

Surreal Dreamscapes: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades

Michael Calderbank

Abstract

This article examines Benjamin's theoretical writings on the dream as a crucial aspect of his engagement with Surrealism. Given his ambivalence towards Surrealism's potential for mystical thinking, it addresses Benjamin's encounter in the *Arcades Project* with the work of Louis Aragon, and its resonances with the writings of vitalist philosopher Ludwig Klages, whom Benjamin had known in his youth. The article traces the ways in which Benjamin's dream theory formed part of his understanding of the revolutionary project of Surrealism, only to lose its critical force in his later 1930s work, and it suggests ways in which Benjamin might have developed this project more successfully.

Sometimes, on awakening we recall a dream. In this way rare shafts of insight illuminate the ruins of our energies that time has passed by.

These lines are typically Benjaminian. In a sense, they might stand as a brief exposition of a critical insight to which he would attempt to give concretion in the *Arcades Project*. However, they are taken not from Benjamin's mature work, but rather, from the unpublished early text 'The Metaphysics of Youth,'¹ written in 1914. Appropriately, Benjamin (above all writers) is stubbornly resistant to any smooth, teleologically-driven linear chronology of intellectual development. Likewise, Susan Buck-Morss uses the analogy, again peculiarly apposite in Benjamin's case, of 'development' in the sense of photography: 'Time deepens definition and contrast, but the imprint of the image has been there from the start.'² Hence, I ought to qualify at the outset the sense in which it is possible to speak of Benjamin's interest in the dream as a 'legacy' from Surrealism. The nature of this relationship is not akin to a printer leaving an impression on a passive surface, as though Benjamin uncritically assimilated a series of previously alien positions.

Nor incidentally (by way of excursus) can we describe unproblematically his relationship with Surrealism as a 'dialogue', since with respect to the mainstream Surrealists at least, there appears to be scant evidence that any sustained personal links were developed, and no sustained attention appears to have been paid to Benjamin's work. Things are slightly different with the circle around Bataille in the Collège de Sociologie and *Acéphale*. Of course, the very fact that we possess Benjamin's notes towards the *Arcades Project* is in no small part down to the efforts of Bataille in securing their safe hiding in the vaults of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Benjamin was drawn within the orbit of the short-lived anti-Popular Front group *Contre-Attaque*, in which Breton and Bataille managed to work alongside each other for a time, but, in itself, this appears to have been a somewhat temporary and insubstantial arrangement of convenience. Benjamin, for his part, had read the work of Bataille and his circle quite widely, recognising a number of shared concerns, although I am not aware if any corresponding assessment or direct consideration of *his* work by Bataille or his colleagues exists. Quite a direct role in Benjamin's work was certainly played by Pierre Klossowski, who was employed on the French translation of the 'Work of Art' essay, but this is said to have been a



frustrating experience for all concerned.³ In the end, relations between Benjamin and Bataille's circle appear to have become somewhat strained,⁴ perhaps as a consequence of the former's deep scepticism towards what he regarded as their politically suspect surrender to mysticism and ecstatic intoxication. However, whilst it is certainly not out of the question that a certain exchange of ideas or influences took place, to suggest that a properly dialogical relationship existed between Benjamin and the Surrealist movement (more widely conceived) seems to be putting it a little strongly.

Rather, I am proposing that it should be characterised as an important 'critical encounter': a designation that helps to convey serious intellectual engagement, without implying the uncritical acceptance of Surrealist tenets or, indeed, minimising the significance of Benjamin's previous work. The first fruits of this encounter can be traced back to as early as 1925, when in a letter to Rilke, Benjamin remarked:

In particular what struck me about surrealism...was the captivating, authoritative, and definitive way in which language passes over into the world of dreams.⁵

Thus, we can see that Benjamin's reception of Surrealism from the beginning circled around a fascination with their treatment of the dream. In a sense, though this is to beg the question, rather than answer it. *Why, we are still left asking, do such ideas strike him as being so significant?*

For although Benjamin himself privately put forward the argument that Louis Aragon's work *Le Paysan de Paris (Paris Peasant)* 'stands...at the very beginning' of the *Arcades* research,⁶ this intimation of a new direction in his work should perhaps be read in dialectical tension with the passage in the *Trauerspiel* study in which he argues that the process of thinking 'tirelessly[...]makes new beginnings, returning in a roundabout way to its original object.'⁷ What lies behind the sheer intensity of Benjamin's reading of Aragon (he related that: 'I could never read more than two or three pages in bed at night before my heart started to beat so strongly that I had to lay the book aside')?⁸ On the one hand it could reflect excited anticipation of future possibilities, but on the other (as Benjamin appears to recognise retrospectively), it painfully struck a nerve: the excitement with which he consumed Aragon's work, was simultaneously 'a warning' of the years which, in Benjamin's words, would have to be invested 'between myself and such a reading', if he was to 'work through' the legacies of the past.⁹ Why did Aragon's writing evoke such a response, so fraught with danger as well as opportunity?

