Rethinking Benjamin:
The Function of the Utopian Ideal

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Walter Benjamin

I. Evoking utopia

Sustaining a general engagement with Walter Benjamin has proven to be an endless discovery of philosophical, as well as poetical, perspectives. However, adding the theme of utopia to the discourse presents yet another dimension -- one that, paradoxically, *combines* philosophy and poetics explicitly, and yet with great complexity. Exemplary of this are Benjamin's views regarding "utopia," a theme that figures somewhat multi-directionally in his overall philosophical montage (this latter being Benjamin's preferred method of theoretical exploration and discovery). On the one hand, utopia is an underlying aspect of his project, one crucial aspect among many. On the other hand, utopia might be said to be *the* over-arching aspect of his project, the ultimate goal to which all of his work adhered. Moreover, the possibility of utopia is seen as potentially both *at hand* -- i.e., existing immanently in the stories and products of material culture -- and *latent,* until activated within something of a collective unconscious laden with scattered dreams and wishes unfulfilled.

It is for these reasons that Benjamin developed the idea of the *dialectical image.* Initially, we could say that the dialectical image is that moment produced by the collision of the "objective" forces of nature/culture and our own "subjective" experience as socio-

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historical beings. Thus, for instance, Benjamin would cite *fashion* as a more blatant utopian dream image -- an example of, most generally, humanity grappling with its condition betwixt and between nature and culture. For Benjamin, these images are dialectical precisely because they begin as wish, develop toward an entanglement with the material superstructure of social reality, and then, if we learn to "see," to bring into visibility, the mediation at play between the utopian capacity to dream and the societal-technological capacity to produce, the presence of these desires can be actualized as transitory moments in a process of cultural transition and awakening. It is here that we can comprehend Benjamin's project as being one possible extension of Marxism, and thus -- although this idea must be received both cautiously and thoughtfully -- as also looking toward a certain socialism as, in fact, precisely this "actualization" of utopia.

II. Urgent beginnings: Marxism and other traces

As Susan Buck-Morss states most aptly, "Marx was concerned with the moment of political revolution; Benjamin was concerned with the transition to socialism that comes after it."[1] In particular, here we would do better to concentrate more on the idea of this "transition" rather than hastily engage the loaded ideological messiness surrounding the term "socialism." On this note, Benjamin was, in fact, resistant to party politics until the end, choosing instead a multi-directional array of resources with which to pursue a "metaphysical knowledge of the objective world."[2] Of course, this is not to sway Benjamin's project from the political, or estrange him from Marx, for that matter. His thought, I hope to show, was intensely, and expansively, political. Still, with respect to a kind of communism, it was not at all the view of socialist realism (which, for someone like Benjamin, is suspect, chiefly because of its emphasis on ideological totality) that inspired Benjamin, but rather the possibilities of a reality of the present that was nevertheless still very much of the past. His thought begins with essentially grounding the utopian ideal in actual historical conditions. This actuality implies both the reservoir of historical memory -- which not only affects, but is ultimately the key to, collective, political change -- and traces of material culture. In Benjamin's methodology, such a "phenomenological hermeneutics of the profane world" blended the exploration of everyday experience with traditional academic concerns.[3] Common, everyday objects of industrial culture become as informative and revealing as the "canons" of academic progress.[4] Thus, in returning to the dialectical image, Benjamin emphasizes, taking his cue from the surrealists, both the dream-like and objective quality of modern (largely urban) phenomena. It is this image, in its various manifestations, that elevates such transitory, material traces of history to philosophical truth. In general, what has been termed variously the "critical, immanent critique" that sustains Benjamin's thought is marked by an integral awareness, an explosive learning through remembrance, which recognizes the notion of self-reflection while being firmly ensconced in a historico-philosophical outlook. Of course, much clarification is still needed, so as to not oversimplify Benjamin here. His undermining of such notions as "the past," myth, history-as-progress, even revolution, begin to suggest Benjamin's vision of utopia, or, the unfolding of the utopian ideal.

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A definitive strain in Benjamin's thought is, in fact, Marxism. But was he a Marxist? In taking the whole of the development of European intellectual thought after the second world war, the argument could certainly be made that, essentially, every intellectual was in some way a Marxist, or in some way indebted to Marx. In fact, the residue of the war and Fascism would seem to have necessitated such an allegiance. If this were so, then going that much further back into the time of the war, even during its initial brewings, would show Marxism as indispensable, even colored with desperation, an ideological cry against Fascism. Benjamin was a part of this leftist intellectual outcry against fascism. Yet he was particularly affected by the present struggles not so much because he suddenly came upon Marxist theory, but because his background and concerns had already identified with the Marxist project. That is, Benjamin was a German Jew. Thus, Benjamin's reception to the rise of Nazism was, in fact, informed by a great fear of this newer power, which espoused, to simplify, a crude ideology, an exclusive naturalization of humanity, an endless march toward warfare, and ultimately, genocide. Yet, it was also an attempt to understand Nazism as a historical, metaphorical "text." Benjamin feared that this text was being read merely in one of two ways. Either Nazism was 1) a chapter consisting of the same page read over and over again, or 2) it was a chapter of many pages simply saying the same thing in different ways. At the very least, both readings hastily assume a historical linearity. In furthering the metaphor, Benjamin came to see that this chapter was then a forgotten humanity, and the book as a whole, historical experience in general. It was thus Marx who, for Benjamin, most successfully articulated the dialectical course of social history, undoubtedly expressed in terms of material forces of production, and played out in terms of economics and class, politics and ideology, and illuminated by art.

