of war. After four years I saw revolutionary workers marching behind red flags in the streets…. Nothing of that can be seen of heard any more, nothing of the

> people, nothing of the buildings. The place is a parcel of land through which the Spree flows. This is what history looks like. (Döblin in Ladd 1998, p. 40).

Benjamin also spoke of the bridges, river and streets of Berlin in his recollections—out of fear for the future fate of the city, as well as his own disappearing past. To compare Berlin of 1933 (as it was last seen by Benjamin) to the ubiquitous remnants of 1945, like those surveyed by Döblin, would have revealed a drastically altered landscape, in both the city, and the surrounding environs that had left such an impact on the young Benjamin. One summary of the city following the war observes that:

> Damage was most severe at the heart of the city, where *Bezirk* Mitte and adjoining Friedrichshain and Tiergarten all lost half of their housing stock. The densely packed inner parts of Charlotte burg and Schöneberg suffered to a similar degree. In addition, nearly every public building in this central area lay in ruins: the old churches of the inner city, the Berlin Palace, the Berlin Cathedral, the Catholic Cathedral, the museums, the French and German churches and national theatre on the Gendarmenmarkt, the *Reichstag* (already damaged by fire in 1933), the Kaiser-Wilhelm Memorial Church—the list seems endless. This central area of maximum devastation was referred to at the time as the 'dead eye' or 'dead heart' of the city. (Elkins 1988, p. 179)

To stroll Benjamin's Berlin at this time would have revealed a *Tiergarten* stripped of trees and filled with displaced persons, the once landscaped grounds bearing the scars of bombing. The suburbs and landmarks around Benjamin's old haunts were extensively damaged, the *Spree* and canal polluted with refuse and corpses. The events of the war had indeed caused a rift—the landscape, the physical city which had been the dwelling place for Benjamin and the site of his childhood recollections had disappeared under piles of rubble that left the city unrecognisable as the Berlin of 1900.[127]

[127] For details see *Berlin Twilight,* Wilfred Byford-Jones (1947, pp. 19-21) and *Berlin Then and Now* (Le Tissier 1992).

30. Farming in the razed Tiergarten (1945)

The 'dead heart' of the city that had suffered the most extensive destruction encompassed the "affluent western sections of Berlin" (*SW 3*, p. 407) where Benjamin had grown up: Charlottenberg, including the hollowed shells along *Kurfürstendamm*, the Kaiser-Wilhelm Memorial church (*Gedächtniskirche*) with its shattered spires, the ruins of Charlottenberg palace. The remembered churches of this neighbourhood, the "Twelve Apostles, St. Matthew's, and the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church" (*SW 2:2*, p. 622) were all damaged during the war, the first two rebuilt, the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church to become a stabilised ruin—now a memorial populated by tourists.[128]

[128] The successful redevelopment of *Kurfürstendamm* has lead to an inevitable standoff between a space of ruin and memorial, and a space of consumption. The placement of a large advertisement for lipstick at the end of *Kurfürstendamm,* next to the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church, is noted Boym as "renewing the battle between commemoration and consumption." (2001, p. 79). That this battle is ongoing in the heart of the city is evidenced by the recent changes to the Topography of Terror and the recently renovated art of the East Side Gallery in particular, increasing a sense of disjunction between the sites of "reflection as well as commemoration" (*ibid.*) and more typical sites that one would expect in a major capital city.

31. Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church (2009)

The contrast between Berlin's multiple, dislocated pasts is explored below using images of Benjamin's remembered Berlin, the pre-war Berlin of the 1930s, and the remnants as I found them in 2009 and 2011.

St Matthew's Church

Benjamin's Berlin was in fact obliterated, and on a scale that encompassed far more than the material ruin that was left behind. The fabric of the city had been fundamentally destabilised, although the destruction of entire blocks of Berlin left residues and traces that might be made to speak more clearly than a comparatively whole city: "It is true that countless facades of the city stand exactly as they stood in my childhood. Yet I do not encounter my childhood in their contemplation." (*SW 2:2*,

p. 611), partially because the intervening years have cultivated such habit in familiar places, that they are no longer associated exclusively with his childhood. Instead, Benjamin notes of St Matthew's that, despite being uncertain of whether he ever entered the building as a child, the church was one of "the few exceptions" to this observation; "…the two pointed, gabled roofs over its two side aisles, and the yellow-and-ocher brick of which it is built" [*sic*] holds within it a knowledge of Benjamin's childhood (*SW 2:2,* p. 611), which was thoroughly contained in the image of the building, rather than events that took place there.

What is intriguing about this building, in light of Benjamin's claim, is that this entire district was damaged extensively due to both Albert Speer's demolitions (discussed later in this chapter) and bombing in the later half of the war. However, the façade of the church was rebuilt—though now incorporated into the *Kulturforum*, the distinctive roof and coloured bricks have been reconstructed, as if they remain as they stood before the Second World War.

32. St Matthew's Church ruins northern side (1952)

33. St Matthew's Church southern side (2011)

Such reconstruction was hardly uncommon, although rarely true to the original. Rather than build the city anew, Berlin was to adhere to the building codes and styles that had defined the city in earlier eras, even if the interiors could not be reliably replicated. The scale of ruin is typified by Wilfred Byford-Jones' everyday encounters with post-war Berlin, but also by his frequent reflection on what once existed there. Overlooking *Kurfürstendamm*, he saw absences and voids—instead of the chic stores and cafes he remembered from earlier visits, there were "heaps of burned woodwork, scraps of twisted shop fittings, baths and wash basins that had crashed down through the floors". (Byford-Jones 1947, p. 23-24) It was as if there were two *Kurfürstendamms*: the broad boulevard "known the world over" (*ibid.*), and the rubble-strewn battlefield that Byford-Jones encountered. This was the landscape that confronted visitors—military, press, refugees—and citizens of Berlin for many years after the war. The *Reichstag* was in ruins—and graffitied by Soviet soldiers—the *Stadtschloss*, Berlin's royal palace, was also mostly destroyed. As time passed, major streets and squares became storage spaces for tonnes of salvaged bricks, steel and fixtures. Standing before the Brandenburg gate, Pariser Platz (like Alexander Platz and Potsdamer Platz) was a wasteland strewn with debris (see image above). The buildings of most of the arterial streets had been reduced to bare facades, with people living and operating businesses out of their basements.

It is categorically clear that Benjamin's Berlin could no longer stand, in any sense, so complete was the level of destruction of all the details (the people, places, and practices) wrought first by the speed of urban and technological development, then by war, and warring ideologies and fascist politics. Against this backdrop, the existence of a replica of Benjamin's childhood speaks of the possibility to confront the past in the present moment, as a configuration in that moment. That the church was in ruins for the visitors of the 1950s and 60s, but is now whole and indistinguishable to me from the church of Benjamin's time—that it could have inspired very different readings in ruins and during reconstruction– and that Benjamin himself didn't recall whether he'd ever set foot in the building is a testament to the power of configurations in the conception of history. It is the image in the moment of its reading that is of most significance.

In the introduction to the 1938 version of *Berlin Childhood,* Benjamin notes that this irretrievability "…has meant that certain biographical features, which stand out more readily in the continuity of experience than in its depths, altogether recede in the present undertaking."(*SW 4*, p. 344). That is: an attempt to capture an essence, or a sense rather than a contextual, linear, contingent whole. He continues "And with them go the physiognomies—those of my family and comrades alike. On the other hand, I have made an effort to get hold of the *images* in which the experience of the big city is precipitated in a child of the middle class." (*ibid*.)

Benjamin's "effort to get hold of the images*"* of the experience of the city in the *Denkbilder* of *Berlin Childhood* was an attempt to both salvage the threatened past from the destructive forces of modernity and, in turn, challenge the ways in which that particular era was being remembered (and, by association, challenge modes of remembrance of the past more generally).

Zoo

The bearing that city-space might have on memory can be isolated in the city that Benjamin recollects, which is tainted by his knowledge of how it appeared to him

later. Considering the childhood space of the Zoological Garden, tainted retrospectively by the conditions of Europe in the 1930s, Benjamin writes:

> And before the economic crisis had so depopulated these resorts that they seemed more ancient than Roman spas, this dead corner of the Zoological Garden was an image of what was to come, a prophesying place. It must be considered certain that there are such places; indeed, just as there are plants that primitive peoples claim confer the power of clairvoyance, so there are places endowed with such power: they may be deserted promenades, or treetops, particularly in towns, seen against walls, railway crossings and above all the thresholds that mysteriously divide the districts of a town. (*Chronicle, SW 2:2,* p. 610).

A framework begins to emerge for an understanding of city spaces as highly porous sites of recollection, but also of fragments and remnants as fractured or dislocated portents of multiplicitous pasts and unknown futures. A reworked section from *Berlin Childhood* reverses this seers vision and directs its gaze at the past:

> At that point, the avenue which welcomed the visitor resembled, with the white globes of its lampposts, an abandoned promenade at Eilsen or Bad Pyrmont; and long before those places lay so desolate as to seem more ancient than the baths of Rome, this corner of the Zoological Garden bore traces of what was to come. It was a prophetic corner. For just as there are plants that are said to confer the power to see into the future, so there are places that possess such a virtue. For the most part, they are deserted places—treetops that lean against walls, blind alleys or front gardens where no one ever stops. In such places, it seems as if all that lies in store for us has become the past. (*BC, SW3*, p. 365)

The neglected area of the garden seems to speak to Benjamin (in his exile) of bleak futures, just as abandoned spaces bear an affinity with long-empty ancient ruins. The extent to which decline and desolation are bound up with past and future history is signified by the fact that absence of people is here correlated to perceived absence of future history and weight of past. The suggestion of a future in ruins that resides in the neglected and deserted places of the city is prescient, not because Benjamin envisioned a melancholic future in ruins, or Berlin's pending destruction, but rather expected that, given the catastrophic nature of history that favours the victor and leaves rubble in its wake, Berlin would be doomed to decline.

34. Partially demolished flack tower, Berlin Zoo (c. 1945)

Anhalter Bahnhof

35. Anhalter Bahnhof (1960)

Of the doomed landmarks of Benjamin's lifetime, the *Anhalter Bahnhof* site was home to the most interesting remains. The building, though missing its roof and structurally unsound, operated as a train station until the border between East and West was closed. After years of decay, it was demolished over just 2 days in 1960, leaving a narrow façade in an otherwise empty lot. On the day we visited the lone remnants, a thunderstorm stranded us for an hour, sitting in the arches which led nowhere and watching the rain. Picturesque as it was, the limited scale of the remaining wall and entryway failed to conjure images of a grand old station. Part of the site was used as a car-park while the open, concreted lot which we looked out across suggested something unfinished or misplaced, and was littered with broken glass and rubbish. In front of the entrance, a triangle of grass too small for any practical use contained a purposeful footpath, ending at the truncated portico. It was as if time had stopped for this one cluster of bricks and stone, while centuries might have passed beyond its cracked walls. More than any sense of a previous whole, or an active past, was an impression of hopelessness, of outside developments pressing in to obliterate a landmark that had barely managed to survive a devastating past.

36. Anhalter Bahnhof (2011)

As the storm cleared, however, and we began to explore the surroundings, traces of the old station began to appear—in a partly landscaped wilderness beyond the tennis courts which occupied the old centre of the site, the remnants of the platforms popped up from beneath the overgrowth. These were the same platforms that had served the largest station in Germany, where thousands of people had been transported to concentration camps, the same station Benjamin identified as the "mother cavern of railroad stations" (*BC*, *SW3,* p. 387) where the trains connecting Berlin to the outside world had arrived and departed for over a hundred years. Beginning and terminating amidst moss, leaf-litter and saplings, the platforms were remnants I could connect with. Unlike the stabilised ruins, their persistence in the landscape felt like a continuance—they stood patiently, as if one day tracks might be re-laid, and the trains which I hadn't been able to envision in the remaining archways of the station would come hurtling through the brush to make contact with these concrete fingers stretching out from the past, to almost grasp and certainly converge on the present.

37. Platform Wilderness (2011)

If the origins of Benjamin's present could be isolated in his recollections of Berlin (or, rather, in the *Denkbilder* that presented the possibility for a conscious reconfiguration of the past in the present), then the origins of any present are to be sought in select fragments that can be wrested from a fading past.

That the past can never be reconstructed as a linear whole (which is the illusion of historicism) is hinted at in the introduction to *Berlin Childhood*, where Benjamin refers to "the irretrievability—not the contingent biographical but the necessary social irretrievability—of the past" (*BC, SW3* p. 344) which he encounters in writing what is simultaneously personal recollection, and an account of a time which cannot occur again, because the necessary conditions could never, realistically, be reconfigured. However, an encounter with this past in some form is not discounted by Benjamin. Rather, he seeks to conjure that time through a series of vignettes; dream-like images which, collected or separated, render fragments of that experience accessible to the reader, and to the broader collective that shared the common experiences of that place and time. This is the concern of his focus on history and collective memory, in which:

> Articulating the past historically means recognizing those elements of the past which come together in the constellation of a single moment. Historical knowledge is possible only within this historical moment. But knowledge *within* the historical moment is always knowledge *of* a moment. In drawing itself together in the moment—in the dialectical image—the past becomes part of humanity's involuntary memory. (*SW 4,* p. 403)

To reiterate a quote from the introduction to this thesis, Benjamin wanted to present the past history of the collective as Marcel Proust had presented his personal one: not "life as it was," nor even life remembered, but life as it has been "forgotten"" (Buck-Morss 1995, p. 3). The past must be recalled, invoked and renewed in collectively accessible forms. Benjamin does not show a disinclination towards the personal, biographical aspects of his life, but instead selectively illuminates the objects, sites, events and figures which are the most comprehensible to others who may identify with his own experience—the "images" which recur throughout 'Berlin Chronicle' and *Berlin Childhood*. This is to some extent a gesture towards the ultimate irrelevance of factual, linear detail in the face of collective histories which might constellate around an object, moment, historical event or era and which reveal

what contents of the period in question might be salvaged, and brought into the light of the present.

Compare the quote above (from the 'Paralipomena' to 'On the Concept of History') with the following, closely related, conceptualisation of historical experience (partially quoted in the epigraph to this chapter), in which Benjamin reveals what is at stake in triumphalist histories that inevitably subdue the multiplicity of the past in favour of universal and linear accounts of the past:

> Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it "the way it really was." It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to hold fast that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to the historical subject in a moment of danger. The danger threatens both the content of the tradition and those who inherit it. For both, it is one and the same thing: the danger of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. Every age must strive anew to wrest tradition away from the conformism that is working to overpower it. The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer; he comes as the victor over the Antichrist. The only historian capable of fanning the spark of hope in the past is the one who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious. And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious. (*OTCH,* Thesis V, *SW 4,* p. 391.).

To explore Berlin today with Benjamin's words in mind generates echoes, reflections, translations and, importantly, experiences of a particular type; experiences which superimpose several pasts upon one moment, and several places upon a specific site. The unique conditions of the city's recent past result in recollections which are not my own reverberating across a contested urban topography, doing away with any singular perception in favour of an encounter which includes not only the vision of Berlin in the present, or in the more recent past, but also Berlin as a site in which to seek the city of Benjamin's remembrance.

The Ruins of Today

There is no typical path for the ruins of Berlin: it would be a challenge to identify a common approach toward the ruins across any period, and from the time the city was divided into sectors after the war, many ruined buildings were retained or demolished based on their proximity to other sectors; value as war reparation; or historical and political significance that was constantly under revision and differed for each

governing body. For example, almost all National Socialist remnants were obliterated immediately after the war, but arguments were made to preserve the few that remained (or were rediscovered) after reunification, some forty-five years later[129]. Similarly, a number of important buildings such as the *Reichstag*, *Stadtschloss* and *Berliner Dom* were initially retained after the war, and then (respectively) left in ruins until reunification, demolished, or painstakingly reconstructed.

During the division, damaged buildings were stranded in wastelands—either in the no-man's-land between the two sides of the city, or in close proximity to the border, leaving them isolated and inaccessible. After 1989, sites that had been borderlands since 1952 became part of the city-centre again, awaiting reappraisal in the new political climate of a united Germany.

If forgetting meant that certain elements of German history would be disregarded, or made less significant, then a concerted effort had to be made to conserve sites or objects which aided in remembrance. While there were no attempts to rebuild or retain the Reich Chancellery or, for example, turn the remains of Hitler's bunker into a site of memorial (although a plaque to identify the general location was put in place in 2006, in time for the FIFA world cup), particular sites became significant points of contention in a much wider debate, which essentially revolved around questions of remembrance—not just how, or where, but which past was to be remembered?[130]

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[129] The Topography of Terror is one such remnant, now a museum on *Niederkirchnerstrasse*, discussed later in this chapter. The *Berliner Unterwelten* society has been arguing for the preservation of Third Reich remnants since the 1980s, in the interests of ensuring that negative elements of the past aren't forgotten.

[130] This is represented in public debates that are discussed later, but also in film, the arts and literature. Counters to dominant interpretations of the past can be found, for example, in the work of Alexander Kluge and W. G. Sebald. See Kluge's short film *Brutalität im Stein* (Brutality in Stone), filmed at the dilapidated rally grounds in Nuremberg (Kluge & Schamoni 1961); or Sebald's reflection on Kluge's work on ruins in *Between history and natural history: On the literary description of total destruction* (discussed in Huyssen 2003, p. 155), particularly the chapter 'Air War and Literature' (Sebald 2003). For a discussion on the latter in relation to Benjamin's work, see 'The Angel's Enigmatic Eyes, or The Gothic Beauty of Catastrophic History in W. G. Sebald's 'Air War and Literature'' (Hell 2004).

Berlin is, in the words of Mary Fulbrook "one of the most historically self aware cities in the world." (2009, p. 126). In considering "historical tourism" in relation to Berlin's past, she notes that "[t]here is barely a street in Berlin's centre that does not have a plaque, a memorial, a sign telling passersby about what previously stood or occurred on a particular site…" (*ibid.*). This proliferation of markers of earlier times and places creates a textual topography of memory that can be read "chronologically, sequentially, and as both witness to and intervention in ever-changing, contested patterns of historical consciousness and public memory." (*ibid.*). However, this witness and intervention does not necessarily value or memorialise equally. It is "problematic", Fulbrook suggests, for any agenda to privilege one negative history as being more horrific than another, that is, for comparisons to be mounted between victims of the holocaust and those of the GDR regime, between one dictatorship and the other, between one past and another. As Fulbrook notes:

> It is a convenient myth to assume that, while the GDR's Instrumentalization of the past was manipulative, Western approaches were 'objective': on both sides, although in different ways during the Cold War and since unification, questions of politics and identity have played a role alongside pragmatic considerations about utility, alternative potential purposes and conflicting pressures. (2009, p. 142)

Fulbrook makes clear that the dictates of various political powers influenced the memory of the past. In order to comprehend the layering of pasts upon the landscape, it is necessary to acknowledge that there is both a shared, collective past, and that it is fragmented and perpetually unfinished.). As a palimpsest overlaid with unresolved histories, Berlin after reunification

> […]was primarily a memory space, haunted by the ghosts of its past: Berlin as the centre of a discontinuous, ruptured history, site of the collapse of four successive German States, command centre of the Holocaust, capital of German communism in the Cold War, and flashpoint of the East-West confrontation of the nuclear age. (Huyssen 2003, p. 77)

More recently, Huyssen argues, "Berlin as palimpsest implies voids, illegibilities, and erasures, but it also offers a richness of traces and memories, restoration and new constructions that will mark the city as lived space." (Huyssen 2003, p. 84). This is a positive and redemptive vision of the city's attempts to deal with a collective past. Not all readings of Berlin's politics of memory are so hopeful. For example, John Grech somewhat scathingly writes of the reconstruction of

Potsdamer Platz that "[i]n spite of these efforts, Berlin remains unable to obliterate its past. Instead, the city clumsily tries to turn even the darkest aspects of its history into saleable items." (Grech 2002, p. 128)[131]

Though perhaps emerging from an era of memorialisation, Berlin is still conceived of as a "topography of memory" where many different histories are physically evidenced, in the built environment. "Berlin is an excellent illustration of the layering of memory, with architectural references to the Prussian, National Socialist and GDR pasts." (Pearce 2008, p. 127).

While traces of Benjamin's Berlin may have been destroyed or damaged—physically and culturally—this situation can be considered alongside the notion that one might salvage the past from the wreckage which necessarily occurs in the process of chronological advancement—to recognise something of what has gone before. This approach recognises the manifold implications of considering history to be unfinished in any present. The reason for this, other than a desire to believe in the ultimate redemption of lost, rejected, or forgotten things, is the clear relation of the past as a foundation for the present and future: both in a personal sense, and also in a world-historical framework. Benjamin identifies fragments of the past as portals to that past—be they scattered relics, revisited locations of previous happenings, works from earlier times, or—as evidenced by his repetition of the motif—ruins themselves.

In 2009 and again in 2011, I visited numerous sites in and around Berlin in various states of ruin. Some were stabilised and government sanctioned ruins, while others were incidental to the conditions of a particular site. Some were, in fact, voids in which nothing at all remained except the *suggestion* of ruins, while others were deemed too important to remove, but did not attract the crowds (or the funding) to preserve them as anything other than decaying remnants. The following sections profile the most contested and confronting of those sites, and chart some interesting changes to the city's remnants over just two years.

