Toward a Copernican Revolution:
Flânerie, Critique, and Capitalist Modernity
in Walter Benjamin.

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Abstract

Walter Benjamin refers to the commodified dream world of nineteenth century Paris as a ‘little universe’, in which the Parisian Arcades first form a modern cosmos of intoxicating ‘phantasmagoria’ that blunts the human capacity to perceive things as they ‘truly are’. Benjamin’s proposed methodology for the ‘dialectical image’ describes a potentially explosive force that would serve to disrupt the centrifugal balance of the historicism of this phantasmagoric universe. Benjamin hoped that his *Passagen-Werk* would spark a ‘Copernican turn of remembrance’ to generate a revolutionary awakening in his own time. Key to these ambitions is the figure of the flâneur who first found his entrepreneurial niche strolling the glass and iron corridors of the Parisian Arcades, and who became progressively alienated from both the city as well as his social class in the years that followed 1848. This thesis demonstrates how the intersection of the flâneur with Walter Benjamin’s work enriches our understanding of both in turn. By engaging with the notion of the flâneur/flânerie as it specifically applies to Benjamin’s work, as well as with how Benjamin’s work is enriched through a broader, deeper historical understanding of the flâneur, I argue that the flâneur becomes a multifaceted and in-depth means of theorizing capitalist/urban experience. The redeeming potential that can be found in the expressions of those who have been most marginalized in society exists as an important theme to Benjamin’s concept of historical awakening and the dialectical image, particularly as it pertains to the work of Charles Baudelaire. From this context, I explore the relationship of Benjamin’s work on the flâneur to his own vantage point at the dawn of the Second World War. The tragic fate of the flâneur foreshadows the political nihilism and, ultimately, self-destructive impulses of inter-war Europe. Yet the redeeming hope and value that Benjamin finds in fragments of poetry and prose left behind by Baudelaire’s alienated flâneur lies in its revolutionary potential as a source of dialectical images.

**Keywords:** flâneur; revolution; commodification; historical materialism; marginal identities; dialectical image
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated in memory and honour of Bob Everton—who tirelessly fought for social justice in the streets and in the institution, and who was among those influential first who inspired and encouraged me to pursue graduate studies.
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Chapter 1. Point of Departure: What is the Flâneur?

1.1. Thesis Introduction

The purpose of this thesis will be to demonstrate how the intersection of the flâneur with Walter Benjamin’s work enriches our understanding of both in turn. I engage with the notion of the flâneur/flânerie as it specifically applies to Benjamin’s work. I also examine how Benjamin’s work is enriched through a broader, deeper historical understanding of the flâneur—particularly as it pertains to the work of Charles Baudelaire. I argue that by juxtaposing the flâneur with Benjamin’s work, the flâneur becomes a multifaceted and in-depth means of theorizing capitalist/urban experience.

In the second chapter of this thesis, I begin the complex process of defining the flâneur. While most conceptions of the flâneur begin with the mid-nineteenth century city ‘stroller’ who engaged in artistic and literary production for the purpose of commercial journalism, the ‘flâneur’ was shaped by much more. Starting with the early nineteenth century, my analysis charts the evolution of three different stages of nineteenth century flânerie: the bourgeois ‘bon-homme’ flâneur, the heroic artist-flâneur, and the marginalized poet-flâneur (Parkhurst-Ferguson, 1994: 22-39). The urban epistemologies characteristic of each stage of flânerie are intertwined with the modernizing forces that shaped Paris as the century progressed. Especially significant are the social and political transformations in France as a consequence of the 1848
revolution and how these transformations were reflected and expressed in the cultural labour performed by the flâneur. Each type of flânerie cultivated unique epistemologies of urban space which, in turn, generated particular ways of seeing. I argue that the flâneur was crucial in shaping the mythology of modern Paris: studying the flâneur allows us to subject this mythology to analytic scrutiny (Harvey, 2006: 24-25). The flâneur serves as a primary magnifier, exposing the lives of bourgeois citizens to reveal their innermost convictions and desires, as well as their failings as a social class (Harvey: 17). Most importantly, the alienated gaze of Charles Baudelaire’s marginalized poet-flâneur tears back the veil of capitalist myth, exposing the brutal social realities of nineteenth century Paris as the city comes under the rule of the commodity form after the failure of the 1848 revolution. This discussion of historical context sets the stage for a more focused investigation of how the flâneur allows us to understand certain aspects of modern/capitalist experience in Benjamin’s work.

In the third chapter, I focus on Benjamin’s engagement with the flâneur, both as methodological inspiration and grounding for his critique of capitalist modernity. I conduct a detailed reading of how Benjamin uses the flâneur to make sense of commodification, the promotional self, memory and experience. I explain how marginality exists as an important theme to Benjamin’s work around the flâneur, particularly as it pertains to Benjamin’s concept of historical awakening and the dialectical image. Digging deeper into Benjamin’s work on Baudelaire I next embark on an exploration of the broader significance of the flâneur/flânerie from the perspective of capitalism, commodified experience, and the dangers of political nihilism. Emphasis is given to theories of memory and experience and how they inform (and are informed by) Benjamin’s use of flânerie as methodology and critique.
In the fourth and concluding chapter, I explore the relationship of Benjamin’s work on the flâneur to his own vantage point at the dawn of the Second World War. The tragic fate of the flâneur foreshadows the political nihilism and, ultimately, self-destructive impulses of inter-war Europe.

Let us begin with an historical analysis of the flâneur that starts in the city streets of nineteenth century Paris.
Chapter 2.  The Flâneur and Flânerie in Nineteenth Century Paris

2.1. Introduction: Paris as Revolutionary Volcano

In *Insurgent Identities* Roger Gould (1995) argues: “Perhaps no nineteenth-century society inspired more fear among conservatives, or hope among revolutionaries, than France” (1). Between 1830 and 1871, the mass uprisings centered in Paris succeeded in “toppling two monarchies and an empire, and shook the foundations of two republics—a record unmatched in any other Western nation” (Gould: 1). By 1848, both Karl Marx and Alexis de Tocqueville perceived “in France’s working class the clearest signs of an impending proletarian revolution” (Gould: 1). As John Torpey (2006) points out, Tocqueville warned his parliamentary colleagues in the French Chamber of Deputies that, although seemingly benign, the social and political opinions of the working classes had in fact grown increasingly radicalized: “[W]hen such opinions take root and spread, sinking deeply into the masses, they...bring in their train the most terrifying of revolutions... Gentlemen, my profound conviction is that we are lulling ourselves to sleep over an active volcano” (as cited in Torpey, 2006: 699). During the same period that Tocqueville was delivering this cautionary speech, Marx and Engels were hard at work penning *The Communist Manifesto*. This manifesto “would eventually become the most widely influential single document in the canon of modern socialism” sowing seeds of revolution across Europe (Torpey: 699).
It is from within this volcanic climate that I begin my analysis of the flâneur. In this chapter, I examine how the urban epistemology of flânerie evolves throughout the century. I draw from the work of Priscilla Parkhurst-Ferguson (1994) to divide nineteenth century flânerie into three distinct stages: the bourgeois ‘bon-homme’ flâneur, the heroic artist-flâneur, and the marginalized poet-flâneur. In my analysis, special importance is placed on how the flâneur’s public representation remains intertwined with the modernizing forces that continue to shape Paris. This historical context establishes the background for a more focused investigation of how the flâneur allows us to understand certain aspects of modern/capitalist experience.

In the section “From ‘Bon-Homme’ to Balzac”, I chart the cultural evolution of the flâneur as an urban social ‘type’ that originates in early nineteenth century Paris and reaches its height in popularity with the advent of the Parisian Arcades. Particular emphasis is placed on Balzac’s ‘heroic’ artist-flâneur in the 1830s and 40s, and how his urban epistemology both shapes and reflects early experiences of commercial culture and class-consciousness. King Louis Philippe’s rise to power following the 1830 July Revolution leads to the increased wealth and dominance of the haute-bourgeoisie, and the critical implications of the flâneur’s rise to popularity are examined in this context.

In the interlude entitled “Revolution and Empire”, I describe the explosive events that take place in Paris as part of the Revolution of 1848. I outline the events leading to the failure of the Socialist revolution in its aftermath, followed by Napoléon Bonaparte’s populist rise to power through a coup d’État that results in the inauguration of the Second Empire in France. This interlude allows for a clear recognition of the profound effect that the failure of the 1848 Revolution subsequently has on Paris and the work of French poet-flâneur Charles Baudelaire.
In the section “Flânerie, Modernity, and Capitalism”, I argue that Baudelaire’s experience of the Haussmannization and commodification of Paris marks a redefinition of ‘heroism’ for the flâneur that is distinctly modernist. I revisit Baudelaire’s salon reviews of 1845 and 1846, examining how they contrast and compare to his work following the revolution of 1848. Elements of Baudelaire’s poetry and prose are explored, such as ‘The Eyes of the Poor’ and ‘The Old Clown’. My analysis of these poems emphasizes how Baudelaire’s alienated and catastrophic expressions become exemplary of the flâneur’s increased proletarianization and marginalization from his literary genre and social class. The effects of this proletarianization and marginalization are examined through an analysis of Baudelaire’s *The Painter of Modern Life*. I focus on how Baudelaire’s work acts as the expression of a society that has increasingly come to perceive itself through a commodified lens. Important themes in Baudelaire’s work -- modernity, art, beauty, women's fashion, war, and prostitution -- are articulated against the social and political backdrop of the Paris of the Second Empire. I conclude by introducing Benjamin’s theory of ‘empathy with the soul of the commodity’ and its application to Baudelaire’s marginalized poet-flâneur.

In “The Privatization of Flânerie”, which is the final section to this chapter, I describe how the flâneur fades into obsolescence as a modern social ‘type’ just as the Parisian Arcades are rendered passé through the introduction of the indoor shopping plaza and department store. The rise of the department store also marks a noticeable shift in the public visibility of middle class women. Women become the new ‘expert’ patrons and sellers to these fully commodified spaces, thereby displacing the flâneur from the position of dominance that he had come to enjoy in the partially public, partially private terrain of the arcades. I explore whether the end of the flâneur’s popularity as a
social ‘type’ nearing the end of the nineteenth century truly marks an end for flânerie, or whether the flâneur may continue to survive in other guises.

2.2. The Origins of the Flâneur: From ‘Bon-Homme’ to Balzac

Most conceptions of the flâneur begin with the mid-nineteenth century city ‘stroller’ who engages in artistic and literary production for the purpose of commercial journalism. However, the first descriptions of the flâneur actually appear much earlier. According to Elizabeth Wilson (1992), the nineteenth century Encyclopaedia Larousse suggests that the word flâneur may have originated from an Irish word for ‘libertine’ (93). Priscilla Parkhurst-Ferguson (1994) conversely traces the first recorded usage of this term back to as early as 1585, in Touraine (39). She observes that the Norman word ‘flanner’ also appears in 1645, which derives from the even older Scandinavian term ‘flana’ (39). Parkhurst-Ferguson explains that ‘flana’ has been described to mean, “courir étourdiment ca et là” (1994: 39). From out of my own French-to-English translation, this might then be roughly understood as the action of aimlessly “running here and there, in a roundabout way”.

In “The flâneur on and off the streets of Paris” Parkhurst-Ferguson (1994) argues that the stages of nineteenth century flânerie can be divided into three distinct eras: the bourgeois ‘bon-homme’ flâneur, the ‘heroic’ artist-flâneur, and the poet-flâneur. She explains that, as a social type, the flâneur first officially appears on the streets of Paris in 1806, in an anonymously-published 32-page pamphlet entitled Le Flâneur au salon ou M. Bon-Homme: examen joyeux des tableaux, mêlé de vaudevilles, more simply known throughout Paris as the ‘Flâneur’ (1994: 26). Shortly after the appearance of the 1806
pamphlet, the term’s next appearance is in a French dictionary of popular usage in 1808. Flâneur is defined as a derogatory slur, a reference to an individual who is known as a “lazy bones, a loafer, a man of insufferable idleness, who doesn’t know where to carry his trouble and his boredom” (as cited in Parkhurst-Ferguson, 1994: 24). This subtly déclassé type of bourgeois ‘bon-homme’ was independently wealthy and therefore spent most of his days strolling around to take in the sights of the city and its burgeoning middle class salons with an air of voyeuristic, yet highly predictable, banality.

As both Elizabeth Wilson (1992: 94) and Parkhurst-Ferguson (1994: 26) point out, the early nineteenth century bourgeois ‘bon-homme’ was quite different from later visions of flânerie, which emphasized expert intensity, spontaneity, and the unexpected joys of urban mystery. Instead, he prefers the steady comfort and reassurance acquired through the regularity of his daily routines. His banal patronage of the cultural destinations of the city little resembles the vehemence with which his successors will later stake claim to their own reviews and cultural production. Rather than flamboyant reviews composed for mass consumption, the bourgeois-flâneur’s salon writing better resembles the private reflections that a hobbyist would jot down in a personal travel journal (Wilson, 1992: 95). He never becomes an artistic contributor himself. Unlike the non-descript, yet subtly elegant, fashion apparel proudly sported by later flâneurs, the bourgeois ‘bon-homme’ remains very easy to pick out in a crowd due to his slightly foppish wig, broad-brimmed hat, and dark brown suit (Parkhurst-Ferguson, 1997: 83).

However, the common link that the early nineteenth century bourgeois ‘bon-homme’ flâneur does share with his successors is a dispassionate indifference to the dominant rhythms of social life. The bourgeois ‘bon-homme’ was an unmarried, independently wealthy man of leisure with little need to bother with the demands of the
work-a-day world. He remained resistant to the increasingly industrialized pace of modern life, and yet was also freed from the social obligations of participation in the bourgeois household. He also refused to observe the customs and quartiers of one particular social class or another. The bourgeois bon-homme remained steadfastly detached from any notable companionship while out and about on his urban forays, remaining independently mobile to wander through the early nineteenth century city and society at will. (Wilson, 1992: 94; Parkhurst-Ferguson, 1994: 27) Although the freedom to live in this manner was dependent upon class and gender privilege, the early nineteenth century bourgeois-flâneur started to earn a reputation for deviance and non-conformity (Parkhurst-Ferguson, 1994: 25; 1997: 84). The expectations associated with this ‘social type’ carried well into the remainder of the century.

In “Time, work-discipline, and industrial capitalism”, EP Thompson (1967) describes how the introduction of the factory clock first impacted and shaped industrial society. The clock was used as a means to coordinate and define hours of productive labour, generating a new demarcation between ‘work’ and ‘life’. Thompson explains, “This measurement embodies a simple relationship. Those who are employed experience a distinction between their employer’s time and their ‘own’ time ... Time is now currency: it is not passed but spent” (61). In other words, this demarcation was fuelled by the concept that ‘time is money’ and should therefore be spent productively. Thompson explains that workers initially resisted the imposition of clocks in factories. “In the first stage, we find simple resistance. But, in the next stage, as the new time discipline is imposed, so the workers begin to fight, not against time, but about it” (Thompson: 85). In the nineteenth century, the Puritanical rhetoric of ‘time-thrift’ became a part of the moral compass that was increasingly imposed upon and internalized by
working people (87). Time was described as an invaluable commodity that should never be wasted, while hours spent in idleness and leisure were increasingly frowned upon. As Rolf Tiedemann (1999[1988]: 944) similarly points out, Walter Benjamin describes how the “anarchistic impulse” which tries to stop time served as an important symbolic component to the civil insurrections that occurred during the 1830 July Revolution in Paris. Benjamin’s quotes in the *Passagen-Werk* report how people stood “at the foot of every clock tower” throughout the city “…firing on clock faces to make the day stand still” (1999: 737). Like the workers who initially resisted the use of clocks in factories, and the civil insurgents who fired at the clock faces during the July Revolution, the *bourgeois*-flâneur’s style of interacting with the city was also perceived as openly resistant to the demands of the capitalist labour process and the mechanization of time.

Several incarnations of the *bourgeois*-flâneur as a leisurely urban stroller occurred in the first half of the nineteenth century. In *Paris as Revolution*, Parkhurst-Ferguson (1997) describes the ‘literary guidebooks’ of Jouy’s popular *Hermit* series as the next analog to the 1806 pamphlet *Le Flâneur au salon*. She explains that Jouy’s ‘hermit’ was later cited as one of the flâneur’s key ancestors in Auguste de Lacroix’s “*Le Flâneur*” from *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* in 1841. Parkhurst-Ferguson writes, “It would not be surprising if Jouy, a well established and widely published author at the time, was trying out a new formula in the 1806 pamphlet. Certainly, the lineage is there” (84). Benjamin (2003[1938]) describes how later generations of flâneurs were famously rumoured to have openly flaunted their ‘resistance’ against the capitalist labour process by taking slow-moving creatures, such as turtles, for long strolls in the city’s most highly attended commercial districts. Benjamin explains, “The flâneurs liked to have the turtles set the pace for them. If they had had their way, progress would have been obliged to
accommodate itself to this pace”. While the pace of modern industrial life continued to accelerate, the flâneur “demanded elbow room and was unwilling to forgo the life of a gentleman of leisure” (31). However, by the time of the ascendancy of Louis Philippe and the restoration of the July Monarchy in France, a climate of surveillance and state censorship prevailed (18). “Down with dawdling!” was to become the watchword of the day, while more leisurely forms of bourgeois bon-hommerie were increasingly forced to adhere to the pace of the productive work cycle (31).

Parkhurst-Ferguson (1994) explains it was the vehemence with which particular groups of writers and artists sharply defended and differentiated their version of the flâneur that made it very much a title of their own (28). Representations of flânerie as a direct form of resistance to both the capitalist labour process and bureaucratic surveillance emerged, and this further served to generate an aura of rebellion and non-conformity around the flâneur. In order to take control of these representations, mid-nineteenth century writers strove to legitimize the flâneur’s position by turning the pejorative connotations attached to flânerie to their own advantage. Parkhurst-Ferguson describes how they increasingly sought to disassociate the flâneur from other urban social types, such as the ‘badaûds’ [gapers] and ‘musards’ [vulgar idlers] (26). “Where M. Bon-Homme accepted his relationship as ‘a very distant cousin’ of ‘M. Musard’, thirty years later, the flâneur insists upon the difference” (Parkhurst-Ferguson, 1994: 28). The mid-nineteenth century flâneur was thus reframed in such a way that clearly set him apart from other more ‘ordinary flâneurs’, whose leisurely and aimless pursuits placed them among the members of a “‘happy and soft species’…given to random speculations and ‘silly conjectures’” (Balzac as cited in Parkhurst-Ferguson, 1994: 29).
In the 1830’s and 40’s, writers such as Honoré de Balzac worked hard to promote, define, and control the representation of flânerie by broadening its definition to include specific forms of cultural activity, which went far beyond the act of strolling. “To stroll is to vegetate, to flâner is to live”, Balzac’s flâneur declared in the *Comédie humaine* (as cited in Parkhurst-Ferguson, 1994: 29). Although Balzac first introduced the topic of flânerie in his *Physiologie du mariage* during the same year as Auguste Lacroix’s more overtly themed ‘Le Flâneur’ in 1826, it is Balzac’s ongoing celebration of the flâneur as artist that proved to be the most influential (Parkhurst-Ferguson, 1994: 29). Within the context of this cooptation, the artist-flâneur rose to its ‘golden era’. Over the next quarter century, Balzac’s framing of the flâneur as modern artist-in-the-making carved a niche for this ‘type’ as an inextricable part of the shifting urban landscape of Paris.

Balzac’s flâneur, then, was not to be confused with a vulgar idler, a duped consumer, or a gaping badaûd. His conspicuous, intentional idleness was framed as evidence for both an elevated social status and a brilliant mind caught up in intense intellectual preoccupation. Balzac made clear that a true artist-flâneur possessed a unique combination of greatness and expertise. Parkhurst-Ferguson writes, “The artist-flâneur of the *Physiologie du mariage* belongs to the privileged elite, the expression and manifestation of the higher, because intellectual, flânerie” (1994: 25). His flâneur was essentially intended to act as modern stand-in for the artistic genius. In his novel *Cousin Pons*, Balzac writes, “Genius…is so visible in a person that even the least educated man walking around Paris will, when he comes across a great artist, know immediately what he has found” (as cited in Benjamin, 2003[1938]: 21). Fittingly, perhaps, it was Balzac who received the earliest citation for the first article devoted to the flâneur in the
nineteenth century *Encyclopaedia Larousse* (Wilson, 1992: 94). In this article, the origin of flânerie is ascribed to mid-nineteenth century Parisian social life with no mention of its connection with earlier forms of bon-hommerie. As Elizabeth Wilson (1992) notes, Larousse explains that even though “…the majority of flâneurs were idlers, there were among them artists, and that the multifarious sights of the astonishing new urban spectacle constituted their raw material” (94). By 1841, Louis Huart’s twenty-five page public pamphlet entitled the *Physiologie du flâneur* proclaimed, “The idler apes the flâneur, he caricatures the flâneur and seems made to inspire disgust for flânerie” (as cited in Parkhurst-Ferguson, 1994: 28). The dissociation of the artist-flâneur from his previous ties to the vulgar idler was thus complete. Any other ‘flaneurs’ left standing outside of this representation were deemed inauthentic in result.

A new series of specialized techniques for cultural production evolved alongside this ‘branding’ of the flâneur. To be an artist-flâneur presupposed new forms of urban epistemology. Parkhurst-Ferguson (1994) explains that Balzac claimed the key to urban control lay in a strategic fusion of science and sensuality. “Whether scholar, thinker or poet, he is a connoisseur of the ‘pleasures’ [‘jouissances’] of Paris who joins the ‘small number of amateurs’ who always have their wits about them on their walks” (Parkhurst-Ferguson: 32). He adopted an air of triumphal superiority that remained seemingly unaffected by any challenges or distractions that lay in his path. A true flâneur would not be swayed to make impulsive purchases in the market, or display overtly emotional reactions to experiences of the city. The joy of urban discovery allowed to him was a form of ‘visual gastronomy’, one that fully delighted in devouring the sights of city life without actually becoming a part of it (35).
Drawing from the works of Georg Simmel and Émile Durkheim, Benjamin (2003[1938]) explains that the increasing size and diversity of the nineteenth century city created social anxiety (19). As Parkhurst-Ferguson (1994) points out, the flâneur’s expertise in social typology was represented as a source of knowledge, and a means for understanding and making sense of this diversity. Like the narrator and the urban detective, the flâneur began to be associated with specialized knowledge and a scientific sense of control (Parkhurst-Ferguson, 1994: 32; Benjamin, 2003[1938]: 22). This knowledge was then packaged and sold to bourgeois audiences as a means of managing anxiety in turn. Parkhurst-Ferguson states, “Amidst the disorientation of what must have seemed to be a population explosion, the flâneur is entertained, not distressed, by the ever changing urban spectacle” (1994: 31).

Balzac’s new brand of artist-flâneur thrived on maintaining critical social distance, with a meticulous eye for detail, which was placed in service to aesthetic creation. Parkhurst-Ferguson explains, “In control of his actions, the flâneur reads the city as he would read a text—from a distance” (1994: 31). This was coupled with a subtly déclassé ability to pass through spatial and socio-political boundaries that others would not have so easily dared to transgress (Harvey, 2006: 40). Unlike the predictably benign daily routines of the bourgeois ‘bon-homme’, the artist-flâneur then took great stock in his spontaneous ability to hunt down the inspiration for his creative endeavours anywhere, anytime. Parkhurst-Ferguson (1994) describes how the autonomous self-sufficiency and urban mobility that the artist-flâneur enjoyed made him exceptionally resourceful as a kind of city guidebook. With a highly instrumental sense of knowledge, the artist-flâneur came to know every potential destination that the city had to offer his bourgeois audiences (31).
The period of the July Monarchy spanned between the years of 1930 to 1948 in France. As Karl Marx (1986) points out, it was not the entire French bourgeoisie that became the dominant class under the rule of King Louis Philippe, but “a fraction of it”. The haute-bourgeoisie, who had been largely influential in Louis-Philippe’s rise to power, became particularly dominant. These “bankers, stock exchange kings, railway kings, owners of coal and iron works and forests, [and] a part of the landed proprietors that rallied around them”, were labelled the finance aristocracy. They were said to have “sat on the throne”, to have “dictated laws in the Chambers”, as well as to have “conferred political posts from cabinet portfolios to the tobacco bureau” (193). In his Exposé of 1939, Benjamin (1999) explains it is in this same period that the use of iron as an artificial building material became increasingly prevalent in France. The popularity of iron began to rapidly accelerate as it was used for the railway lines that were built to radiate in and out of Paris. Marx argues, “In the same way as the ruling class exploited state expenditure in general and state loans, they exploited the building of railways” (1986: 195). Benjamin points out that the increasing popularity of iron was also one of the primary conditions that enabled the construction of the shopping Arcades in Paris (1999[1939]: 16).

Benjamin describes the Arcades as “the forerunners of department stores” (1999[1939]: 15). The 1852 Illustrated Guide to Paris reads, “These arcades, a recent invention of industrial luxury, are glass-roofed, marble-paneled corridors extending through whole blocks of buildings, whose owners have joined together for such enterprises” (as cited in Benjamin, 2003[1938]: 19). They had been built to direct bourgeois pedestrian traffic out of the streets and into the city’s highly popular shopping districts. During this period there were not a lot of wide city streets available to Parisian
pedestrians. Even the very narrow strips that existed outside of the Arcades provided scant protection from a steady onslaught of vehicles, such as the horse and carriage (Benjamin, 2003[1938]: 19). Inside the Arcades, however, wide-open pathways were exclusively reserved for pedestrian traffic and thereby enabled urban consumers to partake in the leisurely pursuits of seeing and being seen (Wilson, 1992: 96). Balzac writes: “The great poem of display chants its stanzas of color from the Church of the Madelaine to the Porte Saint-Denis” (as cited in Benjamin 1999[1939]: 15). It was a perfect location for one to get swept up in the crowd, and to become dazzled by all of the spectacular shops and commodities on display.

Benjamin (2003[1938]) describes how artists and writers flocked to the Arcades. In these long passages illuminated by the century’s first gas lighting: flânerie had found a home. Each corridor magically transformed the boulevard into an intérieur: each passage became its own little city, a world in miniature. Existing somewhere between public street and private intérieur, the commercial Arcades became a dwelling place for the flâneur in much the same way that another citizen might have felt within the comfort and security of his own four walls. The flâneur served the Arcades as its resident chronicler and philosopher, while, in exchange, the phenomenon of ‘the crowd’ provided the flâneur with a daily remedy for his boredom (19). Unlike the bourgeois ‘bon-homme’ of the early century, though, the artist-flâneurs of the July Monarchy were not merely out to leisurely stroll and observe the ever-burgeoning sights of the Arcades. These were professional ‘men of letters’ in search of raw material that would prove lucrative for publishing. Witnessing one choice social encounter might prove fruitful enough to produce an entire serial novel. Keen observation of the physiology and dress of passers-by could inspire a series of popular sketches. Scouting out the most shocking
secrets that the city had to offer could provide the inspiration for a detective story. From the grey cobblestones of the sidewalks, to the elaborate décor of the prostitute’s boudoir, the artist-flâneur remained ever observant and astute to each meticulous detail of the city, its people, and its sights.

The most popular forum for such literary production during this era was commercial journalism, most notably in the entertainment sections of mass-produced newspapers known as the feuilletons. As Benjamin (2003[1938]: 12-13) points out, while journals had been the dominant literary source for bourgeois readers throughout the first part of the century, the introduction of the cultural section in the feuilletons soon took over. A decrease in the cost of newspaper subscriptions and the growing importance of the feuilleton section can also be directly connected to the sharp increases in advertising that were made to supplement production costs. The cheaper and more accessible subscription rates combined with added entertainment value significantly expanded the audience for newspapers, leading their sales to skyrocket. The number of newspaper subscribers in Paris grew from 47,000 in 1824 to 200,000 in 1846, a clear indication of the popularity of the addition of the feuilletons as a regular feature (13).

