

**The Urban Pedagogy of Walter Benjamin.  
Lessons for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

**Part III**

**By**

**Stephen Dobson**

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## **Preface**

Part I of this series dealt with the topics of language and communication, Part II with the question of change, specifically its instigation and connection with dialectics and violence, this third and final Part builds upon these foundations to address most directly what the urban means in terms of the experience of moving through urban space.

Benjamin looked to the poet Baudelaire and figures such as the prostitute and the rag picker for inspiration. Benjamin is for many, most known for his reflections on the flâneur strolling through the arcades. In attention to the small details of different kinds of flâneur Benjamin anticipated the work of Goffman on demeanour and the management of identity. As to the experience of moving through urban space he explored how perception could be altered through different kinds of intoxication and alienation. These topics are never far below the surface of more recent commentators and flâneurs, such as the International Situationists devoted to psycho-geography, De Certeau as he walks and writes pedestrian narratives and Iain Sinclair in his noticeably bitter reflections on the 'tattered' urban fabric of London.

As with Part I and II, this Part includes a Dictionary of Critical Fragments to introduce the reader to relevant aspects of Benjamin's work. The accompanying essays are the seeds of a new generation influenced by Benjamin, following in his footsteps and wishing to botanise the asphalt.

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## Critical Dictionary of Fragments

**Nature** There is a danger that the use of technology and the urban dweller's increasing dependence upon it means that contact with others and with nature, both one's own and that of the surroundings, is prevented or postponed indefinitely. One step removed from consciousness, the individual no longer touches or is touched by what once was most natural. Benjamin voices such an awareness in the following aphorism from *One-Way Street* with the title *Gloves* (1979, p59):

In an aversion to animals the predominant feeling is fear of being recognized by them through contact. The horror that stirs deep in man is an obscure awareness that in him something lives so akin to the animal that it might be recognized. All disgust is originally disgust at touching.

It is not therefore unusual for the urban dweller to feel a sense of anxiety when animals, even under the control of their owners, are encountered in towns. The urban dweller prefers to hide behind a veneer of cultivation and the pride that they have become civilised. However, to once again re-establish contact with nature, both internally and externally, requires a certain strategy according to Benjamin (1979, p298):

Not to find one's way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal. It requires ignorance – nothing more. But to lose oneself in a city – as one loses oneself in a forest – that calls for quite a different schooling. Then signboards and street names, passers-by, roofs, kiosks, or bars must speak to the wanderer like a cracking twig under his feet in the forest...

It requires that the wanderer learn the 'art of straying' into unfamiliar streets, such that the shock of the new can disturb and break the insulating, silken lining of civilisation and its dependence upon technology.

**The flâneur** To saunter, stroll, wander, promenade, to be a flâneur – these are the terms describing the walker who has time on their hands. Not then the commuter in a rush, or the child running for their school bus. For Benjamin the flâneur planted his feet one after the other, in order to let the seed of uncharted and unexpected experiences grow in an unhurried fashion. The allegorical connection with nature and a metaphor drawn from plant life was deliberate on his part:

The style of the flâneur who goes botanizing on the asphalt...  
(Benjamin, 1983, p36)

The walker is able to plant and reap experiences from an activity, which has become increasingly unnatural to many urban dwellers, addicted as they are to the intoxicating thrill of motor, train and air travel.

This most natural of activities, walking, could also have a pedagogical, political and even military goal for Benjamin. It was to recapture and re-experience space surrendered to planners, architects and the owners of capital.

Only he who walks the road on foot learns of the power it commands, and of how, from the very scenery that for the flier is only the unfurled plain, calls forth distances, belvederes, clearings, prospects at each of its turns like a commander deploying soldiers at a front. (Benjamin, 1979, p50)

Sinclair (1997) walking across London and De Certeau (1984) in his charting of everyday pedestrian space have both followed Benjamin's footprints and possessed similar pedagogical and political intentions. To give the flâneur a political rather than leisurely goal.

The flâneuse? Benjamin with his concept of the flâneur might have reproduced the male culture of the nineteenth century, where the only public role allowed for the sauntering woman was as a prostitute, or as an embellishment on the sleeve of their husband's wealth. (Wolff, 1989) To botanise the asphalt in such a masculine manner is then to consign women to the status of objects through the gaze. The walker ceases to be concerned with living plant-life; and instead of planting the seeds of political revolt they take the life of those on the street, in particular women, denying them an active role.

**Intoxication** In the tradition of novelists and members of the avant-garde Benjamin experimented with drugs. He has two accounts of Marseilles, one under the influence of hashish. His goal was to widen his experience of reality and he quotes Joël and Fränkel:

One of the first signs that hashish is beginning to take effect... experiences that approach inspiration, illumination... space can expand, the ground tilts steeply, atmospheric sensations occur: vapour, an opaque heaviness of the air; colours grow brighter, more luminous; objects more beautiful, or else lumpy and threatening. (quoted in Benjamin, 1979, p215)

His observations were as follows:

‘Richard was a young man with understanding for everything in the world that was of the same kind.’... Whereas Jensen’s sentence amounted, as I had understood it, to saying that things are what we know them to be, thoroughly mechanized and rationalized, the particular being confined today solely to nuances, my new insight was entirely different. For I saw only nuances. (Benjamin, 1979, p220)

The increase in his awareness of the interplay between the aura of objects and the hard materiality of objects themselves was repeated in his view of the flâneur and the consumer seduced by commodities in department stores, and also by membership of the crowd, which swirls around these commodities:

The crowd is not only the newest asylum of outlaws; someone abandoned in the crowd. In this he [the flâneur] shares the situation of the commodity. He is not aware of this special situation, but this does not diminish its effect on him and it permeates him blissfully like a narcotic that can compensate him for many humiliations. The intoxication to which the flâneur surrenders is the intoxication of the commodity around which surges the stream of customers. (Benjamin, 1988, p55)

In such a manner, Benjamin had found a way of describing and also experiencing the secular opium of the people and the concrete pedagogics of their intoxication.

The empathy with others and commodities permitted the ‘incomparable privilege of being himself and someone else as he sees fit. Like a roving soul in search of a body, he enters another person whenever he wishes.’ (Baudelaire, quoted by Benjamin, 1983, p55) Intoxication as the pursuit of *the self* and the *self of many selves* is not therefore dependent on the consumption of hashish and other types of medication. The intoxication of the crowd and the commodity might equally be substituted for the intoxication of the medicinal.

**The urban way of life** It would not be unfair to argue that Benjamin rarely had the cow muck of the countryside or of the cow shed upon his footwear. He was an urban flâneur, rather than a man of the woods or the fields out hunting with his dog for small game or hares. His romanticism for the storyteller was not for the workman in the village pub, or for the farmer at home with the family on a Sunday after working the fields.

Instead, mirroring the potential loneliness of urban life he wandered the streets, for the most part on his own. And yet, Benjamin anticipated the now common argument that the urban-rural dichotomy is fast disappearing: we are apt to talk of rural dwellers who commute on a daily basis to urban areas, and vice versa, we recognise urban dwellers who are increasingly willing to sell up and move to the countryside, in order to *appropriate* and *exploit* `green values`, for their children and of course for themselves. As Benjamin phrased it:

Just as all things, in a perpetual process of mingling and contamination, are losing their intrinsic character while ambiguity displaces authenticity, so is the city. Great cities...are seen to be breached at all points by the invading countryside. Not by the landscape, but by what in untrammelled nature is most bitter: ploughed land, highways, night sky that the veil of vibrant redness no longer conceals. (Benjamin, 1979, 59)

In this quote, Benjamin teaches that the city dweller cannot escape brute nature, `ploughed land` and `night sky`, any more than the rural dweller can. And in drawing attention to a third element, the highway; he highlights the inter-connection of the country and the city. It is interesting to note in this connection how the tram line is being re-introduced between London and New Addington, an out of city residential area constructed after the Second World War. The tramline, ploughed land, into which the non-attentive might step, and the night sky all suggest that the experience of the rural dweller is increasingly invaded by the urban dweller and vice versa, so that perception of difference and disparity between the two becomes more difficult and demanding. There are foxes in city areas as in rural copses.

**The virtue of idleness** Do we work too much? Weber traced one argument to support this back to the role of the Calvinist work ethic. Benjamin also noted its influence:

The stringent work ethic and moral doctrine of Calvinism, it may be said, is most intimately related to the development of the *vita contemplativa*. It sought to build a dam to stem the melting of time into idleness, one such time was frozen in contemplation. (Benjamin, 1999, p803)

Where Weber celebrated the growth of the spirit of capitalist enterprise, Benjamin wanted to defend the *vita contemplativa* from it. Or to put it differently, the virtue of not doing anything in particular, of *Being* idle as a way of *Being*.

