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Theory on the Fly

Critical Synthesis under Conditions of Material Pirating and Borrowed Time[[1]](#endnote-2)

1.

The figure of the *flâneur*, in large measure invented by Baudelaire, but elevated to its full notoriety in Benjamin’s writings on the French Second Empire, keeps circulating back in an endless recursive loop to the Parisian haunts of her fascination, inclination, or fatal attraction. My own swings in and out of the virtual environment of *The Arcades Project* (*Das Passagen-Werk*)[[2]](#endnote-3) over the past decade pursue a parallel cat-and-mouse dynamic. Benjamin rendered the account of modernization in Paris during the nineteenth century, an increasingly urgent preoccupation over the last thirteen years of his life, in snippets of historical documents and twentieth century accounts, interspersed with his occasional critical syntheses. This is at once a magisterial historico-critical summation, archive, and accounting in its own right and a key instance of what I have elsewhere termed, in recent work, a “dissolving book,” a work that, in the tradition of the Bible itself, the Talmud, *Don Quixote, Tristram Shandy, Finnegans Wake*, Hofstadter’s *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, and Derrida’s *Glas*, explodes the very formats and parameters indispensable for its legibility under the weight of its ramifications, marginalia, hypertexts, spinoffs, “strange loops,” and free associations.[[3]](#endnote-4) The point at which I repeatedly arrive in my gravitation to such expansive and rambling works, those frustrating any attempt to render an authoritative reading or critique of them, is the inescapable realization that they have been always already embedded with many of the key aspects that we attribute to self-referential and autopoietic programs and machines despite their preponderantly arising in an age prior to the hardware. It may be the fate of *The Arcades Project* to dissolve, having run its course through a sequence of Convolutes (*Konvoluten*) or chapters devoted to fashion, iron and glass construction, photography, prostitution and gambling, and Charles Baudelaire among other topoi. But this transpires not before it has embodied, simulated, and performed the full complexity of life, on socio-cultural, economic, psycho-social, and even unconscious levels--collective as well as individual, amid extreme conditions of urban density, political theology, corporate hegemony, technocratic reproducibility and power. If *The Arcades Project* may be said to constitute the very Bible or operating system of industrial modernization, it simulates while it dissolves. It encompasses within its virtual “binding” a storehouse of the complexity embedded in the hyper-modernity that it simulates.

The *Arcades Project* is a superclimate of the many zones or neighborhoods making it up. This becomes explicit in Convolute D, juxtaposing Parisian moods with the obsession with the weather running a full gamut of contemporary accounts and signature artifacts of the Second Empire, including Meryon’s engravings, the Baudelairean *Fleurs du mal*, and Gustave Caillebotte’s signature canvas, “*Rue de Paris; temps de pluie*” (also known as, “*La Place de l’Europe*,” 1877). Attenuated browsing through this archive and compendium produces a naval pilot’s familiarity with the currents, eddies, and mini-climates among and between the citations, the “information bits” largely composing it. These in turn form the *environment* in which some of Benjamin’s definitive formulations, on such tropes of modernity as collecting and allegory, the dialectical image, and “petrified unrest” arise. Indeed, within the “framework” of *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin’s memorable theoretical syntheses “happen” against the backdrop or manifold of the citations of others in a “figure-ground” relation.

Within the compass of this enigmatic compilation, Benjamin’s culminating critical crystallizations have been written on borrowed time, under street-conditions simulating the totalitarian anomie that overtook Europe in the decades between the 1920’s and the 1940’s. There is no time in *The Arcades Project* to accord the overarching critical overview of an epoch, however incisive, the showcase it would ordinarily claim in an academic treatise, a work composed under “normalcy,” with a full measure of disciplinary and institutional stability (if not stasis). Not only was the *Passagen-Werk* written under conditions of what would now be called extreme precarity[[4]](#endnote-5); the tenuousness of the socio-political as well as personal circumstances under which it was written extends systematically across its composition, progression, and stylistics.

*The Arcades Project* furnishes us with a compelling panorama on the emergence of what I would term “theory on the ground” or “on the run” out of a seemingly chaotic agglomeration of archival materials, retrospective accounts, and critical observations—preponderantly of fragmentary scale and jarring impact. The overarching climate of this *Werk* is pure turbulence. Even approaching social and political catastrophe toward the end of his Parisian run, Benjamin has gathered the telling citations comprising most of *The Arcades Project* in the Bibliothèque Nationale and other Parisian archives with the same playful inquisitiveness with which the child (another central persona in his critical writings) collects its beloved “good objects,” such as the waste-materials of adult construction and craft, and with them improvises the discoveries of its virtual play-world. Indeed, the multidimensional playfulness of childhood has never abandoned either the figure of the irreducibly historicizing “*Sammler*” of Convolute I, nor his counterpart, the invariably quirky and even violent allegorist of the same pages, who somehow manages to torque historical reconstruction into full-fledged critique, in its fully radical and incommensurate prescription

*The Arcades Project’s* most telling “authority” consists in the materials and citations that it can gather and register on its display-screen in a hurry. It is, therefore, the work of philosophy synthesized and formulated under conditions of improvised fieldwork, of what in the social sciences would be termed “quasi-experimentation.”[[5]](#endnote-6) Its major theoretical inroads pursue a menagerie of arcane topics: iron and glass as the first inherently “smart” materials to have found widespread architectural and urban deployment; conditions under which a collective socio-cultural “awakening” might be conceivable; the fate of critical lucidity amid the dialectical “winds” of historical catastrophe. One has not “read” *The Arcades Project* until one has traced the metamorphosis of citational polyvocity and even randomness into stunning critical insight—one that, akin to the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect), entraps us within the double-binds of systematic closure, with insight and circumspect emerging only in borrowed time, “on the fly.” It is this crystallization to which the remainder of the essay will be dedicated: to how *The Arcades Project*, a work overwhelmed from the outset in literary and historical debt to the degree that it is composed preponderantly of citations, liberates itself from the constriction of precedence and predetermination, erupting into a poetics of insight and commitment to ongoing critical discernment and discrimination at all costs. And indeed, for Benjamin, as opposed to subsequent generations of academic professionals, this line of open-ended inquiry and inscription came at all costs: of his patrimony, his home, his library, everything.