In a portion of an interview focusing more specifically on "the proletariat," the philosopher Cornel West suggests, somewhat paradoxically, how Marxist themes of history essentially evoked ongoing historical trends: ". . . we have to disabuse ourselves of the notion that there ever was this proletariat as logos . . . even though the modes of production do create the possibility for such centering . . . certainly, we talk about gender, race, and sexual orientation, which have always been here, therefore it upsets me when people are talking about movements among these people as new movements. They are new relative to a Marxist discourse, a working-class movement."[5] West's comments are interesting in that they seem to express both a distrust of Marxism and a linking of Marxism not only to themes of the past, but to themes continuous through the present age. Benjamin's vantage point is markedly similar, although somewhat inversely. He essentially begins with a passionate affirmation of Marxism toward social transformation, only to later come to be wary of its more orthodox pronouncements, as well as its dilution into party politics. Thus, Benjamin represents an attitude concerned precisely with expanding upon Marxist theory toward a more critical assessment of the various layers within the social discourses it implicates. He suggests an answer to West's ultimate criticism that "the Marxist tradition has no serious or subtle conception of culture, and by culture I mean the sphere of desire and pleasure . . . does not speak to the levels of psychocultural realities. You need Freud, and you need novels, you need the blues, and spirituals, a whole host of other insights."[6] As has been merely suggested thus far, Benjamin's method was certainly as extensive -- in fact, considered to be so to a fault by

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some of his critical Marxist contemporaries (I refer, of course, to Adorno, Horkheimer, and the Frankfurt School writers, who will reappear through the course of this study). For the moment, however, I only seek to clarify the initial interest in Marxism for Benjamin as that which would pave the way for an immanent, genealogical historical materialism. The most important aspect of this initial inheritance of Marxism was that it illuminated quite clearly for Benjamin a significance concurrent with the great tradition of his upbringing, Judaism, itself largely a story of persecution and oppression.

III. Historical materialism and "now-time"

In his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Benjamin writes: "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.[7] Historical materialism wishes to retain the image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger." As opposed to a historicism that "gives the 'eternal' image to the past," thus prescribing a "universal history" comprised of "homogeneous, empty time," the methods of historical materialism are "based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts but their arrest as well."[8] This is precisely where Benjamin seeks to transform Marx while retaining his essential project. As historicism struggled to fill this "always the same" picture of history, so Marx's basic themes could (and did) fulfill a similar predicament -- only this time by means of a rigid determinism instead of a kind of existentialist idealism. Marx's dream is alive for Benjamin, but additionally, as both present and repressed in ways that Marx's critique might not have anticipated. Earlier in the aforementioned interview, West admits, "I am not really a dreamer. I have strong anti-utopian elements given my link to the skeptical tradition." And later: ". . . that amelioration and social betterment are regulated more by moral ideas than a social dream. . . ."[9] Benjaminian thought, in line with Marxism, makes no sharp distinction between these two latter terms. In fact, a long-standing tenet of Left political thinking has always been the fact that the ethical is most readily *fused* with the political. If the role of a critical politics would be to awaken the possibility for change and betterment, then such a politics might glimpse what is, as in Ernst Bloch's philosophy, "momentary, fleeting experience of fulfillment, dimly anticipatory of a reality that is 'not-yet'."[10] The "not-yet" that Benjamin envisions is thus, in general terms, a classless society. The philosopher Terry Eagleton has said, "I have never said that I do not believe in a classless society. Of course I do. I am a Marxist. . . . But then again, it depends on what one means by utopia. Once again the typical move there is caricaturing, is to advance a notion of utopia like the notion of telos that is so idealistic, unreal, perfectionist, conflict-free that nobody will believe it. . . . Why not have a more realistic sense of, let's say, a society that is feasibly but radically transformed from what it is at the moment . . . Marxism for me is a theory and practice of how one might set about doing that."[11] Eagleton's sentiment seems akin to how Benjamin saw things. The idealism to which Eagleton refers suggests "vulgar," orthodox Marxism, a Marxism which, through all of its revolutionary insight, would trap history within the framework of an economic, albeit (arguably) dialectical, materialism, whose most horrifying extreme was fulfilled with Stalin. The question (necessarily resigned to the hypothetical) is then whether *any* such interpretation of Marx is the most fundamental. But perhaps, as has been suggested

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by many contemporary writers close to Marxism, the question of fundamentalism is pointless, especially when one considers the particular sociolinguistic and historically contingent framework in which Marx was working. In this sense, perhaps West was merely suggesting that the conceptual language of Marx needs to be transformed, expanded.

In his overall polemics, Marx "left unexplained how this shedding of the past was to be achieved. The result is a gap in Marx's theory which, whether or not he intended it to be, was bridged by an implicit faith in historical progress, economically determined, as if once socialist production relations were established, industrial-technological production would itself generate the socialist imagination capable of producing a brand new culture."12 Benjamin's most basic answer to this "gap" was that economic revolution must follow with cultural revolution, the latter being the ultimate goal of the former. Thus, he places the critical moment of revolution, not surprisingly, between political power and consumer power. But he goes further. Benjamin's theory of experience is founded as much in a collection of encounters experienced by the desiring subject -- i.e., in a narrative progression -- as it is in larger conceptual structures.