As Sigmund Freud had pointed out, intellectual history had mostly hitherto been divided between an Enlightenment scorn for the dream as mere mental detritus, and inversely, its unqualified celebration in the eyes of the Romantics. While far from being liquidated, such approaches would at least now have to contend with a certain cross-contamination of categories between 'dream' and 'waking reality'. In Benjamin's essay of 1925 entitled 'Dream-Kitsch', his first published treatment of Surrealism (then at the height of its first flourishing), he stresses that this inter-penetration of the two realms is not a 'natural' constant, but a historically specific phenomenon.¹⁰ Kitsch objects, the banal by-products of culture subsumed under the logic of industrial production, are assimilated into dreams, thereby obscuring the oneiric 'blue horizon' of the Romantics, with a 'grey coating of dust'. Correspondingly, as Marx first diagnosed with his analysis of the commodity fetish, at the height of



capitalist modernity, 'ordinary' commodities become invested with a magical, quasi-religious and dreamlike aura. As such, Aragon's *Le Paysan de Paris* offers a remarkably prescient evocation of the arcades as a world where the everyday is saturated with the marvellous, a lyrically intense dream-world in which arises the basis for a 'mythology of the modern'. Hence, the arcades appear as:

...places where men go calmly about their mysterious lives and in which a profound religion is gradually taking shape. These sites are not yet inhabited by a divinity. It is forming there, a new godhead precipitating in these re-creations of Ephesus...¹¹

The earliest part of the text, 'The Passage de l'Opéra' dates from 1924, the same year as the 'First Manifesto of Surrealism', and is very much animated by the same concerns. The pseudo-rational repudiation of dream-life is countered by its positive affirmation, a recognition that everyday life is permeated with qualities of fantasy and imagination which, it is argued, can only be repressed at the expense of a seriously diminished quality of human experience.

Benjamin, on first reading the 'First Manifesto', could hardly fail to be struck by a brand of Romantic idealism which he himself had once espoused. For, as early as 1914, he had written:

For the sake of what prelude do we cheat ourselves of our dreams? With a wave of the hand we push them aside into the pillows, leave them behind, while some of them flutter silently about our heads. How do we dare carry them into the brightness of the day, as we awake? Oh, into the brightness!¹²

For Benjamin, therefore, the re-emergence of 'dream' in Surrealism was inevitably evocative of his identification with the Youth Movement. This was still a profoundly painful memory: it had ultimately been a traumatic experience in which an epoch of wistful dreaming had been abruptly awoken by the outbreak of the First World War. In this context a note from the *Arcades Project* files is particularly revealing:

Awakening as a graduated process that goes on in the life of the individual as in that of the generation. Sleep its initial stage. *A generation's experience of youth has much in common with the experience [Erfahrung] of dreams.*¹³ [my emphasis]

Hence the intensity of Benjamin's fascination with Surrealism's re-iteration of dream experience can be seen as doubly symptomatic, both of the traumatic nature of this intellectual identification, *and* of the unrealised desires which this repressed episode yields. Another way of expressing this, is to say that, as with the conception of the 'dialectical image' itself, Benjamin's critical negotiation with Surrealism represents a re-configuring of the old in order to make apparent new possibilities. Yet there is always the danger that such a utopian potentiality will turn out to be only the compulsive repetition of past traumas. This is why the critical stakes are so high. If the forces that prevented Benjamin's expectations from being fulfilled previously once again emerge victorious from the encounter in the 'time of the now', then the painful experiences of the past will be replayed once more.