Benjamin's radical insistence on allowing the surviving and contemporary materials of Parisian modernization under the Second Empire to speak for themselves may well constitute the defining watermark defining not only *The Arcades Project* but the entire genre of historical narratives and critical receptions crystallized through compilation and grafting rather than through rendering authoritative commentary. It is of course in the electronic media, under the guise of what we call topically configured websites, that Benjamin’s original genre of convolutes has consolidated itself definitively. In terms of contemporary cybernetics, *The Arcades Project* constitutes a network of textual materials configured under the politics of radical democracy: they have, to the same degree as Walter Benjamin, their "collector" and their "allegorist," been empowered to speak on behalf of themselves and the perspectives from which they emanate; also among and between themselves. The materials, including the invariably occasional and offhand comments by Walter Benjamin, form the feedback loops and constitute the virtual domain of what Gregory Bateson,[[6]](#endnote-7) Anthony Wilden,[[7]](#endnote-8) and Douglas R. Hofstadter[[8]](#endnote-9) treat as an "open system," my own term is, again, a "dissolving book." The diverse materials of *The Arcades Project* may be also thought of as a climate-zone in which the textual extracts and fragments interrelate as much through the randomness of turbulence as through cumulative argumentation or topical coherence.

My purpose in this essay is to gain some traction on the play between the archival materials of *The Arcades Project* and the stunningly poetic and epigrammatic formulations (concentrated in Convolutes K-N but by no means limited to them) that were to constitute Benjamin's consummate additions to the literature of critical theory. I am arguing that the very conditions of material destitution, statelessness, homelessness, and "borrowed time" under which Benjamin lived and labored particularly 1933-40 played a constitutive role--not only in the formulations on historical epistemology and catastrophe abounding in Convolute N, but in the very possibility for theoretical deliberation and efficacy in the subsequent stages of the modernization whose emergence in nineteenth-century Paris he chronicled and, in keeping with allegory, performed. Without venturing into explicit detail regarding the “survival” of Benjamin’s sensibility as well as *ouevre* in the post-World War II period, I cannot help but surmise the enduring impact of the script of “theory on the fly” upon such master-strokes of twentieth-century critical theory as the following: Jacques Lacan’s crystallizing for his *Seminars* a prose medium more redolent of the abrupt disruptions and digressions of an analytical session than of a Freudian case-study or “master-elucidation”;[[9]](#endnote-10) Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s writing their “Capitalism and Schizophrenia” diptych from the perspective of what they term “the body without organs” and “smooth space” rather than from putative hierarchical (and institutional) academic authority;[[10]](#endnote-11) and, Jacques Derrida’s highlighting, in the decisive allegorical works of his *oeuvre*—including “Tympan,” “Plato’s Pharmacy,” “The Double Session,” and *Glas*—the sub-semantic “noise” or static nonetheless of decisive significance both within the architecture and the dismantling of knowledge.[[11]](#endnote-12) These memorable critical artifacts, epitomizing the literature of contemporary critical theory, reside at a certain pitch of dramatic uncertainty. In multiple dimensions, they are themselves expressions of a quasi-theory or “theory on the fly,” one fully modulated by conditions of homelessness, transitory movement and temporality, and professional *in*stability, that Walter Benjamin first submitted to a comprehensive test-trial or trial-run.

What this demonstration presupposes, before it turns, inevitably, to chapter and verse, is a short list of propositions that have crystallized to me over years of deciphering *The Arcades Project*  and encapsulating it for students:

Every convolute, that is, loosely thematically organized compartment of *The Arcades Project*, fluctuates between the materials that Benjamin has found most relevant and a theorization, often but not always bearing Benjamin’s signature, immanent to that particular collation of materials or mini-climate. In Convolute A, where Benjamin has defined the Parisian arcades and what transpired there, as well as introduced, always through the medium of citations, their thumbnail history, the emergent theoretical formulations concern such issues and phenomena as signage and naming itself. Only when Benjamin takes on, in Convolute I, the standardization and new emphasis placed on middle-class residential space—as always, with relevant first-hand accounts and twentieth-century recapitulations as the intermediaries—does he hazard the theoretical personifications of the collector and the allegorist, both of whom, in different respects, embody the accumulation and display of consumer commodities within the post-Haussmannian apartment. This is to say that in certain designated eddies or back-alleys of *The Arcades Project*, theoretical formulations advanced initially in a purely local and topical setting, instances including the theory of fashion and the models of historical progression evolving from fashions, or the theory of supplementarity inextricably intertwined with the so-called “black-markets” in prostitution and gambling, increase in power or “chunk” themselves into formulations concerning knowledge or writing themselves. This is another way of saying that in certain sections, notably Convolutes K-N, the stage-by-stage theorization of the benchmarks of modernization covered by *The Arcades Project* loops back upon itself, attaining new levels of programmatic power. The autopoietically upgraded operating system of *The Arcades Project* turns outward—beyond both Paris and the parameters of its own investigation—toward the very configuration of critique amid conditions of historical catastrophe.

I’m implying here that *The Arcades Project*, not unlike *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, stages some process of increase, or sublimation in conceptual power. But the stages along this progressive realization are anything but the carefully orchestrated, sequentially planted, and dialectically mechanical developments that Hegel plots out for *Geist* in his *Phänomenologie* (and in other evolutionary treatises and schemata that it inspired). I will present the inevitable summary of the quantum leaps and other “strange loopings” (the term is Douglas Hofstadters’s)[[12]](#endnote-13) in theory-power in the course of *The Arcades Project* with the greatest compression and brevity that I can manage. Among the many wonders of *The Arcades Project* are the subjects and scenarios that Benjamin selected at the outset of the work as those indispensable to a retrospective processing of modernization in Paris under the Second Empire. How is it that Benjamin could deem the primary materials deployed in the city’s remaking, its subterranean zones, its weather, and even its emotional moods or climate as decisive factors in its modernization and in its enduring ethos and *Gestalt*? Wouldn’t that mean that materialist history, the account satisfying the Marxian imperative that the impact of labor and the material conditions of life be factored into all retrospective equations, is as much the history of the intangibles as the tangibles?

