The Dialectics of Seeing

Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project

Susan Buck-Morss
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## Contents

Preface ix

**Part I**

Introduction 3

1 Temporal Origins 8

2 Spatial Origins 25

**Part II**

Introduction 47

3 Natural History: Fossil 58

4 Mythic History: Fetish 78

5 Mythic Nature: Wish Image 110

6 Historical Nature: Ruin 159

**Part III**

Introduction 205

7 Is This Philosophy? 216

8 Dream World of Mass Culture 253

9 Materialist Pedagogy 287
The arcades as dream- and wish-image of the collective.  

Benjamin was struck by an incontestable, empirical fact: Consistently, when modern innovations appeared in modern history, they took the form of historical restitutions. New forms “cited” the old ones out of context. Thus: “There is an attempt to master the new experiences of the city in the frame of the old ones of traditional nature.”  

And: “[The nineteenth century develops] a thirst for the past.”  

It was “insane that the French fashions of the Revolution and Napoleon I’s Empire mimicked the [ancient] Greek proportions with modern cut and sewn clothing.”  

The Passagen-Werk material is full of evidence of this fusion of old and new. Fashion continuously drew on the past: “[W]ith the Munich Exposition of 1875, the German Renaissance became fashionable.”  

Mechanical looms in Europe mimicked handwoven shawls from the Orient, while the first women’s “sportswear” (designed in the 1890s for bicycle riding) “strove [with its tight-fitting waists and rocco skirts] for the conventional ideal-image of elegance.”  

When Baudelaire searched for the words to describe the specifically modern struggles of the urban poet, he revived the “archaic image of the fencer.”  

When social utopians conceived of new, communal societies, it was as a restitution of small-scale agricultural production. Fourier’s phalanstère, a highly complex, machinelike social organization conceivable only within a modern context, was to produce “the land of Cockaigne, the ur-old wish symbol of leisure and plenty […].”  

Nowhere was the restorative impulse more evident than in the forms taken by the new technologies themselves, which imitated precisely the old forms they were destined to overcome. Early photography mimicked painting.  

The first railroad cars were designed like stage coaches, and the first electric light bulbs were shaped like gas flames.  

Newly processed iron was used for ornament rather than structural supports, shaped into leaves, or made to resemble wood.  

Industry produced utensils were decorated to resemble flowers, fauna, seashells, and Greek and Renaissance antiques.  

“Wild Salome” appeared in a Jugendstil poster for cigarettes.  

The newly invented bicycle was named by a poet “the Horse of the Apocalypse.”  

And the earliest form of air travel was celebrated by a staging of Uranus’ rise from the earth:  

The balloon driver Poitevin, underwritten by great publicity, undertook in his gondola [during the Second Republic] an ascension of Uranus with maidens dressed up as mythological figures.  

In the field of architecture, the wrought iron and steel that was first developed for railroads would ultimately be combined with glass for the construction of modern skyscrapers.  

But the Passages, the first constructions of iron and glass, instead resembled Christian churches, while the first department stores with their immense glassed-in roofs “seemed to have been modeled after Oriental bazaars.”  

Benjamin speaks of iron and glass “come too early”: “In the middle of the last century no one yet had an inkling of how to build with iron and glass.”  

An early entry in the Passagen-Werk notes: “Transportation in the stage of myth. Industry in the stage of myth. (Railroad stations and early factories).”  

The 1935 exposé elaborates: “[Early nineteenth-century] architects mimic the pillars of Pompeian columns; factories mimic private villas, as later the first railroad stations are modeled on chalets.”  

“One simply transferred the way of building with wood onto iron.”  

Under the archaic masks of classical myth (figure 5.1) and traditional nature (figure 5.2), the inherent potential of the “new nature”—machines, iron shaped by new processes, technologies and industrial materials of every sort—remained unrecognized, unconscious. At the same time, these masks express the desire to
5.1 Ptolemy adorns a fountain worked by an invisible steam engine. Crystal Palace Exposition, London, 1851.

5.2 Fountain of iron in the shape of dolphins, shells, and aquatic plants. Crystal Palace Exposition, London, 1851.
“return” to a mythic time when human beings were reconciled with the natural world.

Benjamin writes: “Fashion, like architecture, [. . .] stands in the darkness of the lived moment [im Dunkel des gelebten Augenblicks].” He has taken this phrase from Ernst Bloch. It is central to Bloch’s social utopian philosophy, describing the mystical “nun stehen,” the momentary, fleeting experience of fulfillment dimly anticipatory of a reality that is “not-yet.” According to Benjamin, if the “not-yet” of the new nature is expressed in archaic symbols rather than in new forms commensurate with it, then this condition of modern consciousness has its parallel in the inadequacies of development in the economic base. He is most explicit in a passage from the Passagen-Werk exposé. It begins with a quotation from Jules Michelet: “Every epoch dreams the one that follows it.” Benjamin comments:

To the form of the new means of production which in the beginning is still dominated by the old one (Marx), there correspond in the collective consciousness images in which the new is intermingled with the old. These images are wish images, and in them the collective attempts to transcend as well as to illumine the incompleteness of the social order of production. There also emerges in these wish images a positive striving to set themselves off from the outdated—that means, however, the most recent past. These tendencies turn the image fantasy, that maintains its impulse from the new, back to the ur-past. In the dream in which every epoch sees in images the epoch that follows, the latter appears wedded to elements of ur-history, that is, of a classless society. Its experiences, which have their storage place in the unconscious of the collective, produce, in their interpenetration with the new, the utopia that has left its trace behind in a thousand configurations of life from permanent buildings to ephemeral fashions.

The real possibility of a classless society in the “epoch to follow” the present one, revitalizes past images as expressions of the ancient wish for social utopia in dream form. But a dream image is not yet a dialectical image, and desire is not yet knowledge. Wishes and dreams are psychological categories which for Benjamin have no immediate status as philosophical truth. Parting company with the romanticism of Ernst Bloch (who in turn criticized Benjamin’s “surrealist philosophizing” for its lack of subjectivity), Benjamin was reluctant to rest revolutionary hope directly on imagination’s capacity to anticipate the not-yet-existing. Even as wish image, utopian imagination needed to be interpreted through the material objects in which it found expression, for (as Bloch knew) it was upon the transforming mediation of matter that the hope of utopia ultimately depended: technology’s capacity to create the not-yet-known.

2

The text on collective wish images cited above makes theoretical assertions rather than arguments, and they are by no means self-evident. It may be helpful to consider the passage more closely, this time in an earlier version of the exposé that is significantly different in wording and somewhat less elliptical:

To the form of the new means of production that in the beginning is still dominated by the old one (Marx), there correspond in the societal superstructure wish images in which the new is intermingled with the old in fantastic ways.

Now, Marx argued that when the new means of production comes into being, its socialist potential is fettered by still-existing capitalist relations—hence the inadequacy of development of the economic base. But as an entry in Konrad F. “Iron Construction,” makes clear, Benjamin believed these letters must be understood in terms of the collective imagination, as inadequacies of form as well as of social relations—and that he understood Marx to have meant this as well. Benjamin cites Capital:

“Just how much in the beginning the old form of the means of production dominated the new forms is demonstrated perhaps more strikingly than anywhere by an experimental locomotive that was tested before the discovery of today’s locomotives, which had in fact two feet that it raised up alternatingly, like a horse. Only after further development of mechanics and the accumulation of practical experience does the form become totally determined by the mechanistic principle and thereby completely emancipated from the traditional physical form of the work-instrument that bursts forth into a machine.”

Benjamin comments on Marx’s observation: “Just what forms, now lying concealed within machines, will be determining for our epoch we are only beginning to surmise.” Here is the “new nature” still in its mythic stage. Technology, not yet “emancipated,” is held back by conventional imagination that sees the new only as a continuation of the old which has just now become obso-
leter. Benjamin notes: "The conservative tendency in Parisan life: As late as 1867 an entrepreneur conceived of a plan to have five hundred sedan chairs circulating in Paris."33

Now Benjamin tells us that this formal inadequacy of the new nature is not synonymous with (but only "corresponds" to) "wish images" which, far from restraining the new within the given forms, reach back to a more distant past in order to break from conventional forms. The early version of the exposé continues:

This intermingling owes its fantastic character above all to the fact that in the course of social development, the old never sets itself off sharply from the new; rather, the latter, striving to set itself apart from the recently outmoded, renews archaic, ur-temporal elements. The utopian images that accompany the emergence of the new always concurrently reach back to the ur-past. In the dream in which every epoch sees in images before its eyes the one that follows it, the images appear wedded to elements of ur-history.34

It is necessary to make a distinction: In nature, the new is mythic, because its potential is not yet realized; in consciousness, the old is mythic, because its desires never were fulfilled. Paradoxically, collective imagination mobilizes its powers for a revolutionary break from the recent past by evoking a cultural memory reservoir of myths and utopian symbols from a more distant ur-past. The "collective wish images" are nothing else but this. Sparked by the new, from which they "maintain their impulse," they envision its revolutionary potential by conjuring up archaic images of the collective "wish" for social utopia. Utopian imagination thus cuts across the continuum of technology's historical development as the possibility of revolutionary rupture (display C). This means that each of the "corresponding" elements—mythic nature and mythic consciousness—works to liberate the other from myth. "Wish images" emerge at the point where they intersect.