[131] Grech generally advocates for the significance of visiting the voids and ruins of Berlin as a means to counter the commodification of the past and memorialisation that tends towards reinhabiting and obliterating the space of the past, as colonisation, in 'Empty Space and the City: The Reoccupation of Berlin' (2002)

Berlin Wall Memorial and Ghost Stations

In addition to the voids between and around the wall, the separation of the rail system necessitated by the division left several stations sealed and effectively abandoned for decades. The Berlin Wall Memorial site commemorates both the wall and the "ghost stations", located in the area of today's *Nordbahnhof.*

The *Nordbahnhof* and Berlin Wall Memorial site includes the former *Stettiner* station, referred to by Benjamin in relation to holiday travel with his parents as a child:

> The destination of such rides would usually have been the Anhalt Station—where you took the train to Suderode or Hahnenklee, to Bad Salzschlirf or—in later years—to Freudenstadt. But now and again it was Arendsee, too, or Heiligendamm, and then you left from Stettin Station. I believe it is since that time that the dunes of the Baltic landscape have appeared to me like a fata morgana here on Chausseestrasse, supported only by the yellow, sandy colours of the station building and the boundless horizon opening in my imagination behind its walls. (Benjamin *SW 2:2*, p. 598).

The notion of the station and street as a kind of mirage that evokes the past is especially interesting in the context of the memorial which now occupies the neighbourhood, an extended trail that winds through the still developing space of the old station and the wall. Today, *Chausseestrasse* is in transition—having been a disused wasteland for many years, the street is still populated by abandoned buildings, though interspersed with building sites. The *Nordbahnhof* itself was constructed in 1936, and then became a "ghost station", closed due to its position near the wall, on a western line. The station Benjamin speaks of was left in ruins after the war, and mostly demolished due to its proximity to the wall although a remnant of the suburban station (*Vorortbahnhof*) still stands on *Zinnowitzer Strasse*, and the tunnel that Benjamin later refers to is still partially extant, although not publicly accessible. This tunnel, once a busy thoroughfare and major part of the city's early rail network was "lost", presumed demolished, for many years. "Rediscovered" after reunification, it is one of many sites that is preserved but disused and in decay due to perceived historical significance coupled with challenges for reuse. The difficulty of incorporating such a ruin in the everyday urban experience is a matter of economic viability, but also the fact that large sections of the East in particular are undergoing

renovation. This is especially true in the space where the wall once stood—whether preserved, like those of *Bernauerstrasse* and *Muhlenstrasse*, or demolished.

38. Stettiner Tunnel (2008)

The Berlin Wall Memorial site is one of several extant portions of the original wall structure, and in this case serves the purpose of marking out a topography of the past in the new city, preserving the geography of the wall in contrast to the increasing (and, some argue, destructive) development of the former site. As a modern ruin, the wall remnants provoke reflection on the changes to the city since reunification. As Hell and Schönle note in the introduction to *The Ruins of Modernity*:

> the most iconic ruin of late-twentieth-century history is surely the remains of the Berlin wall, whose destruction—it is worth recalling—was hailed as the end of history, though for many East Germans it seemed instead to herald an unfriendly imperial takeover that resulted in the devaluation of their lives. Ruins produce more ruins. (2010, p. 3).

The Berlin Wall Memorial site is one of many ways come to know the city through ruin and remnant spaces. Like other wall memorials, the emphasis here is on making sense of fragmentary remains. However, through proximity to several empty

or developing sites (including those of the memorial itself), it sits among both active and empty spaces of the city. The Berlin Wall Memorial site links these two aspects of the city, and in doing so embodies many moments and geographies of the city's past—from the absent *Stettiner* station and the impact (then absence) of the wall, and the long-term decline of the area from post-war to reunification, as well as the more recent redevelopment of the void where the wall once stood. This simple memorial space encompasses a complexity of the past of the city, with the fragmented sections of wall giving a sense of multiple landscapes, and an urban topography of memory. The remnants of earlier times that persist in the contemporary memorial space provide an affective way to know both the history of the city, and the city space in transition.

A space as a repository for multiple happening is summarised by Benjamin in considering

> the Place du Maroc in Belleville: that desolate heap of stones with its rows of tenements became for me, when I happened on it one Sunday afternoon, not only a Moroccan desert but also, and at the same time, a monument of colonial imperialism; topographic vision entwined with allegorical meaning in this square. Yet not for an instant did it lose its place in the heart of Belleville. (*AP,* [P1a,2] p. 518)

Here, Benjamin emphasises the "interpenetration of images", a sense the past that imbues a site—particularly a ruined or desolate site—with the impression of multiple temporalities, moments, or events. This is especially relevant in the context of urban space and development, where a newer topography overlays (or is overlaid) by earlier histories, so that one place or space can encompass more than a single "topographic vision" at a time, and may even (as with the Zoo) embody entirely distant and unrelated moments and temporalities, whether allegorically or as a relation to other places and moments—even the possibilities of the future.

For example, Benjamin observes that "More quickly than Moscow itself, one learns to see Berlin through Moscow." (*SW 2:1*, p. 22), and Boym refers to Benjamin's work on Naples (particularly its "dilapidated ruins") as well as the angel of history to consider the ways in which we "can discover the urban past", by exploring the ruined and marginal sites of the city. She is critical of the empty gestures of "memorial plaques", which cannot, in their attempt to acknowledge

heritage, express the "elusive and uncanny" past (2001, p.76-77). Boym quotes de Certeau to exemplify the kind of interaction with the past that might be achieved in the present through investigating the "remains of waning pasts…relics from ravaged universes" (de Certeau in Boym, 2001, p.76). Boym's conceptualisation offers a mode of including marginalia in historical perception by anticipating alternatives and possibilities presented by "hybrids of past and present" (2001 p 31); a reading that admits the unresolved tensions and of an era to a space of multiple temporalities that are vital to an experience of the past embodied in material remnants (2001, p 258) and the porosity of history, time and space in the city (2001, p77). Throughout *The Future of Nostalgia,* Boym relies heavily on Benjamin's work to express the idea that in an experiential urban archaeology lies the possibility to confront the inequality of a history that signposts sites of perceived heritage with a view to the future, while the past is left behind in ruins.

Teufelsberg

Located just outside of Berlin, in the recreation grounds of *Grunewald*, *Teufelsberg* (roughly translated as "Devils Mountain") is little more than a hill, the crown of which is fenced off to enclose the remnants of a former US listening station that was abandoned after reunification.

Teufelsberg is not a natural feature. Immediately following the Second World War, the people of Berlin set to work clearing the rubble, painstakingly sifting through for any salvable building materials before carting the remaining debris to designated dumps on the periphery of the city. The end result (as with other, similarly damaged German cities) was *Trümmerberge*, or rubble hills that emerged in an otherwise almost flat landscape (the city was, after all, built on swampy ground). [132]

[132] "A characteristic of Berlin, springing from one of the darkest periods of its history, is the presence of Trümmerberge (rubble hills), where the rubble from the bombed city was tipped once it had been sifted for reusable bricks and other material…Sometimes a tip was built around a Hochbunker, one of the massive concrete structures that provided both air-raid shelters and an emplacement for anti-aircraft artillery…" (Elkins 1988, p. 78)

In the most basic sense, then, much of the landscape of Berlin was built from ruins—not only the hills that rose around the city, but also the urban landscape of the post-war era. *Trümmerfrauen* (rubble women) salvaged tonnes of usable matter from the destroyed city buildings, an achievement that made the rebuilding of the city possible. The detritus of this effort created the rubble hills, but a great deal of debris were also left lying dormant in empty lots for a generation along the border between what would become East and West Berlin—a void that continues to be visible despite (and in some cases, because of) development in the city since 1989. This visibility is, in part, a result of active conservation, as with the Berlin Wall Memorial (above) particularly as a means to reinforce the typically forgotten trauma of the past.

39. Trümmerfrauen clearing Behrenstrasse (1947)

40. Clearing Markgrafenstrasse (1949)

In the years immediately following the war, the landscape of ruins signified the terrible destruction of a previously functional city, and this is also true of the rubble hills that concealed quantities of refuse that were otherwise impossible to deal with. "Ruins became the symbol of the "zero hour" in Berlin, along with the ubiquitous "rubble women" who patiently cleaned and stacked millions of bricks from thousands of smashed walls. Sentimental attachment to the ruins only came years later, when there were far fewer of them." (Ladd 1998, p. 177)

Teufelsberg is not such a ruin—unlike the *Reichstag*, or the *Neues Museum*, the buildings at *Teufelsberg* are some of the most recently ruined sites of the city—abandoned following reunification, the site has been in private ownership ever since, but is unlikely to be developed in the near future. What is interesting about this site, other than its contemporary origin, is both the rubble upon which it is built, and what is rumoured to be beneath that rubble—a training college erected by Albert Speer, on what was previously undeveloped forest. Furthermore, during the cold war, the site was used as a US listening station, making it a highly restricted zone for decades.

This site in many ways exemplifies the complexity of memory topographies and politics of space in Berlin. Is this site to be defined by its first use as a National Socialist training ground, or as a symbol of the scale of destruction after The Second World War (and the toil of the *Trümmerfrauen)*? Is it a cold-war relic to be preserved, or an ideal site for the kind of reconstruction that typifies the later renewal of the city? Or, due to failed attempts to redevelop the site (including a bizarre rumour that filmmaker David Lynch wanted to buy the site to build a university (Purvis 2007)) is it to be yet another marker of the mixed success of rebuilding a city so fragmented by the multiplicity of its past? Finally, is it a unique site for urban and historical experience, as it stands in a state of ruin—once fundamentally necessary for the security of the people of Berlin, a symbol of the cold war (and an iconic one at that), what does it mean now, as an obsolete and hollowed out shell, useless and unwanted?

Interestingly, like many "off-limits" abandonments, the modern ruins of *Teufelsberg* have accumulated a miscellany of the outdated and outmoded—almost as if such objects share an affinity with a listening station which cannot serve any purpose in a post-Cold-War Berlin—smashed records and unwound cassette tapes litter the site, along with candy-stripe cordons intended to keep people out, torn and fluttering in the wind.

Though symbolically striking as a pile of invisible detritus covered in useless ruins, *Teufelsberg* has a relatively short history, which is swiftly becoming a valuable commodity. At the time of my visit in 2011, tour guides (who double as security guards) were taking visitors through the site under the guise of presenting the history of *Teufelsberg* as a rubble mountain and site for Speer's ruins (depending on the tourist). However, the main purpose of such tours appeared to be the (admittedly spectacular) views from the dilapidated towers, and the chance to wander through the (asbestos contaminated) ruins of the Cold-War era. These are not the ruins of the wall, or the city palace, but they still attest to the layering of palimpsests in a city possessed by the desire to both preserve and exploit the past. The conflict between these two desires is exemplified in the approach to the *Teufelsberg* tours. Where once the myriad abandoned sites of Berlin drew squatters, artists and ravers to make use of

their untended spaces, they are now regulated by sanctioned access that makes the most of the impression of Berlin as a place of history to be toured and consumed[133].

41. Teufelsberg ruins (2011)

[133] This is also the case with *Spreepark* and *Beelitz-Heilstätten*, both abandoned sites in Berlin that are now "officially" accessible through tours, and policed by the tour-guides themselves, often in security uniforms and with guard dogs (but without the authority of more legitimate security patrols). See images 8 and 9 in the introduction to this thesis.

42. View from the top of Teufelsberg (2011)

Schwerbelastungskörper

The building campaigns undertaken during the National Socialist era were intended to prepare the city to become a great modern centre, the contemporary equivalent of Rome. Hitler's head architect, Albert Speer, developed his theory of "ruin value"[134] with the intention of constructing colossal monuments that would endure for centuries.

The demolitions of this era were the first in a series of destructive events that drastically changed the landscape of the city—along with the bombing during the war, the combat within and shelling of the city during the Battle of Berlin, and the destruction of the Cold-War era (both construction of the wall and the alteration of the city's landscape generally, and particularly in the East), which saw several iconic buildings demolished, leaving a void through the traditional heart of the city. During the early years of National Socialist rule, vast tracts of land were cleared, and many

[134] For a theory of "Benjamin's Ruin Value" see 'Ruin Value' (Featherstone 2005, pp. 313-9)

landmarks slated for destruction to make way for wide boulevards and enormous public and governmental buildings, to rival those of antiquity.[135]

Speer wrote of Hitler's plans for Berlin, that:

> Ultimately, all that remained to remind men of the great epochs of history was their monumental architecture, he would philosophize. What had remained of the emperors of Rome? What would still bear witness to them today, if their buildings had not survived? Periods of weakness are bound to occur in the history of nations, he argued; but at their lowest ebb, their architecture will speak to them of former power. (Speer 1970, pp. 55-6).

This notion informed Speer's plans for Berlin "under the pretentious heading of "A Theory of Ruin Value"" (1970, p. 56) in which he suggested that modern materials were unsuited to posterity, as they would decay and wear away, leaving little to impress future generations. As a result, Speer's vision for Berlin was of monumental structures, in a classical style, and on a grand scale. These buildings were to be constructed principally of stone and marble—materials that would last for centuries. This, contrasted against the rubble and ruin of the demolitions carried out to prepare the Nuremberg site for construction of the rallying grounds[136]. Such a theory proposed that the National Socialists "should be able to build structures which even in a state of decay, after hundreds or (such were our reckonings) thousands of years would more or less resemble Roman models." (*ibid.*)[137]

The most famous (perhaps, notorious) of these plans—the Great Hall and triumphal arch— were never built. Nevertheless, a remnant does remain in the form of a huge cement cylinder, the *Schwerbelastungskörper* (or heavy load-bearing body) that, as the name suggests, was intended to test the weight-bearing capacity of the ground upon which the major buildings of the planned world capital were to be built.

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[135] For details on the planned capital, and the demolitions and constructions of the National Socialist era, see Speer (1970, especially pp. 50-70 and pp. 151-160) and *Mythos Germania* published by *Berliner Unterwelten* (Hodge & Markner 2011).

[136] The grounds remain one of the few relatively intact remnants of Speer's building program. They were also the site of the Nuremberg trials, partly due to the significance of the place to the National Socialist regime, and the symbolic importance of bringing its supporters to trial in that location.

[137] The grounds were the focus of a short film by Kluge in 1961, in which he ruminated on them as abandoned structures of a failed regime, see note 130.

At over 20 meters high, and located in a well-occupied neighbourhood, the possibility of demolishing the cylinder is remote.

In 2009, the *Schwerbelastungskörper* was fenced in, and hardly noticeable in the landscape. Large as it is, the quiet area and general neglect of the site made it easy to overlook, like many municipal or post-industrial sites in any city. In 2011, however, the site was open to the public, along with a new viewing platform. Even from the top of this three-story staircase to nowhere, I was unable to photograph a full panorama of the cylinder. With no one else about, I wandered the empty semi-ruin and pondered its chance preservation. This, an unintended by-product of the never-realised dream for a thousand-year Reich, was what still stood in Berlin. The Ministry of Finance, Tempelhof Airport, the site of Hitler's bunker, the exposed foundations of the Topography of Terror—these were all remnants of an era that had been mostly obliterated by the violent opposition needed to overcome the regime itself. However, of the grandiose plans for a monumental future, all that really remained was an impossible cylinder.

43. The top of the Schwerbelastungskörper from the viewing platform (2011)

This concrete monstrosity was obsolete almost before it was built—intended to fulfil part of a plan that, possible to implement or otherwise, would never come to fruition—demonstrating shortly after its construction that the ground was unsuitable for Speer's plans (the cylinder promptly began to sink in the soft soil).

In contrast, one of the few projects completed by Speer, the New Reich Chancellery, was extensively damaged during the war, and then demolished. This approach to relics from a traumatic collective past is not unusual, particularly not in Berlin. Repeatedly, relics from the city's past—and particularly those of the National Socialist and GDR regimes—must be subdued in order to mitigate the threat posed by their persistence in the present. The rubble of the Chancellery was purportedly used to build the Soviet War Memorial that still stands in Treptower Park[138]—one of the few GDR relics to remain relatively untouched after reunification. When Rudolf Hess passed away in 1987 the prison where he was being held was promptly demolished, and the rubble buried at RAF Gatow[139]. More recently, Hess's body was exhumed and cremated and his headstone destroyed, to prevent Neo-Nazi pilgrimages to the site. Particularly since reunification, this physical destruction of a negative past has been questioned, predominantly in terms of retaining remnants of earlier regimes so that the events of those eras do not go unremarked in future[140].

A direct, material reading of Benjamin's claim that the past is vulnerable to destruction by succeeding eras can be taken to its furthest degree in the desecration of

[138] States Le Tissier (2002 p. 361), although this is often debated. Nevertheless, even as a rumour, the symbolism behind building such a war memorial from the ruins of a seat of power clearly demonstrates the attitudes towards the National Socialist regime as a terrible period that needs to be broken to pieces, overcome, or recovered from.
[139] See Tony Le Tissier (1992, p. 346)
[140] For example, the *Berliner Unterwelten* Society has called for the preservation of Third Reich remnants including the *Schwerbelastungskörper*, which has been incorporated in the the *Mythos Germania* exhibition curated by the society. "With reunification and the ensuing rapid social changes, the main intention [of the exhibition] was to locate and identify the tangible architectural legacies of the "1000 Year Reich", which still imbue the city with the murky shadows of a repressed past." (Hodge & Markner. 2011, p. 8). For an excellent summary of the multiple approaches to a complex and negative past (particularly in relation to GDR remnants following reunification), see Colomb (2007), particularly pages 284-287.

cemeteries ordered by Speer up to 1944[141]. For Benjamin, "*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious. And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious." (*SW 4,* p. 391)

This, in contrast with the investment in future fame undertaken by each of the numerous powers that ruled that various sectors of Berlin during the *twentieth century*, undertaking acts in the interests of future posterity just as Benjamin envisaged:

> All previous ages were unanimous in their conviction that their own contemporaries held the keys that would open the doors to future fame. And how much truer this is today, when every new generation finds itself with even less time or inclination to revise already established judgments, and as its need to defend itself against the sheer mass of what the past has bequeathed it is assuming ever more desperate forms. (*SW 2:1*, p. 145)

To contrast Benjamin's view of history with the megalomaniacal visions of Hitler and Speer, as well as the swift and complete obliteration of the vast majority of National Socialist architecture (and, later, GDR architecture, street names, and monuments), demonstrates the perpetual reworking of the past in the present. In each case, the victor—fascist or not—took it as their duty to bequeath something to the future, and in doing so obliterate those aspects of the past that were not deemed suitable for future fame. Sites such as the Topography of Terror (see below) show the possibility, however temporary, to remember a difficult or negative past (rather than obliterate it from the landscape, as was the case immediately after the Second World War), but the "sheer mass of what the past has bequeathed" us presents an increasing challenge: the speed with which the present is ruined, and the forces that generate such ruin, are unequalled in human history.

Finally, what is to be done with a remnant that cannot be dealt with? Is the approach of the *Berliner Unterwelten Society*—to provide information and a viewing platform—in keeping with both a National Socialist relic and the impossibility of such a site? Could this be the lasting remnant to be identified with the regime in

[141]Details of which are available in the exhibition pamphlet for *Mythos Germania: Shadows and Traces of the Reich Capital*, published by *Berliner Unterwelten,* (Hodge & Markner 2011, p. 162)

Berlin, and if so, is this because absolutely nothing else can be done with it? A monument to both grandiose plans for the *Welthauptstadt* and the circumstances of their failure that simultaneously saved and doomed the city—saved from a more lengthy fascist rule by one party; condemned to ruins as the vanquished capital in devastating mass warfare. Saved also from Speer's destructive vision but condemned by the construction of the wall. An alternative vision of the future is contained within the *Schwerbelastungskörper*, but so too is the reality that the material destruction of the past mirrors the selective historicizing of idealised versions of that past.

Humboldt Box (Humboldt Forum)

Reconstruction in Berlin has been a process inextricably linked with desires to simultaneously remember (but not glorify) what has gone on there, and ensure it cannot happen again. In this context Berlin becomes a temporally nebulous space, valuing distant pasts over more recent happenings, but seemingly riven from the far-flung events prior to 1933 (or 1945, or 1989). This tendency to assume a reversed prescience (as if one past might come to haunt the present, while another must be made to speak), can be identified in the absence or accumulation of certain traces on the landscape, the resistance to particular kinds of remembrance, and the apparent nostalgia for eras that have ceased to be memories of the living, and have become the imaginings of a generation who grew up in an emerging, still-fragmented landscape, and yearn for a perceived stability identified in the years surrounding the turn of an earlier century[142].

Ladd's *Ghosts of Berlin* suggests that reconstruction of unified Berlin to a pre-war geography indicates a nostalgia for an era prior to the First and Second World

[142] This is not at all the same thing as the "seer's gaze" which Benjamin attributes to the historical materialist (as identified in Tiedemann's 'Dialectics at a Standstill' (*AP*, 945)), where the prophet turns to "the rapidly receding past" to see "the contours of the future"(*SW 4*, p. 407). This is because the prophet, though looking back, sees the future with the light cast by the past, the "eternal lamp [that is the] image of genuine historical existence" (*ibid.*). This vision is related to redemption, and does not seek to precisely reconstruct what has been, but rather to ensure that it does not disappear from view. Rebuilding the *Schloss* is a historical intervention that in fact condemns elements of the past to the very darkness from which Benjamin wishes to rescue the forgotten and marginal elements of history (see 'Paralipomena to 'On The Concept of History'' and 'Edward Fuchs, Collector and Historian' for details on these concepts).