Just as Benjamin places his own comments in the same epigrammatic and fragmentary form as the citations that he has culled from hundreds of sources, there is never any compartmentalization, in *The Arcades Project*, between the facts and materials of history, on the one hand, and meta-critique on the other. We are astonished on two levels that *The Arcades Project*, once the arcades’ basic historical initiation and the local patois of their signage and vocabulary have been set out in Convolute A, turns to an intense scrutiny of fashion in the nineteenth-century, even though this sphere is almost defined by the arbitrary and non-linear stutter-steps between its generations. Not only does Benjamin gather materials on the rationale behind such extreme phenomena as the crinoline (also on its impact on street-traffic); fashion becomes a more compelling mechanism of historical change and development than, say, the history of technology or of war. What I’m suggesting here is that the entire ecology of Convolutes A-I vacillates at all times and in unpredictable ways between the materiality of Paris in the throes of its nineteenth-century modernization and the near-simultaneous theorization of this process. The theoretical retrospect also amounts to an impact-study of critique in the decades and generations succeeding modernization. In its theoretical articulation, fashion becomes the very model for all culturally-motivated historical evolution: “For the philosopher, the most interesting thing about fashion is its anticipations” [from B1a,1]. “To each generation [of fashions] the one immediately preceding it seems the most radical anti-aphrodisiac imaginable. In this judgment it is not so far wrong as might be supposed. Every fashion is to some extent a bitter satire on love” [from B1a,4]. Iron, steel, and glass, by the same token, are not only the underlying building materials facilitating the transformations imposed by large-scale industrialization, including the multiplication of the commodities produced and the acceleration of their transport and sale. These materials have, by Benjamin’s account, inverted the classical relationships between form and function in architectural aesthetics. Whether a structure houses machinery or residents, whether it shelters pedestrians or serves as a railroad terminal, means everything in the age of steel and glass. Embedded into the new materials is the intelligence to torque, grow, and evolve with industrialization: “It is worth considering . . . whether, at an earlier period, technical necessities in architecture . . . determined the forms, the style, as thoroughly as they do today. With iron as a material, this is already clearly the case, and perhaps for the first time. Indeed the [now citing A. G. Meyer, *Einbauten* (Esslingen, 1927), p. 23]: ‘basic forms in which iron appears as a building material are . . . already themselves, as distinct syntheses, partly new. And their distinctiveness, in large measure, is the product and expression of the natural properties of the building material’” [from F3a,5]. Even where Benjamin plays ventriloquist to A. G. Meyer, his designation of glass and steel as the “smart materials” of their age and its Prevailing Operating System, playing a role analogous to that of semiconductors in our own, is a profound, quintessentially theoretical formulation, but one imbricated within the very material substrate both of the moment and its critical reprise. So too with respect to the weather, another “X-factor” blowing in from the extremities of conceptual left field as a dynamic factor in the history of modernization. But as Benjamin powerfully demonstrates, climates, emotional and geophysical, are quintessential to theorizing the long-term effects—aesthetic, cognitive and psycho-social as well as commercial and technological—established through the consolidation of the Second Empire’s radically different Prevailing Operating System: “The mere narcotizing effect which cosmic forces have on a shallow and brittle personality is attested in the relation of such a person to one of the highest and most genial manifestations of these forces: the weather. Nothing is more characteristic than that precisely this most intimate and mysterious affair, the working of the weather on humans, should have become the theme of their emptiest chatter. Nothing bores the ordinary man more than the cosmos. Hence for him, the deepest connection between the weather and boredom” [from D1,3].

The above examples, culled from a cosmic field of textual cut-outs, illustrate the degree to which Convolutes A-I function as a climate or ecology in which the material remains, and hence brute materiality of history are on an interactive feedback loop with the theoretical crystallizations forming the very substance of critique. Benjamin keeps no cards up his sleeve in getting *The Arcades Project* on its feet. Convolutes A-I have been dealt a full hand, but the rhythms and traffic patterns they establish are simply not nearly as far as the work’s trajectory has to go. In its consummating moments, the work turns aside from its material groundings and addresses the status of theory in its moment, our ongoing age. And these are the conditions of “theory on the fly,” a nomadic, inconsequential draft or formulation, one bearing few ties to the institutions of homeostasis, which as Benjamin will go on to demonstrate, only join the unscrolling catastrophe, playing an integral role within its demonic status quo.

2.

In the wake of the critically repetitive as well as innovative reprise of established motifs transpiring in Convolute J under the aura of Baudelaire, it is as if Benjamin’s theoretical discourse has emerged from a week-long practice at a Yoga retreat: it is more supple and, even where its subject-matter verges on the arcane, more confident to articulate at some remove from the material evidence and remains. Benjamin’s foundational work in Convolutes A-I has been formidable. After the work’s dominant motifs have been recalibrated in keeping with the life, times, and artistic milieu and production of Charles Baudelaire, Benjamin takes the liberty to pronounce on the most tenuous, but for this reason most intriguing spinoffs of modernization: the multidimensional “awakening” that will have to transpire if European civilization is to shake off the slumber of totalitarian rule and thinking. Also during this maiden flight—in Convolutes K and L--of his freeform theoretical articulation, that is, whose conceptual pretext is its own articulation rather than as a “read-out” of the materials, making it, within the panorama of *The Arcades Project*, “second-order”[[13]](#endnote-14) critique, Benjamin offers us a guided tour to the palaces of the collective dream—Parisian museums, libraries and other archives, even train stations—both fending off and facilitating the current backslide to barbarism.

Awakening is a graduated (*stufenweiser*) process that goes on in the life of the individual as in the life of generations. Sleep its initial stage. A generation’s experience of youth has much in common with the experience of dreams. Its historical configuration is a dream configuration. Every epoch has such a side turned to dreams, the child’s side. For the previous century, this appears clearly in the arcades. But whereas the education of earlier generations explained these dreams for them in terms of tradition, of religious doctrine, present-day education simply amounts to the distraction of children. Proust could emerge as an unprecedented phenomenon only in a generation that had lost all bodily and natural aids to remembrance and that, poorer than before, was left to itself to take possession of the periods of childhood (*der Kindheitwelten habhaft werden konnte*) in merely an isolated, scattered, and pathological way. What follows here is an experiment in the technique of awakening. An attempt to become aware of the dialectical—the Copernican—turn of remembrance (*Eingedenkens*). [K1,1]

The nineteenth century a spacetime <*Zeitraum*> a dreamtime (<*Zeit-traum*>) in which the individual consciousness more and more secures itself in reflecting, while the collective consciousness sinks into ever deeper sleep. But just as the sleeper—in this respect like the madman—sets out on the macrocosmic journey through his own body, and the noises and feelings of his insides, such as blood pressure, intestinal churn, heartbeat, and muscle sensation . . . generate, in the heightened inner awareness of the sleeper, illusion (*Wahnsinn*) or dream imagery which translates and accounts for them, so likewise for the dreaming collective, which, through the arcades, communes with its own insides. We must follow in its wake so as to expound the nineteenth century—in fashion and in advertising, in buildings and politics—as the outcome of its dream visions. [K1,4]

