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On Some Methodological Motifs in Benjamin

Just as Proust began the story of his life with an awakening, so must every presentation of history begin with awakening; in fact, it should treat of nothing else. Walter Benjamin.¹

‘Scientific method is distinguished by the fact that, in leading to new objects, it develops new methods,’² Benjamin writes in one of the methodological sketches for his unfinished magnum opus *The Arcades Project*; accordingly, pioneering the method of ‘literary montage’³ is central to Benjamin’s project of charting the history of the nineteenth century through the prism of the Parisian arcades. In this way, the book’s form is in itself an alternative to ‘normal’ historiography, which conventionally presents its material in the form of a narrative rather than as an assemblage of quotes. The extraordinary dimension of Benjamin’s historical thought is also captured in his aim to bring about ‘a real state of exception’⁴ that could be the catalyst for political change. This exceptionality can also be glimpsed in his interest in unvalued historical phenomena, Benjamin himself refers to his materials as the ‘the rags, the refuse’ of history.⁵ In this paper I explore the germination of exceptional methodologies in Benjamin’s early thought to indicate the continuity of Benjamin’s methodological considerations throughout his intellectual career.

Contrary to interpretations that distinguish a Romantic from a Marxist, and further from a Messianic Benjamin, I want to suggest that even though Benjamin’s thought is not systematic, it remains remarkably consistent, particularly in the images that it employs, throughout his oeuvre. In all its facets, his work seeks to resist that which is taken for granted, the normal and normative, the everyday habitual that blunts critical thinking. In the paper’s first four parts I explore how Benjamin in his student years turned to contemporary discourses of dream and awakening, the field of fractal geometry and Romantic poetics in order to conceptualize the exception as a new norm of thought. In the final part I sketch how these motifs echo in ‘Convolute N: On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress,’ the methodological statement at the heart of *The Arcades Project*.

I begin by discussing some of Benjamin’s first published texts; these date back to 1910, Benjamin’s eighteenth year, and were published in student-run journals (the first journal to publish Benjamin was appropriately called *Der Anfang*). A year later Benjamin’s first essays appeared, his first significant work is the expressionistic ‘Metaphysics of Youth,’ written in

¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, [N4], trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 3.

² Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* [N9], 2.

³ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* [N1a], 8.

⁴ Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History, Thesis VIII’ in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Collins/Fontana, 1973), 255-266 (p. 259). Benjamin writes ‘unsere Aufgabe [ist] die Herbeiführung des wirklichen Ausnahmezustands’, which Zohn renders as ‘it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency’ although ‘state of exception’, is a more accurate translation that I will use throughout this paper.

⁵ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* [N1a], 8.

1913-14; the 1914-15 ‘Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin: “The Poet’s Courage” and “Timidity”’ followed by the ambitious ‘On Language as Such and on the Language of Man’ of 1916.⁶ The theological overtones of the language essay complement the literary aestheticising of the Hölderlin piece in painting a picture of the young Benjamin’s mind. His student writings culminate in the doctoral dissertation on ‘The Concept of Criticism in Early German Romanticism’, which he successfully defended in 1919 (and published in Berlin and Bern in 1920).⁷ My aim is to bridge these early texts with the historical-methodological statements found in ‘Convolute N’ as well as the ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’.

Collective dreaming

The symbiotic relationship between dream and awakening appears throughout Benjamin’s oeuvre. Heiner Weidmann notes that ‘[d]ie Motive *Erwachen* und *Traum*, die in Benjamins Werk vorerst nur vereinzelt auftauchen, werden zuletzt im Zusammenhang der *Passagen-Arbeit* zu zentralen Begriffen entfaltet’.⁸ Weidmann places particular emphasis on the philosophical dimension of this conventionally poetic motif, and this paper partially complements Weidmann’s account by showing how already its first appearances in the student writings anticipate structures that permeate *The Arcades Project*. Critics have situated *The Arcades Project*’s development in Benjamin’s reading of Freud, Proust, Marx, as well as the Surrealists.⁹ Benjamin’s difficulties in separating his formulation of collective dreaming from Carl Gustav Jung’s notion of the collective unconscious has also been noted.¹⁰ Benjamin’s formulation of dreaming has also been explored in its relation to Paris and the city’s arcades, museums and entertainment spaces: the city itself is emblematic of the dream of the nineteenth century that the Benjaminian historian seeks to wake up from. In a related vein, photography has been explored as a metaphorical vehicle for historical awakening – just as an image is fixed onto a photographic plate in a flash, so is the moment of awakening triggered by a sudden illumination.¹¹ However, as Barbara Hahn has argued, the interest in dreaming is not a Benjaminian idiosyncrasy, but a common trope in ‘the political rhetoric of

⁶ All three essays are included in Walter Benjamin, *Early Writings: 1910-1917* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 144-160, 171-196, 251-269, respectively.