The extreme ambivalence with which Aragon's work was received was bound up with its failure to distinguish itself from trends which Benjamin had run up against in the past: the mysticism



and vitalism which festered in certain strains of Romanticism. In his passive acquiescence to the dream realm, Benjamin detected serious dangers. In his notes he stressed:

Delimitation of the tendency of this project with respect to Aragon: whereas Aragon persists within the realm of dream, here the concern is to find the constellation of awakening. While in Aragon there remains an impressionistic element, namely, mythology (and this impressionism must be held responsible for the many vacuous philosophemes in his book), here it is a question of the dissolution of 'mythology' into the space of history.¹⁴

Behind this assertion of the need for distance with respect to Aragon, we might well detect, as John McCole has suggested, a hidden interlocutor in the shape of vitalist philosopher Ludwig Klages.¹⁵ The latter figure, on the periphery of the Youth Movement and whom Benjamin had met in 1914, had written a phenomenology of dream-life arguing that it was essentially rooted in the archaic, 'original totality' of experience. Essentially, for Klages, the dream represented a pre-conceptual mode of pure 'Schauen' or seeing which is bound up with a passive surrender of the ego alongside a characteristic feeling of distance and regress. Here, where the boundaries between the location of ego and the object of contemplation are dissolved, arise ephemeral glimmerings of the 'Urbild' or primal image. As Richard Block explains:

...in its pure non-relationality, in the mode of seeing freed from the conceptual paraphernalia as *Geist*, the ...*Urbild* has '*ein[en] leuchtende[n] Schimmer*', a nimbus or numinosity, or as Benjamin might refer to it, an aura. The nimbus results from calling into prominence the distance of the image in relationship to the nearness of the perceived object.¹⁶

Crucial to the realm of *Schauen* is the ecstatic release from the structured world of *Geist*. Dreaming thus becomes figured as the intoxicated reception of a timeless world characterised by the rhythmical fluctuation of appearances.

Hence, like Aragon, Klages celebrates dreaming as a repository of mythic consciousness. In Klages this is coupled with an extreme hostility to progress as *such*, in which all human history had manifested a catastrophic tendency to break from the 'circular path of events', a kind of pagan state of worshipping the magically given, in favour of the endless strivings of an instrumental-purposive relation to a cosmos now conceived as fundamentally alien. Hence, for Klages, the whole course of Western civilization represents an endless process of decay, in which the archaic consciousness is sundered and man begins:

...to sacrifice an *interwovenness* in the imagistic plurality and inexhaustible fullness of life for the homeless *standing above things* of a *spirituality* detached from the world.¹⁷

History, from this perspective, needs to be dissolved back into the mythic. It was precisely such a vitalistic ideology that had led large parts of the Youth Movement into welcoming the First World War under the guise of a mythical heroism and sacrifice, which so appalled Benjamin in its irrational validation of the merely empirical under the guise of the archaic. Moreover, such mystical philosophies had not been exhausted after the war: rather, as Benjamin would have been only too well aware, they continued to find an echo for their highly reactionary ideas, one which would play a key part in Nazi ideology.



How then, to wrest from Aragon's work (and from his own earlier affiliations) a moment of validity, away from the clutches of the dark forces which threatened to overpower text and past alike? How could this desire find a critical methodology equal to it, one which would allow history to be free from premature foreclosure? Benjamin's gambit, characteristically, was to step into the strengths of his opponents' arguments. With respect to Klages, this meant accounting for the role of the image in human perception while trying to cut the ground from under the feet of those who would see dreams *not* as the 'royal road to the unconscious', so much as a 'one-way street' back to the archaic mists of time.

In Benjamin's view, the account of Klages had one significant merit, namely (contra the historicists) that time is not conceived of as rigidly linear, but the past continues to pulsate into the present, under conditions of 'ecstatic anamnesis', while the present is not a simple cumulative addition to a fixed store of past experiences, but a radical *displacement* of the past. Benjamin used the same term as Klages had, *Rausch*, to describe the sense of intoxicated trance with which such 'intercourse with the cosmos', was said to be enjoyed by ancient societies. Far from dismissing such a claim as myth, as perhaps we might have expected, Benjamin goes so far as to argue that:

...it is in this experience alone that we gain certain knowledge of what is nearest to us and what is remotest from us, and never of one without the other...It is the dangerous error of modern men to regard this experience as unimportant and avoidable, and consign it to the individual as the poetic rapture of starry nights.¹⁸

Benjamin conceded that in the purely optical relation to the cosmos characteristic of modern astronomy, a damaging instrumental rationality was already prefigured. Hence, a critique of a narrow conception of 'reason' based upon the natural sciences was an urgent task. Yet how could he prevent what was valuable in the context of a critique of *this* idea of progress, from toppling into a rejection of progress *in principle*?