Interestingly enough, it was with these very notions that Benjamin pursued a materialist philosophy *out of* history, surpassing Marx in some significant ways -- and, in turn, garnering the most criticism from his Marxist-oriented contemporaries. Represented largely by Theodor Adorno, the Frankfurt School stalwarts considered Benjamin's work as, at once, greatly profound and diversified, as it incorporated most explicitly the various literary and psychoanalytic motifs that would become so important in their cultural critique, and critically lacking, precisely because of the way in which he developed these very motifs. Time and again, the word that comes up in association with Benjamin's thought is "undialectical." This criticism has always intrigued me. But here we need to revisit our basic impressions of the dialectic and the Frankfurt School's use of it.

First, the Frankfurt theorists keep to a sense of the dialectic as based in oppositional and contradictory relations. Second, the Frankfurt theorists preserve at times the operative isolation of the three basic concepts of the traditional dialectic -- i.e. thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Of course, the dialectical method is potentially expandable in its applicability in order to touch upon the vulnerability of traditional philosophical concepts as they confront the modern age -- i.e. reason, autonomy, freedom, and justice. Paradoxically, from the standpoint of metatheory, this process describes the dialectic as it has always existed. Hegel applied the dialectic at the service of *Geist.* Marx applied the dialectic at the service of a working class (proletariat) revolution. Critical theory, then, extends the dialectical method's critical utility in exposing and interrogating the traditional dualisms which have plagued both intellectual thought and social action -- e.g., individual versus collective, subjectivity versus objectivity, and obviously, thought versus action. But perhaps even more significant (as surely the great predecessors, Hegel and Marx, dealt with these themes as well) is the move in critical theory toward an application of an expansive dialectics to the greater spectrum of experiential realms affecting social, political, moral, psychological, and artistic relationships. Thus thesis, antithesis and synthesis could neither simply mark a kind of grand conceptual structure

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nor define a general historical movement, but rather these three basic elements of the dialectic can themselves be utilized in investigating different levels of experience.

For his part, Adorno, on the one hand, thought that Benjamin's own investigation of historical experience dealt too much with the more "positivistic," objective, and totalizing elements in Marx -- for instance, superstructure. On the other hand, Adorno criticized Benjamin's foray into surrealism for dealing too much with the "minutiae" of juxtaposition, encounters, the objectification of experience, the "magical," as he once described it. Hannah Arendt cites Adorno and Horkheimer's description of Benjamin in her introduction to *Illuminations:* ". . . 'lacking in mediation' insofar as, in an essay on Baudelaire, he [Benjamin] had related 'certain conspicuous elements with the superstructure . . . directly, perhaps even casually, to corresponding elements in the substructure'."13 However, I would argue that Benjamin's treatment of these notions is precisely what makes his a profoundly dialectical enterprise. Still, even Arendt later states, quite matter-of-factly, how "naturally, nothing could be more 'undialectic' than this attitude in which the 'angel of history' . . . does not dialectically move forward, but has his face 'turned toward the past'."14 Yes, but again, for Benjamin this very idea -- about which Arendt is undoubtedly correct -- has, in fact, a deeply dialectical implication. Benjamin's whole theory of historical movement, which explodes in what he called *now-time* -- i.e., that very moment of the present in which we realize its fusion with past aspirations and "wish images" -- thrives in a dialectical push and pull. The "angel of history" does, in fact, turn his face toward the past. But, as Benjamin writes, "where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet."15 Like the critical historical materialist, the angel looks back in order to see ahead more clearly. This also marks the beginning of Benjamin's critique of "progress." Where we see progress, the angel of history sees "dialectics at a standstill." "As opposed to the Marxist dialectic . . ." writes Rolf Tiedemann, "Benjamin's dialectic tried to halt the flow of the movement [of social forms], to grasp each becoming as being."16

IV. The route to critical intoxication

In linking Benjamin's thought with certain surrealist ideas, Margaret Cohen describes his particular brand of Marxism as "Gothic Marxism," as marked by a genealogical approach fascinated with the apparently "irrational" aspects of social forces and processes.17 Benjamin's Gothic Marxism is thus bent on investigating how the irrational pervades the existing society with, moreover, designs on using it to effect social change. André Breton, the tireless theorist and promoter of surrealism, sought, generally speaking, to fuse Marx with Freud. More specifically, surrealism modifies the practical Marxist notions of subjective and historical processes, causality and praxis, with certain psychoanalytic concepts and content. Surrealist themes, such as *le hazard objectif,* or the objective hazard (roughly, the meeting of chance and necessity), intersubjective desire, the encounter, the social unconscious, and communicating vessels, which connect psychic to material life, spoke to Benjamin's view of historical experience, and especially modern materialism. Surrealist aesthetics were ripe for philosophical translation in Benjamin, as it attempted to expose modern progress for what it was -- a new mythology

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boasting the presence of newness, when in reality it was the debris of bourgeois ideology, of archaic forms, which nevertheless somehow retained articulation.

