

A Visual Journey:
Arcades and Dialectical Images

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ARCADES AND DIALECTICAL
IMAGES

Joel Vacheron, *A Visual Journey: Arcades and Dialectical Images*

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TOWARDS A FRAGMENTED PROJECT

'Fashion, like architecture, (...) stands in the darkness of the lived moment'

Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*

From late 1880s until the 1920s, Atget wandered Paris, methodically photographing the streets, doorways, facades and shop signs of the city. In doing this, he built up a massive inventory of around 8,500 photographs, divided into different categories. His pictures had mainly functional uses rather than being *artistic*, Atget spoke of himself as an *archivist* and called his photographs *documents*. Thus, '*the real consequence of his art is in the cumulative effect of the entire body of work. It seems apt to compare Atget's oeuvre to a great Gothic cathedral. (...) It contains many diverse parts: some shape its main structure, others provide networks of buttressing support, still others serve as fanciful ornamentation.*' (Borcoman J.). It is this same interest in documenting modern city life which initially motivated Benjamin's *cathedral* that is the *Arcades Projects*. Just like Atget, he gathered his observations of the city and composed vast archives of his time. Initially planned as an

essay of fifty pages, all the observations and fragmented historical data produced for the Arcade Project grew in an ensemble of material which, when published for the first time in 1982, contained over a thousand pages.

This inexhaustible source of primary documents was ordered chronologically and grouped into in thirty-six files, or Konvoluts, each entitled with a key word or phrase: for example, gambling, mirrors, street signs, souvenirs, hashish, wax figures, panoramas, boredom, kitsch, prostitution, streets, metros, architecture etc. All these features depict different scenes of the city life and contain records '*on the archetypal 'figures' of the modern metropolis*' defined by their spatial activities. Consequently, '*the city is orchestrated by the flow of commodities and their apparitions (advertising, cinema and so on)*. *The Paris of the Arcades Project teems with bodies, images, signs, stimulants, movement, and is experienced as a perpetual assault on both tradition and the human sensorium alike*' (Highmore B. 2002: 61)

Hence, in response to the endless commodifications of everyday life and the strong presence of phantasmagoria in capitalist culture, Benjamin's main purpose was to provoke a modern everyday shock experience. This experience of shock is to be found in the

metropolitan crowd, in the industrial mode of production, in traffic and in advertising. In short, it is found in all the overlooked and trivial situations '*that could give the modern everyday a voice that would allow for both critical attention and critical practice*' (Highmore B. 2002: 67). The incessant accumulation of debris generated by the modernization became, through Benjamin's gaze, multiple clues to discovering philosophical statements. However, with his unconventional research procedures, Benjamin was not looking to find the truth about the city. Rather, he looked at it as a concrete abstraction (Shields R.) which could reveal all the contradictions and potential prejudices of his time.

Through this '*mosaic of aphoristic paragraphs, captioned by placards of urban scenery*' (Sontag S.), Benjamin shapes a *constellation* that throws the banality of everyday city life into an explicit historicity. According to Steve Pile and Nigel Thrift, '*these juxtapositions are a montage of urban images. But these images are meant to be read side by side, and in moving between them they are meant to reveal something of the present, if only a glimpse.*' (306). The Arcades become a kind of *world in miniature* — a social and historical laboratory in which every components, attitudes or details are an alibi to go deeper in the wishes and phantasms of a society at a given time.

Benjamin's main wish with this juxtaposition of fragments was also to provide a picture, as complex as the city, that would wake the city dwellers from the comfort of the dream that was their urban landscape. Thus, *'rather than search for the statistical average 'arcade-user', he attempted to uncover the mythical structure of impulses, aspirations and anxieties which motivated the interactions of everyday street life'* (Shields R. 1996: 230). By inviting dwellers to re-examine the familiar environment of his era, Benjamin aimed to provoke experiences of the city that would go beyond the myth of progress promoted by industrialization.

The 1935 Exposé and its Teachings

According to Susan Buck-Morss, the 1935 exposé *'provides the closest approximation to the 'clear construction' of the book that by then Benjamin had in his mind's eye'* (53). It is also fully evocative of the farseeing ways in which Walter Benjamin depicted city life. It is made up of six *'provisional chapter divisions'* (W. Benjamin), which are all emblematic of the themes and the particular methodology used by Benjamin to build his critical account of modern experience. The text started from a *'speculative reflection on the fate of art in the context of the changing technical*

and political conditions of the nineteenth-century Paris'. (Caygill H. 1998: 144). The 1935 expose crystallises in a short text the main representative features, the critical statements and the conflict zones of Paris as a singular symbol of modernity. Furthermore, it reveals the hidden aspects behind the visible phenomena of everyday urban experience. Each chapter brings together a historical figure with a historical phenomenon. Fourier or the Arcades; Daguerre or the dioramas; Grandville or the World Exhibitions; Baudelaire or the Streets of Paris and Hausmann and the Barricades, are the different passages that allowed Benjamin to show how phantasmagoria has been spread in the public and private spheres of the capitalist city.

image here?