Benjamin drew a distinction between leisure and idleness. The former was an active filling or fulfilling of time, whereas the latter was lacking in such a clear goal, 'whoever enjoys leisure escapes Fortuna; whoever embraces idleness falls under her power.' (Benjamin, 1999, p800)

Fortuna as a deified, mystical power connected with pure fate, luck and chance, and determining the good and ill befalling a person. The man of leisure was therefore too goal-orientated. 'He to whom leisure no longer means anything in itself is happy to put his idleness on display.' (p802)

Benjamin argued further that idleness was characterised by an openness to immediate experience, rather than to the kind of experience which is the outcome of work. This immediate experience and the contemplation it involves, and rests upon, has 'no sequence and no system', it is a 'product of chance'. Empathy is possible when idle because the individual can focus on whatever they please. They have no obligations to follow a certain route to reach a specific leisure or work goal: 'on the high road of empathy, any passer by whatsoever as its substrate'. (Benjamin, 1999, p805)

But, is knowledge a concern of the idler? Benjamin, as noted, connected the idler with contemplation. He was not against study as a source of knowledge, but it was the study of an 'unfinished collection of things worth knowing, whose utility depends on chance.' (Benjamin, 1999, p802) He gave the news reporter as an example of a person who idly waits for the chance happening. They must try to be present for the unexpected – an impossible task? Not so much present, as prepared:

News service and idleness. Feuilletonist, reporter, photographer constitute a gradation in which waiting around, the "Get ready" succeeded by the "Shoot" becomes ever more important vis-à-vis other activities. (Benjamin, 1999, p802)

The point is that the kind of knowledge the reporter is waiting for and contemplating is open and unlimited. Rather than the fixed and limited character of knowledge necessary to play a game of leisure or complete a work task, it was indeterminate in its scope.

Benjamin also envisaged other sources and strategies for obtaining such knowledge through idleness: an idleness connected with study. In *One-Way Street* he describes the importance of the art of copying. The copying of the text, as opposed to its reading, was likened to the person who walked the contours of the landscape rather taking a plane to fly over it:

Only he who walks the road on foot learns of the power it commands, and of how, from the very scenery that for the flier is only the unfurled plain, it calls forth distances, belvederes, clearings, prospects at each of its turns like a commander deploying soldiers at a front. Only the copied text thus commands the soul of him who is occupied with it, whereas the mere reader never discovers the new aspects of his inner self that are opened by the text...because the reader follows the movement of his mind in the free flight of daydreaming, whereas the copier submits it to command. (Benjamin, 1979, p50)

He provides further advice on copying:

Fill in the lacunae of inspiration by tidily copying out what is already written. Intuition will awaken in the process. (Benjamin, 1979, p69)

Copying the text in both these examples is important because it lets the text lead the person. In reading by contrast, the reader is concerned to lead the text in the direction of a meaning which they seek to impose and find confirmed. Or to put it even more strongly, the reader forces a meaning upon the text, instead of idly waiting for the text to take over and create the meaning. The latter is found in the art of copying.

Benjamin is suggesting two things: Firstly, that it is important to practice the art of not doing anything in particular. It may even have revolutionary potential in the sense that it refuses the work ethic and the leisure ethic, both based upon filling time. Secondly, he is suggesting that it is possible to gain knowledge through idling, but it is knowledge of a more diffuse, inexact character. In sum, he is providing guidance on how idling can be an existential way of *Being*. Time fills itself, rather than we filling it. However, as a way of *Being*, idling can be distorted and combined with the work ethic: 'the true salaried flâneur (Henri Béraud's term) is the sandwich man' advertising commodities, as he walks in an apparently idle manner (Benjamin, 1999. p804).

# Exploring Accumulated, Suspended and Lost Time in London. From topology to topology

Stephen Dobson and Øivind Haaland

## Introduction

Baudelaire in 1863 suggested that urban life was characterised by the ‘transient, the fleeting, the contingent’. Similarly, some writers in postmodernism speak of the collapsing of distinctive historical styles, moments and epochs into an endless spiral of commodity fetishism, in which consumers pick, choose and quote from among lifestyles, architectural styles and historical moments. Both Baudelaire and the postmodernists offer a homogenous, flat view of time, contrasting to the diverse ways we all experience time.

Benjamin offers a less homogenous version with his distinction between ‘*erlebniss*’, the lived and forgotten time of the factory worker, and ‘*erfahrung*’, the intense non-repeatable time of revolutionary moments like the Paris Commune of 1871. But his account too quickly pigeon holes the experience of time into one or the other. In this essay, we suggest there are a number of possible experiences of time, of which we identify three: accumulated time, suspended time and lost time.

## I: The City of London

De Certeau (1984) in his book on the practice of everyday life became an advocate of the stories told by pedestrians in the city. Not verbalised or written in text, but those spatial narratives as people traverse the city in an uncontrolled, irregular fashion, predominantly in their leisure time. These pedestrian stories provide a counter-foil to the panopticon, disciplined, rational use of space defined by planners and the owners of capital. De Certeau represents an anarchistic voice drawing attention to the disruptions in the regular flow of people and time. Further, pedestrian stories resist the experience of panopticon time. Panopticon practices based upon the observation and planned control of people can be self-administered and not just imposed. For instance, in the daily commute to work, the worker cannot totally disregard the transport systems directions or they may never arrive at their destination. But it is not just the imposition or self-imposition of ordered practices which is interesting. The panopticon control of movements also leads to accumulated experiences of time. Time experiences can be slightly

different over a longer period of time, but they can nevertheless accumulate.

At work, we can see examples of the accumulation of time. These can be connected with the production of future exchange-value. The logic is that commodities cannot be produced if time is not experienced in a cumulative, planned and administered manner. In the City of London in the morning and the evening, commuters rushing to and from work build up accumulated experiences of time spent travelling. When at work, they can sometimes be seen moving between different office blocks, crossing busy streets, with documents or contracts under their arms, and their images suggest that the contracts and deals on which they are working are the foundation for future exchange-value. Over time their work activity will be accompanied by a sense of time experienced as an accumulated entity.

The image of the office worker or the image of the commuter are *snap shots* which suspend or freeze an activity for us to examine or reflect upon, at our leisure. This means that the activity and its experience of time are removed from the ongoing narrative, the lived life as lived so to speak, which gives the image its character and direction. We are called on as viewers to re-construct this narrative and to thereby *flesh out* how those portrayed in the image experience time in and through their activity.

The urban commuter and office worker are an image of capitalism at a specific juncture, the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To become an image of dialectical experiences of time: moments of the now, dialectically united with an accumulating repeatable experience of time. But, this image also contains a second dialectical experience of time, since it joins the accumulated image of the moment and time to the more persistent sustained image of what Sombart called the 'quintessence of capitalism'. By this he meant the modern businessman as a materialised spirit of capitalism. (Sombart, 1915) Thus, the image of the urban commuter and office worker in their experiences of time as lived moments of the now are dialectically united with, and reveal the persistent corporal expression of the spirit of the modern business man, a 'mental outlook that cares only for gain.' (Sombart, 1915, p304)

The more we observe the details of the commuter and office worker, the more we also entertain the thought that we are already viewing the remnants of soon to disappear experiences of time and its actors. With the rise of electronic communication the workers of the future may no

longer commute, working instead from home. Related to this, the carrying of paper documents which *flesh out* visible evidence of work on contracts and deals will be replaced by drafted and electronically communicated alternatives. The commuter and office worker as images of accumulated experiences of time might therefore be transitional, on the way towards new and different images of more privatised home-based experiences of accumulated time.

## **II: Legal London: the Inns and Temples**

Returning to the journey through London, as the City's financial district is left a new area is entered: the Law Courts and those who work with matters concerning the practice of law. Barristers and judges in their work pay tribute to accumulated cases of law over time and in so doing experience accumulated time. Here, it is not so much the concrete production of use-value in a factory and images of the worker in oiled overalls. Neither is it the production of foundations of future exchange-value and images of the office worker. Instead, it is the production and maintenance of the rules and regulations, which form a parameter protecting precisely the concrete production of use-value or the foundations of future exchange-value. The images are of barristers and clerks of the court in their black robed attire.

Just like the office workers and the commuters their image is dialectical: their court robes point backwards in time, reflecting accumulated experiences and traditions of time down the centuries, at the same time as the passing moment is seen in the cut of their suits, their shoes and the hair styles. In other words, images and experiences of past time and present time are dialectically interwoven; and the business man's mental outlook desiring material gain, clearly an element in the motivation of the barrister's desire for success is here disguised, hidden or denied by a corporeal image of serving the rule of law, stability and precisely tradition. The atmosphere is one of maintaining the already established rule of law, which in turn secures the parameters of the production of exchange-value in other production-based activities, such as for the business person.

## **III: School**

The foundations for future exchange-value is also visible as an image seen in the residential areas touching on the boundaries of the City: in the Isle of Dogs and Whitechapel areas. Children in uniforms travelling to or from school indicate that they are engaged in the formation of the educational premises for their future occupational involvement in the

production of exchange-value. With their daily repetitive movement and their regular involvement in education they experience time as an accumulated entity. But time will also be experienced dialectically, where the counterpart is the way the children live and experience time not as an accumulated phenomenon directed towards future goals, but as the opportunity to experience passing moments in different play activities outside of the classroom. The time experienced in the playing of hopscotch or rat, tap and bolt is for example lived intensively and then abandoned for another game or activity. It lacks the accumulative aspect of activity preparing for tasks in the adult world.