Another way of asking this question might be: how can Surrealist experiments into states of intoxication be prevented from merely falling into reactionary mystical idealism? We must remember that, although in his essay 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia' (1927) Benjamin characterised its ambition as 'to win the energies of intoxication for the revolution,' he then went on seriously to delimit the parameters in which such a project should be undertaken.¹⁹ As this qualification was uncommon in other critical writings of the period, I will quote at some length:

...to place the accent exclusively on it [the intoxicating component in each revolutionary act] would be to subordinate the methodical and disciplinary preparation for revolution entirely to a praxis oscillating between fitness exercises and celebration in advance. Added to this is an inadequate, undialectical conception of the nature of intoxication. The aesthetic of the painter, the poet, *en état de surprise*...is enmeshed in a number of pernicious romantic prejudices ... histrionic or fanatical stress on the mysterious side of the mysterious takes us no further; we penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic...²⁰



Hence, 'extremes' of experience such as the dream, are valuable insofar as they reveal elements of the marvellous which pervade the everyday. In refuting Klages and his ilk, Benjamin suggests that the 'dream' does not open up a vista on the archaic as a promised horizon of lyrical escape, but is already saturated with the mundane objects of modern everyday life.

Moreover, for Benjamin as well as Klages, the past is not inaccessible in any chrono-'logical' sense (as nineteenth-century historicism would have it), but only in the sense that it is displaced, 'out of reach', not in the immediate vicinity of our grasp. The vital difference, however, is that for Benjamin the past is not just comprised of timeless, archaic images which flare up only as spectacle, always at a distant remove from the immediate presence of the now. Benjamin offers the figurative illustration of a child learning to grasp by trying to catch what is manifestly 'out of reach', namely the moon: a utopian gesture, it may be, but not necessarily worthless. Analogously, he argues for the politically emancipatory significance of the image for the way we develop the capacity to actively intervene in and shape the world around us, a process that comes no more naturally to the collective than it does to the infant:

The collective is a body, too. And the *physis* that is being organised for it in technology can, through all its political and factual reality, be produced only in that image space to which profane illuminations initiates us. Only when technology, body and image space interpenetrate so that all revolutionary tension becomes bodily collective innervation, and all bodily innervations of the collective become revolutionary discharge, has reality transcended itself to the extent demanded by the *Communist Manifesto*.²¹

It is significant, surely, that Benjamin articulates this important expression of the revolutionary project in the context of a discussion of Surrealism. Here he saw the need for an urgent intervention as especially pressing (imagining himself as a 'philosophical Fortinbras'²²) in order to prevent the surrender of the image's power to the forces of reaction. In his counter-thrust, Benjamin offers a dialectical reading of the image, one which is simultaneously rooted in the archaic, but which is also bound up with a progressive, *future*-oriented dimension. The dialectical image appears at a moment in which elements of past experience flash tantalisingly into the 'now-time', retroactively disclosing unknown layers of significance which have been secreted in the object; a moment capable of uniting with concerns in 'our time' to be apprehended as revelations of futurity. In this way, 'politics attains primacy over history.'²³

It is in this sense that utopian 'wish images' play a crucial mediating role in the interface of technology and human development, stimulating research into how we might learn to achieve the not-yet-possible; one side of a dialectic which also sees the development of new technologies reciprocally offer possibilities for radically *new* forms of perception and cognition. In the *Arcades Project*, which represents an attempt to trace how such a dialectic plays itself out concretely, Benjamin returns to the scene of Aragon's compromised depiction of a reality suffused by dream - the arcades of Paris - and, armed with the conception of the dialectical image, he returns to the project of a properly critical assessment of such dream processes. In 'Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century', Benjamin cites a motto from Jules Michelet, 'every epoch dreams the one to follow', followed by this formulation:



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 old and new penetrate. 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 order of production.²⁴

Just as Freud had argued that dreams were the 'fulfilment of a wish', in however disguised a form, so, Benjamin claims, everyday life is also permeated by 'wish images.' In these, the desires of the collective, which the forces of production are not sufficiently developed to realise in reality, are able to find expression.

A passage from Marx's *Capital* is cited in support of this claim, in particular an illustration of the earliest experimental locomotives, which before the requisite technology had been developed, began life with 'two feet that raised it up alternately, like a horse.'²⁵ Clearly, here, an older form of production, before a new form was ready to take its place, nevertheless bodied forth a pre-figurative 'wish image', 'to transfigure the immaturity of the social product and the inadequacies in the social order of production.' In their fascination with dreams, the Surrealists again helped to engender such a materialist insight or 'profane illumination,' as they strove:

...to blaze a way into the heart of things abolished or superseded, to decipher the contours of the banal as rebus...Picture puzzles, as schemata of the dreamwork, were long ago discovered by psychoanalysis. The Surrealists, with a similar conviction, are less on the trail of the psyche than on the track of things.²⁶

'To perceive the revolutionary energies that appear in the "outmoded",²⁷ such was the crucial project with which this avant-garde movement was engaged. In its output were manifested the latent energies invested in objects we are habitually conditioned into seeing as utterly trivial, but which can, in fact, disclose powerful utopian desires.