Marshall Berman (1982: 147-148) explains that the feuilletons were composed for the purpose of daily and weekly mass-circulation, with the entertainment section usually appearing on the first or center page, next to the editorial column. Intended to be one of the first things a reader would encounter, the cultural section was supposed to remain evocative and reflective in tone, as though written from the perspective of an outsider. This technique was employed, in part, to balance the more heated and polemical arguments of the editor—although the feuilleton could also be strategically
selected to reinforce the editor’s point of view. Alongside other key international players such as Nikoli Gogol and Edgar Allan Poe, Honoré de Balzac was among the more successful mid-nineteenth century novelists to first gain exposure through the feuilletons (148).

David Harvey (2006) describes Balzac’s prolific works culminating in the Comédies humaines as crucial to shaping the mythology of modern Paris, and thereby providing us with the opportunity to subject this mythology to analytic scrutiny (24-25). He explains, “Balzac ‘anticipated’ in uncanny ways social relations that were identifiable only ‘in embryo’ in the 1830s and 1840s” (17). Paris as a “restless queen of cities” is a theme that figures prominently in Balzac’s works as they evolve. Alongside this anthropomorphic depiction is an exceptionally detailed rendering of the city in the period just before its systemic transformation into the Second Empire. The true achievement of Balzac’s representations, Harvey argues, was to peel back and reveal the formative social forces that remained omnipresent in bourgeois society throughout this period. “In drawing back the veil to reveal the myths of modernity as they were forming from the Restoration onward, Balzac helps us identify the deep continuities that underlay the seemingly radical break after 1848” (Harvey, 2006: 17). The figure of the flâneur acts as the primary magnifier, exposing the lives of bourgeois citizens to reveal their innermost convictions and desires, as well as their failings as a social class.

Before the Haussmannization of Paris had demolished and restructured large portions of the city core, the walls of buildings lining narrow winding streets created physical barriers between working and middle class neighbourhoods (Berman, 1982: 153). These barriers were largely due to the remaining archaic infrastructure of Paris, which had been established during feudal and medieval times (Harvey, 2006: 96).
Entire districts of the city existed in isolated clusters, like amoebic cells that did not connect to each other or to the city as a whole. In this archaic form, mobility between neighbourhoods would have been severely restricted and, consequently, most people would have had little exposure to how those outside their social class lived (Berman, 1982: 153). Benjamin explains how, “Under the reign of Louis Philippe, the private individual makes his entry into history. For the private individual, places of dwelling are for the first time opposed to places of work. The former come to constitute the interior” (1999: 19). He argues that the domestic interiors of the households of the middle classes were highly segregated, with copious collections of belongings and fabrics creating plush barriers between outside and in (2003[1938]: 25-26).

This division and isolation helps to explain the initial appeal of the work of artist-flâneurs, such as Balzac, to the largely middle-class audience that read the feuilletons of the 1830s and 40s. As Harvey (2006) explains, Balzac knew how to play on their curiosity about what occurred beyond the edge of the privatized worlds that separated them from others without the threat of actually having to be confronted by it (40)—and this ultimately proved profitable. Through the cultural observations published in the feuilletons, the artist-flâneur assigned connective lines of correspondence between different topographical points on the urban and social maps of nineteenth century Parisian society (43). At times of social anxiety and constant change, he helped make sense of experiences that were otherwise overwhelming and incomprehensible. He domesticated the potentially disruptive power of ‘the crowd’ and the urban environment by mythologizing it and turning it into entertainment (Parkhurst-Ferguson, 1994: 31). Reading the city as a text from afar, while simultaneously remaining its savvy inside
source, the flâneur alone maintained the privileged position to expose what lay behind its mysteries.

This style of social observation both permeated nineteenth century writing and served to carve out a competitively distinct niche-market for flânerie that probably seemed to be ripe for the taking for the next generation of aspiring young writers, such as Charles Baudelaire and Gustave Flaubert. Cultural producers, such as Honoré de Balzac, had co-opted the deviant non-conformist mythology of flânerie as a ‘sexy’ title for the moderately lucrative purposes of their own niche marketing, and had succeeded. It was not until the failure of the French Revolution of 1848, the dictatorial rise of Napoléon III, and the ever-increasing Haussmannization of the city's spaces that the bourgeoisie began to more stringently dissociate the social ‘type’ known as the flâneur from one of their own (Parkhurst-Ferguson, 1994: 34).

2.3. Interlude: Revolution and Empire

In the years before 1848, mass unemployment, hunger, and general discontent had accompanied the steady influx of people moving into the Parisian core in search of sustenance (Harvey, 2006: 3). Harvey (2006) reports how housing provision had lagged behind the growth of the Parisian population: “The number of houses in the city increased from 26,801 in 1817 to 30,770 in 1851, while population rose from 713,966 to 1,053,897” (127). He explains that the scarcity of housing enabled property owners and landlords to profit from conditions that were highly exploitive, producing the “…undermaintenance and overcrowding in those insalubrious quarters so graphically described in the novels of Eugène Sue as well as in Balzac’s Cousin Bette” (127). Economic downturns amplified by bad harvests contributed to the growing discontent of
the 1840s (94). Marx describes how it was the “high cost of living of 1847” which directly followed the “potato blight and bad harvests of 1845 and 1846” that “…called forth bloody conflicts in France as well as the rest of the Continent” (1986: 197).

Although Louis-Philippe had promised democratic reforms, symbolized by his acceptance of popular sovereignty in the moniker ‘King of the French’, his actual style of governance was highly authoritarian. Rather than honouring pledges to expand suffrage, the July Monarchy instead worked to expand the wealth and power of the haute-bourgeoisie through generous enfranchisements (Goldberg-Moses, 1984: 98). Marx explains, “the finance aristocracy made the laws, was at the head of the administration of the state, had command of all the organized public powers, [as well as] dominated public opinion through facts and through the press” (1986: 197). The right to vote, for example, was granted only to the wealthy. Expressions of public dissent were effectively quashed, with laws that prohibited the right to assemble, petition, or demonstrate. Pro-capitalist, laissez-faire policies and tariffs protected the right to ‘business as usual’ for the French elite, while state censorship worked to suppress the freedom of the press to comment (Harvey, 2006: 65). Despite state repression, there was a vigorous underground debate during this period that was incredibly rich with ideas about alternatives (Harvey: 61-88). Republicans and socialists alike were determined to confront the July Monarchy and demand democratic reform (Harvey: 3). And there was ongoing talk of the need for revolution (though this was often couched in the language of conspiracy rather than class).

On February 23, 1848, these undercurrents of dissent suddenly exploded to the surface. A relatively small public demonstration at the Foreign Ministry on the Boulevard des Capucines turned violent and over fifty demonstrators were killed as troops opened
fire on the crowd. A cart containing the bodies of those killed in the demonstration was wheeled around the city by torchlight while largely silent crowds gathered in the streets to look on (Harvey, 2006: 3-4). As Harvey points out, the real events that spurred the revolution of 1848 took on additional layers of mythological significance as they were depicted in the work of nineteenth century authors: “The legendary account, given by Daniel Stern and taken up by Flaubert in Sentimental Education, focuses on the body of a woman (and I say it is legendary because the driver of the cart testified that there was no woman aboard)” (2006: 3). In this account, a boy would illuminate the body of the woman allegedly killed, while a man would hold her body up for the crowd to see. Harvey (2006: 4) explains that liberty “had long been imagined as a woman” in France, and in this representation it now seemed as though the very embodiment of liberty itself “had been shot down”. He continues, “[t]he night that followed was, by several accounts, eerily quiet. Even the marketplaces were so. Come dawn, the tocsins sounded throughout the city. This was the call to revolution”. That next morning a wave of workers, students, small property owners, disaffected bourgeoisie, lumpenproletarians, and members of the dismembered National Guard assembled in mass resistance on the streets. On February 24, 1848, Louis Philippe hastily abdicated the throne in favour of his eight-year-old grandson and fled to England. The crowd next invaded the Tuileries, and sacked its contents. Ordinary citizens took turns sitting on and mocking the royal throne, which was then hauled through the streets and burned at the Bastille. The demonstrators forced Louis Philippe’s Chamber of Deputies to relinquish control of the state, and established a provisional government made up of moderate republicans and democratic socialists (4). Open elections followed in April, and when the Constituent Assembly met in May, the new Republic was officially proclaimed (Harvey: 5).
Harvey (2006) explains that the overthrow of the July Monarchy was initially greeted with a swelling of optimism, hope, and goodwill in France. Class divisions and hatreds were seemingly forgotten in place of a newfound sense of pride in the rights and possibilities that had been won by the people. “Much of provincial France voted right, much of Paris voted left, and some notable socialists got elected. More important, spaces were created in which radical organizations could flourish” (5). A plethora of ideas for renewing the city were brought forward from those who had previously only planned on the fringes under the rule of the July Monarchy. The freedom of the press was reestablished (Marx, 1986: 205), while “[i]n Paris alone, 171 new newspapers and some 200 to 450 political clubs came into existence between March and mid-June” (Goldberg-Moses, 1984: 128). Harvey describes how, “… worker associations sprang up, and those who had been most concerned about the question of work procured an official commission that met regularly in the Luxembourg Palace to look into social and political reform” (2006: 5). Strong arguments were made toward a Republic that would be both social as well as democratic: “that is, responsible to the needs of the poorer classes” (Goldberg-Moses, 1984: 127). National workshops were created to provide work and fair wages for the unemployed (Harvey, 2006: 5). Hope for a revolutionary collaboration between workers, artisans, and bourgeoisie was widespread.

However, as Harvey (2006) points out, by June of 1848, earlier hopes for widespread improvements to the standard of living had been dashed. The economy had taken a turn from bad to worse and levels of debt were increasing. The left had grown increasingly divided, failing to mobilize around any plans for coordinated action (5). Goldberg-Moses (1984) describes how the plight of the poor and unemployed had not improved during the spring of 1848, but actually worsened. The national workshops
were failing to generate productive opportunities for workers: “those limited number who
were enrolled were given little productive work to do, and thus the workshops served
more as a charity than as true employment” (144). Harvey (2006: 5) explains that
bourgeois property owners had also become increasingly reactive, fearing for their rights
and privileges as landlords, rentiers, and employers. Flaubert writes, “Property was
raised to the level of Religion and became indistinguishable from God” (as cited in
Harvey, 2006: 5). Marx (1986) describes how, the National Assembly next “threw out
the proposal of a special Labour Ministry”, along with a round of “stormy applause”
following Minister Trélat’s statement: “The question is merely one of bringing labour back
to its old conditions” (216). On June 22, 1848, the political right, which held a republican
majority by this point, disbanded the national workshops for the unemployed leaving
those who had come to depend on them with no viable alternatives for support
(Goldberg-Moses, 1984: 144). Marx: “The workers were left no choice, they had to
starve or start to fight. They answered on June 22 with the tremendous insurrection in
which the first great battle was fought between the two classes that split modern society”

Harvey (2006) explains that the following four days in June saw significant
elements of the population fighting in rebellion against the National Assembly from
behind barricades built with cobblestones in the boulevards (6). Marx describes how the
workers, “with unexampled bravery and talent”, fought “without chiefs, without a
common plan, without means and, for the most part lacking weapons”, yet still managed
to hold in check “the army, the Mobile Guard, the Parisian National Guard, and the
National Guard that streamed in from the provinces” (1986: 217). The barricades, and
most of the people behind them, however, were ruthlessly and brutally smashed by an
army lead by Louis Cavaignac. Cavaignac was a newly appointed bourgeois republican general whose tactics had proven quite successful in the colonizing of Algeria (Harvey, 2006: 6). This “ugly revolution”, as Marx describes it, revealed the fiction behind idealized notions of revolutionary collaboration between workers, artisans, and the bourgeoisie (1986: 218; Shaya, 2004: 71). As Harvey (2006: 5-7) points out, the June days did not resolve matters of leadership, but only made them worse. The National Assembly had become increasingly polarized between left and right. Many of those who had so fervently articulated their desire for a social republic in the 1830s and 1840s were now simply sidelined and repressed. Sentiments fuelled by bourgeois proprietorship and staunch republicanism ruled the day, with liberty and equality equated with market-based agency rather than enhancing democratic rights and participation of the population as a whole. Most of the socialist leaders who had been so confidently elected to the National Assembly in 1848 had been driven into exile by the summer of 1849. Socialist revolution in France had failed.

It was this climate of political disappointment and frustration that created the conditions for the right-wing populism of Louis-Napoléon. As Walter Benjamin points out (2003[1938]: 3), Louis-Napoléon built early support for his coup d’état on the backs of large factions of the lumpenproletariat. He used the press to gather support through his principal Bonapartist paper, the Pouvoir (Marx, 1986: 305). Harvey (2006) describes how, partially in attempts to quell Napoléon’s momentum, the remainders of the Assembly foolishly reinstated press censorship and abolished international suffrage once again. These manoeuvres, however, “unwittingly” set the stage for a full dictatorship (7). For Marx argues the repudiation of universal suffrage constituted an open confessional by the bourgeoisie: “Our dictatorship has hitherto existed by the will
of the people; it must now be consolidated against the will of the people" (1986: 294).

Press censorship only served to fan the flames of public discontent and draw more attention to the outcries of the Bonapartist press (Marx: 304-305). Once Louis-Napoléon had captured the attention of the public, he next set out to win over the army (Marx: 308). By December 2, 1851, he had gathered enough political support to mount a coup d'état and the Assembly was officially dissolved. Napoléon III Bonaparte was installed as Emperor, inaugurating the Second Empire (Harvey, 2006: 7).

2.4. Flânerie, Modernity, and Capitalism: Baudelaire as Modern Hero

Some of Baudelaire’s most well known writing about the flâneur and conceptions of art in modernity were composed for popular journalistic forums such as the feuilletons. His salon reviews of 1845 and 1846, his short essay The Painter of Modern Life, and two compiled books of poems Les Fleurs du mal and Paris Spleen, are among his most influential works on these topics. Here, I would like to further engage with Priscilla Parkhurst-Ferguson’s notion of the heroic-flâneur. Parkhurst-Ferguson (1994: 32) connects the concept of a heroic-flâneur to Baudelaire, but more as a comparative reflection that points back to the flâneur of Balzac’s era (who she then renames “the heroic flâneur-artist”). Conversely, I argue that the concept of the heroic remains most fruitful in discussions about Baudelaire, more so, for instance, than with reference to the artist-flâneurs which preceded him. Quite simply, the brand of bourgeois heroism incarnated within the texts of those preceding Baudelaire could not retain the same meaning after the events of 1848. Baudelaire’s redefinition of the heroic speaks, centrally, to the capitalist transformation of experience. In particular the loss of agency
which accompanies this experience stands in stark contrast to more idealistic (and ideological) assertions of agency which dominate earlier, romantic conceptions of flânerie. Just as the first half of the nineteenth century witnessed the ‘golden era’ of flânerie, the latter half of the century experienced its decline. Harvey (2006: 86-87) explains that before 1848, Balzac positioned the flâneur in the fore as an expert in the psycho-geography of a perpetually shifting urban world—a master in the discovery of the city and all its secrets. There were hopes, dreams, and ideals that the social order could somehow be subverted from within; the people could remake the city and themselves and take possession of Paris as their own. After 1848, however, we encounter the sparse, tightly honed poetry and prose of Baudelaire and Flaubert. This flâneur writes with a critical literary scalpel, carving the city into static, aesthetic fragments. The flâneur of Baudelaire’s world no longer represents discovery, mastery, and idealism, but instead expresses dispossession, alienation, and anomie.

Parkhurst-Ferguson (1994: 32) argues that after 1848, the flâneur rests under a sign of failed creativity. As Susan Buck-Morss points out, it is not only a sign of failed artistic creativity, but of social creativity as well (1986: 127). The privileged vantage point occupied by the artist-flâneur of the 1830s and 40s sold the idea of urban control to the middle classes (Harvey, 2006: 86). The failures following 1848 completely undermined the authenticity of this control. Before 1848, the artist-flâneur claimed a dispassionate distance from the market, relying on the guise of modern artistic genius as an excuse for loitering in the Arcades. However, the June days of 1848 shattered the illusion of autonomy from the market: ‘escape’ from the pressures of bourgeois proprietorship and the capitalist market was no longer possible. They revealed that every thing and, more importantly, everyone is up for sale. The ideal of standing apart
from the marketplace via the *feuilletons* was exposed as a naïve, utopian fantasy. Rather than the flâneur taking possession of the city, the city of the Second Empire now takes possession of the flâneur (Parkhurst-Ferguson, 1997: 95). The flâneur no longer enters the market as an aloof and dispassionate observer, but clearly in order to seek a buyer (Benjamin, 2003[1938]: 17).

Marshall Berman (1982) recalls an exemplary anecdote from Charles Baudelaire’s 1855 essay on ‘Progress’. Here Baudelaire recounts an incident in which Balzac critiqued a contemporary painting of a pastoral scene with a winter cottage, surrounded by earthy looking peasants. Balzac cried, "How beautiful it is! ... But what are they doing in that cottage? What are their thoughts? What are their sorrows? Has it been a good harvest? No doubt they have bills to pay?" (141). In this anecdote, Baudelaire identifies how idealized notions of modern ‘progress’ run up against this reality time and time again. Modern life contains experiences that may appear to have a distinctive and authentic beauty, but they remain inescapably intertwined with the anxiety that there will always be bills to pay. Just as the masterful possession of Paris, that “restless queen of cities”, figures so prominently in Balzac’s compiled works for the *Comedies humaines*, the anxiety, dislocation, and anomie of commodification figures even more so in the works of Baudelaire.

Harvey (2006: 16) describes 1848 as a time that not only marks radical shifts in governance, but also a radical break from the past. In the case of Paris, it marked the birth of a newly and radically modernized conception of the city. Just as the cultural observations of writers like Balzac exercised enormous influence over the city’s self-image prior to the 1848 revolution, so too does the work of the ‘modern’ flâneur figure prominently in generating and sustaining the myths of urban transformation during the
Second Empire. Even amidst the ruins of the 1848 revolution, conventional romantic forms of heroism still retained an enormous popular appeal. Baudelaire was exceedingly embittered by how he and other young contemporaries such as Flaubert remained completely overshadowed by the fame and authority of older novelists such as Victor Hugo. Highly populist texts such as *Les Misérables* (1862) resonated with audiences then as they continued to do throughout the twentieth century (Benjamin, 2003[1938]: 39; Harvey, 2006: 270). Balzac’s simultaneous notoriety and popular success as a writer strongly influenced Baudelaire’s vantage point. Balzac carved out a niche for the modern artist-flâneur that became a heroic genre unto itself. His profoundly utopian yet often bitterly nostalgic tone of critique ultimately informed, if not inspired, the next generation of writers to which Baudelaire belonged. However, in the end, it was the broader social conditions that Baudelaire’s work reflects which shaped his own distinct conception of ‘heroism’. The bourgeois heroism that Baudelaire first envies and admires, occupies a niche position in a middle class from which he gradually realizes he has been excluded.

The uniquely mournful, alienated, and ironic tone that the ‘heroic’ begins to take on in Baudelaire’s work after the failure of the Revolution of 1848 marks a new form of experience that is distinctly modernist. Baudelaire actively portrays the mid-nineteenth century as a time of transition, making the case that modernity poses a radical break from history (Harvey, 2006: 16). For Baudelaire’s flâneur, there is no pleasure in wearing the mask of the great romantic literary hero of the generation before him. Instead, he can only pay tribute to the ultimate unattainability of that heroic posture. This dystopian realism becomes Baudelaire’s niche market, even if it was to remain a marginal one throughout his own lifetime. Let us turn now to examine some of his key
works, and to evaluate the new thematic elements that mark this transition for Baudelaire, as well as for his reshaping of the terms for flânerie.

2.4.1. Pre-Revolutionary Ambivalence

Before the 1848 revolution, Baudelaire cries out to his contemporaries about the need for an artist who can adequately depict the heroism of modern life. In the concluding paragraphs to his debut, the Salon of 1845, he argues that all of the artists of his time are too preoccupied with replicating epic and classical motifs of the past. Very few seem to be seeking out new art forms for the representation of truly modern subjects. He questions why the same old art of perfecting classical busts and mythic scenes of the gods and goddesses of antiquity remains more alluring than representations of contemporary dress and subject matter: “No one is cocking his ear to tomorrow’s wind; and yet the heroism of modern life surrounds and presses upon us” (Baudelaire, 1965: 31-32).

Baudelaire revisits this theme again, and at greater length, one year later at the end of his review, Salon of 1846. His challenge to contemporary readers is to open their eyes to the heroism of modern life. Rather than continuing to applaud the epic heroes of antiquity, he urges them to seek the heroism that can be found for themselves, in the pages of the Gazette des Tribunaux and in the Moniteur. This heroism is not to be confused with that of Achilles, Agamemnon, Hercules, or Cleopatra, nor can it to be replicated in eccentric imitations of classical dress. Rather it is represented somewhat ironically in the same plain black clothing worn by the middle class public at large. Baudelaire describes the common black frock coat as a symbol of universal equality, as well as an expression of the public soul. He writes, “Is it not the necessary garb of our
suffering age, which wears the symbol of a perpetual mourning even upon its thin black shoulders? ... We are each of us celebrating some funeral” (1965: 118).

The literary creations of Balzac’s *Comédie humaines* also figure quite heavily in Baudelaire’s examples of modern heroes, but this is not without an element of added irony. At the end of his *Salon of 1846* review, he writes: “For the heroes of the Iliad are but pigmies compared to you, Vautrin, Rastignac and Birotteau” (1965: 119). Each of the literary characters that Baudelaire names would have been first encountered in Balzac’s serial novels for the *feuilletons*. Irrespective of their social class, they are all characters caught up in conflicting and contradictory modern circumstances. And, as Baudelaire makes clear, the artist-flâneur certainly qualifies as an exemplar of the heroic self among them. He concludes, “—and you, Honoré de Balzac, you the most heroic, the most extraordinary, the most romantic and the most poetic of all the characters that you have produced from your womb!” (1965: 120).

Three elements are especially noteworthy here. First, Baudelaire acknowledges the loss and dispossession of something—although it is not clear that he recognizes what—through his recognition of the public soul trapped in perpetual mourning. Second, he cynically exposes Balzac’s profitable brand of flânerie as self-authored heroism—albeit one that has some redeeming virtues given the conflicting and ambiguous conditions for modern art. Thirdly, he encourages readers to look to bourgeois fashion and commercial aesthetics as a new means of defining beauty, heroism, and modern art.

The early reviews are also noteworthy for Baudelaire’s impassioned identification with the lumpenproletariat. These reviews were written under the influence of the tone
of revolutionary idealism that permeated circles of romantic novelists and poets who aligned themselves with the worker’s movements of the 1830s and 1840s. As Harvey (2006) points out, others such as Balzac, Eugène Sue, and most notably, Victor Hugo, were producing texts that had made much of the potentially disruptive power of the “dangerous classes” (229). Hugo continued to do so quite successfully well into the Second Empire, when he was forced to live outside of France in political exile from the repressive regime of censorship instituted by Napoléon Bonaparte (270).

In 1845-46, then, Baudelaire exalts the heroism that exists in the conflicts and ambiguities that pervade the everyday experiences of modern life. He points out the opportunity for modern artists to create a heroic niche for themselves by keeping faith with the nature of those experiences. But it is not those who claim to rise triumphantly over the experiences of modern existence that Baudelaire claims as his own heroes. Rather it is those who struggle in its depths. These are the “thousands of floating existences—criminals and kept women—that drift about in the underworlds of a great city” (Baudelaire, 1965: 118-119). Thus Baudelaire confronts his readers with the possibility of a different form of heroism that can be found only in the darkness of the marginal and dispossessed—and yet, unlike the romantic novelists that most directly precede him, he does not offer any liberation from it.

Before 1848, Baudelaire’s sentiments toward both the bourgeoisie and the marginalized proletariat contain elements of utopian idealism, yet his political sympathies remain decidedly ambiguous. In *The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire*, Benjamin (2003[1938]) argues that Baudelaire’s political insights ultimately do not go beyond those of a conspirator (4). His tone is filled with sentimental praise at one moment, only to turn to fierce revolutionary idealism at the next. In the 'To the
Bourgeois’ section of his 1846 review, for example, he adopts a surprisingly warm and praising tone to appeal to the bourgeoisie as modern patrons to the arts. Benjamin explains, “he appears as their advocate, and his manner is not that of an *advocatus diaboli*. Later… he attacks the ‘honnête bourgeoisie’… as if he were the most rabid *bohémien*” (4). While he may have joined with other radicals and artists who had aligned themselves with craft workers in socialist sentiment, Baudelaire could be found in the February Revolution of 1848 brandishing a rifle on a street corner, shouting “Down with General Aupick!”¹. This might be similarly compared to statements made by his fellow contemporary Flaubert, who once expressed, “Of all of politics, I understand only one thing: revolt” (as cited in Benjamin, 2003[1938]: 4).

2.4.2. Post-Revolutionary Nihilism

Any utopian or harmonizing sentiments that Baudelaire might have entertained died with the failure of the 1848 Revolution. What remained was a symbolic identification with the experiences of the city’s dispossessed. More than any revolutionary politics, such identification was expressed through a tone of nihilism and dislocation. Alongside increasing social, economic, and cultural marginalization from the middle classes, entire under-privileged populations of the Second Empire were simultaneously experiencing an additional form of dislocation. Their experience was of an actual physical dislocation from the geography of Paris, as it was blasted from out of

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¹ General Aupick was Baudelaire’s mother’s second husband, whom she had married after his father had died. Baudelaire deeply resented his stepfather, an army General, for trying to control his choice of career, as well as for limiting the access that was granted to his inheritance.
its older medieval infrastructure and remodelled into a modern metropolitan core. (Berman, 1982: 150-151; Harvey, 2006: 130; Parkhurst-Ferguson, 1997: 93-94)

Harvey (2006) explains that in June 1853, Baron Haussmann, a long time Bonapartist sympathizer and supporter, took his oath of office and began to lay down plans with Napoléon III for a massive overhaul of Paris (99). Baron Haussmann’s projects of urban renewal were intended to bring Paris out of the ‘dark ages’, and create a modernized capital built on the back of commerce and “hard-headed managerialism” (Harvey: 3). Throughout the 1850s and 1860s, Haussmann’s projects changed the face of Paris forever. Public sanitation was improved through the construction of sewers, bridges, and massive underground waterways (249-252). The expansion of railways, the widening and straightening of old roads, and the construction of grand boulevards facilitated the rapid flow of traffic in and out of the city core (109-111). The construction of the boulevards also introduced new wide-open spaces where the city’s population could gather together in large numbers to see and be seen (Berman, 1982: 152). From out of the rubble rose a network of fashionable promenades, shopping plazas with department stores, restaurants, cafes, operas, and grand-exhibition halls, sizeable public parks, and city racetracks (Parkhurst-Ferguson, 1997: 94). New apartment style residences were built in quartiers boasting both liveability and commercial entertainment. Through a process of what would be called ‘gentrification’ today, a new Paris was created both for and in the image of the bourgeoisie (Harvey, 2006: 138; Berman, 1982: 151; Parkhurst-Ferguson, 1997: 93-94).