#### **IV: Tourist London**

A fourth example of accumulated time is supplied by the image of two tourists on the street as they study a map in deep concentration. In attempting to navigate or negotiate a route through the city towards some event or monument a number of streets will be traversed. The experience of these streets will be cumulative in the sense that its elements, the traffic lights, pedestrian subways, entrances to buildings, bus stops and similar things will be accumulated as part of a journey to and from some desired tourist sight. And, just as the streets, lights and so on accumulate, so will the experience of time take on the character of an accumulated entity as the goal is neared. Even in this case however, the experience of time will be dialectical, not only is time accumulated, but it is also lived as passing moments, the reading of the map is completed without recalling in detail the time spent consulting it again and again. In other words, the accumulated experience of time is dialectically opposed by moments of time experienced as passing moments, lived and forgotten.

To summarise, in a daily fashion, the worker, commuter, lawyer, school pupil and tourist through their respective activities can experience time as an accumulated phenomenon. In many respects these experiences are the result of imposed or self-imposed panopticon practices. Such as following a map, interpreting the word of law, being receptive to a school lesson, finalising a business contract, or producing a commodity some form of discipline is required. Furthermore, the wider goal of producing exchange-value or its premise are an important source of accumulated experiences of time. Lastly, the connection of imposed and self-imposed discipline with the production of value or its premises yields not merely experiences of time as an accumulated phenomenon; time is experienced dialectically as the joining of the lived, passing moment, *erlebniss*, with more persistent experiences of time linked with traditions or the essence of capitalism. When the production of use-value, its premise or the tourist's journey are broken or disrupted, the

experience of time as an accumulated dialectical phenomenon connected with experiences of time as passing moments is also disrupted. A second experience of time intervenes or takes over, here termed *suspended time*. It coincides in some respects, as has been noted, with Benjamin's concept of *jetztzeit*, now time. But, as is typical of Benjamin his theoretical categories were often left embedded in his descriptions of urban life and he rarely developed theoretical typologies, which is the goal of this essay.

## **V: Petticoat Lane**

Baudrillard once drew attention to a raid on a supermarket, where the people already in the building were encouraged to take what they wanted. (Baudrillard, 1981) The normal pursuit of value, whether in the shape of use-value or exchange value, was momentarily suspended and people were a little unsure as to what to do. Should they take these 'unpriced' commodities, with the possibility that they might have to return them at a later date when law and order was re-established? And, if they were to take commodities, which should they select, since price was no longer a viable measure of their value? In such a situation, time was no longer experienced as accumulated. It had been suspended in a permanent *Now*, what Benjamin so aptly called *jetztzeit*, Now Time. It could also be called suspended time in the sense that time was neither accumulated nor lost, a kind of limbo state. The time of opportunity, of choice, of existential truth. It could be argued that this suspended time should in fact include the time when commodities are exchanged, because in this activity the person is once again suspended between future exchange-value of the commodity and the past accumulation of exchange-value used to produce the commodity and now embodied in it. In other words, suspended time might, drawing upon and developing Baudrillard's conception, also refer to experiences of suspended time caught between moments and experiences of accumulated time.

Attending London street markets, such as Petticoat Lane, provides images of people exchanging commodities with money as the mediating term. Time is experienced as an accumulated phenomenon connected with the steady accumulation of purchases or sales, and yet it is dialectically opposed by a more insistent experience of time: the repetitive non-progressive experience of time as exchanges are made again and again with each new trader/customer. In other words, the time of exchange, as suspended time, fights to expand a position between and also within the experience of time as an accumulated phenomenon.

## **VI: The bus stop**

Suspended time can also be seen in the image of people waiting in a queue to catch a bus or to purchase an entry ticket to some form of entertainment. In waiting, time is experienced as neither use-value or exchange value. It might be useful that time is spent in the queue, but while standing in the queue it is easy to become impatient or bored in anticipation that time can once again begin to flow and be experienced as accumulated usable time. And, as with the case of the market, a dialectical experience of time is in evidence: the experience of suspended time measured against the steady insistence that time should and will once again in due course be experienced as an accumulated phenomenon.

## **VII: The refugee camp**

Such waiting also corresponds with the refugee's experience of time in transit camps, while they are waiting to be moved either to a country of permanent resettlement or returned to their homelands. The word *transit* sums up how the suspended time of the queuing experience is connected with a movement from one place to another, but the actual movement has been interrupted, hence the queue and the waiting.

## **VIII: The Tower of London**

Suspended time takes on a third form in the images of tourists visiting historical monuments or galleries, such as the Tower of London or St. Paul's Cathedral. At these sites, historical events have been frozen, or rather suspended in a fixed state for the benefit of the tourist. The same is also the case at the gallery where the object or image displayed has been taken out of its normal context and frozen or suspended for the visitor. But, the fact that the monument or the gallery can be visited again and again on later occasions reveals once again the presence of a dialectical counterpart to the experience of suspended time, namely an experience of accumulated time. Visits can be experienced as suspended time and then accumulated.

In these tourist locations the experience of suspended time is not exactly the *now time* of which Benjamin talked. For Benjamin, *now time* was connected with future possibilities as the past was projected into the present with the precise goal of motivating participants to bring about revolutionary changes. Tourists are not seeking to realise revolutionary goals even if they might experience an important change in their self-identity on the basis of the visit. Neither is this form of suspended time the same as the experience of time while waiting or attending a market to

exchange commodities. Instead, it is time experienced as stopped or frozen. Not then the experience of time in transit to another location of activity (for example to use the commodity purchased at the market), where time can once again be experienced as accumulated.

### **IX: Les Halles/Soho**

A political and aesthetic movement embracing some of these dimensions of suspended time existed in Europe in the 1950s and 60s. They were known as the International Situationists and practised psycho-geography. Psycho-geography is the collective or individual drift (*dérive*) through the city on foot in search of centres of ambience, where the rational planners' desire to direct and control people's movements are disrupted. These centres of ambience, in the context of our discussion, would be centres of suspended time. Sites and routes where the normal, goal-orientated movement of commuters and their accumulating experiences of time are momentarily disrupted.

Whether the Situationists intended making these situations of ambience through political acts and thus creating *situations of now time*, or, merely desired to discover them as 'ready mades' is a matter for further discussion, not within the bounds of this essay. (Sadler, 1999, p147-157) Irrespective, in sites such as the district of Les Halles in Paris they found ambience and time experienced as suspended and a junction between other more rational, cumulative experiences of time. As a recent commentator on the International Situationist movement put it:

(Les Halles)... evoked beautifully the way in which some unities of ambience acted as stations on the drift, junctions in the psychogeographic flow of Paris. The situationists coined a term for these junctions: *plaques tournantes*. The term punned on so many meanings that it is not possible to translate it straightforwardly. A *plaque tournante* can be the center of something; it can be a railway turntable; or it can be a place of exchange (in the same way that Marseilles is sometimes described as a *plaque tournante* for trafficking, or that Paris as a whole has been celebrated as a *plaque tournante* of culture). As a centre for markets, drinking, prostitution, and drugs, Les Halles was clearly a *plaque tournante* in all these senses. (Sadler, 1999, p88. Italics in the original)

In London, perhaps the triangle of space encompassing Soho – Leicester Square – Covent Garden functions as one of these junctions or turntables, where time is experienced as suspended between the accumulated time of London's financial district (the City of London) and

political (Parliament - Whitehall) district. But, even the Soho – Leicester Square – Covent Garden area has its traditions, several visits over a longer period of time will make it possible to experience the visits as instances of accumulated experiences of time, rather than suspended time.

If the experience of time as suspended represents a disruption and interruption of the experience of time as accumulated, there is a danger that it is assumed that time is primarily experienced as a shift between suspended and accumulated time. But, we will now argue that a third experience of time in an urban setting is also possible, the experience of time as lost.

### **X: Kensington Park**

How often are couples hand in hand witnessed in London? As the evenings draw on their images are seen more regularly on the streets or pausing on bridges to look down at the Thames. Sometimes they are seen kissing. If it is not the first time they have embraced, this would suggest time experienced in an accumulated manner. And yet, there are instances when the image of the couple seen kissing takes on a daylight appearance. One example comes to mind, outside the church or registry office after having just got married. Often a camera is used to catch the moment and the experience of time before it is lost. Or, to put it in dialectical terms, the moment encompasses an experience of time as lived in the present, at the same time as it is in the process of being lost forever. Hence the camera does not bring back the experience of lost time, but rather documents that this lost time has once existed.

There is therefore a difference between the images of the repetitive kiss and these special kisses. The latter experience of time as not repetitive and as lived and lost this is its distinguishing mark. To digress, it might be speculated that this time lived, lost and documented is what makes sculptures of kissing couples, such as Rodin's, so enduringly fascinating. The viewer of his art, as the viewer of these images of the kissers in the park or after the wedding ceremony, are witnesses and thus also share experiences of lost time. The sense of time being non-repeatable is furthermore a characteristic which separates these photographed or sculpted kisses from the cumulative time experiences of the commuter, office worker or the consumer of commodities. Additional kisses later in time may open experiences of repetitive, accumulative time, but these kisses will never have the character of those associated with lost time. They will lack the sense of uniqueness, of the once only.