In the outlandish mosaic of his materials, Benjamin does not stop short of including sleep—and the cognitive processing that persists under somnolent conditions—among the consequential parameters of any given Prevailing Operating System. Even sleeping counts in the retrospective collation of telling cultural factors. And sleep under the Second Empire, Benjamin is arguing, is substantially different from sleep, or anxious insomnia, today. The arcades represent, not unlike contemporary Las Vegas, a persistent collective dream of the moment: in the case of the Second Empire as we have seen, a particularly ravenous, if unschooled stage of economic expansion and commercial acceleration. As the embedded composite narrative of this hyperactive moment emerges, the arcades serve as the prototype of a new commercial space doubling as a dream-space. It is no stretch at all for Benjamin to extrapolate the original arcades of the early decades of the nineteenth century—modest in scale and deliberate in their planning despite their revolutionary repercussions—into the grand steel-and-glass architectural monuments of the age, whether the central rail-terminals of the city, the grandiose department stores, or a new generation of comprehensive archives and museums. These become, in Benjamin’s terms, the “dream-houses” of nineteenth-century Paris. We need to process, as informed readers of *The Arcades Project* that with relish Benjamin documents the place and role of these consummate edifices within the collective panorama of modernization while at the same time, in the name of awakening, he dedicates the ambient theoretical practice emerging in the work to the very rupture and critical penetration of this dream. The strategy of these transitional convolutes, for “awakening,” makes Benjamin a strange bedfellow of contemporary “sexploitation” cinema—drawing on the cutting edge of cinematic verisimilitude to enhance the sexual allure of its mediated virtuality, while rendering moralistic judgment on its depicted transgression.

In the passage immediately above, then, Benjamin generates a convincing pastiche—parroting the first pages of *Du Côté de chez Swann—*of Proust’s poetic eulogy of sleep as a surface-depth, figure-ground phenomenon. In the passage from Convolute L below, he furnishes a verbal companion-piece to a series of impressionist canvasses of Gare St-Lazare that Monet painted in the late-1870’s. These are notable for the dreamy quality of the smoke emanating from the railroad locomotives that we address head-on. Their vapor overwhelms the station-shed, partially obscuring it. The pervasive nineteenth-century enchantment at steel-and-glass and steam technologies that *The Arcades Project* perforce records and documents in no way obliterates Benjamin’s strong sense that it is from this dream that history—somewhat urgently--needs to escape. Excavating a mythological substrate coinciding with the *noir* atmosphere of the Parisian underground (specifically addressed in Convolute C), Benjamin places his full credentials as a modernist on display. But even the classical underworld referenced by the station’s monumental statuary, its invocation of Orpheus, Eurydice, and Hermes, is a figment of a cultural Imaginary in need of awakening. We wander into museums—at least into those initiated under the Ideological State Apparatus of the Second Empire[[14]](#endnote-15)—as well for a confirmation and celebration of our broader culture’s long-standing dreams. But as Benjamin will explicitly spell out in Convolute N, the tradition plays its own constitutive role in the catastrophe of encroaching barbarism:

The Gare Saint-Lazare: a puffing, wheezing princess with the stare of a clock. “For our type of man,” says Jacques de Lacretelle, “train stations are truly factories of dreams” (“Le Rêveur Parisian,” *Nouvelle Revue française*, 1927). To be sure: today, in the age of the automobile and airplane, it is only faint, atavistic terrors which still lurk within the blackened sheds; and that stale comedy of farewell and reunion, carried on before a background of Pullman cars, turns the railway platform into a provincial stage. Once again we see performed the timeworn Greek melodrama: Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes at the station. Through the mountains of luggage surrounding the nymph, looms the steep and rocky path, the crypt into which she sinks when the Hermaic (*hermetische*) conductor with the signal disk, watching for the moist eye of Orpheus, gives the sign for departure. Scar of departure, which zigzags, like the crack on a Greek vase, across the painted (*dargehaltenen*) bodies of the gods. [L1,4]

Museums unquestionably belong to the dream houses of the collective. In considering them, we would want to emphasize the dialectic by which they come into contact (*entgegenkommen*), on the one hand, with scientific research and, on the other hand, with “the dreamy tide of bad taste.” “Nearly every epoch would appear, by virtue of its inner disposition, to be chiefly engaged in unfolding (*entwickeln*) a specific architectural problem: for the Gothic age, this is the cathedrals; for the Baroque, the palace; and for the early twentieth century, with its regressive tendency to allow itself to be saturated with the past: the museum” Siegfried Giedion, *Bauen in Frankreich*, p. 36. The thirst for the past forms something like the principle object of my analysis—in light of which the inside of the museum appears as an interior magnified on a grand scale. In the years 1850-1890, exhibitions take the place of museums. Comparison between the ideological bases of the two. [L1a,2]

As the dream-palaces of the advanced capitalist world, museums, train stations, and department stores, house its transitional spaces: sites where the public encounters and engages the transitional objects of the moment. These are play-spaces. In the free-wheeling convolutes preparatory to Convolute N, Benjamin is in a thoughtscape adjacent to the one out of which, on War’s outbreak, Johan Huizinga wrote *Homo Ludens*, in which homicidal annihilation and playful contest are not nearly as foreign to one another as might be supposed.[[15]](#endnote-16) The post-War, psychoanalytical reprise to this broad survey is D.W. Winnicott’s *Playing and Reality*.[[16]](#endnote-17) The psychoanalyst, having treated, at crucial junctures, the displaced children produced by the War, invokes and mobilizes playfulness—both as a store of untapped inner gumption and energy and as programmatic material for therapeutic healing. Constitutionally fragile and attenuated, even amid catastrophe, allegorico-materialist critique surveys the playing fields where untrammeled improvisation may again resume after the time-out declared in the name of barbarism.

3.

With its stunning formulations on historical epistemology, the dialectical image as the pivotal trope of illumination amid conditions of historical catastrophe (a disarray that may in fact be solid-state), and “dialectics at a standstill,” Convolute N, placed neither at the beginning nor at the end of the work, nonetheless furnishes a certain theoretical denouement to the sporadic, if stunning episodes of meta-critical illumination that have preceded it. Like a secondary character in a novel, whose machinations turn-out, in an act self-disclosure usually reserved for late in the drama, to have been formative, Convolute N supplies decisive missing program and information. While the cultural labor of deciphering *The Arcades Project* might have been easier had these formulations been available from the start, say in the kind of introductory material now *de rigeur* in academic monographs, readers would not have lived the experience of nineteenth-century modernization in quite the same way. I would even go so far as to suggest that the stunning formulations of Convolute N hung at the Parisian horizon beyond Benjamin, until he himself had undergone the theoretical, meta-critical, and proto-cybernetic experiences of cobbling together Convolutes A-M.