Despite the universalizing rhetoric that justified this urban makeover, Haussmann’s projects did not improve the standard of living for all Parisians. Broad swathes of poor and working class neighbourhoods were levelled, with little thought or
planning devoted to rehousing the tens of thousands of displaced residents (Berman, 1982: 150-151). Many wandered out of the rubble to camp in makeshift slums (Harvey, 2006: 130). The end result of ‘Haussmannization’ was a rebuilt inner city core dominated by wealthy bourgeoisie with the majority of the working class evacuated to outer-lying suburbs (Harvey: 150). Benjamin argues, “The true goal of Haussmann’s projects was to secure the city against civil war” (1999[1939]: 23). The long, straight lines and wide-open spaces of the inner city boulevards were strategically designed to allow for the easy flow of military power throughout the city (Berman, 1982: 150; Benjamin, 1999[1939]: 23-24). This new urban structure sought to systematically dissipate the potential threat that large groups of “dangerous classes” could pose to the dominant social order (Harvey, 2006: 150). Haussmann’s design was intentionally created to discourage the building of future barricades in areas that had proved favourable to the local insurrections of 1848 (Berman, 1982: 150). Benjamin explains, “He wanted to make the erection of barricades in the streets of Paris impossible for all time” (1999[1939]: 23).

2.4.3. Two Poems

A close reading of Baudelaire’s two prose poems ‘The Eyes of the Poor’ and ‘The Old Clown’ from his posthumously released Paris Spleen help us to understand how the flâneur of Baudelaire’s era both reflects, and reflects upon, the destructive effects of modern capitalist urbanization. Parkhurst-Ferguson (1997) explains that the dislocated relationship the flâneur increasingly experiences from the rapidly changing modern city after 1848 redefines his conditions for creativity. The newly-Haussmannized Paris of the Second Empire is no longer reflected in mysteries that can be skillfully unravelled and explained away by the narrator like a genius detective, and this holds deeper
implications for the artist (94). Whereas the old heroic-flâneur of Balzac’s era could firmly locate characters within the city with a detailed and masterful narrative, the new heroism of Baudelaire’s poet-flâneur remains reflective and unresolved. In one case, the flâneur makes sense of the city in such a way that exalts the dominant bourgeois worldview. In the second, the flâneur also makes sense, but in such a way that challenges the comfortable bourgeois world-view. It is expressed instead in the tragic and unresolved fragments of experience that the artist is now confronted with both outside and inside of himself.

Harvey (2006) argues that Baudelaire’s entire sense of modernity shifts after the bittersweet experience of creative destruction accompanying the events of 1848 (15). Benjamin explains, “Haussmann gave himself the title of ‘demolition artist’… It has been said of the Île de la Cité, the cradle of the city, that in the wake of Haussmann only one church, one public building, and one barracks remained” (1999[1939]: 23). Like the demolition crews, which reduced large areas of the ancient city to rubble, the process of creative destruction aims to clear the way for new ideas to be built and take shape. It overthrows the strong bonds of tradition, arguing that this must be done even by violent means, if necessary, in order to grapple with the present and create the future. But, as Harvey explains, lost in this process are the deep-seated values and understandings that have kept tradition firmly in place. Benjamin (1999[1939]: 23) describes how the writings of Hugo and Merimee suggest that Haussmann’s transformations of the city appeared “as a monument of Napoleonic despotism” to Parisians. He also recounts how in a speech in front of the National Assembly in 1864, Haussmann vented his “hatred of the rootless urban population”. Yet, as Benjamin points out, this population grew ever larger as a result of Haussmann’s projects, and when increasing rents drove the
proletariat to the suburbs, the *quartiers* of Paris also lost their “distinctive physiognomy”. The experience of creative destruction can be devastating, leaving individuals, communities and even entire societies adrift. People often feel powerless, as though social circumstances are beyond their control. Benjamin explains, “The inhabitants of the city no longer feel at home there; they start to become conscious of the inhuman character of the metropolis” (1999[1939]: 23).

Parkhurst-Ferguson (1997) explains that Baudelaire’s flâneur no longer seeks a human connection with the crowd, or even an ongoing connection to the rapidly shifting topography of Paris, for that matter. What he seeks is modernity itself (94). As Harvey emphasizes, by 1860 Baudelaire writes that the aim of the artist must be to recognize the modern as “the transient, the fleeting, the contingent”. This stands in equal relation to the other side of art, which seeks out “the eternal and immovable” (as cited in Harvey, 2006: 15). The great anxiety that is faced by the artist in this process is whether he will be able to latch onto each creative opportunity fast enough, before it slips completely from out of his grasp (Harvey: 15).

The contradictions between intensified urban poverty and the gleaming facades of bourgeois wealth provided fertile inspiration for Baudelaire. A telling example of what social relations might have looked like during the times of Haussmann’s massive revitalization of Paris can be found in Baudelaire’s (1970[1869]) poem, ‘The Eyes of the Poor’, from his posthumously released *Paris Spleen*. The poem is about a happy couple out together in ‘the city of love’, staring deeply into one another’s eyes on the terrace of a glitzy little café. This café is one of the smart new businesses erected on a corner of Haussmann’s newly constructed boulevards. Although rubble still litters the ground outside, the inside has been decadently adorned with expansive mirrors and a lavish
decor that combines mythic and neoclassical motifs. It is dazzlingly lit from within with a flood of gaslight. Baudelaire writes, “Even the gas burned with all the ardor of a debut . . . all history and all mythology pandering to gluttony” (52).

Suddenly, this scene of urban romance is interrupted by a poor old grey-bearded father and two young children dressed in tattered clothes who gaze upon the bourgeois from the street outside. “They were in rags. The three faces were extraordinarily serious, and those six eyes stared fixedly at the new café with admiration, equal in degree but differing in kind according to their ages” (Baudelaire, 1970[1869]: 52-53). Looking back upon the poor family, the protagonist experiences pangs of self-consciousness and shame for how he and his significant other can enjoy the decadence of this glittering new café, while the others stand outside looking in. What makes it even worse is that he cannot even catch a glimpse of anger or resentment in their stare, just wide-eyed admiration and sorrowful fascination for the beautiful scene inside. “Not only was I touched by this family of eyes, but I was even a little ashamed of our glasses and decanters, too big for our thirst” (Baudelaire: 53). The poet turns to his female companion, expecting that his conflicting feelings and thoughts will be reflected in her empathetic eyes. Instead, she impatiently demands that they call the Manager to have ‘those people’ sent away, explaining that she hates how they are just standing and staring in at them “with their great saucer eyes”. The poet concludes by saying that this is why he now hates his companion, and how he has realized that it is truly not possible for one to really know or love another. “So you see how difficult it is to understand one another, my dear angel, how incommunicable thought is, even between two people in love” (Baudelaire, 1970[1869]: 53).
There is sadness and a true sense of loss reflected in the broken social relationships depicted in ‘The Eyes of the Poor’. Each of the characters in the short modern tragedy interacts differently with the fragmented and dislocated conditions of the aggressively modernizing city that surrounds them. As Berman (1982) suggests, it may not be the selfish sentiments expressed by his companion that truly angers the poet. Perhaps it is self-hatred that he truly feels, because a part of him feels the same selfish desire to have the poor family swept from out of his sight as well (154). What he is battling becomes his own inner conflict after being confronted with a disruptive reminder of the inequality that remains on the other side of a falsely universalized world of bourgeois ‘happiness’. Although he doesn’t recognize it as such, it is this blatant reminder of a failed social system that leaves the urban love story feeling fragmented and unresolved. As it is seen from the broken social relations that occur in ‘The Eyes of the Poor’, another problem with the continual drive for ‘progress’ is the human wreckage left in its wake. Capitalist modernity never takes the time to consider those lost in the ruins, but only boldly forges ahead in the heady pursuit of progress.

This type of experience features heavily in Baudelaire’s prose poem ‘The Old Clown’, from Paris Spleen. In this poem Baudelaire realizes that the perpetual rush toward progress will inevitably abandon the flâneur as well. In ‘The Old Clown’, the poet recalls going out to a big public carnival for the fête impériale of the Second Empire. The crowd that has gathered to partake in the spectacle is utterly massive. The carnival’s events are in full swing by the time the poet arrives. All around him, he sees people on holiday, enjoying the festivities like free spirited children for the carefree hours that will take them outside of their everyday disputes and struggles. Baudelaire (1963 [1869]) describes the fête impériale as all “light, dust, cries, happiness, uproar”. There is
the thick aromatic smell of perfumes and frying food permeating the air like incense. Everywhere there is “joy, profit and dissoluteness; everywhere the assurance of bread for tomorrow” (85).

In the fashion of a “true Parisian”, the poet strolls through a long line of carnival booths. This year the booths are in top form, with the buskers outdoing one another and themselves. Children are excitedly tugging on their mother’s skirts to get a stick of candy and climbing up on their father’s shoulders to get a better view of magicians “as dazzling as a god”. But amidst all of this “carrying on [in] formidable rivalry: squealing, bellowing, and shouting” for attention, something less joyful catches the poet’s eye (Baudelaire, 1963 [1869]: 85). At the far end of the booths, there is a run down hut lit up by the butt ends of two smouldering candles. Standing by this hut is a poor old clown who has grown decrepit and frail, leaning back against one of the poles like a ruined man. In his absolute poverty, the old clown is dressed in tattered rags. He does not gesticulate, sing, dance, or shout. He simply stands mute and motionless, as though he has given up on life and his hope for a better destiny is over.

The poet feels his throat hysterically constrict and his eyes become “clouded with rebellious tears which will not fall” in response to the old clown (Baudelaire: 86). He does not even dare to ask what surprises are contained behind the hut’s torn curtain. He wants to surreptitiously leave the old clown some money on the boards of his hut, so as not to humiliate him. But the excited rush of the crowd surges forward and sweeps the poet away before he gets the chance. A last time, the poet turns to look at the old clown, trying to get some sense of why this particular vision has affected him with such profound sorrow. And then, suddenly, he understands it: in this broken down old clown, he has just seen the image of himself. The ‘man of letters’, just like the clown, has
survived the generation for whom he was once the brilliant entertainer. The destiny of
the clown is what will also become of the old poet who has given everything to his
career. He will stand alone “without friends or family or children, degraded by his
poverty and the ingratitude of his public, and standing at the booth which the forgetful
world no longer has any desire to enter!” (Baudelaire, 1963 [1869]: 86).

In the nature of tragedy that Baudelaire has created around the story of ‘The Old
Clown’, the increasingly commodified world of the Second Empire is brought to light. For
it is not only the poet who confronts the destiny of old clown, but everyone and
everything in the market. The process of creative destruction lies at the core of the
capitalist market and its perpetual cycles of ‘boom’ and ‘bust’. The object that is a ‘hot
commodity’ one day may have completely fallen out of fashion by the next. The cultural
producer has no immunity from this system; indeed, he is especially vulnerable to its
logic. In the poem, the value of the artists and entertainers at the fête impériale depends
upon their ability to draw an audience. Their success is based upon their capacity to
outperform and compete for the attention of the crowd. At one level, the old clown is an
example of human frailty and suffering. More importantly, though, he is also a symbol of
the failed commodity. Here the product and the person become inseparable. Indeed, it
is not the man himself that Baudelaire empathizes with, but his obsolescence to the
crowd that surges past him. His value as a commodity is what determines his survival at
the fête impériale. It is the primary source of his social connections, and his monetary
sustenance. Without it, he is left in ruins.

This alienation, of the commodity that has been abandoned by the crowd, is one
of the primary themes that Baudelaire’s poetry and prose come to represent. By the
time Baudelaire enters the market as a professional ‘man of letters’ an aura of tragedy
has begun to pervade the entire creative enterprise of flânerie. Like the old clown at the fête impériale, the image of the ‘man of letters’ as stand-in for modern artistic genius has been replaced with the image of a failed creative wage-labourer. The obvious proletarianization of this ‘type’ has thus reframed the flâneur’s urban mobility and public representation. His identity has become enmeshed with the tragic contradictions and disappointments of modernity and capitalism, rather than the power to dominate them. But Baudelaire’s flâneur does not shy away from the isolation and singularity that this alienation brings—he revels in it. It is this jarring state of ‘spleen’ generated by the experience of alienation and anomie that provides Baudelaire’s flâneur with an entirely new type of urban epistemology.

2.4.4. The Painter of Modern Life, Man of the Crowd

This epistemology is most evident in Baudelaire's 1859-60 essay, The Painter of Modern Life. This essay is commonly cited as one of his primary works around the flâneur, even to the point where some describe it as one of the primary texts defining flânerie (Tester, 1994: 1-2; Wolff, 1985: 40; Mazlish, 1994: 48; Smart, 1994: 160). In The Painter of Modern Life, Baudelaire writes about the life and works of commercial sketch artist Constantin Guys, referred to as ‘Monsieur G’. The art and day-to-day practices of Monsieur G are used by Baudelaire to portray Guys as the ‘painter of modern life’—yet the intensely personal elements of the essay seem to be more autobiographical in nature.

2 Baudelaire reveals at the beginning of his essay that Constantin Guys did not wish to participate in a public piece featuring his artwork. He uses this obvious name-masking technique in order to create one anyway.
Baudelaire’s review essentially dissociates ‘the painter of modern life’ from the earlier type of artist-flâneur of Balzac’s era, by emphasizing the uniquely different set of practices and skills required for the modern “sketch of manners” (1964[1859-60]: 4). He dismantles the heroic constitution of the artist-flâneur with the argument that the term ‘artist’ now refers to something much too restrictive in scope of experience (7). “Observer, philosopher, flâneur — call him what you will...” states Baudelaire, “but whatever words you use in trying to define this kind of artist, you will certainly be led to bestow upon him some adjective which you could not apply to the painter of eternal...of heroic or religious subjects” (4). Baudelaire explains, “I ask you to understand the word artist in a very restricted sense, and man of the world in a very broad one”. The artist remains “a specialist, a man wedded to his palette like the serf to the soil” (4). By focusing on particular quartiers of the city, the ‘artist’ remains myopic and out of touch with the larger world. “The artist lives very little, if at all, in the world of morals and politics. If he lives in the Breda district, he will be unaware of what is going on in the Faubourg Saint-Germain” (Baudelaire: 7). In this sense, the artist cannot be a true painter of modern life, because it is no longer possible for him to uphold the much broader scope of experience better befitted to the ‘man of the world’. Actual experiences of modernity exceed the artist’s ability to absorb them. Conversely, Baudelaire describes the man of the world as “a man of the whole world, a man who understands the world and the mysterious and lawful reasons for all its uses” (7). Rather than donning the guise of conventional artistic genius, the painter of modern life finds new ways of experiencing in order to adequately process and express modernity.

Baudelaire (1964[1859-60]) argues, in this context, true artistic genius requires a child-like sensibility that can be invoked at will, to generate deeper, stronger more
powerful experiences. In order to be a painter of modern life, the ‘man of the crowd’ requires the heightened and unfiltered senses of a child (7-9). These senses are also comparable to the spiritual faculties of one who is drunk, or that of an eternal convalescent returning from the shadow of death (7). “Any man,” Baudelaire asserts on Monsieur G’s behalf, “…who can yet be bored in the heart of the multitude, is a blockhead! a blockhead! and I despise him!” (10). As a perpetual man-child, the ‘man of the crowd’ sees everything from a state of innocence. Perceiving as if for ‘the first time’, he retains the ability to remain keenly interested in all things. In fact, this deep and joyful curiosity becomes an irresistible passion. No aspect of life can ever grow stale for him, even if it appears completely trivial to others. He retains the fervent desire to remember everyone and everything, indiscriminately absorbing all of the details delivered to his senses. With the “animally ecstatic gaze of a child”, he remains excitedly transfixed, as he moves from one shiny new and colourful thing to the next (8).

To be a true ‘man of the crowd’, the flâneur must also heroically abandon himself to the city and the crowd. Like a soldier who has been deployed to different locales around the world, the ‘man of the crowd’ learns to embrace being at home everywhere, and yet far away from home at all times. “For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate spectator,” notes Baudelaire, “it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and infinite” (1964[1859-60]: 9). The crowd becomes his element, as air and water are to the bird and the fish. In the crowd, he is at the center of the world and yet also completely hidden, much like an undercover prince rejoicing in a newfound state of incognito. At the same time, Baudelaire’s new version of the flâneur is no longer simply content with the role of dispassionate observer. If anything, he cannot even aspire toward insensitivity or
a blasé attitude. “Monsieur G. has a horror of blasé people. He is a master of that only too difficult art … of being sincere without being absurd” (Baudelaire: 9).

Baudelaire (1964[1859-60]) describes the ‘man of the crowd’ as “an ‘I’ with an insatiable appetite for the ‘non-I’”. He acts as a mirror held up to the crowd, a “kaleidoscope that has been gifted with consciousness”. His passion and his profession are simply to become one with the crowd, as a lover of universal life plugged into “an immense reservoir of electrical energy” (10). He compares each moment of inspiration in the crowd to a convulsion, where “every sublime thought is accompanied by a more or less violent nervous shock which has its repercussion in the very core of the brain” (8). And at the end of each day, in the stark contrast of night and city light, the man of the crowd moves from the childlike state that marks his capacity for seeing, to the residual power of its expression. Baudelaire explains, “Few men are gifted with the capacity of seeing; there are fewer still who possess the power of expression” (11). For the majority of people, “the fantastic reality of life has become singularly diluted. Monsieur G. never ceases to drink it in; his eyes and his memory are full of it” (15). At the time when others are asleep in their beds he is hunched over his worktable, locked in a creative ferment of activity in which he is almost violently driven to put memory to page (11).

“Be very sure that this man, such as I have depicted him…”, Baudelaire states, “…has an aim loftier than that of a mere flâneur, an aim more general, something other than the fugitive pleasure of circumstance. He is looking for that quality which you must allow me to call ‘modernity’…” (1964[1859-60]: 12). This desire to record the experience of modernity remains extremely important to the greater project that Baudelaire’s painter of modern life has undertaken, which is no less than to absorb and give permanent shape to a modernity in which all is ephemeral, fugitive, and contingent (12). In order to
accomplish such a task, the ‘man of the crowd’ must be able to draw heavily upon his adult faculties for self-expression, reason, and analysis. “All the raw materials with which the memory has loaded itself are put in order, ranged, and harmonized, and undergo that forced idealization which is the result of a childlike perceptiveness” (Baudelaire: 11). Baudelaire describes these steps as an important part of distilling from nature something that he describes as “the phantasmagoria”. In the phantasmagoria, “…the external world is reborn upon his paper, natural and more than natural, beautiful and more than beautiful, strange and endowed with an impulsive life like the soul of its creator” (11).

Among the most striking elements in *The Painter of Modern Life* is how dominant the experience of commodification has become in Baudelaire’s descriptions of beauty, art, and war. To this flâneur, the heroism of experience emerges through the glorification of the aesthetic. As Berman (1982: 136-137) points out, Baudelaire’s description of modern life now sounds more like advertising copy than culture. Modern life has become little more than a spectacular fashion show, and its ultimate triumph lies in the glittering allure of each new façade. In the world that Baudelaire claims Guys has portrayed, the modern spectator “marvels at the…amazing harmony of life in capital cities, a harmony so providentially maintained amid the turmoil of human freedom”. In other words, the social order provides a far more lucrative version of heroism to the masses than the ‘thousand floating existences’ of the lumpenproletariat that Baudelaire and his older romantic contemporaries had written of nearly a decade and a half earlier. The kind of subject matter that appeals to this artist of modern life is “the pageantry of life [*la pompe de la vie*] as it is to be seen in the capitals of the civilized world; the
pageantry of military life, of fashion, and of love [la vie militaire, la vie élégante, la vie galante]” (Baudelaire as cited in Berman: 136).

Baudelaire’s descriptions of Monsieur G’s sketches of an army regiment are even further glamorized (1964[1859-60]: 10-11). The regiment marches past like a joyful parade in all its glittering pom and splendour. Baudelaire fixes the eyes of the spectator with a child-like fascination on their shiny equipment, their heavy moustaches, and boldly determined glances. He describes the music, and the ‘soul’, that lives in the regiment as though it were moving as one proud and joyful animal, a model image of obedience. As Berman (1982) points out, Baudelaire likens this account, which he sees in the military sketches of Monsieur G, to a poem. Such a description, of course, bears no resemblance to the soldiers responsible for killing 25,000 Parisian citizens in the June days of 1848, and who cleared the path for the rise of the authoritarian dictatorship of Napoléon Bonaparte in 1851 (137).

Other aspects of Baudelaire’s glorification of the aesthetic remain similarly troubling. Consistent with his earlier depictions of women in the poetry of Les Fleurs du mal (1857/1861), Baudelaire’s descriptions of art and beauty in The Painter of Modern Life sketch a sordid picture of the Paris of the Second Empire as an empire of prostitution and decay. “We must never forget,” Baudelaire writes, “that quite apart from natural, and even artificial, beauty, each human being bears the distinctive stamp of his trade, a characteristic which can be translated into physical ugliness, but also into a sort of ‘professional’ beauty” (1964 [1859-60]: 36-37). Baudelaire explains that each profession “derives its external beauty from the moral laws to which it is subject” (25). This beauty of each profession functions as a part of its “class”, “like a characteristic badge, a trade-mark of destiny” (25). He first calls upon the example of the ‘dandy’, as a
well-recognized type to the upper strata of commercial culture and society: “he, in short, whose solitary profession is elegance, will always and at all times possess a distinct type of physiognomy, one entirely *sui generis*” (26). Baudelaire describes the evolution of dandyism as a form of new aristocracy that is marked by the ability to revolt and gather power during times of transition, when traditional notions of aristocracy have just begun to totter and fall (28). Baudelaire states, “Dandyism, an institution beyond the laws, itself has rigorous laws which all its subjects must strictly obey, whatever their natural impetuosity and independence of character” (26). His description places the dandy in the same category as the military man, and the courtesan, “though of an essentially different flavour” (25). Baudelaire explains, because the military man has grown “accustomed to surprises”, it is with difficulty that he will be “caught off his guard”. “The characteristic of his beauty will thus be a kind of martial nonchalance, a curious mixture of calmness and bravado…” (25).

Aside from his impeccable sense of fashion and perfected toilet, the principal distinguishing characteristic of the dandy is an aristocratic superiority of mind. A dandy’s beauty exists in a cult of the self that takes great care to never be visibly moved (29). This characteristic resembles the beauty that Baudelaire equates with the “martial nonchalance” of the military man: “it is a beauty that springs from the necessity to be ready to face death at every moment” (1964 [1859-60]: 25). With a decisive air of coldness, he remains unshakable, even in the face of severe suffering. “Dandyism”, Baudelaire declares, “is the last spark of heroism amid decadence”. It is a “declining daystar…glorious without heat and full of melancholy” (28-29). The dandy erects walls of self-discipline that Baudelaire equates to disciples of the highest monastic order. Although he may be filled with fire, passion, courage, and energy, his ultimate triumph is
to trap his passion within such that, in his outward appearance, he resembles a corpse. Baudelaire explains that while dandies grow increasingly rare in nineteenth century France, they continue to flourish in England. The reason that he provides for the dandy’s continuing survival in England is the continuing rigidity of the English social class system. The culprit that Baudelaire blames for the ultimate loss of the dandy’s power in France, is democracy: “But alas, the rising tide of democracy, which invades and levels everything, is daily over-whelming these last representatives of human pride and pouring floods of oblivion upon the footprints of these stupendous warriors” (29). Monsieur G’s sketches then portray a particular kind of dandy to Baudelaire, one that he describes as: “A rich man perhaps, but more likely an out-of-work Hercules!” (29).

At first glance, one might think that Baudelaire’s appreciation of women’s fashion is materialistic and superficial, especially insofar as his praise of clothing, jewellery and cosmetics occasionally reaches absurd levels. Yet there is something much darker that lurks beneath his prose. In this case, the enemy that Baudelaire fingers is Nature, a force that Baudelaire decrives as inherently evil. Baudelaire (1964 [1859-60]) argues, “Evil happens without effort, naturally, fatally; Good is always the product of some art” (32). Once humanity has moved beyond the basic needs and necessities for survival, abiding by the animalistic counsel of Nature can only result in absolute abomination where the pursuit of pleasure and luxury are concerned. What is required instead is the stiff upper hand of reason and calculation to keep the more insidious qualities of Nature in check. The absolute subjugation of the animalistic self to its idealized form should be constantly sought. Baudelaire explains, “All that I am saying about Nature as a bad counsellor in moral matters, and about Reason as a true redeemer and reformer, can be applied to the realm of Beauty” (32). The triumph of women’s fashion and cosmetics,
then, is not a more perfect imitation of Nature, but its complete and total abrogation. In order to lift themselves above Nature, women have a social duty to propagate the aesthetic appeal of the magical and supernatural (33). The rituals associated with cosmetics must not be confused with attempts to imitate Nature. Rather the striking effect created by a painted face endows the woman who wears it with a supernatural quality, transforming her into something as passionate and mysterious as a high priestess of the phantasmagoria (34). These divine rights of artifice constitute a 'sacred prostitution of the soul' making the object and the person inseparable. Like the dandy striving to better imitate the corpse, the woman too must sacrifice the life force within.

The woman that Baudelaire describes is “a divinity, a star”: “She is a kind of idol, stupid perhaps, but dazzling and bewitching, who holds wills and destinies suspended on her glance” (30). She beautifies herself through a world of things as though they are the very definition of her being: “Everything that adorns women, everything that serves to show off her beauty, is part of herself” (Baudelaire: 30). The “abstract unity in the colour and texture of the skin” that is created by her makeup functions like the tights on a dancer, it “approximates the human being to the statue, that is to something superior and divine” (34). Baudelaire insists, “she has to astonish and charm us; as an idol, she is obliged to adorn herself in order to be adored” (33). He questions, “What poet, in sitting down to paint the pleasure caused by the sight of a beautiful woman, would venture to separate her from her costume?” (31). Thus the inanimate object takes on a ‘life’ that is more real than the wearer which has become its instrument of display. Rather than view discarded items of fashion as “dead things”, Baudelaire claims that a true artist will recognize them as spectral testimony to the beauty of the woman who once wore them (33). Like a child, the true artist remains ecstatically transfixed by the enchanting properties promised by fetishized objects.
Baudelaire (1964 [1859-60]) next describes Monsieur G’s sketches of ‘women and prostitutes’ as a “vast picture-gallery of life” that could be based in either London or Paris (37). Baudelaire’s discussion does not solely focus on Monsieur G’s sketches of women who are supposedly prostitutes, but rather a spectrum of women from all social classes, as well as different age groups. “Having taken upon himself the task of seeking out and expounding the beauty in modernity”, Baudelaire explains, “Monsieur G. is thus particularly given to portraying women who are elaborately dressed and embellished by all the rites of artifice, to whatever social station they may belong” (35). These ‘fallen women’, as he describes them, exist in a state of “revolt against society— at all levels” (37). However, much like the dandy, the only means of revolt available to them is to internalize all aspects of the self as an expression through things. Baudelaire’s descriptions of the women in Monsieur G’s sketches revolve around the fashion items with which they have been accessorized, and which type of social category they belong to. His discussion does not demonstrate any interest in the subjects themselves. He describes how, in the “complete assemblage” of Monsieur G’s works, “differences of class and breed are made immediately obvious to the spectator’s eye, in whatever trappings the subjects may be decked”. Baudelaire starts at the top of the social strata, describing “young women of the most fashionable society”. Then he moves to describe bourgeois wives with their husbands in public parks, and “skinny little girls with billowing petticoats”. Next, Baudelaire describes the “lowlier theatrical world”, where “little dancers” shake “absurd fancy-dresses” on their “virginal, puny shoulders”. He describes the type of women who frequent cafes, such as a highly accessorized cigar smoking “mistress” that he calls a “half-wit peacock” (35). Next Baudelaire’s description probes into the casinos and the cabarets, where the women have “exaggerated the fashion to the extent of perverting its charm and totally destroying its aims” (36). As Baudelaire’s
descriptions of women grow darker and darker in tone, he concludes as though we have reached the final layer of a downward spiral in the Roman satirical *femina simplex* (38). Here women who are prostitutes stand against a background of “hellish light”: “…against magical backgrounds such as these which remind one of variegated Bengal Lights, there arises the Protean image of wanton beauty” (36). Those who suffer from consumption and addictions are described as “macabre nymphs and living dolls whose childish eyes betray a sinister glitter…” (Baudelaire: 38). A woman with a dirty kerchief on her head tends a bottle-laden counter, whom he describes as “an enormous Xanthippe” casting a “satanically pointed shadow” on the wall (38).