Such images are not only to be detected in the obviously 'fantastic' visions of a Fourier: the utopian investments of successive generations can also be discerned 'in a thousand configurations of life, from enduring edifices to passing fashions.'²⁸ This has considerable significance for a mechanical conception of Marxism still anchored in the prejudices of the nineteenth century, especially the 'false consciousness' model of ideology. Just as the positivists had dismissed dream as mental detritus, its content to be rejected out of hand, so a certain positivist strain in Marxism would explain away our investments in the 'superstructure' simply as ideological error. What this fails to understand is the 'utopian' moment which can be glimpsed in capitalism consumption, the fragment of truth to be redeemed from the false totality: its secretion of wish images, traces of which are left even in neglected and unvalued artefacts as instances of unrealised desires. As Max Horkheimer once remarked:

We cannot blame people that they are more interested in the sphere of privacy and consumption rather than [in] production. This trait contains a Utopian element. In utopia production does not play a decisive part. It is the land of milk and honey. I think it is of deep significance that art and poetry have always shown an affinity to consumption.²⁹



That the dream-world of the arcades did not provide a true 'reflection' of the capitalist mode of production was, Benjamin argued, *not* because superstructural elements had been 'consciously falsified by the ideologues of the ruling class,' but out of a deeper structural need, one which Surrealism, emerging from the realm of the aesthetic, was in a privileged position to discover.

Again, it is the dream that provides the key for the conceptual remodelling of the historical materialist methodology, and the 'base-superstructure' paradigm in particular:

The superstructure is the *expression* [my emphasis] of the infrastructure. The economic conditions under which society exists are expressed in the superstructure precisely as, with the sleeper, an overfull stomach finds not its reflection but its expression in the content of dreams, which from a causal point of view, it may be said to 'condition.'³⁰

Marxism must, in Benjamin's view, reject the notion of ideology as a reflection (howsoever distorted) of an economic base for a more intricate notion of causality, just as psychoanalysis must confront the highly complicated questions of causality between the physical processes of the body and psychic operations. We understand nothing of the dream if we take it at face value, or attempt to understand its meaning as delivered as an organic whole, forming a discrete totality which 'reflects' waking reality. Read in such a way, the dream seems to be a mere absurdity. Rather, as Freud's pioneering work suggested, the dream was only *interpretable*, only capable of sundering its meaning, if its façade of unity was broken down into discrete fragments.

In this respect, Benjamin's appraisal of dream remarkably echoes his earlier work on the aesthetics of allegory, a mode for which 'the value of fragments of thought is all the greater the less their relationship to the underlying idea,'³¹ he claims, in a passage from his *Trauerspiel* study which might just as easily have been taken directly from Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*. Similarly in baroque allegory, according to Benjamin:

The false appearance of totality is extinguished. For the *eidos* disappears, the simile ceases to exist, and the cosmos it contained shrivels up. The dry rebuses which remain contain an insight which is still available to the confused investigator.³²

Suddenly, the very excess of meaning which Benjamin finds in the German mourning play sounds uncannily like Freud, the 'confused' interpreter before the rebus of his own dream. Hence, for Benjamin, the 'rebus' character assumed by the work of a Baudelaire, the strange dream-world of the arcades, and the modernist aesthetic of montage, is obligatory, since, if we are to remain true to our experience it can only be truly rendered in the form of the fragmentary and the disinterred. But just as the seeming chaos of the rebus form does not preclude Freud as interpreter of the dream from making a *meaningful* reconstruction, so the historical materialist can gleam an emancipatory kernel from the chaos of modernity. The model of psychoanalysis suggests this cannot be achieved, however, by a crude theory of reflection.

Moreover, if the 'base-superstructure' model of causality is re-worked along the lines of the dream, then we begin to see new possibilities for the study of cultural phenomena which had often previously appeared as subordinate or subsidiary concerns with respect to the 'main' task of examining the economic base. Freud had argued that the dream is a narcissistic phenomenon, as



the libidinal cathexes are withdrawn from the external world back into the body. Hence, in a dreaming state the dreamer is highly responsive to corporeal sensations, which will often be transposed into dream imagery (meaning that certain dreams, for example, might reveal - in coded form - the presence of a serious illness before it had been diagnosed in waking life). Benjamin makes a similar point with regard to the social collective:

Blood pressure, intestinal churn, heartbeat, muscle sensations become perceptible for him [the dreamer] and demand the explanation which delusion or dreams holds ready. This sharpened receptivity is a feature of the dreaming collective, which settles into the arcades as into the insides of its own body. We must follow in its wake in order to expound the nineteenth century as its dream vision.³³

Indeed, from this perspective the ideological 'dream' could be seen not as a layer of fog which obscures the economic base, but as a *heightened* form of the cognition normally shown in the 'conscious' waking state. Just as the neglected world of dreams provided a 'royal road' to the unconscious for Freud, perhaps the arcades as a dream-world of banal and outmoded forms of capitalist consumption could yield up fresh insight into the workings of the nineteenth century from which his own age was trying to awaken.