Surrealism's own struggle with the role of art in modern society, in which we see a clashing of impulses between an extreme aestheticism (the aesthete's radicalization of the autonomy of art) and the politicization of art (the breaking out of aesthetic conformity) mirrors Benjamin's own interest in the struggle between the self-referential unfolding of aesthetic forms and the self-abrogation of that world of forms. In response to the inherent exclusivity of *l'art pour l'art,* the surrealists, and later Benjamin, would come to "posit that aesthetic experience, far from being an ethereal phantom, affords access to a substratum of original, archaic experience."[18] On the other hand, as John McCole also argues, in its focusing on the social institutions of art, and not just the artistic medium -- and in light of its complicated, but consistent, association with socialist politics -- surrealism, resembling Benjamin's own struggle, seemed forced into an either-or choice concerning politics. This is to say that it was forced back to the "shock value" tactics that it sought to eliminate somewhat, and, in turn, forced to inhabit a position akin to "revolt-for-revolt's sake." Still, we should be careful, especially if we are attempting to grapple with surrealism on its own terms -- not to hastily demote it with respect to this issue of art and revolt. As we shall discover, for Benjamin, "revolution" should be traced more to an operative life praxis than to a historically determined teleological quest. We might call this idea of revolution *immanent utopianism.* Benjamin himself commended the surrealists for focusing on the archaic forms in modern experience. "Among the quintessential surrealist experiences was the perception that certain objects, configurations, and places in the waking world sometimes appear to be surrounded by a mysterious shimmer."[19] Such a "shimmer" is, quite simply, the stuff of surreality. It also quite clearly suggests what we could aptly cite as the phenomenological aspect of Benjamin's thought, and its surrealist inheritance, which encourages exploring not the "soul" of things, but the things themselves -- but this, not so much in the Kantian noumenal sense, but rather in terms of the complex, juxtaposed, montagic, and sometimes evasive, material sense by which we seem to experience the modern world. Nevertheless, the great concern for Benjamin along these lines remained the "ensnarement of humanity in mythic forces."[20] Habermas touches on these ideas in tracing Benjamin's changing thought process with respect to the notion of experience in general: "Benjamin polemicized against 'experience reduced to point zero, the minimum of significance,' against the experience of physical objects with respect to which Kant had paradigmatically oriented his attempt at an analysis of the conditions of possible experience. Against this, Benjamin defended the more complex modes of experience of people living close to nature, madmen, seers, and artists."[21]

V. The palette of awakening

Benjamin's surrealist-inspired Marxism seeks to explode the mythic present by discovering a continuum of historical origins through an investigation of consciousness informed by a kind of empiricism. The reservoir for this continuum is what he calls "ur-history" -- i.e., a history of the origins of that particular present historical moment. Urban and industrial objects, although presented as signs of true progress and historical

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improvement, are actually for Benjamin better read like "fossils" of a *living* history: ". . . the fossilized commodity remains are not merely 'failed material.' As traces of prior life, they are historical clues. . . ."22 Of course, "progress" deceptively engulfs modern temporality without actualizing it. In fact, such temporality is fetishized by the notion of progress. In response, Benjamin's dialectical images attempt to expose these shifts in the superstructure -- in this case, collective social movement -- as marking precisely a dialectic between the new technological potential and the utopian imagination. This also suggests both empirical and psychoanalytic expressions, respectively. Adorno criticized Benjamin's work for what he thought was an unhealthy dose of the "collective" that would uncover these "clues" about history. He feared such a notion, in general, because he thought it was dangerously similar to Jung's conception of the "collective unconscious" (and, in fact, Benjamin does use this term), which, for Adorno, ultimately swallowed its crucial complement: the individual. Here, the worst expression of being swept away by a kind of collective unconscious would be fascism. Moreover, as much as psychoanalytic concepts were helpful, Adorno warned that psychoanalysis was itself ideological. The intersubjective character of experiential reality notwithstanding, Adorno feared that to eliminate the individual was to eliminate the one who forced the dialectic between "true objectivity" and its correlate, "alienated subjectivity."

As Margaret Cohen notes, we can also see a curious reversal here, where Adorno interprets the result of the dialectical image as depicting merely a fragment, or fragments, of objective relations, while Benjamin "repeatedly associates the dialectical image with some form of subjectivity: first with the collective consciousness, as dream image, and then with the critic's work of construction, as this dream's demystification."23 In fact, Benjamin acknowledges the ideology of psychoanalysis. It was precisely his intent to ally a theoretical methodology that would release the positive potential of certain ideological projections with his notion of awakening. However, before we discover further how this notion comes to be the crux of Benjamin's entire project, its basic principle must be clarified. Hence we turn yet again to surrealism.

VI. Surrealism

"Awakening" does not refer to the habitual waking world, but to the result of a dialectical thinking, which penetrates ur-history, or, the residues of a dream world, in order to ultimately expose the supposed hegemony of historical movement. In this sense, dialectical thinking is the first flame for Benjamin, as poetic automatism and juxtaposition is for surrealism. The fruition of awakening is surreality. Of course, there are scholars who believe that is at the point of awakening that Benjamin and the surrealists actually part company. As Rolf Tiedemann states, "Benjamin knew that this motif of awakening separated him from the surrealists. They tried to abolish the line of demarcation between art and life, to shut off poetry in order to live writing or write life. For the early surrealists both dream and reality would unravel to a dreamed, unreal Reality, from which no way led back to contemporary praxis and its demands."24 However, contrary to this criticism, and at times, Benjamin himself, it is my view that surrealism does not in the least confuse dreams with reality, but rather seeks to exploit their intermingling toward a kind of fluid reconciliation. Moreover, whether or not