In a poem intended for inclusion in *Les Fleurs du mal*, Baudelaire writes, “In order to have shoes, she has sold her soul;/ But the Good Lord would laugh if, in the presence of that vile woman,/ I played the hypocrite and acted lofty—/ I who sell my thought and wish to be an author” (as cited in Benjamin, 2003[1938]: 17). In *The Painter of Modern Life* Baudelaire makes it similarly clear that the poet, like the prostitute, has been relegated to the margins of society. Both remain locked in a life of triviality that he argues necessitates warfare and cunning (1964 [1859-60]: 36-37). Like the prostitute, the poet-flâneur wears his profession as a type of uniform, and it too carries a haunting and provocative brand of aesthetic that renders him an object on display in the market. It is in this sense that Baudelaire brings the physiology of the flâneur’s profession to light. As with dandyism, the aristocratic superiority of mind attached to the heroic artist-flâneur has become a declining daystar. Baudelaire’s poet-flâneur now carries with him the overtly profane value of an object of public consumption. No longer able to feign an abstract and critical distance from the market, he too, like the prostitute, has become an embodiment of the commodified self. But it would be a mistake to simply dismiss the
experiences of the poet-flâneur, or the prostitute, as ‘marginal’ and therefore outside of the society that Baudelaire writes about. If anything, it becomes clear through Baudelaire’s descriptions that both prostitute and poet become exemplary of a social logic that lies at the core of society. In the jarring state of ‘spleen’ that Baudelaire both experiences and hides behind as a ‘man of the crowd’, he has developed the capacity to see through to the darker underlying forces of the culture that surrounds him. On the one hand, Baudelaire is extraordinarily perceptive with respect to the nature of experience, but, on the other hand, it simply functions as a source of nihilistic and empty rage. Although he can describe this experience, he does not display the capacity to make the connection to the capitalist system at its source.

While Benjamin (2003[1938]) acknowledges the uniquely proletarianized position from which Baudelaire is able to gain distorted semblances of the shocking realities of the capitalist modernity that surrounds him, he does not conclude the same for the nineteenth century class of petty bourgeoisie to which Baudelaire belonged (33). He argues that, during Baudelaire’s time, the triumph of the nineteenth century bourgeoisie had only hit the beginning of its decline. “The very fact that their share could, at best, be enjoyment, but never power, made the period which history gave them a space for passing time” (Benjamin, 2003[1938]: 34). Benjamin explains that throughout the course of the nineteenth century, the bourgeoisie had increasingly sought refuge from powerlessness by staging a retreat into the spectacular world of entertainment and the commodity. Over time it had become “…self evident, however, that the more this class wanted to have its enjoyment in this society, the more limited this enjoyment would be” (Benjamin: 34). Baudelaire’s poet-flâneur is conversely premised by the fact that he has “already half withdrawn from” society, and therefore finds a particular kind of enjoyment
of society from the perspective of its intoxicated outsider (34). Benjamin (2003[1938]: 31) describes the condition through which the flâneur experiences intoxication as ‘empathy with the soul of the commodity’. He argues that if there actually were “…such a thing as a commodity-soul (a notion that Marx occasionally mentions in jest), it would be the most empathetic ever encountered in the realm of souls, for it would be bound to see every individual as a buyer in whose hand it wants to nestle”. He explains: “The intoxication to which the flâneur surrenders is the intoxication of the commodity immersed in a surging stream of customers” (31). Benjamin notes that Baudelaire’s poet-flâneur remains preoccupied with “the religious intoxication of great cities”, in which he argues something more powerful than “what people call love” can be attained by “the holy prostitution of the soul” (Baudelaire as cited in Benjamin, 2003[1938]: 32). It is the commodity, however, that Benjamin identifies as the true speaker behind Baudelaire’s words. He reasons that, as the market is comprised of a concentrated number of customers, multiple buyers are required in order for a commodity to gain and retain commodity status. The more buyers that surround a commodity, the more attractive it will be perceived to be. Similarly, Benjamin asserts, it is the city’s mass of inhabitants that allows for prostitution to become widespread over large areas: “And only the mass enables the sexual object to become intoxicated with the hundred stimuli which that object produces” (33). As Benjamin (2003[1938]) points out, Baudelaire’s poet-flâneur derives his intoxication by allowing the spectacle of the crowd to act on him (34). He is hooked on the practice of love-for-sale. The poet enjoys “…the incomparable privilege of being himself and someone else, as he sees fit. Like those roving souls in search of a body, he enters another person whenever he wishes” (Baudelaire as cited in Benjamin, 2003[1938]: 32). The crowd that surges around him functions as a protective asylum, which “…permeates him blissfully, like a narcotic that can compensate him for many
Like a “veil” that “billows” over top of the urban scene, the narcotic enjoyment that the poet-flâneur receives causes its “…horrors to have an enchanting effect on him” rather than a chilling one. Benjamin explains, however, there are times that this veil will tear, and, in that brief moment of shock, the flâneur, too, will receive “an undistorted view of the big city” (34). The most profound fascination that Benjamin thus argues Baudelaire finds in the urban spectacle is that even as it intoxicates him he is never fully blinded to its horrible social realities. He identifies with society in the same way “… in which intoxicated people are ‘still’ aware of reality”, with “all the pleasure and uneasiness” that can be gleaned from it (Benjamin: 34).

2.5. The Privatization of Flânerie

Shortly before Charles Baudelaire’s death in 1867, the city’s first department stores were constructed along the Right Bank. These indoor commercial shopping plazas were intended to pick up where the glass roofed Arcades of the first half of the century had left off. For Benjamin, this transition marks the beginning of the end of flânerie: “The department store is the last promenade for the flâneur” (2003 [1938]: 31). It exemplifies the absolute privatization of a world fully steeped in commodities. As Elizabeth Wilson (1992) points out, the newly evolved demographic of department store shoppers no longer offered the flâneur the privileged status that he had previously enjoyed in the partially public, partially private, male-dominated territory of the Arcades. Instead, the new indoor shopping plazas were primarily populated by women of the middle classes, all of whom had become much more adept than he in the selling and sensual appreciation of the commodity goods primarily targeted toward them (100-101).
Parkhurst-Ferguson’s (1994: 32-33) archival research reveals that the word ‘flâneur’ also underwent a notable semantic shift at this time. In the 1866 edition of *Spirite*, Gauthier redefines flânerie as an indoor activity that functions as part of a highly selective milieu catering to groups of men who lounge around [flâni*ent*] on sofas. In 1867, the term “flâneuse” appears for the first time, not in reference to a female flâneur, but as an advertisement for a reclining chaise lounge! As these definitions suggest, the notion of the flâneur clearly shifts from a public to private personage in the latter decades of the nineteenth century.

Benjamin’s references to Edgar Allen Poe’s tale of ‘The Man of the Crowd’, paints an evocative picture of the flâneur when he first stumbles upon the department store. “If in the beginning the street had become an intérieur for him, now this intérieur turned into a street, and he roamed through the labyrinth of commodities as he had once roamed through the labyrinth of the city” (Benjamin, 2003 [1938]: 31). The cool impenetrable veneer of the man of the crowd expertly assessing objects on display had been replaced by the circuitous wandering of a lost man who can do nothing but gaze at his new surroundings with a wild and vacant stare. If the glass-roofed city streets of the Arcades initially presented a public interior that allowed the flâneur to make himself at home, the department store marks its ultimate decay. Once the flâneur exchanges the open streets of Paris for the enclosed world of the department store, he loses his position of privilege. No longer able to retain the appearance of critical distance and immunity to the enchantments of the spectacular displays of commodity goods that surround him, he too is swept up in the wave of conspicuous consumption. The moment flânerie has ultimately been subsumed by the act of going shopping, the flâneur becomes just like everyone else.
Does the *flâneur* actually ‘disappear’ at the fin-de-siècle, or does he simply lose his privileged position as an urban social ‘type’ in the marketplace and in the public sphere? Were there other venues for continuing flânerie that need to be considered? Walter Benjamin’s critical project in relation to capitalist modernity provides us with an excellent point of departure from which to examine these potentialities.
Chapter 3. The Dialectics of Flânerie in Walter Benjamin’s Work

3.1. Introduction: Paris as Fossilized Remains

By the time Walter Benjamin first wrote about the Parisian Arcades in the 1920s they had grown exceedingly passé. No longer seductive sites of commodity consumption, the arcades had become obsolete ruins of the past. In one of Benjamin’s earliest drafts for the Passagen-Werk, he writes: “Paris is a counterpart in the social order to what Vesuvius is in the geographic order: a menacing, hazardous massif, an ever-active June of revolution” (1999[1928-1929]: 882). The hopes and dreams for a better world that erupted from the revolutionary volcano of the nineteenth century continue to exist within the social and political landscape of Paris, even if they now lie dormant beneath the coat of lava that cooled and fossilized in the generation directly before his own. “But just as the slopes of Vesuvius, thanks to the layers of lava that cover them, have been transformed into paradisal orchards, so the lava of revolution provides uniquely fertile ground for the blossoming of art, festivity, fashion” (Benjamin, 1999[1928-1929]: 882). As Susan Buck-Morss (1989) points out, Benjamin’s project built around the Parisian Arcades is a “double text” (47). If, at one level, it offered a social and cultural history of nineteenth century Paris, it was also intended to provide “a political education for Benjamin’s own generation”. It is an Ur-history, “a history of the origins of that present historical moment which, while remaining largely invisible, is the determining motivation for Benjamin’s interest in the past” (Buck-Morss: 47). Benjamin
refers to the commodified dream world of nineteenth century Paris as a ‘little universe’ (1999[1929]: 211), in which the Parisian Arcades first form a modern cosmos of intoxicating ‘phantasmagoria’ that blunts the human capacity to perceive things as they ‘truly are’ (1999[1939]: 25). Benjamin’s proposed methodology for the ‘dialectical image’ describes a potentially explosive force that would serve to disrupt the centrifugal balance of the historicism of this phantasmagoric universe. Benjamin hoped that his Passagen-Werk would spark a ‘Copernican turn of remembrance’ to generate a revolutionary awakening in his own time (Benjamin, 1999[1928-1929]: 884). Key to these ambitions is the figure of the flâneur who first found his entrepreneurial niche strolling the glass and iron corridors of the Parisian Arcades, and who became progressively alienated from both the city as well as his social class in the years that followed 1848.

In this chapter, my analytic focus is how and why the flâneur occupies such a crucial role in Benjamin’s project. In the section “Phantasmagoria and Dialectical Image”, I begin by examining how the concept of phantasmagoria applies to Benjamin’s philosophy of history. Phantasmagoria is not only a concept through which to critique modernity and the commodity form, but also an aspect of Benjamin’s methodology. Next, I explore Benjamin’s conception of the dialectical image as a revolutionary tool, a means of generating a subversive and sensuous form of awakening based on body-consciousness (and not solely as an abstract and rational exposé of modern capitalism as myth).

In the section “Benjamin as Flâneur?” I explore whether Benjamin himself should be considered a flâneur. I engage with David Frisby’s (1994) argument that the flâneur provided methodological inspiration for Benjamin’s project. Particular emphasis is placed on Frisby’s argument that Benjamin finds value in the flâneur’s perceptual
activity, as constituting an urban epistemology based in the bodily senses. Different ‘types’ that appear in Benjamin’s texts, such as the ‘detective’, the ‘collector’, the ‘ragpicker’, the ‘archaeologist’, and the ‘critical allegorist’ are examined with these themes in mind. In “Schooling the Spectator”, I elaborate how the different stages of nineteenth century flânerie apply to the experiential shaping and expression of capitalism as a form of ‘second nature’.

In the section “Mimesis and Empathy” I look to Benjamin’s interest in Baudelaire, with a specific emphasis upon how Baudelaire’s work influences and expresses Benjamin’s theory of empathy with the soul of the commodity. First, I look at how Benjamin theorizes mimesis and empathy with the commodity. Second, I outline how particular cultural practices, such as fashion and gambling, serve as the means through which empathy with the commodity is cultivated. Baudelaire’s *Painter of Modern Life*, women’s fashion, and prostitution are re-examined here. Third, I look at how Benjamin speculates that the mimetic faculty holds the possibility for a dialectical awakening to the logic and effects of the commodity form. Areas where Benjamin perceives liberatory potential, such as in childhood play, language, and collective consciousness, are described and then applied to the flâneur. The concept of awakening is introduced, and described as a kind of ‘shock’ that registers bodily as well as consciously. To argue how and why mimesis remains central to Benjamin’s dialectical image as a method for generating revolutionary ‘shocks’ of awakening, I draw examples from the work of Baudelaire, as well as from Benjamin’s analysis of art, fashion, and the prostitute.

The section “Theorizing Experience”, explores Benjamin’s argument that the human bodily senses remain intimately connected to the functioning of perception, memory, and consciousness. I outline and define Benjamin’s theory of two kinds of
experience, ‘Erfahrung’ and ‘Erlebnis’. Special attention is given to how the influence of the psychoanalytic theories of Freud factor into Benjamin’s theories of experience, ‘shock’, and remembrance. The modern phenomenon of ‘phantasmagoria’ as a compensatory reality that numbs the senses to the violence of everyday life is examined from within this framework. In “Dialectics of Shock,” I analyze Baudelaire’s urban epistemology as a flâneur and ‘man of the crowd’, tracing how his alienated experience of ‘spleen’ allows for ‘shocking glimpses’ of the dream world of modern capitalism as deathly ruin. In “Baudelaire, Allegory, and the Poetry of Commodification”, I explore how Baudelaire’s poetic technique and form remain highly influential to Benjamin’s proposed methodology and form for the Passagen-Werk. I connect this back to his earlier work on the Trauerspiel or German ‘mourning plays’, explaining why Benjamin equates the alienated gaze of Baudelaire’s flâneur to a form of ‘allegorical genius’.

My final section for this chapter, “Proust and Memory”, discusses Benjamin’s interest in Marcel Proust’s “mémoire involontaire” as a bodily form of remembrance. I contrast and compare the connections that can be drawn between the epistemologies of Proust and Baudelaire, and how this particular combination applies to Benjamin’s proposed methodology. Emphasis is placed on Benjamin’s argument that memories can only be released through object-induced stimuli that first ‘trigger’ a response in the human body. I explain how this understanding of memory applies to Benjamin’s dialectical image to generate revolutionary ‘shocks’ of awakening. In my concluding chapter, “Historical Awakening and the Dialectic”, I discuss how these ‘shocks’ of awakening were intended to be focused toward a “Copernican turn of remembrance” in Benjamin’s own critical moment of pre-WWII history in Europe, and how the flâneur uniquely factors in to this level of his analysis.
Let us begin with Benjamin’s analysis of ‘phantasmagoria’, ‘historical materialist’, and ‘dialectical image’.

3.2. The Phantasmagoria and Dialectical Image: as Methodology & Critique

3.2.1. Phantasmagoria

The “phantasmagoria” is a key concept in Benjamin’s work, one that can be argued to have gained increasing relevance over the time that his critical project evolved (Cohen, 1989: 89). Max Pensky (2004) describes the phantasmagoria as “a delusional expression of collective utopian fantasies and longings, whose very mode of expression itself, as delusional, ensures that those same longings remain mere utopian fantasies” (184). Susan Buck-Morss (1992) explains that the term ‘phantasmagoria’ “originated in England in 1802, as the name of an exhibition of optical illusions produced by magic lanterns” (22). Margaret Cohen (1989) attributes the invention of the phantasmagoria itself to Étienne-Gaspard Robertson in the late 1790’s (91). Cohen describes the “phantasmagorical experience” as “literally illuminating. Using a movable magic lantern called a phantoscope, it projected for its spectators a parade of ghosts” (1989: 90). As Buck-Morss (1992) points out, however, it is Karl Marx who first drew Benjamin’s attention to the concept of the phantasmagoria. She explains that Marx made the term famous by applying it to his description of the world of commodities, as a force that acts to obscure the labour behind their production: “They veil the production process, and—like mood pictures—encourage their beholders to identify them with subjective fantasies and dreams” (25).
In his exposé of 1939, Benjamin (1999: 14) describes the subject of his proposed book, *Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century*, as “an illusion”. This illusion, he explains, can be expressed in “the feeling of vertigo” that is “characteristic of the nineteenth century’s conception of history”. Benjamin argues that the nineteenth century conception of history “corresponds to a viewpoint according to which the course of the world is an endless series of facts congealed in the form of things”. The residual characteristic of this conception has resulted in the “History of Civilization”, which offers a thorough “point by point” inventory of “humanity’s life forms and creations”. The “riches” that are accumulated in the trove of “civilization” appear as though they have been identified as such “for all time”. Benjamin counters, however, that this is a “reifying representation of civilization”, and that it “minimizes the fact that such riches owe not only their existence but also their transmission to a constant effort of society—an effort, moreover, by which these riches are strangely altered”. Benjamin explains that his investigation aims to show how, as a consequence of this representation, “the new forms of behaviour and the new economically and technologically based creations that we owe to the nineteenth century enter the universe of a phantasmagoria” (14). The world, which is “dominated by its phantasmagorias—this, to make use of Baudelaire’s term, is modernity” (Benjamin, 1999[1939]: 26). Benjamin’s exposé describes several phantasmagorias in which the creations of the nineteenth century have been “illuminated”, all of which he argues can be observed “in the immediacy of their perceptible presences”, and not solely “in a theoretical manner, by an ideological transposition” (14). He states, “Thus appear the arcades … the world exhibitions …. Also included in this order of phenomena is the experience of the flâneur… the phantasmagorias of the market… of the interior… the phantasmagoria of civilization itself” (1999[1939]: 14).
Margaret Cohen (1989: 89) argues that the “phantasmagoria assumes a key methodological position” in Benjamin’s work. While acknowledging the importance of the “dialectical image” as “a dream image” throughout the longer duration of Benjamin’s project, she describes how it is his concept of the phantasmagoria that “…becomes the expressive form taken by the products of 19th-century commodity culture” at the time of its latest development in his exposé of 1939. Cohen perceives Benjamin’s concept of the phantasmagoria to hold a dual function. On the one hand, Benjamin argues that the phantasmagoria is utterly mystifying as the expressive form of the nineteenth century’s commodity culture. On the other hand, there are areas of Benjamin’s work that indicate the potential of the phantasmagoria to be appropriated for critically illuminating purposes. Cohen explains, “While the 1935 essay ends with Benjamin’s suggestion that the demystification of 19th-century Paris is an experience of awakening…the 1939 essay concludes by according the power of ideological demystification to the phantasmagoria itself” (1989: 90). As Cohen points out, this dualism helps to better contextualize Benjamin’s closing discussion concerning Louis-Auguste Blanqui’s book *L’Éternité par les astres* [Eternity via the Stars] in the 1939 exposé. Benjamin (1999[1939]) writes, “This book completes the century’s constellation of phantasmagorias with one last, cosmic phantasmagoria which implicitly comprehends the severest critique of all the others” (25). Benjamin describes Blanqui as “the most dreaded adversary of this society, who “revealed to it, in his last piece of writing, the terrifying features of this phantasmagoria” (15). Blanqui’s version of the world that surrounds him: “Humanity features there as damned” (15). He addresses the people of the nineteenth century “as if they were apparitions”, describing them as “natives” to a “region of hell” under torments which “figure as the latest novelty of all time, as ‘pains eternal and always new’” (Benjamin, 1999[1939]: 26). Benjamin concludes, “Blanqui’s
cosmic speculation conveys this lesson: that humanity will be prey to a mythic anguish so long as phantasmagoria occupies a place in it” (15).

In this period, Benjamin (1999[1939]) also writes about the rise and the fall of the Paris Commune of 1871, the end of the phantasmagoria of classes that had dominated the “earliest aspirations of the proletariat” (24). This was a time when the cracks in the veneer of the bourgeoisie and the Haussmannized city core were just starting to show: “the pomp and the splendour with which commodity-producing society surrounds itself, as well as its illusory sense of security, are not immune to dangers” (15).

In On the Concept of History, Benjamin (2003[1940]) famously describes the cultural legacy of the ruling class as a ‘document of barbarism’ (392). His explanation is strikingly similar to his description of the “History of Civilization”, which serves as the catalyst to the world of the nineteenth century phantasmagoria in the introduction to the 1939 exposé (1999: 14). For the historical materialist “there is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is never free of barbarism, so barbarism taints the manner in which it was transmitted from one hand to the other” (Benjamin, 2003[1940]: 392). Historicism has only ever sympathized with the victor: “The historical materialist knows what this means. Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which current rulers step over those who are lying prostrate” (391). The victor gets to choose from the “spoils” and determine which “cultural treasures” are to be carried in the procession, as well as what will be left behind to be forgotten. As such, the historical materialist should always maintain “cautious detachment” when viewing the “treasures” of the past. “[I]n every case these treasures have a lineage which he cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great
geniuses who created them, but also to the anonymous toil of others who lived in the same period” (Benjamin: 392). The historical materialist, Benjamin argues, thus “…disassociates himself from this process of transmission as far as possible”, making it his critical task to “brush history against the grain” (392). How does one “brush history against the grain”? With dialectical images.

3.2.2. Dialectical Image

In the *Passagen-Werk*, Benjamin describes capitalism as “a natural phenomenon with which a new dream-filled sleep came over Europe, and, through it, a reactivation of mythic forces” (1999: [K1a.8], 391). Capitalist modernity had cast a mythical spell over the lives of everyday people, seducing them into a deep phantasmagoric dream sleep from which they cannot awaken. David McNally (2001) explains the evolution of the dialectical image as heavily dependent upon Benjamin’s use of Freud. Much like the process of recovery from trauma, addiction, and neuroses in the therapeutic model, the revolutionary process of ‘awakening’ for Benjamin is similarly met with struggle and resistance from within. McNally explains, “as a character structure laid down in the past senses the traumas it has denied, a battle ensues between primitive impulses to deny and forget and conscious desires to remember, to understand, and get better” (2001: 192). Freud attributes the struggle to maintain forgetfulness and denial to the conservative side of memory, which protects the fragile human psyche from experiences that would otherwise prove traumatic and overwhelming (Benjamin, 2003[1940]: 316-317). The therapeutic purpose of reminiscence is conversely destructive, yet ultimately reconstructive, because it aims to shatter the protective shield of false consciousness that enables patterns of neurotic and addictive behaviour, and thereby healing the underlying causes of that behaviour. “Two different drives for happiness collide: one
which seeks happiness through forgetting, the other which seeks it (and an escape from neurotic behaviour) by recovering the past” (McNally, 2001: 192). In therapy, the redemptive side of struggle occurs with breakthroughs in consciousness, allowing one to face past sources of trauma and begin the liberating process of healing in the present tense. However, as McNally points out, Benjamin is “[c]onvinced that revolutionary consciousness cannot arise as a more or less automatic process of daily life under capitalism…” (2001: 192). Benjamin does not see much hope for the dreaming collective while their innermost wishes for happiness and change are seemingly met through the commodity form. But, he reasons, if the direction of this dream could be reversed so that the experiences of everyday people are brought fully to consciousness as mythic, natural, and/or degraded, perhaps it might also be possible to redeem utopian impulses that have been mistakenly invested into the ‘things’ that furnish the world of capital (Gunster, 2004: 79). McNally explains that this is why “Benjamin sought to construct images that could trigger dialectical leaps out of routinized (and neurotic) forms of everyday behaviour” (2001: 192). The dialectical image, then, becomes a revolutionary, therapeutic device intended to stimulate past memories that have been repressed and realities that have been denied in favour of self-destructive compulsive patterns. In the Passagen-Werk, Benjamin (1999) compares this process to forging ahead “with the whetted axe of reason, looking neither right nor left so as not to succumb to the horror that beckons from deep in the primeval forest…. Every ground must at some point have been made arable by reason, must have been cleared of the undergrowth of delusion and myth”. The aim of his project, then, is to “cultivate fields where, until now, only madness has reigned”. And the primary location for igniting this revolutionary battle in consciousness and memoration is “the terrain of the nineteenth century” ([N1,4], 457).
Dialectical images illuminate realities that have been otherwise left unacknowledged and hidden through the habitual conscious perceptions of modern people in their daily lives and realities. As Benjamin writes in *The Storyteller*, “[t]he wisest thing—so the fairytale taught mankind in older times, and teaches children to this day—is to meet the forces of the mythical world with cunning and with high spirits” (2002[1936]: 157). The dialectical image similarly approaches the mythical dream sleep of capitalist modernity with cunning and high spirits. Susan Buck-Morss (1989) argues that, for Benjamin, cunning is “the trick” through which humanity gets the better of “mythic powers”: “The ‘trick’ in Benjamin’s fairy tale is to interpret out of the discarded dream images of mass culture a politically empowering knowledge of the collective’s own unconscious past” (273). Benjamin proposes that the construction of dialectical images involves unearthing “motifs of redemption” just as much as it involves a critical awakening to the horrors and disappointments of capitalism as mythic experience (2003[1939]: 179). Benjamin hypothesizes that dialectical images can only be created when the contradictory forces of opposites come clashing together through the juxtaposition of their absolute extremes. Oppositional themes, such as change and repetition, progress and ever-sameness, modernity and antiquity, life and death, Heaven and Hell, and so forth, “…must be sufficiently extreme that their imagistic juxtaposition can break the cycle of dream-sleep imposed by capital” (Gunster, 2004: 79). What lies between utopian hopes and dreams on the one hand, and utter exploitation on the other, is the revolutionary potential to revitalize collective desire for a better social world. Hopes, dreams, and desires for happiness therefore feature just as heavily in Benjamin’s conceptualization of the image as does the disappointment, disillusionment, and lack that accompany such happiness denied. McNally (2001) compares this opposition of extremes to the aim of the therapeutic process, in which, “Self-understanding comes, if
at all, in the recognition that our lives have been a series of failures and catastrophes, a recognition that can generate the drive to redeem the past by claiming happiness in the here and now” (193). The sufferer of neuroses must recognize his or her frustrated desires for happiness, just as much as he or she must recognize the traumatic source of unhappiness, in order to move forward with the truly self-actualizing steps involved in healing. McNally (2001) writes, “Real insight, therapeutic leaps in self-understanding that overcome intense resistance, have an explosive character. Benjamin tries to capture this with his concept of ‘dialectics at a standstill’” (192).