THE NEW CODES OF THE EVERYDAY

‘The realization of dream elements, in the course of waking up, is the paradigm 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.’

Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*

The Arcades Project had an additional aim. Indeed, this large inventory of Konvoluts sought to test ‘*how ‘concrete’ one can be in connection with the history of philosophy.*’ (Benjamin W. quoted in Buck-Morss S. 1999: 4). In other words, the Arcades Project was also an endeavour to build a bridge between theoretical considerations and material artefacts, and Benjamin’s concern with the ‘banal’ must be treated with the same rigorous procedure as any *serious* issue. Thus, ‘*this speculative but finite thought, which informs the entire Arcade Project, is neither a historical empiricism nor a transcendent idealism; rather it insists on the presence of the absolute in concrete experience, and not only in actual, but also in possible experience. Each epoch is on the threshold of its possible futures, which remain nested within it in a latent state.*’ (Caygill H. 1998: 148). The city can also be regarded as an intricate labyrinth in which each

feature, specific part, material object or attitude, could be a clue to discovering the ideology of an epoch and its possible futures.

Faced by this multitude of clues, the reader might find it difficult not to become lost in an abyss of symbols without meanings. However at least in the view of Susan Buck-Morss, *'what saves the project from arbitrariness is Benjamin's political concern that provided the overriding orientation for every constellation'* (Buck-Morss S. 1999 (1989): 6). Benjamin's warnings about preventing the biases and inherent dangers of modernism remain the solid foundation of the whole project. Besides his influence in shaping the study of the modern city, Benjamin's goal, more than being an attempt to depict was to challenge city dwellers politically and ideologically in how they related to the urban environment and to teach them to see beyond the supposed neutrality of everyday life. That means *'that if pedagogy is to have more than a descriptive task limited to exposing and confirming existing codes in society, it must have additionally a political and emancipatory project: the breaking and making of new codes in an urban environment'*. (Dobson S. 2002: 6). From this standpoint, Benjamin arguably succeeded in revealing the implicit regulations attached to supposedly insignificant aspects or things of their time in order to *'crack the codes which exert a strangle hold on existing conditions'* (Dobson S. 2002: 4)

The photography and the dialectical thinking

Besides his emancipatory goal, Benjamin had a profound interest in the changing role of photography. It would be inaccurate to think about Benjamin's approach of the modern everyday city life without considering the ways in which he made use of images, especially photographs. The Arcade Project also presented a model of Benjamin's interest in taking cultural theory towards the visual. Indeed, he considered photographs to be more than just artistic interpretation. Through Benjamin's eyes, photographs became documents that once analysed and commented, provided the hermeneutic tools to give concreteness to his critical history of the present. This interest is obvious in his canonical texts, such as *A Little History of Photography* or *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, which are directly focused on the social and artistic implications of the photographic medium in modern ways of seeing. The purpose of *The Work...*, also published in 1935, is essentially an epistemological one, since it outlines the loss of aura undergone by paintings once they have been photographically reproduced. This process of dissociation with the original is also patent in his critique of the dioramas *'which illusionistically reproduced natural and historical scenes for a viewing public'* (Caygill H. 1998: 145). Benjamin

deplored the attrition of the mimetic function of painting as a consequence of the advancement of, firstly, the dioramas and, later, other technical technology like photography and cinema.

Nevertheless, photography plays a crucial role as a hermeneutic tool in Benjamin's analysis and he insisted on the effectiveness of using archaic images to identify what is historically new in modern experience. This principle is central in his concept of dialectical image: *'The dialectical image is a constellation (a montage) of elements that, in combination, produce a 'spark' that allows for recognition, for legibility, for communication and critique. What Benjamin is aiming at is a collage practice that can arrange the materiality of modernity into a design that awakens it from its dreamscape and opens it out on to history'* (Highmore B. 2002: 71). Hence, photographs in this dialectical conception allow the flow of history, and particularly its representation as the march of progress to be immobilized. They can be recognized as a specific experience of a moment. In this way, Benjamin raises the viewing of image-documents as a conscious and potentially emancipating act as opposed to the sterile consumption of photographs as commodities. By this procedure, Benjamin brings together elements that were not necessarily related in terms of linearity. Thus, *'by placing these images together, by asking the reader to make the*

connection between these images for themselves, and by putting these images into a relationship that also changed their meanings, Benjamin hoped to set in motion a train of thoughts that would keep moving. But he was not intent on destroying what was there already: far from it, he was attempting to recuperate the ruins and dust of the modern city and to reassemble them into something that was genuinely unimaginable.' (Pile S. & Thrift N. 2000: 307). This is this definition of the montage, and its impact on our ways of seeing the city life, that will be developed in the next parts of this essay.