⁷ Published in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, trans. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 116–200.

⁸ ‘The motifs *awakening* and *dream*, that at first appear only occasionally in Benjamin’s work, are finally, in the context of *The Arcades Project*, developed into central concepts.’ Heiner Weidmann, ‘Erwachen/Traum’, in Michael Opitz and Erdmut Wizisla, eds, *Benjamins Begriffe* vol. 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2011), 341–362 (341); my translation.

⁹ See Warren S. Goldstein, ‘Dreaming of the Collective Awakening: Walter Benjamin and Ernst Bloch’s Theories of Dreams’, *Humanity and Society* 30 (2006), 50–66, for an overview of Benjamin’s notion of dreaming in relation to Freud, Jung, and Marx. Goldstein highlights the relative absence of nightmares in Benjamin’s dreaming (62).

¹⁰ Adorno repeatedly cautioned Benjamin on this score, see e.g. Weidmann, ‘Erwachen/Traum’, 356-60 for a discussion of Benjamin’s response to Adorno’s critique.

¹¹ See Irving Wohlfarth, ‘History, Literature and the Text: The Case of Walter Benjamin’, *Modern Language Notes*, 96 (1981), 1002–1014 (esp. 1012) and Eduardo Cadava, ‘Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History’, *Diacritics*, 22 (1992), 84–114, for two different takes on the metaphorical links that Benjamin forges between photography and historical awakening.

the time [that] was determined by allusions to dreaming and awakening'.¹² In fact, notions of awakening were mobilized by all possible parties at the time – in a somewhat different context Jonathan Crary recalls 'the main election slogan of the Nazi Party in the early 1930s: "Deutschland Erwache!"'¹³ This by no means implies that Benjamin sympathized with proto-Nazi rhetoric, but rather indicates how widely disseminated the trope of awakening was in the discourses of Benjamin's lifetime. It also points to the urgency of appropriating the powerful rhetoric of awakening and theorising a *real* awakening in contradistinction from the slogans bandied about by the Nazi propaganda machine.

The concept of awakening first appears in one of the first essays that Benjamin published, the 1911 piece 'Sleeping Beauty'.¹⁴ Here, he writes that 'Youth ... is the Sleeping Beauty who slumbers and has no inkling of the prince who approaches to set her free. And to bring about the awakening of youth, its participation in the struggle going on around it, is precisely the goal to which our journal aims to contribute.'¹⁵ The clearly stated goal – to awaken youth so that it can participate in the 'struggle' – shows the political pathos of this essay. It is written in the context of what is commonly referred to as the German Youth Movement, a rather loose array of disparate groups of young people, primarily students, who turned against what they perceived to be the stale bourgeois morality of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The student movement, as well as Benjamin's contributions to it, were political, and the 'Sleeping Beauty' essay relates the movement to other radical causes of its day such as socialism and feminism. While the movement was fuelled by what has, by now, become a stereotypical adolescent wish to break norms, its commitment to developing a new type of morality was genuinely felt. However, Benjamin's contribution to the Youth Movement cannot properly be termed radical. Even if he calls for a 'new humanity,' his immediate goal is limited to a reform of the consciousness of students. Thus, for all the talk of rejecting the bourgeoisie, this is quite a bourgeois manifesto – written by a student for other students: people who, like Benjamin, could anticipate a respectable career and a comfortable lifestyle. Therefore it is not surprising that particular vehemence is directed precisely against the prospect of such a future. In his 1915 essay 'The Life of Students'¹⁶ Benjamin rails against the idea that study at university should prepare the student for a vocation: 'among some of the most innocently mendacious reservations people have about science is the expectation that academic study must lead to a profession for all and sundry. Yet scholarship, far from leading inexorably to a profession, may in fact preclude it.'¹⁷ The essay develops an opposition between studying in order to pursue knowledge for its own sake and the idea that studying should lead to a profession. Virtually echoing the Kantian conceptualization of aesthetic experience as 'purposeful without a purpose', Benjamin presents study as an activity that, although purposeful, should not be conducted with a

¹² Barbara Hahn, 'Dreams of the Collective - Or How to Wake Up?', *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory* 87 (2012), 230–241 (231). Hahn reads Benjamin's theory of dreaming as an example of the literary genre of dream accounts. Aside from examining the dream protocols published in *One-Way Street*, she comments on the philosophical status of dreams in this era.