When Benjamin describes his use of dialectical images in konvolut N of the Passagen-Werk, he explains, “It’s not what is past that casts its light on what is present, or what is present that casts its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill” (1999: [N2a,3], 462). For Benjamin, as Gunster (2004) explains, the significance of particular historical events may not have been fully experienced, understood, and actualized when they occurred. Other possible outcomes to the event may have been shut down by dominant political, economic, social, and cultural structures at the time, leaving the fragments of what might have been seemingly frozen in time. “One can debate the interpretation of historical events and processes, and one can even argue about the lessons to be learned from specific incidents. But such inquiry freezes history into something that has happened and is now finished…” (Gunster, 2004: 127). Actual experiences of history will only truly remain abstract sources of contemplation. Benjamin argues that memorialization, on the other hand, has the power to explode apart the linear perception of historical time by breaking open the past, so that upon returning, we can rescue the possibilities that were once lost and find
potential redemption for them in the present. “Such is the real value of memory for Benjamin. It gives human beings the luxury of circumventing the seemingly inexorable march of history by enabling their literal return to the past to rescue the images that are stranded there” (Gunster, 2004: 123). But dialectical images are not timeless: they depend as much upon a particular time in the present for their activation as they do on the past. “[W]hile the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent” (Benjamin, 1999: [N2a,3], 462). Benjamin refers to this process as a “telescoping of the past through the present”, where, “it is the present that polarizes the event into fore-and after-history” (1999: [N7a,3], [N7a,8], 471). McNally (2001) explains: “[t]he struggles of the present transform the past by making a ‘moment of danger’ in the here-and-now the context in which past meanings are reactivated and translated into the language of the present” (192). Recall the earlier analogy of Freud’s therapeutic model: for Freud, the purpose of psychoanalysis is to aid in transformation and healing in the present; it may not ever be possible to know exactly what happened in the past. Instead, the psychoanalytic process explores how the reconstruction of the past can help the individual retroactively engage with trauma, so as to allow for self-transformation and growth. McNally writes, “Psychoanalytic knowledge is palpable, corporeal; the struggling individual can feel its truths because they both hurt and inspire” (2001: 194). He argues that this is similarly the case for Benjamin’s conceptualization of a dialectical construction of history: it “does not reside in providing an accurate depiction of everything that has happened but, rather, in its capacity to shake up members of the oppressed class, to fuel their desire to change their situation” (194). The reason that the past is therefore so crucial to Benjamin is because it remains the critical site of class struggle whose traumatic damages still reverberate in the present tense. McNally
explains, “So long as the ruling class succeeds in imposing its story, its continuous historical narrative, the oppressed will be unable to locate the energies they need for liberation” (2001: 192). As a form of methodology, Benjamin intends for the dialectical image to be engaged as a means to shatter this historicist account of civilization, as a document of “barbarism” (Benjamin, 2003[1940]: 392). But how is this to happen? And why does he situate this critical project in and around the Parisian Arcades?

Max Pensky (2004) argues that “Benjamin regarded the dialectical image as the methodological heart” of the Passagen-Werk. One of the central problems with “the centrality of dialectical images” in Benjamin’s own understanding of the methodological foundations of the project is “the obscurity of the notion of dialectical images” (178). As Pensky notes, Susan Buck-Morss (1989) describes the concept of the dialectical image as “overdetermined in Benjamin’s thought”, containing “a logic as rich in philosophical implications as the Hegelian dialectic” itself (67). Rolf Tiedeman (1999[1988]), one of the primary editors of Benjamin’s collected works, similarly argues that the “…dialectical image and dialectic at the standstill are, without a doubt, the central categories of the Passagen-Werk. Their meaning, however, remained iridescent; it never achieved any terminological consistency” (942). Benjamin intended the dialectical image to be applied on an imagistic and methodological scale, and not solely a theoretical one: “I needn’t say anything. Merely show” (Benjamin, 1999: [N1 a, 8], 460). Pensky (2004) argues that Benjamin’s Passagen-Werk was intended to become “…a radically new mode of materialist critical historiography: the work proposed to construct a series of images representing the philosophical truth content of the rise of capitalist culture and capitalist consciousness over the course of the nineteenth century” (180). The vast amount of historical materials that Benjamin collected for the Passagen-Werk were to be a
reservoir that could be drawn upon for the construction of images: “images that is, that would ‘spring forth’ from constructions of the historical material itself” (180). Pensky explains that the tendency to deemphasize theory in favour of method was in fact an ongoing theme in Benjamin’s conceptualization around the dialectical image. The reason Benjamin “grew increasingly unwilling to commit his project to a theoretical justification” is because he “was convinced that theories in general remained too dependent upon the intentions of the theorist” (180). Benjamin argued, however, that there was an “historical truth of the nineteenth century” which could remain “objectively present in his assembled fragments, and that this truth would be lost, not recovered, by the imposition of a superstructure on them” (Pensky: 180).

Benjamin’s critical project focusing on the nineteenth century Parisian Arcades was intended to be a Marxist-inspired cultural critique. In the methodological materials compiled in konvolut ‘N’ of the Passagen-Werk, Benjamin (1999) explains that his research aims to deal “fundamentally with the expressive character of the earliest industrial products, the earliest industrial architecture, the earliest machines, but also the earliest department stores, advertisements, and so on” (460). This “becomes important for Marxism in two ways”:

First, it will demonstrate how the milieu in which Marx’s doctrine arose affected that doctrine through its expressive character (which is to say, not only through causal connections); but, second, it will also show in what respects Marxism, too, shares the expressive character of the material products contemporary with it. (Benjamin, 1999: [N1a, 7], 460)

Benjamin corrects Marx’s deterministic, causal connection between economy and culture as it applies to the doctrine of the superstructure. In the preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, Marx (1977[1859]) argues that the
material and economic factors at the base of society will directly condition the type of politics and ideology that society will uphold as its superstructure. He explains:

The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. (as cited in M.I.A.: para. 6)

Pensky (2004: 183) points out that while Marx tends to focus on the relationship between material and cultural production as literal and direct (based in cause and effect), Benjamin argues this relationship is expressive. Benjamin (1999) writes about “the doctrine of the ideological superstructure” in konvolut ‘K’ of the Passagen-Werk:

It seems, at first sight, that Marx wanted to establish here only a causal relation between superstructure and infrastructure. But already the observation that ideologies of the superstructure reflect conditions falsely and invidiously goes beyond this. The question, in effect, is the following: if the infrastructure in a certain way (in the materials of thought and experience) determines the superstructure, but if such determination is not reducible to simple reflection, how is it then—entirely apart from any question about the originating cause—to be characterized? As its expression. The superstructure is the expression of the infrastructure… ([K2, 5], 392)

Benjamin’s methodology marks an attempt to shift away from the economic determinism that he perceived as problematic to a Marxist theory of culture. According to Pensky (2004), Benjamin’s modification asserts that the cultural expressions of an epoch contain elements that are “simultaneously material and symbolic, economic and cultural ….the collective consciousness of nineteenth-century European culture [expresses itself] …in a double manner” (183). The cultural expressions of an historical epoch can also take
shape in distorted forms, much like aspects of an individual's life would appear in the symbolic remnants of a dream. In *konvolut 'K'* of the *Passagen-Werk*, Benjamin writes:

> The economic conditions under which society exists are expressed in the superstructure—precisely as, with the sleeper, an overfull stomach finds not its reflection but its expression in the contents of dreams, which, from a causal point of view, it may be said to “condition”. The collective, from the first, expresses the conditions of its life. These find their expression in the dream and their interpretation in the awakening. (1999: [K2, 5], 392)

Pensky (2004) explains that, on the one hand, the cultural products of the nineteenth century were understood by Benjamin to express “the imperatives of capitalism... in the conscious attempts of its apologists, literary and aesthetic heroes, and statesmen to generate a dominant culture that expresses the triumphs of capitalist modernity” (183). On the other hand, nineteenth century cultural expressions would also appear “in the largely unconscious reactions to the hellish consequences of this same modernity, which are expressed, in encoded form, in a thousand inadvertent, overlooked, or otherwise worthless cultural forms” (183). It is the latter of these two expressive modes that Benjamin considered the most valuable source of dialectical images for his critical project. As David McNally (2001: 194) explains, “Benjamin adopted the attitude of the junk collector: to grab hold of whatever decaying things could be salvaged for constructive purposes”. Benjamin did not approach the past “as a repository of truths”. Rather, “I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them” (Benjamin, 1999: [N1a,8], 460). Benjamin wrests his scrap materials from the obsolete cultural goods of the nineteenth century to use in the construction of dialectical images.
The second contribution Benjamin’s project makes to Marxism is to “show in what respects Marxism, too, shares the expressive character of the material products contemporary with it” (1999: [N1a, 7], 460). Benjamin argues that Marx’s theory of the commodity can be applied to his own theory of the expressive character of the material products of the nineteenth century. Pensky (2004) points out that Marx had already noted that there was a “particular dialectical structure” to the “industrial commodity” (183). In the first volume of *Capital*, Karl Marx (1990[1867]) argues: “Initially the commodity appeared to us as an object with a dual character, possessing both use-value and exchange-value. Later on it was seen that labour, too, has a dual character: in so far as it finds its expression in value…” (131-132). Marx’s description of what constitutes the ‘use-value’ of a thing begins quite simply: “The usefulness of a thing makes it a use-value” (126). He argues that the use-value of the commodity is based upon physical properties, and is based upon two combined elements: the raw materials that have been provided by nature, and the labour power that transforms it into something useful (133). The ‘exchange value’ of a thing, on the other hand, is the value it acquires when it is bought and sold on the market. Marx explains, “This relation changes constantly with time and place. Hence exchange-value appears to be something accidental and purely relative…” and yet also “consequently an intrinsic value…inseparably connected with the commodity” (126). It is for this reason that the “mystical character of the commodity does not therefore arise from its use-value”, but rather from its fetishism as a commodity-form (164). Marx explains that the process of commodity fetishism in capitalist society “is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves, which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things” (165). He argues that the fetishization of commodities alienates the worker: through the commodification of his or her own labour, and in subsequent
alienation from the products of that labour in turn. The worker ceases to recognize the commodity as a product of his or her own labour. Once it has been taken into the market and assigned an exchange value it takes on the commodity’s “mystical character” (164).

Pensky (2004) explains that there is a dualism inherent to Marx’s notion of ‘commodity fetishism’. While human beings are alienated from the products of their labour, commodities are then perceived to assume all kinds of human qualities through the process of exchange-value. Subjects are turned into objects, while objects are “transformed into subjective beings” (183). Benjamin recognizes that the qualities of fetishism become most clearly manifest in commodities, as objects of consumption. This is why, for Benjamin, commodities function as “…sites for the disclosure of a kind of historical truth about modern capitalism” (183-184). Pensky argues, “In this sense, commodities are both nature and culture, both economic and symbolic forms, or better, are the concrete appearances of the intersection of these dialectical poles” (2004: 183). In the “concentration, and reversal,” of the dialectical poles separating subject from object, “commodities express both the hellish and the utopian sides of human consciousness” (184). As demonstrated by Benjamin’s Passagen-Werk, the dialectical images that he perceives to hold these oppositional forces find their source in the spaces, objects, and practices of industrial capitalism. Gunster (2004) argues, to Benjamin’s eyes, each of these ‘things’ (as the commodity) expresses the socioeconomic structures from within which it was created and consumed, in addition to acting as a receptacle for the underlying hopes, dreams, and desires of human society. It is this dual-identity that both facilitates and is necessary for the contradictory elements of the dialectical image to be engaged. “In capitalist society, dreams of a classless
society can only attain expression in a reified, fetishized form” (Gunster, 2004: 133). For Benjamin, then, commodities possess the potential to act as the “markers for a continuum of unfulfilled utopian expectation”, pointing both “backward” to the “pre-class society” and “forward toward a revolutionary interruption of the continuum that perpetuates them” (Pensky, 2004: 184). In the 1935 exposé for Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century, Benjamin writes:

Corresponding to the form of the new means of production, which in the beginning is still ruled by the form of the old (Marx), are images in the collective consciousness in which the new is permeated with the old. These images are wish images: in them the collective seeks both to overcome and to transfigure the immaturity of the social product and the inadequacies in the social organization of production. At the same time, what emerges in these wish images is the resolute effort to distance oneself from all that is antiquated—which includes, however, the recent past. These tendencies deflect the imagination (which is given impetus by the new) back upon the primal past. In the dream in which each epoch entertains images of its successor, the latter appears wedded to elements of primal history <Urgeschichte>—that is, to elements of a classless society. And the experiences of such a society—as stored in the unconscious of the collective—engender, through interpenetration with what is new, the utopia that has left its trace in a thousand configurations of life, from enduring edifices to passing fashions. (1999: 4-5)

David McNally (2001: 200) explains how the emergence of new means of production in society can provide hope: “the shortcomings of the ‘social system of production’ might be remedied by these productive forces themselves”. Dreamers in society will seek a radical break from the recent past in order to envision the future. For dreamers to construct “the images of a new social order”, they must first be able to reach far back into the past, “to their earliest images of happiness ….this means constructing images which draw upon the experience of a pre-class society, of a social order prior to class exploitation”. Why then did Benjamin choose to focus specifically on mid-nineteenth century Paris? McNally (2001) explains that two factors were crucial: Firstly, “Paris is the city of the world exhibition: the world fairs of 1855, 1867, 1878, 1889, and 1900 were
designed to entrance the population with the wonder of commodities and new technologies, to give them the ‘lesson of things’” (200). Secondly, Paris also was “the site of the two most important working-class uprisings of the nineteenth century: the revolution of June 1848, and the upheaval of 1871 which created the workers’ government of the Paris Commune” (201). Paris functions for Benjamin as a dialectical site, containing “both sides of the utopian dream-wishes generated within bourgeois society” (McNally: 201). The first side wishes “for liberation through commodities (embodied in the world fairs)”, while the other side wishes “for liberation from the rule of commodities (expressed in the failed workers revolutions)” (201). The central political and cultural problem that animated Benjamin’s critical project is “the fetishistic inversion by which desires for a society of freedom and solidarity became cathected onto commodities” (McNally, 2001: 202-203).

Just as Freud conducts an analysis of symbols and dreams within the therapeutic process, Benjamin treats the commodities that furnish the world of capital as the materialization of the shattered expression of utopian impulses that once found their place in high art, theology, and the folktale. Like Freud describes dreams as the distorted expression of wishes that cannot be consciously acknowledged or expressed, Benjamin argues that the censorship mechanisms embedded in commodity exchange provide “the distorted representation of wishes that cannot be allowed to enter consciousness in their original form” (Gunster, 2004: 133). These petrified desires, which take shape as the wish-symbols that are projected onto the commodity form, can be ‘read’ and psychoanalyzed as a form of language expressed by the collective unconscious. “Benjamin’s later work, then, is preoccupied with psychoanalyzing the
places, objects, and things of contemporary society as traces that bear mute witness to the dialectical interpenetration of dream and ruin under capitalism" (Gunster, 2004: 134).

The central methodological problem raised in Benjamin’s application of Marxian historical materialism to his concept of the dialectical image in this context is “[i]n what way is it possible to conjoin a heightened graphicness <Anschaulichkeit> to the realization of the Marxist method?” (Benjamin, 1999: [N2, 6], 461). Pensky (2004) explains that Benjamin remained cognizant of the expressive qualities of archaic wish images as a distortion of reality. His concern then became, how to effectively reverse these images into a politically shocking force in which they could be “recognized, precisely for what they are” at the moment in which two diametrically opposing extremes collide (185). One of the earliest answers for Benjamin took the form of surrealist montage. Benjamin explains,

The first stage of this undertaking of history will be to carry out 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 moments the crystal of the total event. (1999: [N2, 6], 461)

For Pensky (2004: 185), Benjamin’s plans to “carry over the principle of montage into history” referred to his initial intent to “borrow an aesthetic technique of the literary avant-garde, the French Surrealists, and to apply that method beyond the aesthetic sphere, into the practice of critical historiography”. The use of montage in the surrealist art movement intended to break away from the traditional notion of the “solitary creative genius”, using both medium and form as the front line of attack against the “institutionally structured history of painting”. Unconventional materials were often employed, such as “otherwise useless or discarded found objects” like buttons, ticket stubs, newspapers,
paper scraps, cigarette butts, and other such ‘detritus’ (185-186). Pensky (2004: 186) describes two elements as very important in building montage: First, he describes the methods employed in gathering and assembling raw materials, which are often accomplished “with the aid of quite extravagant notions of ‘objective chance’, automatic writing, intoxication, dream states, and so forth”. Secondly, he describes the “principle of construction”, which is employed in the individual placement and cross-referencing of objects in potentially shocking and defamiliarized contexts in order to challenge and provoke different meanings and experiences. Benjamin applies the principle of montage to historiography by collecting ‘otherwise useless’ historical scraps and detritus through his research in the archives (and other less conventional locations) as the raw materials to be “mounted” within a “series of textual juxtapositions”. Through the juxtaposition of varying historical scraps and materials Benjamin intended to create ‘constellations’. Each constellation, Pensky explains, “forms an image, not the intuitive sense of a visual image…but precisely in the sense of a new, necessary interpretation of the fragment’s relationships with one another” (186).

As Benjamin writes in his Surrealism essay, “the trick by which this world of things is mastered—it is more proper to speak of a trick than a method—consists in the substitution of a political for a historical view of the past” (1968: 182). Gunster (2004) explains that the surrealist use of montage contains a destructive element that rips objects and experiences from out of the contexts in which they have been conventionally embedded (147). For this reason, Benjamin perceives great potential in the technique of montage to “juxtapose advertisements, dreams, images of childhood, fragments of history and fiction in order to create allegories of a society suffocating beneath the crushing weight of commodities and money” (McNally, 2001: 180). However, McNally
emphasizes, “this requires a new mode of writing oriented to profane illumination of disintegrating bourgeois order” (2001: 180). Like Baudelaire’s poetry, the surrealist art movement looks to the banal and the everyday of urban capitalism for its raw materials. The surrealist emphasis upon the outmoded constitutes what Benjamin describes as a “profane illumination” that draws attention to the fetishism that has been stripped from former objects of desire. Benjamin credits Andre Breton, for example, as one of the key figures that he encountered in the surrealist movement while living in Paris who opened his eyes to the revolutionary energies that can be gleaned from the outmoded objects, fashions, places, and designs that linger as ruins in the urban industrial core (Gunster, 2004: 145). “Disavowing the hermetic practices of most art,” explains Gunster, surrealism “plunges into the very heart of capitalist society, exploiting its products and spaces as the source of a ‘profane illumination’ that all can share” (2004: 145). There is a revolutionary quality to the visceral sense of revulsion evoked by the obsolete ‘trash’ that has been freshly ejected from circuits of exchange. Such ‘trash’ functions as an ‘anti-aphrodisiac’ because of how it has been stripped of exchange value. In this context, each piece of ‘trash’ serves as an illuminating source of contradiction against the system that stands, thereby providing a ready source material for constructing dialectical images toward the re-politicization of history (145).

McNally (2001) argues that it is also important to recognize that Benjamin’s intention was not to generate aesthetic representations of capitalism and commodification that could be contemplated from a distance. Rather, his work was to serve as an experimental exploration of new modes of knowledge and experience intended to interpenetrate body and consciousness (181). In One Way Street Benjamin writes: “To turn the threatening future into a fulfilled ‘now’, the only desirable telepathic
miracle, is a work of bodily presence of mind” (1996[1928]: 483). The body becomes the revolutionary site of a form of the transformative knowing that can only emerge from physical action. Benjamin’s methodology is situated in a holistic fusion that starts from within: “By image, then, Benjamin is referring not to a visual representation but to the fusion of an individual’s sensory and perceptual apparatuses, cognitive faculties, and mnemonic field, including the unconscious, in the full experience of a particular moment in time” (Gunster, 2004: 123). Gunster (2004) argues that Benjamin theorized montage as a pedagogical technique that could generate cognitive and bodily ‘shocks’ using dialectical images as stimuli. These ‘shocks’ are intended to activate a liberatory breaking away from the conventional thought patterns and processes regulated by bourgeois experiences, by intentionally arresting time between past and present and thereby illuminating contradictions (147). McNally (2001) explains that this is why Benjamin responds so positively to Brecht’s epic theatre. On the epic stage, physical gestures are often engaged to disrupt the flow of narrative and arrest a particular moment in time. The use of gesture breaks through the instrumental confines of language, thrusting the body back into the center of human life. “Such gestures are dialectical because, by disrupting the flow of scenes and actions which recreate the time of everyday history, they cast light on the space of the body and its desires. In so doing, they give rise to ‘the dialectic at a standstill” (McNally, 2001: 190). Bodily gesture functions as a “dialectics at a standstill” for Benjamin because it works to break apart dominant bourgeois narratives. Like the anarchistic impulse that Benjamin (2003[1940]) describes as civil insurgents fired “simultaneously and independently” at the “dials on clocktowers” on the first night of fighting in the July Revolution (395), the dialectic at a standstill destabilizes “the apparent continuity of history by making time stand still” (McNally, 2001: 196). Pieces of the past are brought onto “the stage of the present” in
order to allow us to “glimpse those discontinuous moments when the oppressed have disrupted the ‘natural’ order of things only to be defeated” (McNally: 196). By doing so, Benjamin “hopes to reveal the painful (and potentially therapeutic) truth about the present: that we live in the midst of immense suffering that need not be” (McNally: 196).

3.3. Benjamin as Flâneur?

David Frisby (1994) makes a compelling argument about the connection between Benjamin’s methodological research process and the more perceptually involved activities of flânerie. He proposes that flânerie not only had a strong presence in Benjamin’s work as a recurring motif, but more importantly as an applied form of methodology. He argues that Benjamin’s writings on the flâneur are best understood as an exploration of the different modes of perceptual activity of flânerie (93). Frisby (82-83) divides these modes into three categories: first, observation and listening; second, reading metropolitan life as texts; third, the production of texts. Observation and listening require the constant absorption of the people, places, sounds, and things that are encountered in the city through the use of the human senses. Reading metropolitan life includes reading the actual city, engaging with its architecture, spatial imagery, and human configurations as a text, alongside the reading of texts that have already been written for or about the city. This kind of reading involves a mode of illustrative seeing, which wrenches each scrap and impression out of its original context in order to locate it within new configurations. The production of texts includes literary texts, lyrical and prose poetry, illustrative/visual texts, narratives and reports, as well as journalistic or sociological texts. Frisby suggests that each of these layers of activity can be further applied to the illustrative figures that surround the flâneur in Benjamin’s project.
Could the *Passagen-Werk* itself be considered a form of flânerie? Benjamin’s methodology certainly contains elements that are similar to the urban epistemologies mapped out by the flâneur. For example, Frisby (1994) identifies the detective as the central illustrative figure for the process of investigation which Benjamin himself undertakes (83). He suggests that we can read Benjamin’s comments around the theme of the detective as much more than musings about the origins of detective literature. The flâneur as detective “must listen carefully to sounds, stories, scraps of quotations as well as search for clues amongst the ‘dead data’ of the metropolis—just like the detective; or in the archive…” (Frisby, 1994: 93). Frisby argues that Benjamin’s hours of archival research constitute a form of exegetical flânerie amidst key texts of modernity, coupled with a desire to bring some semblance of order to the scraps gathered from the extensive archives of the Bibliothèque nationale. Frisby (1994) describes how Benjamin, much like the flâneur as detective, went “in search of the traces” in the library setting. Benjamin would “literally read the traces of the nineteenth century from hard-earned clues” while insisting “upon the ‘necessity of listening for every accidental quotation, every fleeting mention of a book over many years’” (97). It is not only the flâneur wandering urban space: Benjamin, too, was “exploring the texts of the city, the texts on the experience of modernity, the representations of modernity all of which are themselves as labyrinthine as the metropolis itself” (99). As Susan Buck-Morss (1989: 6) points out, Benjamin’s labour did not stop at the walls of the archive, nor do his referents all point back to the “musty corridors of academia” from which his work attempts to escape. Like the flâneur, Benjamin explored a wide variety of personal, cultural, pedestrian, and mundane commercial avenues in order to track down the fragments that he meticulously assembled in the *Passagen-Werk*. Frisby (1994: 97) argues that Benjamin’s early attempts to completely eliminate theory from his project
through the principle of montage and the copious gathering of citations makes “an orthodox analysis” of his work difficult. The perceptual skills and activities that are attached to the illustrative figure of the flâneur as detective prove ideal for the collection of such materials. The ‘illustrative mode of seeing’ that Frisby attaches to flânerie first develops when Benjamin’s early insistence on citation gives way, “to the notion of dialectical images in modernity”. It is the “graphic nature of Benjamin’s texts” alongside his “…desire to bring some order to the scraps of information and citations gathered” that implicates the perceptual skills and activities of the other figures illustrative of his method (Frisby, 1994: 97).

The second figure that Frisby (1994: 97) identifies as helpful for understanding Benjamin’s methodology is the collector. The primary task of the flâneur as collector is to place “the similar in conjunction with one another”. “Reading, recording, extracting, ordering, reconstituting, deciphering, and the like” remain important tools for the “construction of constellations of objects, figures and experience” that become “particularly apposite” for Benjamin as he conducts his research around nineteenth century Paris. Frisby integrates the figure of the ‘chiffonier’ [‘ragpicker’] into the same area of activity as the collector. The flâneur as ragpicker is a “marginal figure” who assembles the refuse of the city while “seeking to read the traces from the details” (Frisby, 1994: 99). The marginality of the flâneur as ragpicker enhances these abilities because of how he engages with the text of the city. Whether it be through the obsessively meticulous hoarding of goods with no apparent use value (other than sentimental associations), or in desperate attempts at some form of opportunistic refurbishing to garner exchange, this figure must be able to perceive from outside of the concrete realities of the everyday in order to excavate such significance in otherwise
empty objects. Frisby argues that Benjamin’s *Passagen-Werk*, with “over a thousand pages of notes, commentaries and the like” serves as a “complex *inventarium*” that requires a special kind of reading “to be rendered meaningful” (1994: 99). Drawing from the work of Michael Opitz, Frisby explains that the ‘illustrative mode of seeing’ required for this kind of reading exists as part of a “dialectical relationship” between the flâneur and the reader: “‘The text’, Benjamin writes in the *Arcades Project*, ‘is a forest in which the reader is a hunter’... The reader as hunter and flâneur as reader of traces; they are both in search of something... To the reader and to the flâneur the books and city become a hunting ground” (Opitz as cited in Frisby, 1994: 99).

The third illustrative figure is “the reader of texts that remain to be deciphered”. Sometimes this reader of texts is “the critical allegorist”, and at others “the archaeologist” (Frisby, 1994: 98). As critical allegorist, the reader “emphasizes the significance of language”, while as archaeologist, the reader “researches for traces of the past in the layers of its representations from the present downwards”. The critical allegorist and archaeologist both remain focused in the areas of Benjamin’s work that deal with the excavation of memory. Frisby (1994) describes Benjamin’s hermeneutic intention in his ordering of materials for the *Passagen-Werk* as similar to that of someone conducting an archaeological dig: “a good archaeological report must not only indicate the strata from which its discovered object emanates, but those others above all which had to be penetrated” (98). He explains that Benjamin’s complex collection of materials for the *Passagen-Werk* as it has been assembled under a filing system of upper and lower case letters provides a good example of such hermeneutic intent (98). Like the flâneur as archaeologist, Benjamin explores the texts of the city and capitalist modernity as though he is in the process of unearthing fragile ancient relics from an underground labyrinth.
After each trace is carefully and meticulously dislodged, it is then catalogued and sorted into thematically assigned compartments. In this process we see an overwhelming array of remnants and scraps that have been inventoried and placed into select constellations. In texts such as, *One Way Street, Berlin Chronicle,* and *Berlin Childhood,* for example, Benjamin employs the method of literary montage to assemble the fragments of his own childhood memories. In *Berlin Chronicle,* Benjamin (1999[1932]) argues that memory “is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theatre. It is the medium of past experience, just as the earth is the medium in which dead cities lie buried. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging” (611). Benjamin explains that each of the memory fragments he has extracted from the “dark loam” of his own life history stand “like precious fragments or torsos in a collector’s gallery—in the sober rooms of our later insights”. They have been “severed from all earlier associations” in order to explore how they might alternatively interconnect in the now (611). In Benjamin’s *One Way Street,* “[t]he reader is invited to stroll along the textual one way street, that is itself the product of a kind of flânerie” (Frisby, 1994: 101). Frisby quotes Eckhardt Kohn, who proposes that the contents of montage in Benjamin’s *One Way Street* were actually taken from “the linguistic material of the street”. He explains that they “mirror the written material of the street as it is offered to the observer in a stroll”, through the thematic inclusion of metropolitan pedestrian visuals such as, “nameplates, posters, advertising… house facades, shop windows and exhibition showcases” (as cited in Frisby, 1994: 101). Frisby (1994) suggests that the ‘illustative mode of seeing’ that remains central to the flâneur as critical allegorist and archaeologist can be “placed in conjunction with reading”. The flâneur, like an “astrologer”, must learn to interpret “from the signs of other constellations. The flâneur reads the city. In so
doing, he is guided by the streets and buildings just as the reader of the text by the script” (99).