As I write this particular simulacrum of my own making sense of *The Arcades Project* quintessential “dissolving book” over the years, I of course open wide the question of the status of the thirty Convolutes succeeding what I am tagging as the decisively theoretical Convolute N. Do not these as well hold to the generic specifications of what I would characterize as a major, again proto-cybernetic addition to the full array of literary forms—i.e., the Convolute itself--on Benjamin’s part? This is indeed a legitimate question to pose. My irreducibly provisional answer runs as follows: with the exception of Convolutes O (labeled “Prostitution and Gambling” by the U.S. editors) and Y (“Photography”), the remaining Convolutes can be productively thought of as the “overflow stacks” within the Borgesian archive or library that the *Passagen-Werk* simulates. Without an exception, they introduce material and commentary relevant to the phenomenon of modernization under the Second Empire; Benjamin was nonetheless able to do without their interpellation in the sequence leading to Convolute N’s magisterial, but quintessentially sporadic and fragmentary theoretical asides. To the degree that the “Prostitution and Gambling” Convolute amounts to a brilliant staging of the supplemental economy to French national expansion in the nineteenth century, in which the “black markets” of gambling and the skin-trade themselves form a continuous Möbius strip, conspicuously “handing off” to one another at crucial junctures in the primary materials surviving from the day, Convolute N lets us down gently. Convolute O, it could be well-argued, is a striking historico-material allegory of the theory of supplementarity, decades before Jacques Derrida coined the term and orchestrated this process as an ongoing philosophical infrastructure as well as a rhetorical trope.[[17]](#endnote-18) By the same token, Convolute Y introduces vital material that is new to *The Arcades Project*, above all expanding its “coverage” of image-reproduction and therefore deepening its theorization of modern media. And surely the work on “Literary History, Victor Hugo” in Convolute d is a viable companion to its counterpart on Baudelaire: its insertion anywhere in the aftermath of Convolute J justified. We may thus take the work’s theoretical apotheosis in Convolute N, neither at the outset, as things turned out, nor as a definitive downbeat, in several ways: first and foremost, in a work of near-global receptiveness to different art-forms and discursive media, as the inclusion of fragmentary, occasional theoretical “outtakes” as merely one format of articulation in a very wide spectrum that has included literary citations, first-person accounts, historical consolidations, and twentieth-century recapitulations in a variety of disciplines. A crucial Benjaminian lesson regarding the indispensable interplay and exchange between different discursive media in the synthesis of memorable criticism may well be embedded here. However intense the critical poetry that Benjamin managed to instill within the theoretical sequences “emerging suddenly, in a flash” in Convolute N, it may be by design that he placed this particular “scene of writing” among the others. And then, there is the “overflow” factor mentioned above: it could simply turn out that Benjamin, giving his work-in-progress a final sequencing before entering a completely transient existence, found Convolutes P-r ancillary to the traffic-patterns that I have been tracing, for better or worse.

In whatever fashion contemporary and future critical reception resolve the issues posed by the *Arcades Project’s* sequencing, the arcs of meta-critical thinking emerging in Convolute N are among the most striking to have emerged in the history of fragmentary philosophical articulation—certainly also including early German Romanticism and Nietzsche, whether we take the “longest view” possible, factoring in Anaximander and Parmenides, or not.[[18]](#endnote-19) Whether by design or default, Convolute N becomes the theoretical engine-room of the time-capsule of modernization, with its ramifying conceptual and textual rhizome, that Benjamin bequeaths to European history in catastrophic times. Within the framework of the current writerly occasion, I have latitude to “process” at most two of the telling sequences from the Convolute, linked by a crucial inter-text, in which Benjamin characterizes his theoretical achievement as “dialectics at a standstill.” I’ve insisted on extracting the two sequences of entries from Convolute N in their “entirety,” though this notion is entirely up for grabs, as found objects, in other words, in their fully random and arbitrary “thrownness” (*Geworfenheit*).[[19]](#endnote-20) It is almost only by chance that these two sequences have come up on my personal critical “screen” as units of articulation claiming a certain degree of integrality. Within the radioactive cloud chamber of *The Arcades Project*, then, the two sequences “emerge in a flash,” they are purely immanent, but as allegorical scenes of theoretical illumination, they resonate to me as only very few others in the history of this artform, at whatever length. Taking into account the chaotic conditions under which Benjamin synthesized his formulations, I am arguing, as theoretical “mini-treatises,” these panels of snippets from Convolute N of *The Arcades Project* may be placed alongside Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, Proust’s *Recherche*, Kafka’s *Der Process*, Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and the miniature fictions of Jorge Luis Borges and Italo Calvino. The first such sequence from the *The Arcades Project’s* running account that I would clip out for my display is the following:

This research—which deals fundamentally with the expressive character of the earliest industrial products, but also the earliest advertisements, department stores, and so on—thus becomes important for Marxism in two ways. First, it will demonstrate how the milieu (*Umwelt*) in which Marx’s doctrine arose affected that doctrine through its expressive character [*Ausdruckscharakter*] (which is to say, not only through causal connections); but second, it will also show in which respects Marxism, too, shares the expressive character of the material products contemporary with it. [N1a,7]

Method of this project: literary montage. I needn’t *say* anything. Merely show. I shall purloin (*entwenden*) no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own (*zu ihrem Rechte kommen lassen*): by making use of them (*sie verwenden*). [N1a,8]

Bear in mind that commentary on a reality (for it is a question here of commentary, of interpretation in detail), calls for a method completely different from that required by the commentary on a text. In the one case, the scientific mainstay (*Grundwissenschaft*) is theology; in the other case, philology. [N2,1]

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 sharply from bourgeois habits of thought. Its founding concept is not progress but actualization. [N2,2]

Historical “understanding” is to be grasped, in principle, as an afterlife of that which is understood: and what has been recognized in the analysis of the “afterlife of works,” in the analysis of “fame,” is therefore to be considered (*zu betrachten*) the foundation of history in general. [N2,3]

How this work was written: rung by rung, according as chance would offer a narrow foothold (*schmalen Stützpunkt*), and always like someone who scales dangerous heights and never allows himself a moment to look around, for fear of becoming dizzy (but also because he would save for the end the full force of the panorama opening out to him). [N2,4]

Overcoming the concept of “progress” and overcoming the concept of “period of decline” (*Verfallszeit*) are two sides of one and the same thing. [N2,5]

This passage amounts to a lucid “tell-all,” implanted near the dead-center of the work’s vast archive of resources, of how Benjamin set about producing the work. “If I had only known beforehand,” we are so tempted to say. The “literary montage” not only characterizing the work’s collation of references and textual fragments but creating an inextricable affinity between this twentieth-century “dissolving book” and cinema takes place against a backdrop of Marxian expressiveness [N1a,7]. This may be characterized as the moment at which the materials and “material conditions” at the basis of the Marxist worldview begin to speak on their own and in their own terms; when the paradox of expressive matter, is kicked into action, an anomaly akin to the intelligence that Benjamin has located in modern steel and glass. The work of *Passagen*, in other words, or passaging, will brook no rigid distinction between the things of culture—its fragments, its *matériale*, and its articulation, its rendition into sense. The fabric of *Das Passagen-Werk* is a mixed bag, semantic and ideational, on the one hand, and absolutely obtuse on the other. Citation is the gift that keeps on giving because it is the compositional process accessing and displaying, to a comprehensive degree, text’s dual status as information and as matter, material, stuff, German *Stoff*, hence woven or texted material, or colloquially, cultural dead meat. This material amalgam is the dialectical image par excellence, folded in on itself in its mutually neutralizing thingly and expressive functions. Yet it is precisely in deploying such an inchoate medium that Benjamin has managed, “rung by rung” to assemble a perversely systematic and asystematic simulacrum of nineteenth-century modernization in “advanced” Europe.