¹³ Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London, New York: Verso, 2013), 23.

¹⁴ Benjamin, *Early Writings*, 26–32.

¹⁵ Benjamin, *Early Writings*, 26.

¹⁶ Benjamin, *Early Writings*, 197–210.

¹⁷ Benjamin, *Early Writings*, 198.

particular purpose in mind. The political ambition of this essay is made evident by the fact that it was published twice in 1918, in *Der Neue Merkur* and in *Das Ziel*, and incorporates a long quotation from Benjamin's 1914 inaugural lecture as president of the Berlin Independent Student's Association. While the political relevance of the essay has dissipated today, it is still valuable as an early example of what was to become Benjamin's signature technique – the inversion of hackneyed phrases and commonplaces. In a philosophical variation of the formalist alienation effect, Benjamin's thought starts out with the normal to draw out its hidden but no less extraordinary dimensions. It is out of a similar drive to challenge what we take for granted that he chooses translation over poetry to write a poetics, baroque allegory over romantic symbolism to reflect on aesthetic truth,¹⁸ and the refuse of history rather than its canonical monuments in order to understand the past. Benjamin's political student writings make an axiom of norm-breaking and thereby introduce a method that will be sustained throughout his intellectual life.

Youthful time

Young Benjamin teaches us that youth is not a time when one should prepare for professional life, but a time to develop a particular mode of purposeless thought. Youthful thinking is furthermore distinguished by its peculiar temporality, as Benjamin opposes what he calls 'developmental time' to 'youthful time'.¹⁹ Benjamin defines developmental time as 'calendar time, clock time, and stock-exchange time' to which the self is 'condemned'.²⁰ Youthful time on the other hand is 'immortal', a 'no time', a 'realm of timelessness' – a temporality always at risk to be 'purloined by everyday reality, which in a thousand ways, with event, accident, and obligation, disrupt[s] youthful time'.²¹ This 'youthful' time of 'no time' flows through our life but is also outside of it: simultaneously opposed to everyday waking reality and located at the far end of a continuum of wakeful states.²²

However, this intrication of dream and waking life makes one wonder whether Benjamin's model of awakening holds up to critical examination. In one of the lyrical passages of 'The Metaphysics of Youth' Benjamin wonders:

For the sake of what prelude do we cheat ourselves of our dreams? With a wave of the hand we push them aside, into the pillows, leave them behind, while some of them flutter silently about our raised head. How do we dare, on awakening, carry them into the brightness of day? Oh, the brightness! All of us carry around invisible dreams.²³

¹⁸ Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator', in *Illuminations*, 69–82, and Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London, New York: Verso, 2009), respectively.

¹⁹ Benjamin, 'The Metaphysics of Youth,' *Early Writings*, 144-160; esp. section called 'The Diary', 149-156.

²⁰ Benjamin, *Early Writings*, 151.

²¹ Benjamin, *Early Writings*, 150.

²² Mike Hiegemann makes a similar point in the opening of 'Waiting for the Turnover of Time: Reading the Narrative Strategy of Awakening in Walter Benjamin's *One-Way Street*', *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory* 87 (2012), 242–260 (242).

²³ Benjamin, *Early Writings*, 156-7.