Benjamin is not maintaining that the contents of past myths provide a blueprint for the future. To believe that they could be purely utopian. Nowhere in his writings do the ur-images have a status other than that of dream symbol. They provide the motivation for future emancipation, which will not be literally a restoration of the past, but will be based on new forms that "we are only beginning to surmise." "Every epoch dreams the one that follows it"—as the dream form of the future, not its reality. The representations of the collective unconscious are not revolutionary on their own, but only when dialectically mediated by the material, "new" nature, the as-yet unimagined forms of which alone have the potential to actualize the collective dream. The images are thus less pre-visions of postrevolutionary society than the necessary pre-visions for radical social practice. Hence Benjamin's theory of revolution as "innervation". Wish images "innervate" the "technical organ of the collective," supplying it with nerve stimulation that prompts revolutionary action—"like the child who learns [the practical task of] grasping by trying [impossibly] to catch the moon in its hands."35

By attaching themselves as surface ornamentation to the industrial and technological forms which have just come into existence, collective wish images imbue the merely new with radical political meaning, inscribing visibly on the products of the new means of production an ur-image of the desired social ends of their development. In short, even as they mask the new, these archaic images provide a symbolic representation of what the human, social meaning of technological change is all about. Thus it is of the utmost political significance that Victor Hugo saw in mass reproduction the historically real, objective form of Christ's miraculous division of bread to feed the multitudes: "The multiplication of readers is the multiplication of bread. The day when Christ discovered this symbol, he foresaw the printing works."36 Similarly, it is crucial that Fourier's early nineteenth-century utopia, in which fish swim in rivers of lemonade and sharks help humans hunt for fish,37 "filled the ur-old wish symbol of leisure and plenty [. . .] with new
life," and that utopian socialists generally resurrected images of an originary Golden Age:

"Yes, when the entire world, from Paris to China, O divine Saint-Simon, will come to embrace your doctrine, then must the Golden Age return in all its brillianee, the rivers will flow with tea and chocolate; sheep fully roasted will gambol on the plain, and pike cooked in butter will navigate the Seine; steamed spinach will spring from the ground with a border of croutons. The trees will bear stewed apples; and grain will grow in bales ready to harvest; it will snow wine, it will rain chickens, and ducks will drop from the sky with a garnish of turkeys."\(^{40}\)

Such visions are proof of the "too early" stage\(^{41}\) of both technology and imagination. Their fantastic forms are "the most authentic witness" of "just how caught in a dream technological production was in its beginnings."\(^{42}\) At the same time, however, they tell us that utopian desires have been attached to the new nature from the start. Insofar as their image traces have been lost in history, it is politically necessary to redeem them.\(^{43}\) When Benjamin states that these images "pertain" to a "classless society," it is because the fairy-tale quality of the wish for happiness that they express presupposes an end to material scarcity and exploitative labor that form the structural core of societies based on class domination. The early version of the exposé passage concludes:

It is not because of being consciously garbled by the ideology of the ruling class that the reflections of the substructure within the superstructure are inadequate, but because the new, in order to shape itself visually, always connects its elements with those pertaining to a classless society. The collective unconscious has more of a share in it than the consciousness of the collective. Out of it come the images of utopia that have left their traces behind them in a thousand configurations of life from buildings to fashions.\(^{44}\)

In the beginning of an era, there is an intuitive, "too-early" apprehension of the future. The residues of past cultural creations bear witness to it. But if the anticipatory wish symbols that leave their traces on these creations have remained "unconscious," this is another way of saying the collective is not even aware that it is dreaming—with the inevitable result that symbol turns into fetish, and technology, the means for realizing human dreams, is mistaken for their actualization. Commodity fetishes and dream fetishes become indistinguishable. When processed food appears on the shelf

5.3 "Human Happiness—food for the asking—in the Fourierist utopia"—Grandville, 1844.
as if it had dropped from a Saint-Simonian sky, commodities begin their "theological capers," the wish images become phantasmas, and dream turns into delusion. When mass media are seen as themselves the democratization of culture, distributed as miraculously as Christ's multiplying food, they too become fetishes.

The tremendous power of the new technology has remained in the hands of the ruling class that wields it as a force of domination, while privately appropriating the wealth it produces. In this context, dream symbols are the fetishized desires that advertise commodities. And the collective goes on sleeping. But should it awaken, the utopian symbols can be redeemed as a manifestation of truth. Essential to this truth is its transitoriness. The wish symbols, signposts in a period of transition, can inspire the refocusing of the new society so that it satisfies material needs and desires that are the source of the dream in the first place. Wish images do not liberate humanity directly. But they are vital to the process.

"It is easy to understand that every great... interest," when it first steps upon the world stage, extends in 'idea' or 'imagination' far beyond its real limits, and mistakes itself for the interest of humanity in general. This illusion forms that which Fourier calls the tone of every historical epoch."[46]

The technological capacity to produce must be mediated by the utopian capacity to dream—and vice versa. Was Benjamin presuming an autonomy of the imagination incompatible with historical materialism? Adorno thought so. He would not have considered the tautology of the wish symbols sufficient cause for their redemption. Ultimately he saw no distinction between those dream images and conventional consciousness in that both were produced within the distorting context of class society. It was precisely the expose passage on wish images considered above that so troubled him.[57] It seemed to eternalize in a most ahistorical way the contents of the collective psyche. Adorno appears to have understood Benjamin as affirming literally Michelet's idea that every age dreams its successor, as if dream images were dialectical images pure and simple, and he protested:

[...I]f the dialectical image is nothing but the mode in which the fetish character is conceived within collective consciousness, then indeed the Saint-Simonian conception of the commodity world might be brought to light, but not its reverse side, namely the dialectical image of the nineteenth century as Hell.[46]

The image of Hell, central to the "glorious first draft" of the Arcades project, appeared to Adorno to have been repressed in the expose. The remaining idea of "wish images" was, he claimed, "undialectical," implying an "immanent," almost "developmental" relationship to a utopian future.[49] Against this Adorno insisted: "The fetish character of the commodity is not a fact of consciousness, but dialectic in the eminent sense that it produces consciousness."[50] And he urged: "The concept of the commodity as a fetish must be documented, as is surely your intent, by the man who discovered it"[51]—that is, by Marx himself.

Benjamin's response (via Gretel Kaplans) was to agree with "almost all" of Adorno's reflections, but to claim that his conception in the expose was not different. He had not given up the theme of Hell that figured so essentially in the early notes; rather, these notes and the expose represented "the thesis and antithesis of the work."[52] That Adorno remained unconvinced, given the expose's elusive wording, is not surprising. Yet the Passagen-Werk material substantiates Benjamin's claims. Throughout it, images of the nineteenth century as Hell figure prominently (as we have seen). Benjamin had worked through the relevant passages of Capital on commodity fetishism.[54] Where the expose spoke of the new as "intermingled with the old," Adorno said that he missed the inverse argument, that "the newest, as mere appearance and phantasmagoria, is itself the oldest."[55] But Benjamin's still-central conception of "natural history" made precisely this point.[56] Their disagreement was in fact limited to their evaluation of the collective's utopian desire (and hence the degree to which mass culture could be redeemed). Benjamin affirmed this desire as a transitory moment in a process of cultural transition. Adorno dismissed it as irredeemably ideological. In denying the autonomy of collective desire, he clearly believed his position to be the more rigorous from a dialectical materialist standpoint. Yet the argument lies close at hand that on this issue Benjamin was in fact in accord with Marx's own perceptions. In several texts, most explicitly in the 18th Brumaire of
Lever Bonaparte, it was Marx who, well before Benjamin, observed the crucial role played by images that conjured up the symbols and myths of antiquity at times of radical historical rupture. Marx wrote:

And just when [human beings] seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and objects, in creating something that has never existed before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up to their service the spirits of the past and borrow from them names, battle slogans and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honored disguise and this borrowed language. Thus Luther wore the mask of the Apostle Paul, the revolution of 1789 to 1814 draped itself alternately as the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire [...].

Marx goes on to criticize the bourgeois “revolutionaries” of 1848, whose citings of the past were no more than parodic re-citings in a farcical attempt to repeat the Revolution of 1789. He attributes the nineteenth-century predilection for ancient Rome to the bourgeoisie’s need for “self-deception,” in order to “hide from themselves” the class limitations of the “content of their struggles.”58 At the same time, Marx recognizes that such historical masks are capable not only of concealing, but also of glorifying the very newness of the present historical drama, and that this can serve a progressive purpose so long as the masking is temporary:

Thus at another stage of development, a century earlier, Cromwell and the English people borrowed the language, passions and illusions of the Old Testament for their bourgeois revolution. When the real goal was reached, when the bourgeois transformation of English society was accomplished, Locke displaced Habakkuk.

The awakening of the dead in the case of this revolution served to glorify new struggles rather than parody old ones, to amplify the present task in the imagination, not to take flight from achieving it in reality, to rediscover the spirit of revolution, not to make its ghost walk about again.59

Marx warns that “the social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot create its poetry out of the past, but only from the future.”60 Yet he does not assume that the new “poetry” will be produced ex nihilo by the working class as soon as bourgeois ideological hegemony is overthrown. He compares the process to learning a new language:

It is like the beginner [who...] always translates back into the mother tongue, but appropriates the spirit of the new language and becomes cap-

able of producing freely within it only by moving about in it without re-
calling the old [...].

Surely Benjamin means nothing else when, in considering the inadequacies of collective consciousness vis-à-vis the new technology, he asks:

When and how will the words of form that have arisen in mechanics, in film, machine construction and the new physics, and that have over-
powered us without our being aware of it, make what is natural in them clear to us? When will the condition of society be reached in which these forms or those that have arisen from them open themselves up to us as natural forms.62

So close is Benjamin to Marx’s own formulation that the fact these passages are missing from the Passagen-Werk material must come as a surprise. Benjamin includes other passages from 18th Brumaire,63 while leaving this discussion (which occurs at the very beginning of Marx’s text) unacknowledged. That the omission was accidental is unlikely. Rather, it suggests Benjamin realized that although his arguments paralleled those of Marx, they did not coincide. Marx was concerned with the moment of political revolution; Benjamin was concerned with the transition to socialism that comes after it.

In 18th Brumaire, Marx wrote that socialist society “cannot begin itself until it has shed all superstition ir regard to the past,” and has “let the dead bury the dead.”64 But he left unexplained just how this shedding of the past was to be achieved. The result is a gap in Marx’s theory which, whether or not he intended it to be, has been bridged by an implicit faith in historical progress, economically determined, as if once socialist production relations were established, industrial-technological production would itself generate the socialist imagination capable of producing a brand new culture. Benjamin’s trip to Moscow had convinced him that seizing political power and nationalizing the economy, while the preconditions for socialist transformation, were not its guarantee, and that so long as the Soviet government repressed cultural innovation, the political revolution itself was in danger of being lost.65 If his 1935 exposé put forth the notion that socialist culture would need to be constructed out of the embryonic, still-inadequate forms that preexisted in capitalism, it was in the Ar:work essay composed the same year that Benjamin articulated a full-blown theory of the
superstructure. Whereas Marx had discovered in the capitalist economic base not only the creation of conditions which would lead to increasing exploitation of the proletariat but also those "that would make it possible to abolish capitalism itself," Benjamin argued that within the superstructure there was a separate (and relatively autonomous) dialectical process, "no less noticeable [. . . ] than in the economy," but proceeding "far more slowly." It is this dialectic that makes possible the transition to a socialist society. It plays itself out between the collective imagination and the productive potential of the new nature that human beings have brought into being, but do not yet consciously comprehend. Moreover, this dialectic has developed not by "burying" the dead past, but by revitalizing it. For if future history is not determined and thus its forms are still unknown, if consciousness cannot transcend the horizons of its sociohistorical context, then where else but to the dead past can imagination turn in order to conceptualize a world that is "not-yet"? Moreover, such a move itself satisfies a utopian wish: the desire (manifested in the religious myth of awakening the dead) "to make [past] suffering into something incomplete," to make good an unfulfilled past that has been irretrievably lost.