Hopelessly after the fact, Benjamin lifts the curtain concealing his method: one before the fact visual as well as verbal (“needn’t *say* anything, merely show”). This is a visual performativity on the page. The convolutes, each configured to order, play or dance their points at least as much as they posit them. They tap a visual performative clearly tipping its hand toward the cinematography of splicing, editing, emerging and disappearing within the visual manifold “in a flash.” Yet Benjamin keeps his cool within the volatile street-scene of “theory on the fly”—maintaining cool being the indispensable ur-principle to this particular modality of critical inscription. This is what would enable him, under full battle conditions, to place the commentary on a “reality,” i.e. a historic-epistemological configuration or state of affairs, under the overall aegis of theology [N2,1]; “in a flash,” in the same snippet, to understand that analysis setting out from the linguistic and media conditions of an artifact belongs to philology. I needn’t overstate the considerable exertions the critical theory of the post-War period went to in order to establish precisely this fact: the suspension of a priori moral, ethical, and logical premises in the analysis of artifacts whose constitution is irreducibly formal and linguistic. I underscore the dramatic epigrammatic compression attained by theory under the conditions of what may well turn out to be its definitive skirmishes. The critical argumentation crystallizing in these crisis-riddled sequences attains the miniaturization that already, not so long after the War, became the *Grundprinzip* of cybernetic information-systems and organizations.

Such a modality of theoretical inscription, whether it attains permanent display in one culture memory-capsule or another or not, surely has a vested interest in stopping history in its tracks, in somehow, through sheer imagistic precipitousness and captivation, capturing the catastrophe in a freeze-frame. This may well be the unconscious wish underlying the dead halt, to which the imagistic flashes of insight sporadically exploding, with the help of Benjamin’s montage technique of materials, across the panorama of history, will bring systematic thinking. So nuanced, overdetermined, and on target is what Benjamin terms the dialectical image that it stops easy historical, theologically-driven interpretation in its tracks even where the tragedy of history marches on. Perhaps *the* pivotal passage of Convolute N runs:

Every present day is determined by the images that are synchronic with it: each “now” is the now of a particular recognizability (*Erkennbarkeit*). In it, truth is charged to the bursting point with time. This point of explosion, and nothing else, is the point of *intentio*, which thus coincides with the birth of authentic historical time, the time of truth. 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, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash (*blitzhaft*) with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill (*Dialiktik im Stillstand*). For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been (*Gewesenen*) to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural <*bildlich*>. Only dialectical images are genuinely historical—that is, not archaic—images. The image that is read—which is to say, the image in the now of its recognizability—bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded. [from N3,1]

Once again, in a particularly resonant transitional passage between several of Convolute N’s telling extended riffs, Benjamin has prophetically anticipated the signature issues of post-War critical theory. He has seen them far out ahead of their explicit recognition, but has also compressed them, in the turbulent cloud-chamber of *The Arcades Project*, to the now of their recognizability. The striking images flashing up from the photographic plate of historical progression register on a recognizability already in place. They would otherwise remain illegible. There is some sort of cognitive silver nitrate at work allowing the image to register, and be registered, in the now. At great length Lacanian psychoanalysis characterizes the *méconnaissances* emerging from nothing more formidable than every child’s belated entry into the community of language-users. The distortion-effects prompted by the belatedness of linguistic signaling, reception, and comprehension become a mainstay of theoretical post-War models, from psychoanalysis to deconstruction. The dialectical image is truly shocking, in the sense of the spasmodic movement-style and urban concussions that Benjamin traced to “The Man of the Crowd” and its Baudelairean repercussions; but the time-frame in which it works to full effect is metaleptic and uncanny. What explodes in the machine-gun fire of nows each shocking in its impact is the broader cultural concept of *intentio* itself. From formalistic analysis to Barthesian semiotics and post-Structuralism, post-War theory devotes bookshelves to the debunking of intentionality in discourse as well as fiction. In the theoretical street-skirmishes of Convolute N, the shocking emergence of successive images in the now opens “authentic historical time,” whose truthful dimension is the affinity between its own thinking and writing- conditions and the catastrophic events in the world. Under such attenuated conditions of thinking and civilization itself, Benjamin invokes what he calls the dialectical image as the only intercession powerful and striking enough to reinstate thoughtful and critical deliberation through its initiation of a cease-fire or time-out in the endless defile of catastrophic spinoffs. The dialectical image, conjured into Being throughout the Convolute, is a crystallization so anomalous and striking in itself that it brings the distractions of history and the easy forward momentum of articulation to a dead halt. “Petrified unrest,” “dialectics at a standstill,” and indeed, Benjamin’s textual medium in itself, at once material in its sourcing and deployment but critical in its repercussions and in the illumination that it radiates, are all perfect instances of the dialectical image. Perhaps my favorite example of an elaborated figure bringing reading and thinking as well to a productive standstill, the Zen double-bind from which a leap of realization might emerge,[[20]](#endnote-21) is the falling star from Section 9 of “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” whose trajectory starts out as a wish-laden folkloric vehicle and ends up on the roulette table in the gaming sideshow to capitalist accumulation.[[21]](#endnote-22)

How ironic that the last momentous critical passage from Convolute N that I invoke here unveils the intrinsically dialectical image of the sailboat. Temperamentally, perhaps, this image resides at a far cry from the aggravated conditions under which Benjamin synthesizes his critical caption for the historical movement arising in the arcades and first international expositions, and ending, for many beside himself, in twentieth-century totalitarianism. Sailing, as Norbert Wiener and other initiators of cybernetic discourse had noted clearly,[[22]](#endnote-23) involves a constant taking and correction of bearings amounting at least to the first stages of meta-critical revision and of the rise in processing power that it affords. The pilot’s skill as *kybernētēs* is the ability to productively take stock, adjust, and reconfigure amid what we call “battle conditions,” precisely such catastrophic upheaval as Benjamin faced as he assembled the materials of the *Passagen-Werk*. Benjamin’s crystallization of the dialectical sailboat as the very medium for theoretically-guided critique in times of accelerated turbulence and destruction extends beyond a vague, proto-cybernetic intuition, one in keeping with his pitched overall attention to twentieth-century media. It is, then, by design that the critical sailboat that Benjamin unveils in order to characterize the relation between concepts and historical turbulence, between the sedate and the violent conditions of writing, is hardly out for a smooth sail.