Wars—the same era Benjamin writes of in his childhood recollections. Both Ladd (1998) and Richard Bessel (2009) identify this as nostalgia for stability, but those who called for pre-war restoration are largely those who couldn't remember this earlier Berlin. They were being sustained by a dream, not a memory. Arguably, they were also motivated by a desire to (selectively) forget the years between 1933 and 1989.

In 1993, four years after reunification, Berlin mayor Eberhard Diepgen (born in the midst of war, in 1941) envisioned the planned renewal of the battered centre of Berlin following reunification as producing "…the character and charm of a cityscape like those we know from old black and white photographs." (Ladd 1998, p. 229). As Ladd summarises: "Among Berlin's many pasts, the one sought here is indeed the age of black and white photography: the boom decades before and after 1900."(Ladd 1998, p. 230).

These are the same years that Benjamin recalls in both *Berlin Childhood* and *Chronicle*, and it is interesting that in an effort to come to terms with the past, some Berliners need to think back well before even the foundations of that past had been laid. To rebuild the city (or parts of it) to imitate its form prior to the First World War relied on arguments that framed Berlin as a destroyed city—not just by the events of the war, but potentially also during the years of its emergence as a modern city, and the entire period of the Third Reich, encompassing a large part of the twentieth century. Regarding Berlin's urban development and post-war reconstruction, Ladd notes that "The result, in many people's minds, is a destroyed city; the solution is to restore links to the city of a century ago."(Ladd 1998, p. 110)

On one hand, the uneasiness about early twentieth century urbanism, and fascism, is echoed in Benjamin's own concerns about a destructive force of urban redevelopment. On the other, the aim to reconstruct a long-vanished landscape problematically obliterates the more recent spaces of memory, and enacts the same destructive force on the recent past, by emphasising only a distant and apparently more distinguished era.

One such attempt to restore the heart of the city can be seen in the plans to rebuild the *Stadtschloss* (city palace), which was demolished in 1952, after standing

(quite iconically) as a ruin in the early years after the war. This kind of reconstruction relies on the argument that "It is the very essence of Berlin for those who would like to see Berlin's past recreated", quoted from *The Berliner Schloss Post* (2011)[143]. In the same publication the project is referred to as a "transformation of what was once the Hohenzollern palace" (2011, p. 7) as if the building itself hadn't been absent from the landscape for more than fifty years. The *Schloss* does not exist as a memory, or even as a remnant (or not only this)—it is referred to throughout the publication in the present tense, where possible—"The Schloss, founded in 1443, is almost as old as the city itself". This appears to be something other than a weak translation, when taken in the context of the insistence that the proposed location for the rebuilding of the palace is not a site, or a space—or a void—but rather a place that defines Berlin: "Berlin was the Schloss" (2011, p. 12).

However, to rebuild the *Stadtschloss* required the demolition of the GDR *Palace of the Republic*[144], the seat of government of East Germany and a major public centre until its abrupt closure in 1990. This "palace" was itself demolished, its partial skeleton visible as it was slowly dismantled, and finally cleared from the site in 2009.

The current site for the proposed rebuilding—to be named the *Humboldt Forum*—is part building site and part temporary exhibition. The *Humboldt Box*, houses the exhibition space, and is an asymmetrical, pale blue, geometric shape designed to be temporary, but also make a stark impression in the landscape. It will stand while the *Stadtschloss* is reconstructed, giving information to visitors about the destruction of Berlin, and the planned future of the site. Completely contrary to the aims which initiated the project, this is a multi-temporal space—a "world" (according to the project website (humboldt-box.com 2011))—that encompasses all the moments of being of this site.

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[143] *The Berliner Schloss Post* is a free newspaper circulated by the *Förderverein Berliner Schloss* group, who are planning the reconstruction of the old palace. The paper makes no reference to any other use of the site, and is openly and aggressively critical of any opposition to the proposed reconstruction. For example "…an increasing number of dissenting voices have been heard recently in various media outlets questioning the proposed use of the Forum… this view can only be based on ignorance." (July 2011 edition, p. 4)

[144] For a detailed history (and, to some extent, lament) on the *Palace of the Republic* see Colomb (2007).

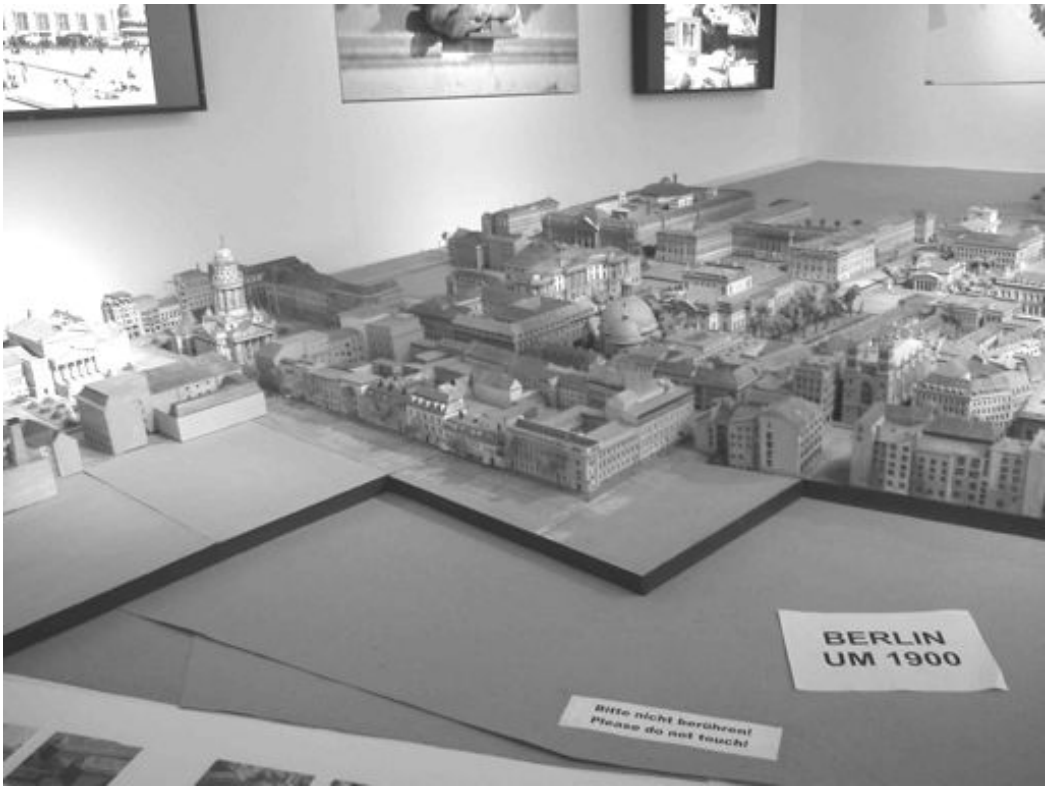
44. Ruins of the Stadtschloss (1945)

45. Palace of the Republic (1976)

46. Humboldt Box (2011)

Despite this claim, there is little detail in the exhibition about the absent palace of the republic. Furthermore, a large section of the exhibition space is occupied by a model of *Berlin Um 1900*. The window overlooking the partially excavated building site reads (in English) "CATCH A PEEK AND BE A CONTEMPORARY WITNESS". The dialogue is centred around the idea of a contemporary encounter with a (yet-to-be-built) relic of the past—an event related to the history of Germany, which has yet to happen. Even more puzzling is the fact that privately funded project does not yet have the capital to finance the construction.

47. Viewing window overlooking construction site (2011)



48. City model, Humboldt Forum (2011)

To replicate precisely what once stood on this site requires not only funding, but also a detailed knowledge of the interiors, which simply does not exist—there are no detailed plans of the original palace; the building has disappeared from the record as much as from the place where it once stood. The compromise is thus a three-walled façade that "restores the aesthetic unity" of the city centre, with an interior that would be more suitable to contemporary purposes. The claims of the Humboldt Project to restore the site as a kind of restitution to the city, and a lost past, presume that the implication of a continuity is enough to undo the extensive destruction of the area. However, this approach implies that the recent past is less significant—even, negative—and the construction of the Humboldt Forum is potentially just another symbolic act in a series of politically loaded demolitions undertaken to subjugate the terrain of the city to whatever political vision is dominant. This tendency is evident in the colonial Prussian architecture of the Brandenburg Gate and its subsequent iterations[145]; the demolitions of Speer for his *Welthauptstadt* and colossal neo-classicist buildings; the stark concrete of the GDR, or the present reactive work of critical reconstruction and economic revival (and its opposition).

Critics have responded to the plan to reconstruct the palace with scepticism—why reconstruct a relic of a distant past, on a site distinctly linked with a more recent—and, some suggest, increasingly marginalised—history?[146] The claim to restoring a lost aesthetic unity of the site is as much a claim to authority over the way in which the urban landscape should contain the past, in which a pre-war existence is seen to transcend all other uses of the site, an approach that Didem Ekici describes as a "negation", which perpetuates an "illusion of continuity between the present and a selected past—in this case a Prussian past—thus reducing the multiple layers of urban space to a linear narrative." (2007, pp. 26-7).

[145] Originally a gate of peace, it has variously symbolised war, defeat and empire building throughout its history, and continues to be controversial, particularly in relation to the quadriga on the top: "the debate in 1991 was between restoring the 1814 quadriga and the 1958 version…Berlin's leaders ceremonially rededicated the restored quadriga, with the staff of 1814-1945 as well as an artificial patina, on august 6, 1991, the two hundredth anniversary of the gate." (Ladd 1998, p. 80)

[146] For example, Phillip Oswalt believes it is a mistake to "physically erase the regime of injustice" (thelocal.de 2009) and is openly critical of the project. See also Oswalt on shrinking cities elsewhere in this thesis.

Hypothetically, anything could be built here—it is currently an empty construction site and well-used public space. What is the point in making up for the bombing and demolition of one place with the obliteration of another—whether that be the demolition of the Palace of the Republic, or the future construction of the Humboldt Forum on a public green widely used by the community for recreation? Is it enough to claim that this is a necessary opposition to the politics of fascist regimes, or is it just another attempt to submit the past to the control of the victor?

Topography of Terror (2009/2011)

At the time of reunification, the Topography of Terror was an empty, weed-covered lot, on which had previously been the headquarters of the Gestapo and the SS. The building had been demolished after the Second World War (though not until 1949), and due to its close proximity to the border, the site had remained empty ever since.[147] Ladd summarises the history of the site up to its demolition as follows:

> In the years that followed, the land was cleared of rubble and leveled, leaving no trace of the old buildings. Some of them could have been restored, but there was no will to do so. This site met the same fate as the rest of WilhelmStrasse, across the border in East Berlin, where the chancellery and the old ministries had stood. Down Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse, the less-seriously damaged ethnology Museum remained standing—and in use—until it too was demolished in the early 1960s. Between it and the vanished Gestapo headquarters, the gutted and gashed shell of the former applied art museum continued to stand alone, its future uncertain. (Ladd 1998, p. 157).

As tensions increased, *Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse* became the border between East and West, with the wall running along the street itself, and the site became a liminal space "made marginal by the wall" (Ladd, 1998 p. 160). During the 1970s, the land accumulated construction debris, and was also used as a driving track. The construction debris remain, while the "[r]utted paths left by the cars have gradually disappeared amid the weeds and trees that grew on the neglected land" (*ibid.*)

Following reunification, excavations at the site revealed "the foundation walls of the old buildings along both Niederkirchenerstrasse and Wilhelmstrasse", as well

[147] As Ladd notes: "This once feared address became one of the many stretches of neglected ruins during the immediate post-war years." (Ladd 1998, p. 157)

as "several cells of the Gestapo jail". The significance of "[t]hese ruins could not be ignored…the city government agreed to sponsor a provisional exhibition on the history of the Prinz Albrecht site…" (Ladd 1998, p. 160)

Even later, when digging the foundations for the installation of the exhibition,

> workers unexpectedly found more ruins—of what turned out to be a previously unknown outbuilding used as a kitchen by the Gestapo. The cellar walls of this building were incorporated into the exhibition, "Topography of Terror," which opened without fanfare in July 1987. (Ladd 1998, p. 160)

Everything about this memorial site was accidental, and that which was initially preserved here wasn't the usual stuff of museum or archive. Primarily located outdoors, there was little to suggest more than accidental or arbitrary preservation (which is true to circumstance). A site of fragments of rubble, marked and decaying walls, dirt tracks and information which enabled the visitor to envision what is only suggested here, stories that the fragments merely hinted at.

The exhibition of 1987 was temporary. However, a commission into the use of the site in 1989 was "opposed any substantial alteration or development of the site." (Ladd 1998, p. 162)—the Topography was to be retained as it was, not as any kind of definitive memorial, not a selective history, but a jumble of ruins. As Ladd notes, "[t]o return the land to its appearance as of 1945 would be a falsification of history…the exhibition's organizers do not want to present a selective history of the place. For example, they have insisted that the memory of forty years of unaesthetic neglect be preserved." (Ladd 1998, p. 166) That this site could have been neglected, and its history suppressed, was intended to be part of the message.

The combination of the physical location with the documentation of its past, amongst otherwise ambiguous collections of ruins and piles of dirt and detritus, weeds, small trees—in effect a landscape of waste, an abandoned lot, a no-mans-land—once served to orient a meaningless and potentially discarded jumble of remnants. The reception of the site following its initial exhibition proved that a place must be made to consider, actively, the role of the various bodies of the National Socialists in Berlin's past. In 1995, John Czaplicka described the site as a "modern

archeological dig" (Czaplicka 1995, p. 181), which served "as a symbol for the active suppression of the Nazi past and removal of its traces" (*ibid.*). Czaplicka also stated that the Topography provided "one of the most enlightening if troubling commemorative experiences in postwar Germany" (*ibid.*) in the suggestion of a flattened cityscape, strewn with rubble.

The fact that little was left of the site itself enabled the visitors to encounter only a sense of what had existed—in the remains lay the possibility of being able to confront, perhaps for the first time, the more powerful perpetrators of National Socialist crimes. That featurelessness gave significance—in the absence of elevating any one interpretation of the remnants[148].

However, the years since Ladd and Czaplicka's publications have seen the appearance of the Topography of Terror altered. When I visited in 2009, the site was mostly closed, with message boards around the exterior, and a construction site behind which the "topography" itself was hidden from me, undergoing major redevelopment.

Following the renovation of the site, "800,000 people visited the "Topography of Terror" in 2011, making the documentation center one of the most frequently visited places of remembrance in Berlin." (topographie.de 2011) Perhaps more than any other memorial site in the inner city, the Topography encompasses both the sense of a landscape—a city space—that remembers, and the need to preserve even the ephemera, even the ruins of the vanquished. Where Czaplicka noted that "The abandoned urban setting displays physical traces of past use, which are marked for the benefit of the viewer" (1995, p. 183), the site is now located in the heart of an increasingly developed city centre, and is well-occupied by visitors.

[148] For example, in 1995, Czaplicka stated "At Christian Boltanski's site-specific art work, Missing House (1990), and at two more standard public-commemorative sites in Berlin—the execution chambers used by the Nazis at the Plötzensee Prison (1952-present), where resisters were murdered by the Nazis, and the Topography of Terror (1987), at the site of the former Gestapo headquarters—one sees an interplay among facts, fascination, and beauty, between the archive and aesthetics, that mediates history in a manner that may engender a profound reflection on the meaning of past events." (Czaplicka 1995, p. 157)

As visitor numbers increase, the Topography is slowly being made to conform to a historically palatable, sanitised, homogenised and consumable version of the past. Counter to its earlier aims, it is now yet another space in which crowds of tourists come to consume Berlin's traumatic past in the form of neatly ordered information panels, collections of objects and photographs, and stark white rooms. But the Topography was originally a random pile of remnants, to be made sense of in their haphazard and fragmentary formation—the disordered refuse of the past.

Fig 49. Rubble landscaping, Topography of Terror (2011)

The teleological historicism that was particularly prevalent prior to the First and Second World Wars emerges here, despite more recent conceptions concluding that there can be no one historical truth. Amidst the remnants whose preservation is undoubtedly the product of the postmodern supposition of many histories coalescing on a site, is a narrativisation of the past, an attempt to make it more accessible through an ordered representation that apportions responsibility for events of the past, and explains how that past is to be encountered. Although there is a suggestion of making the past present in a way that is sympathetic to Benjamin's demands, on the other, the ruins and remnants of the Topography of Terror have been made to speak in a

particular way, no longer true to its aims of a preserving what, by chance, remained, without further explanation.

During my visit in 2011, I found the site to be a mostly typical tourist destination—albeit one that, like most of those in Berlin, emphasises a dark period in the history of the city. With marked paths, landscaping, and a clear expectation of what visitors want to see, and how they want to see it, the Topography was eclipsed by detailed information posts, the documentation centre and its neatly contained lawn of symbolic rubble, with crowds of people following the same path through both the indoor and outdoor exhibitions.

I was the only visitor who wandered the rest of the site, viewing the remains of the driving course, and the dirt piles that still remained. This half of the site looked like any number of vacant lots around the city, and it was evident that the visitors didn't want to experience a Topography that wasn't explicitly clear about its significance.


50 and 51. Topography visitors, and the rest of the site (2011)

A Multiplicity of Ruins

For some time, Berlin lived the material experience of Walter Benjamin's concept of history. The vanquished in an ideological battle for supremacy—between forces that pitted good and evil, and left millions of dead and unfathomable tonnes of rubble after the war. Benjamin could not have foreseen the fate of the city, to be incomplete for decades (both divided and in ruins), yet Berlin experienced the precise horror of the Angel of History, looking ahead and behind without being able to make the city

whole. After reunification, ruin propagated ruin until the entire recent past appeared broken—either in need of mending, or to be acknowledged as an epoch of fragmentation and turmoil, with two distinct experiences of Berliners competing for recognition—East and West—while simultaneously attempting to come together as one in a process of reconstruction and future-building that was equally a process of demolition and obliteration.

Svetlana Boym suggests that the city of Berlin has transformed from the post-reunification ideology of a city under construction to a "new" city (2001, p. 176). If we consider the Berlin of the 1990s to be a space of emerging and conflicting pasts, of ruined and fragmented spaces, then the later city is increasingly a site of construction and reconstruction which, as it settles on acceptable modes of acknowledging the past in the urban environment, begins to move away from valuing ruins to absorbing them into the living city in ways that can be more easily managed—a move away from a multiplicitous history, to a more universal conception of both city and past.

While the city continues to house stabilised ruins, fragments of the wall and numerous relics of a fractured past, the rubble has long been carted away, the voids have largely been built over, and the actual ruins have almost all been reconstructed, reused or renewed in some way.

For example, the *Tacheles* site (a stabilised ruin and art-gallery since 1990) is currently partially closed, its future uncertain. Writing of *Tacheles* in 2001, Svetlana Boym observed that:

> Walter Benjamin wrote that ruins help to naturalize history and are inherently dialectical. In them all the contradictions of the epochs of transition are frozen in a standstill dialectic; they are allegories of transient times. Tacheles is an inhabited ruin that is already aestheticised, estranged, reimagined. (Boym 2001, p. 208).

For Jennifer Hosek, the ruins of Berlin also hold a potential for action and habitation beyond their particular context—the site of resistance, and the suggestion of a future in ruins—but also are increasingly commodified: "…Tacheles is such an effective commercial magnet as to have rendered itself a permanent presence, at least for the moment." (2010, p. 213).

Despite this, *Tacheles* is almost certain to be "renovated out of existence" (*ibid*.) in the near future. During a visit in 2009, the site was under threat from the gentrification, and the contrast between the dank and crumbling (if vibrant) gallery and the largely renovated surroundings gave the sense of a "besieged ruin" which was "under the threat of a more radical destruction" than it had already undergone in its long transformation from Jewish department store, to ruin, to anti-museum, to suddenly valuable commodity. (Boym 2001, p. 208-209)

By the time of my second visit in 2011, the official *Tacheles* collective had taken a payment of 1 million Euros and the main attractions—café and cinema—were gone, while the courtyard was fenced off. Although (at the time of writing) some artists continue to occupy the building and host exhibitions, *Tacheles* is unlikely to remain an art space and ruin for much longer, although the developers of the site will no doubt trade on the profitable history of the building.

With the renovation of the Topography of Terror and the *Schwerbelastungskörper* between 2009 and 2011, almost every remnant site now possesses either a documentation centre, a viewing platform, or both[149]. What was once a jumbled and barely recognisable heap of ruins was first cleared—leaving the dead heart of the city—then reclaimed and rebuilt with the kind of speed that Benjamin considered characteristic of early modernity.

The question, then, is to what extent the later twentieth century approach, which matched most closely with Benjamin's hope that things may be salvaged from destructive forgetting, has now been extinguished by a resumption of narrative, linear and universal histories. While I have argued above that Berlin is a city built from

[149] Viewing platforms are increasingly common at historical sites across Berlin. The suggestion of mastery implied by panoptical surveillance and the imperial surveyorship of a past to be conquered is emphasised by the touristic provision of such platforms—any monument, memorial or remnant of significance has a platform to augment and speed the process of comprehension. From the Humboldt Box and Topography of Terror (which incorporate viewing platforms into their structure) to the Berlin Wall Memorial and the *Schwerbelastungskörper*, with their incongruous metal staircases leading to nowhere.

ruins, whose past is broadly understood to be fractured and fragmented—certainly not the conception emphasised by progress-driven narratives of the past—the further the city moves from the era of ruin and decay, the more its intentionally preserved ruins and remnants are concerned with commodification, accessibility, and closed or set versions of history.