The socialist transformation of the superstructure, which begins within capitalism under the impact of industrial technology, includes redeeming the past, in a process that is tenuous, undetermined, and largely unconscious. As a result of the distortions of capitalist social relations, the progressive and retrogressive moments of this process are not easily discerned. One of the tasks that Benjamin believed to be his own in the Passagen-Werk was to make both tendencies of the process visible retrospectively. He traces their origins to the forcefield between art and technology, which in the nineteenth century became falsely perceived as oppositional camps, with the result that even attempts to reconcile them produced reactionary cultural forms.

The relationship between art and technology is a central theme in the Passagen-Werk. The 1935 exposé presents this relationship in a programmatic way, outlining specifically the impact in the nineteenth century of photography on art, engineering on architecture, and mass journalism on literary production. The result is an original contribution to Marxist theory, suggesting not merely the ground for a materialist aesthetics and sociology of art (although both are implied). It identifies a structural transformation in the relationship of consciousness to reality—specifically, fantasy to productive forces—that has general theoretical significance, and that is capable of informing every sort of critical cultural practice. It could be said that for Benjamin progressive cultural practice entails bringing both technology and imagination out of their mythic dream states, through making conscious the collective's desire for social utopia, and the potential of the new nature to achieve it by translating that desire into the "new language" of its material forms. Benjamin writes that in the nineteenth century, the development of the technical forces of production "emancipated the creative forms (Gestaltungsformen) from art, just as in the sixteenth century the sciences liberated themselves from philosophy." This is quite an extraordinary claim. It implies that, just as reason ("the sciences"), once having become secularized ("liberated from philosophy"), became free to be applied instrumentally to processes of social production, so imagination, inspired by "the creative forms" of technology and diverted from purely aesthetic goals (that is, "emancipated from art"), can be applied to the task of constructing a new basis for collective social life.

Previously, bourgeois art had appropriated the imaginative discovery of new forms as its own terrain, defined by the very fact of its separation from social reality. Following Adorno, one can argue that this separation was beneficial, sustaining a power of imagination that, because it was able to resist the given state of things, was the source of the utopian impulse intrinsic to bourgeois art. On one level, Benjamin surely would not disagree. Yet he would insist that the "autonomy of art" becomes a hollow phrase in light of the tremendous creativity of industrial production which itself constantly revolutionizes reality's material forms. In an argument absolutely dependent on Marxist theoretical claims (yet without precedent in Marx's own theory of the cultural superstructure), Benjamin was suggesting that the objective (and progressive) tendency of industrialism is to fuse art and technology, fantasy and
function, meaningful symbol and useful tool, and that this fusion is, indeed, the very essence of socialist culture.

It is important to emphasize that Benjamin understood the synthesis of technology and art as a structural tendency, not synonymous with history’s actual course. In fact the nineteenth century witnessed an institutionalization of the split between technology and art to a degree previously unknown in history. This split was strikingly manifested in the establishment (in 1794) of l’École polytechnique as separate from, and moreover in rivalry with, l’École des beaux arts. The former trained builders and “engineers” for the construction of industrial edifices, naval ships and military fortifications. The latter trained artists and “decorators,” whose work was valued precisely because it refused to subject aesthetic imagination to functional purposes. In this split, architecture fell to l’École des beaux arts, a fact that “worked to its detriment.”

Previously, architecture had included the science of engineering. Of all the arts, it had been “[...] the earliest to grow away from the concept of art, or better said, [...] it least tolerated the view that it was “art,” a view which the nineteenth century forced upon the products of intellectual activity to a degree previously unimagined, yet with no more justification than before.

The architectural style of the Paris arcades was emblematic of the warring tendencies of engineering and “art.” Demanding the skills of both, it was recognized by neither Ecole as an object worthy of instruction. On the one hand, the continuous glass roofs that became their hallmark in the 1820s were technologically advanced skylighting constructions; on the other, the interior “walls” of their shop galleries were the most derivative ornamental facades, replete with neoclassical columns, arches, and pediments that were the epitome of architectural “good taste.” As dialectical images, the arcades thus had a “hermaphroditic position,” fusing the two tendencies which elsewhere developed in total, and hostile, isolation.

It was the engineers who, together with workers, gave shape to the “new” nature of industrial forms: railroads, machines, and bridges. Benjamin cites Sigfried Giedion: “It should be noted that the marvelous aspects which the new construction out of iron afforded the cities [...] for a long time were accessible to workers and engineers exclusively.” Siring Giedion’s enthusiasm for these “marvelous aspects,” Benjamin contrasts the “ornamental style” of the architects (which he connects with “boredom”) to Giedion’s “excellent examples” of bridge scaffolding. Referring to Giedion’s photograph of the Pont Transbordeur in Marseilles (figure 5.4), he writes the word: “Marxism. For who else but engineers and proletarians at that time took the steps that alone revealed fully that which was new and decisive about these constructions, the feeling of space?”

Throughout the nineteenth century, the “fine art” of architecture defensively held itself back from engineering innovations: “Those whose aesthetic conscience was particularly sensitive hurled out from the altar of art curse after curse upon the building engineers.” The accepted nineteenth-century architectural “style” remained oriented toward the preindustrial past, and the most respected style was neoclassicism. “In the nineteenth century ancient Greek architecture again bloomed in its old purity” —at least so it appeared to what Benjamin called the “vulgar consciousness” of the time. When iron was used for scaffolding, it was given a “stone covering” so that it was visible only from the
interior (figure 5.5), or used only for decorative effect. ""Henri Labrouste, artist of restrained and austere talents, inaugurated successfully the ornamental use of iron in the construction of the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève [1850s] and the Bibliothèque Nationale [1860s]."" On exterior facades (figure 5.6), iron was used in continuous balconies as surface design in direct contradiction to the new potential for verticality. Illustrating ""the tendency, again and again in the nineteenth century, to ennoble technical exigencies with artistic aims.""95

""The sensitivities of [architects] demanded that the ever-stronger horizontal tendency of the house ... come to expression ... And they found the means in connection with the traditional iron balcony. They introduced it on one or two floors over the whole width of the front [...]. When house appeared next to house, these balcony gratings fused into one another and strengthened the impression o' a street wall [...].""96

Iron, known to humankind since prehistory, was rapidly transformed from ""cast iron to wrought iron to ingot steel,"" demonstrating its ""unlimited possibilities.""97 Exclaimed Benjamin: ""Iron as revolutionary building material!*98 But architects, still trained in the tradition of Alberti, brought to any ""artificial"" form of iron ""a certain mistrust precisely because it was not immediately present in nature.""99 Moreover, they polemicized against the mathematics of static physics that was the essential tool of engineers, claiming mathematics was ""powerless to assure the solidarity of buildings.""100

Ostracized from the dictates of ""good taste,"" engineering submitted to the dictates of practical use.101 ""The source of all architecture out of iron and glass in the contemporary sense is the greenhouse,""102 Such ""houses for plants"" were the model for Paxton's plan of the Crystal Palace (executed by engineers rather than architects).103 Subsequent exposition halls imitated Paxton's design, as metaphorical ""hothouses"" for the new machinery.104 It was in buildings for the new mass culture that the principle of iron and glass construction proliferated, at first ""under the banner of purely utilitarian buildings,"" ""iron halls"" were built as warehouses, workshops, and factories,105 covered marketplaces (Les Halles) and railroad stations (Gare de l'Est). As practical, protective shelters for a mass public, iron halls well suited the ""need for unbroken space,""106 because of the expanse such construction allowed. Ben-
jarns noted that these buildings were connected with transitoriness, in both the spatial sense (as railroad stations, places of transit) and the temporal one (as galleries for world expositions, typically torn down after they closed).

Spared the self-conscious mediation of "art," such structures settled into the collective imagination in an unconscious form, as buildings for use rather than contemplation—at least for a time. Ultimately, iron and glass construction, having bowed to the challenge of architectural style, itself became one, and began (predictably) to think of emulating the past:

"By 1878, it was believed that salvation could be found in iron architecture: its vertical aspiration [..] the preference for over-filled spaces and the lightness of the visible skeleton fanned hopes in the birth of a style that would revive the essence of Gothic genius [..]."104

The 1889 Paris Exposition was heralded as the "triumph of iron,"105 Built for it was the Gallery of Machines (dismantled in 1910 "out of artistic sadism"106) and the Eiffel Tower, the latter an "incomparable" monument to the new "heroic age of technology,"107 which survived after the close of the fair because of its utility as a tower for wireless transmission.108 Assembled by riveting together sectional iron pieces, the Eiffel Tower, for all its fa凉like effects, employed the same principle of construction as railroad tracks, and anticipated skyscrapers directly.110 "Modernism" in architecture had arrived. The Eiffel Tower was an enormous popular success; but still the "artists" protested:

"We come, writers, painters, sculptors, architects... in the name of French art and history that are both threatened, to protest against the erection in the very heart of our capital of the needless and monstrous Eiffel Tower... overshadowing with its barbarous mass Notre Dame, the Sainte-Chapelle, the Tour Saint-Jacques, all our monuments humiliated, all our architectural works diminished."111

The invention of photography, with its exact rendering of nature, enabled technology to overtake artists at their own task, and undermined the uniqueness, the one-time-only "aura" of the masterpiece by allowing for the mass reproduction of images.
Part II

The first international exposition at which photography was exhibited was held in 1855 in Paris. The invention of photography was prefigured in the 1820s by the dioramas, those glassed-in, three-dimensional scenes of figures in a realistic setting which, "by means of technical artifice," attempted "a perfect imitation of nature," including the temporal movement of changing daylight, sunsets, or a rising moon. The dioramas mimicked reality so successfully that the painter David urged his students to make studies of nature from them. Dioramas (and subsequent cosmoramas, pleoramas, panoramas, and diaphanoramas, as well as wax-figure cabinets) were the "too early" precursors of photography and film just as the arcades (in which they were frequently found) were too early anticipations of modern architecture. "Just as architecture begins to outgrow art with iron construction, so painting does the same through the panoramas."

