

Residues of a Dream World

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In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama (Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels)* conceived of in 1916 and written in 1925, Walter Benjamin discusses *Trauerspiel* (a particular form of baroque theatre based on royal martyr dramas) as a play of sorrow, a ceremonial and ritualized expression of grief, where the hero is both a tyrant and a martyr, sovereign and Christ, part man and part god, grounded in history rather than myth, and emphasizing the corporeal as well as the transcendental. (1) In these dramas sadness at the transience of life was represented, for example, as nature petrified in the form of fragments of death, skulls and corpses, and as civilization disintegrating as ruins of classical monuments and buildings – both were understood as allegories of the human condition. Benjamin stated that: ‘Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things.’(2)

The figure of the ruin highlights a key aspect of allegory for Benjamin – its relation to time. He notes in baroque allegory ‘an appreciation of the transience of things’, as well as an expression of sadness about the futility of attempting to save for eternity those things that are transient.(3) Benjamin’s study of the baroque also focused on allegorical engravings of the sixteenth century such as Albrecht Dürer’s ‘Melencolia’ (1514), in which he describes the ‘utensils of active life’, as well as tools of creative pursuit ‘lying around unused on the floor’ next to the figure of melancholy personified, as ‘objects of contemplation’. (4) Cultural theorist, Susan Buck-Morss, has drawn out the importance of the temporal in Benjamin’s definition of allegory, how in allegory ‘history appears as nature in decay or ruins’.(5)



My first visit to the house I came to call ‘Moss Green’ had occurred in the spring of 2001. For the next decade I was to walk past Moss Green several times a year, as part of my weekly Sunday walk. In our walks out of Sevenoaks we would sometimes take the route down Oak Lane, then Grassy Lane, past Fig Street, and then along Gracious Lane, drawing to a halt at the fork in the road where Moss Green is situated. When we first saw the house we were entirely enchanted, with the way of life it represented as well as the arresting beauty of its slow yet gentle decay. The house was single story, of a brick and timber construction, placed at the top of a scarp slope – with its porch facing a view out over southern England, under which two benches faced one another.

The interior was full of exquisite touches: a perfectly placed built-in cupboard, a carefully detailed window sill and frame, a thoughtful light switch, a door handle that

An important aspect of the allegorical method is its focus on the image as an 'amorphous fragment' rather than an 'organic totality', producing, rather than ambiguity and flexibility of meaning.(6)



fitted like a glove. It was hovering at that point where the decay was still able to provide an atmosphere of charm, where the thought of collapse could be held off, and where it was still possible to imagine oneself into the house, repairing the woodwork and occupying the rooms. But over the years the house has increasingly fallen into disrepair, and our spirits now sink each time we see it. When its slate roof was removed around three years ago the rot really set in and as a structure it is now barely stable. As it slipped passed the threshold of being 'save-able'; we have surrendered our dream of living there ourselves in a modest rural retreat.

On one visit, years ago, when the house was open to the elements, but some of its contents still present, we noted books on architecture, old journals from the building trade, and piles of photographs. We salvaged a few items - notably one book, *New Architecture of London: A Selection of Buildings since 1930*, along with a

Art theorist Peter Bürger has defined Benjamin's understanding of allegory as a four-part schema that involves, first, the isolation of an element as a fragment and the removal of that fragment from its context; and second, the combination of various isolated fragments to create meanings other than those derived from the fragments' original locations. The third important aspect of Benjamin's understanding of allegory for Bürger is his interpretation of the allegorist's activity as melancholic, where the melancholic gaze of the allegorist causes 'life' to be drawn out of the objects she or he assembles; finally, Bürger considers the viewer's reception of allegory in which history is represented as decline rather than progress.(7)

Benjamin's own major work, the unfinished *Passagen-Werk* or *The Arcades Project*, was composed of fragments, including both quotes collected by Benjamin and words written by him between 1927 and 1939. It focused on a particular ruin – the Parisian

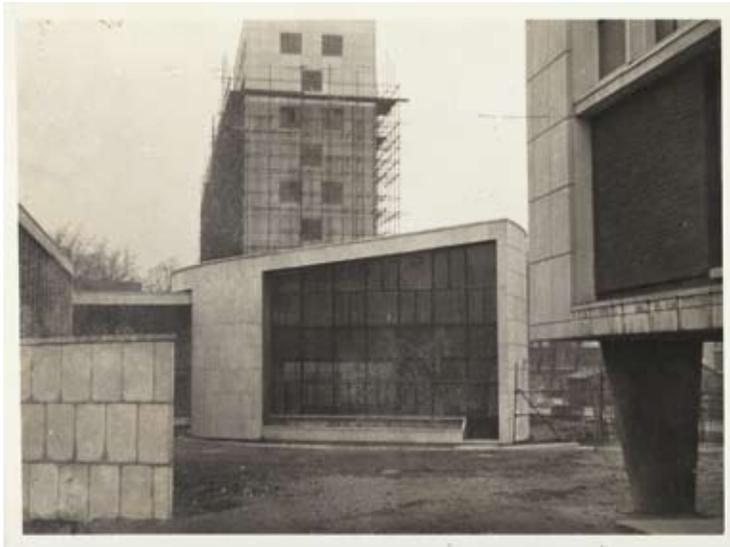


selection of black and white photographs, some of which are reproduced here. Recently in examining the photographs more closely I have become fascinated with tracking down the buildings imaged in them. As well as the architectural qualities of the structures, I have had five text-based clues to work with – a board in front of one block of flats with the name: 'Ernest Knifton Ltd.'; a car parked outside another with the registration plate: 'SLX 956'; a street sign reading 'Westmoreland Terrace'; and letters over the entrances to two other buildings with the words: '1-24 Edmund Street' and 'Witl'.