This latter point is crucial, however, for if Freud had perpetually slumbered along in the absurdity of dreams we would be none the wiser about the genesis of such visions. The same is true with the arcades where, as soon as we have entered, we are fully immersed in a world that is utterly self-enclosed. In 'Konvolut L', Benjamin notes: 'Arcades are houses or passages having no outside - like the dream.'³⁴ Here there might have loomed a kind of characteristically postmodern 'dead-end': if we are fully immersed in a *particular* context of experience, how can we also get so entirely outside that context in order to secure a vantage point from which to launch or validate an objective critique? Could Benjamin be admitting defeat when he notes that 'the "purity" of the gaze is not just difficult but impossible to maintain'³⁵? This is to mistake the point - Benjamin means simply to repeat the basic materialist axiom that all conscious thought must, of necessity, have been conditioned (though never absolutely determined) by the social and historical location in which it is obliged to begin. That our gaze is inevitably partial is a condition of possibility for subjective experience. Moreover, following Marx, Benjamin sees such conditions as developing dialectically: the social 'context' that structures our thoughts is never monolithic or static, but rather is internally fractured and continually transforming by virtue of its dynamic contradictions. He applies this schema to the study of dream which thereby already contains the seeds of its own awakening: what Benjamin terms the 'dialectical, Copernican turn of remembrance.'³⁶

This insight, Benjamin considers, is of the utmost significance for our historical understanding: The compelling - the drastic - experience, which refutes everything 'gradual' about becoming and shows all seeming 'development' to be dialectical reversal, eminently and thoroughly composed, is awakening from dream...

This, he argues, will be the basis of the new



...dialectical method of doing history: with the intensity of a dream, to pass through what has been, in order to experience the present as the waking world to which the dream refers. (And every dream refers to the waking world. Everything previous is to be penetrated historically.)³⁷

What Benjamin presents here is a description of a dialectical movement between 'dream' as a historically specific modality of experience on the one hand, and on the other, 'dream' conceived of on the hermeneutic level as textual object, a critical resource waiting to be interpreted as a guide to future experience. Whether or not Benjamin knew it, he had come very close here to the formulations of André Breton in his *Communicating Vessels* of 1932. Strikingly, given Theodor Adorno's later criticisms of Benjamin's treatment of dream in the 1935 article 'Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century', we find a passage in a letter to Benjamin, in which the former, upon reading a review of Breton's book in an English film journal, recommends it to his friend, remarking:

...unless I am mistaken, [it] appears to converge very closely with many of our own intentions. It too counters the psychological interpretation of dreaming and defends an approach in terms of objective images; and it also seems to ascribe a crucial historical character to such images. The entire piece is so closely related to your thematic concerns that it will probably necessitate a fairly radical revision...it may prove to be of great significance for you, comparable perhaps - what a parallel - to the significance of Saxl and Panofsky for your book on the baroque.³⁸

Such a substantial engagement with Breton's text does not appear to have happened, perhaps because Benjamin feared that such a sympathetic figure, far more than an obvious adversary like Klages, could surreptitiously smuggle back 'pernicious romantic prejudices' into his work. This is pure speculation, but I do think that Adorno was absolutely right here: Breton's text could have helped Benjamin clarify his conception to a greater degree.

I do not intend to deal with Breton's work at length here, so I will restrict myself to the observation that Benjamin would have found in Breton's treatment of the dream, a parallel emphasis on a dream-waking dialectic which reflects the significance of 'awakening' for the material development of human *praxis*. For Breton this is understood in the sense of a liberating rupture from the grip of the past, enabling us to work to achieve in 'reality' what previously we could only have cognisance of in wish-fulfilling thoughts:

On the very brief scale of the twenty-four-hour day it [the dream] helps us to make the *vital leap*...It is the unknown source of light destined to remind us that at the beginning of the day as in the beginning of human life in earth, there can be only one resource which is *action*.