Benjamin appreciated the lithographer A. J. Wiertz, whose early essay on photography ascribes to it the philosophical enlightenment of painting in a political sense: "images become intellectually reflective and thereby "agitaitonal." Wiertz wrote: "Do not think that daguerreotype kills art. No, it kills the work of patience; it renders homage to the work of thought," and he carried this principle over into his own work, believing that ultimately photography and art would work together.

With photography, the artist's attempt to replicate nature was made scientific. It extended the human sense of sight in a way commensurate with Marx's idea in The 1844 "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts" that the human senses in a "true, anthropological [i.e., social] nature" are "as nature as it seems to be through industry," even if such nature, due to "private property," now exists only in "alienated form." That the "human eye" perceives differently than the "crude, nonhuman eye" is demonstrated by photography, presenting to our vision new discoveries about nature, and not merely beautiful images. François Arago, speaking in the 1850s on the place of photography in the history of technology, "prophesizes its scientific application—whereupon the artists [predictably missing the point] begin to debate its artistic value.

Photography secularized the image by bringing it up close. On the photography exhibit of the 1855 Paris Exposition:

"The public crowded into the exhibitions, standing before countless portraits of famous and celebrated personalities, and one can imagine what it meant in that epoch that one could see the famed personages of the theatre, the podium, in short of public life, at whom until now one had only been able to gaze in wonder from a distance."

From the start, photography was part of popular culture. Pioneers like Nadar expanded its subject matter, taking a hundred exposures of Paris' catacombs and sewers, and including all social classes and ranks in his portraiture. The photographic method encouraged the practice of amateurs, so that the line between artist and public began to blur. Arago reported to the Chamber in 1851 on the effects of the invention:

"[... T]he opticians' shops were besieged; there were not enough lenses, not enough dark rooms to satisfy the zeal of so many eager amateurs. The sun sinking on the horizon was followed with a gaze of regret, taking with it the raw material of the experiment. But on the following day you could see great numbers of experimenters at their windows in the first hours of daylight, striving with every kind of nervous precaution to induce onto the prepared plaques images of the nearby dormer window, or the view of a population of chimneys."

Photography democratized the reception of visual images by bringing even art masterpieces to a mass audience. Benjamin believed this democratization of production and reception as well as the non-"auratic," scientific approach to objects were tendencies intrinsic to the medium, and he considered them progressive. Because photography intruded so decisively upon the image preserve of painters, it inevitably challenged and changed the way the latter went about their work. Arago wrote:

"Whoever has just once in his life covered his skin with the magic cloak of photography and peered into the camera in order to see there those wonderful miniature reproductions of natural images must have been struck by the question of what, indeed, will our modern painting come to once photography has succeeded in fixing colors just as permanently as it now does forms."

Defenders of art insist that it was "impossible for a human countenance to be captured by machine." Yet portraits were precisely the genre most vulnerable to the encroachments of photography, even if they changed what such portraits recorded. "What makes the first photographs so incomparable is perhaps this: that
they represent the first image of the encounter of machine and human being. Artists asserted the superiority of their trade, but their unconscious response was an acknowledgment of vulnerability. "Apparent symptom of a radical displacement [Verschiebung]: painting must put up with being judged by the standard of photography." Artists began to move in directions in which photography could not (yet) compete:

The paintings of Delacroix avoid competition with photography not only by their power of color but—there was then no action photography—by the stormy movement of their subjects. Thus it was possible for him to be kindly disposed toward photography.

And subsequently: "As Impressionism gives way to Cubism, painting has created a domain into which photography at the outset cannot follow."

Thus painters attempted to defend themselves against the new technology. They thereby missed the real threat to their cultural creativity, the effects of the capitalist market. Already in the early arcades, the window arrangements of commodities "displayed art in service of the salesman." In the course of his research, Benjamin found a lithograph depicting the beginning of art as advertising:

[... ] a painter who makes his way forward with two yard-long, narrow planks, on each of which he has painted several garnishings and arrangements of meat products. Title: "Misery and the Arts." "Dedicated to Monsieur the Butcher." Caption: "The man of art within the impediments of his trade."

Another showed the proletarianization of artistic production in terms of worker exploitation:

Lithograph: A poor devil looks on sadly as a young man signs the picture that the former has painted. Title: "The artist and the amateur of the nineteenth century." Caption: "It is by me, seeing that I sign it."

Due to the distorting effects of capitalist social relations, the mass culture in which art and technology converged did so to the detriment of both. On the side of art, production methods began to resemble those of any commodity: Needing to compete with photography, artists were forced to speed up production, mimic mechanized reproduction by hand, and turn out "individual" portraits with a rapidity that rendered only what was typical about the sub-

5.9 Studio photograph of Walter Benjamin and his brother George as "Alpinists," ca. 1900.
ject, while the new style of “genre paintings” was based on the concept of repeatability. On the side of photography (which in portraiture clearly had the competitive edge) the limitless reproduction of images extended the sphere of market society “enormously,” which in turn encouraged “modish variations of camera techniques” in order to increase sales. Moreover, the retrogressive canons of artistic style induced photographers to be more “painterly” in their images (figure 5.9), placing subjects before “picturesque,” backdrops, utilizing props, and retouching and otherwise “embellishing” the image in the name of aesthetic standards.  

Nowhere were the distorting effects of capitalism clearer than in the realm of literary production. Here the threat to traditional art forms came from the technology of rapid printing, and from the journalistic style that emerged as the consequence of the mushrooming of mass newspapers. In “The Author as Producer” (1934), Benjamin describes the potential effects of new literary technologies making it clear that he considers them progressive in the political sense because they tend to create a democratic forum for information and lower the boundary between literary producer and audience; and because they destroy the old notion of individual artistic genius and completed, self-contained “works,” replacing the concept of the “masterpiece” with a political notion of writing as “intervention” which has an “organizing function.” The writer’s most important strategic task is less to fill the new literary forms with revolutionary content than to develop the revolutionary potential of the forms themselves. So long as the mass press “still belongs to capital,” however, this task is riddled with “insoluble antinomies.” The newspaper is the scene of this literary confusion.” Capitalist journalism commodifies writing, treating it as a product to be consumed by a passive audience. In a context where the traditional standards of “literature” are stubbornly clung to, the result is a “decline of writing,” a “debasement of the word.” But in the “unselective” assembling of readers and facts, and by needing to cater to the “smoldering impatience” of the readers who, “excluded, believe that they have the right to speak out in their own interests,” a “dialectical moment is concealed: The decline of writing in the bourgeois press proves to be the source of its regeneration under socialism.” Benjamin defines the situation of the socialist press (equating it with the actually existing press in the Soviet Union) as one in which the worker, as “expert,” becomes literate in an active sense. He or she “gains access to authorship,” the qualifications for which thus become “public property”, “living conditions” themselves become “literature,” while the latter loses relevance as a purely aesthetic form.  

The Passagen-Werk material gives evidence from the early years of industrial capitalism of both positive and negative poles of this dialectic as they appear, fully entangled, in the historical phenomena themselves. Benjamin is particularly concerned with the transformation of literary works into commodities, and the effects of capitalist relations on the production process. He finds prototypical the production innovations of the dramatist Eugène Scribe:
"While he made fun of the great industrialists and men of money, he learned from them the secret of their success. It did not escape his sharp eye that all wealth in essence rests on the art of having others work for us and thus, a pathbreaking genius, he transferred the fundamental principle of the division of labor from the workshops of fashion tailors, cabinet-makers, and steel-spring factories, into studios for the dramatic artist, who before this reform, with one head and one pen, still only earned the proletarian salary of an isolated worker."\textsuperscript{137}

But regardless of salary, the writers within these studio workshops were "proletarian" now in the literal sense of the word, as they had lost control over the production apparatus. And if salaries of worker-writers rose, Scribe's wealth as the owner of their labor power grew exponentially:

Scribe chose the material, he ordered the plot in its broad outlines, indicated the special effects and brilliant exits, and his apprentices set dialogue on small verses thereto. If they made progress, then naming their name in the title (next to that of the firm) was their adequate payment, until the best of them became independent and produced works with their own hand, perhaps also attaching new helpers to themselves. Thus, and with the protection of the French publishing laws, Scribe became a millionaire several times over.\textsuperscript{138}

Alexandre Dumas, similarly, was less a novelist than the owner of a "factory of novels"\textsuperscript{139} in which other writers mass-produced "his" works. Dumas boasted of producing four hundred novels and thirty-five dramas in twenty years in a process that "permitted 8,160 persons to earn a livelihood."\textsuperscript{140}

"Who knows the titles of all the books M. Dumas has signed his name to? Does he know them himself? If he doesn’t keep a double register with debits and credits, he has no doubt forgotten...more than one of those children for whom he is the legal father or natural father, or godfather. The productions of these last months have not been less than thirty volumes."\textsuperscript{141}

Before mid-century, newspapers were still too expensive to allow for mass readership.

Because of the rareness of newspapers, one read them in groups at the cafés. Otherwise they could be obtained only by subscription, which cost 80 francs per year. In 1824 the twelve most widely distributed newspapers had altogether about 56,000 subscriptions. Indeed, the liberals as well as the royalists were interested in keeping the lower classes away from newspapers.\textsuperscript{142}

In 1828, journals were first brought within the grasp of the lower classes, a potentially democratic change\textsuperscript{143} that was, however, made possible by precisely that force which began to transform news information into a commodity: paid advertising. At first it was literature itself that was advertised, in the form of unsolicited literary reviews.\textsuperscript{144} The next step was to generalize the principle:

The thought of using a newspaper insert to advertise not only books but industrial products, was that of a certain Dr. Veron, who did so well in this way with his pâte de Regnauld, a cold medicine, that on an investment of 17,000 francs he received a return of 100,000.\textsuperscript{145}

Along with advertising inserts and single issue sales, the editor Emile de Giradin introduced the "feuilleton," a special section in mass newspapers for literature and reviews in which novels appeared serially prior to their publication as books.\textsuperscript{146} This format, along with the literary periodicals and reviews that proliferated by mid-century,\textsuperscript{147} had significant repercussions on literary form, resulting in essay treatments, short stories, or serial novels. Under capitalist relations, style adapted to the exigencies of the medium: "There were feuilleton honoraria of up to 2 francs per line. Many authors wrote just dialogue as much as possible, in order to make money on the partially empty lines."\textsuperscript{148}