I have managed to track down most of the structures – it turns out that the majority we now regard as modernist icons, such as: The Elmington Estate (1957), Picton Street, London SE5, designed by the LCC Architect's Dept., now largely demolished; The Hallfield Estate (1952-1955), Bishops Bridge Road,

arcade.(8) Benjamin's specific interest in the Parisian arcades of the early nineteenth century, along with certain material fragments associated with them, for example dust and mannequins, concerned their role as dialectical images.(9) According to Benjamin, as thesis the arcades "flower"; they are palaces of commodity consumption and the wish-images of the dreaming collective of the early nineteenth century; as antithesis, in the early twentieth century, the arcades are in decline; they are ruins, no longer desired by the consuming populace.(10) In his own words, 'They are residues of a dream-world...'(11)

As a particular form of dialectical synthesis, the arcade is a dialectical image – a moment where the past is recognized in the present as a ruin that was once desired. Benjamin's image captures dialectical contradiction in an instant: 'The dialectic, in standing still, makes an image.'(12)



W2, designed by Tecton, Drake and Lasdun for Paddington Borough Council; The Alton East Estate (1952-1955), Portsmouth Road, SW15, designed by the LCC Architect's Dept.; The Alton West Estate (1955-1959), Roehampton Lane, SW15, designed by the LCC Architect's Dept.; and Churchill Gardens (1950-1962), Grosvenor Road, Lupus Street, SW1, designed by Powell and Moya for Westminster City Council.

What has happened today to the socialist ideals of modernism? Some of the modern movement's public housing projects have become oases of cool property in the London postcodes associated with the rich, well-maintained, sometimes privatized and provided with concierge schemes, while in poorer neighbourhoods they have been allowed to decline materially, often not included in 'major works' programmes – the large scale council repair and maintenance cycles. In aspiring regeneration zones, some have been demolished because

The ruin that features in baroque dramas in terms of decay and disintegration, and as a site for a melancholic reflection on the transience of human and material existence, as a dialectical image in the *Passagen-Werk* becomes politically instructive.



the original construction is viewed to be too expensive to overhaul, others are in ruins or at least the years of neglect have led to conditions of terminal dereliction. But the seeming pragmatic solution offered by viewing the problem as an economic concerns, is a symptom of an underlying problem where modern architecture is itself seen as the cause of the malaise, intimately tied through its brutalist aesthetic to deterministic design and social deprivation. This has forced the designers of certain regeneration schemes, the Elmington Estate for one, to adopt a new architectural language: one not so obviously 'modern' and therefore capable of suggesting better standards of living in a less utopian manner.

Returning to Moss Green, once again, several weekends ago, much of the timberwork had collapsed and was lying in pieces over the grass. I turned one rotten section over to reveal two words painted in fast fragmenting white letters: 'May Morn'. This, I remembered, was the building's name plaque, which had been located at

For Benjamin, a key quality of the dialectical image is its ability to create a moment when the usual patterns of thinking stop and new ones are given the chance to emerge: 'Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock.' (13) Montage was for him a progressive form because it had the ability to 'interrupt the context into which it is inserted'. (14) A technique he admired in other artworks, Benjamin used montage as a form of textual construction in his own *Passagen-Werk*: 'Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't say anything. Merely show ... The first stage in this undertaking will be to carry over the principle of montage into history. That is, to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment' the crystal of the total event.' (15)

- (1) George Steiner, 'Introduction', Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, [1925] trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1977) pp. 16-8.
- (2) Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 178.
- (3) Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 223.
- (4) Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 140.
- (5) Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 166-8.
- (6) Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, pp. 176-7.
- (7) Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) p. 69.
- (8) Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project (1927-39)*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).
- (9) Rolf Tiedemann, 'Dialectics at a Standstill: Approaches to the *Passagen-werk*', Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 932.
- (10) Walter Benjamin, 'Materials for the Exposé of 1935', *The Arcades Project*, p. 910.
- (11) Walter Benjamin, 'Paris: The Capital of the Nineteenth Century' [1935], trans. Quintin Hoare, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: New Left Books, 1997) p. 176.
- (12) Benjamin, 'Materials for the Exposé of 1935', p. 911.
- (13) Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' [1940] trans. Harry Zohn, *Illuminations* (London: Fontana, 1992) pp. 245-55, p. 254.
- (14) Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, pp. 67 and 77.
- (15) Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, pp. 460 and 461.



the entrance to the plot, framed by brambles, when we first came across the house.

Morn and mourn are homonyms, one suggests a beginning, the other an ending. Due to their deteriorating material states, the 'Moss Green' house, the paper of the photographs, and the painted letters 'May Morn', all point towards their own disintegration – or endings, yet the buildings contained within the photographs are shown at the beginning of their life. What does it mean to turn back now and examine these ruins – these deteriorating photographs of modernist icons – at an early moment – a spring-time?

Note: This image-text piece is composed of two strands. The text on the right, positioned in between colour images I took of the ruined house – May Morn – built in the Arts & Crafts style, is set in Golden Type, a font designed by William Morris in 1890. The text on the left is set in Helvetica, a modern sans-serif typeface developed by Swiss typeface designer Max Miedinger with Eduard Hoffmann in 1957, the same year as building of the Elmington Estate, one of the housing estates depicted in the black and white photographs found at May Morn. This work draws on previous research on dialectical images in the writings of Walter Benjamin published in Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture* (London: IB Tauris, 2006) and a longer image-text work, 'May Morn' published in Gareth Evans and Di Robson (eds), *Towards The Re-Enchantment: Place and Its Meanings*, (London: Artevents, 2010), pp. 40-59.