For Benjamin the political struggle of youth rests on making good on our invisible dreams, rendering them visible even in the brightness of day. Yet one may well question the extent to which these ‘silently’ fluttering creatures, our invisible dreams, are capable of breaking the settled norms of the bourgeois world. This question points to the more sinister underside of the ‘innocently mendacious’ spirit of vocationalism that Benjamin castigates in ‘The Life of Students’:

The secret domination of the idea of profession is not the most insidious of those distortions, which appalling effect is that they all strike the centre of creative life. In exchange for various surrogates, a banal conception of life barter the spirit. It succeeds in ever more thickly veiling the peril of spiritual life and in ridiculing the free surviving visionaries as starry-eyed dreamers.²⁴

This is ridicule that at a stroke blunts the political edge of a critique such as Benjamin’s: youthful resistance is immediately reduced to little more than the unrest of ‘starry-eyed dreamers.’ As Brecht was later to teach Benjamin, ‘crude thinking’ is more politically effective than beautiful visions²⁵ and perhaps it is a certain amount of crude force that is lacking in Benjamin’s early political writings. Dreamy, youthful thought-patterns are hard put to bear the weight of political awakening that Benjamin ascribes to them; this is a dilemma that will remain unsolved throughout Benjamin’s life and still haunts the dream imagery of *The Arcades Project*.²⁶ Thus, one may object to the slumber of youth along the same lines that Adorno later would object to Benjamin’s formulation of collective dreaming: the passage from an individual dream to a dreaming collective is fraught with ‘unmediated’, ‘mythological’ essentialism and risks collapsing into Jungian proto-fascist archetypes of the national/collective unconscious.²⁷ Nonetheless, it is clear that Benjamin from the outset conceives of awakening as a collective, politically relevant event – an event that not only disrupts the norms and conventions that ossify into a bourgeois notion of cultural heritage but also the very temporality in which these norms are couched.

²⁴ Benjamin, *Early Writings*, 205.

²⁵ For an account of the intellectual exchange between Benjamin and Brecht see Edmut Wizisla, *Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Christine Shuttleworth (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009). Benjamin’s critical writings on Brecht are gathered in *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock (London, New York: Verso, 2003).

²⁶ In a generous spirit, Weidmann suggests that Benjamin’s inability to distinguish dream from awakening is a ‘scharfsichtig vorgenommene Kritik an der *Passagen*-Arbeit, die vielleicht auch nichts weiter ist als ein Träumen, wie man erwacht’ (‘a sharp-sightedly executed critique of *The Arcades Project*, that is perhaps nothing more than a dream of how to wake up’: ‘Erwachen/Traum’, 360-1; my translation). However, even if Benjamin is aware of the inconsistencies of the interrelated concepts, it does not necessarily follow that he is practicing a preemptive auto-critique.

²⁷ See for instance Adorno’s letter of 2-4 August 1935, reprinted in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, trans. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1996-2003), 53-62. See also Hahn, ‘Dreams of the Collective’, 237-40, for a concise commentary on this exchange.

Fractal Time

Temporality is an important problem in Benjamin's early thought and was one of the subjects discussed with his then new friend Gershom Scholem, a mathematics student who was to become one of the most important Jewish theologians of the twentieth century and remain one of Benjamin's closest intellectual friends. In his book *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*,²⁸ Scholem recalls a conversation on the philosophy of history that he and Benjamin had in 1916:

We discussed that subject for a whole afternoon, in connection with a difficult remark of his: ... Did time, which surely was a sequence, have direction as well? I said that we had no way of knowing that time does not behave like certain curves that demonstrate a steady sequence at every point but have at no single point a tangent, that is, a determinable direction.²⁹

The central chapter of Peter Fenves's elegant study *The Messianic Reduction: Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time* revives this conversation and shows how both Benjamin and Scholem distance themselves from the idea that 'the course of time must be represented as an irreversible motion along a straight line'.³⁰ In addition to Judaic theological models, the two friends consider contemporary developments in mathematics, particularly the newly emerging field of fractal geometry, in their search for a different picture of time. Fractal geometry presents the model of 'a curve that is everywhere continuous yet nowhere differentiable':³¹ such a curve is exceptional in that it only consists of sharp turns and therefore cannot have any tangents to indicate its direction. Carried over into the realm of time, the fractal curve preserves temporal succession while deposing of teleological development.³² Furthermore, the fractal curve also places a particular emphasis on repeated self-similarity as opposed to linear progression.³³

The contrast between this model and the common timeline indicates Benjamin and Scholem's radical departure from normal conceptions of history, but it is also an attempt to use mathematics against the grain. In 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy' (1918), written two years after his conversations with Scholem, Benjamin sets out to revise Kantian

²⁸ Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of Friendship*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1981).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

³⁰ Peter Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction: Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2010), 15.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

³² In this it also resembles Benjamin's earlier formulation of 'youthful time'. Cf. Walter Benjamin, 'Theological-Political Fragment' in *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 305-306, where Benjamin clarifies that while the arrival of the Messiah puts an end to history, it is not its *telos* or goal; in other words, history is not directed towards the coming of the Messiah. Scholem dates this fragment to the period 1920-21, while Adorno places it in the late 1930s; 'Anmerkungen zu "Theologisch-Politisches Fragment"', 946-7 in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 946-949.