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surreality achieves such a reconciliation, although clearly debatable, is clearly not as crucial as the *working through* of this movement, its ramifications for a life praxis. Surrealism does not so much wholly embrace the romanticism of intoxication as it does expand upon it. As Benjamin so aptly describes in his essay on surrealism, its "profane illumination" is precisely a penetration of history, which is at once material and anthropological. Habermas writes, "Benjamin therefore calls *profane* the illumination he elucidates in terms of the effect of surrealistic works that are no longer art in the sense of autonomous works but manifestation, slogan, document, bluff, and counterfeit. This experience is profane because it is exoteric."25 In this essay, Benjamin also speaks to Adorno's concerns regarding a lost individualism, or alienated subjectivity: "In the world's structure dream loosens individuality like a bad tooth. This loosening of the self by intoxication is, at the same time, precisely the fruitful, living experience that allowed these people (the surrealists) to step outside the domain of intoxication." And further along: "anyone who has perceived that the writings of this circle are not literature but something else . . . will also know, for the same reason, that the writings are concerned literally with experiences, not with theories and still less with phantasms."26 Of course, perhaps in an effort to distance himself from the influence of surrealism, Benjamin does clarify at one point that "we penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday."27 Still, in my view, this statement more exemplifies the surrealist endeavor than criticizes it. Breton once wrote: "Daily life abounds, moreover, in just this sort of small discovery, where there is frequently an element of apparent gratuitousness, very probably a function of our provisional comprehension, discoveries that seem to me not in the least unimportant. . . . You only have to know how to get along in the labyrinth. Interpretive delirium begins only when man, ill-prepared, is taken by a sudden fear in the forest of symbols."28 What surrealism had crucially added to Dada, Benjamin added to surrealism: a method of application toward negotiating this "labyrinth" of which Breton speaks. Benjamin, convinced of the broader, more dialectical implications of surrealism, worked to bring to light its internal struggles, deepening in turn its philosophical merit for sociohistorical inquiry.

VII. Suggesting montage

It is the surrealist technique of montage that, both in theory and practice, marks Benjamin's exploration of historical experience. Montage juxtaposes one working structural image with any other image, or images, toward an overall picture, which is at once loosely cohesive in form and yet explosively multi-directional in content. Generally, but not always, montage will enlist any number of media to fulfill its task. Yet, perhaps more significantly, it presents images that are themselves ultimately dialectical. On the one hand, one medium-structure struggles to maintain a certain "identity." The elements of a montage fold back on themselves, evoking a sort of commentary or criticism once placed in relation to the other medium-structures. On the other hand, the one medium-structure is joined with the others in a kind of overlapping, layering effect. In fact, its elements must necessarily fold out of themselves, in order to accommodate a newer meaning when joined with the other medium-structures. For Benjamin, montage provides symbolic microcosms of the "big picture" of historical movement. Richard Wolin writes:

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"His discourse becomes a collage of images which, like a work of art that kindles one's fascination, beseeches interpretation or decipherment."29 With this underlying principle of montage, Benjamin could make a radical break with the so-called "natural" state of things and disrupt "homogeneous, empty time." In doing so, Benjamin hoped to provoke remembrance as to the social promise, or utopian dream, of technology.

VIII. The myth of Being

Without cultural transformation, however, the "new nature" marked by every phase of technology and industry shows itself as even more fleeting than the old. As opposed to a Heideggerian historicity and nature of "Being," in which nature and history become essentially indistinguishable, Benjamin posits nature and history as dialectically entwined -- which is to say that they are distinct and yet nevertheless engaged in an ongoing criticism of one another. In fact, Benjamin's theory of knowledge "does not desire as much to provide concrete images of fulfillment in the here and now, as it . . . seeks unremittingly to expose and unfold the distorted nature of reality such as it is, in order thereby to accentuate the desperate need for its imminent transformation." Any "Being" in Benjamin's philosophical spectrum is certainly a historical one, but it is "less sheer being in its ontological immediacy that he seeks to exalt than a being which has never yet been."30 To put it another way, in the Heideggerian tradition, for instance, Being, although apparently still historical, is essentially naturalized. Paradoxically, it ceases to be a historical referent. Thus, ultimately, when modern temporality is fetishized by "progress," and historical referents are called "natural," the result is myth. And myth, at least in our present context, is incompatible with history. For all its assertions of newness, myth here actually stipulates that nothing new could ever happen, that human beings are powerless, whereas history implies the possibility of a human influence upon events, "the moral and political responsibility of people as conscious agents to shape their own destiny."31 Before touching upon these two modes of responsibility, however, it would prove fruitful to put Benjamin's views on how the dialectical image, myth, and utopia interact under a more critical lens.

IX. Subtle dialectics and an expansive materialism

Again, it is through various extraordinary exchanges with the critical, if occasionally strident, Adorno that Benjamin's peculiar brand of dialectics comes into view (remembering, of course, that for Adorno these exchanges eventually came to show the "undialectical" aspect of Benjamin's thought). Adorno warned that the dialectical image "should not be transferred into consciousness as a dream, but in its dialectical construction the dream should be externalized and immanence of consciousness itself be understood as a constellation of reality."32 Yet, such a development had been part of Benjamin's schema from the beginning. For Benjamin, the dialectical images of ur-history exist for the primary purpose of such "externalization." As Habermas notes, part of myth's role as dialectical image, for instance, rested, for Benjamin, in "wearing the robes of progress."33 Furthermore, Adorno's sentiment with respect to the "immanence of consciousness" was of major importance to Benjamin. Of course, he certainly would want to posit neither a consciousness that simply slips into dream nor an isolated, merely

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self-reflexive category independent of sociohistorical situatedness. In fact, the dialectical image does not belong to either a collective or individual realm, but, as even Hegel had suggested, must be the result of the activity of both. As was made explicit by the surrealists, the object-as-dream and the object-as-reality exist in something of a reciprocal relationship. The subject, seemingly so crucial to Adorno, is not lost amidst this relationship, but is (echoing Kant, yet more specifically attuned to the critical, a kind of "body-subject" phenomenology as seen in Merleau-Ponty, for instance) precisely bound up within these forces, at once shaping experience and being shaped by it.