The new mass readership drew authors into national politics as well.\textsuperscript{149} Benjamin searches out the origins of this phenomenon, unique in our own era, whereby cultural producers, as popular entertainers, became mass politicians (Lamarque, Chateaubriand, Sue, Hugo), not always (or indeed not usually) with the most enlightened results. The philosophical idealism\textsuperscript{150} entrenched in bourgeois literature carried over into political positions. Balzac "deplored the downfall of the Bourbons, which signified to him the loss of the arts,"\textsuperscript{151} and advocated peasant "socialism" along the lines of a reestablished feudalism.\textsuperscript{152} Chateaubriand made the political stance of "vague sadness" a fashion.\textsuperscript{153} Lamartine exhorted patriotism over socialism,\textsuperscript{154} employing his poetic rhetoric for nationalist glorification: "as if he had made it his job," so one contemporary criticized him, "to prove the truth of Plato's statement that poets should be thrown out of the Republic [...]"\textsuperscript{155}

Those authors first in a position to speak to the masses did not speak for the masses,\textsuperscript{156} at least not in a way that would make it
possible for them to understand their objective historical situation, because as writers, they did not understand their own. Victor Hugo, whose fiction documented accurately the suffering of the urban poor, is exemplary. Although in November 1848, Hugo cast his vote against General Cavaignac's repression of the workers' June revolt, he subsequently voted "consistently with the right," and gave his "enthusiastic endorsement" to Louis Napoleon as presidential candidate, hoping (in vain) to become the latter's Minister of Education. Equating words themselves with revolution, Hugo exemplified the new significance of literature for political propaganda as an aspect of the phantasmagoria of mass politics. His unreliable political judgment was not unique among writers. Balzac, an opponent of the breakup of landed estates, saw no other cure for petty-bourgeois hoarding than the contradictory position of turning them into small landholders. Alexandre Dumas was offered money by the government in 1846 to go to Algiers and write a book that would spread among his five million French readers "a taste for colonization." Lamartine, moved to provide the masses with the rhetoric of "a single idea, a conviction" around which they could rally, placed his literary skills at the services of the state. The cognitive strength of these writers was limited to describing social appearances, not uncovering the social tendencies that underlay them, and that were affecting their own conditions of production so deeply.

One has only to regard the format of a nineteenth-century newspaper (figure 5.11), in which the feuilleton occupied the bottom quarter of the front page, to see, literally, how thin was the line between political fact and literary fiction. News stories were literary constructions; feuilleton novelists used news stories as content. The tendency of mass media is to render the distinction between art and politics meaningless. Benjamin was vitally concerned with what happens when the two realms merge, as he believed they were bound to, due to the "[...] massive melting-down process of literary forms, a process in which many of the oppositions in which we have been accustomed to think may lose their relevance." At issue is not whether the line is crossed, but how. Benjamin sees two possibilities: Either (as was the case with Lamartine, Hugo, etc.), the new technologies of literary reproduction are used by writers as the means for a rhetorical representation of reality that slips into
political propaganda, or, by focusing on these new technological forms themselves, writers begin to illuminate both their emancipatory potential, and the political realities that presently distort their effects. The choice is between swaying the public or educating it, between political manipulation or technical awareness. The latter politicizes not so much through an elaboration of the deficiencies in the present social order as through demonstrating that this order constrains the means that already exist to rectify them.

But in the nineteenth century, artists and writers generally did not understand the positive potential of the new technologies for cultural production any more clearly than they did the dangers of using these technologies to aestheticize mass politics. Balzac pronounced newspapers as "deadly to the existence of modern writers." Gautier (like Balzac, a monarchist) praised Charles I's suppression of the press, claiming that it "rendered a great service to the arts and to civilization".

"Newspapers are of the species of courtiers or horse dealers who interpose themselves between the artists and the public, between the king and the people...their perpetual barking...hurls such mistrust...into the mind that...royalty and poetry, the two grandest things in the world, become impossible." Architects, as we have seen, distrusted mathematics. But engineers were no more clairvoyant, coming only "slowly" to "new methods of fabrication." And if artists preached "art for art's sake," and, scouring the new technology, insisted: "A drama is not a railroad," it was also true that the very Arago who reported the famous positive evaluation of [photography], reported in the same year [...] a negative evaluation of the railroad construction planned by the government. ("Among other arguments, the difference in temperature at the entrance and exits to the tunnels would, it was said, lead to fatal heat and chills.") But was the "progressive" alternative simply to make an art object of railroads themselves?

Theatre du Luxembourg, 30 December 1837: "A locomotive with 'several elegant wagons' appears on the stage."
between art and technology were premature. Within Benjamin's intellectual landscape, they belonged to the anticipatory realm of dreams. The sheltering arcades were the first modern architecture for the public. But they were also the first consumer “dream houses,” placed at the service of commodity worship. In the nineteenth century, when the tempo of technological transformations threatened to outstrip the capacity of art to adapt itself to them, advertising became the means of reestablishing a link between technology’s forces and social desires: “The advertisement is the cunning with which the dream imposed itself upon industry.” At the same time, the development of advertising was symptomatic of the transformation of information into propaganda, so that in commercial art fantasy only “prepares” itself to become socially “practical” in a positive sense. Similarly, before photography can obtain a “revolutionary use-value,” the photographer must “rescue” the image from “the fashions of commerce,” with the proper caption. In the feuilleton, writers find their rightful place as communicators to a mass audience and as commentators on everyday life, but the commercial genres of their literature—physiognomies of the crowd, panoramas of the boulevard, the reveries of the flâneur—transform reality into an object that can be consumed passively, pleasurably, and directly in its dream form rather than “refunctioning” the communication apparatus into a tool that will make it possible to wake up from the dream. Given the ambivalence of the phenomena, those artworks that eschewed the new social pressures and espoused the doctrine of l'art pour l'art were as much to be redeemed as, for different reasons, the tendency of tacking aesthetic “masks” onto the new forms. The latter were warning signs that fantasy’s new social usefulness did not make its utopian aspect superfluous. In short, the liquidation of traditional art would remain premature, so long as its utopian promise was left unrealized.

If the situation had been simple, if art and technology had been the opposing poles of a historical dialectic within the superstructure, then there would have been nothing easier than their “synthesis.” The new culture would emerge as a process of aestheticizing technology, or conversely, of proclaiming technology as art. Both these forms were attempted in the early twentieth century, the first by Jugendstil, which strove to renew art from the “form-treasures of technology” and to “stylistize” them “ornamentally” as natural symbols; the second by Futurism which, pronouncing technology beautiful, wished to raise it to an art form in itself. Benjamin criticizes them on the same grounds: “The reactionary attempt to release technologically determined forms from their functional contexts and to reify them as natural constants—i.e., to stylize them—occurred similarly in Jugendstil and later in Futurism.”

Despite Adorno’s reservations, Benjamin’s theory of mass culture did provide criteria for a critique of cultural production under capitalism. But it also identified how in spite of these conditions, socialist imagination could come—and indeed, was coming into being. The cultural transformation which Benjamin was investigating is not to be thought of simply as a new aesthetic style. It involves giving up the ingrained habit of thinking in terms of the subjective fantasy of art versus the objective material forms of reality. The dialectic which was “no less visible” in the superstructure than in the substructure would transform the very way these two societal components were related. The binary of substructure and superstructure would itself be drawn into the “melting-down process.”

Recall that the collective fantasy released at the beginning of the new era of industrialism reaches back to an ur-past. In the temporal dimension, images of the ancient, mythic origins of Western civilization become prominent (one manifestation of which is neoclassicism). Materially, the technologically produced “new” nature appears in the fantastic form of the old, organic nature. The Passagen-Werk gives repeated documentation of how the modernity that was emerging in the nineteenth century evoked both of these realms, in what might seem to be a collective expression of nostalgia for the past and the outmoded. But Benjamin leads us to understand a different motivation. On the one hand, it is an “attempt to master the new experiences of the city” and of technology “in the frame of the old, traditional ones of nature” and of myth. On the other hand, it is the distorted form of the dream “wish,” which is not to redeem the past, but to redeem the desire for utopia to which humanity has persistently given expression. This utopia is none
other than the communist goal stated by Marx in the 1844 "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts," the harmonious reconciliation of subject and object through the humanization of nature and the naturalization of humanity, and it is in fact an ur-historical motif in both Biblical and classical myth. Greek antiquity, no heaven-on-earth in reality, achieved such a reconciliation symbolically in its cultural forms. To replicate these forms, however, as if some "truth" were eternally present within them, denies the historical particularity which is essential to all truth. Rather, the utopian themes are to be rediscovered not merely symbolically, as aesthetic ornamentation, but actually, in matter's most modern configurations.

It is with the new, technological nature that human beings must be reconciled. This is the goal of socialist culture, and the meaning of Benjamin's question, already cited:

When and how will the worlds of form that have arisen in mechanics, in film, machine construction and the new physics, and that have overpowered us without our being aware of it, make what is natural in them clear to us? When will the condition of society be reached in which these forms or those that have arisen from them open themselves up to us as natural forms?

The paradox is that precisely by giving up nostalgic mimicking of the past and paying strict attention to the new nature, the ur-images are reanimated. Such is the logic of historical images, in which collective wish images are negated, surpassed, and at the same time dialectically redeemed. This logic does not form a discursive system in a Hegelian sense. The moment of sublation reveals itself visually, in an instantaneous flash wherein the old is illuminated precisely at the moment of its disappearance. This fleeting image of truth "is not a process of exposure which destroys the secret, but a revelation which does it justice."  

Can such a cognitive experience (which, literally, educates our imagination, leading it out of its still mythic stage) be illustrated in the context of the present discussion? By way of conclusion, here are two such attempts, demonstrating both the moment of critical negation in the dialectics of seeing that exposes the ideology of bourgeois culture, and the moment of redemption, as a fleeting revelation of truth. The first illustration, constructed out of extremes of archaic and modern, makes visible the difference between the repetition of the past and its redemption. In the second, the new nature flashes together with the old in an anticipatory image of humanity and nature reconciled.