Proceeding with the argument, there are other more commonplace images and experiences of lost time where the dialectical experience of the lived time against lost time is present, but less tightly connected with the once only of the unique. For example, the image of the person arriving at the station platform as the train draws away. Stamping their feet in exasperation. Over-heated and sweat dripping from their faces if they have been running or carrying a heavy bag or briefcase. The importance of this image is firstly, the experience of lost time. It is as if it is disappearing in the departing train. Secondly, there is the dialectical aspect, as the lost time is lived in the moment. It is paradoxically an experience of time lived and lost at one and the same moment. Arriving too late can be repeated again and again, but it is still the character of time lived and lost that dominates. It is not the accumulated time of the worker producing among other things use-value, or of the commuter making their way, as usual to or from their place of work. Furthermore, it contrasts sharply with the image of the person standing in the queue, where time is experienced not so much as lost as suspended in the sense that it is within their grasp, they have just chosen to use and experience it in the activity of waiting.

There is also the image of young people out drinking or partying. They are consuming time as they consume alcohol and money. Time is experienced as a lost commodity, and since they can party or drink on other occasions in the same manner, they will experience this time as repetitive, but as with arriving late, it is not accumulated, it is used up in the course of the experience. It is not then part of an activity leading to the production of use-value for future consumption. The dialectical image of the drinkers is therefore of time lived in the moment and at the same time lost.

### **XI: The Embankment**

A fourth image of lost time has more painful and less intoxicated, pleasurable connotations: the homeless person huddled up in a sleeping bag by a shop entrance or beside the entrance to a railway/underground station. They *flesh-out* time experienced as lost, in the sense that they could have been using it elsewhere and in an another kind of activity (assuming the opportunity existed and they desired it). Dialectically this experience of lost time is joined with the lived time of the moment. In other words, it is a case of time lost for productive purposes, but not always lived as a pleasurable moment, as in the case of the party revellers.

Time experienced by the homeless living on the street is complicated when by daylight and into the evening they beg or collect money for the sale of the Big Issue magazine. In such activities they are clearly experiencing time as an accumulated phenomenon as they are also accumulating funds, and this expels the experience of time as lost. Although waiting for donations or purchasers may simultaneously be experienced as suspended time.

It was earlier argued that the office worker's experience of time as accumulated moments of the *now* was dialectically connected with a more persistent, long-term experience of time. Namely as belonging to that tradition of modern capitalist business men with a mental outlook dominated by gain. That is a persistent experience of time in the sense that it is a desire for material gain over time which is never fulfilled once and for all. Persistent also in the sense that the office workers join the shared tradition of capitalists stretching back in time. To put it differently, they continue to experience belonging to a tradition with a shared motivation: gain. The homeless, the beggar and the seller of the Big Issue in a similar manner experience a more persistent, long-term experience of time as their activity connects them with a tradition. The tradition of not so much the capitalist motivated by gain, but of the urban pauper trying to survive in some manner. Baudelaire the poet saw the tradition of the pauper in the image of the ragpicker, and Benjamin (1983, p19) commented:

When the new industrial processes had given refuse a certain value, ragpickers appeared in the cities in larger numbers. They worked for middlemen and constituted a sort of cottage industry located in the streets. The ragpicker fascinated his epoch. The eyes of the first investigators of pauperism.

Thus, the homeless join the ranks of paupers stretching back to the ragpickers, they all share an experience of the harshness of poverty and want. An experience of time as persistent, accumulated and yet it is also joined with an experience of time as lost.

#### **Part IV: Topologies and grammars of time**

The *typology* of experiences of time presented in the foregoing parts of this essay reveal a kind of cognitive map with potentially plotable coordinates. This map is *topological* in the uneven and changing manner in which time is experienced. Time viewed as a map helps organise and provide guidance through different time experiences, as lived in the specific locations in the city and in their types of accompanying social activity. Such an approach provides an illustration of how experiencing

time in a non-homogenous manner can be realised. The move from a *typology* to a mapped *topology* of experiences is in many senses a descriptive cognitive enterprise. Jameson would like to move beyond such an enterprise, making cognitive mapping into the preparatory phase in subsequent revolutionary activity. There is no reason why this should not also be a possibility in the application of the topological project we have been suggesting. And, it is precisely the uneven aspect of the topology which provides pauses, interruptions and openings for experiences of a radical, revolutionary character.

Different types of mapping might also be envisaged, yielding not merely spatial topologies (Jameson, 1984) or time-based topologies, but also emotional topologies as time, space and social activity are changed in the movement across the city. Relevant emotional categories might be pleasure, surprise, boredom, elation or resentment. Tuan (1974, p99-110; 1980, p145-174) suggests other emotional categories in his topophilia 'affective ties with the material environment' such as familiarity and attachment, patriotism, sense of wildness and fear.

Alternatively, instead of either *time* or *space*, commentators inspired by Hägerstrand, such as Giddens (1984), have argued for a topology based upon actor's combined *time-space* trajectories as they move through an urban infrastructure and its landscape. For Giddens, what is also important is the mapping of the power contained in the allocation of resources supporting these trajectories, which not only constrains, but also engenders structures of domination. (Giddens, 1984, p117) But Giddens' arguments tend to remain at an abstract level of generality, and without material drawn from or referring to empirical reality, there are few exemplifying images. Images in the sense as they have been understood in this essay: *fleshing out* lived activity offering a greater level of visibility to what would otherwise remain abstract and concealed.

The main point shared by all these conceptions of cognitive mapping is that they stress the importance of involving individuals and groups in an active manner. Building upon the idea of a move from a passive, descriptive stance to an active, self-autonomous stance we suggest that individuals and groups develop topologies of experiences of time, not only to document their own time passages through urban space and social activities, but to construct something else: their *own grammars of time games*. This term is used here to indicate a reworking of Wittgenstein's (1994) concept of language games to mean time games, as each of the categories of time outlined in the typology above and

traced in the topologies of time represent minimal linguistic and experienced units in a person's construction of their own *grammar of time*.

In this essay a number of dialectical images of time have been presented, for example, the commuter (time lived in the moment and *time accumulated*), the person in a queue (non-accumulated, *suspended time* of the moment joined to and resisting accumulated time), the couple kissing after a wedding ceremony (time lived in the moment and *time lost*). In all cases, the dialectical aspect of the image brought together the lived time of the moment with different corporeally experienced images of time: accumulated time, suspended time and lost time.

A person learning to recognise these dialectical images (accumulated time, suspended time, lost time connected with the lived time of the moment), becoming aware of the narrative connections of these categories of time (as the movement between the past, the lived moment of the present and the future of the yet to Be) would also have the opportunity of recognising narrative chains of belonging. To say that the person should learn to recognise these narrative chains of belonging is only partly correct. The narratives would also to some extent be constructed by the those witnessing or experiencing them and not then merely pre-exist, but be embedded in the activity and awaiting for recognition. In other words, the active efforts of the person are required, whereby the person learns a two-sided activity: *constructive recognition*.

Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, based upon a collection of quotations and self-composed aphorisms (of 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris) are an example of this *constructive recognition*, where the reader in studying the text can learn to recognise and construct dialectical images of 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris (e.g. the prostitute who sold herself in the passing moment, to support in turn the more long-term temporal experience and re-production of the capitalist system). The reader can also learn a *constructive recognition* of dialectical images as images of the 19<sup>th</sup> century are dialectically connected with the reader's own contemporary lived context and activities (e.g. the manner in which a waged labourer in a factory of today sells their body's productive time just as the 19<sup>th</sup> century prostitute sold her productive time).

These resultant dialectical images feel the pulse of the moment, of time and of belonging or exclusion. Some might go as far as to say that learning to think and experience in images is different to the kind of learning connected with the thinking and experiencing of written texts.

The one image-based and spontaneous and the other conceptual and delayed by reflection. But, surely Benjamin's point was not to pose the image against the concept, even if he was well-versed in Klages' desire to do precisely this (Roberts, 1982, p106), but to use the conceptual and text-based quotations and aphorisms of the *Arcades* project as a source of images, and not as the source of something totally different from images. It was the image making and image recognising faculty which was his ultimate pedagogic goal, and in this essay we have pursued a similar goal, with an added emphasis upon precisely *typologies* and *topologies* of time.