Adorno's misunderstanding here further exacerbated his distrust of what the dialectical image could show us about myth. He criticized Benjamin's belief that the awakening of the collective unconscious to dream images existing in ur-history could inform a quest for utopia on the grounds that it would produce yet another myth. Even worse, argued Adorno, Benjamin's focusing on social phenomena in the name of a materialist critique in order to make claims about the merely theoretical (and, to Adorno's mind, hopelessly transcendental) construct of ur-history was a doomed project from the start. As Habermas writes: "Benjamin's exposé ["Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century"] speaks of the collective unconscious as the storehouse of experiences. Adorno is rightly put off by this use of language; however, he is quite incorrect in thinking that disenchantment of the dialectical image has to lead back to an unbroken mythic thinking, for the archaic dimension of modernity -- in which Adorno would see Hell instead of the golden age -- contains just the potentialities for experience that point the way to the utopian condition of a liberated society."34 In fact, Adorno believed that, if Benjamin would maintain a theme of utopia, he would do better to actually return to his earlier preoccupation with theological concerns. Of course, I have purposely not explored such concerns in the present study in terms of the influence of certain theology on Benjamin, insisting instead on such concerns as they appear as forces of social history. This is certainly not to say that such concerns cannot also entertain issues theologically oriented. Still, unlike the ultimate assessment of Richard Wolin and other Benjamin scholars, which seems to start and end with an insistence on a grand theological telos implicit in Benjamin's work, I would argue that Benjamin's shift to materialism was perhaps even more decisive. If theological concerns persist in Benjamin, they become not prima facie or representative of a priori principles, but rather are best apprehended pragmatically, as themselves representative of the trials and tribulations of humanity. If theology persists, it does so as an expression of historically situated experience. Here, Rolf Tiedemann seems to split the difference -- though, arguably, still leaning away from theology -- when he writes, "Benjamin's historical materialism can hardly be severed from *political* messianism."35 By itself, theology is unable to account for an immanent conception of history and experience, for, as Habermas makes clear, "the myth nesting within modernity, which is expressed in positivism's faith in progress, is the enemy against which Benjamin sets the entire pathos of rescuing. Far from being a guarantee of liberation, deritualization menaces us with a specific loss of experience."36

Now, undoubtedly, an aspect that does, in fact, persist in Benjamin is the notion of redemption, as well as "redemptive criticism," which obviously has theological underpinnings. Even here, though, any theological ideology seems to ultimately serve the

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purposes of the bigger picture of a more expansive materialism, which aims to cut through the forces of socio-phenomenal history. In this sense, the title of an important essay by Habermas on Benjamin, from which I have drawn in this essay, seems that much more deliberate: "Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique." Of course, I might wish to replace the "or" with an "and," as both aspects seem befitting of what Benjamin sought to accomplish. It is true that, for Benjamin, the task at hand was, in fact, a "sacred" one -- but, of course, the relationship between the sacred and the theological is not at all a clear picture.[37] Responding to both this former implication in Benjamin and how he himself would "read" history, Terry Eagleton so eloquently states, "In a manner that Benjamin attempts, by scanning or fanning history in order to find the redemptive, emancipatory moments, crevices, sparks within a text that is largely oppressive and negative. . . . Now, one doesn't have to subscribe to that Judaic theology in order to see the power or suggestiveness of a certain reading of history that is rather like a materialist reading (which Benjamin's was also), that looks for certain emancipatory impulses, certain moments of the past to be rescued and protected as he wished, certain attempts, as in the Cabala, to make correspondences between the present and disparate moments in history."[38] So, when Adorno charges Benjamin with collapsing theory and life, he fails to recognize precisely that "for Benjamin theory possesses an inalienable constructive or redemptive function . . . i.e., the idea of theory as redeeming forgotten and misunderstood literary texts."[39] Moreover, the argument of Adorno against the use of the notion of ur-history is ultimately an untenable one. Adorno wants to criticize this notion as being both essentially transcendental, and thus incapable of having any praxeological relevance for a materialist critique, and a blatant adoption of social utopias of old (suggesting Benjamin's own references to Saint-Simon and Fourier), thus wedded to the past and nearly succumbing to a reactionary standpoint. However, first, the whole thrust behind Benjamin's use of ur-history is that it is a reservoir for wish images as seen in the concrete forms of social movement. So, although it is, in fact, a theoretical construct, it is not meant to be a transcendental one. Second, Benjamin's use of ur-history refuses to mark a simple return to the past, but more critical remembrance turned toward awakening. In one sense, the idea of an ur-history is Benjamin's attempt to provide something of a political education for present and future generations. Yet, crucially, "nowhere in his writings do the ur-images have a status other than that of dream symbol. They provide the motivation for future emancipation, which will not be literally a restoration of the past, but will be based on new forms. . . ."[40] In another sense, ur-history is a philosophical construction, one which "strained the traditional conceptions of both history and philosophy to the breaking point . . . [breaking] radically with the philosophical canon by searching for truth in the 'garbage heap' of modern history . . . shifted meanings, and, above all, transiency."[41] Thus, Benjamin obviously thought Adorno drastically missed the point in charging "myth is not the classless longing of a true society, but the objective character of the alienated commodity itself."[42] In fact, myth is not itself this "classless longing," but rather the result of this longing unfulfilled and then taken over by forms of commodification, fetishization, and reification. Adorno was right to be wary of a sort of lifeless, anti-antagonistic element behind the idea of a collective unconscious, but the dialectical mediation which he sought would seem to be present in Benjamin's adaptation of the Hegelian relationship between consciousness and

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reality -- the former representing for Benjamin the meeting of waking and dream, the latter representing the meeting of petrified nature and transitory nature.