Archaic/Modern

Not only architectural tastes were dominated by neoclassical aesthetics in the nineteenth century. Bourgeois theater enthusiastically restaged the ancient Greek tragedies, defining "classics" as those works, the truth of which was untouched by historical passing. In the genre of caricature (more receptive to the new technologies of lithographic reproduction due to its lower status as an art form) the artist Honoré Daumier produced images of his own class which, in making the bourgeois subject their object, lent to his visual representations "a sort of philosophical operation." His humor provided the critical distance necessary to recognize the pretensions of the bourgeois cloak of antiquity. Daumier showed neoclassicism to be not the recurrence of an eternally valid form, but a peculiarly bourgeois style of historical distortion. He depicted the bourgeoise depicting antiquity, in a way that articulated the former's transience, not the latter's permanence (figures 5.12 and 5.13). Baudelaire suggested as the motto for a book by Daumier on ancient history: "Who will deliver us from the Greeks and the Romans?"—and he recognized in this artist a fellow modernist because of it. He wrote:

"Daumier swoops down brutally on antiquity and mythology and spits on it. And the impassioned Achilles, the prudent Ulysses, the wise Penelope, and that great innocent Telemachus, and beautiful Helen who loses Troy, and steaming Sappho, patron of hysteres, and ultimately everyone, has been shown to us in a comic ugliness that recalls those old carcasses of actors of the classic theater who take a pinch of snuff behind the scenes."  

Daumier's images provide the critical negation of bourgeois classicism. But it is to the "dramatic laboratory" of Brecht's epic theater, the most technically experimental of contemporary dramatic forms,
that we must look for a reanimation of the scientific power of classical theater—as Benjamin’s defense of Brecht makes clear:

[Brecht...] goes back, in a new way, to the theater’s greatest and most ancient opportunity: the opportunity to expose the present. In the center of his experiments is man. The man of today; a reduced man therefore, a man kept on ice in a cold world. But since he is the only one we have, it is in our interest to know him. He is subjected to tests and observations. [...] Constructing out of the smallest elements of human behavior that which in Aristotelian drama is called “action”—this is the purpose of epic theater.216

Similarly, in technological structures, classical form returns, a fact of which Le Corbusier, a founder of architectural modernism, was aware. Benjamin clearly affirmed the new architecture as the (historically transient) form adequate to the period of transition. He wrote: “In the first third of the last century no one yet had an inkling of how one must build with glass and iron. The problem has long since been resolved by hangars and silos.”217 As if to illustrate this point, the plates that accompanied a 1923 edition of Le Corbusier’s collected articles included photographs of hangars and silos. Moreover, they juxtaposed such modern forms to the buildings of antiquity, in order to demonstrate how architects of the contemporary era, rather than imitating antiquity intentionally, take their lead from the engineers who, unwittingly, have discovered its forms anew (figures 5.14–5.17). Benjamin asks rhetorically: “Do not all great triumphs in the area of form come into existence [...] as technological discoveries?”218

Old Nature/New Nature

The earliest Passagen-Werk notes state that the work of Grandville is to be “compared with the phenomenology of Hegel.”219 In fact this graphic artist (whom Surrealists as well as silent filmmakers recognized as their precursor) made visible the “ambivalence between the utopian and cynical element”220 in the bourgeois idealist attempt to subsume nature under its own, subjective categories. His images depict nature as pure subjectivity in its most specific, bourgeois-historical form, that is, as commodity. A contemporary of Marx, Grandville’s “cosmology of fashion” portrays nature decked out in the latest styles as so many “specialty items.”221
5.14 and 5.15 Contemporary grain elevators (Le Corbusier).

5.16 and 5.17 Details of the Parthenon (Le Corbusier).
"Flowers and fruit rejoice in the coming of spring"—Grandville, 1844.

"Venus as an evening star"—Grandville, 1844 (top).

"An interplanetary bridge; Saturn's ring is an iron balconv"—Grandville, 1844.
5.21 “A dog walking his man”—Grandville 1844.

Grandville “brings well to expression what Marx calls the ‘theological capers’ of commodities.” and, pursuing commodity fetishism “to its extremes, reveals its nature.” In his work the image of humanity reconciled with nature is given a cynical twist: Nature imitates humanity’s fetishized forms as “so many parodies by nature on the history of humanity.” Grandville’s fantasies transfer commodity-character onto the universe. They modernize it. Comets, planets, flowers, the moon and evening star are animated, only to receive the “human” attribute of being transformed into a commodity (figures 5.18–3.20). But in depicting the “battle between fashion and nature,” Grandville allows nature to gain the upper hand (figure 5.21). An active, rebellious nature takes its revenge on the humans who would fetishize it as a commodity (figure 5.22).

The myth of human omnipotence, the belief that human artifice can dominate nature and recreate the world in its image, is central to the ideology of modern domination. Benjamin names this fantasy (which is believed with deadly seriousness by those who wield technology’s power over others): “childish.” Grandville depicts it, when, “God knows, not gently,” he stamps human characteristics onto nature, practicing that “graphic sadism” which would

5.22 “Fish fishing for people, using various desirable items as bait”—Grandville. 1844.
5.23 "The marine life collection, showing that underwater plants and animals are based on forms invented by man—fans, snips, combis, brushes, etc."—Grandville, 1844.

5.24, 5.25, 5.26, 5.27 Photographs of plants as ur-forms of art, Karl Blossfeldt, 1928.
become the "fundamental principle" of the advertising image. Grandville's caricatures mimic the hubris of a humanity so puffed up with its new achievements that it sees itself as the source of all creation and brutally imagines the old nature totally subsumed under its forms (figure 5.23).

But this cognitive experience is inverted when the new technique of photographic enlargement (figures 5.24-5.27) shows us with what cunning nature, anticipating the forms of human technology, has been allied with us all along! Photography thereby takes us like "Lilliputians" into a land of gigantic and "fraternal" organic plant forms, wrote Benjamin in his review of Karl Blossfeldt's *Urformen der Kunst (Ur-forms of Art)* in 1928. Comparing Blossfeldt to Grandville, Benjamin commented:

Is it not remarkable that here another principle of advertising, the gigantic enlargement of the world of plants is now seen to heal the wounds that caricature delivered to it?"292

Here is a use of technology not to dominate nature but to take off the "veil" that our "laziness" has thrown over the old nature, and allow us to see in plant existence "a totally unexpected treasure of analogies and forms."239

Ur-forms of art—yes, granted. Still, what else can these be but the ur-forms of nature?—Forms, that is, that were never merely a model for art, but from the very beginning, ur-forms at work in all that is creative2924

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Transitoriness is the key to Benjamin’s affirmation of the mythic element in cultural objects, redeeming the wish-images attached to the transitional, “too-early” ur-forms of modern technology as momentary anticipations of utopia. But in the process of commodification, wish image congeals into fetish; the mythic lays claim to eternity. “Petrified nature” (erstarrte Natur) characterizes those commodities that comprise the modern phantasmagoria which in turn freezes the history of humanity as if enchanted under a magic spell. But this fetishized nature, too, is transitory. The other side of mass culture’s hellish repetition of “the new” is the mortification of matter which is fashionable no longer. The gods grow out of date, their idols disintegrate, their cult places—the arcades themselves—decay. Benjamin notes that the first electric street-lighting (1857) “extinguished the irreproachable luminosity in these passages, which were suddenly harder to find [...].”2 He interprets Zola’s novel *Thérèse Raquin*, written a decade later, as an account of “the death of the Paris arcades, the process of decay of an architectural style.”3 Because these decaying structures no longer hold sway over the collective imagination, it is possible to recognize them as the illusory dream images they always were. Precisely the fact that their original aura has disintegrated makes them invaluable didactically:

To cite an observation of Aragon that constitutes the hub of the problem: That the Passages are what they are here for us [*für uns*], is due to the fact that they in themselves [*an sich*] are no longer.4
5 Mythic Nature: Wish Image

1. V. p. 1212 (1935 expose note no. 5).
2. V. p. 560 (M16a, 3).
3. "My analysis deals with this thirst for the past as its main object" (V. p. 313 [I.1a, 2]).
4. Friedrich Theodor Vischer (1861), cited V. p. 115 (B2a, 3).
5. V. p. 1017 (K*, 20).

6. V. p. 110 (B1, 2 and B1, 3).
8. "One can describe the phalanistic as a human machine. That is not a criticism, nor does it mean something mechanistic; instead it describes the great complexity of his construction. It is a machine out of human beings" (V. p. 772 [W4, 4]).
10. V. p. 838 (V7, 5).
11. V. p. 228 (F7, 3).
12. "In the mid-1830s, the first iron furniture appears, as bedposts, chairs . . . , and it is very characteristic of the times that advertised as their particular advantage was the fact they were capable of being mistaken for every kind of wood" (Max von Boehn [1907], cited V. p. 212 [F1, 3]; see also F5a, 2). Cf.: "Cabinet making in iron reveals that in wood . . ." (Fouchet [1814], cited V. p. 225 [F5a, 2]).
13. V. p. 287 (I2a, 3, and I2a, 4).
14. V. p. 1011 (G*, 22).
15. V. p. 132 (C8, 2).
16. V. p. 260 (G12a, 2).
17. V. p. 216 (F2, 8).
18. V. p. 216 (F2, 8).
19. V. p. 103 (A10a, 1; also F4, 5).
20. V. p. 98 (A7, 5).
21. V. p. 1044 (a*, 1; again, F3, 2).
22. V. p. 1052 (d*, 2; again F1 and F3, 2).
23. V. p. 1031 (o, 4).
24. V. p. 46 (1935 expose; also F2, 2). Cf. an 1875 project for a railroad station: "'Rails supported by elegant arches elevated 20 feet above the ground and 615 meters long'—'a sort of Italian mansion'"—"How little it diverts the future of the railroad"' (Maxime DuCamp [1875], cited V. p. 214 [F2, 1]).
26. V. p. 437 (K12a, 4).
27. V. pp. 46–47 (1935 expose). There are several versions of this expose. This version is M* (the latest version, published in V as the most definitive).
28. See Bloch's discussion of Benjamin's Einhundertpfennig, "Revueform der Philosophie" [1928] in Erkennen der Zeit [1935], vol. 4 of Ernst Bloch, Gesammelte (Frankfurt am Main: Suhr-
exploitation of nature by human beings is the reflection of the exploitation of people by the owners of the means of production. If the integration of technology into social life has failed, the fault lies in this exploitation" (V, p. 64; see also below, chapter 8, section 6).


42. V, p. 245 (G5, 1) cites the well-known passage from chapter 1 of Capital, which Benjamin has taken from Otto Kühle, Karl Marx: Leben und Werk (1938).

43. Marx and Engels, "The Holy Family" (1843), published 1932, cited V, p. 778 (W7, 8).

44. Adorno received a version (T') in some ways different from both of the ones cited here (ed. note V, p. 1252); but the passage we are considering is the same in T' and the first version (from the 1935 expose, pp. 16–17) cited above.