Though still valuable as a test for Benjamin's conception of an accessible past that persists in the present, where else does one find this fractured and fragmented past, if not in the rubble hills, exposed foundations, National Socialist relics, and wall/monuments that make up the tourist-trail of Berlin's topography of memory?

The modern city-space of Berlin provides a case-study of the most intensely concentrated catastrophic burden of historical change, which in its extreme manifestation destroyed the physical landscape of the city, so great was the rupture caused by the events of the era. The discussion of Benjamin's history and memory here becomes a discussion of material and memorial. To consider the history of Berlin is to understand the linear version of the city's recent history, the choices made, the weight of bombs dropped or rubble carted away, the lives lost, the date the attacks began or were halted, the years it took to rebuild. Another approach is to encounter the city as the site of its own fate and destiny, a multiplicity of recollection, event and topography—a theatre, for "memory is not an instrument for exploring the past, but its theatre. It is the medium of past experience, just as the earth is the medium in which dead cities lie buried." (*SW 2:2,* p. 611). It is not reconstructing an exact moment, but rather bringing the past into the present, which is brought on by experience in space. The rest of the passage, in which Benjamin uses a metaphor of excavation, proposes that recollection--whether collective or biographical--makes the historical content of that space and time appear near, just as the excavation of material from the past makes that era suddenly present, the lost features interpenetrate the moment of encounter.

The conflict caused by debates on Berlin's ruins and renovations reveals the challenge of managing a fractured past within traditional historical frameworks. Fractured by forgetting, fractured by the voids formed through absent people, forgotten years, stranded generations, contrasting and conflicting politics and

symbolism, multiple versions of truth and history. The ruins of Berlin demonstrate the potential of sites of ruin to be particularly affective in relation to encountering or perceiving a landscape as a historical map or tapestry. Remnants are seen to be connected in their fragmentation to a larger whole, in the case of Berlin that whole was (and is) perceived as a lost city, a destroyed city, a dead city; a forgotten or neglected or lingering past[150].

This approach is threefold: it is one of personal experience, a search for traces and reclamation of relics, and it is concerned with a process of fragmentation that engenders a force of relentless turmoil. However, procedural history generates a perpetual state of non-radical destruction, generative obsolescence. This is only to be countered in an approach, like that of Benjamin's historical materialist, that values the discarded fragments, and explodes the temporal continuum of linear history in order to allow the past to persist, to oppose the victorious forces that would level the enduring topography of the past to rubble.

Rolf Tiedemann's 'Dialectics at a standstill' summarises Benjamin's opposition to this force: "Benjamin devised his dialectic at a standstill in order to make such traces visible, to collect the "trash of history" and to "redeem" them for its end." (*AP*, p. 945). This task infused Benjamin's work, and informs his desire to oppose progress[151].

The radical change in perception, relativistic thinking, historical preservation and politics which would be required to embark on the path to a history of forgotten, neglected, decaying, fractured, dying things is opposed by the constant state of "as is"—which is, itself, actually a constant state of emergency, or pending crises which perpetuate the march of history as progress.

Benjamin's "catastrophic antihistoricism" (Rabinbach 1997, p. 8), which confronted the wreckage of the past in an attempt to defeat anticipatory investment in

[150] Kathleen Stewart's notions of poetics and affect make use of such an approach to the past, and underpin the framework of this thesis. See *Space on the Side of the Road* (1996) and *Ordinary Affects* (2007). The following chapter on Detroit discusses space and place theory, and Stewart's approach to modern (if not urban) ruins.
[151] A concept dealt with in the previous chapter.

a hypothetical future time, and set an apocalyptic vision against forces of progress and accounts of history in terms of victory and war. In casting faith in causality as inviting apocalypse, Benjamin thus encourages scepticism towards any presumption of stability in linear progress. Though Benjamin did not live to see the destruction of his home city, his apocalyptic configurations of a present haunted by the potentialities of past and future apocalypse are identified by Rabinbach as bearing a relation to post-Second World War literature and responses to the effects of the war, which are "the philosophical analogy to the panoramas of cataclysm" that emerged in the photographs of ruinscapes following the war. (Rabinbach 1997, p. 9)

This concept of apocalypse can be seen not only in the angel of history (as noted by Rabinbach), but in Benjamin's letters[152], in his preoccupation with redemption and illumination, and in his genuine fear that the pursuit of material progress and investment in future fame could only result in the fundamental fracturing of historical experience.

For Benjamin, the combination of longing, remembrance, and fragments or remnants paves the way for an approach to the past which values the link between events, experiences and moments which, though linear in their initial manifestation, now exist as scattered fragments—material and biographical--of a broader, collective, redeemable history. These events can be conjured if they are understood in the context of figurative ruins littering the landscape of history—as traces, as abandoned, forgotten or neglected things, as overgrown and obscured sites of past events that contain within them the interpenetration of past and present.

The ruins of this chapter were and are the product of the perceptions and forces with which Benjamin was concerned following the First World War. However, in more recent times, they were met with a promising reticence toward a single, unified past—even once the city was no longer divided. The disinclination to emphasise a single version of the past—a linear narrative or whole account—is demonstrated in the approach to Berlin's recent history which casts the past as

[152] For example, in his letter of the 7th of May 1940, Benjamin writes to Theodor Adorno of epic and reflexive forgetting in relation to aura and childhood memory (Benjamin 1994, pp. 628-635), concepts which cannot be expanded here.

fragmented and multiplicitous and perceives many temporalities in the landscape, manifested in ruins, voids, and absences—often memorialising what is no longer present. This approach has been shared by many of the parties toward which Benjamin was most critical—journalists, political leaders, architects and planners—however, it is possible that the temporary emphasis on the importance of remnants in Berlin is dwindling, giving rise to the supposition that the years of debate on Berlin's ruins may have some affinity with Benjamin's hypothetical moment of suspended catastrophe: "Redemption depends on the tiny fissure in the continuous catastrophe." (*SW 4*, p. 185).

The relationship between catastrophe and progress discussed above presents the possibility for the ruins of Berlin to offer a suspension of catastrophe itself in the inhabitable annihilation of the past, and intimation of endangered histories and changeable futures embodied in the present. To suspend catastrophe requires an investment in the discarded, the broken, the detritus of a force that looks only to the future. The relationship between the aims of the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin's work on a philosophy of history, and his writing on Berlin and memory, is summarised in the following discussion by Peter Szondi and Harvey Mendelsohn:

> A knowledge of ruin obstructed Benjamin's view into the future and allowed him to see future events only in those instances where they had already moved into the past. This ruin is the ruin of his age. A Berlin Childhood belongs, as the epilogue observes, in the orbit of the prehistory of the modern world on which Benjamin worked during the last fifteen years of his life and which is called *Paris, die Hauptstadt des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Szondi & Mendelsohn 1978, p. 501).

For Benjamin's generation confronted with the currents of modernity—the acceleration of the churning of history and the proliferation of change—Berlin became the victim of a procedural history, one in which things came into being to wink out again, in ever narrowing time frames. This accelerated process also applies to ruination—the modern city is a powerhouse of material and metaphysical transformation of the very conditions of existence and experience. Such profound change, hastened first by modernity, then by mass warfare, was followed by National Socialist rule beginning in 1933 that initiated mass-demolition in preparation for the construction of a "world capital" that never eventuated, and with the closing of the Second World War brought catastrophic ruin upon the city. The division of the city

brought a similar proliferation of major alteration to the landscape—most notably the "scar" of the wall—and has again undergone an era of major construction and development in recent years. A brief armistice—the pause for consideration after reunification—is perhaps the most promising era in the city's recent past, during which the reflection on a rubble-strewn historical landscape gave credence to Benjamin's hope that an approach like that of the historical materialist might wrest something of the past from the victorious enemy, and interrupt the perpetual progression into a "homogenous empty time" that generates such ruin.

Chapter 3—**Ruin space: Detroit in decay and decline**

> Confronting the ruins of the Jamf ÖlfabrikenWerke (Jamf Petroleum Factory Works), in the light that breaks "some night at too deep an hour to explain away," Thomas Pynchon's Enzian reaches an "extraordinary understanding. This serpentine slag-heap…*is not a ruin at all*. It is in perfect working order." If readers of Walter Benjamin sometimes grasp the Passagen-Werk in an Enzian-like epiphany, at other moments they apprehend it in a fashion more suitable to Coleridge. Briefly imagining this text in all its completed majesty, they see fully developed concepts where Benjamin left only fragments. (Margaret Cohen , 'Walter Benjamin's Phantasmagoria' p. 1))

> Detroit, the Motor City, was once the symbol of our national industrial prowess, the home of an innovative automobile industry that played a key role in the development of the modern middle class. Its engineers created the production line, and its firms soon dominated the world in the manufacturing of cars and trucks. Because of its specialization in the production of heavy equipment during World War II, the city earned the sobriquet Arsenal of Democracy (Farley, Danziger and Holzer, *Detroit Divided*, p. 1)

> The place that invented planned obsolescence has itself become obsolete. (Camilo José Vergara, *American Acropolis*, p. 18)

This chapter is concerned with the city of Detroit, which continues to be in a state of severe decline following the closure of the majority of the manufacturing plants that provided most of the employment for the once-booming industrial city.[153] Between 1960 and 2008, Detroit's population declined from almost 1.7 million, to just under 1 million residents.

The result of this decline is mass abandonment, not only of numerous, expansive manufacturing complexes (such as the Packard plant, see below), but also of high rise apartments (the Brewster Projects, for example), grand hotels (Lee Plaza), and many residential blocks in the once densely populated inner-city. Churches, schools, and other municipal buildings (libraries, police stations and court houses) are also in decay, leaving one of America's largest cities a slowly depopulating pile of rubble; a vast playground of unkempt open spaces and disordered jumbles of

[153] The reasons for these closures are myriad and complex, and include ongoing racial tensions and the 12th Street riot, an increase in offshore manufacturing, and a general decline in the fortunes of both Ford and Packard. For a summary, see *Life in the Ruins of Detroit* (McGraw 2007).

discarded objects; a storehouse of unguarded resources (lead, copper, window frames, fireplaces, floorboards, school books, car bodies); an inestimable heap of dormant, and fading, potentials.

The earliest awareness of this type of urban decay can be traced to the 1970s, when major cities (and particularly the industrial hubs of the West) began to experience population decline following job-losses, particularly in manufacturing. It is from this period that many familiar images of inner-city slums and decline originate—burnt-out cars, rubbish filled lots and boarded up buildings. Decentralisation in the form of suburban sprawl also left the inner areas of many cities with numerous empty buildings that were not easy to deal with, while deindustrialisation also produced mass abandonment on a scale rarely seen in the modern era.[154]

In an urban context, this combination of a shrinking population, a reduction in quality of life and services and visible neglect of the built environment produced the undesirable city in decline, a city that would harbour socially undesirable ills in its abandoned buildings, vacant lots and empty streets[155]. Ever in contrast to such ruins, the modern city is frequently considered in terms of progress and newness—even in the context of urban decay, renewal, reconstruction and momentum are emphasised.

The modern city that Le Corbusier idealised in his praise of Haussmann's efforts is very much the city that Detroit developed into during the first half of the twentieth century. Despite Le Corbusier's lament on the motorcar as a "mortal danger" to an ordered city (in Kasinitz 1995, p. 103), Detroit was built on a Haussmannesque plan of boulevards during its early boom-years. Le Corbusier's

[154] See Berger's *Drossscape* (2007) and Cowie & Heathcott's *Beyond the Ruins* (2003). Periods of economic decline such as the Great Depression also generated urban decay and abandonment, especially in Detroit, but the scale and particularly the inclusion of high-rise and large building complexes is unique to more recent history.
[155] Writing in 1982, Berman identifies New York, and the Bronx in particular as "an image of modern ruin and devastation". This is one of the first usages of the term "modern ruin". He continues "The Bronx, where I grew up, has even become an international code word for our epoch's accumulated urban nightmares: drugs, gangs, arson, murder, terror, thousands of buildings abandoned, neighbourhoods transformed into garbage-and brick-strewn wilderness." (Berman 1995, p. 131)

influence on modern architecture is significant, and his expectation that the imposition of order would perpetuate the renewal of the city has continued to have dominance over what we expect in urban spaces. Yet, if Detroit was the epitome of the modern, new, ever-developing city that Le Corbusier advocated—what of its colossal decline?

As a "shrinking city"[156], Detroit has suffered from more than a loss of population—there is a lack of infrastructure and opportunity common to many deindustrialising cities. What is different about Detroit, however, is its previous status as a premier American city—not only in terms of its manufacturing output, but as a cultural icon—the stereotypical city in which any American family might prosper.

Though other cities are in a state of decline, few other cities decline on such a scale. Outside the destruction of war or disaster, or impact of major political upheaval, this level of mass-ruin is unprecedented. As John Gallagher (2010) argues, the extent of decay in Detroit is largely attributable to the dreams which built the city: accessible home ownership, vast spaces of mass production (specifically car manufacturing plants) that provided plentiful employment, and the freedom of the driving culture itself which demanded expressways and provided little public transport infrastructure, leaving the city highly vulnerable to even minor fluctuations in population.[157] The extreme popularity of American-made cars in the post-war boom period, as well as the emergence of Detroit as a working middle-class ideal for American families wanting well-paid unskilled work and large homes is in many ways what makes Detroit's extreme decline possible.

[156] Philipp Oswalt and the Federal Cultural Foundation in Berlin generated a "shrinking cities" project during 2002-2008, to investigate the phenomenon of deindustrialisation in urban contexts. The possibilities for shrinking cities such as Dresden and Leipzig in Germany; Manchester and Liverpool in England; Post-Soviet cities in Russia, and rust belt cities in the US (among others) are considered in through a variety of approaches in Vol 1 of *Shrkinking Cities* (Oswalt, Bittner & Fishman 2005).

[157] Gallagher (2010, pp. 21-34) notes that Detroit's decline, in population numbers alone, is not unique. However, he shares the observations of Farley et al. (2000) that the sheer mass of abandonment, and the size of the individual sites and empty spaces themselves is virtually unprecedented, even among other American "rust belt" cities such as Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Buffalo, Cleveland and St Louis.

The city was the heart of an American manufacturing complex and cultural empire which produced more than tonnes of metal: Detroit was the testing ground for the production line under Henry Ford, and generative of the eponymous system of mass production and wealth distribution[158]. Early developments in reinforced concrete construction, car manufacture and the generation of electricity also figure in the history of the city. In later years, Detroit featured in the development of iconic pop-culture—Rock 'n' Roll music had deep roots among the Jazz, blues and soul cultures of the city while Berry Gordy's Motown records was founded and flourished there (the name, of course, is a play on Detroit's status as the heart of the American motor industry), and, later, Techno music.[159].

Just as Paris of the Nineteenth Century was for Benjamin a foundation of a particular kind of modernity, conditions in Detroit so often echoed or (very often) foregrounded important social, economic, and cultural developments of the last century. For Benjamin, constructions in glass and iron were of immense significance to the emergence of nineteenth century industrialisation and consumer culture (not just the arcades, but exhibition halls like London's Crystal Palace). So, too, the reconstruction of Paris by Haussmann, the use of gas lighting, and other objects and spaces produced by that culture, were identified by Benjamin (in *The Arcades Project*, broadly, and more succinctly in 'Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century') as bearing a particular origin or home in Paris of that era[160]. Similarly, in twentieth

[158] If the ruins of Detroit are, in many ways, the symbolic ruin of Ford's dreams, and the shared dreams of American imperialism, and the physical ruin produced by such dreaming, then the ruins of Fordlandia are equally interesting. Constructed as part of a project to grow rubber in the Amazon, for use in Ford's manufacturing, Fordlandia was a thoroughly failed venture, which ended in ruin twenty years after it was founded. These ruins still stand (Grandin 2009). Similarly abandoned is Iron Mountain, a manufacturing town in Michigan (Grandin 2009, p. 12). Greg Grandin also notes a possible progenitor to Detroit's decay as early as the Great Depression, when Ford moved his administration offices and some production out of the inner-city of Detroit (2009, p. 241).

[159] For details on the significance of the city to American culture, development and economy, see *Detroit Divided* (Farley et al. 2000), particularly Chapter 2: 'Detroit's History: Racial, Spatial, and Economic Changes'; *AfterCulture* (Herron 1993), a series of essays about living in Detroit; *Corporate Wasteland* (High & Lewis 2007), particularly Chapter 5 'Gabriel's Detroit'; the self-published *63 Alfred Street* (Kossik 2010) and the series of articles by George Steinmetz including 'Drive-by Shooting' (2006) and 'Harrowed Landscapes' (2008).

[160] For many examples, see Convolutes A, F and H, in particular in *AP*.

century Detroit, the development of the production line, and the use of reinforced concrete; the early adoption of electric lighting; the construction of boulevards along a directly Haussmann-inspired plan; the later construction of some of the first urban freeways; the development of the suburb of Highland Park as a model for working middle-class living; the emergence of labour rights, set wages and guaranteed employment, all clearly situate Detroit as a key city of the post-war era in America.

Detroit can be seen as the originary space for a post-war mass-culture of consumption and dreaming: the centre of mass-production in the US, the birthplace of the "Model T" Ford, the assembly line, testing ground for reinforced concrete. This, in contrast to the glass-roofed arcades, and the goods they held.

52. Collapsed Section, Packard Plant (2009)

Even in its decay, Detroit contains representative conditions for other cities in the United States—the rust-belt phenomenon, race riots and subsequent "white-flight", the decentralisation and mass migration to suburbia, the emergence of ghettos, the extremes of wealth and poverty are all familiar challenges faced by American cities since the late 1970's. When America was booming, Detroit was "The Paris of the Midwest". As crime, disadvantage and blight dominated cities like New York and Chicago in the 80's, Detroit had the highest rate of population decline, abandonment, and homicide in the country[161]. Now, as the Global Financial Crisis inspires a rethink of the basic principles of capitalism, Detroit is emerging as a site for alternatives to the system which built, and then condemned, the city—a concept covered by Gallagher in his "re-imagining" of Detroit as a new kind of modern city: defined by urban prairie and agriculture, self-sufficiency in energy and economy, driven by green initiatives, with cycleways and better public transport, more community space, "walkable" neighbourhoods, and—unlike everything that previously caused the city to prosper, and then decline—a localised economy (Gallagher 2010, pp. 149-151).

Detroit, a city once symbolic of the American Dream, is (in ruins) potentially a site of opposition and deconstruction of many of the fundamental tenets of that ideology. As a remnant of the high-point of an era—and an increasingly decrepit remnant—the entire city (as well as select, specific ruins) present the failures of progress, reveal the reality of obsolescence which is inherent in linear progress, and may also suggest, perhaps for the first time in generations, that shrinking is as natural to urban spaces as growth and prosperity are seen to be. The pursuit of material progress is by no means a guarantee against ruin, and the illusion of stability contained within such a pursuit in fact generates ruin and upheaval.

Benjamin's fascination with obsolescence and decline, from the 1920s onward, paves the way for a reading of decline, of failure, and ruination as ordinary, while also giving rise to the possibility of rescue. These sites that were once the place of banal daily repetition on behalf of the workers are split apart, rotting. One way to

[161]These details are sourced generally from a variety of sources (including news media and personal conversations in Detroit in 2011), but are concisely summarised in the introduction to *Detroit Divided,* titled: 'Three Centuries of Growth and Conflict' (Farley, Danziger & Holzer 2000, p. 1-13).

see this is a tragedy for the workers and the community, and undoubtedly this is the case on many levels. Another is to view these sites with regret and nostalgia—to remember the "good times" of the past. However, to move beyond the conditions that generated this decay, to consider that there might be, in fact, an alternative to a churning modernity of increasing speed and insistence, these ruins can be used to pose not a melancholy lament for a future in ruins, but rather the truth of modernity as a destructive force, in which progress, fashion and obsolescence necessitates mass ruin on a scale that increases exponentially with the investment in consumption, material advancement, teleological history, and perpetual movement away from the recently outmoded.

To use Benjamin's work in relation to a city he never visited, in a state of decay that he would never have encountered[162], this chapter adapts several concepts for use in modern, urban, ruin spaces. The first is the proposition, borrowed most directly from Sigrid Weigel (though considered by many others in a similar way), of an image-space in which lived experience coalesces with Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image, to provide a mode of engagement that brings the past into the present. The second, proposition is to expand Benjamin's concept of critique beyond creative works and their concepts and contexts to include the built environment and lived space[163]—an approach that intertwines the metaphorical city of ruin with a physically ruined city, and which allows the kind of urban experiences that Benjamin identified in Surrealism to merge with the illuminating potential of fragmentation. This combined approach frames contemporary ruins in relation to catastrophe, progress, and history, presenting them as sites which can interrupt progress on a number of levels—as readable texts, as experiences which emerge (or persist) as images, as portals that make a critical reading of the past and the present possible, and as material reminders of decline as stability, and "status quo" as both catastrophe and emergency.

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[162] Although Benjamin wrote of the decline of the arcades, the dilapidation of the dock areas around Marseilles, the run-down back streets where he encountered prostitutes in Berlin, and Berlin following WWI and during the depression, there is nothing to indicate that he encountered anything like the large-scale ruins of Detroit.
[163] This isn't a significant stretch for Benjamin's theory if only because, as Erik Steinskog suggests, architecture is also a work of art (Steinskog 2005, pp. 222-3).