Scientific method is distinguished by the fact that, leading to new objects, it develops new methods. Just as form in art is distinguished by the fact that, opening up new contents, it develops new forms. It is only from without that a work of art has one and *only* one form, that a treatise has one and *only* one method. [N9,2]

On the concept of “rescue”: the wind of the absolute in the sails of the concept. (The principle of the wind is the cyclical.) The trim of the sails (*Segelstellung*) is the relative. [N9,3]

What are phenomena rescued from? Not only, and in the main, from the discredit and the neglect (*Verruf und Miβachtung*) into which they have fallen, but from the catastrophe represented very often by a certain strain in their dissemination (*wie eine bestimmte Art uhrer Überlieferung*), their “enshrinement in heritage.”—They are saved through the exhibition of the fissure that is within them.—There is a tradition that is catastrophe. [N9,4]

It is the inherent tendency of dialectical experience to dissipate the semblance of eternal sameness, and even of repetition, in history. Authentic political experience is absolutely free of this semblance. [N9,5]

What matters for the dialectician is to have the wind of world history in his sails. Thinking means for him: setting the sails (*Segel setzen*). What is important is *how* they are set. Words are his sails. The way they are set makes them into concepts. [N9,6]

The dialectical image is an image that emerges suddenly, in a flash (*ist ein aufblitzendes*). What has been is to be held fast—as an image flashing up in the now of its recognizability. The rescue that is to be carried out by these means (*dergestalt*)—and only by these—can operate solely for the sake of what in the next moment is already irretrievably lost (*unrettbar verlornen [sich] vollziehen*). In this connection, see the metaphorical passage from my introduction to Jochmann, concerning the prophetic gaze that catches fire from the summits of the past. [N9,7]

Being a dialectician means having the winds of history in one’s sails. The sails are the concepts. It is not enough, however, to have sails at one’s disposal. What is decisive is knowing the art of setting them (*Die Kunst, sie setzen zu können, ist das Entschedende*). [N9,8]

The concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are “status quo” *is* the catastrophe. It is *not* an ever-present possibility but what in each case is given. Thus Strindberg (in *To Damascus*?): hell is not something that awaits us, but this life here and now. [N9a,1]

We need again to take up the marvelous shorthand of these messages scribbled out, crunched into a bottle, and then left for posterity with George Bataille. They may well comprise a secret code of what is left for us to accomplish as we adapt past traditions and conventions of scholarly publication to such media as Twitter and Facebook, as we ourselves count, for rescue, rescue from obscurity, from the “repressive tolerance” comprised of being fancy-free within, but quarantined on campus, by new media of script and social recognition. Do the trenchant and prophetic above formulations dodge the bullet of historical sensibility? Decidedly not! The formidable, exhausting labor of precipitating an ambient theory of the moment out of the detritus of the actual events and the cultural records anticipating them and left behind them has gone on since page 1 of Convolute A and continues through to the *Werk’s* last page. As much as Benjamin, we need to read *everything*. We need to “take no prisoners” in our openness to virtually all relevant data-bases, information-stores, and discursive media. Our professional dismissiveness and complacency are artifacts of a delusional stability and social consensus regarding what we do that had in a now-distant cultural scene already been terminally damaged by 1927, when Benjamin first set out on the sailboat ride that became *The Arcades Project*. Tradition, in the passage above, is as much the catastrophe as human barbarism and blindness. It remains incumbent upon us to do the reading, to process the manifold and unscrolling text, but then to infuse the findings into media that are still capable even now of being *received*. A formidable challenge, you say? Benjamin surely rose to it in the above passage, and for that reason it is still read, with open-ended amazement, today. Particularly in the meticulous attention that Benjamin paid to image-transfer techniques and visual media in Convolute Y of *The Arcades Project* and elsewhere, he methodically took up this challenge.

It is the nature of intellectual and cultural production that we always end up overstaying our time: the winds of history are too chaotic; the permutations that they mobilize too complex and multifaceted. Before I overstay the rhythm and span of the current study, I will limit any further comments to the figure of the dialectical sailboat and the rescue it might promise.

Benjamin is, once again, as boggled as we are that anything as deliberate and orderly as a *method* could have emerged from his active engagement with as many strands as he could access of nineteenth-century modernization and its twentieth-century reception. The culmination of this adventure is the sailboat, a dialectical image, that is to say a self-programming and redirecting vehicle of the second order, of his own methodological programming, even if explicit performatively and allegorically rather than discursively. Benjamin still—messianically[[23]](#endnote-24)—affords himself the hope of cultural deliverance effected through some alignment between thinking and the vast energy-expenditure, or explosion, of catastrophe. In the literature of systems and chaos theory, beginning with Norbert Wiener’s 1954 *The Human Use of Human Beings:* *Cybernetics and Society*, sailing a boat (as riding a bicycle) is almost a stock figure for the correction of balance, direction, and other parameters of homeostasis by means of open-ended feedback with the environment. Early though this kick-off to the cybernetic age may seem to some, a good decade beforehand, Benjamin had launched interactive, autopoietic critical theory on its course with the more nuanced figure of the dialectical sailboat. It is within the framework of sailing, as Benjamin did in happier times with intellectual interlocutors and his future lover Asja Lacis off Capri in 1924, that the cultural critic, even amid catastrophic winds, stays calmly at her post, “trimming,” then “setting,” her sails, so that they are propelled by the “wind of the absolute,” which is also the “wind of world history.” Set accurately, through all the “relative” modulations, the sails deliver the “concept,” changing over time, but at every juncture keeping the critic on track, even amid cultural turbulence deranging the bedrock institutions of society, say higher education, law, and journalism. Curiously, in this sequence, it is the “phenomena” needing to be rescued. Even under cultural anomie, one fueled as much by steady-state complacency as by draconian authoritarian insults, the thinker struggles to navigate her boat, to maintain its stability, in the hope that the concept distilled and periodically reconfigured through philosophical rigor is capable of rendering an adequate reading of the brutal facts. Accessing the concept, or we would now say, theoretical program that can make sense of the facts, is the credo and vocation of the critic. Imagining the rapt attention that the critic, amid hurricane conditions, pays to minute differences in the sail-settings is an aporia, or systematic double-bind exhausting the fullest possible limberness and torque of the dialectical image. And the tool that the dialectical sailor has for making these adjustments is nothing more formidable than his words: “Thinking means for him: setting his sails. What is important is how they are set. Words are his sails. The way they are set makes them into concepts” [from N9,6]. The critic keeps writing. Writing is the only craft or exercise through which the writer maintains her tact at setting the sails of difference and modulated articulation, even if she already has tenure, even if writing further therefore represents an unnecessary risk or danger to the stability she has achieved. The critic keeps on writing, even as she has sustained her quixotic quest of reading, in Benjaminian fashion, *everything*.