What the detective, collector, ragpicker, critical allegorist, and archaeologist, all have in common as the illustrative figures engaged in the methodology for Benjamin’s project is that they demonstrate the dynamic ability to illuminate parts of it that otherwise remain hidden from the rest of us. Benjamin’s project was assembled out of “details, traces into dialectical images and the ‘tiger’s leap’ into our present. This construction commenced from a myriad fragments whose meaning could often not be recalled except through their construction and re-presentation in a new constellation” (Frisby, 1994: 99).

Each illustrative figure functions as a part of the complex methodology that Benjamin has created for the collection and strategic placement of images in his critical project. The flâneur, who “acts as the embodiment of all these dimensions of exploration”, makes his way through capitalist modernity “in search of that which is hidden: the ever-same in the new; antiquity in modernity; representations of the profane in the mythical, the past in the present, and so on” (Frisby, 1994: 98).

Frisby (1994: 96) argues that “many of Benjamin’s texts belong to the literature of flânerie” and therefore asserts that Benjamin should be considered a flâneur insofar as he engages in his own forms of textual production. “Benjamin’s own activity in producing the hitherto most illuminating account of the flâneur involved the reading of texts on metropolitan modernity and the production of texts on modernity” (Frisby, 1994: 96). He goes on to suggest that “it is precisely the author of an article entitled ‘The author as producer’, who should prompt us to look at how Benjamin himself produces texts and to ask what is distinctive about the flâneur as producer” (96). What Frisby neglects, though, is how Benjamin explicitly positions his role as a historical materialist as a
dialectical *counterpoint* to flânerie. Benjamin’s historical materialism nourishes the possibility of revolution, and thus the possibility of transcending the limits of existing social configurations, while the flâneur has no such ‘exit’ plan in place. Benjamin engages with the flâneur and flânerie as a fertile source of images, texts and signs. Yet his ultimate goal is to dispel the mythical dream world of capitalist modernity—not wallow within it.

### 3.4. Schooling the Spectator: Capitalism as ‘Second Nature’

It is of particular importance that the figure of the flâneur first appears at the dawn of the nineteenth century in 1806 as the focal point of a literary pamphlet that essentially describes the urban myth of his ‘type’ as one would a fictional literary character. The flâneur enters history as a new urban public entity that could be recognized by others as a character, but not as a specific individual, at least not at the outset. Benjamin foregrounds the section on the flâneur in *The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire*, with a discussion of little paperback novels called ‘physiologies’. Benjamin explains that the physiologies emerged as a form of panoramic literature to be sold by vendors on the streets of Paris in the 1840’s, in “the period that marked the *haute école* of the feuilleton” (2003[1938]: 18). Much like the 1806 pamphlet that first identified Mr. Bon-Homme as a bourgeois ‘type’ of flâneur (Parkhurst-Ferguson, 1994: 26), the physiologies were a series of exaggerated character sketches that categorized a variety of social ‘types’ within the rapidly exploding human population of Paris. Benjamin (2003[1938]) describes how, “[f]rom the itinerant street vendor of the boulevards to the dandy in the opera-house foyer, there was not a figure of Paris life that was not sketched
by a *physiologue*” (18). The little books became so popular at one time that they were followed up with several other varieties of physiologies, such as the physiologies of animals, and of nations, for example.

Benjamin (2003[1938]: 19) suggests that the sudden popularity of these kinds of categorical sketches was linked to the overall sense of social anxiety that people were experiencing as they adjusted to rapid growth in densely populated urban environments. The underlying political subtext of the physiologies, however, emerges in the context of the despotic political environment in which they were produced. “[L]ife in all its varieties and inexhaustible wealth of permutations can thrive only among the gray cobblestones and against the gray background of despotism was the political secret to which the physiologies belonged” (Benjamin: 19). There was a marked increase in the production of comedy and satire as distraction and entertainment in reaction to a tightening of political censorship under the rule of the July Monarchy after the September Laws of 1836. The physiologies were entirely composed by one social class: “It was a petty-bourgeois genre from the ground up” (Benjamin: 18). The object of the physiologies was a pseudo-scientific taxonomy of the ‘masses’, categorized into ‘types’ in the same way that the natural sciences divide different species, or shopping catalogues might feature specialized brands of commodities on display.

“It was indeed the most obvious thing to give people a friendly picture of one another. Thus, the physiologies helped fashion the phantasmagoria of Parisian life in their own way” (Benjamin, 2003[1938]: 20). Although seemingly “harmless and perfectly affable” on the surface, the darker effect that Benjamin reads into the physiologies is a naturalizing narrative that represents class divisions as though they were laws of biological science, and not the products of social and historical processes (19).
Consider, for example, the portrayal of working class people as a ‘type’ who spend their lives in factories due to their naturally endowed characteristics and preferences (20). Such caricatures, then, do not simply reflect the anxiety of a public trying to gather its bearings, they also depoliticize the contradictions of social class and inequality through the naturalizing figure of ‘the crowd’. Readers are tutored in the art of a discriminating gaze that catalogues individuals through close attention to their external appearance based on commodified aesthetics.

This leisurely, detail-oriented, style of narration is the hallmark of the flâneur. Like the producers of the physiologies, the flâneur comes from a bourgeois background, and primarily caters to an urban middle class public. He writes about ‘the crowd’ that he secretly observes from within (Benjamin, 2003[1938]: 22). Much like the tutored gaze presented in the physiologies, the flâneur is completely immersed in the crowd, yet simultaneously detached from it as a panoramic observer (18). He wanders the urban capital day and night, conducting a form of urban ‘botany’ that catalogues the people, places, and things that populate its interior (19). Yet the flâneur must also secure his own visibility as a ‘star’ commodity, advertising himself as a mysterious and potentially subversive man of letters (14). As cultural producer, then, the flâneur serves as both author and star of bourgeois phantasmagoria. In the little 1841 paperback ‘Physiologie du flâneur’, Louis Huart writes, “without the arcades, the flâneur would be unhappy” (as cited in Parkhurst-Ferguson, 1994). But, as Parkhurst-Ferguson argues, the reverse is also true: “without the flâneur the arcades would not exist” (23). The bourgeois phantasmagoria produced, in part, by the flâneur becomes one of the dominant forms of culture through which people come to understand and experience the rapid expansion of capitalist urbanization and modernization. As Urhistory, these cultural texts help us to
understand how the modern gaze was first tutored and framed to fit the experiences of the capitalist marketplace.

When we examine Benjamin’s exploration around the flâneur as a form of methodology for his own critical aims, each of the three distinctive urban epistemologies from the different stages of flânerie explored in the first section are relevant. To briefly recap, we started with Monsieur Bon-Homme’s early public displays of loitering and bourgeois individualism, which came to represent a type of deviance and non-conformity to the capitalist work cycle and to the pace of the modern city. Balzac’s modern artist-as-genius was introduced next, as the leisurely bourgeois-flâneur turned competitive creative entrepreneur who both appropriates and exploits this image. The urban epistemology of Baudelaire’s ‘man of the crowd’ is based in a position of marginality and alienation from the city as well as the bourgeois middle class. As Paris is thoroughly Haussmannized and commodified, Baudelaire inventories the dislocated fragments of a failed social system that his alienated experiences of ‘spleen’ profoundly register and yet do not conceive any viable exit from.

Although Benjamin has very little use for the bon-hommerie associated with the early bourgeois flâneur, this archetype provides an excellent backdrop for critical understanding. The ‘subversive’ image of deviance and non-conformity attached to the early bourgeois-flâneur is actually fuelled by an air of class and gender privilege, and this sets the precedent for future generations of cultural producers to uphold. With the flâneurs of Balzac’s era we begin to see how the flâneur intentionally strives to distance his public image from the central controls of capitalist modernity, thereby taking on the guise of rebellion as a potentially ‘dangerous’, suspicious, and subversive element of non-participation. This evolving emphasis on the public representation of flânerie
illustrates the illusory quality of the ‘subversive’ guise of Balzac’s ‘hero’-flâneur, but it also helps reveal growing anxiety about the dislocation and anomie of capitalist urbanization. Through the authority of his self-authored heroism, Balzac’s artist-flâneur ‘expertly’ domesticates and explains away the threatening forces of the unknown in order to promote and sell mythologized understandings of urban control to his primarily bourgeois audiences. Benjamin helps us to understand this ‘heroism’ as an ideological strategy for anxiety management, which both expresses and then symbolically resolves those fears (2003[1938]: 19). In this era, there is a clearly marked and fundamental difference between the street-savvy mobility that is chosen by the bourgeois flâneur as a form of urbane public leisure, as opposed to the increasingly street-bound necessity experienced by the city’s disenfranchised lumpenproletariat as a means of survival. One represents the luxuries attached to a privileged and self-satisfied enjoyment of the market, while the other represents its ultimate victimization and exploitation. At this earliest point, the two are arguably not at all intermeshed as a public image.

With the flâneurs of Balzac’s era, the guises of the artist-as-genius and urban-detective are engaged to promote the impression of expert control and privileged ownership. As already discussed with respect to the physiologies, this is accomplished by a comprehensive inventory and typification of the city’s places and populations, with the hopes of domesticating its underlying mysteries and secrets. In his exposé of 1939, Benjamin (1999: 21-22) argues that the “flâneur plays the role of scout to the marketplace” and this “points to an agonizing phantasmagoria at the heart of flânerie”. The flâneur, is a “man who abandons himself” to the crowd, and is therefore “accompanied by very specific illusions”. Benjamin explains that “Balzac’s work provides excellent examples” of just such an illusion: Balzac’s flâneur “flatters himself that, on
seeing a passerby swept along by the crowd, he has accurately classified him, seen straight through to the innermost recesses of his soul—all on the basis of his external appearance”. As Benjamin (2003[1938]) points out, to hold such a perception of one’s fellow man was so removed “from experience that there were bound to be uncommonly weighty motives for it. The reason was uneasiness of a special sort. People had to adapt themselves to a new and rather strange situation, one that is peculiar to big cities” (19). The creation of copious social and classificatory ‘types’ seeks to inscribe particular meanings (and strategies of control) upon an otherwise unmanageable cityscape, thereby prescribing particular sets of reactions and understandings as part of its overall experience. The flâneur of Balzac’s era places himself, as well as the bourgeois spectator, in an illusory position of urban control. Benjamin (2003[1938]) states, “The physiologies present this ability as a gift which the good fairy lays in the cradle of the big city dweller” (20). It appears to be a position of empowerment, yet it ultimately leads to “the anguish of the city dweller who is unable to break the magic circle of the type even though he cultivates the most eccentric peculiarities” (1999[1939]: 22). This positioning begins to condition bourgeois audiences to process and perceive experiences in a particular way. Although the “soothing little remedies” that were offered up for sale with the physiologies soon went out of style, Benjamin describes the next genre of literature that came about as more fixated and concerned with the “disquieting and threatening aspects of urban life”. He explains: “In times of terror, when everyone is something of a conspirator, everybody will be in the position of having to play detective. Flânerie gives the individual the best prospects of doing so” (2003[1938]: 21). In this case, the veil of ‘the crowd’ typified by the physiologies makes way for the densely populated form of the urban ‘masses’. Here, for the first time, “the masses appear as the asylum that shields the asocial person from his persecutors. Of all the menacing aspects of the masses, this
one became apparent first. It lies at the origin of the detective story” (Benjamin, 2003[1938]: 21).

In *The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire*, Benjamin describes how some of the most popular and successful literary products of the nineteenth century repeatedly call upon the imagery of an unpredictable primordial wilderness to express the experiences of the newly modernizing urban capital (2003[1938]: 22-23). Shane Gunster (2004) describes how Benjamin draws from the nineteenth century detective genre as one of the means to demonstrate how these connections can be made. Benjamin notes, for example, how writers such as Alexandre Dumas and Honoré de Balzac plundered the themes from James Fennimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* to “describe the jungle that was Paris”, and how Victor Hugo’s widely popular novel *Les Misérables* parallels cities to forests in which there are dens where terrible monsters hide (Gunster, 2004: 72). Benjamin (2003[1938]) explains that “it is Balzac who, above all, never tires of referring to Cooper as his model. … Balzac’s intrigue is rich in forms that fall somewhere between tales of Indians and detective stories” (22). Benjamin quotes Balzac: “The poetry of terror that pervades the American woods, with their clashes between tribes on the warpath—this poetry which stood Cooper in such good stead attaches in the same way to the smallest details of Parisian life” (as cited in Benjamin, 2003[1938]: 22). Benjamin also cites Baudelaire, who asks: “What are the dangers of the forest and the prairie, compared with the daily shocks and conflicts of civilization? Whether a man grabs his victim on a boulevard or stabs his quarry in unknown woods—does he not remain here and there the most perfect of all beasts of prey?” (2003[1938]: 21). Urban streets thus become a form of ‘hunting grounds’ where ‘detectives’ can cunningly track, and the ‘hunted’ can elusively escape, into the densely
tangled ‘forest of the masses’ comprised of the rapidly shifting and expanding populations of city centers (Gunster, 2004: 72). We begin to see that just as the cultural representations of the physiologies frame the exploitation of the working class as though it were a product of the laws of nature, the city of the detective genre becomes an unpredictable and terrifying natural entity that exists beyond the scope of human understanding and control.

Gunster (2004) explains that one of the primary themes explored in Benjamin’s work around the Parisian Arcades is the concept of capitalism as a form of ‘second nature’: where “the imagery of untamed nature is deployed again and again by mass culture and used by people to structure and interpret their experience of a world that is utterly social at its core” (74). He emphasizes how Benjamin’s writings focus on the cultural products of the nineteenth century as an expression of human beings first striving to cope with “certain aspects or qualities of a rapidly expanding capitalist economic system” while existing within newly urbanized centers that have grown increasingly populated (72). How can we explain the nineteenth century appeal of using ‘natural’ imagery to describe the most ‘unnatural’ of places, the modern city? Benjamin’s work ultimately intended to awaken individuals from an intoxicating, yet impoverished, dream sleep revealing how modern capitalist societies have been veiled by myth. A root cause of this mythic dream sleep is the alienated abstraction of human labour in the form of the commodity. “A cornerstone of critical theory from Hegel and Marx to the Frankfurt School is the idea that there is no such entity as a pure, ontological ‘nature’, but rather only a physical environment that continues to be socially mediated through human activity” (Gunster, 2004: 75). The very notion of a pristine state of ‘nature’ could not exist without historic and social elements to define it as such. If there were no society
through which to remain socially and historically insulated from the “raw physical power” of nature, there would be no grounds for appreciating or defining its properties as something that exists outside of those boundaries (Gunster: 75). As Gunster points out, natural motifs are also, perversely, used to understand and engage with social processes and institutions created by human activity but increasingly perceived as natural entities that exist beyond the scope of human understanding and control. In order to theoretically critique how such processes of alienation occur, Benjamin draws from Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, which argues that one of the defining qualities of labour as it exists under capitalism is the alienation of the worker from his or her activity and the products of that activity in turn. Once a worker has been thoroughly alienated from his/her labour, it becomes an object that stands outside of him/her, as an external and seemingly oppositional autonomous power. “In other words,” Gunster explains, “the mediation of human activity through the commodity form produces a strange and alien world—one which those who produced it can no longer control or even recognize as their own” (2004: 75).

Capitalism has taken on mythic significance, as a kind of ‘second nature’. “Our emancipated technology stands beside contemporary society as a second nature and indeed, as economic crises and wars show, as no less elemental nature than that confronted by primitive societies” (Benjamin as cited in Gunster, 2004: 74). Whether it is market cycles, bureaucratic institutions, or the rituals surrounding cultural products and activities, humanity has come to experience and perceive these social processes as ‘natural’, and thereby come to understand their own lives as ruled by powerful and irrational forces beyond their comprehension and control. By juxtaposing the reified city streets of the urban capital core with their phantasmagorically constructed counterparts,
it becomes clear that the implicit value of human experience is anything but civilized: “It would seem that the jungle has once again become our home” (Gunster, 2004: 72).

Just as the city streets of the exterior are represented as ‘natural’, so too is the bourgeois interior. Analogous to how city streets are juxtaposed with ‘primordial forests’ and ‘hunting grounds’, the bourgeois interior also begins to crumble and erode into a phantasmagoric landscape of its own (Gunster, 2004: 73). Benjamin shows how the nineteenth century bourgeoisie begins to stage a retreat inside of itself. Benjamin writes in his Exposé of 1935 that the bourgeoisie independently “realized the goals of 1789” with the July Revolution (1999: 8). The realization of these goals, however, did not include the same emancipation for the working classes. With the failure of the Revolution of 1848, the “revolutionary physiognomy of Paris” was “overlaid with the phantasmagoria of commodities” (McNally, 2001: 201). The ‘heroic’ phase of the bourgeois revolution was finished, with the transformative social energies of the bourgeoisie collectively exhausting themselves over the remainder of the century. In the Passagen-Werk, Benjamin describes how the rooms in the early nineteenth century factories once contained an almost residential and domestic character: “within these spaces one can imagine the factory owner as a quaint figurine in a landscape of machines, dreaming not only of his own but of their future greatness” (1999: [17a,1], 226). But with the administrative disassociation of the owner from the industrial workplace, this “homely” touch disappeared altogether. Thus “[c]apital alienated the employer, too, from his means of production, and the dream of their future greatness is finished. This alienation process culminates in the emergence of the private home” (1999: [17a,1], 226). In his 1939 exposé for Paris Capital of the Nineteenth Century, Benjamin (1999: 19) argues: “Under the reign of Louis Philippe, the private individual
makes his entry into history”. He explains that it was when the private individual began to create a division between place of dwelling and place of work that the phantasmagorias of the interior emerged. Because the private individual had no actual “intention of grafting onto his business interests a clear perception of his social function”, it became all the more important that the domestic interior help “sustain him in his illusions”. Benjamin states: “From this derive the phantasmagorias of the interior—which, for the private individual, represents the universe. In the interior, he brings together remote locales and memories of the past. His living room is a box in the theater of the world” (1999: 19).

Here in the private dwelling of the bourgeois interior the flâneur-detective surfaces again, but this time through the literary styles first popularized in France with Baudelaire’s translations of the works of Edgar Allan Poe (Benjamin, 1999[1939]: 20; Gunster, 2004: 73). In the Passagen-Werk, Benjamin describes the nineteenth century bourgeois interior as a ‘receptacle for the person’: “it encased him with all his appurtenances so deeply in the dwelling’s interior that one might be reminded of the inside of a compass case, where the instrument with all its accessories lies embedded in deep, usually violet folds of velvet” (1999: [I4,4], 220). Like a protective encasement housing a fragile item, the bourgeois dwelling turns into a protective, insular shell. “Here is the origin of the detective story, which inquires into these traces and follows these tracks . . . The criminals in early detective fiction are neither gentlemen nor apaches, but simple private citizens of the middle class” (Benjamin, 1999[1939]: 20). As Gunster (2004) points out, once immersed in this landscape, the detective becomes a different kind of predator: one who cleverly sniffs out each of the petrified traces that have been left behind by his prey. He has become the forensic-archaeologist of the panoramic
interior, and with the tutored gaze of an expert, he meticulously deciphers each clue from the inanimate, fossilized remains of human activity. The secret motive that Benjamin attaches to the popularity of the ‘expert gaze’ is the bourgeoisie’s desire to leave behind definitive evidence of its existence (73). Benjamin (2003[1938]) argues that the reason behind the overly plush and crowded interiors of the bourgeois class is that it has been striving to compensate for the fact that no traces of its private life have been left behind in the city: “It seeks such compensation within its four walls—as if it were striving, as a matter of honour, to prevent the traces, if not of its days on earth then at least of its possessions and requisites of daily life, from disappearing forever” (25). He writes in Short Shadows (II):

Living in these plush compartments was nothing more than leaving traces made by habits. Even the rage expressed when the least little thing broke was perhaps merely the reaction of a person who felt that someone had obliterated the ‘traces of his last days on earth’. The traces that he had left in cushions and armchairs, that his relatives has left in photos, and that his possessions had left in linings and etuis and that sometimes made these rooms look as overcrowded as halls of funerary urns. (Benjamin, 1999[1933]: 701)

Just like the reification that transforms the city streets into a ‘natural’ environment instead of a social one, the bourgeoisie increasingly seeks to ‘humanize’ commodities by giving them homes in ‘covers and cases’. There is a highly sacrificial component to the naturalization of this behaviour. As Gunster (2004) argues, by privileging the “inert, fossilized remains of human activity over that activity itself” the social relations that govern the interior are drained of any “imaginative constitution of subjectivity” (73). David McNally (2001) explains that because capitalism constantly markets ‘the latest and the greatest’, it also constantly prematurely ‘lays things to rest’ “long before they expire naturally, so as to replace them with the new” (203). Along with this commodity cycle, each part of the self that socially identifies with obsolete commodities has to be
killed off too. Therefore, capitalism produces a “paradox”: with the introduction of each new cycle of the commodity on the market, a part of the bourgeois ‘sense of self’ has to die along with the obsolete. But the only way “to stop this process, to stop the flow of time, is itself to stop all change, to die” (204). The only true novelty that actually remains, then, is the finality of biological death. Bourgeois society responds to this paradox with a morbid “fascination” with “different forms of death”, which is based in a mournful desire to stop the constant erosion of the self “by the cult of novelty” (204-205). In doing so, the bourgeoisie endeavours to latch on to the “stability of dead objects in which the change-inducing processes of life have been extinguished” (205). By humanizing commodities, people begin to interact and express their social selfhood through ‘things’. This objectification of the self and others cuts off the capacity for subjective actualization and exchange.

There is also a highly sacrificial element to the ‘visual gastronomy’ inherent to Balzac’s urban epistemology of flânerie. As Parkhurst-Ferguson explains, the heroic-flâneur’s narrative first conditions its spectator to pass by “the shop windows, ‘tasting’ their delights without ‘really’ consuming them” (1994: 35). The early tutelage offered by these texts, however, grows more ominous as the century progresses. In the ‘Work of Art’ essays, Benjamin suggests that the aestheticization of consumption schools consumers to find enjoyment through forms of spectatorship rooted in an alienated perspective of detachment. “The logical outcome of fascism is an aestheticizing of political life” (Benjamin, 2003[1939]: 269). Like the cultural goods of Balzac’s era condition the urban spectator to look upon others as ‘thingified’ types, the practice of ‘visual gastronomy’ conditions the spectator to sacrifice his/her own subjectivity in place of the worship of commodities. The nineteenth century world exhibitions acted as
“places of pilgrimage to the commodity fetish” (Benjamin, 1999[1939]: 17). Benjamin describes the phantasmagoria of the world exhibition as “a school in which the masses, forcibly excluded from consumption, are imbued with the exchange value of commodities to the point of identifying with it” (18). This phantasmagoria is based in a form of alienated distraction that says: “Do not touch the items on display” (18), yet compels its spectators to aesthetically devour “everything”, “both culture and people,” to an absolute “surfeit” (Benjamin, 2003[1933]: 734). Benjamin (1999[1939]: 18) explains that, “within these divertissements, to which the individual abandons himself to the framework of the entertainment industry, he remains always an element of a compact mass”. Once a part of the mass, the spectator finds himself easily swept up “in an attitude that is pure reaction”. This attitude leaves him susceptible to a state of “subjection which propaganda, industrial as well as political, relies on” (18). The use of propaganda, both political and industrial, remains relevant to nineteenth century flânerie. It reflects how bourgeois industrialists were first able to rely on distraction, rather than face the emancipation, of the working classes with the advent of the mass worship of commodities as entertainment. Benjamin explains that the world exhibitions “arose from the wish ‘to entertain the working classes, and it becomes to them a festival of emancipation’”. The workers, in fact, “would constitute their first clientele” (Benjamin, 1999[1939]: 17). Rather than liberating the worker from the oppression and alienation of industrial capitalism, however, the nineteenth century world exhibition “schools” him to abandon his subjectivity to become a spectator in the depoliticized “mass” of consumers and audiences. He learns to seek fulfillment in the aesthetic worship of his hopes, needs, and desires for emancipation as they are found in their distorted expression through ‘things’, rather than through any actual revolutionary realization of emancipation.
Citing Bertolt Brecht, Benjamin writes that “[r]ulers have a great aversion to violent changes. They want everything to stay the same—if possible, for a thousand years... when the rulers have fired their shot, the adversary should no longer be permitted to fire; their own shot should be the last” (1999: [B4,5], 71-72). Benjamin (1999[1939]: 24) describes the phantasmagoria that “dominates the earliest aspirations of the proletariat” as: “the illusion that the task of the proletarian revolution is to complete the work of [the revolution of 1789] in close collaboration with the bourgeoisie”. He argues, moreover, that the “bourgeoisie never shared” in the same illusion as the proletariat: “Side by side with the overt position of philanthropy, the bourgeoisie has always maintained the covert position of class struggle” (24). The bourgeoisie’s “battle against the social rights of the proletariat dates back to the great Revolution. … As early as 1831, in the *Journal des débats*, it acknowledged that ‘every manufacturer lives in his factory like a plantation owner among his slaves’”. Yet the bourgeois “philanthropic movement that gives it cover” actually reaches its “heyday under Napoléon III”, in the Paris of the Second Empire (24-25). In the era of Balzac’s heroic-flâneur, before the 1848 revolution, we see the texts of other literary authors, such as Victor Hugo and Eugène Sue, positioned as bohemian cultural counterparts to the cause of the ‘dangerous’ classes (Benjamin, 2003[1938]: 39, 45). The narratives generated at this time appropriate the plight of the disenfranchised lumpenproletariat and working classes to the increasingly profitable cultural banner held up in the phantasmagoria of the bourgeoisie. Alongside these texts comes the heroic-flâneur’s illusive myth of bourgeois urban control and ownership in the phantasmagoria of the marketplace. Ultimately, with the failure of the revolution of 1848, these texts are forced to take on different critical meaning. Where Benjamin’s greatest interest is invested, however, is exactly at this point. The increasing marginalization and proletarianization of the flâneur at the time of
the Paris of the Second Empire is what causes Benjamin to focus on the work of Baudelaire.