# **Botanising the asphalt: First reflections on a day spent walking between Wapping Hydraulic Pumping Station and the London Eye**

**Stephen Dobson**

## **I – The walk**

A few introductory points - to set the compass for our reflections. Already, in his early work on German tragic drama (*trauerspiel*) Benjamin was somewhat sceptical towards those who viewed drama only from the spectator's experience of *catharsis*. Catharsis understood as Aristotle's term for physiological purification or cleansing through the act of aesthetic appreciation. Benjamin spent the late 1920s and the following decade researching Paris and its Arcades. This entailed his walking the length and breadth of Paris. A project which he alluded to as a 'botanising of the asphalt'. In walking from Wapping to the London Eye one of the day's ambitions was to re-create for our context, in time and space, Benjamin's project of walking across a city landscape.<sup>1</sup>

While walking one of the questions we discussed was the following: In botanising the asphalt, was Benjamin attempting to purify or cleanse his experiences of life in general? In other words, was he deliberately seeking *catharsis* from his divorce, his frustrations in attempting to publish his work, his personal economic struggles and the lack of commitment from fellow intellectuals in the face of rising Fascism?

Those on our walk who supported this thesis argued that he regarded Paris as a drama in the sense of Aristotle's *Poetics*, where he could purify his feelings of guilt and disappointment. The sight and experience of the Paris streets of the 1920/30s and his imagination of how they must have been in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were the plot (*suzhet*) and substance (*fabula*) of this drama.

There were also those on the Wapping to London Eye walk who argued that Benjamin's goal was not *catharsis*. His refusal to reduce tragedy to merely a physiological phenomenon seeking physiological effects was evidence in itself that he could never regard the cityscape as an aesthetic drama. They argued that Benjamin was instead interested in appropriating the Platonic essence of the city, its signs and symbols: his

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<sup>1</sup> The walk was part of the Critical Imagination's joint conference arranged by Goldsmiths' College (University of London) and Lillehammer College (Norway) in October 2000.

goal was to read the city allegorically, as a storehouse of signs and symbols, which when fossilised and reified could yield the traces of lost life, forgotten dreams and embedded experiences: Benjamin's 'familiar city as phantasmagoria'.

But why should one be forced to choose between one or the other view? Could not the activity of botanising the asphalt, in the Paris of the 1920/30s, or, in contemporary London, be an experience of *catharsis* and at the same time an appropriation of the signs and symbols of the city? Not then even a relegation of *catharsis* to the body and the appropriation of signs and symbols to an act of cognition. Instead, a strategy more in keeping with Nietzsche who said, in the *Twilight of the Idols*, that a thought should gain somatic form, be walked or allowed to dance. And he meant dance in the way the thought danced across the page in the concrete movement of the writer's hand, and danced as the thinker walked and tested its viability before or after its documentation in textual form. In his words, 'to dance with the feet, with concepts, with words: do I still have to say that one has to be able to dance with the pen?'

Benjamin's interest in cityscapes was undoubtedly inspired by the Surrealists, especially Aragon, and their city explorations: empty streets, the arcades and so on. This could be proof enough that he like them wanted to botanise the asphalt in search of its hidden signs and symbols, as well as wanting at the same time to experience the magical intoxication of *cathartic* enervation.

## II – Technology

Benjamin walked around Paris. Fifty years later, Baudrillard, a Parisian well-versed in Benjamin's work chose the car as his favoured mode for botanising the United States. A strange paradox emerges if it is noted that while Benjamin often wrote about the advent of mechanical technology and its effects upon mass consumption, he still chose to walk and not drive or take the Metro. This could mean that Benjamin looked *backwards* into history, to the Paris of the nineteenth century when the car had yet to gain a dominant position and the Metro was still in its infancy. While Baudrillard looked *forwards* into the future. But even this cannot provide the complete answer, since Baudrillard's look into the future should surely have suggested a time when the reign of the car was transcended for some other form of motion: a hyper-real form of motion.

The starting point for our walk was Wapping's now disused hydraulic pumping station. Here, until fairly recently hydraulic power was pumped to the West End, raising and lowering stage curtains in theatre land. The

pumping station is interesting in at least three respects. Firstly, the pipes taking power to the city reveal or rather conceal an underground, dimly-lit world of which few are aware. At the time of our visit, an art installation had been inserted into the station: in a semi-full water chamber, where the hydraulic power once began its journey to the city, a number of luminous green lines have been strung from the ceiling and fall into the depths of this otherwise pitch black chamber. From the viewing platform in the chamber it felt as if we had found the hidden source of not only an aquatic journey, but also journey of the soul. This sense of the source also mingled with the sense that this place was paradoxically a kind of Hades, where life reached its point of termination and was evaluated. Secondly, the disused power station has found a new lease of life, as a women's theatre and as a place for art exhibitions. Its restaurant, scarcely a café, was expensively priced and this combined with the *avant-garde* art suggested that the intended public were not to be the working class, who in previous generations dominated the area. Thirdly, if the London Parks are commonly referred to as the lungs of London, then Wapping Hydraulic station was in all respects the source of the blood that flowed through these London veins. And without the pumping action of the station at its heart, how could a person even contemplate filling their lungs with air?

In sum, the power station represents an entry into the hidden, underground world that powered the city of London. Its survival as a building, with its machinery intact, draws attention to a forgotten technology made obsolete by the greater use of electricity and other forms of power, such as gas. But the pipes have now been used by companies laying their fibre optic cables across London. An indication that each new technology is destined to be super-ceded by a successor, in a seamless flow of unending technologies, like the flow of hydraulic power itself, always flowing – riverrun, as Joyce would say, - without noticeable break.

The walk was split into three parts, a walk to the Hydraulic Station from the nearest tube station, then a walk around Whitechapel and lastly a walk along the South Bank. The connecting link between the second and third part was on an underground tube ride to Blackfriars station, although some chose to walk this connection. This mixing of walking with underground tube travel allowed the participants to experience a second form of motion in addition to walking, in this case technologically and electrically assisted and below ground. One recalls Benjamin's aphorism in *One Way Street* about the person who emerges from the underground to be surprised that the over-ground world is still

going on as before: ‘So quickly has he forgotten the weather of the upper world. And as quickly the world in its turn will forget him.’ Is Benjamin suggesting some invisible thread joining the hidden underground world, a metaphor for the unconscious, with a visible street level world, a metaphor for the conscious part of the psyche? Irrespective of whether these metaphors are accepted or recognised, it is possible that Benjamin is an opening for a corporeal experience of the unconscious and the conscious as they are played out in the time and space of the journey from Wapping to the London Eye. In other words, a Surreal experience and awareness is deemed appropriate, as the world of the unconscious is threaded and woven together with the world of the conscious. And, technology, in the form of the tube train, becomes just one element along with the corporeal, self-propelled motion of the walker occupied with botanising the asphalt

### **III – Property**

On the walk participants were aware of their regaining or re-conquering space, which they were either unaware it existed, or aware that it had belonged to others. At Cable Street, the wall mural depicting the inhabitants of Whitechapel battling against fascists and police in 1936 revealed how the space of the street could belong to those who lived in the area.

Nevertheless, if the act of walking provides the opportunity of re-conquering space, making it the property of those who occupy it, it is important that the feeling of intoxication accompanying these occupations are not the source of mystifications. Access to many buildings, leading onto and off the streets was and still is prohibited. High metal fences and video cameras being the most visible evidence of this today. On Princelet Street, Rodinsky’s room was not open to the public, thus preserving its hidden magical quality and also making sure that we could not occupy it and make it our own, as many tourists are keen to do on their passing journey through London and its tourist sites. (Literally, taking souvenirs in the form loose pieces of plaster from a room, or, pieces of football pitch turf, in the case of a football ground). A number of paradoxes or contradictions are therefore encountered in the attempt to occupy space in the course of the Wapping to London Eye walk. If space is occupied, the occupier can feel that they own it although property rights are not transcended. Secondly, it is not necessarily a permanent ownership supported by deeds deposited in bank vaults. It is a transient, mobile ownership and the danger is that the owner can be intoxicated by the moment, as with other forms of narcotic assisted experience. The walker can recall precisely how Benjamin took

hashish in Marseilles, perhaps to experience in revolutionary style altered states of ownership.

How real was the ownership of walkers who completed their journey with a trip on the London Eye? On the one hand it was a visual ownership normally restricted to those in helicopters or flying over the city. On the other hand, as with the walkers in the street, the ownership was only temporary and did not change the long-term property rights of the state and other landowners. Were we then really investigating forms of virtual ownership?

#### **IV – Summary**

The journey from Wapping to the London Eye and the botanising of the asphalt provided a contemporary insight into the methodology developed by Benjamin. Questions were not so much answered as raised, with respect to the role of *catharsis*, the appropriation of the city as a set of signs and symbols; the role of technology above and below street level; the role of unconscious and conscious corporal experiences; and the question of real or visual, dare one say, virtual property rights.

The recent publication in English of Benjamin's Arcades work has puzzled a number of its readers. One of the challenges has been how to read it, or more precisely, how to give it one reading in preference of another. Buck-Morss (1993) looked, in the manner of a detective, for a number of codes to unlock its treasures. The walkers from Wapping Hydraulic Station to the London Eye were presented with and also encouraged to develop a more corporeal, exploratory reading of this Arcades text. Could it be that for us, as for Benjamin, that the Arcades text was a set of deliberately uncompleted, open-ended notes based upon city walks of catharsis and symbol/sign appropriation? A guide-book, or notebook, and not then a text book or limited set of stable Platonic truths to be revealed.