49. Letter, Benjamin to Gretel Karples, 16 August 1935, V, p. 1138.

50. See above, chapter 4.

51. These passages (see above, note no. 45) were recorded in Karel“G” in the early section "assuredly written before June 1933" (ed. note V, p. 1252), that is, before Benjamin received the letter from Adorno’s reminiscences.


53. See above, chapter 3.


55. Marx, "18e Brumaire," p. 116. Later Marx would encourage enthusiastically the Paris Commune, because the working class voiced its own interests. Benjamin documents, however, that even the Communards, who had everything to lose from such "self-deception", the Commune "felt itself thoroughly the inferior of 1793" (V, p. 550 [K1a, 3]). "The illusions that still underlay the Commune came to expression in a striking way in Proudhon's formulation, appealing to the bourgeoisie: 'Save the people: save yourselves, as did your fathers, by the Revolution'" (V, p. 592 [K2a, 1]).


goals that are alien to nature, and with means that are alien, even hostile to nature, that emancipate themselves from nature and subject it.

63. See V, pp. 451–54 (J2a1, 1–J21. 3). Instead, in regard to the role of labor in preparing humanity to separate from its past, he cites a related passage from Marx's 'Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right,' V, p. 588 (N6a. 2).


65. See above, chapter 2.

66. The close connection between the Artwork essay and the Passagen-Werk is documented in a letter written by Benjamin just after completing the Artwork essay to an unlocated Dutch woman with whom he fell in love in 1932: "... The center of gravity of my work ... still concerns my big book the Passagen-Werk. But I now only seldom work on it in the library. Instead, I have interrupted the historical research ... and have begun to concern myself with the other side of the scale. For all historical knowledge can be conceptualized in the image of a pair of scales ... the one arm of which is weighted with the past, the other with knowledge of the present. Whereas in the first case the facts assembled cannot be unified and numerous enough, in the second, only a few heavy, significant weights are allowed. It is these that I have secured in the last two months through considerations of that which determines the life of art in the present. In the process I have arrived at extraordinary formulations, emanating from totally new insights and concepts. And I can now declare that the materialist theory of art, about which one had heard much but seen nothing with one's own eyes, now exists. Because it is the best thing I've found since I found you, I sometimes think about showing it to you" (letter, November 1935, VI, p. 811).


68. Benjamin is cautious to say that a retrospective analysis of this process cannot tell us in advance what art will be like after the molecular forces peter, "not to mention art in a classless society," but instead it makes certain pragmatic claims possible regarding present tendencies in art (Artwork essay, II, p. 135).

69. Cf. Benjamin's assertion: "[... ] history is not only a science, but no less a form of recollection. What science has established, recollection can modify. Recollection can make the incomplete (laziness) into something finished, and that which is finished (suffering) into something incomplete. Thus is theology: but in recollection we have an experience which forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally theologic, just as little as we are permitted to attempt to write it in terms of immediately theological concepts" (V, p. 169 [N4. 1]). For why Benjamin is "not allowed" to use theological concepts, see below, chapter 7.

70. Given the eliptical language of the expose, and the fact that the abundant historical data in the Passagen-Werk material on the relationship of art and technology are assembled with minimal commentary, a rigorous, systematic examination of Benjamin’s argument is impossible on the basis of the Passagen-Werk alone. In the following analyses, I have drawn on related essays which Benjamin published in the years just before and just after the expose: "The Author as Producer," II, pp. 693-701, and "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproduction," I, pp. 235-308.

71. Except for a few references to Kersaun’s work on Offenbach, material and commentary relevant to music are noticeably lacking in the Passagen-Werk, perhaps because among the Frankfurt Institute members, this was clearly Adorno’s intellectual preserve. Yet the earliest notes (1927 A series) do make these observations: "Music in the Passagen-Werk. It appears to have first settled into these spaces with the decline of the arcades, that is, at the same time as the age of mechanically reproduced music. (Gramophone. The "Theatophone" is to a certain extent its predecessor.) And yet there was music written in the spirit of the Passagen-Werk, a panoramic music that one now only gets to hear at resplendently defiled concert halls, like those by the Kaskelot’s in Monte Carlo: the panoramic compositions of David de Léporat, "Herzelamurum" etc (V, pp. 1005-06 [F5, 5]; see also O, 61 ["in jazz noise is emancipated"]) and H1; 2; H1; 5; Q2; 6; Q5a. 1).

72. Benjamin clearly considered Marx’s theory of the superstructure inadequate (see e.g., V, p. 581 [N4a, 2]); and one of the purposes in the Passagen-Werk was to make up for this lack.

73. V, p. 59 (1935 exposé).

74. Marx’s theory that the superstructure is distinct from the forces of production purports the division between art and technology as a social constant rather than a specifically bourgeois phenomenon. It neglects to consider the possibility (as an application of his own argument that forms of socialism began to appear within the existing relations of capitalism), that the effects of industrial capitalism may have been precisely to undermine this division.

75. The term "imagery" was first used in France in the 1780s, applied to officers trained in the art of military siege and fortifications (V, p. 218 [F3. 6]).

76. "The characteristic of l'École polytechnique ... was the coexistence of purely theoretical training with a series of applied exercises, relevant to civil works, building construction, military fortifications, mining, even shipbuilding ... Napoleon decreed the requirement that the students live in barracks." (de Lapparent [1891]. V, p. 582 [r1, 3]).

77. V, p. 219 (F3. 6).

78. Cf. Balzac’s critical judgment: "I do not believe that an engineer from l'École polytechnique would ever be able to build one of the marvels of architecture that Leonardo da Vinci knew how to erect; the latter was a mechanic, architect and painter all at once, one of the inventors of hydraulics and tireless constructor of canals. Formed at a young age by the absolute simplicity of decrees, the persons coming out of l'École lose the sense of elegance and ornament; a pillar appears useless to them; it is not deplying from utility, they regret to the point where art begins." (Balzac, cited V, p. 986 [F3. 7]).


80. "The Halle an der is 1911 in which, anticipating the arcades, had a central glass gable which, like the curving arcades, was composed of transparent glass and iron, and... from the architect Behrens and the engineer Bruns. As far as we know, it is the first time that architects who are at present working are not only working in one person" (Giedion [1929]. Cited V, p. 213 [F3. 5]).

81. V, p. 217 (F3. 1).


83. V, p. 222 (F3. 3).

84. "The most important step toward industrialization: the construction of specific forms (sections) of transparent iron or steel on mechanical miniature. The spaces penetrate: one began, not with structural components, but with railroad tracks ... 1832. Here lies the beginnings of sectional iron, that is, the fundamental basis of steel frames (out of which modern skyscrapers were built)." (Siegfried Giedion [1929]. Cited V, p. 216 [F2. 9]).
85. "The way from the Empire-form of the first locomotives to the consummated new objective (Industrieform) of today identifies a revolution" (Joseph August Lux [1909], cited V, p. 224 [F7a, 7]).

86. Giedion (1928), cited V, p. 218 [F3, 3].


88. V, p. 218 (F3, 3). Benjamin refers specifically to nos. 61–63 of Giedion’s illustrations. Reproduced here (figure 3.4) is no. 62.

89. Joseph August Lux (1909), cited V, p. 221 (F1a, 7).

90. Journalist (1837), cited V, p. 219 (F3a, 2).

91. V, p. 220 (F3a, 1).

92. Émile Levassuer (1904), cited V, p. 214 (F1a, 4).


94. Fritz Stahl (1929), cited V, p. 231 (F8a).

95. A. G. Meyer (1907), cited V, p. 219 (F3a, 1).

96. Meyer (1907), cited V, p. 219 (F3a, 1).

97. Meyer (1907), cited V, p. 220 (F3a, 1; cf. F3a, 1).

98. From a "much-published" penman by Perris architects in 1805, cited V, p. 228 (F6a, 3; also F4, 3).

99. Benjamin notes that neoclassical buildings could house any purpose precisely because their architectural "style" had nothing to do with utility. He cites Victor Hugo’s observation that the pseudo-Greek temple built to house the Bourse could just as well contain "a king’s palace, a House of Commons, a civic hall, a college, a museum, a courthouse, a market, a church, a temple, a theater" (Hugo, cited V, p. 227 [F6a, 1]). In contrast, the public responded to a newspaper query as to how the Crystal Palace might be used after the London Exposition by suggesting everything from a hospital to public baths to a library (V, p. 225 [F5a, 1]). Benjamin comments: "The Bourse could mean anything; the Crystal Palace could be used for everything" (ibid.). On the arbitrariness of meaning as a characteristic of commodity society, see chapter 6 below.

100. Meyer (1907), cited V, p. 221 (F4, 1; also F2a, 1).

101. He was confronted with the practical problem of enclosing "marvelous elm trees which neither the Londoners nor Parisians wanted to tear down" (Meyer [1907], cited V, p. 221 [F4, 2]).

102. V, p. 216 (F2a, 1; also F6a, 2).

103. Meyer (1907), cited V, p. 222 (F4, 5).

104. Meyer (1907), cited V, p. 222 (F4a, 1).

105. Dubreul-J’Espezel (1926), cited V, p. 223 (F4a, 5). The "gothic" iron style referred to here is Eiffel’s 1879 Paris Exhibition Hall (picture below, chapter 9, figure 9.7).

133. Interpretors of Benjamin have insisted that he lamented the “disintegration of the aura” of artworks. This was, rather, Adorno’s position, part of his apprehension regarding mass culture generally. The Pasages-erect material commemorates quite uncategorically that Benjamin was no more (nor less) swayed by nostalgia in his description of these objective developments than, say, Marx, when he wrote in the 1848 Manifesto of the Communist Party that the bourgeoisie “has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his natural superiors [...]”

134. Walter Crane (1893/95), cited V, p. 826 (Y6a, 3).

135. V, p. 832 (Y6a, 4).

136. V, p. 832 (Y6a, 3).

137. V, p. 838 (Y7, 5). Benjamin’s example is from Galisaud (1905): “We will be one with the opinion of the public in admiring... the fastidious artist who... represents himself this year with a pasting that in its finesse could extend with the proofs of daquerreotypes.”