Benjamin’s primary interest in the flâneur, and in Baudelaire in particular, is based in how his work expresses the increasing impact of capitalist urbanization on the human capacity for perception. He places the alienated “gaze of the flâneur” at the core of his critical project because of its dissonant and destructive capacity to break from the dream-like continuity of the phantasmagoria that drove the capitalistic development of nineteenth century Paris (Benjamin, 1999[1939]: 21). Benjamin is drawn to Baudelaire because of his position of marginality from the bourgeois middle classes as a cultural producer in the period that directly follows the failure of the revolution of 1848 in France. He perceives Baudelaire’s flâneur to exist in a climate of failed creativity, where the revolutionary possibilities of the public sphere have been abandoned in favour of the privatized world of the bourgeois interior. Baudelaire’s anomic, nihilistic descriptions of the ‘heroism’ of modern life mark the retreat of the nineteenth century bourgeoisie into the protective armour of a commodified self that exists in what Benjamin describes as “the universe of a phantasmagoria” (1999[1939]: 14). Benjamin writes, “Baudelaire patterned his image of the artist after the image of the hero. From the beginning, each is the advocate of the other” (2003[1938]: 39). Yet, this heroism turns out to be nothing more than an illusion, a commodified part that the flâneur plays “in the phantasmagorias of the market, where people only appear as types” (Benjamin, 1999[1939]: 14). Benjamin states, “Flâneur, apache, dandy, and ragpicker were so many roles to him. For the modern hero is no hero; he is a portrayer of heroes. Heroic modernity turns out to be a Trauerspiel in which the hero’s part is available” (2003[1938]: 60). As Paris is thoroughly Haussmannized and commodified, Baudelaire inventories the dislocated
fragments of a failed social system that his alienated experiences of ‘spleen’ profoundly register and yet do not conceive any viable exit from. His poetry and prose come to reflect society in a state of decay. In his *Exposé of 1939* Benjamin thus describes Baudelaire’s work as a form of “allegorical genius” that “feeds on melancholy”. He explains, “The gaze which the allegorical genius turns on the city betrays . . . a profound alienation. It is the gaze of the flâneur, whose way of life conceals behind a beneficent mirage the anxiety of the future inhabitants of our metropolises” (1999: 21). In other words, Baudelaire’s unique absorption and expression of this anxiety draws Benjamin’s attention because it also provides an explosive vantage point from which to piece together the continuing impact of capitalist urbanized modernity on the inhabitants of the metropolises of his own time.

### 3.5. Mimesis & Empathy with the Exchange Value of the Commodity

In a letter to Theodor Adorno discussing his 1938 draft for *The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire*, Benjamin writes that “[e]mpathy with the exchange value of guns would make them an even more desirable object of consumption than butter” (2003 [1938]: 111). Benjamin’s theory of the flâneur was closely intertwined with the idea that one might empathize with the commodity form. At this point, I want to focus upon how Benjamin draws theoretical and epistemological inspiration from the work of Baudelaire’s poet-flâneur to develop a radical, dialectical analysis of the shifting terrain of memory and experience in capitalist modernity. My discussion will, in particular, explore three elements of Benjamin’s concept of the mimetic faculty: empathy with the commodity form, the cultivating of empathy through cultural practices, and a dialectical
awakening to these effects. Our key text will be Benjamin’s *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*, in which his theorization of empathy with the soul of the commodity receives its fullest expression.

### 3.5.1. Theorizing Empathy with the Commodity Form

In *On the Mimetic Faculty*, Benjamin (1999[1933]) writes that “[n]ature produces similarities; one need only think of mimicry. The highest capacity for producing similarities, however, is man’s” (720). Shane Gunster (2004) suggests that Benjamin’s concept of the mimetic faculty has two different components: the first refers to the ability to perceive similarities between objects; and the second involves the practice of making oneself like other objects (80). Gunster reads Benjamin’s theory of mimesis as a ‘powerful compulsion’ to become like other objects derives from anthropological speculation that prehistoric peoples once instinctively imitated the raw and unpredictable forces of nature with the hope of securing some control over them: imitation was a primitive strategy for survival and self-preservation (2004: 84). “[F]or much of human history”, explains David McNally (2001), *mimesis* could be found in ritual and myth; for the most part, mimetic skills and practices have been largely abandoned and repressed in favour of an “ultra-rationalist bourgeois historical consciousness” (223). For Benjamin, however, the mimetic faculty continues to play a decisive role in the higher functioning of modern human beings (such as in language and text) even though it has become harder for us to recognize it as such (1999[1933]: 720). And this mimetic faculty contains enormous potential to facilitate human emancipation: “The question is whether we are concerned with the decay of this faculty or with its transformation” (Benjamin: 721).
Exemplary of its emancipatory potential is its lingering presence within the play of children (Benjamin, 1999[1933]: 720). For most adults, Gunster (2004: 80-81) explains, cognition of objects is organized around their classification within a fixed taxonomy. This system defines the characteristics by which each object can be distinguished from other objects as well as from oneself. Children, however, tend to mimetically seek similarities between themselves and other objects instead. As Benjamin (1999[1933]) argues, “Children’s play is everywhere permeated by mimetic modes of behaviour …”. Children are not only capable of imitating other individuals in their games but also of ‘becoming’ the objects around them. Thus, “[t]he child plays at being not only a shopkeeper or teacher, but also a windmill or train” (720). Susan Buck-Morss (1989) suggests that the theoretical significance Benjamin places on childhood play connects to the corporeally creative and active modes of cognition that have been repressed through processes of bourgeois socialization and education (262-264). There is, nonetheless, much to be learned from the nature of children. Benjamin argues: “Every child’s gesture is a creative impulse which corresponds exactly to the receptive one” (as cited in Buck-Morss, 1989: 264). Buck-Morss explains that an important part of his conception of the mimetic faculty is “the capacity for inventive reception based on mimetic improvisation” (1989: 264). Children excel in these improvisations and, consequently, they are able to release new possibilities for meaning in the world. In particular, children’s cognitive improvisation has a revolutionary power because it is tactile and directly tied to action. As children have not yet learned any predetermined meaning for the objects that surround them, they must lay hold of them and use those objects creatively (264). Mimetic play, such as that first encountered in the play of children, thus possesses the power to reignite the revolutionary properties of seemingly valueless objects. Benjamin states, “In using these things they do not so much imitate the works of adults as bring
together, in the artifacts produced in play, materials of widely differing kinds in a new intuitive relationship” (as cited in Buck-Morss, 1989: 262). Gunster (2004) similarly explains that, for Benjamin, children’s use of the mimetic faculty in play not only stems from a particular set of cognitive processes, but is also expressed through physical forms of thinking by doing. In this sense, the gap between subject and object remains fluid and open to the bodily dimension of cognitive interpretation, as the logic that will later categorize each has yet to be formed. Childhood play sponsors the union of humankind’s mimetic and rational capacities, even if only for a small window of time before the latter is repressed through education, socialization and the instrumental rationality of the market and workplace. Of course one cannot simply idealize infantile patterns of behaviour that are just as often marked by narcissistic fantasies of total domination as they are by openness to the other. As such, Benjamin’s aim is less nostalgic than redemptive: he wants to nurture serious forms of play, stimulate the mimetic capacity of adults and thereby open adult eyes to the revolutionary potential of an emancipatory relationship with the world of objects that is not only empowering and pleasurable, but also non-instrumental. (81)

As with other conceptual points of focus in Benjamin’s work the mimetic faculty can be said to be dialectical. In some contexts, the human capacity for mimesis might be envisaged to be the most emancipatory of human practices, while in others it comes to represent the height of degraded experience under the sway of modern capital (Gunster, 2004: 80). In both cases, mimesis remains highly important to the areas of memory and experience in Benjamin’s work, because of his conceptualization of it as a form of bodily cognition through identification with ‘things’ (McNally, 2001: 223). As much as Benjamin celebrates the emancipatory potential of the mimetic faculty, he is
equally attentive to the oppressive consequences that can accompany the insular, defensive side of mimesis. Gunster (2004) explains that, in its repressed form, mimesis has, in a certain sense, been ‘perfected’ rather than abandoned. The mimetic capacity is channelled into an imitation of the ‘second nature’ of capitalism in much the same way that it was once harnessed to the ritualistic imitation of ‘first nature’ as an irrational and powerful force (85). As McNally (2001) points out, “commodity fetishism is not an illusion for Marx, but, rather, an objective social process in which the movement of things (commodities) really does regulate the lives of human beings” (197). Gunster (2004) explains, “Marx described how the commodification of labour-power sponsors the alienation of labour and its eventual return, in the form of capital, to further tyrannize and dominate the worker—that which is living is forced to submit and adapt to that which is dead” (85). In an unplanned, competitive market system, individual units of capital are likewise subjected to powerful and irrational forces that are seemingly outside of human control. As a result, “alienation and reification inhere in the total structure of modern society. For its inhabitants, ‘their own movement within society has for them the form of a movement made by things, and these things, far from being under their control, in fact control them’” (McNally, 2001: 197). McNally (2001) argues that Benjamin’s reading of Freud’s The Interpretation of Dreams, and his essay “The Unconscious” powerfully influenced Benjamin’s theorization of the modern repression of the mimetic faculty (221-222). “Like Freud, Benjamin held that psychic repression can never truly eliminate the body, its drives, its dreams and its histories. And the same is true of a society that tries to repress corporeal needs and desires by turning the body into an instrument of production” (McNally, 2001: 223). Precisely because it has been repressed, Benjamin perceives that the human mimetic faculty will always return “forcefully, albeit in unconscious and potentially damaging forms”, just like Freud argues that repressed
memories, needs, and desires will resurface in distorted form through dreams and compulsive behaviours (McNally: 223). Mimesis has not disappeared: instead, “it has simply been displaced”. As a consequence of that displacement, “…mimetic-erotic energies are everywhere around us—attached to commodities, fashions, technology, and systems of power (as in fascism)...myth lives on in scientific rationality while eros attaches itself to death rather than to life” (McNally, 2001: 223).

In On Some Motifs in Baudelaire, Benjamin draws upon Marx’s description of the worker’s assimilation to the factory machine. “It is a common characteristic of all capitalist production... that the worker does not make use of the working conditions. The working conditions make use of the worker; but it takes machinery to give this reversal a technologically concrete form”. The use of machinery, Marx argues, conditions workers to coordinate their “movements with the uniformly constant movements of an automaton” (Marx as cited in Benjamin, 2003[1940]: 328). Gunster (2004) argues that, for Benjamin, this adaptation of the worker to the machine marks the insular, defensive, side of mimesis, which is based in an instinctual struggle for self-preservation in capitalism as ‘second-nature’ (84). This type of adaptation to the machine is by no means restricted to the factory floor, but now saturates the totality of modern capitalist existence (86). In On Some Motifs in Baudelaire Benjamin states, “The shock experience [Chackerlebnis] which the passer-by has in the crowd corresponds to the isolated ‘experiences’ of the worker at his machine” (2003[1940]): 329). Susan Buck-Morss (1989: 268) explains that Benjamin fears that the advent of technological production now threatens the human capacity for experience: “industrialization has caused a crisis in perception due to the speeding up of time and fragmentation of space”. These shocks are “intercepted and parried by consciousness”
as a protective strategy against their traumatic effect (Benjamin as cited in Buck-Morss, 1989: 268). Instead of human beings opening themselves cognitively and socially to the world that exists externally around them, they close down as a protective measure against the harm visited upon the human body and sensory apparatus by constant shock-like stimuli in industrialized environments. “Both the assembly line and the urban crowd bombard the senses with disconnected images and shocklike stimuli” (Buck-Morss: 268). Human beings find themselves in a constant state of distraction in urban environments, where consciousness largely acts as a “shock absorber” that registers “sense impressions without really experiencing them” (Buck-Morss, 1989: 268).

Benjamin (2003[1940]) observes how pedestrian behaviour depicted in Edgar Allen Poe’s short story “The Man of the Crowd” resembles the mimetic adaptation of the worker to the machine. He argues that Poe’s pedestrians “…act as if they had adapted themselves to machines and could express themselves only automatically. Their behaviour is a reaction to shocks. ‘If jostled, they bow profusely to the jostlers’” (329). Even the human face surrenders to these practices: while swept up in the hustle and bustle of the metropolis, the smile of a passer-by operates as little more than a “mimetic shock absorber” (328). Benjamin explains that the uniform facial expressions of the crowd in Poe’s story “provide food for thought”, because they reflect just one part of a complex form of bodily conditioning. Quoting Marx, Benjamin states: “All machine work … requires prior training of the workers” (2003[1940]: 328-329). Having no option but to assimilate to the conditions of the industrial urban core, its inhabitants have similarly learned to mimetically adapt in a mechanized way: “today’s pedestrians are obliged to look about them so that they can be aware of traffic signals. Thus, technology has subjected the human sensorium to a complex kind of training” (Benjamin: 328).
Some Motifs in Baudelaire, Benjamin also quotes late nineteenth century writer Paul Valéry, who argues that the inhabitants of modernized city centers have in fact reverted to a state of “savagery” even though their lives have grown increasingly mechanized (2003[1940]: 327). Valéry explains that this particular type of savagery is brought on by “isolation”, in which “the feeling of being dependent on others, which used to be kept alive by need, is gradually blunted in the smooth functioning of the social mechanism” (as cited in Benjamin, 2003[1940]: 327-328). Benjamin continues: “Comfort isolates; on the other hand, it brings those enjoying it closer to mechanization” (2003[1940]: 328).

Like the ‘automatons’ conditioned to move a certain way on the factory floor to accommodate the capitalist machine of production, the modern city also conditions its inhabitants to interact in particular ways that are naturalized through the socially mechanized functions of its core. Through insular and self-protective forms of mimetic adaptation, that which is living submits to that which is inanimate corporeally, psychologically, as well as socially. The result is an increased alienation, where people identify through automated processes in a ‘thing’-like manner as opposed to in actual direct social exchanges with one another.

In the letter to Adorno, Benjamin ventures that “empathy with the commodity might well, in principle, be empathy with exchange value itself. In fact, it is difficult to take ‘consumption’ of exchange value to mean anything other than empathy with exchange value” (2003 [1938]: 111). Shane Gunster (2004) argues that empathy, in this case, can be closely connected to the mimetic faculty, because an important part of empathizing with another is to imagine what it would be like to be that other (89). Gunster writes, “as commodities are brought to the consumer through the marketplace, the act of exchange is vicariously libidinized: the commodity form itself becomes the
privileged site for the arousal, management, and satisfaction of human desire” (87). In empathy with the exchange value of the commodity, the commodity takes on a life of its own. Rather than being just a ‘thing’, each commodity is treated subjectively, as though the lives and identities that people desire can only be achieved through them: “In a sinister doubling of the commodification of labour, people empathize with commodities, desiring to become commodities themselves in the hope of partaking of some of the independence, autonomy, and ‘life’ that they seem to possess” (Gunster, 2004: 89). Commodities thus elicit an irrational and uncontrollable allure, appearing to be endowed with the consumer’s innermost desires, wishes, and dreams. Yet commodities never ultimately satisfy the desires that are invested in them. The practice of gazing upon commodities as the vehicles to our innermost wishes and dreams entangles people in a phantasmagoric ritual designed for seduction and betrayal. McNally (2001) explains, “capital appropriates the erotic longings that erupt...—for food, laughter, sex, togetherness, and community—in order to sell us commodities, which regularly betray desire” (196). Yet, as Gunster asserts, “the belief that one is entering into a relation of immediacy with these objects is a double illusion: not only are the fantasies they offer an objective delusion generated by the fetishism of the commodity, but access to them is always mediated through the market” (2004: 87). Even though we, as consumers, may well understand that commodities will not fulfill our innermost needs, the strong visceral effect that is generated through them remains powerful enough to convince us to pursue them anyway: “As with the neurotic who experiences a compulsion to do self-destructive things, capitalism produces a systemic kind of behaviour, a deeply ingrained repetition compulsion” (McNally, 2001: 196).
3.5.2. Cultural Practices through which Empathy is Cultivated

An excellent example of how empathy with exchange value impacts the mimetic capacity can be found in Benjamin’s depictions of capitalism as mythic Hell, an underworld that remains locked in circuitous patterns returning to the ever same. Benjamin argues that this mythic Hell becomes readily evident in the compulsive, yet seemingly naturalized, capacity for cultural practices to cultivate empathy with the exchange value of the commodity, particularly as it pertains to gambling and fashion. In the Passagen-Werk Benjamin writes, “The essence of the mythical event is return. Inscribed as a hidden figure in such events is the futility that furrows the brow of some of the heroic personages of the underworld (Tantalus, Sisyphus, the Danaides)” (1999: [D10a,4], 119). One of the traits of the mythic cycle central to Benjamin’s critique of modern capitalism is the return of the ever same (Gunster, 2004: 76). Ancient mythic archetypes illustrate the experience of those living under the rule of capital. “This conception of time is unequivocally connected to a social and material experience ruled by natural forces” (Gunster, 2004: 76). Within temporal and spatial experiences of return, new events may occur, but the fate that governs their outcome remains controlled by powerful and mysterious external forces. Those who are subjected to these forces must strive to adapt, with little independent or collective agency to determine how it will ultimately turn out. In this sense, the experience of life’s social and material conditions seem to shift with the cycle of each event throughout the seasons, but the endpoint is entirely governed by a form of repetition and chance that remains naturalized and unchanging. Gunster points out, “while the compulsion to repeat is openly acknowledged in ancient myths, no such awareness accompanies its return under capitalism” (2004: 78). The rituals of fashion parallel traditional and organic celebrations organized around the seasons. Unlike those celebrations, however, modern fashion is
based upon a compulsive obsession that focuses upon the ‘newest’ styles and designs while concealing the repetitive infrastructure that lies underneath its production. As Susan Buck-Morss notes, “The spring rites of fashion celebrated novelty rather than recurrence; they required not remembrance, but obliviousness to even the most recent past” (as cited in Gunster, 2004: 78). Gunster concludes that, “those who participate in the repetitious rituals of modernity are not fully aware of them as such. Instead, these rituals are often glorified as the very incarnation of development, progress, and ‘the new’” (2004: 78).

At the centre of Benjamin’s critique of capitalism as mythic Hell is his theory of empathy with exchange-value. “In modernity, repetition is hidden beneath the compulsive pursuit of novelty fostered by commodification itself. Or, better stated, the relentless search for the new, which is always and never found, is the form that recurrence now assumes” (Gunster, 2004: 77). Living under the rule of capital, people are conditioned and compelled to enact rituals of commodity desire embedded within endless cycles of expectation and disappointment—“a cycle which inflicts the same repetitive patterns that dominate the world of myth” (Gunster: 77). And yet, the novelty of each commodity inevitably decays into faded obsolescence. Gunster explains that commodities function for Benjamin as the “fetishized ‘wish image’ of change within an unchanged system” (Benjamin as cited in Gunster, 2004: 77). In the state of eternal return, it is not that the same thing necessarily keeps happening over and over again, but rather that the needs and desires which are stimulated to reinforce the superior marketability of the ‘newest-thing’ are never fully fulfilled. While the act of a commodity purchase may deliver an immediate (though illusory) sense of gratification, it simultaneously cheats the consumer of the prospect that their wishes will or could ever
be realized. Emotion, desire, time and energy are continually mis-invested in reified objects and commodities that inevitably betray the wishes, hopes and dreams of their buyers. And so each new commodity inevitably “lay[s] the trail for the next one” (Gunster, 2004: 77). The road to hell, it would seem, really is paved with good intentions.

Benjamin is especially horrified by the capacity for cultural practices to transform experiences of boredom, drudgery and repetition into sources of pleasure: the worker’s mimetic assimilation to the rhythms of the machine are secretly inverted into the consumer’s ecstatic assimilation to the commodity form. And mythic Hell becomes a source of (tortured) pleasure. In On Some Motifs in Baudelaire, Benjamin observes the frightening parallels between games of chance and the drudgery of the worker under capitalist production. He describes a gambling scene from Baudelaire’s poem ‘Le Jeu’:

“the figures presented show us how the mechanism to which gamblers entrust themselves seizes them body and soul, so that even in their private sphere, and no matter how agitated they may be, they are capable of only reflex actions” (Benjamin, 2003[1940]: 330). Completely absorbed in each moment of anticipation and reaction, the players remain indifferent to how time passes as the game moves through the same repetitive cycles. Almost as though they will never be “allowed to finish what they started” the gamblers remain just as fixated on each “ivory ball” that rolls into the “next compartment”, and every “next card” that will be placed on top (331). Benjamin compares the gamblers not to a series of excited players enjoying times of leisure on the edge of new and promising surprises, but instead to ‘automatons’ whose senses have been defensively degraded just like the mechanized movements of the urban

Gambling can be situated in the same constellation of phenomena as fashion, fun fairs, and world exhibitions (Gunster, 2004: 88). “What the amusement park achieves with its dodgem cars and other similar amusements is nothing but a taste of the training that the unskilled labourer undergoes in the factory” (Benjamin, 2003[1940]: 329). Here we see the compulsion to assimilate to the modes of the capitalist machine as it is mimetically repeated through the mechanization of the human body in reflex actions. Fully immersing himself in the flashing lights, sudden jolts, and repetitive whirl of the machinery at amusement park, the worker ends up reproducing the same experiences of the labour process. But rather than perceiving the repetitious and monotonous form of such activities as boring, frustrating, or hateful, the worker learns to enjoy them as pleasurable.

Benjamin is equally concerned with the capacity for cultural practices to cultivate empathy with the exchange value of the commodity. In his 1935 exposé for Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century, Benjamin argues, “Fashion stands in opposition to the organic. It couples the living body to the inorganic world. To the living, it defends the right of the corpse” (1999: 8). For Benjamin, the rituals of modern fashion provide an important nexus from which we can observe how the organic and inorganic intersect to produce a never-ending array of commodities in the marketplace (Gunster, 2004: 86). Benjamin (1999[1935]) draws upon the comically clever and surreal artwork of nineteenth century artist Grandville to make this point. The “enthronement of the commodity, with its luster and its distraction” acts as the “secret theme to Grandville’s art” (7). “Grandville’s fantasies”, he explains, “confer a commodity character on the
universe”, thus extending “the authority of fashion to the objects of everyday use” (8). His artwork cleverly melds together organic imagery of the natural world, with industrial imagery based in nineteenth century commercial capitalism (8). Describing a satirical sketch by Grandville, which depicts commodities moving around as though they are human, Gunster argues that it can be conversely observed how “in the case of fashion, that which does have life—the human, primarily the female, body—is treated as an inanimate object that can only acquire life by draping itself in the newest fashions of the day” (2004: 87).

Benjamin draws upon Baudelaire’s poetry and prose to theorize empathy with the soul of the commodity. Recall Baudelaire’s descriptions of women’s fashion in *The Painter of Modern Life*, and the more overt connections to prostitution and decay common to the subject matter of *Les Fleurs du mal*. In *The Painter of Modern Life* Baudelaire makes it clear that modern bourgeois heroism has abandoned the now passé desire to seamlessly assimilate the plight of the lumpenproletariat and working classes to a cause of its own (1964[1859-60]: 25-29). True modern heroism is now exemplified in the dandy, who sacrifices the animate parts of his inner being to adopt the armour of an upwardly mobile appearance. This ‘heroism’ illustrates the cultivation of empathy with the commodity soul by showing the mimetic tendency to glorify and replicate self-objectification. What else is the heroism of the dandy but the mimetic impulse to become more like the commodity? By so fiercely valuing the process of becoming more like a ‘thing’, the dandy is elevated by Baudelaire to a higher ‘spiritual order’ in the phantasmagoria of modern beauty and art. Benjamin’s theory of empathy with the soul of the commodity describes Baudelaire’s preoccupation with “the religious intoxication of great cities”, in which he argues something more powerful than “what people call love”
can be attained by “the holy prostitution of the soul” (Baudelaire as cited in Benjamin, 2003[1938]: 32). In *Central Park* Benjamin argues that, “[i]n Baudelaire, the poet for the first time stakes a claim to exhibition value. Baudelaire was his own impresario. The *perte d’auréole* [Loss of a halo] concerned the poet first of all. Hence his mythomania” (2003[1939]: 169). Baudelaire’s flâneur uses the effect of objectification and exhibition value to such an extreme that it becomes a drug. He objectifies himself as the poet, others as the vessels for his “roving soul”, and the crowd as the “protective asylum” into which he escapes (Benjamin, 2003[1938]: 31). With his “child’s kaleidoscope” of consciousness, the poet is able to blissfully envision everyone and everything as a new and exciting ‘type’, where each “turn of the hand dissolves the established order into a new array” (Benjamin, 2003[1939]: 164). Empathy with the exchange value depends upon the life-like desirability and allure that the commodity assumes as it becomes the vehicle for the consumer’s deep-seated wishes, needs, and desires. As one empathizes with the desirable characteristics and traits perceived through exchange value, the consumer aspires to become more like commodities themselves. This dynamic is at its most extreme in the world of fashion: “Fashion prescribes the ritual according to which the commodity fetish demands to be worshipped… The fetishism that succumbs to the sex appeal of the inorganic is its vital nerve” (Benjamin, 1999[1935]: 8). Fashion fuses human desire to the synthetic insofar as commodity objects seem to generate their own independent ‘sex appeal’ (Gunster, 2004: 86). Such ‘fetishization’ depends upon the misattribution of characteristics and power to an object that ‘properly’ belongs somewhere else. Fashion may function as a fetish, but it is “[t]he cult of the commodity [that] presses such fetishism into its service” (Benjamin, 1999[1935]: 8).
Esther Leslie (1997) argues that fetishism, in the sex appeal of the commodity, can be equated to a certain kind of “deadliness” in Benjamin’s work. This transformation is most clearly exemplified in the form of the commodity, which exists as the alienated product of living labour. “The certainty of what is dead, what is living, is confounded by fetishism’s mechanisms. Sex, like the commodity, straddles two realms—the realms of the living and the realms of the dead” (Leslie, 1997: 81). In the Passagen-Werk Benjamin (1999) explains: “In fetishism, sex does away with boundaries separating the organic world from the inorganic. Clothing and jewellery are its allies. It is as much at home with what is dead as it is with living flesh. The latter, moreover, shows it the way to establish itself in the former” ([B3,8], 69). Leslie (1997) argues that Benjamin’s analysis of women’s fashion “develops a dissectional aesthetic” in order to examine how this type of fetishism takes place. She describes how Benjamin astutely observes that the human “body, clothed and unclothed” begins to mimic “the inorganic world” (80). As a form of self-sacrifice, the erotic appeal of the female body is maximized through fragmentation (the fixation upon distinct, isolated parts) and the instrumentalization of those fragments as venues for the display of commodities (hands for rings, feet for shoes, bodies for fashion, faces for makeup, etc). “The female body turns into an ornament. The fragmentation of female beauty into its most noteworthy parts is like an autopsy. In such fetishistic fragmentation body parts are popularly compared with alabaster, snow, jewels, minerals or other inorganic forms” (Leslie, 1997: 80). As Baudelaire’s (1964[1859-60]) descriptions of women’s fashion in The Painter of Modern Life suggests, the human body is instrumentalized and compartmentalized as inseparable from the things that adorn and define its synthetic beauty (30-34). Even after the commodity no longer has a wearer Baudelaire argues that it will retain a life of its own. That which is damaged, dead, and defiled now carries a form of melancholic
beauty, as tribute to the loss of that which was not realized in the promise that it once possessed (33).

David McNally (2001) describes this “eroticization of death” as a characteristic trait of the bourgeoisie. “Bourgeois society is a society of mourning—for our forgotten pasts, for our unfulfilled wishes, for our deaths which have been foretold as the only real novelty we will experience” (McNally, 2001: 204). This is why Benjamin (2003[1938]) emphasizes Baudelaire’s call to regard the heroic “black suit and frock coat” of the middle classes as “an expression of the public mentality: an immense cortege of undertakers—political undertakers, amorous undertakers, bourgeois undertakers”, finally expressing: “We are all attendants at some kind of funeral” (46). This emphasis on the funereal also exemplifies the objects, accessories, and memorabilia that surround the collector in the bourgeois interior. “The collector proves to be the true resident of the interior. He makes his concern the idealization of objects. To him falls the Sisyphean task of divesting things of their commodity character by taking possession of them” (Benjamin, 1999[1939]: 19). The collector attempts to conserve a sense of self by referring to obsolete souvenirs, knick-knacks, and ‘things’ as the definitive proof of his existence (McNally, 2001: 204). In the figure of the collector, not only Baudelaire but the entire bourgeoisie latch on to the “stability of dead objects in which the change-inducing processes of life have been extinguished” (McNally: 205).