Richard Hamilton, *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes so Different, so Appealing*, collage, 1956.



HAMILTON'S POP FLAT

'The private individual, who in the office has to deal with reality, needs the domestic interior to sustain him in his illusions. This necessity is all the more pressing since he has no intention of allowing his commercial considerations to impinge on social ones. In the formation of his private environment, both are kept out. From this arise the phantasmagorias of the interior —which, for the private man, represents the universe. In the interior, he brings together the far away and the long ago. His living room is a box in the theater of the world'

Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*

In the chapter, *Louis-Philippe or the Interior*, Benjamin traces the social and technical conditions which have led to the separation of the living space from the workplace, a distinction which sanctioned the setting up of the modern private sphere as an '*expression of the individual personality of the dweller but at the same time exposed the interior upon the exterior, thus shattering its casing*' (Caygill H. 1998: 146). According to Benjamin, this situation tends to exclude social and political questions from those of everyday life and the private space also becomes a striking *sphere of illusion: a phantasmagoria of the interior*. This famous work by Richard Hamilton offers an example that illustrates the orientation and main features of Benjamin's legacy proposed in this essay. It is generally considered to be the first

work of pop art, because of its many references to the then popular culture and consumerism in the United States. Hence, this collage, produced in 1956, acts like a metonymic representation of some postulates proposed by Benjamin twenty years earlier in the Arcades Project, especially as a visual demonstration of the principle of dialectical image.

With this method of collage, Hamilton manages to assemble a montage of disparate pictures, objects and topics which were typical of popular culture during the late 50s. Even though this setting depicts an instance of the private sphere, each component carries significant resonance with everyday life and social preoccupations of this period. Depending on the point of one chooses, the same picture can reveal issues as different as: media (newspapers, TV, recorder, cinema); gender (the bodybuilder, the pinup, the cleaner); desire (the moon, the cars, the romance); techniques of representation (cartoon, painting, photography), and even some analysis of furniture design and a definition of kitsch. Through their potentially infinite combinations, all these items open the door to an inexhaustible number of interpretations which could each enlighten another facet of modernity. The various elements presented in this work always show something different and open the door to a myriad of interpretations. Through their crystallisation in one space of representation,

these various heteroclit elements can express the excesses and *dérives* of this consumerist period. Hence, *just what is it...* is motivated by the shifting nature of everyday life in the late 50s. The relationship between the private and public spheres tends to become more singular with the spread of mass culture: the consumer world steadily taking control of the traditionally secluded and safe household.

Even if the private indoor space is still the *box in the theatre of the world* described by Benjamin, this space is increasingly ruled by the commercial considerations that feed dwellers' phantasmagoria. Following the critical schemes of the International Situationist, this montage also figures the general process of *spectacularization* occurring during that period. According to Guy Debord, *'the spectacle is used to signal a new stage of advanced capitalism, especially evident in the reconstruction period after WW II, in which consumption, leisure, and the image become more important than ever before in the economies of social and political life.'* (Foster H. et al. 2004: 688). Faced with this new mutation of the capitalist system, the *situs* provided some subversive precepts to take control of the everyday city life. The following chapter outlines some proposals to transform the city from *'the most marginal of all the marginal avant-gardes'* (Sadler S. 1999: 2)



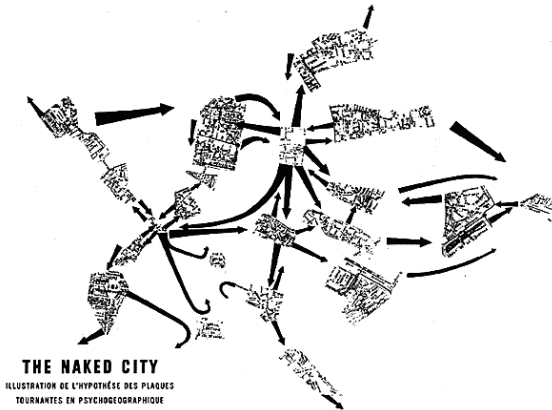
THE DERIVES OF THE BANAL

‘The true goal of Hausmann’s projects was to secure the city against civil war. He wanted to make the erection of barricades in Paris impossible for all time.’

Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*

With the example of the Hausmannization of Paris, Benjamin outlines the relegation of art into a means of causing harm or destruction — in this case under the guise of architectural engineering. Taking the example of the boulevards, he outlines that they *‘did not owe their existence solely but also to political exigencies, namely the securing of the city from insurrection through the eviction of the proletarian population of the inner city’* (Caygill H 1998: 147). Benjamin also considers *Hausmann’s work of destruction* as a highly emblematic way of reshaping the city to avoid future insurrection. With regards to the architectural innovation of his time, Benjamin opens the 1935 exposé with the juxtaposition of the history of the arcade and the project of the social utopian Charles Fourier. He mentions that *‘the arcade marked a technical development that anticipated by almost a century the social conditions for its full utilisation.’* (Caygill H 1998: 145). However, the innovation that was the arcade was still essentially concerned with the purely rational, and lacked a social dimension.

Guy Debord and Asger Jorn, *The Naked City: illustration de l'hypothèse des plaques tournante en psychogéographique* 1957.



This is why Fourier's plans challenge the myth 'that industrialization had to develop as it has, that is, as a mode of dominating both human beings and the natural world of which they are part' (Buch-Morss S. 1999: 276). The various examples above outline how Benjamin was focusing on the intrinsic political nature of architectural orientations and the constant struggle endured by city-dwellers to get an environment close to their personal desires. These aspirations would eventually culminate in the students' revolt of May 1968. Particularly the radical views held by the situationists which, in many ways, emphasized Benjamin's political concerns.

This map of Paris entitled *The Naked City: illustration de l'hypothèse des plaques tournante en psychogéographique* was made in 1957 by Guy Debord and Asger Jorn and is, by far, one of the most famous images to come out of situationism. It was made after a Gaullist councillor proposed, in the early 1950's, a massive *Hausmannian* redevelopment of some of the popular quarters in Paris in order to create new commercial zones. This map illustrates the 'situationist claims that urbanisme represented a drive to rationalize, homogenize, and commercialize the socioeconomic diversity of Paris' (Sandler S. 1999: 61). With it, Guy Debord expressed a critique against the commercial standardisation that dislocated suburbs and popular areas.

Like Fourier's utopian views, the situationist's radical projections against urbanism also look at the unification of space and architecture together with the social and individual experience: *'Turning the city from its productive orientation to being a centre for the consumption of environments, in which people lived by drifting from area to area and activity to activity depending on their moods rather than being regulated by instrumental rationality was certain to disrupt the modern city'*. (Shields R. 1996: 244). The Naked City also represents the process of urban re-reading promoted by the situs. By dividing the traditional map in different fragments, it achieves a disorientated practice of the city.

One of the major notions of situationism was the practice of *derive*, literally *drifting*, that highlights 'the emotive aspects of the city, where places are commonly characterised not just by physical data but by their powers of *attraction* and consequently *'introduces an aesthetics of place and space purified of the traditional focus on architectural aesthetics'* (Shields R. 1996: 245). The drift was a totally unproductive occupation except on occasion of unexpected encounters with other people and places. *'wandering around the city, drifting without destination, neither going to work nor properly consuming' was seen consequently as a 'transgression of the alienated world'* (Sander S. 1999: 94). These walks embodied for the situs a manner of contesting the temporal and spatial

economy in a society where *time is money*. In giving rise to unexpected situations, *'drifts had to alert people to their imprisonment by routine. (...) Cutting freely across urban space, drifters would gain a revolutionary perception of the city'* (Sander S. 1999: 94). It was a similar revolutionary sensitivity which inspired the occupation of Paris's streets during May 1968. The militants created a situation which simultaneously provoked disapproval from the more capitalistic population, thereby characterizing it with the utmost clarity, and rendered that disapproving population powerless to act, by undermining its authority in big numbers. The city became the site of political rebellion where the barricades stood as a tangible symbol of urban repossession.

Even though proposed in a less radical way, this call for a new perception of the urban environment is also at the origin of de Certeau's concern for the recognition of a *pedestrian speech act*: that is to say a *'narrative of footsteps by which urban spaces are activated and used as places for this and places for that'* Shields R. 1996: 245.

Following this statement, the city, far from being a *mappable* totality, is always subject to the new contextual redefinitions of its users. It is this particular way of drifting, proposed by Michel de Certeau and echoing Baudelaire's *flânerie*, that will be the focus of the next chapter.