## Some thoughts while walking around Whitechapel

Jo Hadley

In the converted Victorian pump house in Wapping, past and present converged. As Michael Keith suggested during his talk while we were there, this 19th century subterranean network that once powered London still acted as a space and metaphor for power networking in London today - a dominant 19th century presence in the 21st century, if you will. Now a stylish restaurant and art installation space, echoes of the pump house's past function - power - surrounded us in architecture and machinery as we considered the meaning of 'violence' in Benjamin's pre-WWII work. Stephen Dobson discussed the '*destructive character*' as perhaps one associated with ruptures from painful histories, clearances of social spaces and the possibility of new beginnings. During this, I was reminded not only of the rich history and recent development of Docklands itself, but of contemporary challenges to the institutional nature of power, racism and cultural identity in Britain running alongside it.

Nineteenth century urban explorers once described the area as 'an endless grand aspect' of London, where 'the wealth of the Indies was cast upon Britain's shores' (Jerrold, [1872] 1970: 29). This itself was built upon an earlier life, where the docks played 'host' to the thousands of slave-maintained trading ships which connected transatlantic maritime cities in a lived space described by Paul Gilroy as 'the Black Atlantic' (Gilroy, 1993:16). Amid the legacy of overseas merchant shipping, trading and mainland manufacture, an early global mix of diverse migrant and urban cultures emerges. For those early explorers, the new police functioned not only as guardians, but as gatekeepers and guides for the gaze of the dominant Victorian middle classes upon less 'grand aspects' of some urban walks of life.

Described as the 'forlorn men women and children of Whitechapel and thereabouts' (Jerrold, [1872] 1970: 141), these early urban explorers were escorted by the local police through the very lodgings of those otherwise 'dangerous' urban classes. It is, of course, inconceivable that such escorted visits should be reciprocated and thereby the social power relations between the Victorian classes that allowed an empowered one to gaze upon diverse disempowered others; the loyalties of the Police within these structures made clear in the process. Perhaps echoes of these voyeuristic 19<sup>th</sup> Century power relations still exist in the lenses of film crews, as they selectively follow the police into the homes of today's

'others'. It is through layers of history that I'd like to conceptualise subterranean legacies of power.

Questions of continuing police loyalties were brought into focus as we ventured from the Docklands' pump house in Wapping towards Whitechapel (and thereabouts). Walking along Cable Street, we stopped at the commemorative mural of the famous 1936 anti-fascist battle site, fought and won by the local working class and Jewish communities. Ben Gidley recounted the story of Oswald Mosley and his British Union of Fascists, as they attempted and failed to march through the neighbourhood in their 'blackshirt' political uniforms to voice anti-Semitic demands exhorting the expulsion of Jewish people from the country. These events are inextricably linked to the forces of fascism in Europe at the time but also, in wartime, they shaped a defensive 'British character', ambiguous in its relation to the cultural diversity of today.

Within the mural's mix of blackshirted fascists, red-shirted communists and local residents, the Police are clearly visible. Dominating the lower left foreground, is the contorted face of a constable receiving a fisted blow to the jaw. The Police were seen as siding with Mosley's fascists in that they were there to secure the march. Indeed, even in the face of imminent violence, the Police Commissioner was under direct telephone instructions from the Home Secretary 'to see it through' (BBC 1969). Experiencing their path blocked, marchers spilt over into Cable Street, where fighting ensued. It was here a first hand story is told of a group of residents spontaneously taking a police officer hostage. Having dragged him into their home, they wondered what to do with him because no-one had ever 'arrested' a police officer before. In the end, they took his helmet and truncheon and sent him back to his colleagues to suffer the indignation of explaining the loss (BBC 1969).

This image challenges post-war notions of the 'British Bobby' as guardian of a romanticised vision of past British cultural identity. Of note also, is that since being put up in 1986, the mural has been daubed with white paint, echoing racist sentiments of 'keep England white'. Yet in recent times, the perception of the police as siding with representatives of a conservative and racist Britain has been strong. Moreover, it has marked a troubled history of a failed police commitment to community race relations, resulting in murderous inner-city riots (Holdaway, 1996). To be blunt, the captors of PC Blakelock during the 1985 Tottenham riots, could be considered less forgiving than the residents of Cable Street when they chose to decapitate rather than return him.

In the wake of the 1998 Macpherson report into the failed Police investigation into the murder of black London teenager, Stephen Lawrence, and its charges of institutional police racism, Chief Officers are working hard to re-present the Police as ‘champions of multiculturalism’. I wondered, as we walked on, if Benjamin’s *destructive character* could usefully emerge during these troubled times of police reform and need for re-invention. A character that can help cast away the pain and guilt of past identities and use its energies to clear a space for new beginnings, without giving up on itself and retreating to a more intensely fierce defender of a disguised, but narrower ideological nationalism.

Running alongside this, are vexed responses to notions of a multicultural Britain, found amongst the dominant voices of a conservative middle England. The Telegraph’s fiercely patriotic rejection of the Runnymede Trust’s report on ‘*The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain*’ bore witness to this. The report argued that Britain has to understand itself more widely than from the standpoint of a singular national identity. To achieve this, the UK needs to broaden the educational curriculum to embrace a teaching of the nature and history of racism and the value of cultural diversity accordingly (Parekh, 2000: 148, 291, 302). Yet Tory leader, William Hague’s response, backed by editorial comment and many reader articles, was to politically denounce the report as positively *anti-British*, whilst simultaneously extolling the virtues of a multicultural heritage as the very stuff of past British greatness. (Hague in the Telegraph 13<sup>th</sup> October, 2000). It is clear that ideas of multiculturalism are far from clear.

‘Botanising the asphalt’, I found myself mindful of the difficult relationships between the urban and the rural over visions of a multicultural Britain. ‘London is not England’, I have heard some suburban and village folk say. To what extent, then, can the produce of urban horticulture find itself re-potted in the contemporary English country garden? The invoked image of the ‘British Bobby’ in the Cable Street mural, is one whose relationship to the community alters when applied to a rural setting. A future ‘champion of multiculturalism’ perhaps, but in a possible rural/urban ideological divide can urban solutions be applied to rural problems when it is a question of race relations?

In discussing the rural dimensions of racism, delegates at a recent conference, *Implementing the Lawrence Inquiry Report*, suggested that

the politics of minority community representation were not the same as in the city. To illustrate a tendency to keep out of rural race politics as a survival strategy, the speaker gave the example of 'Darky Day', still celebrated in a Cornish fishing village. During the period of slave trading, slave boats would moor in the harbour and once a year the black slaves were allowed to go ashore to entertain and dance for the locals. Today the local community still celebrates this by 'blacking up' and re-enacting it. In concern over race relations, the organisers consulted with the only black resident (upon his moving to the village) to ask if he found the event problematic, which – not wanting to make himself unpopular - he said he did not and the day of commemoration continues.

Though I don't know to what extent the village school capitalises upon this for the purpose of racism and diversity awareness, it seems that through this Cornish celebration some cultural aspects of the Black Atlantic are still played out in a rural setting. A potentially useful conduit back to the Victorian Pump House in Wapping, where we started our day. Perhaps, like many things, it is what something is *used* for, rather than what it is made of which counts. So when powerful institutions like the police, political parties or anyone else with a troubled race relations record, wish to re-invent themselves as 'champions' of multiculturalism, perhaps it is right to seek clarity on what that might mean when the simple alternative not to is couched in terms of termination.

In conclusion to my reflections on the day, I would say that the political interpretations and related deployment of ideas around multiculturalism(s) in contemporary Britain is crucial in the development of a positive imagination of the self in the future. Benjamin's *destructive character* has been in some way useful in contemplating the contemporary condition of traditional British cultural identity and an institutional desire for survival through a radical rupture with the past.

## Angels, Fragments and Ruins in London's East End

Ben Gidley

### I: Sabbath Eve in Stepney

*Being now tired of the West End, I thought a little ugliness would be refreshing; and striking east... walked down Fenchurch Street and so into the Whitechapel High Street... Ugliness! I never saw so much beauty in two hours before that Saturday Night! (Wilfrid Owen, in his diary 12 June 1915, on the eve of enlisting)*

*Bethnal Green and Hackney, Shoreditch and Whitechapel, Shadwell and Limehouse, the grim streets of Dockland... It was worse than my reading and what I had been told had led me to expect. I came back from our excursions physically and spiritually exhausted. It was an abyss of human suffering, an inferno of misery... I saw with my own eyes thousands of human beings who could hardly be considered such. (Rudolf Rucker in his memoirs)*

“*Botanising the Asphalt*” was my third walking tour in East London in five months. The first of these was an anarchist guided tour of the East End, part of the Reclaim the Streets Mayday 2000 weekend (which culminated in riots in Trafalgar Square). About a hundred of us – hooded German autonomen, bearded Tolstoyans, dreadlocked crusties – were accompanied by about the same number of policemen as we walked through the grey drizzle of Stepney and Bow.