For both writers, what is significant is not the waking state *per se*, which could quite easily carry on in the same drearily prosaic way, but the moment when consciousness is shocked into the recognition of possible forms of cognitive experience from which it is excluded in reality. Both writers also, therefore, develop a notion of a single material reality, in which 'dream' and 'waking' experience are *both* inextricably grounded, and which progresses not in a gradual, seamless, linear continuum, but instead proceeds unevenly in jolts, leaps and unexpected reversals. In this sense, we might



speculate along with Terry Eagleton that it is by no means coincidental that such works were produced in a historical moment which saw its expression in Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution.³⁹

A serious engagement here with Breton might have stimulated Benjamin's work on the dream to a more felicitous conclusion than that which it in fact enjoyed. In the re-written 1939 article on Paris it has slipped from view, although I think Margaret Cohen goes too far when she says that he 'drops the dream model'⁴⁰ in favour of his interest in phantasmagorical representation. It is displaced, certainly, under the hail of Adorno's criticisms, but Benjamin's interest in oneiric processes can be seen hovering behind his commentaries upon other forms of virtual seeing, of which the dream is perhaps only the most elementary. Hence, its trace can be discerned, in however displaced a form, not only in the fascination with the optical technologies of the nineteenth century, but also in his fascination with twentieth-century cinema and animation. Yet now, the dream theory itself, like the hunchbacked-dwarf theology of his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History,' is not allowed to venture back out into the light. Adorno's criticism had no doubt hit home, and yet the displacement of the dream theory would not help to bring Benjamin's project to completion. Let me now conclude with a few words on how the outstanding difficulties of this might at least have been confronted.

One of the criticisms made by Adorno was that Benjamin's account was predicated upon a notion of the collective unconscious which was indistinguishable, in all major respects, from that of Carl Gustav Jung. Benjamin had argued that if the future could be read in such wish images it could only disclose itself through a re-citation of archaic images:

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.⁴¹

Buck-Morss suggests that Marx might again have provided the inspiration here, citing the passage in the 18th *Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* where Marx explains how revolutionary epochs in history, thrown back on their own resources, often begin by consciously imitating previous ages (hence, the bourgeois republic in France modelling itself on Rome, Cromwell and his age adopting the language of the Old Testament and so forth). Actually a more likely influence in this respect might be the late nineteenth-century historian and philosopher Johan Jakob Bachofen, whose suggestion that the earliest forms of society were classless and matriarchal seems closer to the strong sense of 'Golden Age' which Benjamin seems to invoke. For whereas in Marx's account the new is articulated through the manhandling of historical materials (perhaps similar to Freud's account in *The Interpretation of Dreams* of how the day's residues are 'worked-over'), in Benjamin's account the supposed Golden Age of the archaic is invoked in a direct, unmediated, trans-historical sense.

A more thorough reading of Freud could perhaps have offered Benjamin an alternative path. Unlike Jung, who posited the unconscious as a timeless repository of fixed 'archetypes' from which the imagination would be forced to choose in the construction of a dream, such a hypothesis was not essential for Freud. The dream, in Freud's view, was not a *direct* expression of the unconscious, but a *symptom* that such tempestuous desires were repressed, that is, were prohibited from being



expressed. Hence, the dream-image is not lifted 'off the shelf' from a pre-available stock, but instead represents, as I have suggested, a 'working-over', or creative manhandling of the materials which lie at its disposal, the day's residues. As Jacques Lacan has shown (himself no stranger to Surrealism), the dream cannot be confined to an event in the psyche of the individual subject; indeed, subjectivity is itself bound up with an alien, irrational element which functions to obscure for us the abyss between what we take for reality and the Real as such. Hence, as symptom, the dream is just as much a 'social' product: the symptomatic token of unassimilable desires whose expression the social order cannot allow. By the same token, the commodity itself is also just such a 'symptom'. As Slavoj Žižek has observed:

...the 'secret' to be unveiled through analysis is not the content hidden by the form [of commodities, of dreams] but, on the contrary, *the 'secret' of this form itself...*⁴²

The key question, as Žižek puts it, is not to explain *what* the commodity is (the 'hidden kernel' of its social origins), but rather, *why* labour can 'affirm its social character only in the commodity-form of its product.' Benjamin was really asking a form of the same question, which we could formulate as: *why* can our desires for a fulfilled life be affirmed in the *form* of the dream-images of mass culture? And how can we harness this utopian energy to transform our present existence and fulfil our innermost potential? Clearly, as Benjamin was already clear, the dream (as symptom) cannot be simply collapsed into 'waking' reality, a prospect to which postmodernism subsequently has given ironic realisation. Rather, we are faced with the authentically political question of what kind of social mediation could liberate the possibilities which, at present, receive only distorted form in the shape of the 'dream'-images of consumerism. From today's vantage point (in the context of the challenges posed anew by the rise of the anti-capitalist movement), I would suggest that Benjamin's work critically extends the Surrealist fascination with the dream in ways still highly relevant for understanding contemporary social experience.