138. V, p. 832 (Y6a, 2). Action photography, first possible in 1802, inaugurated photograinism (Y7, 8).

139. V, p. 49 (1935 exposé).

140. V, p. 45 (1935 exposé); see as example V, p. 90 (A7, 1).


142. Cabinet des Estampes, cited V, p. 908 (d1a, 6).

143. “In Marseilles around 1850, there was a total of four or five miniature painters, of whom only two enjoyed the particular reputation of finishing fifty portraits in the course of a year. These artists earned just enough to make a living... A few years later there were in Marseilles four to five photographers... Each produced yearly an average of 1,000 to 1,200 negatives which they sold for 15 francs a piece, receiving 10,000 francs, so that the group of them constituted a business turnover of close to a million. And one could confirm the same development in all the large cities of France” (Vidal [1871], cited in Freund, cited V, p. 830 (Y6a, 2)).
economic insecurity. "The true Bohemian," who were still in their twenties in 1848, represented a "veritable intellectual proletariat." Marger was the son of a "bourgeois" tailor; the father of Champfreux was secretary of a town hall at Laon... that of Delcva a turner from the faubourg Saint-Marceau; the family of Gourbet was a "peasant..." Champfreux and Chintreuil handled packages for a bookseller; Bonvot was a typographer." (Martimol 1913, cited V, p. 931 [d10, 1]. Cf. p. 25 [U6a, 5]). Benjamin’s prime example of the autonomous writer was, of course, Baudelaire, considered in detail in chapter 6 below.

162. V, p. 717 (U5a, 7).

163. The fact that newspapers first reached working-class audiences through individual sales to people in their homes, the reading rooms (salles de lecture) which were frequently found in the backyards. They were places where for a small fee books and newspapers could be read in a collective setting. These reading rooms, having to compete with cheap publications, declined after 1850 (as did the arcades).

164. V, p. 725 (U9, 1).

165. V, p. 731 (U12, 3).

166. V, p. 734 (U13, 4).

167. Cf. the yearly statistics of new journals launched, V, p. 737 (U11, 6).

168. V, p. 726 (U9a, 1).

169. Benjamin notes the "connection between revenues [Hugo 300,000 francs for Les Misérables; Lamartine 600,000 for Les Gondal] and political aspirations" (V, p. 913 [d6a, 1]). Sociopolitical impact was not limited to the electoral arena. The "novels of George Sand led to an increase in divorces, almost all of which were applied for from the side of the woman. The author's work is a large part of which she functioned as advisor to the women" (V, p. 914 [d6a, 7]).

170. Exemplifying this fundamentally idealist stance: Victor Hugo saw in the shape of Notre Dame an "H," as the gigantic projection of his own name (see V, p. 935 [d17a, 1]).

171. J. Lucas-Dubreton (1927), cited V, p. 903 (d1, 3).

172. "Meant ironically: 'It was a fortunate idea of M. de Balzac to predict a peasant revolt and demand the re-establishment of feudalism! What do you want? Is it his own brand of socialism. Mme. Sand has another. Likewise M. Sue: each novelist has his own'" (Paulin Lamave 1848), cited V, p. 903 [d1, 5], cf. V, p. 920 [d12a, 8].

173. Albert Malet and P. Grillet (1919), cited V, p. 901 (d1a, 3).

174. "...[The] red flag which you bring to us has never done anything but tour the Champ de Mars, dragged in the blood of the people in '91 and '93, and the troubadour has made a tour of the globe with the name, the glory and the liberty of the nation'" (Lamartine, speech at the Hôtel de Ville, 25 February 1848, cited in Albert Malet and P. Grillet [1919], cited V, p. 903 [d1, 2]).

175. Friedrich Szarvody (1852), cited V, p. 901 (d1a, 2).

176. On 6 April 1848, Lamartine asserted: "Russian diplomat that the French population had..." "such healthy common sense, such a respect for the family and for property..." that "...order in Paris" would be maintained; moreover, the bourgeois National Guard who

were called back to the city (and who ten days later were to put down a workers' demonstration by violence) would, he maintained, "...keep in check the fanatics of the clubs, who are supported by several thousand arms and criminal elements..." (Lamartine, cited in Pekowsky [1928], cited V, p. 925 [d12, 2]).

177. "Decisive facts in Les Misérables are based on real occurrences" (V, p. 925 [d12, 1]).

178. V, p. 907 (d3, 6).

179. Éugène Spuller, cited in E. Meyer (1927), cited V, p. 918 (d8a, 5).

180. V, p. 935 (d17, 3).

181. V, p. 918 (d8a, 5). When Hugo subsequently participated in the resistance to Louis Napoleon's coup d'État, he was rewarded with exile from France.

182. As one critic evaluated Hugo speaking: "...I make a revolutionary with rattle. I place a red bonnet on the old dictionary. No more words, sacred! No more words, commoner! I make a tempest at the bottom of the suk-pot." (Paul Bourget 1885, cited V, p. 903 [d2a, 3]). A June 1848 revolutionary passed this judgment: "Citizen Hugo has made his debut in the tribune of the National Assembly. He was as we predicted: quok of gestures and phrases, orator of lambast and hollow words..." (political sheet, cited V, p. 904 [d1a, 2]).

183. V, p. 917 (d8, 4).

184. J. Lucas-Dubreton (1928), cited V, p. 908 (d1, 5).


187. CE, V, p. 926 (d12a, 2).

188. The "Passage-Herb" thus provides the historical research in support of Benjamin's political-cultural pronouncement at the end of the Artwork essay that fascism "aestheticizes politics; communist responds by politicizing art" (Artwork essay, I, p. 509).


191. V, p. 216 (F2, 8). The "difficulties and crises..." faced by art technology were of a degree "no longer easily comprehended." It was thought that the "steam carriages..." should run on "streets of granite" rather than railroad tracks ("Der Saturn..." V, p. 1061).

192. Cited, V, p. 906 (d2a, 5).

193. V, p. 826 (V1a, 5).

194. Dubech-D'Espérec (1926), cited V, p. 826 (V1a, 5). The development of railroads was "surpassed everywhere" (ibid.). Politicians were no more perceptive in recognizing the significance of the new railroads. "Theirs, thinking railroads would never function, had gazes (idem, cited V, p. 220 [F3a, 6]). "Hausmann didn't know how to adopt what one could call a policy for the construction of train stations" (idem, cited V, p. 225 [F4a, 3]).
196. This was the crucial point. Benjamin’s reason for assembling these historical facts was to demonstrate to the writers and artists of his own era that their objective interests, as “technicians,” would “scream or later” lead them to make assessments that would “ground their solidarity with the proletariat in the most passionate way” (“Der Autor als Produzent,” II, p. 699).

197. In its early years the École polytechnique was receptive to the theories of Saint-Simon (V, p. 728 [U16a, 3]). Marx noted in regard to the insurrection of workers in 1848: “In order that the people’s last illusion disappear, in order that the post be broken with entirely, the custodians of poetic ingredient of the enthusiastic bourgeois youth, the pupils of the École polytechnique, the three-beamed hats, had to stand on the side of the oppressors” (Marx, cited V, p. 987 [Sla, 2]).

198. V, p. 828 (Y2a, 6).

199. V, p. 232 (G1, 1).


202. Hence the “phantasmagoria” of the flâneur (V, p. 540 [M16, 6]), whose perceptions, blended with dreams, paralleled those of the hashish smoker (M12, 3; M12, 4).

203. V, p. 1062 (“Der Saturnring . . .”).

204. V, p. 692 (S9a, 1). Benjamin mentions Realism as the first attempt to fuse the two in a self-conscious response to the threat from technology (see S3, 5). By the time of Jugendstil this threat had “fallen into repression”; Jugendstil’s “aggression” against technology, because hidden, occurred “all the more aggressively” (S9a, 1).

205. V, p. 693 (S9a, 7).

206. Marxists have traditionally envisioned socialism as an overcoming of the division between mental and manual labor in that each member of society will do none of both. Benjamin’s conception is that the technological revolution will make both kinds of labor the same. While mental work is mediated by an increasingly technological production apparatus, “manual” labor becomes intellectualized. He notes that at the building site of the Eiffel Tower, “thought dominates over manual power,” as human energy found a substitute in “scaffolding and cranes” (“V, p. 1067 ["Der Saturnring . . .”].

207. V, p. 350 (M16a, 3).

208. These are cited heavily in the pre-1937 entries to Kasendat X, “Marx” (V, pp. 808-809).

209. V, pp. 500-01 (K3a, 2); cf. the earlier entry (G, 32), which has in place of “clear to us,” “arhistorical.” The K3a, 2 version adds: “Of course, within the dialectical essence of technology this throws light on only one moment. (Which one? it is difficult to say: antinomy if not synthesis.) In any case there exists in technology the other moment: that of bringing about goals that are alien to nature, also with means that are alien, even hostile to nature, that emancipate themselves from nature and subdue it.”

210. V, p. 578 (X3, 1).
6 Historical Nature: Ruin

1. Cf. Adorno's definition (which draws on Benjamin's Transespi study) of Naturschutz as a "kind of enchantment of history" (Adorno, 'Die Idee der Naturgeschichte,' GS I, p. 361).

2. V, p. 698 (p. 4; also T1a, 8; cf. D, 6; a, 2).

3. V, p. 1016 (a, 4). The novel opens with a description of the Passage du Pont Neuf: "[...] a narrow, dark corridor [...] paved with yellowish flagstones, worn and loose: which always exude a damp, pungent smell, and is covered with a flat glazed roofing block gray with grime."

4. "On fine summer days, a whistling light does fall through the dingy glass roofing and hang dismally about this arcade [...]. The smoky shops behind are just so many black holes in which weird shapes move and have their being. [...] The Passage du Pont Neuf is no place to go for a nice stroll" (Emile Zola, Théâtre Romain, trans. Leonard Tancock [New York: Penguin Books, 1978], pp. 31-32).

5. Theodor W. Adorno, "Die Idee der Naturgeschichte" (1932), Gesamte Schriften, vol. I: Philosophische Schriften, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1973), p. 336. Adorno cites, not the now famous discussion of "second nature" in Lukács' Histoire et Classe Grouaumoos, which uses the term as synonymous with Marx's concept of commodification, but Lukács earlier use of the Hegelian term in Théorie du Nouel. "The second nature of human creation has no logical substantiative. Its forms are too fixed for the symbol-creating moment to nestle in them. [...] This nature is not mute, obvious and meaningless like first nature; it is a frozen sense-complex that has become alien, no longer awakening the soul. It is a hilt of symbols [Gotteslehre] of deceiving, misleading, and could therefore—if this were possible—only be awakened through the metaphysical act of a reawakening of the psychic that it created or contained in its former or supposable existence, never, however, capable of being experienced by another unawareness." (cited in ibid., pp. 336-37).


7. Adorno, "Die Idee [...]," GS I, p. 357. Cf. Benjamin's comment in a letter to Scholem that he and Lukács came to similar conclusions, despite different ways of getting there (Briefe I, p. 355).