In visiting the ruins of Detroit, I address the question of what a series of crumbling remnants can do—can they tell the viewer or explorer about a swiftly receding era that once defined a quintessentially modern American metropolis—a city now defined by decay and decline? What are the ruins of the recently outmoded, of the dreams that built modern America actually *like*?

In a New York Times article of 2009, Bob Herbert summarised the city in the following introductory lines:

> Detroit.
>
> In many ways, it's like a ghost town. It's eerily quiet. Driving around in the middle of the afternoon, in a city that once was among the most productive on the planet, you see very little traffic, minimal commercial activity, hardly any pedestrians.
>
> What you'll see are endless acres of urban ruin, block after block and mile after mile of empty and rotting office buildings, storefronts, hotels, apartment buildings and private homes. It's a scene of devastation and disintegration that stuns the mind, a major American city that still is home to 900, 000 people but which looks at times like a cross between postwar Berlin and the ruin of an ancient civilisation. (Herbert 2009)

Written in the same year that I visited Detroit, this account from the *New York Times* resonates with my own experiences of the city—the contrast with Berlin is extreme, certainly, but the level of devastation is, as Herbert emphasises, akin to the mass-destruction of war or major social collapse. Similarly, the following passage from the collaborative publication *Stalking Detroit* describes more abstract qualities—the hauntings, the emptiness, the spectres—of a city that persists despite catastrophic rejection and absence:

> With awe, both dread and wonder, the gaze glances out over the barren landscape and registers the presence of absence". It is space with "streets leading to nowhere", "differentiating nothingness" and "Detroit persists, suspended between an obsolete, abandoned past, and an unimagined future (Young, Daskalakis & Waldheim 2001, p. 79).

This quote, part of a collage-like selection of writings, shows that any ruin site in Detroit is a microcosm of the entire inner city area. Although there are pockets that

flourish—particularly around the university, and in the downtown district—you are never out of sight of abandonment and decay, on varying scales.

The Packard Plant

53. Packard Plant windows (2009)

Benjamin writes of "the rooms in early factories" as places of dreaming about "future greatness". (*CP, SW 4,* p. 186) These dreams are swiftly overcome, evidenced in the inhabitable dead remnants of a period of prosperity. "Baroque allegory sees the corpse only from the outside. Baudelaire sees it also from within." (*CP, SW 4,* p. 186) The allegorical shattering that sees the innards of a dead modernity can be likened to wanderings in the ruins of Detroit's accessible exposed remains, and also to the revelation of the true face of a city, as the Surrealists attempted in Paris.

54. Packard Innards (2009)

The photographs I took while visiting these ruins are not at all the same thing as souvenirs that are the dead effects of an estranged past, the dislocation of human beings from a living past (*SW 4,* p. 183). The collapsing Packard Plant is a playground of history, a collection of rusty and ruined things (and spaces) that reveal more of the present moment than a dock filled with immaculate vehicles—in their mystifying newness—ever can.

The Packard Plant holds within its walls one of the largest spaces of urban ruin in the United States. (Walls is a generous description the grid of voids that make up most of the remaining buildings on the site). Within that ruin space one can find an array of discarded objects or, in many cases, not-quite or no-longer objects. Things on their way to "being no more". Pages ripped out of books, eyes from stuffed toys, and furniture without legs, doors, and drawers. Miscellaneous legs, doors and drawers without their surrounds. Half a table. A room piled with slightly burnt shoes.

I imagine that if one set out to find any particular combination of objects, they would, somewhere in a ruin, exist. An endless iteration of the rejected, outmoded, unsuccessful, unloved that pass out of dream, out of desire and constellate with one

another until they become those things that "tomorrow will never know", objects of "bygone times" (*SW 4,* p. 334) which overcome the ruin and its previous life, just as the outdated is overcome by progress, "the dead departed Years [*sic*] leaning over Heaven's balconies, in old fashioned dresses" (Baudelaire in *SW 4,* p. 334), to which Baudelaire resigns himself. But in resignation, Baudelaire transcends the limits of such decay—he knows the past resides in the life of such dead effects. To leave their corpses untouched is to condemn them to the earthly hell of modernity (*AP,* [N9a, 1] p. 473).

55. Burnt Shoes, Packard Plant (2009)

Things that should be elsewhere have been moved and appear on every available surface: two speed boats lying next to one another give the impression of having been launched from above. A urinal is parked on the concrete driveway. A door, along with its frame, lies on the ground, fractured as if it has been pushed from one of the higher levels. A toy duck has been carefully placed in a cleared space on the floor of an office next to a large tree branch and a collection of short metal rods that look like damaged batteries (but could also be bullet casings). While clothing is scattered about everywhere—in bags, in piles, in boxes—here and there is a shirt hanging from a convenient protrusion; a hoody draped across the half-table; several pairs of shoes placed side-by-side.

56. Half Table, Packard Plant (2009)

There are compelling and affective things going on here: no two windows break in quite the same way. Each shard possesses its own unusual shape, particular sharpness, and odd glint. Paint peels away, revealing in patches an uncountable array of patterns and colours, and showering the ground with speckles and flakes, like confetti. Depending on the season, grass sprouts out of every possible crevice, flowers blanket rusty-fenced meadows, snow piles up unhindered on sills and against entrances; rubbish gathers in particular corners, or flutters and is strewn about.

While Benjamin resisted the baroque conceptualisation of melancholy and eternal transience, and considered the destructive aspect of modernity in terms of catastrophe, he did not necessarily frame decay and decline as solely negative: the ruination caused by the push for progress and desire for increasingly fetishised commodities could, in fact, be opposed in ruin. That is, the myth, the illusion constructed by the increasingly detached material products of an era can, in their decay, reveal the dreams of the era as just that—improperly invested imaginings. This is in contrast to a redemptive investment in that which is set to disappear—an investment in revolutionary potentialities of history.

Where urban decay is seen only pejoratively, the ruinous nature of progress and modernity is made clear. The anti-ruin (also, pro-progress) sentiment so often directed toward modern ruins is summarised in the following by Alan Berger (who coins the unappealing term “Drosscape” in his publication of the same name):

> North America's manufacturing and resource towns have grown old since their heyday during the 1940s and 1950s. Industries that once symbolized modernity and progress have come to represent an antiquated past that should be put behind us. (2007, p. 7)

This perception of the recent past as something outdated to "be put behind us" is the very attitude in which Benjamin identifies the tendency toward utopian dreaming, a central concern of both 'Paris, The Capital of the Nineteenth Century' and the unfinished *Arcades Project* (of which the former was a model). Quoting Michelet, Benjamin states that "[e]ach epoch dreams the one to follow". (*SW 3*, p. 33). He then relates this notion directly to utopian imaginings of the future, and the wish images that this dreaming generates as mass production, fabrication, and transience come to permeate material construction from the nineteenth century onward. The question, then, is: did we dream these ruins?

In some sense, the answer must be yes, but this holds a potential within it. To dream is to precipitate awakening. A configuration of Michelet's quote from 'Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century' states that it is "[t]he 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…". (*SW 3*, p. 43) A dialectical approach to the recent past, therefore, is one which, as in Paris of the nineteenth century, sees the ruin of the present before it has even begun. For Benjamin:

> …it was exactly the outmoded state of these wish-symbols that attracted him to them. Having lost their dream-power over the collective, they had acquired a historical power to "awaken" it, which meant recognising "precisely this dream as a dream. It is in this moment that the historian takes upon himself the task of dream interpretation" (V, 580). (Benjamin quoted in Buck-Morss 1995, p. 6)

Tiedemann shares this insight, stating that "[i]nsofar as dialectical thinking tries to define as well as to expedite the end of decaying bourgeois culture, it became for Benjamin, the "organ of historical awakening" (*AP*, p. 939)

The materials for the 'Exposé of 1935' sketch the relationship between awakening, dialectics and decline, in the following order:

> First dialectical sage: the arcade changes from a place of splendour to a place of decay
>
> Second Dialectical stage: the arcade changes from an unconscious experience to something consciously penetrated
>
> Not yet conscious knowledge of what-has-been. Structure of what-has-been at this stage. Knowledge of what has been as a becoming aware, one that has the structure of awakening.
>
> (*AP*, p. 907)

In decay, the arcades become sites that can precipitate awakening. Furthermore, in the same section, Benjamin frames the dream as both a historical and a collective phenomenon. For the collective to wake from the dream, the individual must be able to conduct themselves by some canon, in some manner that reliably makes awakening possible (AP, 907). However, the collective shows a clear tendency to avoid power of the decaying and outmoded, even as they cling to tradition:

> Corresponding to the form of the new means of production, which in the beginning is still ruled by the form of the old (Marx), are images in the collective consciousness in which the new is permeated with the old. 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. (*SW 3*, p. 33)

Generally speaking, the drive of the new, which is central to commodity cultures, tends to devalue and distance itself from an unfashionable, outmoded past—"all that is antiquated". The problem with breaking away from the immediate past, as Benjamin states, is that:

> These tendencies tend to 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 [*Urgeschichte*]—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. (*SW 3*, pp. 33-34).

This notion of utopia is directly related to linear, teleological history, and the force of progress, as well as the dreaming collective: "The phantasmagoric

understanding of modernity as a chain of events that leads with unbroken, historical continuity to the realization of social utopia, a "heaven" of class harmony and material abundance—this conceptual constellation blocked revolutionary consciousness" (Buck-Morss 1989, p. 95). To oppose this essentially false utopian vision requires "A construction of history that looks backward, rather than forward, at the destruction of material nature as it *has actually taken place*, provides a dialectical contrast to the futurist myth of historical progress (which can only be sustained by forgetting what has happened)." (*ibid.*). Where ruins stand against such forgetting, the myths, illusions and phantasmagoria of an era are exposed as the utopian wishes, and insubstantial imagistic imaginings that do not have a solid bearing in destruction as it takes place in the material, lived city.

Detroit is on a grand scale what the Paris Arcades were for Benjamin in the 1930s. Where Paris pioneered the early forms of consumer and mass culture and urban industrialisation, Detroit was the originator of the affordable motor car, the five dollar working day, and the American middle class. Rather than the site from which commodities are pedalled, these are the places where the collective dreams of a generation were built, in the first self-contained middle-income suburbs in the country, and in the motor cars which, as they proliferated across the country, followed the progression of working American's aspirations for material success, which represented the manifestation of the benefits of capitalism and democratic freedom as central tenets of American identity.

Benjamin identified a destructive momentum in our obsession with the new and devaluation of the recently outmoded. To oppose this force of progress that leaves rejected ephemera and epic history as the predominant remains of the past, Benjamin indulged in an experimental configuration of remnants—forgotten literary and art works, as well as material fragments—as images or concepts that he assembled at the point of their oblivion "where the tension between dialectical opposites is greatest" (*AP,* [N10a, 3] p. 475). Dialectically, transient material remnants hold the promise of the new and the truth of decline. As an example, the "Arcades are such monuments of being-no-more. And the energy that works in them is dialectics." (*AP,* [Dº,4] p. 833) Benjamin suggests that at the point of disappearance, one finds the potential for a

reversal in which "the moment of their ceasing to be" (*AP,* [Dº,4] p. 833) distils the essence of both the structure and the epoch, and revolutionises the site.[164]

Beyond the ruin as a metaphor for destructive, shocking modernity, this thesis reads urban, modern ruins primarily as discarded remnants and inverts Benjamin's imagining of the modern city as ruin by investigating the potential of modern ruins in terms of urban space as much as commodity fetish, awakening and materialism. As Gilloch suggests: "In stressing the centrality of the commodity, one must be careful that one does not, as Buck-Morss tends to, lose sight of its location and setting: the city as the space of ruin." (Gilloch 1996, p. 138). Though Gilloch is not expressly referring to the physical ruin of a city in decline, it is important to note that Benjamin's theory can be applied beyond commodity fetish, beyond objects alone, to the space of the city itself.

Modern ruins are the detritus of contemporary society. Whatever the specific conditions of their abandonment and decay, they are, fundamentally, rejected, outmoded or surplus to need. They exist as the result, and in the face of, expansion, development and the desire for perpetual renewal that has dominated conceptions of the city since Haussmann's boulevards cut through the old *quartiers* of Paris. In the case of mass abandonment (and even more particularly, industrial ruins), vast sites that were recently of significance become useless, hollowed out, and fall to pieces. But beyond a consideration of ruins as bearing a similarity to Benjamin's adopted ephemera or (as actual material remnants) a modern equivalent of the classical ruins which grounded the metaphysics of romantic theatre, the argument is expanded here to elevate such ruins to the same status—with the same potential—as the Parisian arcades.

Impossible City

In Benjamin's work, almost every figure, every idea, each concept reiterated refers to a diversity of other concepts, figures, and meanings. In this section, the distinctions between lived experience, symbol and metaphor, allegory, image and space—between being, seeing, and thinking (ontology, perception and criticism)—are blurred. Just as

[164] See especially [D°4] and [D°6] of *AP*

Buck-Morss contends that Benjamin's ideas are intricately bound to one another, and to every object, character, or political urgency with which he is occupied[165], the argument for "reading" modern ruins presumes a multiplicity of points of encounter: a blunt reading of abandoned buildings as personal experience and physical decay (the literal object, like the declining Arcades themselves); a related reading of modern, urban ruins as the manifestation of obsolescence brought about through the drive for material progress (like the outmoded objects within the arcades); modern ruins as sites of critique, made possible by temporal distance and physical dislocation combined with presence and persistence (like the objects of a collector, but also literary and art criticism, and as architectural works)[166]; modern ruins as both past and present (like the Arcades, again, as thresholds leading to an earlier era); and then the two most abstract readings: modern ruins as ur-histories and modern ruins as dialectical images, containing past and present, and embodying the simultaneous stasis and movement, the reflection that generates historical possibility, that is held within such an "image".

Throughout *The Dialectics of Seeing*, Buck-Morss assembles and reassembles various fragments from *The Arcades Project*, combining concepts, objects, symbols and images to conclude that "The *Passagen-Werk* is a historical lexicon of the capitalist origins of modernity, a collection of concrete, factual images of urban experience. Benjamin handled these facts as if they were politically charged, capable of transmitting revolutionary energy across generations."(1989, p. 336). This revolutionary energy is concerned with overcoming progress and its polarity, decline, they are related tasks, for (to reiterate a key from the introduction), "Overcoming the concept of "progress", and overcoming the concept of "period of decline" are two sides of one and the same thing" (*AP,* [N2,5] p. 460).

Just as Benjamin identified in obsolete and declining spaces (specifically, the arcades), the possibility to locate the entire ur-history of a lost epoch, the large-scale

[165] For example, Buck-Morss infuses references to trash, residues, traces, remnants, dust and ruins, as well as recalled events and experiences, with both concrete objects and images (cited and printed throughout the work) and abstract concepts of "revolutionary Marxist pedagogy" (1989, p. 218), mythic awakening (1989 p. 261), phantasmagoria (1989 p. 95), and so on, combining lived experience and philosophy in a way that Benjamin often implied, but was not quite so explicit about.

[166] A clue to the broad potential of Benjamin's criticism can be found in 'The first form of criticism that refuses to judge' (*SW 2:1*, p. 372)

ruins of Detroit—in form, in variety, in concentration—are ruins which can be read as remnants of a fading epoch. These remnants are those of a receding past, which becomes less and less defined as we move beyond the era. To quote Buck-Morss again, for "Walter Benjamin (who was describing an earlier era), for us at the threshold of the twenty-first century, the out-of-date ruins of the recent past appear as residues of a dreamworld." (1995, p. 4). Furthermore, these remnants provide the revolutionary potential of the recently outmoded—transitory portals to a past, sites that interpenetrate the present and future, they offer in their impossible but total decay the potential to overcome both progress and their own imminent decline.

The impossible city of Detroit, in avoiding the typical progression from slum to renewal (or, as a city in transition between the two), reveals the precariousness of an urban vision, which assumes perpetual growth and frames decay and decline as deviance. In ruins, Detroit stands open to any and all potentials—it does not have to be redeemed in the sense of renovation, cash-injections and massive population increases. Instead, many of the restrictive and binding practices and regulations common to iconic American cities dominate only conceptually in Detroit (often as a lament), leaving the ruins themselves—the failed promise of mass production and utopian dreaming—open for experience and reflection over a period of time and space so vast as to be unprecedented. This reflection holds a possibility for redemption that is not the typical rescue undertaken by renewal projects. It is, instead—like Berlin, like the arcades on the brink of oblivion, and unlike the ultimately failed reactive ruin of Paris in 1871—the break in the catastrophe, the fissure that allows a temporary suspension of the status quo that is, despite notions of stability inherent in order, a fundamentally destructive force. Such redemption is the salvage of the lost from a presumption of history as a process by which the past is left behind, and the new embraced as the means to gain access to a promised future. Conceptually, Benjamin's evocation of catastrophe applies to historical perceptions and events, but can be enacted in the world by the rescue of material ephemera, discussed in the following fragment from *The Arcades Project*:

> What are phenomena rescued from? Not only, and not in the main, from the discredit and neglect into which they have fallen, but from the catastrophe represented very often by a certain strain in their dissemination, their "enshrinement as heritage"—They are saved through the exhibition of the

> fissure within them. –There is a tradition that is catastrophe. (*AP*. [N9, 4] p. 473)

The "tradition that is catastrophe" is avoided by condemned remnants where they embody such a fissure—the very "discredit and neglect into which they have fallen" (*ibid*) can become the source of rescue. In the established approach to urban decay, for Detroit to become a "successful" urban space again would require the demolition and reconstruction-beyond-recognition of thousands of buildings (to an extent, a process that Berlin is currently undergoing) and with them the erasure of a complicated social history—the good and the bad—which currently makes the city particularly challenging. Thus, it would be wrong to suggest urban renewal as a possible avenue for salvage, particularly in light of Benjamin's own objection to the work of those like Haussmann, whose approach fostered "phantasmagoric illusions" and "the mythic imagery of historical progress" (Buck-Morss 1989, p. 89), perpetuating dreaming and the illusion of the new. "As a classic example of reification, urban "renewal" projects attempted to create social utopia by changing the arrangement of buildings and streets—objects in space—while leaving the social relationships intact." (*ibid.*), What Benjamin sought was not the "illusion of social equality" that such aesthetic and spatial renovation provides. The apparent necessity for renewal that may be presented by large-scale decay is countered by the destructiveness inherent in such an investment in progress.

In 'Convolute N' of *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin describes "The pathos of this work: there are no periods of decline. Attempt to see the nineteenth century just as positively as I tried to see the seventeenth, in the work on *Trauerspiel*. No belief in periods of decline." (*AP,* [N1,6] p. 458). Benjamin emphasises here that no city, no moment, is more important or significant than the last—this resonates with his concept of history, which demands an end to the elevation of certain ideals or conceptions to the detriment of what is already present.

Benjamin's criticism of the unerring belief in progress emerged early in his work. For example, in a passage from *One-Way Street* titled 'A Tour Through the German Inflation', Benjamin writes:

> To decline is no less stable, no more surprising, than to rise. Only a view that acknowledges downfall as the sole reason for the present situation can advance beyond enervating amazement at what is daily repeated, and perceive the phenomena of decline as stability itself and rescue alone as extraordinary, verging on the marvelous and incomprehensible. (*SW 1*, p. 451)

Here, Benjamin refers to the crises facing Europe at the time—in this case in terms of personal economic demise, but with far-reaching implications. Decline is not only naturalised here, but incorporated into a framework that normalises it in the same way the presumptions of progress, advancement, profitability and so forth are projected positively into an indefinite future. Benjamin later goes on to comment: "Conversely, the assumption that things cannot go on like this will one day confront the fact that for the suffering of individuals, as of communities, there is only one limit beyond which things cannot go: annihilation." (*SW 1*, p. 451)

57. Grand Piano, Detroit (2009)

Image Space

As summarised in the introduction, the interpretation of the dialectical image in this thesis makes the claim that Benjamin's notion of the image is that in which one could perceive "dialectics at a standstill", and refers to anything that might hold within it that atemporal transience of a static, but immediately outmoded, constellation, as the following passages from Benjamin suggest:

> It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past [sic]; 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 one encounters them is language. (*AP,* [N2a, 3] p. 462)

This notion of the dialectical image as contemporaneously emergent constellation of past and present is further emphasised on the following page:

> Only dialectical images are genuinely historical—that is, not archaic—images. The image that is read —which is to say, the image in the now of its recognisability—bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded. (*AP,* [N3, 1], p. 463)

The image is a model for a way in which to see the world. It is not (or not only) a deconstruction of representation, symbolism, or layers of meaning. Though the image is read, it is akin to the postmodern conceptualisation of a text that can be read and understood. In this sense, then, the built environment is a readable text (or, as Weigel argues, an "image-space") in much the same way that Klee's *Angelus Novus*, Surrealist photography or, indeed, the bourgeois interior are "read" by Benjamin as composites of past, present, and future, or the *Denkbilder* of Berlin *Childhood Around 1900*, *One-Way Street* and 'Central Park' emerge as constellations of images which cluster around experiences or ideas and bring them into the present moment of reading.