³³ When magnifying a fractal curve, one finds smaller manifestations of the same curve: the curve does not have a direction but folds out of itself, as it were.

philosophy. His most damning criticism of Kant is that the transcendental philosopher organizes experience along the lines of Newtonian ‘mathematical physics’³⁴ that dominated the intellectual life of the eighteenth century. Benjamin believes that by limiting his concept of experience to the mathematically quantifiable, Kant is not taking into account the linguistic – and therefore, for Benjamin, ultimately theological – nature of experience. Benjamin concludes his philosophical program with the demand that ‘the great transformation and correction which must be performed upon the [Kantian] concept of knowledge, oriented so one-sidedly along mathematical-mechanical lines, can be attained only by relating knowledge to language, as was attempted by Hamann during Kant’s lifetime’.³⁵ For Benjamin, the kind of truth that exists in the realm of language trumps mathematical reason much like youthful dream consciousness surpasses the purposive business of the adult. However, the fact that Benjamin condemns ‘mathematical-mechanical’ experience merely two years after employing mathematics to develop new models of time should not be seen as a contradiction or a change of heart. Rather, Benjamin’s thought-experiments in the newly-emerged, non-linear field of fractal geometry are motivated by the fact that fractal geometry relates to ‘normal’ Euclidean space much like the dream relates to waking life, or linguistic knowledge relates to mathematical formulae; in all these couplings one member of the pair (fractal geometry, dream, language) revokes the logic of its norm-giving other (Euclidian geometry, waking life, mathematics). From the viewpoint of waking life the dream is exceptional, as are the non-symmetrical categories of language from the viewpoint of mathematics. Characteristically Benjamin turns to the outstanding in order to stand the norm on its head. The result is a methodical discontinuity that remains consistent without turning into a normative system.³⁶

The challenge to linear chronology raised in the conversation with Scholem is still operant when Benjamin writes his last finished text, the ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’. The fourteenth thesis states: ‘History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now.’³⁷ Consequently, time should not be represented as the familiar timeline, but as something discontinuous and filled with moments of now – just like the fractal curve unfolds into smaller, self-similar reiterations of its larger structure. Furthermore, just like vocational purposiveness was tied to a concept of ‘developmental time’ and resisted by means of ‘youthful time’, so now-filled, Messianic time not only contests a linear conception of chronology, but also the particular view of human progress accompanying this chronology: ‘The concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogenous, empty time.’³⁸ By filling homogenous empty time to the brim with moments of the now, Benjamin simultaneously cancels out the bourgeois ideal of human progress.

³⁴ Benjamin, ‘On the Program of the Coming Philosophy’ in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 100-10 (100-1).

³⁵ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 107.

³⁶ Later in life Benjamin was to express a comparable interest in Einsteinean relativity theory that challenges Newtonian norms of space and time. See for example letter to Scholem of 12 June 1938, reprinted in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 322-29, where Benjamin proposes to read Kafka with the help of Sir A. S. Eddington’s account of the new physics.

³⁷ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 263.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 262.

Progressive Universal Poetry

Benjamin and Scholem's 1916 conversation does not only play with mathematical models, but is also indebted to Benjamin's earlier readings of Romantic poetry and poetics. This interest comes to fruition in the doctoral dissertation, which sought to uncover the Romantic philosophy of art, particularly in the works of Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis. In Benjamin's reading, the Romantic conception of poetry is intimately related to the Romantic view of history: 'the concept of art is a legitimate – and perhaps, besides history, the only legitimate – fulfilment of Friedrich Schlegel's systematic intentions'.³⁹ This sets up an analogy between poetic art and history that allows Benjamin to move from a discussion of poetry to one of temporality and historical epochs: Schlegel's 'concept of progressive universal poetry is easily exposed to modernizing misunderstanding', Benjamin asserts, '[t]his misunderstanding would consist in seeing endless progression as a mere function of the indeterminate infinity of the [poetic] task, on the one hand, and the empty infinity of time, on the other'.⁴⁰ Benjamin distances himself from the notion of an 'empty infinity of time' in favour of a 'medial and qualitative'⁴¹ one; that is, he sees infinity as a medium in which infinitely many connections can take place:⁴²