Does anything in this excursion along the shoals of critical contingency and chaotic immanence sounds familiar? Even if our writing instruments have morphed into laptops and iPads? At the beginning of a fresh new solar cycle (2012), I wish all of you indulgent enough to lend these occasional scribbles some credence a year of exuberant writing ahead. I do *not* wish you staying out of trouble.

1. This essay has been extracted from Chapter 5 of my forthcoming Playful Intelligence: Digitizing Tradition (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2014) and appears with the kind permission of the Bloomsbury Publishing. It was originally prepared for a Special Session on “Guilt and Debt in Literature” at the 2011 Modern Language Association Convention in Seattle. I’m deeply grateful to Profs. Jonathan Luftig of Morgan State University and Helmut Illbruck of Texas Christian University for their kind invitation and their expert organizing. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. Citations in this essay derive from Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Harvard UP, 1999). Benjamin’s technique of numbering each extract in this encyclopedic and thematically organized collection of primary sources mixed with his own pointed commentary spares me the need for page-references to this work. This measure also allows readers of *The Arcades Project* in “foreign” languages, notably in the German original, to follow along. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. In recent writing, I’ve attempted to characterize these and other “dissolving” works as sites of production where the book medium tests its conceptual and physical bindings as it moves toward the *ouverture* of “open systems.” See my *Around the Book: Systems and Literacy* (New York: Fordham UP, 2011), xi-xxi, 1-22, 134-37. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. I’m considerably indebted to the Whitney Humanities Center Working Group in Theory at Yale and to its guiding lights, Kirk Wetters, Joshua Alvizu, Jason Kavett, and Andrew Kirwin, for introducing me to this highly suggestive term and its literature. Highly recommended basic reading on precarity would include Franco “Bifo” Berardi, *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the Pathologies of the Post-Alpha Generation* (London: Minor Compositions, 2009) and *Open*, 17 (2009): *A Precarious Existence: Vulnerability in the Public Domain* (New York: NAI010 Publishers). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. In the social sciences, Thomas D. Cook and Donald T. Campbell made a major impact with their overview of the objectivity and critical detachment that could be imported to experiments conducted *à l’improviste* and under field (as opposed to laboratory) conditions. Their position-paper on the exigencies pertaining to rigorous thinking and reality-testing conducted, in terms of the present chapter, “on the fly,” is their *Quasi-Experimentation: Design and Analysis Issues for Field Settings* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000), pp. 315-17, 446-53, 490-95, 498-501, 504-11. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. Anthony Wilden, *System and Structure* (London: Tavistock Press, 1972), pp. 203-05, 356-67, 373-77. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. Douglas R. Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 36-38, 85-87, 97-99, 115-16, 191-94. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. For merely *one* instance of this discursive modality, see Lacan’s comments on Freud’s personal “Dream of Irma’s Injection,” which he subjected to self-analysis in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, I: The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, 1954-55, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988), pp. 146-71. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987), pp. 43, 149-66, 474-88. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. For an aggravated instance of sub-syllabic semantic drift or glide in Derrida’s readings, see *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavy, Jr. and Richard Rand (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1986), pp. 119-22, 139-42, 235-37. Derrida’s fragment, “Tympan,” inaugurates his *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, U of Chicago P, 1972), pp. ix-xxix. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. For “strange loopings” in Hofstadter, see *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, pp. 15, 21, 149-51. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. Within the discourse of contemporary systems theory, “second-order” is the register at which cybernetic and other isomorphic programs become self-adaptive and “autopoietic,” at which they “learn,” when their activity is not only intra-systematic but meta-systematic. The current primer to processes and capabilities at the second order is *Emergence and Embodiment: New Essays on Second-Order Systems Theory*, ed. Bruce Clarke and Bruce N. Hansen (Durham, NC: Duke U P, 2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. For Louis Althusser’s pivotal construct, the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), see his *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, pp. 142-47, 150-51, 166-67, 181-86. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955), pp. 40-41, 49-53, 58-65. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
16. D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, London: Tavistock/Routledge, 1991), pp. 38, 40-52, 108-09, 121. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
17. See, for example, Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1976), pp. 144-57, 163-64, 262-68, 313-16; *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981), pp. 99-102, 108-12, 202-03, 208. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
18. I recall here the well-established argument that Romantics from Wordsworth and Blake to their German counterparts including Goethe and the Athenaeum group elaborated and refined fragmentation as they deployed it on multiple fronts in resisting the claims to systematic comprehensiveness and totality of their day. Along with the image, the idea, and criticism, fragmentation played a prominent role in Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy’s interstitial overview, on the interface between literary invention and philosophy, in Romanticism, in *The Literary Absolute*, trans. Philip Bernard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: SUNY P, 1988), pp. 39-58. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
19. For the key Heideggerian notion of thrownness (*Geworfenheit*), see Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Maquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), pp. 134-38, 174, 219-24, 235, 264-65, 294-95, 434-36. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
20. Hofstadter, in setting out the broadest possible primer of emergent cybernetic culture and technology in 1979 for a literate public, includes Zen kōans (along with Bach’s canons, Escher’s impossible perspectives, Gödelian incompleteness, and the biochemically transmitted codes of genetics) as a phenomenon *expanding* its programmatic possibility through its gravitation toward stark double-binds. He views the capacity to “break” double-binds through non-linear transformations (mutations, in the case of genetics; mystical realizations in Zen meditation) as a feature of all “self-referential,” autopoietic, or “second-order” systems. See his *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, pp. 189-90, 231-65. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
21. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, IV, pp. 330-31. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
22. Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1954), pp. 15, 61, 152, 178. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
23. In his *Messianic* *Reduction: Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2011), Peter Fenves compellingly updates the prospects for Benjamin’s messianism, particularly with respect to the various temporalities that it implicates and informs. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)