Nadir Lahiji makes the argument that architecture can be read in the same way that the photographic image (and other media) can be read—that buildings possess

elements of both technology and photography (Lahiji 2010)—while Brian Elliott states that "…the idea that historical experience (both for the individual and collectively) is made possible through images attached to material objects comes to dominate Benjamin's thinking increasingly over the course of his life." (Elliott 2011, p. 11). Further, Elliott states emphatically that the dialectical image is not simply a philological construction: "Benjamin's numerous descriptions of such images make clear that, rather than being construed as mental contents, they are understood as *materially embedded*." (2011, p. 100) As an example, Elliott considers the potential of the arcades as dialectical images: concluding that "Benjamin can privilege the built environment as the carrier of collective historical promise" (*ibid.*). Thus, the lived, the experiential, can be read and made use of dialectically.

To corroborate this notion of Benjamin's dialectical image as more than just a read text, but also an inhabitable moment of experience, and measure of the potential of abandoned and decaying space, I refer to Wolin's summary of *The Arcades Project*: "Benjamin viewed it as his task in the Arcades Project to unlock, via the employment of dialectical images, the utopian potential that lay dormant in the manifestations of nineteenth century cultural life" (Wolin 1994, p. xlvii). Wolin shares the view of the city as a site of accessible, dialectical images which hold within them the potential to illuminate the past. Gilloch, too, directly attests to this:

> The arcades became the perfect object of the dialectical image, that method concerned specifically with the pause between life and death. The dialectical image captures the last fleeting moments of the afterlife of the object, the precise instant of the demise in which illusion withers and truth becomes manifest. On the brink of oblivion, the crumbling arcade reveals itself as the locus of dreaming. The dialectical image is the redemptive 'at last sight' of the ruined phantasmagoria of modernity. (Gilloch 1996, p. 127)

This is precisely the claim that I am making for the hollowed out shells of America's period of mass-production and cultural ascendancy in supporting the reading of the material remnant as a means to confront and interrupt. Just as Baudelaire sought to "interrupt the course of the world" through allegorical intervention that imposed antiquity upon the new, the ruined spaces of the modern era are sites in which opposition can be achieved, through embodied negation of newness, commodification and progress.

Weigel addresses, on numerous occasions, the relationship between figurative, metaphorical, theological and philosophical concepts and illustrations in Benjamin's work, and the lived, corporeal and recollected experiences from which they derive and into which they transform. Benjamin's concepts are drawn out and exemplified; configured and arranged; tested and dismissed through a series of experiments in writing, inhabiting and remembering. Against a binary (or strictly dialectical) reading of Benjamin's approaches as subject/object dichotomies, or an overemphasis on classical philosophical cannon, Weigel states that: "On the contrary, via the correspondence between concrete thing and philosophical counterpart, Benjamin circumscribes precisely the field in which the image is constituted as a resemblance between the figures of the external world and those of abstract knowledge."(Weigel 1996, p. 54). Throughout his work, Benjamin takes on concepts and weaves them through figures or images to bring thought and experience, ideas and phenomena, past and present, together in a single constellation.

Similarly, I draw from Benjamin's metaphorical and figurative images that he evokes in order to speak of larger, collective ideas, and adapt Benjamin's own experiences, which are written, again, as examples or figures through which concepts can be understood. In both cases, Benjamin makes use of images to explicate theory. This multiplicity (of interpretation, of time, of ideas, of forms), prepares for a reading of Benjamin's writing (and especially his later writing) as a tableau of dialectical images.

Weigel's reading of the angel of history, for example, determines that it can be broken down into a number of different constellations: topographical, spatial, bodily, temporal, material, mythical, and conceptual or historiographical (Weigel 1996, p. 57). As a constellation of constellations, the angel as dialectical image simultaneously represents the concept of the dialectical image as an image (the angel itself, Klee's painting) and as a stilled set of concepts that provide illumination.

Whether in taking on the image of Klee's *Angelus Novus* and adapting it to a sense of history that mimicked the physical impact of an abstract theoretical framework (the idea of world-historical progress was, at the time, producing very real,

as well as potential and abstract piles of rubble), or the imagined redemption of illumination made real in the act of bringing discarded objects back into the world, these concepts in images, to be read, *are* "dialectics at a standstill". That is, movement in ideas, and sudden understanding to be grasped in a moment of reflection.

That Benjamin's writing came from real-world experience and that it so often contained broken and displaced fragments demonstrates the interpenetration of material and conceptual, of living and thinking worlds throughout Benjamin's work. As Weigel notes, Benjamin, in the Angel of history, was also working through a real-world problem—his fascination with the Klee painting which inspired his own image of the angel. What Weigel does not address is that at the time when Benjamin wrote the *theses*, he was negotiating to sell the painting[167]. Perhaps Benjamin was also aware of Klee's illness and death in June of 1940. The painting begins to appear threatened even in its own material existence—like the configuration of the world in Benjamin's present that the image of the angel despaired over. Here, again, is his universe appearing in figures and images in his critical work, as follows: [168]

> "By contrast, the dialectical image is a *read* image, an image in language, even if the material of representation can here be very various: from physiognomy via dream images, the world of objects, to architecture, encompassing both the organic and the inorganic. Benjamin sees all gathered together in the 'landscape of the arcade. The organic and inorganic world, base necessity and audacious luxury, enter into the most contradictory of alliances, the merchandise hangs and shoves in as unrestrained a confusion as images in the wildest dreams'. In view of the correspondences between outer world and dream world, the arcade in the city of modernity becomes for Benjamin the topographical paradigm of investigation." (Weigel, 1996 p. 20)

The city's ruins can be read as images, can be topographies of past and present, can appear as the multiple moments of reading, on the point of oblivion. Crucially for this argument, they are also, at the point of obsolescence, objects which provoke critical distance in which their conditions come to be able to be read, and wherein the dreams that generated their original construction are to be revealed as just

[167] This is mentioned in a letter to Adorno on the 6th of August, 1939 (Adorno et al. 1999, p. 316). It appears the sale did not go ahead, however, as it was gifted to the Israel Museum by Gershom Scholem.
[168] For a discussion of related ideas, see Sigrid Weigel's *Body-and Image-Space*, 1996, pp. 54-60.

that. In perceiving the city as a multiplicity of fragmentation and ruin, the combination of Weigel's notion of body-and image-space, derived from Benjamin's writing on Surrealism, and Buck-Morss (and others') emphasis on a materialist approach presumes a combination of psychoanalytical, philosophical and experiential elements—ideas and reality, thinking and living—which incorporates the many interpretations of modern ruins into Benjamin's dialectical conceptualisation.

58. Gutted High School, Detroit (2009)

Ruins Interrupt

One way to "interrupt" progress is via the dialectical reading and redemptive potentials covered in the preceding section, in which modern ruins become sites of experience which mimic Benjamin's philosophical proposition of a true image of the past that might be grasped in a fleeting, but transient, constellation; an image which can hold within it, and illuminate, the potentials of past, present, and future that are inherent in such a constellation. The other frames Detroit as a post-metropolis in which the dreams and myths of commodity cultures can be laid bare, an approach comparable to the moment of critical understanding in which the "truth content" of an art work or literary piece is revealed.

In order to further examine the notion of critique (which, it is presumed, generally refers only to the arts, literature, perhaps film, music and photography, but not plainly to lived or spatial experience), I consider Benjamin's application of critical theory to material objects as a model for a ruin critique (that is, a critique of modern ruins in the form of a philosophical ruination (deconstruction) and fragmentary constellation (collection) that is made possible in the material, physical state of decay and disorder, on the point of oblivion).

Buck-Morss suggests that "there can be no "Capital City" of the late twentieth century." (Buck-Morss 1989, p. 330)[169]. This is because, with the destruction of the Second World War "the significance of the modern metropolis as the ideological centerpiece of national imperialism, of capital and consumption, disappeared..." The "urban dream worlds" with which Benjamin was concerned no longer existed.

What of the new suburbia, however? What of cities, like Detroit, which promised permanent work at a fixed wage, the possibility of home-ownership, and a prosperity that had been hitherto largely unknown to the working class? Were these not new dream worlds, or perhaps even sites of revolutionary possibility that echoed the aspiration for a classless future that Benjamin identified in the notion of utopia? If nineteenth century modernity could have people "locked up hopelessly", and the fascist city of Benjamin's era similarly limited possibilities, the reduction in freedom under the illusion of progress presented by a prosperous, decentralised, semi-urban ideal is plausibly the next phase of that limitation. In this reading, the ruins of Detroit are the residues of the dreamworlds of Rock and Roll music and Motown, Drive-ins, effective and free public education, and a pre-Reagan era working middle-class. Perhaps, just as the detritus of the nineteenth century allowed Benjamin to comprehend the conditions in his own era, the ruins of Detroit have a similar potential.

[169] I consider Detroit to be an ideal candidate for that title, however. Berlin is also given this label, for similar reasons. See Webber's *Berlin in the Twentieth Century*, particularly the introduction, titled 'capital of the twentieth century?' (Webber 2011)

In her later article, 'The City as Dreamworld and Catastrophe', Buck-Morss does identify such ruins as "dream-forms" of modernity. Surveying modern history as a remnant landscape, in 1995, she states:

> But from our own postsocialist, postmodern perspective, the dream-forms of industrial modernity- capitalist, socialist, and fascist-all seem part of an earlier historical era. The Ford Motor Company's Highland Park factory in Detroit, where assembly-line production originated (the model for Fiat's Lingotto factory built under Mussolini, and for the AMO-Moscow and Nizhni-Novgorad automobile plants built under Stalin), is closed and in ruins. (Buck-Morss, 1995 p. 3)

Buck-Morss identifies the same energies in the outmoded relics of Detroit—as dream-forms of industrial modernity—that Benjamin found in the arcades as relics of the nineteenth century. This is significant in casting modern ruins together with the arcades in Benjamin's work: "In Benjamin's time, the arcades were in ruin, an out-of-date architectural form cluttered with commodity discards. Walking into one was a journey into the past" (1995, p. 6). In doing so, "[h]is goal was not to represent the dream, but to dispel it." (*ibid*).

It is here—alongside the arcades—that the ruins of Detroit come to be filled with the potential for awakening, but the question remains—how can modern ruins be rendered for interpretation in the same way that texts and art works are open for critique? The first part of the answer is to read them as dialectical images (and therefore historically critical image-spaces), as in the preceding section. The second is to consider them both as objects (material remnants) and sites of critique.

In his response to Adorno's critique of 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire', and the ideas underpinning *The Arcades Project* more generally, Benjamin, in December of 1938, suggested a far-from comprehensive understanding of his aims, and the multiple realms in which his philosophy was to apply. Here, Benjamin states that in both form and content, the work would "receive sudden illumination in the decisive contexts later on" (Adorno et al. 1999, p. 290) and that, as an example, his work on the flâneur would eventually become redemptive: "This is the place, and indeed the only place in this part, where the theory comes into its own

in an *undistorted* fashion. It breaks like a single ray of light into an artificially darkened chamber." (*ibid.*)[170]

In the same way that the arcades were worlds which, in their decline, revealed the origins of mass consumption, modern ruins—that is, decaying sites of the recent past—are, collectively, an entire world on the verge of collapse. Equally disenchanted, equally magical, detached and odd, they provide a space of critical contemplation, in which, on the brink of disappearing from the world, such ruins reveal the truth of their origins. Howard Caygill supports this notion, by identifying an expanded dimension to Benjamin's literary criticism "The exercise of critique indeed extends the concept of experience, pointing to new topologies of space, time and the absolute which are also new ways of being-in-the-world" (Caygill 1998, p. 40). Similarly, Gilloch observes: "The modern reveals itself as ruin. The notion of ruination is rooted in a recognition of the importance of an object's 'afterlife'. For Benjamin, the truth of an object or event is only discernible when it is on the point of oblivion." (1996, p. 14) This point of oblivion is not restricted to material ephemera, but is notably embedded in the real.

The Arcades Project, as a whole, takes on the "immanent critique" outlined in *Origin* (Gilloch 2002, p. 23), in a modified version that Caygill cites as "strategic critique" (1998, pp. 61-72). Essential to this form of criticism, as applied to urban spaces, is its emphasis on material, lived, and tangible phenomena, particularly as they present in urban contexts. Similarly to the immanent critique of the romantic *Trauerspiel* (though less melancholy, and with Kantian influences) the "truth content" is revealed in the afterlife of anything that survives from an earlier epoch, to persist in a state of decay.

To contextualise the experience of ruin as criticism, I refer to two passages, one from Gilloch's *Critical Constellations*, and the other from Benjamin (both in

[170] The flâneur, though intoxicated by hidden details and a sense of past in the city (see [M1, 2] and [M1, 5] of *AP*, and 'Convolute M' generally) is not a central consideration in this thesis because of the emphasis on occupied spaces of the city (particularly spaces of consumption) and Benjamin's assertion that the flâneur disappeared as the modern city developed. See Convolute M in *AP*.

reference to Benjamin's critical interpretation of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's work):

> [A]lthough material content and truth content may initially appear irrevocably coupled, this bond disintegrates through time and through criticism. The historical process of decomposition fractures surface layers to disclose the truth beneath them. Criticism is the 'mortification', as Benjamin later terms it, of the work of art so as to permit the redemption of its truth content. (Gilloch 2002, p. 47)

> It could appear to be commentary; in fact, it is meant to be critique. Critique seeks the truth content of a work of art; commentary, its material content. The relation between the two is determined by that basic law of literature according to which the more significant the work, the more inconspicuously and intimately its truth content is bound up with its material content. If, therefore, the works that prove ensuring are precisely those whose truth is most deeply sunk in their material content, then, in the course of this duration, the concrete realities rise up before the eyes of the beholder all the more distinctly that more they die out in the world (*SW 1,* p. 297).

Benjamin derives this preoccupation with truth and material content from both classical and Marxist traditions. In the case of the former, he identifies in Baroque allegory a tendency to devalue the world of things, to perceive, allegorically, in material transience, the truth of the world so typically sought in classical philosophical tradition. (Or: A reductive regression to melancholia). Although I have argued that the use of the ruin as it appears on *Origin* is often mentioned inaccurately or superficially to exemplify the relationship between decay and history, it is important to note the classical foundations of some of Benjamin's thought (alongside Hegel, Kant, and Marx, among others)[171].

As Plato used the metaphor of the sun and the allegory of the cave in *The Republic* to demonstrate two stages of the move from empirical to abstract, via the mediation of language and concepts, Benjamin makes use of metaphor, and elevates allegorical perception, in order to simultaneously strip away illusions and bring cultural/conceptual remnants and material fragments alike back into the world. This creates a kind of loop—physical, metaphysical—metaphor, allegory and commentary

[171] For example, see Benjamin's 'On The Program of the Coming Philosophy' (*SW 1*, p. 100)

and critique as a means to understand the present, and encounter the empirical world, which in turn clarifies the present, by salvaging the past.

Benjamin did not ever fully conclude how redemption and criticism might come about in terms of historical perception and progress, which accounts for such a diversity of readings—both direct and abstract. Perhaps his intent was to leave the concept open—to foster the very possibilities contained within his vision of a historical reflexivity that might be able to break, fundamentally, with the past, while also redeeming that past (rather than entering into perpetual cycles of similitude). In his 'Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History'', the final notes read: "Should criticism and prophecy be the categories that come together in the "redemption" of the past?" and "How should critique of the past (for example, in Jochmann) be joined to redemption of the past?"[172]. Finally, and perhaps indicatively, he writes: "To grasp the eternity of historical events is really to appreciate the eternity of their transience." (*SW 4*, p. 407). The oft-repeated quote on transience, when contextualised in a series of unanswered questions and fragmentary notes, emphasises, if nothing else, that Benjamin's ideas were far from finalised, and perhaps even that they were unable to be reconciled in anything other than a partial sketch of philosophical and material relations. This quote reads like his insistences that there is no such thing as decline, and that progress and decline are two sides of one and the same thing. If progress is a force of ruination, and ruination a means of redemption, then it is the criticality of transience that Benjamin wishes to trap in both the dialectical image and destructive method of critique. However, Benjamin's uncertainty leaves open the possibility for a fusion of redemption and critique—criticism and prophesy as key to an engagement with the past that is counter to the investment in linearity and progress.

The ruins of Detroit are the lived, inhabitable spaces of Benjamin's approach to understanding modernity (whether his own, via the nineteenth century, or the recent, modern past of the nineteenth century through the only connection to that past—its remnants). This engagement with ruins opens up similar possibilities to any

[172] See 'The Regression of Poetry, by Carl Gustav Jochmann' (*SW 4*, p. 356), in which Benjamin attempts to rescue both the forgotten works of Jochmann, as well as expand on Jochmann's own philosophy that emphasises destructive forgetting.

of the various engagements with the forgotten and outmoded in which Benjamin indulges, the ruined city is a counter to the dominant city of modernity. As the writers of *Stalking Detroit* observe:

> These silent, luminous, free spaces shock and reactivate our sensory and experiential abilities that have been diminished by the crowdedness, the material superfluity, and speed of modern life, dulled by the incessant movement of space, people, information, and capital. [they are] conspicuous pauses amidst a landscape homogenized to the point of indiscernibility. … the empathize with our feelings of placelessness and dislocation within our cities. (Young, Daskalakis & Waldheim 2001, p. 80)

As an accessible site of the recent past—pervaded by a level of decay which reveals at first a hopeless jumble of ruined places and objects, that appears increasingly as the wreckage of a problematic process of catastrophic obsolescence—the city of Detroit is effectively stranded between past, present, and future—a physical manifestation of Benjamin's metaphysical grappling with language, philosophy, historical materialism and political action within human history and the built environment. It (and its individual ruins) simultaneously offer the lived potential of awakening: presenting both a dialectical image world and a lived process of critique, in which the physical remnants decay and therefore reveal the illusion of progress, and of commodity fetish that imagined these constructions were anything other than transient works of art or exemplars of technology that would fade with fashion and be made obsolete by the drive for newness and ever-more-efficient modes of production.

This is not to suggest that Detroit is beyond redemption—or that this redemption ought to consist of urban renewal and erasure. Rather, in the negotiations with the dominant perception of both an ideal urbanism and a negative response to inevitable decline, reside numerous possibilities to reconfigure the future of such ruins.

An example of the unique possibilities offered by a ruined city like Detroit can be found in Wendy Walters' hopeful consideration of the Heidelberg Project, a chaotic piece of street art installed on the exteriors of decaying houses in Heidelberg Street in an inner suburb of Detroit by artist Tyree Guyton, and made up of found

objects, refuse, remnants, and the abandoned buildings themselves[173]. Walters sees potential in the spectacle of detritus that Guyon has constructed, "a reclamation of Detroit's recent history" (Walters 2001, p. 65) that also gives hope for the future of a city that is often regarded as lost.

Similarly, a *Time* series saw writers spend a year blogging about alternative approaches to Detroit's future. Certainly, the emphasis in such mainstream publications is to get the city back on track as a major centre of growth and prosperity—yet the subtitle of the series, "One Year. One City. Endless Opportunities" (TIME 2010) suggests a degree of nonconformity that cannot be found in more highly regulated and populated urban settings.

Guernica magazine has also dedicated several articles to the unusual state of Detroit, and the unique possibilities provided by mass decay—local food production, unfettered art projects, remarkable experiences of epic decay—all framed in contrast to more typical images of both Detroit before its decline, and other, more functional, American cities (see for example 'Food Among the Ruins' (Dowie 2009); 'Detroit City Limits' (Walljasper 2010), and John Leary's piece 'Detroitism' (2011).

In his rumination on the value of urban ruins, Leary questions the potential of abandoned buildings, and refers to urban explorers as "ruin fetishists" (Leary 2011). It is perhaps an apt term in the sense that many ruins achieve iconic status amongst explorers, as indicated by the repetition of certain images online (particularly amongst communities of "urban explorers"), as well as in print, and particular reverence for sites of significance (usually based on their size, and thus the scale of decay, as well as level of accessibility). But Leary also refers to "ruin porn", suggesting that these images gratify some desire, perhaps voyeuristic, to uncover the ruin, to lay it bare and to indulge in the pleasure of a ruin aesthetic.

[173] The project was partially demolished in 1999, but has now grown into a not-for-profit organisation supporting the original project and community art as regeneration: "The Heidelberg Project offers a forum for ideas, a seed of hope, and a bright vision for the future. It's about taking a stand to save forgotten neighborhoods. It's about helping people think outside the box and it's about offering solutions. It's about healing communities through art—and it's working!" (Heidelberg.org 2011).

59. Entry to Michigan Central Station (2009)

Ruin Space

Such ruins are a final product of the events that slide and mingle and happen or are forgotten, of forces and practices and intentions—the sort of things which, step by step or perhaps with a crash, create the ruin space. It is as if the whole story of the place is gathered up at this point of its existence and can be intuited within the immediate experience of that space. It is not a history in the conventional sense because there are details which may not be known (may be unknowable); however, the essential qualities of its being, becoming and ceasing to be are all caught up in the abstract and concrete impressions of the ruin space.

If space is socially and culturally produced, as Lefebvre suggests in *The Production of Space* (1991), then a contemporary ruinscape is a void of production—its status as a place is called into question as its material decline signifies the end of its life as an actively inhabited (and therefore continually produced) space. The modern ruin becomes dead space because death "…has a location, but that location

lies below or above social space", which is "a space of society, of social life'"(Lefebvre 1991, p. 35). Another way of framing the space/place distinction is in de Certeau's iteration of Merleu-Ponty's phenomenology, in which he frames space as a site of movement and action, ever ambiguous, while place "implies an indication of stability" (de Certeau 1984, p. 117). de Certeau also notes that death "falls outside the thinkable" (*ibid*), which, when applied to modern ruins as dead spaces, goes some way to explaining their sudden shift from dynamic to inert sites of social production.