We saw the site of the Siege of Sidney Street: where in 1911 Latvian revolutionaries fought an armed battle with the police (the latter under the command of Winston Churchill). One of the participants, Peter the Painter, got away, becoming a minor East End folk hero.

We saw Jubilee Street, where the Yiddish anarchists' Workers' Friend Club was opened in 1906. Among the people who frequented the Club were Tsarist secret agents, terrorists (including the Sidney Street gang) and future Soviet ministers. Lenin, too, was frequently seen sipping hot tea there. Speakers there included Emma Goldman, the American Jewish anarchist, Prince Peter Kropotkin, the Russian ethnographer and libertarian philosopher, and the Yiddishists and Jewish cultural

nationalists Chaim Zhitlovsky and Ber Borochov. Many of the great Yiddish poets read there.

We saw Dunstan Villas, where the moving forces behind the Workers' Friend movement lived: the unmarried couple Rudolf Rocker and Milly Witcop, and their sons Fermin and Rudolf Jr. (A few years ago I heard Fermin, now in his nineties, recount about with his years at Dunstan Villas, including a memory of urinating over the balcony onto a policeman.<sup>2</sup>)

We then went East to Bow. We saw some of the places where the feminist, libertarian communist and Pan-Africanist Sylvia Pankhurst was active in the years around World War I. Finally, we saw the Bryant and May match factory, where the matchgirls' strike of 1888 sparked off the "new unionism" (the militancy of the low-paid casualized workers, including many Irish, Jewish and female workers). The building is now home to a gated and exclusive yuppie housing complex, and its residents didn't seem too happy to see us standing outside.

## **II: Avenging Angels**

*It may be that the continuity of tradition is mere semblance. But then precisely the persistence of this semblance of persistence provides it with continuity. (Walter Benjamin<sup>3</sup>)*

Most of the people on that walk – as the sun went down on that wet but peaceful East End Friday night – would find themselves in a riotous West End at the close of the weekend. (The statue of Winston Churchill on Whitehall – the man who led the police charge at Sidney Street – was daubed with Turkish revolutionary slogans; McDonalds was smashed up; Trafalgar Square was a scene of carnage.) Many must have felt a sense of contrast between the two events. But there were more resonances, perhaps, than were immediately obvious.

Mayday as a workers' holiday goes back to the Haymarket Tragedy. On Mayday in 1886 there was a one-day general strike in the USA to campaign for an eight-hour working day. In Chicago, 400,000 stopped work and 80,000 – including a large anarchist presence – marched through the streets. The following Monday, the police fired on strikers and six workers were killed. The next day, a protest meeting at Haymarket Square was broken up by the police. In the ensuing

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<sup>2</sup> See Fermin Rocker *The East End Years: A Stepney Childhood*, 1998, London: Freedom Books (the front cover is a drawing of Dunstan Villas by Fermin).

<sup>3</sup> *The Arcades Project* (1999, Cambridge: Harvard University Press) N19,1, p.486

confusion, a bomb was thrown at the police, killing one outright and fatally wounding seven others. Evidence came to light later that the bomb had been thrown by a police agent. However, some anarchist activists were put on trial. The jury was made up of businessmen, their clerks, and a relative of a dead policeman. Four anarchists were hanged (Albert Parsons, August Spies, George Engel and Adolph Fischer), some of whom hadn't even been at the protest meeting. Another anarchist (Louis Lingg) escaped the hangman by taking his own life the day before execution. At the funeral, half a million people lined the route and another 25,000 were at the burial. Seven years after the execution, an inquiry found those executed innocent of all charges. Workers' organisations from then on made May 1<sup>st</sup> a commemoration of the Haymarket Martyrs.

London was one of the places where Haymarket commemorations were frequently held in those years. The impact of Haymarket was felt in the "new unionism" of the late 1890s; there were commemorative meetings at the Jubilee Street Club; the martyrs were celebrated in the pages of Pankhurst's paper, *The Workers' Dreadnought*. Lucy Parsons, the widow of one of the hanged men and an important anarchist leader in her own right, made frequent trips to England after 1888. As a working class black woman (part African-American, part Native American and part Mexican), she symbolized the heterogeneity of the workers movement that was emerging in the East End at that time.<sup>4</sup>

This East End movement, like *Reclaim the Streets* a century on, would frequently invade the West End's spaces of privilege. In London in 1886, the year of the Haymarket events, a warm summer and an economic recession led to many unemployed "roughs" sleeping out in Trafalgar Square and St. James' Park. "Agitation" among them by members of the Marxist Social Democratic Federation (SDF) gained much support and a winter of confrontations between the police and militants ensued. In August and again in October of 1887, the SDF called mass demonstrations in the Square. The October rally, with speeches from SDFers and the raising of a black flag, led to police hostility; when a second procession entered the Square behind a red flag, they were charged by the police with many arrests. As a result, the police banned meetings in the Square. A protest demonstration against this, on November 13 1887, came to be known as Bloody Sunday. Mounted police and soldiers charged the marchers. The following Sunday, there

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<sup>4</sup> Lucy Parsons - who once said "Now is the time for every dirty lousy tramp to arm himself with a revolver or a knife and lie in wait outside the palaces of the rich and shoot or stab them to death as they come out" and who led a parade through a rich part of Chicago with a banner reading "Behold your future executioners" - was a big influence on Class War in the 1980s.

was a disorganized attempt to retake the Square; the police hospitalized many and killed one man. The casualty, a bystander named Alfred Linnel, became a working class martyr; his funeral attracted 200,000 marchers, a sea of red flags, and some green banners of Irish freedom and yellow pennants of the radical clubs.<sup>5</sup> Two weeks later, there was a second death from injuries sustained on Bloody Sunday, that of William Cunner, an unemployed Deptford painter.<sup>6</sup>

The Poll Tax riots of 1991, the anti-Criminal Justice Act riots in Hyde Park and Trafalgar Square during the summer of 1994, the 1997 Reclaim the Streets/Liverpool dockers occupation of Trafalgar Square and the bloody police assaults on it, and now Mayday 2000: these can be seen as continuations of the traditions of Haymarket and Bloody Sunday.

### III: Angel Alley

*At any given time, the living see themselves in the midday of history. They are obliged to prepare a banquet for the past. The historian is the herald who invites the dead to the table.*  
(Walter Benjamin<sup>7</sup>)

A few months after the anarchist walk in the East End, I went on a walking tour led by Bill Fishman, octogenarian, East Ender and historian, author of the classics *East End Jewish Radicals*<sup>8</sup>, *The Streets of East London*<sup>9</sup> and *East End 1888*<sup>10</sup>. The walk was organized as part of an International Post-graduate Jewish Studies Conference held at University College, London. The small tour party was diverse; participants in the resurgence of Jewish studies in the various fragments of the former Soviet empire alongside middle-aged North Londoners, now experiencing the second generation nostalgia of the children of absentee East Enders.

We started in Angel Alley behind Aldgate East tube, the home of Freedom, an anarchist collective whose story stretches back to the 1880s

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<sup>5</sup> Mark Wallinger's sculpture in Trafalgar Square, *Ecce Homo*, serves, according to Wallinger, partly to commemorate Alfred Linnel, a man who has never had a statue built for him. The humility of the piece sharply contrasts with the authoritarian monumentality of Nelson's Column and the other statues of military "heroes" and kings. Incidentally, one of these kings (James II) is by plebeian Deptford carver Grinling Gibbons.

<sup>6</sup> On the events of the late 1880s in Trafalgar Square and the East End, see Gareth Stedman Jones *Outcast London* (1984, London: Penguin), William J Fishman *East End 1888* (1988, London: Duckworth), and Stephen Coleman *Stilled Tongues: From Soapbox to Soundbite* (1997, London: Porcupine).

<sup>7</sup> *The Arcades Project* (1999, Cambridge: Harvard University Press) N15,2, p.481

<sup>8</sup> 1975, London: Duckworth

<sup>9</sup> 1979, London: Duckworth

<sup>10</sup> 1988, London: Duckworth

and the era of Haymarket. Standing in Angel Alley, Bill told us about his memories of the Battle of Cable Street, when local people, Jews, Irish, Communists and socialists defended the streets of the East End from Oswald Mosley and his fascist Blackshirts. He told us of how he spoke at a Cable Street anniversary meeting along with Phil Piratin, one of the Communist leaders in the East End at the time of Cable Street, and later the Communist MP for Mile End. He told us that he had never liked Piratin in the 1930s (Fishman had been in the Labour League for Youth and they had disliked the Communists, who had “no sense of humour”), but that it was moving to share a platform with him. They embraced, and Piratin told him “I am the oldest living veteran of Cable Street, and you’re the youngest”. A few weeks later, Bill said, Phil Piratin died.<sup>11</sup>

We saw Toynbee Hall, the Victorian centre for adult education that has played a crucial role both in the development of social science, social policy and social work and in working-class life in the East End. We saw the place where Lenin stayed when he was in England for the congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, now, ironically, a Burger King. We saw the streets that inspired Jack London and Charles Dickens and others.