¹ Benjamin, Walter, 'The Metaphysics of Youth' [1914], in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 1: 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, Harvard UP, 1996), pp. 6-17.

² Buck-Morss, Susan, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* [1991] (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), p. 7.

³ See Weingrad, Michael, 'The College of Sociology and the Institute of Social Research,' *New German Critique*, 84, Fall 2001, p. 130.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 130n.

⁵ Benjamin, letter to Rilke, cited in Wolin, Richard, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 126.

⁶ Benjamin, letter to Adorno (from Paris), May 31st, 1935, in *Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin: The Complete Correspondence 1928-1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), p. 88.

⁷ Benjamin, *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: New Left Books, 1977), p. 28.

⁸ Benjamin, letter to Adorno, in Lonitz, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

¹⁰ Benjamin, 'Dream Kitsch,' in *Selected Writings Volume 2: 1927-1934*, ed. M.W. Jennings, H. Eiland, and G. Smith (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, Harvard UP, 1999), p. 3.

¹¹ Aragon, Louis, *Paris Peasant*, trans. S. Watson Taylor (London: Pan Books, 1980), p. 28.

¹² Benjamin, 'The Metaphysics Of Youth' [1914], *op. cit.*, p. 16.



-
- ¹³ Benjamin, 'Paris Arcades,' in *The Arcades Project*, trans. H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, Harvard UP, 1999), p. 838.
- ¹⁴ Benjamin, 'Paris Arcades,' in *The Arcades Project*, op. cit., p. 845.
- ¹⁵ McCole, John, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993), p. 236.
- ¹⁶ Block, Richard, 'Selective Affinities: Walter Benjamin and Ludwig Klages', *Arcadia: Zeitschrift für Allgemeine und Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft*, vol. 35, 2000, pp. 117-135.
- ¹⁷ Klages, Ludwig, *Menschen und Erde* [Men and Earth], cited in McCole, op. cit., p. 237.
- ¹⁸ Benjamin, 'To the Planetarium,' in 'One Way Street', *Selected Writings Vol. 1*, op. cit., p. 486.
- ¹⁹ Benjamin, 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia' [1927], in *Selected Writings Vol. 2*, op. cit., p. 215.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 215.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 217-218.
- ²² Benjamin, cited in McCole, op. cit., p. 206.
- ²³ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, op. cit., pp. 388-9.
- ²⁴ Benjamin, 'Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century' [1935], in *The Arcades Project*, op. cit., pp. 4-5.
- ²⁵ Marx, Karl, *Kapital*, cited in Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, op. cit., p. 155.
- ²⁶ Benjamin, 'Dream Kitsch', op. cit., p. 4.
- ²⁷ Benjamin, 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia', op. cit., p. 210.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.
- ²⁹ Horkheimer, Max, 'Letter to Leo Lowenthal', June 2nd 1942, cited in Jay, Martin, *The Dialectical Imagination* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown & Co., 1973), p. 213.
- ³⁰ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, op. cit., p. 392.
- ³¹ Benjamin, *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, op. cit., pp. 28-29.
- ³² *Ibid.*, p. 176.
- ³³ Benjamin, 'Paris Arcades', *The Arcades Project*, op. cit., p. 842.
- ³⁴ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, op. cit., p. 406.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 470.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 389.
- ³⁷ Benjamin, 'Paris Arcades', *The Arcades Project*, op. cit., p. 838.
- ³⁸ Adorno, letter to Benjamin (Oxford), 6 November 1934, in *Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin: The Complete Correspondence 1928-1940*, op. cit., p. 54.
- ³⁹ See Eagleton, Terry, *Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: New Left Books, 1981).
- ⁴⁰ Cohen, Margaret, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 22n.
- ⁴¹ Benjamin, 'Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century', in *The Arcades Project*, op. cit., pp. 4-5.
- ⁴² Žižek, Slavoj, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 11.

Michael Calderbank has recently completed his PhD in the Department of English and American Studies, University of Manchester, on the topic of the dream in Freud, Surrealism and the Frankfurt School. Recent research papers include "The Vital Leap", or Reading as Catastrophe: Dreaming in André Breton's *Communicating Vessels*, delivered in November 2003.