The possibility to "interrupt" the force of progress is situated within a reconfiguration of modern experience itself, rendering the immediate and shocking experience of urban life more comprehensible via a direct attempt to convert such experience to a more lasting form, consciously accessible to remembrance, "more weighty" as its disconnected nature differentiates it from more typical recollection which is "is inseparable from the representation of a continuity", as the following fragment from *The Arcades Project* indicates:

> What distinguishes long experience from immediate experience is that the former is inseparable from the representation of a continuity, a sequence. The accent that falls on immediate experience will be the more weighty in proportion as its substrate is remote from the work of the one having the experience—from the work distinguished by the fact that it draws on long experience precisely where, for an outsider, it is at most an immediate experience that arises. (*AP,* [m2,a4] p. 802)

This emphasis on accent and experience attempts to encounter the world in a similar way to what Bachelard terms the "poetic image" (1964, p. xv), which he considers to be a direct antecedent to a phenomenological approach to the multiplicity of experiences of space and place. This poetic image "has no past", and is to be received or acted upon "'at the moment it appears" (*ibid.*). In considering image and experience in a Benjaminian sense with space and place theory, this study of modern ruins comprehends these ruin spaces far beyond the basic material content which might be encountered by a stranger not revisiting their own past—they enter the individual and collective experience of the viewer not as the immediate and dislocated experience of the tourist in a bustling modern city, but as a historically grounded tactical engagement with the past in urban space.

Beyond discarded objects and decaying facades, beyond rot and mould—and moss and murky water and rust and black grime, and fungus, and even slime—is a sense of history, or time slipping by or perhaps pending; of a mixed temporality and unfinished, open past. In this respect, these ruins are reverberations, simultaneously of the past, yet within the present; also simultaneously living (in the sense of being), whilst dying… These images are presented as reflections of that being, as captured reverberations of the phenomenological experience of modern ruin space.

In relation to sensing place, Casey notes of Bachelard that his poetic image of space is one that "reverberates" in the psyche, stating that:

> "The psychic surface must send forth the images it receives; it must give place to them by fulgurating with them, shining with their momentary presence. The sense of place that counts here is not that of place as it contains and perdures but as it lights up with the sudden spark of a single striking image, like a shooting star in the dark abysm of night" (Casey 1997, p. 287-288).

This description bears a strong resemblance to Benjamin's dialectical image, which "flashes up" in the "moment of its recognisability", something "suddenly emergent", and conjures the sense of a world that is shifting and fading, constantly.

Another abstractly Benjaminian reading of space is developed by Kathleen Stewart in both *A Space on the Side of the Road* (1996) and *Ordinary Affects* (2007), in which ruins are most affective through personal encounters. Stewart recognises that:

> "It is among these ruins, then, that the storyteller stands; this is the place from which she speaks. A place from which there is no other place to go "in this world" no future of assimilation into America, no need for an abstract notion of progress. Yet it is also a place that in its very abandon to the performance of a world got down includes a utopia of latent and remembered possibilities." (Stewart, 1996, p .48)

Progress and ruin are also intertwined for Stewart, and in getting closer to the day-to-day experience of place, and its transience, she can reflect upon a landscape not of objectively knowable truths, but one in which traditionally unremarkable paraphernalia reveal that "[w]ays and ideals and fundamental attachments emerge from out of the ruins as a space of desire resonant with nostalgias, heroics, dreams

and reversal." (Stewart, 1996, p. 48) Stewart is concerned with the layered narratives, the complexity of interaction steeped in intimacy, and familiarity with the place itself, but she also borrows heavily from Benjamin's writing on myth and history to evoke a fading world of past dreams and lost potentials, threatened by eternal progress and historicism—"a utopia of latent and remembered possibilities" (*ibid.*) contained within modern ruins.

Stewart keenly identifies a space of memory, of poetics, of nostalgia, sentiment and feeling. This is not at all the same space as that which Lefebvre and Casey investigate; it is much more the space of the fragment or remnant, a space of cultural transformation and intense relationship between people and the geographic sites of their lives. She investigates the ties that bind people to place, rather than the making of that place itself. Instead of trying to distance people from the notion of place, in order to dissect it, she investigates the intimate details of place and experience, by asking us to "Imagine life in a place that was encompassed by the weight of an industry and subject to a century of boom and bust, repeated mass migrations and returns, cultural destabilizations and displacements, and then the final collapse of mining and the slow inexorable emigration of the you. Imagine a history remembered not as the straight line of progress, but as a flash of unforgettable images" (Stewart, 1996, p. 15) Again, the flash of Benjamin's dialectical image and illumination is what gives some promise to the otherwise fading histories of America's industrial age.

60. Occupational training equipment, school, Detroit (2009)

According to Stewart, a "chronotype of the trembling space-time—the arrest of the sheer flow of time in a lyrical scenic image—fuses the mythic with the everyday, the fated with the accidental, the concrete with the symbolic, the storied with "the real". (Stewart, 1996, p. 93) History is thus tied to the landscape of the place in which the past once was: "Objects that have decayed into fragments and traces draw together a transient past with the very desire to remember. Concrete and embodying absence, they are confined to a context of strict immanence limited to the representation of ghostly apparitions." (*ibid.*) They are tangible, and persistent, "they haunt. They become not a symbol of loss, but the embodiment of the process of remembering itself; the ruined place itself remembers and grows lonely." (*ibid.*)

To combine Bachelard and Stewart's poetics with Benjamin's work allows the ruin to become a spatial—and thereby lived and experiential—category. As a destination that is between place and space, between being and unbecoming, the contemporary ruinscape holds a shifting transience—hardly a tautology, this notion considers the inherent possibility of a such space, which at any moment might face total demolition, partial reconstruction or trendy urban renewal; a transience that must be acknowledged because it renders the space fundamentally precarious.

The term *Terrain Vague* denotes an indefinite peripheral landscape of "empty, abandoned space" (Solá-Morales 1995, p. 119) defined by both nothingness and potential: "Void, absence, yet also promise, the space of the possible, of expectation." (1995 p. 120) In a consideration of the subversive elements of *Terrain Vague*, Sola-Morales suggests its contrast to the city in a way that also imbues empty or abandoned spaces with the power to undo the myths and dreams of an era in their boundless transience, stating:

> Strangers in our own land, strangers in our city, we inhabitants of the metropolis feel the spaces not dominated by architecture as reflections of our own insecurity, of our vague wanderings through limitless spaces that, in our position external to the urban system, to power, to activity, constitute both a physical expression of our fear and insecurity and our expectation of the other, the alternative, the utopian, the future. (Solá-Morales 1995, p. 121)

Solá-Morales introduces the notion of strangeness that can be isolated by *Terrain Vague*, a strangeness borne of the conflict between our selves and our cities as a result of the radical transformations that define modern experience. In this context, for Morales as well as (hypothetically) for Benjamin, *Terrain Vague* suggests "alternative, strange spaces" of refuge from "a crushing homogeneity, a freedom under control." (1995 p. 122). "The enthusiasm for these vacant spaces—expectant, imprecise, fluctuating—transposed to the urban key, reflects our strangeness in front of the world, in front of our city, before ourselves." (*ibid*).

Materially, the concentration of ruins in a city like Detroit provides an opportunity to be confronted *en masse* by the illusions of assumed linear progression and perpetual development, in a context in which this alternative to the dominant urban experience becomes the primary impression of the city. Polarised, the fetish of the new and the unerring destruction of the obsolete are powerful forces of change in the material world. Contrary to the promise of progress as fulfilling innovation, the desire for newness, for fashion, for consumption results in perpetual decay of all that must be discarded in order to pursue this constant renewal.

Finally, this chapter returns to progress and the hope for interruption that might be presented by modern ruins. At the end of his 'Exposé of 1939', Benjamin uses the words of Blanqui to outline the hopeless side of progress. "Blanqui here strives to trace an image of progress that (immemorial antiquity parading as up-to-date novelty) turns out the be the phantasmagoria of history itself"… (*AP, p.* 25). He then quotes Blanqui directly: "Here, nonetheless, lies a great drawback: there is no progress…. What we call "progress" is confined to each particular world, and vanishes with it. Always and everywhere in the terrestrial arena, the same drama, the same setting, on the same narrow stage—a noisy humanity infatuated with its own grandeur…" (*ibid*) Where Benjamin concluded the 1935 Exposé with the ruins of the Bourgeoisie, he concludes the 'Exposé of 1939' with the bleak summary of Blanqui's final words on progress and history, "[t]his resignation without hope is the last word of the great revolutionary. The century was incapable of responding to the new technological possibilities with a new social order." (*AP*, p. 26). This echo of Benjamin's comments on the *Paris* Commune is as true in Detroit as it was in Paris in 1871, and Berlin throughout the last century. The phantasmagoria of history—like the

phantasmagoria of the commodity fetish touched on in the Paris chapter—demands a pursuit of newness that sets the scene for the same ruin after ruin, in which the possibilities for that which is forgotten and discarded must always be sought in the wreckage of any era, as long as the age is unable to respond to the call to awaken from the utopian dreaming enabled by the products and spaces of the modern age.

61. Hotel Eddystone, Detroit (2009)

Conclusion

> The concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are status quo is the catastrophe. It is not an ever-present possibility, but what in each case is given. (Walter Benjamin, 'Central Park', *SW 4,* pp. 184-185).

> The concept of mankind's historical progress cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such a progression must underlie any criticism of the concept of progress itself. (Walter Benjamin, 'On The Concept of History', thesis XIII, *SW 4,* pp. 392-395)

> Anyone who has climbed a mountain on his own and arrived at the top exhausted, and then turns to walk down again with steps that shatter his entire body—for such a person, time hangs loose, the partition walls inside him collapse, and he pushes on through the rubble of the moment as if in a dream. Sometimes he tries to stop, but cannot. Who knows whether it is his thoughts that shatter him, or the roughness of the way? His body has become a kaleidoscope that at each step presents him with ever-changing figures of truth. (Walter Benjamin, 'Ibizan Sequence' *SW 2:2*, p. 592)

If, as Esther Leslie suggests, "[t]he Arcades Project is a meta-history book, a book about books about the history of Paris" (Leslie 1994, p. 304), then this thesis is something of a meta-ruin—a thesis about ruins and of ruins. That is, in placing the fragmented *Arcades Project* at the centre of a thesis on urban decay and decline (a thesis which is filled with accounts of rubble and ruin, a thesis which refers back to the arcades themselves as urban ruins, contemporary to Benjamin's time), and presenting the material in a somewhat haphazard and fragmentary manner, it is the aim of this piece to present a reading of urban decay in which ruins can provide a mode of perception, a way of thinking, and a possibility for "interrupting the course of the world" (*SW 4,* p. 170)

As Margaret Cohen suggests in *Profane Illumination*, Benjamin's early work on experience particularly emphasises the importance of subjecting contemporary experience, with its violence and shock, to a mode of perception that provides for a deeper experience, a mode of penetrating the shallowness of the material world, by interrupting the distance and alienation of the modern, allowing for "an experience

disrupting ideological distortion". (1993, p. 185) In this sense, modern ruins are both proximal and distant, in relation to shock and experience. As incomplete fragments, they are both transformative and destructive. "For it is in this experience [*Erfahrun*g] alone that we gain certain knowledge of what is nearest us and what is remotest to us, and never of one without the other." (*OWS*, (in Cohen, 1993, p. 182))

As experientially encountered ephemera of modernity, ruins are *both* near and far, they are fundamentally beyond and outside modern ways of being in the world. Significantly, Cohen quotes *One-Way Street* to expound the possibility of new experience in which she suggests that Benjamin is "asking whether violent contemporary contact with external reality may in fact be the precursor of a form of *Erfahrung* not yet recognised as such" (1993, p. 185). Here is where I think ruins rest—providing, as experience of the new and the urban, both the fusion of antiquity, and the moment of contemplation and understanding that is made possible in ruins; that is, as both native and alter to the contemporary metropolis, modern ruins are new by-products of the forces that Benjamin opposed.

Although this reading potentially contradicts Benjamin's other writings on experience (particularly in relation to shock and aura, which are decisively impacted by a dislocated modern experience), the inability to close off contradictory conceptions within his approach to history is characteristic of a philosophical framework that is itself incomplete and fragmented, as I have argued. It is questionable whether *The Arcades Project* would ever have reached completion, so ambitious and theoretically amorphous were its aims[174]. The philosophy of history which grew out of Benjamin's attempts to write the ur-history of an epoch was filled with unresolved tensions (the notion of the dialectical image, for example), and Benjamin states himself, that "Whoever wishes to know what the situation of a "redeemed humanity" might actually be, what conditions are required for the development of such a situation, and when this development can be expected to occur poses questions to which there are no answers." (*SW 4,* p. 402) The combination of a theological conception of redemption with a materially directed and ephemera

[174] As Pensky suggests, Benjamin may have had his own doubts about the future of *AP* "which Benjamin had begun to consider a failed project." (1993, p. 152). Pensky attributes this to the challenge of the dialectical image, although he notes that other Benjamin scholars do not share this supposition.

obsessed vision of earlier eras was perhaps never assimilable to a singular theoretical framework. Whether or not this was Benjamin's ultimate aim will remain open to interpretation, but his approach is exceptionally useful for all of the things that continue to disappear from the world, and cannot be made sense of within a static framework that values only wholeness, progression and newness in the future—rather then the ever-present detritus of a recent past. In the case where a more flexible approach—one entirely more sympathetic to decay and opposed to forgetting and jettisoning—is needed, Benjamin's body of work (from literary and art criticism, to *The Arcades Project* and his concept of history, in conjunction with his attempts to rescue his own earlier recollections), provides a space in which such impossible places can congregate and be illuminated in a flash of recognition, unique to that moment alone.

Like Franz Kafka's Odradek in 'The cares of a family man' (a useless and unrecognisable object which appears to be "only a broken-down remnant" (Kafka 1971, p. 428), the ruin is an unwanted yet persistent relic that momentarily haunts the present. "Odradek is the form which things assume in oblivion", states Benjamin (*SW 2:2*, p. 811), exemplifying the inevitable transformation from useful to useless, yet persisting despite the loss of worth. Benjamin sees this discarded and distorted object, on the point of oblivion, as both signifying the guilt of forgetting, but also the (collective) historical perception which relegates things to the realm of the forgotten, and the possibility presented by oblivion for bringing the object back into the world; blurring the lines between presence and absence, for "[o]blivion is the container from which the inexhaustible intermediate world in Kafka's stories presses toward the light". (*SW 2:2*, p. 810).

Bringing Odradek back from oblivion is one of many redemptive images Benjamin borrows from the German literary canon. As a "guilt ridden" object, rejected and forgotten, the Odradek calls us to account for all of our forgotten pasts—as well as calling up the echoes of vanishing pre-history. Of the Odradek's favoured haunts, Benjamin notes "Attics are the places of discarded, forgotten objects." He goes on to isolate these objects as things that we avoid, encounters we "would like to put off […] til the end of time" (*SW 2:2*, p. 811), for fear of having to face the residual guilt, the weight of forgetting. (*SW 2:2*, p. 811). Fundamentally, Benjamin

wants to isolate things in motion, things that are passing from the world, and freeze them in a moment. But, crucially, that moment must come when such a thing is in transition—that is, holds within it past, present and future possibilities, and, crucially, redemption—pressing toward the light, coming into view from the darkness or rejection, deviance and defeat.

This is especially relevant to the Odradek, whose redemption is not figured in victory, but rather endurance in the world as a peripheral and useless thing. The Odradek may have no discernible use or role, but yet it "presses toward the light" (*SW 2:2*, p. 811), a quality of Kafka's work identified by Benjamin as bearing a very close relation to his own concerns with redemption, and a quality which is similarly obscure in terms of its theological significance and origins.

To return to the conclusion of the Detroit chapter, and the last line of 'Paralipomena to 'On The Concept of History'': "To grasp the eternity of historical events is really to appreciate the eternity of their transience." (*SW 4*, p. 407). Crucially, these last lines are contextualised in a series of scrawled thoughts about historical time. It is clear that Benjamin is grappling particularly with the notion of illumination and redemption of the past, "developing the concept of historical time" (*SW 4*, p. 407) as a means to provide "an antithesis to the idea of a temporal continuum." (*ibid*). Moving on from a temporal continuum means altering the historical perception that emphasises progress, but also salvaging the past by bringing it to light, by illuminating the lost and forgotten in a moment of constellated reflection. Such illumination suggests that "[t]he eternal lamp is an image of genuine historical existence" (*ibid*), yet despite the religious connotations of such an image, Benjamin still asks: "[s]hould criticism and prophesy be the categories that come together in the "redemption" of the past?", that is—a prophetic vision, that sees "the contours of the future in the fading light of the past as it sinks before him into the night of times." (*ibid*). Perhaps it depends on whether Benjamin was thinking of Scholem's mysticism[175], or Adorno's more practical concerns.[176]

[175] See, for example, the discussion by Benjamin in his letter to Scholem of June 12, 1948 (Adorno et al 1999, p. 563), where he identifies urban experience with Jewish mysticism.

[176] Generally, Adorno was sceptical about the possibilities of redemption, as well as Benjamin's questionable reading of Marx. See, for example, the letter in response to

In either case, bringing the lost and forgotten back into the world is a redemptive act. To repeat a quote from the introduction, as Benjamin proclaims in 'On the Concept of History', '[t]he past carries with it a secret index by which it is referred to redemption' (*SW 4*, p. 390). The diversity of these ruins, and the degree of exposure afforded by abandonment and neglect, allows them to be reclaimed—not in material ownership, or the rescue and rebirth which might redeem discarded objects, but in the more abstract impression of encountering and knowing the secret index of history which Benjamin considers to be vital to salvaging lost and threatened pasts. The possibility for salvage simultaneously opens a space for modern ruins, and relegates them to the margins. In the midst of production, demolition and reconstruction, a comparative handful of buildings can represent myriad "lost" histories, the possibility to reclaim what is arbitrarily made meaningless, to reinhabit those spaces of the past that are on the brink of disappearing from the world forever.

This reclamation, though not centred on possession, is in some respects like the goal of a collector. To place this in context: Benjamin attributes to the collector "a relationship to objects which does not emphasise their functional utilitarian value—that is, their usefulness—but studies and loves them as the scene, the stage, of their fate." (*SW 2:1*, p. 380): I want to meet these places at the stage of their fate, or to use another of Benjamin's phrases, their "future fate" (*SW 2:1* p. 380)[177]. As material remnants subject to fate such sites are abandoned to decline and decay. As important as any event-based linear history that can be recounted is this liminal status as the ruin, fated to disappear. In collecting, I am encountering each building, gathering them as ruins on the brink of oblivion, then leaving them to "a fate expressly theirs"—the same fate of the images of Benjamin's middle-class urban childhood which show that although the past is socially and biographically irretrievable,

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Benjamin's Baudelaire work, dated November 10, 1938, in which Adorno casts serious doubt on Benjamin's potentially unstable use of Marxism, and his emphasis in uncovering an epoch through its material contents, while emphasising redemption (See pages 581-584 of *Correspondence* (1994) in particular).

[177] This phrase comes from "Against a Masterpiece" in which Benjamin considers a "salvation history of the Germans" written by Max Kommerell (See *Selected Writings Volume 2 part 1,* 1999, p. 378-385)

remnants can serve as both vaccine and salvage against loss and forgetting (*SW3*, p. 344).

While Benjamin was expressly referring to the collector of books in 'Unpacking My Library', the sentiment of salvaging artefacts from an uncertain fate bears a close relation to the collection presented here—assembled from a jumble of ruined spaces, and sorted into an approximate order. To quote Benjamin again: "…the life of the collector manifests a dialectical tension between the poles of order and disorder." (*SW 2:2* p. 487) Such tension is equally manifested in the collection of forgotten spaces whose life (or, perhaps, afterlife) can be read as the experiential equivalent of an accumulation of obsolete objects from an earlier age.

In considering modern ruin-gazing as practice of collecting the fragments of a vanishing past, to explore the ruin is to acknowledge both the multiple forms such collecting might take, and collecting itself as something more than the hoarding of a curated set of artefacts—it is, in fact, a method:

> The true method of making things present is to represent them in our space (not to represent ourselves in their space). (The collector does just this and so does the anecdote.) Thus represented, the things allow no mediating construction from out of "large contexts". The same method applies, in essence, to the consideration of great things from the past—the cathedral of Chartres, the temple of Paestum—when, that is, a favourable prospect presents itself: the method of receiving things into our space. We don't displace our being into theirs; they step into our life. (*AP,* [H2, 3] p. 206)

What is significant here is the pairing of collecting and space in a methodological framework, to conjure the notion of objects, people and locations sharing intimate space. [H1a, 2] of *The Arcades Project* discusses the life of things, and the act of collecting in more depth:

> What is decisive in collecting is that the object is detached from all its original functions in order to enter into the closest conceivable relation to things of the same kind. This relation is the diametric opposite of any utility, and falls into the peculiar category of completeness. What is this "completeness"? It is a grand attempt to overcome the wholly irrational character of the object's mere presence at hand through its integration into a new, expressly devised historical system: the collection. (*AP,* [H1a, 2] p. 205)

This placement of collected items (in this case, ruins, or at least their images) in a new historical system is more than an attempt to read the physical ruin as an incomplete and fragmented symbol of transience. Each ruin, when discarded and perceived as something which is no longer whole, complete, or useful, is akin to each object snatched from oblivion simply by the act of collecting, which reintroduces the object into a new, binding constellation, and imbues it with a political and critical potential. Benjamin alerts us to collecting as "a form of practical memory", which is "the most binding" of all attempts to make the past present, to bring things near, to freeze them in a moment so that they may reflect an entire epoch, or indeed call it to account: "[w]e construct here an alarm clock that rouses the kitsch of the previous century to "assembly"." (Benjamin [H1a, 2] p. 205). Here, I make two arguments: one, that my approach to the abandoned buildings of Detroit presents modern ruins in a petrified collection of like objects; and two, that collecting, relates very directly to Benjamin's understanding of the dialectical image. That is, in the process of configuring ruins as a set or constellation, they present a relationship between past and present, at a standstill—"And for the true collector, every single thing in this system becomes an encyclopedia of all knowledge of the epoch, the landscape, the industry, and the owner from which it comes." (*ibid*).