To begin with, the infinity of reflection, for Schlegel and Novalis, is not an infinity of continuous advance but an infinity of connectedness. This feature is decisive, and quite separate from and prior to its temporally incompletable progress, which one would have to understand as other than empty. Hölderlin – who [...] had the last and incomparably most profound word – writes, in a passage in which he wants to give expression to an intimate, most thoroughgoing connection, 'They hang together infinitely (exactly).' Schlegel and Novalis had the same thing in mind when they understood the infinitude of reflection as a full infinitude of interconnection: everything is to hang together in an infinitely manifold way – 'systematically,' as we would say nowadays, 'exactly,' as Hölderlin says more simply.⁴³

The Romantic concept of infinity presents an infinitude of possible interconnections. This offers another decisive building block in Benjamin's late historiography: the Romantic unfolding through an infinitude of interconnection, as opposed to an infinite progress through empty time, provides a structural model for seeing historical time as filled with connectable moments of now rather than as an undifferentiated void. Where the Romantics speak of

³⁹ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 138.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² My reading of Benjamin's concept of 'filled infinity' is indebted to Anthony Phelan, 'Fortgang und Zusammenhang: Walter Benjamin and the Romantic Novel', in Andrew Benjamin and Beatrice Hanssen, eds, *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism* (London, New York: Continuum, 2002), 69–82; Josh Cohen, 'Unfolding: Reading After Romanticism', 98–108 in the same volume; and Samuel Weber, 'Criticism Underway: Walter Benjamin's Romantic Concept of Criticism', in Kenneth R. Johnston, Gilbert Chailin, Karen Hanson, and Herbert Marks, eds, *Romantic Revolutions: Criticism and Theory* (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 302–319.

⁴³ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 126.

poetic forms, Benjamin speaks of historical phenomena; nonetheless, the Romantic figure of interconnection is echoed when Benjamin develops his own historical methodology in *The Arcades Project*:

It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather [dialectical] image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent.⁴⁴

If Schlegel and Novalis' interconnections manifested themselves in the poetical image, Benjamin's do so in the dialectical image. Rather than following one another in a linear progression, historical events are infinitely interconnected; accordingly, historical method is not about describing a 'continuous advance' but about fixing the 'exact' constellations in which past and present are connected in the now. Much like Romantic 'universal progressive poetry', then, dialectical images unfold in an infinitude of interconnected 'nows', hanging together exactly in the 'filled infinity' of Messianic time. Benjamin sets a new norm for thinking about history, one where the past is not simply past, but continually being reconfigured in the medium of the present. It is a temporal progression that curves in on itself so that each now links past and present without directing them along a linear axis. In this way the historian becomes privy to 'a wholly unique experience of dialectic. The compelling – the drastic – experience, which refutes everything "gradual" about becoming and shows all seeming "development" to be dialectical reversal is the awakening from dream.'⁴⁵ This awakening brings history into a 'state of exception',⁴⁶ a critical juncture where something truly new – a just society – may emerge. However, Benjamin bifurcates the state of exception: there is a normalized state of exception which has enabled and validated the Nazi seizure of power (under the slogan 'Deutschland Erwache!') and then there is a real state of exception, a real historical awakening, which must be mobilized in the struggle against these forces:⁴⁷

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that "the state of exception" in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about

⁴⁴ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project AP*, [N2a], 3; repeated almost verbatim in [N3], 1, however, with the final words reading 'is not temporal but figural'.

⁴⁵ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, [K1], 3; cf. Benjamin's early definition of 'developmental' time as the linear time of the stock-exchange, calendar and clock time. Benjamin, 'The Metaphysics of Youth' in *Early Writings*, p. 150-1, cited above.