Finally, we stood outside 19 Princelet Street, where David Rodinsky used to live. Bill told us movingly of watching Rodinsky walking out of his house onto Brick Lane. On Brick Lane, a homeless black man sitting on a doorstep looked up and saw Rodinsky, his eyes lighting up as he held out his hands. “Thank you for asking me”, Bill heard Rodinsky say as he gave the man a handful of coins. Rodinsky, for Fishman, was a true *tsadik*, a righteous man, or perhaps even a *lamed vavnik*. Here is how Borges defines the *lamed vavnik*:

There are on earth, and always were, thirty-six righteous men whose mission is to justify the world before God. They are the Lamed Vavniks. They do not know each other and are very poor. If a man comes to the knowledge that he is a Lamed Vavniks, he immediately dies and somebody else, perhaps in another part of the world, takes his place. Lamed Vavniks are, without knowing it, the secret pillars of the universe. Were it not for them, God would annihilate the

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<sup>11</sup> See Phil Piratin *Our Flag Stays Red* (1978, London: Lawrence & Wishart). Ironically, the CP, who have a central place in the popular memory of Cable Street, only decided to participate in the action at the last minute after pressure from East End militants. See Joe Jacobs *Out of the Ghetto* (1978, London: Janet Simon) for a very different perspective. While Piratin advocated a policy of mass mobilization in public places and getting respectable figures on board the campaign, Jacobs advocated more of a direct action approach, coupled with vigorous class struggle in local communities. Jacobs would shortly be expelled from the Party.

whole of mankind. Unawares, they are our saviours. (Jorge Luis Borges *The Book of Imaginary Beings*)

After the walk, we took some of the foreign visitors to a pub on Commercial Street where the walls were covered with Sherlock Holmes and Jack the Ripper memorabilia – deerstalker hats and briar pipes, sepia Victorian photographs and yellowing newspaper pages. The pub would rapidly fill and as rapidly empty as tour groups came in, hastily drank their pints and warmed up, before going out again into the night to be shown the sites of Jack the Ripper's grizzly murders.<sup>12</sup> Our Russian visitors seemed to appreciate the "authentically English" atmosphere in the pub. But, for those of us more familiar with the East End, there seemed to be something disturbing about the juxtaposition between this Baudrillardian hyperreality and the emotional power of listening to Bill Fishman's memories. The ethical urgency of his memories disrupts the homogenous time of the official Jack the Ripper Walk East End.

#### **IV: Botanising the Asphalt**

*Post-colonial sensibilities necessitate fresh ways to acknowledge the histories of migration and the waves of migrants that have given so much energy to the life of this city and those who, like Stephen Lawrence have given their lives to it too, while changing --incrementally, glacially -- what it means to be English in the process. Kelso Cochrane, Altab Ali and Blair Peach, Gurdip Singh Chaggar, Asseta Sims and Joy Gardner are only a few of the best-known names to commemorate in this special category. Their life stories prompt a further moment of reflection in our local politics of remembrance. – Paul Gilroy<sup>13</sup>*

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<sup>12</sup> Since writing this, that pub has become a trendy winebar, yet another East End jostling with the existing ones.

<sup>13</sup> "A London Sumptin Dis " (1999). Kelso Cochrane was an Antiguan carpenter killed by racists in the streets of Notting Hill on 16 May 1959, aged 33. Blair Peach was a teacher from New Zealand, killed at age 33 on 23 April 1979 by blows from a police baton at a demonstration in Southall against fascism. Peach was an active member of the Anti-Nazi League in East London, where he taught. Gurdip Singh Chaggar was stabbed to death at the age of 18 by a gang of racists in Southall in the late 1970s. Joy Gardner was a forty year old Jamaican woman killed by police in 1993. She had spent much of her life in the UK; her son Graeme was born in the UK; and her mother was a British citizen. However, her request for residency was turned down and the police Aliens Deportation Group raided her home at dawn to deport her. They forced her face down on the floor, sat on her body, bound her hands with a leather belt and manacles, strapped her legs together, wound thirteen foot of surgical tape around her head - while her five year old son watched. There has been no public inquiry and no punishment for her killers.

*It may be considered one of the methodological objectives of this work to demonstrate a historical materialism which has annihilated within itself the idea of progress. Just here, historical materialism has every reason to distinguish itself from bourgeois habits of thought. Its founding concept is not progress but actualization.*(Walter Benjamin <sup>14</sup>)

A month or so after Bill's walk came the "Botanising the Asphalt" day. While some of the participants took the tube from Wapping to Whitechapel, our group decided, through some gritty commitment to an ethics of walking, to make our way on foot. This meant that we were able to see the mural painted to celebrate the Battle of Cable Street. We saw too the striking contrasts between the gentrified warehouse conversions in riverside Wapping and the dilapidated social housing of Shadwell. Where we were walking, the tidal line of gentrification seemed to be the Highway, which before World War Two marked the border between the Catholic and Jewish East End. The Jewish East End exists now only in traces, fragments, ghosts, ruins and fading memories. One such ruin that we passed was the building on the Cannon Street Road where Rogg's delicatessen used to be until March 2000. The last time I went in there before he closed shop – to buy supplies of creamed herring, dill pickles, chopped liver, kosher salami, heymishe cheese-cake and potato latkes – I asked Barry Rogg what we would become of our culinary lives when he left. "You'll all eat curry," he said.

Getting to Whitechapel Road, we saw the Pavilion Theatre (Whitechapel's main Yiddish theatre until 1935), Vallance Road (where Reggie and Ronnie Kray, the gangsters, lived) and the big Salvation Army building. A little to the West, we came to Altab Ali Park, named after the Bengali tailor murdered by racists there on May 4<sup>th</sup> 1978. The Park, formerly St. Mary's Gardens, was traditionally known as the Itchy Park, after the vermin that fed on the tramps who hung out there, and was immortalized in the Small Faces song (more recently covered by M People) "Itchycoo Park". In the late 1970s, the area – and especially Brick Lane market – was the battleground between Mosley's heirs, the fascist National Front, and both the local community and white working-class anti-fascists. It was against this backdrop of fascist organization that Altab Ali was murdered, and it was against the backdrop of mass mobilization against fascism that the park was renamed Altab Ali Park in 1979. More recently, the Park became the site for a Bengali Martyrs Monument (commemorating the deaths in Bangladesh's struggle against Pakistan) and has been the site of Islamicist political activities, anti-

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<sup>14</sup> *The Arcades Project* (1999, Cambridge: Harvard University Press) N2,2, p.460

fascist rallies, and open air press conferences for family campaigns around Asian victims of racist violence such as Shah Alam.<sup>15</sup>

On Brick Lane we passed the mosque that is famous for having been a synagogue and before that a Huguenot church, symbolizing the successive waves of immigration to the area. What is less known is that when it was a Jewish synagogue it was an important site of resistance to assimilation. It made a complete break with the West End-based assimilationist rabbinical authorities in this country, forbidding the use of English and of garments that resembled those of Christian priests, and imposing stricter dietary laws than the official rabbinical authorities did. As a site of the immigrant Jews' refusal of assimilation, it symbolizes the East End's subaltern relationship with the West End.

After Brick Lane, we went to Spitalfields Market, currently the site of very different struggles over space: the site is contested by various groups who variously use discourses of “community” and “gentrification” to lobby support for their competing development plans.

## **V: The Ethics of Walking**

*Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past, who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious (Walter Benjamin, VI<sup>th</sup> Thesis on the Philosophy of History)*

Huge numbers of tourists come to London every year – whether from Norway, Russia or Florida, or from England’s Home Counties – and are sold a particular narrative of London’s heritage. This narrative (or panorama?) is fixed into the stones of London: in its blue plaques and in its statues and sculptures and monuments. The episodes (or explosive fragments?) I have invoked in this text are not, for the most part, commemorated so publicly or officially in London’s physical space. We have to walk with our noses closer to the ground, our ears more sharply tuned, to attend to their traces. A few tourists wind up in the East End, but usually it is Jack the Ripper and Sherlock Holmes who they hear about, not Rudolf Rocker or Sylvia Pankhurst, let alone Lucy Parsons or Milly Witcop.

The episodes invoked here have frequently had as their theme the struggle over space: struggle over the control and occupation of space,

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<sup>15</sup> see Back, Keith and Solomos “Reading the Writing on the Wall” in Slayden and Whillock’s *Soundbite Culture* (1999 Sage).

whether resistance to gentrification in the shadows of the walls of the City of London, or resistance to fascist presence on the pavements of Brick Lane or Cable Street, or resistance to the police in the battles for Trafalgar Square and Sidney Street.

But as well as the struggle over the control of space, there is also the struggle over the *meaning* of space and the *marking and naming* of space. The naming of Altab Ali Park and the mural on Cable Street are important in the attempt to try and keep the dead safe from “the enemy who has not ceased to be victorious”. But so many more of these dead – William Cunner, Alfred Linnel, the nameless matchgirls, the anonymous mass of Jewish refugees who passed through Stepney – are not recalled in any monuments. It is our task, as we walk again the streets that they walked, to remember them.

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