From his earliest encounters with the world, Benjamin's work was that of renewal, even his collecting in childhood was concerned with bringing the rejected back into the world, as he reflects: "I, however, had something else in mind: not to retain the new but to renew the old. And to renew the old—in such a way that I myself, the newcomer, would make what was old my own—was the task of the collection that filled my drawer." (*SW 4*, p. 403). Similarly, the collected ephemera of the ruin-fields of Detroit, together, provide—on contemplation and cataloguing—the possibility to renew what is otherwise dilapidated and dying.

However, to adapt also Benjamin's montage method of *The Arcades Project*, somewhat contradictorily, the ruins are to be made use of—or, at least, their images (symbolic, written, photographic)—"Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't *say* anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them." (*AP,* [N1a,

8] p. 460). I readily admit that there is a conundrum here—but I believe it is somewhat resolved by the sheer impossibility of collecting ruins as one might collect artefacts. In terms of making use of the "rags, the refuse" of history, I make something of a brief inventory, that of the collector, before letting them come into their own, making some use of them as tools to read the past and the present.

In undertaking this project, I could have chosen a set of obscure sites, which do not already have a very substantial record, or which had not been studied in terms of ruins in the past. In identifying a category of ruin space, I argue that the sites I selected are not unique—they are representational phenomena. During my early research, I considered abandoned asylums and municipal buildings; the entire American "Rust Belt" (which stretches from Buffalo in New York to Pennsylvania); Europe's post-industrial ruins; and the post-Soviet remnants which can still be found throughout Russia and Eastern Europe. I also considered ghost towns and cities such as Hashima Island in Japan, Pripyat (near Chernobyl) in the Ukraine, Centralia in the USA, and Wittenoom in Western Australia. As my project developed, I also became familiar with the phenomena of abandoned resorts and holiday homes both during and following conflict, and also as a result of recent financial crises; the decline (and attempted renewal) of the "high street" in the United Kingdom; and the almost universal existence of disused rail-lines, sewers; sub-stations and power stations; water treatment facilities, rail yards and workshops; wharves, bridges and piers; and military ranges, outposts and lookouts, in every city. In choosing Paris, Berlin and Detroit, however, I have selected cities which have not only been overcome by ruin, but have each served an iconic status as a particular kind of urban space, providing a much broader framework—a collective and historical charge—through which they can be read.

I am making a call for a kind of collective memory space, in relation to ruins. Our notions of history and reception of ruins are inextricably linked and in such ruins we might isolate suspended collective histories and undertake archaeologies to unearth the recent past. Like Benjamin's attempt at an Ur-history of the nineteenth century, such suspended histories are collective not only due to mass media, but also due to their shared modernity, and the universal perception of a modern era forever passing beyond grasp. Instead of a romantic or nostalgic view of ruins, this thesis

presents an overall argument for an encompassing meta-historical approach, derived from Benjamin's philosophy of history. However, rather than driven by political crises (as Benjamin reacted to in his time) this approach to the ruins of the recent past is driven primarily by material crises, (which Benjamin also critically intercepted). The most important question, then, is whether history (driven by progress) must be a process of catastrophic decay and decline, or whether, if we simply redefine the approach, history can emerge in a different form—a from particularly pertinent to the fragmented histories of a mobile urban modernity.

What, then, would that form be? Is it possible to have an experimental history of ruins—of decay and catastrophe—a history that attempts to move beyond binary ideals of desirable and undesirable cities? To use Benjamin's "image of genuine historical existence" (*SW 4*, p. 407) provides a far more encompassing mode that includes private memory and temporality, alongside experience and materiality, suggesting that a ruin-history is not only obvious, but also reactive in a uniquely useful way.

It is in Berlin, Paris and Detroit collectively that this combination of oblivion, recollection, opposition and redemption can be isolated in ruins—as remnants of the recent past to be engaged with and brought into the "realm of thoughts" from the endangered position that they occupy in the "realm of things[178]".

In ruins we have rejected material remnants that have outlived their usefulness and persist despite being discarded. Our archival and self-conscious history continues to be structured by the value-making processes which Benjamin alludes to in *The Arcades Project* in which the arcades, as beholders of a heralded new age of consumption were, within the emerging framework in which they subsisted, quickly disinherited by the culture that generated them, and which they, in turn, had affected significantly—on the whims of fashion and in the face of drastic change (particularly

[178] This is an intentional adaptation of a quote from Benjamin's *Origin* in which he summarises the baroque conception of decay and transience stating: "allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things." (Benjamin 1998, pp. 177-178). This quote is often adapted from its original context to discuss urban ruins in relation to Benjamin's work, but is of more value in discerning the relation between abstract and real ruins, and decay and allegory.

of urban space, architecture and experience). The turnover of these revered galleries into mausoleums is symptomatic of the decline of many buildings that are abandoned as the world moves on without them. The more recent reuse and readmittance of the arcades as reified spaces of earlier cultures of consumption is also related to such decline, vulnerable as they are to both geographical and historical fashion that determines each of their current states.

In considering the past, Benjamin demands the combination of distance and urgency—a site, space, or object, a figure that can be used to convey an idea. Whether his *Denkbilder*, *Vexierbilder*, urban remnant (arcades), figures (flâneur and ragpicker, collector), object (sock), technological phenomena (lighting, iron construction) or medium (film, radio)—each is read critically and destructively, for the truth can only be revealed in a moment of decay or ruin, of distance from the present. That he constellates the fragments of this destructive perception is significant for both a past-present dialectic, and an overall approach to temporality that constantly places the critical moment in the present—the oft-quoted now of recognisability. The modes in which this might be achieved differ. For example, as Weigel states:

> The radicality of Benjamin's thinking lies precisely in his work on such constellations—in the transformation which does not simply adjudge and denounce the former as false consciousness. He himself describes this work as a reflection in moments of awakening, and it is a reflection that does not neutralize or rationally resolve the desire condensed in these pre-existing images. Rather, the desire is incorporated into the thought-image, so that it becomes both allegorical practice and redeeming critique. (Weigel 1996, p. 59)

The allegorical practice and redeeming critique of which Weigel speaks is very much the framework for reading the urban obsolete in Paris and Detroit in particular. "It is easier to penetrate to the heart of obsolete things in order to decipher as picture-puzzles (*Vexierbilder*) the contours of the banal…." (Weigel 1996, p. 121)

Here, Weigel refers to Benjamin's earliest writings on Surrealism, a piece on Dream Kitsch from 1927, in which he suggests that fading dreams are unveiled on the point of decrepitude, that ruin lends itself to revelation. "The gray coating of dust on things is the best part", states Benjamin (*SW 2:1*, p. 3), and it is in "things abolished or superseded" (*SW 2:1*, p. 4) that one can "take in the energies of an outlived world

of things." (*ibid.*). This revelatory energy in the outmoded is both the primal history embedded in the dream-kitsch of fashionable objects, and the possibility of "the world of things" to be inverted, revealing not the "blue horizon" of dreams (*SW 2:1*, p. 3), but rather the "most threadbare and timeworn point" (*ibid.*), grasped in such a way as to make the decaying familiar and retrieve the fading image of the past.

A ruin is not merely a pile of rubble, or a collection of broken things, but rather a disordered portrait of all the events, people and moments, of various lives and lifetimes, which lead to the decline of a previously active place. Detected in the ruin are the currents of what went before—the sense of its previous wholeness, clues as to its prior function and appearance, a suggestion of the changes it has undergone as well as those to come. The modern ruin, as a repository of fragments and remnants of the past, becomes a seemingly atemporal site; a moment within which many other moments may be distinguished.

I have argued that the mainstream view of modern ruins does not see any value in the outmoded remnants of the recent past. For most, such sites remain unnoticed in the everyday landscape (for example, Hollander (2009) and Gallagher (2010) resolve to fix the problems presented by modern ruins by erasing them from the landscape, or incorporating them into projects of renewal). However, a growing body of literature on contemporary ruins attempts to deal less reactively with decay and abandonment. In their relation to the present they can be seen as post-industrial ruins (Edensor, 2005), detritus of recent history (Hell and Schönle (2008) on the ruins of modernity), postmodern or post-Fordist ruins (High and Lewis 2007; Cowie and Heathcott 2003, on deindustrialisation), or as memorial and palimpsest (Huyssen's present pasts (2003)). As sites they can be scapes (Bergers's drosscape, 2007 (Berger 2007); Hell and Schönle's ruinscape, 2008); spaces (Edensor's interstitial spaces (2005 p. 60), Turner's liminal landscapes (Turner & Bruner 1986, pp. 33-44)), and de Certeau's espaces (1984 p. 117)); and states (*Terrain Vague* (Solá-Morales, 1995) and shrinking cities (Oswalt et al. 2005)). As place they can be defined by what they were (as in Boym's nostalgia (2001)) or what they might become (Vergara's 'American Acropolis' (1999, p. 15)). Each of these contributions to the field make inroads in directions I cannot take, but each also adheres to the notion of a shared similarity between ruins that are contemporaneous to an era—rejected, abandoned, outmoded,

they all come to be clustered together in their decay, united by those who are attempting to rescue them from a particular kind of abyss.

Unique to the experience of the abandoned, disordered, and rejected sites of recent history is the nature of their appeal to those who seek them. Writing about this appeal without grand statements and clichéd accounts can be challenging because these are sites in which human culture is absent, locations where there is little discourse within which value might be attributed. Part of the appeal of modern ruins is also in the confronting impact of decay, which is also challenging to communicate without emotive generalisations. New language must be found—that is to say, existing terms must be applied to the experience itself. To say an abandonment is wild, beautiful, colossal, epic and confronting in its decay is to say it is sublime, in the classical sense of an ancient ruin, and speak also of a romantic ruin aesthetic. To say a ruin is lost and forgotten, full of history or holds memories is to speak of an urban palimpsest in the sense of a "politics of memory" (Huyssen 2003), of Avery Gordon's ghosts and haunting (Gordon 2008), and Benjamin's critique of progress as a force which obliterates the past. The idea of an unacknowledged or lost past, of untold stories, also relates to Stewart's poetics and affect (1996 and 2007) and Mark Crinson's urban amnesia (Crinson 2005). The observable fascinations with peeling paint, broken and smashed windows and objects, discarded rubbish and unidentifiable substances are the stuff of Julia Kristeva's uncanny and abject (Kristeva 1982) or Trigg (2006) and Edensor's (2005) aesthetics of decline.

Generally, modern, urban ruins are ruled by peculiar absences. Almost every usual condition of being in space is suspended: there is no one to greet you, and no one to oppose your presence. There are often unguarded entries, impotent gates, wide open windows, and faded signs directing you to things that no longer exist, or to keep out of a place that effectively has nothing inside it, or has begun to fuse with its exterior environment to such a degree that the distinction between inside and outside is meaningless.

The sudden break of a rusted support frame, like the violent break made by the Commune from the Paris of the Second Empire, the heap of rubble from a collapsed wall which reveals a sight unseen in a generation, the fading paint on a weathered

sign, rendering the message indistinct and meaningless without context—all are the marks of the reality of the perpetual emergency which means that nothing stays as it is. They are also images of a culture of consumption which, with increasing speed, churns and leaves material remnants, just as it churns up and devours the past itself, closing it off to critical revelation. Progress therefore destroys all of the ways in which such a past might be considered—a process that can irrevocably dictate what survives an era, and what remains of that era in the future.

Of course there are two uses of the term progress: the first relates to the notion of empty time, and the second to the linearity of events and moments, beginning, ending and becoming historical, to be viewed later from the future as a neat chronology of significant events, privileging the dominant views of a given period, but also derived from the dominant perspectives at the time in question. The fact that modern ruins exist and are largely ignored, or seen to be eyesores—except in the case where they are memorials, where there are exceptions—reflects the gaping holes in our current engagement with the past in urban space. Spatial, embodied experience is important if we are to negotiate material histories—this includes gathering the remnants, and experiencing secret or hidden spaces—spaces which represent the soon-to-be forgotten experiences and events.

Generally, if Benjamin was seeking possible sites of action, potentially shocking dialectical images, then urban ruins emerge as the direct opposition needed to break the dreamworld of capitalism—they are physical spaces which, as in Buck-Morss's "materialist pedagogy", reveal the contradictions in the dominant order, by presenting them in a way that can be engaged with, revealing such ruins as sites of subversive, shattering, critical action.

Like Berlin in a moment of reflection after war; unlike the failed attempts of the *Paris* Commune; akin to Baudelaire's destructive allegory; visible in the wasteland of the recent past in Detroit; and fundamentally revealed in Benjamin's preoccupation with the power of the fragment, the sudden, critical moment of disappearance embodied in modern ruins is made possible by their existence as incomplete, decaying and rejected refuse that is dislocated from a more ordered and complete world.

Urban ruins in particular embody a dramatic dislocation from an ideal built environment: They manifest in decay, collect (and appear as) waste, and harbour the unknown. In the city, where fences, footpaths, roads and signs clearly delineate borders, these sites have an impact as deviant and separate from the rest of the built environment. In this way, they provide a stark contrast to any active urban space nearby, and also to the perception of how a city should appear aesthetically, and how urban space should be used (that is, it should always have a designated use). In relation to the work of Mary Douglas, Tim Cresswell notes that transgression in urban spaces is manifested in descriptions of dirt, blight, garbage and so on in order to reinforce "normative geographies in the ordering of "appropriate" behavior" (Cresswell 1996, p. 38) (in this case, graffiti). Manifesting outside the prescribed urban order, abandoned and decaying structures are perceived as waste to be removed: "Things that transgress become dirt—they are in the wrong place. If there was no "wrong place," there would be no transgression." (1996, p. 39). What is deemed to be transgressive in the city is defined ideologically by those in power: "Those who can define what is out of place are those with the most power in society." (*ibid.*). Urban ruins are places that are out of place, and as such they provide the potential to subvert the designation of waste and transgression that renders these sites ostensibly worthless.

Thus, modern ruins come to provide a valuable alter to the lived (and highly regulated) spaces of both urban living and urban imaginaries. For example, while many (particularly European) cities contain historical ruins within their most densely populated centres, Vergara's suggestion for a ruin park of modern decay is framed by Vergara himself as an outrageous scheme. "Detroit as an American Acropolis? What I envision is 12 square blocks of enormous ruins--right in the middle of the city around Grand Circus Park. Sounds crazy." (Vergara 1995, p. 1) But what Vergara proposes is the valuation not of a melancholy indulgence in decay, but rather the confrontation of the fact that "The place that invented planned obsolescence has itself become obsolete" (*ibid.*). In such obsolescence the alternative to an over-regulated urban space that offers ever-fewer possibilities outside the established order: "This urban monument valley would be a rare place where one could go to escape capitalism and to experience silence." (*ibid.*)

The engagement with the collected ephemera of the past is the acknowledgement of the perception-altering potential of ruins. The ruin of a fascist past in Berlin, of the spaces of the ruling classes in Paris and shrines of commodity in the arcades, and of twentieth century industrialisation and a Fordist utopia in Detroit are complimented by a critical engagement with the remnants of each of these sites.

In response to Adorno's suggestion that the obsolete takes on ancient meaning[179], Benjamin suggests that something unique takes place with the advent of mass-production (and, thus, mass obsolescence): "With regard to these reflections, it should be kept in mind that, in the nineteenth century, the number of 'hollowed-out things increases at a rate and on a scale that was previously unknown, for technical progress is continually withdrawing newly introduced objects from circulation." (*AP,* [N5, 2] p. 466). The obsolete factories of Detroit are like the commodities they produced, hollowed out even before their moment of ruin, objects that in their mass production and replication, cease to have meaning as individual objects, yet are also condemned to the oblivion made possible by fashion and progress. The alienated objects are further hollowed in their ruin—their houses of production become hollow themselves, and it is this point of oblivion wherein the critic can begin to consider their true character, using Benjamin's departure from Marx to read an earlier or contemporary era, or the future, in the possibilities of its remnants "The point of departure invoked here by Marx need not necessarily connect with the latest stage of development. It can be undertaken with regard to long-vanished epochs whose "ought to be" and whose aim is then to be presented—not in reference to the next stage of development, but in its own right and as preformation of the final goal of history." (*AP,* [N5, 3] p. 466).

Thus, it is only on the point of destruction that we can begin to understand our world, and only through opposition to the status quo, the supposedly harmonious, that we can see beyond the currents of the present age into the origin of an era, revealing totality as the illusion of wholeness, which in turn enables a more penetrating and

[179] For this reading, see the letter referred to by Benjamin, In *Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno The Complete Correspondence* (Adorno et al. 1999, pp. 114-115)

whole image of the world, in fragments. Derrida's critique of Benjamin reflects this, as Rabinbach observes:

> Jacques Derrida has also argued that by its very insistence on terms like explosion, ruin, collapse, or dissolution, the rhetoric of modernism is fetishistically attached to a nostalgic figure of totality. He finds, in Benjamin, for example, the "longing for an architecture, a construction, that is irretrievably destroyed, but one in which the phantom of totality still haunts the ruins." (Rabinbach 1997, p. 13)

The destruction sought by Benjamin is inherently productive, as Rabinbach's work suggests, in which he identifies the concept of "apocalypse" as a useful force against a predominantly negative modernity. (1997, pp. 27-65). Benjamin's redemption is destructive in striving to uncover the alternatives to progress and linearity. Rabinbach suggests that the First World War provided the inspiration for Benjamin's later apocalyptic imaginings (1997 p. 47), which were crystallised in his later sympathies with Marx's theory that led him to the conception of historical materialism that is presented in his final pieces of work. In particular, his deep antipathy toward narratives of victory, and investment in war as a historical vehicle toward a valorous future is again observed by Rabinbach, who states that:

> Though many embraced the war as the harbinger of a new and more violent modernity, Bloch and Benjamin were among its most resolute opponents and perceived the war as a total conflagration that threatened to consume all of bourgeois culture in the name of its own destructive values. (1997, p. 47).

Thus from the First World War onward, Benjamin's entire oeuvre was always at least partially concerned with the interruption of such a framework; concerned with rescuing the vanquished, the rejected, the insignificant, the marginal from a powerfully ruinous modernity. This project was enacted across and within literary, material and political spheres, but always with a historical perception that was effectively atemporal. To apply Benjamin's theory to a spatial experience is just one more abstraction from a complex series of material and thematic exchanges, where Benjamin repeatedly withdraws from the key subject, to revolve around thematic

concerns; material objects; or metaphorical, allegorical or otherwise symbolic representations of the matter to hand.[180]

Benjamin supports a history wherein the significant fragment can stand for an eternally fragmenting whole, where constellations, crystallised monads, selections and collections interrelate across epochs—rather than enclosed narratives which take their place in a finished "past". An extension of this proposition would include a space and place reading of ruins, where spaces of decay are seen as transgressions—temporally and spatially—that blur otherwise distinct boundaries of here and gone, past and present, moment and eternity, by virtue of their existence, and the experience they provide as sites of *un*becoming. They combine the material and metaphysical elements of Benjamin's philosophy of history—as products of an ongoing struggle between production and consumption, economic value and cultural or social significance; as sites of conflict between value and memory (i.e.: industrial vs. memorial); as manifestations of an enduring past which has already been discarded, and is considered to be "dead". It is from within this conception that interrupting progress emerges—that a site of such struggle, or cessation of struggle in the moment of being "lost" to time, fundamentally impedes the presumed inevitability of moving on from the past.

In a similar vein, then, what this thesis has attempted is to take a series of abstract, metaphysical, sometimes theosophical, political thoughts and transform them into active ideas that impress upon the experience of the built environment. This has often meant a challenging approach of adopting Benjamin's figurative or allegorical piles of rubble and ruins and then exploring their real-life equivalents, as if that is enough to manifest his thought productively.

I have argued that it is, in fact, enough—primarily because it is a means of making conclusions that Benjamin himself could never have made. He couldn't have seen Berlin in ruins, nor did he live to comprehend the prescience of his unfinished

[180] For example, the essay 'Edward Fuchs, Collector and Historian' (*SW* 3, p. 260), which uses the figure of Fuch's as a lost historian to expand on both Fuch's opposition to historicism, and Benjamin's own ideas on historical materialism. This essay also sets up the significance of the "recent past" (*ibid.*) to an alternative approach to history.

Arcades Project in a new age of mass production, mass media and urban experience. It seems he didn't study the images of Paris's post-Commune ruins, and he certainly was not present for the next stage of the surviving arcades as once-again chic (or still-declining) passages. Finally, Benjamin would never have made it to post-industrial Detroit—a landscape that corresponds with Benjamin's declining arcades, but in another century, produced by another kind of modernity, yet still a site of ruin and catastrophe, still a site of revolution and potential, and still in need of rescue.

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