⁴⁶ Benjamin's term *Ausnahmezustand* is borrowed from political conservative and Nazi sympathizer Carl Schmitt. Adorno suppressed Benjamin's references to Schmitt in his edition of Benjamin's *Schriften*, most likely out of political considerations, and Benjamin's appropriation of Schmitt has challenged many of his readers. Samuel Weber offers a nuanced discussion of the problematic heritage of this concept in Benjamin's work in 'Taking Exception to Decision: Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt,' *Diacritics*, 22 (1992), 5–18. For a controversial application of the concept to the post-9/11 era, see Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago, London: Chicago University Press, 2005).

⁴⁷ This recalls the formulation from 'Sleeping Beauty', cited above: 'And to bring about the awakening of youth, its participation in the struggle going on around it, is precisely the goal...'

a real state of exception, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism. One reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm.⁴⁸

Revealing the abnormal in this historical norm paves the way for its destruction. The awakening from the dream of history is the *real* state of exception that reveals history as a *normalized* state of exception – here Benjamin grasps for what is exceptional to the reigning exception itself.

Dreamtime

If the dream politics of Benjamin's early work are limited to the life of students, the political dimension of awakening is wholly developed in his last writings, where the homonymy between the words *Zeitraum* and *Zeit-traum* opens up the time of the nineteenth century as a dreamtime:

The new, dialectical method of doing history presents itself as the art of experiencing the present as waking world, a world to which that dream we name the past refers in truth. To pass through and carry out *what has been* in remembering the dream! – Therefore: remembering and awakening are most intimately related.⁴⁹

This historical awakening brings about a 'real' state of exception that unmask the reigning state of exception as norm. The dialectics of dream and awakening explored in 'The Metaphysics of Youth' is echoed in Benjamin's reflection whether 'awakening [is] perhaps the synthesis of dream consciousness (as thesis) and waking consciousness (as antithesis)? Then the moment of awakening would be identical with the "now of recognisability."⁵⁰ This is the same 'now of recognisability' in which the dialectical image appears,⁵¹ which implies that the temporal constellation captured in the dialectical image also incorporates dream and waking states. The mutual constitution of the 'now' that recognizes the 'what-has-been', and the 'what-has-been' that can only be recognized in this particular 'now' also reveals how things hang together 'exactly' in this infinite *Zeitraum*. Furthermore, the insistence that '[i]n order for the past to be touched by the present instant <Aktualität>, there must be no continuity between them'⁵² seems to contain a wink to the 1916 conversation with Scholem that courted temporal discontinuity by means of fractal geometry.

⁴⁸ Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History, Thesis VIII' in *Illuminations*, 259; amended translation.

⁴⁹ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, [K1], 3.

⁵⁰ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, [N3a], 3; put more directly in [N18], 4: 'The now of recognisability is the moment of awakening.'

⁵¹ 'For the historical index of the [dialectical] images not only says that they belong to a particular time; it says, above all, that they attain to a legibility only at a particular time ... Every present day is determined by the images that are synchronic with it: each "now" is the now of a particular recognizability. In it, truth is charged to the bursting point with time.' Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, [N3], 1.

⁵² Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, [N7], 7.

Above all, Benjamin's method of doing history distances itself from standard accounts of human progress. Instead, he is interested in the disruptive gesture, the flash-like moment when 'thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions'.⁵³ In such moments we witness the historical phenomena's 'violent expulsion from the continuum of historical progress'.⁵⁴ Despite the violent imagery, this expulsion is actually a rescue. 'What are phenomena rescued from?', Benjamin rhetorically asks and immediately answers: 'Not only, and not in the main, from the discredit into which they have fallen, but from the catastrophe represented very often by a certain strain in their dissemination, their "enshrinement as heritage."' ⁵⁵ It is such enshrinement that has to be resisted. Most importantly, what appears in this act of resistance against tradition, in this violent expulsion from the bourgeois cultural heritage, is something intimately connected to its moment of appearance in the now, something that 'is manifest on each occasion, only to a quite specific epoch – namely, the one in which humanity, rubbing its eyes, recognizes just this particular dream image as such. It is at this moment that the historian takes up, with regard to that image, the task of dream interpretation.'⁵⁶ The historian is called upon to interpret the invisible dreams that humanity carries around: only this mode of interpretation is capable of bringing about the *real* state of exception in which humanity awakens into the sober light of history, while still remembering its utopian dreams.

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⁵³ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, [N10a,], 3.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* [N9], 4.

⁵⁶ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project AP* [N4], 1.

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Biography

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