A DRIFTING GLANCE

'It isn't that the past casts its light on what is present or that what is present casts its light on what is past; rather an image is that in which the Then and the Now come together into a constellation like a flash of lightning. In other words: an image is dialectics at a standstill.'

Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*

In the section *Baudelaire on the street of Paris*, Benjamin interrogates the fate of the public space, in particular through the figure of the flâneur: *'The flâneur is the metaphoric figure originally brought into being by Baudelaire, as the spectator and depicter of modern life, most specifically in relation to contemporary art and the sights of the city. The flâneur moves through space and among the people with the viscosity that both enables and privileges vision'* (Jenks C. 1995: 145-146). Baudelaire's poetry, through *'his attack against the phantasmagoria of his age'* (S. Buck-Morss) gives a pivotal example of the shock experience of modern city life. At the same time, it denounces the *'harmonious façade' of continous historical progress'* (Buck-Morss S. 1999: 195). Baudelaire also refers to the allegoric uses of the city in Benjamin's argumentation. Nevertheless, in Baudelaire's prose, the city is never regarded as an object of spectacle and Paris is not often

described in his poems, but *'it was in fact during his flânerie that Baudelaire composed his poems. At times he did not own a work table. He made aimless wandering through the city streets itself a method of productive labor'* (Buck-Morss S. 1999: 185). This is also another aspect of Benjamin's pedagogy, i.e. to consider the city as an inspirational scene of work for poetic purposes.

This aspect is particularly significant in Michel de Certeau's writings about cities. This interest in everyday city life is also found in the re-assessment of culture that emerged vividly in the wake of May 1968. However, Michel de Certeau does not see *'the city as a future battleground for the conflict over the meaning of modernity'* (Hussey A. 2002: 217). Rather than a potential site for civil insurrection, he sees instances of resistance in the city as the inventive forms of appropriation that occur in everyday practices. According to de Certeau, *resistance* is not only synonymous with opposition but is above all present in everyday life practices. Michel de Certeau outlines *'a resistance born of difference, of otherness: bodies that are at variance to the machines that they operate; traditions that are unlike those being promoted; imaginings that are different from the rationale governing the present'*. (Highmore B. 2002: 148). He is observing the infinite range of popular procedures through which people operate and practise in the city.

In his essay *Walking in the City* from the late 70s, de Certeau describes his first impression, when looking over Manhattan from the top of the World Trade Center. From this high point, he comments on how the city is offered as a totality, a homogeneous image, which contrasts with the messy and meandering city that one moves through at street level. The street level is the realm of lived experience and de Certeau attributes a particular role to the walkers who constantly transform space in their action: *'the ordinary practitioners of the city live 'down below', below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They walk—an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers, Wandersmänner, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban 'text' they write without being able to read it (...). The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representations, it remains daily and infinitely other'*. (de Certeau M. 1993: 128). This observation defies the geometrical constructions imposed by urban development and emphasises the impossibility of giving an objective and rational picture of the city. Because, according to de Certeau, *'there is no finished system, no structure that can be overlaid on the everyday to produce neat schemas and mappable territories.'*

(Highmore B. 2002: 146). The city-dwellers' invisible walks resist the *organized illusion* of totality by creating the city through numerous journeys.

Far from being reduced to geometrical or theoretical constructions, the city first has to be regarded as a privileged space that can be used to develop a poetic experience. However, as was the case with the situationist's *drifting*, the city becomes a creative operation that is not reserved to the poet only. It is irreducibly freedom itself that defies reification and allows dwellers to take (re)possession of city life. A process outlined by Richard Wentworth's project Making Do and Getting By. Since 1974, the intention of this series is to record the trivial situations of everyday city life in order to highlight the 'outstanding unnatural beauty' of urban environment.

Wentworth is a flâneur who explores the streets of his neighbourhood scrutinising moments of disruption. His standpoint on the cityscape echoes Atget's approach. Indeed, '*Wentworth and Atget are interested in something similar here—not so much in strata of muck piled in the streets, nor the stratification of society, but in another kind of layering of the world: how things go into freefall, how connections are made, broken, remade, lost and found again. This is how city life is. This is where we lose and find ourselves at every turn, chasing the ghosts of past selves*' (Searle A. 2001).

This inherent interrelatedness symbolises the

spark, the flash of lighting, that photographs can produce thanks to their dialectical dimensions. Benjamin's legacy in representations of city life provides this *drifting glance* that is the first act of resistance against the phantasmogoria of capitalist culture.

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p. 30: Richard Wentworth, *Making Do and Getting By*

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