For Benjamin, political responsibility must also be dialectical, aiming at an "authentic political experience" free from an "always-the-same" historicism. Yet, it must be re-emphasized that Benjamin seeks to avoid the pitfalls with respect to the other extreme. That is, it must be made clear that historical materialism is *not* historical determinism. Here, Susan Buck-Morss elicits Benjamin's view of revolution-as-innervation: "When Benjamin states that these images 'pertain' to a 'classless society' it is because the fairy-tale quality of the wish for happiness that they express presupposes an end to material scarcity and exploitative labor that form the structural core of societies based on class domination."43 Furthermore, Buck-Morss marks the crucial nexus whereby Benjamin surpasses Marx by citing a wondrous sentiment from his *Theses:* "Where Marx himself had fallen under the spell of the discourse of progress, identifying revolutions as the 'locomotives of world history,' Benjamin countered: 'Perhaps it is totally different. Perhaps revolutions are the reacting of humanity traveling in this train for the emergency brake.'"44 Thus, my earlier suggestion regarding both the manifest and latent function of the utopian ideal reappears here. On the one hand, revolution as such aims at the socialist transformation of culture. It is thus, *to a point,* teleological. On the other hand, revolution is embedded in an *immanent* brewing of the possibility for change. It is something of a constant imperative. Moreover, such "brewing" aims precisely to explode the continuum of history through an ongoing criticism, which follows the path of awakening. Here, the political implications of montage are made explicit. Richard Wolin aptly describes it as that of "estrangement": "As a result of the new 'shocking' juxtaposition of everyday objects in the Dialectical Image, these objects demand a unique, critical consideration and thus cease to be serviceable for the ends of the ruling powers."45 What Adorno seems to have misunderstood was that such an estrangement ultimately *did* account for alienated subjectivity, despite its apparently exclusive concern with "objects in themselves." The key principle is clearly that of the fundamental Hegelian dialectic between subject and object, only now enmeshed in the context of a Benjaminian now-time, in which the wrenching of these everyday cultural objects out of their original context serves to both literally and figuratively awaken the reader to her alienation. First, these objects are linked to the subject through the utopian imagination, through dreams unfulfilled: dialectical images. Second, these objects are divested "of their familiarity and thereby stir the reader from a state of passivity into an active and critical Posture."46

Not surprisingly, in turning toward moral responsibility, which Benjamin also believes to be crucial to the historical subject, we apprehend once again that realm where the ethical meets the political. Obviously, for Benjamin this meeting does not mean a simple joining of the two, and certainly not an upper hand for one over the other. In fact, ethics and politics are complementary spheres. Benjamin's turn toward Marxism was most immediately, and desperately, a cry against fascism. In the sense of an aesthetico-political dynamics, Marxism not only offered the most clarified principles, but it was the last progressive vestige against an ideology (fascism) that "reversed the avant-garde practice of putting reality onto the stage, staging not only political spectacles but historical events, and thereby making 'reality' itself theater."47 Yet, even beyond Marxism, a sense of

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urgency with respect to the ethico-political sphere is consistent with Benjamin's call for an "immanent criticism." Thus, for example, as opposed to Althusser's attempt to free Marxism of an ideological component toward its solidification as a kind of science, Benjamin sought to dialectically free Marxism from its specifically inherited nineteenth century ideological vestiges by approaching it as though it were a kind of *expression.* Thus, when Susan Buck-Morss notes that Benjamin was more concerned with the social transformation that will occur after the moment of revolution, she is not downplaying revolution or suggesting that Benjamin's choice of Marxism was an arbitrary one. Rather, she is suggesting precisely the way in which ethics complements politics -- i.e., for Benjamin, in the urgent striving of the utopian imagination to get its head above water. This will be assisted through critical exploration, while providing something of a corrective to a Marxist ideology that risks slipping into party politics, state totalitarianism, and historicism. Just as dialectics provides the operative framework for cultural awakening, so Marxism provides Benjamin with a decisive moral and political stance. As Richard Wolin writes, "Benjamin disparages the value of Communist (as well as all political) goals and speaks of communist action for its own sake as a 'corrective' to those goals. . . ." Moreover, he suggests a preoccupation of Benjamin (as well as of Adorno and other Frankfurt critical theorists) in exploring and attempting to fuse certain elements of the often disparate traditional philosophies of Hegel, via Marx, and Kant: ". . . it is, above all, communism 'as an obligatory mode of conduct' that seizes his imagination, the idea of communist praxis as the historically appropriate embodiment of the categorical imperative."48 We cannot wait to see how dialectical relations will unfold, urged Benjamin -- they are unfolding presently before us.

X. Conclusion

I would begin my concluding thoughts with an anecdote from a brief exchange. When I finished writing the initial abstract for this project, I shared it with my dear friend and grandmother, a Hungarian who experienced World War II as a young mother with a baby boy (my father) and later fled her home country during the 1956 revolution in Hungary. Upon reading the abstract, she said, "It's a sad thing, no?" "Yes," I said, "the predicament is a sad one, but with Benjamin there is still a sense of hope." "Well, such a hope is always with the young people," she said, "and as you get older, it deteriorates." The question, then, I thought to myself in response to her statement, was "Why?" Marx's false consciousness undoubtedly only takes us so far -- if it is to have some lasting use at all -- and we must acknowledge his overestimation of how communism would rectify it historically.

In discussing Benjamin and "utopian ideals" in this essay, I have certainly not disacknowledged the existence of isolated utopian communities, nor the necessary primacy of theory, as someone who got hold of my abstract had charged. Still, the presence of utopianism(s)-in-practice, of which this reader's response to my abstract reminds us ("UTOPIAN COMMUNITIES ARE EXISTING NOW" were the words printed loud and clear in the response) would seem to clear up any endless theorizing about the "possibility" of utopia. Yet, it somehow does not accomplish this clarity . . . at least not entirely. In fact, such a reminder encourages us to keep asking the question as to

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how our utopian ideals can inform our quest for social change on a macro-level. From a sociological perspective, we could say that the success of actual utopian communities is a success for "symbolic-interactionism" -- i.e., for individuals coming together in peace and cooperation to form an ethical community and way of life. Yet, from this same perspective, we find that issues -- both individual and collective, existing on both the macro- and micro-levels of social interaction -- have not been rectified in terms of a "social-conflict" model. I would argue that, contrary to the notion that theory should be undermined on the basis of actual, functioning utopian communities, for example, the theoretical pursuit is encouraged that much more by the existence of such actual utopias. Still, for this very reason, the theoretical engagement with notions of utopians is a necessarily frustrated one. This is the sadness, or perhaps the tragedy, which so impressed my grandmother, and Walter Benjamin as well. Not only have we neglected to discern some quest for social change and happiness through the explosion of a myth-laden present, but we ironically dismiss as "utopian" such isolated manifestations of a most sacred tenet of democratic virtue, which is today thwarted by so-called liberal "individualism." In terms of a general dialectics, theory has failed to inform practice, and perhaps more significantly, practice has failed to inform theory. Benjaminian now-time exposes the presence of "dream images," which exist like blood underneath the skin of industrial and technological progress. Yet, since such progress has never been awakened in the context of an ethical humanity and cultural transformation, it has never really "progressed" at all.

Notes

1 See Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989): p. 123.

2 Ibid., p. 13.

3 . . . and beyond. His "supervised" experiments with hashish and well known. However, these experiments were neither meant to be the stuff of pure whim and mindless escapism nor some attempt at a kind of scientific method. Rather, as Hermann Schweppenhäuser notes, "Benjamin's experiments correspond quite precisely to the specific cognitive intentions articulated in his most developed philosophical texts bringing bits and pieces to the surface . . . discontinuous, utterly concise, and at the same time painfully incisive fragments" ("Propaedeutics of Profane Illumination," in *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections,* ed. Gary Smith, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1991: pp. 34-35).

4 Buck-Morss, p. 3.

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5 See Eva L Corredor, *Lukacs After Communism: Interviews with Contemporary Intellectuals* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997): p. 106.

6 Ibid., p. 107.

7 See Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections,* ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968): pp. vi, 255.

8 Ibid., pp. xvii, 262.

9 Corredor, p. 101.

10 Buck-Morss, p. 114.

11 Corredor, pp. 134-35.

12 Buck-Morss, p. 123 (my emphasis).

13 See Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations,* p. 10.

14 Ibid., p. 12.

15 Ibid, p. ix, 257.

16 See Rolf Tiedemann, "Dialectics at a Standstill: Approaches to the *Passagen-Werk* (1982)," in *On Walter Benjamin,* p. 285.

17 Although I will not pursue the specific comparison at length, we should note here Cohen's interesting choice of genealogy as that method which Benjamin adopted. In particular, we should not hesitate to liken his approach to that of Foucault, suggesting a similar "micro" route to genealogy via an ultimate frustration with a more rigid structuralism, in this case, as represented by Marx and an implicit faith in "macro-revolution."

18 See John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993): p. 208.

19 Ibid., p. 218.

20 Ibid., p. 211.

21 See Jürgen Habermas, "Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique," in *On Walter Benjamin,* p. 106.

22 Buck-Morss, p. 66.

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23 See Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of the Surrealist Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995): p. 27.

24 Tiedemann, "Dialectics at a Standstill," p. 270.

25 Habermas, "Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique," p. 108-109.

26 See Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings,* ed. Demetz (New York: Schocken Books, 1978): p. 179.

27 Benjamin, *Illuminations,* p. 190.

28 See André Breton, *Mad Love* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1987): p. 15.

29 See Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994): p. xi.

30 Ibid., p. 102.

31 Buck-Morss, p. 78.

32 See Fredric Jameson (ed.), *Aesthetics and Politics* (London and New York: Verso, 1977): p. 102.

33 Habermas, "Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique," p. 106.

34 Ibid., p. 115.

35 Tiedemann, "Dialectics at a Standstill," p. 286 (my emphasis).

36 Habermas, "Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique," p. 106.

37 Here, the work of Georges Bataille, in particular, comes to mind.

38 Corredor, pp. 143-44.

39 Wolin, p. 182.

40 Buck-Morss, p. 116.

41 Ibid., pp. 217-18.

42 Jameson, p. 116.

43 Buck-Morss, p. 118.

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44 Ibid., p. 92.

45 Wolin, p. 125.

46 Ibid., p. 124.

47 Buck-Morss, p. 36.

48 Wolin, p. 115.

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