In konvolout Z of the Passagen-Werk, a section entitled “The Doll, The Automaton”, Benjamin references Baudelaire’s descriptions of women’s fashion in The Painter of Modern Life (1999: [Z2a,2], 696-697). Baudelaire describes an empire of consumerism in which everything and everyone functions as a prostitute under various guises. His description focuses heavily on women’s fashion, outlining several ‘types’
that are defined entirely through the social status that is attached to their clothing, cosmetics, and accessories (1964[1859-60]: 35-38). Esther Leslie (1997) argues that Benjamin’s analysis focuses on women as the “ultimate consumer”, and fashion as the “…‘dialectical switching-station’ between ‘Weib und Ware’ (woman and commodity)”. She explains: “Benjamin records how, in capitalism, an economic system of universalized exchange is socially broadcast using women as objects and enticing them as complicit subjects” (77). In the words of Susan Buck-Morss, “sexual liberation for women under capitalism has had the nightmare effect of ‘freeing’ all women to be sexual objects (not subjects)” (1986: 124). Personal subjectivity, social identification, and the living, breathing body are so fused to the commodity that “in big-city prostitution, the woman herself becomes a mass-produced article” (Benjamin, 2003[1939]: 171). The shared commonality between each of the women in Baudelaire’s descriptions is the characteristic of an objectified ever-sameness: each is a mass-produced article, an aesthetic ‘type’ that never ends. This objectification is rooted in their commodified value under the kaleidoscopic lens of the flâneur and the capitalist world of fashion, which constructs a phantasmagoria of ‘novelty’, ‘beauty’, and ‘allure’ around them as fetishized objects but not as living breathing people (Benjamin, 2003[1939]: 164). The compulsion “[t]o desire the fashionable, purchasable woman-as-thing is to desire exchange-value itself, that is, the very essence of capitalism” (Buck-Morss, 1986: 121).

Benjamin perceives the changing nature of women’s commodification as an expression of the changing conditions of capitalist production: “The regimentation of the assembly line has come to be reflected in a new form of sexiness…the chorus line, with its display of women ‘in strictly identical clothes’” (Buck-Morss, 1986: 125). The regimentation of the assembly line also appears in the mass-produced realm of
consumption, where anything from cosmetics, to shawls, corsets, dresses, and hats express the increasing mass desire for novel-ever-sameness as the pace of each popular ‘fad’ accelerates.

Baudelaire concludes his description of women’s fashion in *The Painter of Modern Life* as if he has reached the final layer of the downward spiral into the Roman satirical *femina simplex*. Here the dirty-kerchief adorned image of a satanic looking woman deals narcotics from behind a garishly backlit bar, while others who suffer from consumption and addictions are described as macabre ‘nymphs’ and ‘dolls’, in the seedy urban version of modern capitalist Hell (1964[1859-60]: 35-38). As both Buck-Morss (1986: 127) and Leslie (1997: 81) point out, Benjamin argues that the automaton, or mechanical doll, is linked to a form sadism that remains fused to the fetishistic eroticism of capitalism. “The uncovering of the mechanical aspects of the organism is a persistent tendency of the sadist. One can say that the sadist is bent on replacing the human organism with the image of machinery. Sade is the offspring of an age that was enraptured by automatons” (Benjamin, 1999: [J80,1], 368). Susan Buck-Morss establishes that at this point we have returned again to the central role of ‘Einfühlung’, or Benjamin’s theory of empathy with the commodity (1986: 127-128). In this case, empathy is not only based in objectification and alienation through identification with ‘things’, but also in the disturbing ability to regard the suffering of ‘others’ from a perspective of alienated detachment (Buck-Morss, 1992: 37). Benjamin “saw a close connection between the distortions of modern erotic life and fascism” (Buck-Morss, 1986: 127). Buck-Morss (1992) describes, for example, how Hal Foster, drawing on Ernst Jünger, characterizes the fascist display of the physical body in the Berlin Olympic Games as “a kind of armour” that shields against pain and fragmentation: “The
armoured, mechanized body with its galvanized surface and metallic, sharp-angled face provides the illusion of invulnerability. It is the body viewed from the point of view of the ‘second consciousness’ described by Jünger as ‘numbed’ against feeling” (38). Esther Leslie (1997) applies Benjamin’s theory of the sadism to the factory exploitation of women, children, and slaves in the textile and cotton industries. The failure (or inability) to draw connections between the realities that have occasioned such suffering and those in the marketplace is one of the integral points that Benjamin takes from Marx’s Capital, namely, the “idea of fashion as intimate with death” (Leslie: 82).

3.5.3. Dialectical Awakening to these Effects

But just as the mimetic assimilation to the ‘second nature’ of capitalism can be repressive, Benjamin also believes that the mimetic faculty holds the revolutionary potential to be emancipatory. We have touched upon the redeeming value that Benjamin perceives in the remnants of the mimetic faculty manifest in children’s play, and how Benjamin aims to nurture serious forms of play that will stimulate the mimetic capacity of adults toward the revolutionary potential of an emancipatory relationship with the object world (Gunster, 2004: 81). As David McNally (2001) argues: “Children’s play becomes a model of redemptive experience…Children’s play returns the warmth of things, restores the magic to matter, and provides a re-entry into the language of things. In so doing, it reestablishes a mimetic relationship to the world” (186). David Frisby (1994) suggests that Benjamin’s methodology utilizes a set of perceptual activities that have been based in flânerie (82-83). Thus one might say that Benjamin treats flânerie as a serious form of ‘play’, a dynamic set of actions intended for gathering and expressing the raw materials of experience that have been rejected and repressed by capitalist modernity. The flâneur’s actions are intimately bound up with the mimetic
Benjamin’s treatment of the flâneur is dialectical, like the mimetic faculty itself. On the one hand, the flâneur prefigures emancipatory forms of praxis. On the other hand, he also incarnates the worst forms of insular, defensive experience in his absolute assimilation to the commodity form. This is why the parallel that Benjamin establishes between the markets, crowds, and things in the highly externalized world of the Parisian Arcades, and the miniaturized interior world of childhood memory, proves highly valuable to his early explorations of the technique of literary montage. Benjamin’s allegorical literary montages *Berlin Chronicle* (1999[1932]: 595-637), *Berlin Childhood* (2002[1938/1934]: 344-413), and *One Way Street* (1996[1928]: 444-488) provide excellent examples of such explorations. In Benjamin’s *One Way Street*, this parallel becomes suggestively, if not immediately, apparent (McNally, 2001: 185). Benjamin juxtaposes his own childhood memories of the bourgeois interior to the larger ‘interiors’ brought about by the creation of the Parisian Arcades. He cleverly moves between the images and worlds of the flâneur and his own childhood, allowing the world in miniaturization to inform the larger life picture about the alienation and falsity that remains repressed from an earlier time of origin. These experiences are described as allegoric fragments of the child’s dynamic first experiences of interacting with the object world. Each fragment falls under titles, such as: *child reading*, *belated child*, *pilfering child*, *child on the carousel*, *untidy child*, *child hiding*, and more (Benjamin, 1996[1928]: 463-465). Benjamin’s ‘enlargements’ of the experiences of children becomes the mimesis that the flâneur also brings with him as he wanders into the enlarged bourgeois ‘interior’ of the Parisian Arcades. More importantly, these allegories mark the moments that Benjamin has brought with him as the child that seeks his way along ‘half-hidden paths’. As with his interest in children’s play, Benjamin’s engagement with colportage and the modern poetics of the flâneur is intended to be mimetic and pedagogical. The
flâneur gathers the scraps and provides the clues, while Benjamin’s historical materialist suggests that the same emancipatory type of mimetic capacity engaged in children’s play releases the potential for these fragments to be ‘read’ and interpreted as ‘bearers’ for new meaning. Under the title “Construction Site”, Benjamin (1996[1928]) writes:

For children are particularly fond of haunting any site where things are being visibly worked on. They are irresistibly drawn by the detritus generated by building… In waste products they recognize the face that the world of things turns directly and solely on them. In using these things, they do not so much imitate the works of adults as bring together, in the artifact produced in play, materials of widely differing kinds in a new, intuitive relationship. (449-450)

Outside of the fusion of the bodily senses, action, and cognition exemplary in children's play, there are additional cultural and aesthetic practices through which Benjamin explores the emancipatory possibilities to be found in the mimetic perception of similarities. Gunster (2004) explains that for Benjamin the mimetic faculty can also identify non-sensuous similarities in media such as language. For Benjamin, the meaning of language transcends its functional role as a purely semiotic system. For example, Benjamin points to the expressions of the unconscious which can be excavated by the graphologist in ‘reading’ another’s handwriting. “Script has thus become, like language, an archive of nonsensuous similarities, of nonsensuous correspondences” (Benjamin, 1999[1933]: 722). Gunster (2004) points out that, in this sense, language carries both semiotic and mimetic elements (83). The mimetic dimensions of language can activate the submerged traces of a collective unconscious that remains buried within linguistic forms, much like symbols and dreams can be unearthed in the process of Freudian psychoanalysis. Benjamin (1999[1933]) states, “The mimetic element in language can, like a flame, manifest itself only through a kind of bearer. This bearer is the semiotic element. Thus the nexus of meaning of words or
sentences is the bearer through which, like a flash, similarity appears” (722). These illuminating ‘flashes’ of similarity catalyze our individual and collective abilities to access memory and “create a framework for experience” that progresses beyond the immediacy of each present sensation (Gunster, 2004: 83). Words, for Benjamin, can ‘trigger’ images from memory “…those moments of rupture in the flow of narrative time, where discontinuities burst forth. Or, more accurately, some words can—those that exist on the frontier between two linguistic regions, of children and adults” (McNally, 2001: 186).

For Benjamin, language contains both destructive and reconstructive elements. On the one hand, the destructive force of language is capable of breaking apart traditional organic unities that have traditionally arranged memory and experience into set and particularized forms. On the other hand, language can draw together seemingly unrelated moments or concepts, thereby generating illuminating flashes of memory. In language, a non-sensuous mimetic logic can be activated in order to reconstruct shattered fragments of experience into constellations and patterns through which additional linkages can be made. Drawing these connections helps “bring into play the mimetic sensitivity of language to the hidden correspondences between different experiences, and thereby increase the chance that memories which lie buried deep within the body and unconscious will be released” (Gunster, 2004: 122). For Benjamin, language is more than semantics. Not only do we read or hear language in the conventional sense, but we can also look to the world around us as a form of ‘text’ to be read and (potentially) reconfigured. This guides his collection of raw materials for dialectical images in the Passagen-Werk: he treats these fragments as a language that can be potentially ‘read’ from the spaces, objects, practices, and texts of urban industrial capitalism. “The expression ‘the book of nature’ indicates that one can read the real like
When Benjamin writes about Paris as the Capital of the Nineteenth Century, he conceptualizes it as the ‘childhood’ of modernity in a way that parallels the experiences of his own generation. “Benjamin’s theory acknowledged that the relationship between consciousness and society on a historical level was interspersed with another dimension, the level of childhood development, in which the relationship between consciousness and reality has its own history” (Buck-Morss, 1989: 265). This brings us back to the “trick” of the dialectical image, in which the fairytale teaches humanity “to meet the forces of the mythical world with cunning and with high spirits” (Benjamin, 2002[1936]: 157). Buck-Morss (1989) describes the “discarded dream images of mass culture” as the medium through which the “collective unconscious communicates across generations”. The newest inventions “conceived out of the fantasy of one generation, are received within the childhood experience of another”. This premise creates what Buck-Morss describes as a “double dream theory”, which is “based on the childhood of an epoch on the one hand and that of a generation on another” (273). Dream images are also based upon the utopian dream wishes of primal (pre-class) society. “If capitalism has been the source of the historical dream state, the latter is the ontogenetic origins, and the two axes converge in a unique constellation for each generation” (Buck-Morss, 1989: 273). The utopian impulse that often accompanies the invention of new technologies is very important to Benjamin, because it was reflective of utopian desires for a new social order (McNally, 2001: 200). As Buck-Morss (1989) points out, the ‘old world’ of wish symbols of a pre-class society are based in Benjamin’s “Marxist sensibility”, and not in the Jungian sense of “innate, archetypal” symbols. “When the
child’s fantasy is cathected onto products of modern production, it reactivates the original promise of industrialism, now slumbering in the lap of capitalism, to deliver a humane society of material abundance” (Buck-Morss, 1989: 274). The rediscovery of these ur-symbols in “the most modern technological products” contain “a politically explosive potential” in terms of “socialist, revolutionary politics” (274). Benjamin finds the mimetic capacity for cognition first encountered in childhood essential in ‘reading’ and deciphering dream images because “the child’s creative perception of the objects in fact recollects the historical moment when the new technology was first conceived…” (273). Mimetic capacity based in childhood looks upon the world of objects with the same receptivity and creative potential as when they were first created. The child can “discover the new anew” from the fragments and images of the previous generation. What lies slumbering in these discarded objects are the utopian wishes that can potentially be rescued and brought back to life with explosive and revolutionary potential, and generate an historical awakening. The biological task of awakening first encountered in childhood, as a coming-of-age, becomes a model for Benjamin of the awakening of the social collective. When a generation reaches coming-of-age and consciousness together, the result can be a politically charged and historically unique moment. Benjamin proposes that this new generation not only holds the potential to awaken to itself, by moving in rebellion against the traditional parameters of the ‘parental world’. It might also awaken the slumbering utopian potential that lies submerged in the subconscious wishes of an epoch. “A materialist history that disenchants the new nature in order to free it from the spell of capitalism, and yet rescues all the power of enchantment for the purpose of social transformation: this was to have been the goal of Benjamin’s fairy tale” (Buck-Morss, 1989: 275). But, as Buck-Morss points out, Benjamin never suggests “that the child’s mythic understanding was itself truth”. Rather
the mimetic capacity of childhood catches “historical objects in a web of meanings” (275). It takes the images ‘triggered’ from the memories of the “grown generation” to be able to ‘read’ and decipher those meanings.

Mimesis also contributes to the types of ‘shock’ that generate an awakening to the effects of empathy with the soul of the commodity in Baudelaire, as the flâneur of the “grown-generation”. The value for Benjamin in the poetry and prose of Baudelaire is connected to the same motif of shock/(re)cognition that we encounter in the allegory of ‘The Old Clown’. Although the flâneur first strolls into the market merely pretending to take a look, in reality he has come to seek a buyer. The empathy that Baudelaire’s poet-flâneur feels for the old clown relates directly to the man’s humiliating presence as a failed commodity in the capitalist marketplace. As he recognizes the similarities between himself and the old clown, Baudelaire’s poet-flâneur experiences a ‘shock’ that allows him fully to understand the experience (and trajectory) of self-commodification for the first time. The ‘hysterical tears’ that overcome Baudelaire in response to the old clown is a reflex action. It is brought on by his mute helplessness as witness to the creative destructive cycle of ‘boom and bust’, which inevitably leaves every commodity in ruin once the marketplace has coldly ejected it. But, in this case, that ruin is a human being—and that is what provides the shock value for Baudelaire. Not simply in the fact that a human life has been ruined, but that the flâneur can see himself (and his own future) in the ruin of the clown. That creates a progressive shock of empathy, which has value as a form of awakening for Benjamin’s analysis. The commodity form that the clown wears in this case clearly points toward the tyrannical power of the death mask over human subjectivity that has been denied. The human subject wears the instrumentalized oppression of his commodity failure as an abject social death. After a
life of sacrifice for the sake of his professional survival, he stands alone, “without friends or family or children, degraded by his poverty and the ingratitude of his public, and standing at the booth which the forgetful world no longer has any desire to enter” (Baudelaire, 1963 [1869]: 86). Key here is the specific character of empathy between the flâneur and the clown. Representations of poverty, on their own, are common enough. But what remains the most valuable about Baudelaire’s motif is the shock-like (re)cognition that is generated between dialectically opposed experiences of the clown’s fate, and the excitement of seeking a buyer in the market. In the shock of empathy that generates an awakening, the dialectical nature of the mimetic capacity is reversed. With a flash of (re)cognition the veil of the bourgeois phantasmagoria is torn away, allowing Baudelaire to catch a momentary glimpse at the truth of the commodity as immense human suffering.

Gunster (2004:142) argues that the allegoric form of Baudelaire’s work provides an aesthetically mediated expression of the actual experience of the commodity. It is this absolute alienation, which can be felt through the transmutation of the human self into a dead object that comes to fully embody the permanent catastrophe of modern existence. This is why Benjamin points to the figure of the prostitute in Baudelaire as having such critical value: her presence symbolizes to Benjamin the fusion between use-value and exchange-value in the body. As Esther Leslie (1997) points out, the prostitute remains a powerful and central image to Benjamin because she represents a theoretical holism. She is the “commodity and salesgirl in one” whose very presence “smashes through the divisive illusions of life under capitalism” (83).

We have already touched upon several examples from the negative side of empathy with the commodity as it applies to women’s fashion and the prostitute. But
does Benjamin perceive motifs of redemption to be salvaged from the scraps of these images as well? David McNally (2001) describes women’s fashion and the body of the prostitute as “sites of redemptive possibilities”. He explains that fashion and prostitution are “at the heart of the dialectic of extremes which characterizes capitalism: sexuality and death, history and nature collide” (211). Benjamin finds value in fashion, from a methodological standpoint, for the generation of dialectical images. “Fashion has a nose for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago; it is the tiger’s leap into the past” (Benjamin, 2003[1940]: 395). Because fantasies of emancipation take shape in and through the language of fashion, Benjamin argues that disruptive elements will exist as a part of its expression as commodity form (McNally, 2001: 211). The problem is that the fashion industry’s uncanny ability to latch onto the power of historical images is still being commanded from within the arena of the ruling class. But “[t]he same leap in the open air of history is the dialectical leap Marx understood as revolution” (Benjamin, 2003[1940]: 395). This leap into the open air of history definitely includes images of women as vital historical and political agents to Benjamin’s project. Leslie (1997) argues that Benjamin’s aim in presenting “the sociological fact of objectification of women” is to validate, from out of the petrified ruins of modernity, “the explicit shift of women into the realm of history and culture, recognizing the enormity of its social and political implications”. She explains, “it is the revolutionary chance for salvation. Benjamin is not a moralist, providing positive images, but his images of negativity are dynamite” (79).

In fact, there are numerous images of women in Benjamin’s project that contain the potential to disrupt conventional bourgeois narratives. Just as capitalism generates idealized feminine images as the embodiment of nature and beauty, it also “dissolves
older family forms, and creates new social spaces for those who reject identification with motherhood and procreation" (McNally, 2001: 209). Images, such as, “sex-objects, sex-sellers, [and] commodity retailers” accompany “widows, sex-murder victims, fashion mannequins, lesbians, female factory workers” utopian Saint-Simonian socialist-feminists, and the anarchistic arsonist transvestite ‘demoiselles’ of the 1830s, as “specimens who signify conventional femininities in crises. They are examples of non-domesticated feminine bodies…” (Leslie, 1997: 75). Each holds the potential to disrupt naturalized perceptions of woman as reducible to nature, thereby marking her point of departure into the realm of history and culture. David McNally (2001) identifies Benjamin’s account of the revolutionary “Vésuviennes”, a group of working class women who first take this step through the process of industrialization. New advances in technology, such as the introduction of the factory machine, shattered traditional gender roles by putting women into the factories for the first time. “The result was a masculinization of proletarian women which was expressed politically during the revolution of February 1848” (McNally, 2001: 208). This expression also took place through fashion. The Vésuviennes were widely known for the militant “bloomer costume” that they wore with a rifle and cap while staging “frequent street demonstrations” to draw attention to their class and gender politics (Goldberg-Moses, 1984: 130). They announced: “a revolutionary volcano is at work in every woman who belongs to our group” (Benjamin as cited in McNally, 2001: 208). However, after the

3 Leslie (1997) explains: “However out of step with current progressive vocabulary, this depiction recognizes a shift in the actuality of women’s roles. This shift is, of course, classed. Engels speaks similarly, using the phrase ‘unsexed’ to describe women workers, in order to point to the historically changing form and ideological basis of femininity and masculinity. Such observations about the mutability of gender occur with Marx’s assessment of the social-sexual changes ushered in by capitalist modes of production… In Benjamin’s Arcades Project, as in Marx, women are shown to be injected into commodity relations” (76).
failure of the 1848 revolution “the fashion industry laid a layer of glitter over this volcano of female revolutionary hopes. Yet, Benjamin claims, the eruptive power of the revolution still lurks within the interstices of fashion” (McNally, 2001: 208).

This is not to say, however, that Benjamin intends by any means to glorify women’s fashion or prostitution. Rather it is the shocking capacity for dreams of revolutionary emancipation and the absolute Hell of commodification to come clashing together at the site of the human body that renders them powerful sources of dialectical images. As McNally (2001) points out, Benjamin argues that the mimetic faculty contains the potential to be liberatory because it is based in the human body. For Benjamin, “the human body is inherently linguistic and historical”. As “a site of memories, images, and social desires” the body acts as “the point of departure for all of human experience—for language, history, and culture” (223). It is at the site of the human body, with the capacity to (re)cognize similarities, that revolutionary images can be unearthed and mobilized toward the volcanic effect of awakening.

3.6. Theorizing Experience: Erfahrung and Erlebnis

The forms of popular leisure that Benjamin draws examples from, such as fashion, fun fairs, world exhibitions, gambling, and the Arcades, describe events where modern day people are conditioned to derive pleasure through encountering a ‘shock-like’ quality that serves to detach them from the actual context of their experience (Benjamin, 1999[1935]: 6-11; Benjamin, 1999[1939]: 15-24; Benjamin, 2003[1940]: 316-332). It is important to keep in mind that there are different kinds of shock for Benjamin—the ‘shocks’ of urban experience and the capitalist labour process that require a defensive posture; but also the awakening ‘shocks’ of recognition. In the case
of the former, the capacity of individuals to truly experience reality is essentially blunted. The human capacity for experience has been numbed through forms of cognitive and physical conditioning that occur in the context of urban experience, the capitalist labour process, and the distractions of consumer culture. Through defensive and self-protective responses to shock, modern people have been physically and cognitively conditioned not to look beyond the thrill brought on by each isolated moment of distraction. While seemingly engaged in leisure activities, they are unwittingly replicating the very same cognitive patterns and physical behaviours that the capitalist labour process has set in motion through the worker’s imitative assimilation to the factory machine. Yet instead of registering the repetitious and monotonous form of such leisure activities as alienating, frustrating, and hateful, people have been conditioned to enjoy them to the point of compulsive addiction. They wind up engaging with wave after wave of commodities, and endless cycles of expectation and disappointment, rather than experiencing self-actualizing moments in genuine social interaction with others.

Benjamin draws upon the work of Freud to develop an innovative theorization of human experience which can help us understand how cycles of expectation and disappointment, as well as how such imitative assimilation to the shocks of capitalist modernity (and the labour process), are perpetuated. In *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*, Benjamin explains that Freud’s essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* hypothesizes a “correlation between memory…and consciousness” where memory serves a purpose that is “essentially conservative; reminiscence destructive” (2003[1940]: 316-317). Freud argues that consciousness serves as a shield that protects against stimuli, potentially harmful excess energies from the outside world: “The threat posed by these energies is the threat of shocks” (Benjamin: 317). The ‘cushioning’ or ‘parrying’ of
potentially traumatic shock by the shield of consciousness leads to the repression of memory traces in the subconscious (318).

The creative destructive cycle driving the development of capitalist modernity has shattered the traditions that once bound people and communities together. On the one side of the coin, Benjamin perceives the seeds for great liberatory potential to exist in such shattering of tradition (Gunster, 2004: 140). On the other side, he argues that something dangerous has profoundly impacted the creative capacity for both individuals and the greater social collective to recognize experience as part of a long-term historical continuum (97). Benjamin is particularly concerned with the impact of these changes on human capacities for memory; but he is also hopeful that explosive new forms of collective experience and memory can be assembled from the ruins of tradition. Benjamin (2003[1940]) divides the capacity for human experience into two different forms: Erfahrung, which could be considered a long chain of ‘life experience’ that remains connected to a historical continuum of memory, and Erlebnis, which can be understood to be a series of isolated fragments of experience that occur in the immediacy of a moment and then are quickly sublimated and repressed from conscious memory.

In The Storyteller Benjamin (2002[1936]) writes, “Memory creates the chain of tradition which transmits an event from generation to generation” (154). Gunster (2004) explains that to Benjamin, Erfahrung represents a traditional way of remembering practiced by peoples of the past, where “personal and communal memories blended together in a tightly woven mnemonic field that both enabled and regulated the transmission of cultural knowledge” (92). With Erfahrung, experiences of specific events are immersed in a field of memory and tradition: they cannot be remembered
separately. This field “traces multiple connecting pathways between [the] particular location in time and space” of each event, and the broader individual and collective life experiences of which they are a part (93). All experiences are embedded within a shared “network of stories and memories” that determines their meaning and significance (92). The accumulation of knowledge and experience is not a serial, teleological progression from one event to the next, but rather an evolving web of experiences. “Something of this full experience of the world—largely generated and sustained through an expansive use of memory to embed the individual in tradition and history—is what Benjamin hopes to convey with the term Erfahrung” (Gunster, 2004: 93).

To Benjamin, social and cultural practices that enable the constant integration of particular experiences and events into a broader chain of memory, meaning, and history can be found in traditional artisanal forms of communication, especially storytelling (2002[1936]: 149). Through storytelling, otherwise isolated experiences and events are connected to the greater social collective, woven into an intricate tapestry of memory (Gunster, 2004: 94). As part of the transmission of cultural knowledge prevalent in older cultures with oral traditions, specific events are holistically integrated into the overall network of shared stories. Shared memory begins with community storytellers, with each person integrating parts of the story into their own life histories, which are then themselves retold. Erfahrung, then, depends upon “the desire and capacity of individuals to embed particular events in their own life histories, and, subsequently, to communicate both the event and its narrative integration to others” (Gunster, 2004: 92).

In The Storyteller Benjamin (2002[1936]) argues that “the storyteller joins the ranks of the teachers and sages”. The storyteller has been “granted the ability to reach
back through a whole lifetime” that includes “much of the experiences of others” and not simply his or her own life experiences (162). Storytellers treat stories as part of their own life experience, as compared to describing distinct and isolated events, as one might do with information or a report (149). The storyteller “teaches by example”, showing how one can make another’s experiences one’s own through the “active presence” that he or she takes within the sharing of the story (Gunster, 2004: 93). Each listener’s personal memories are assimilated into the broader field of experiences in Benjamin’s notion of Erfahrung (93). “What the storyteller knows from hearsay is added to what is most his own… His gift is the ability to relate his life; his distinction, to be able to relate his entire life” (Benjamin, 2002[1936]: 162). Benjamin explains how storytelling in the milieu of work is shared: “It submerges the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus, traces of the storyteller cling to a story the way the handprints of the potter cling to a clay vessel” (149).

The “community of listeners listens to the tales in such a way that the gift of retelling them comes to [each listener] all by itself” (Benjamin, 2002[1936]: 149). It might seem that maximizing attentiveness in the act of listening would help one to not only hear the stories of others but also to assimilate them to one’s own memory and experiences. Benjamin argues, however, that the exact opposite is the case. The ability to remain open to receiving the experiences of others is achieved through what Benjamin describes as a “self-forgetful” state of “boredom and relaxation” that can be compared to the practice of listening while caught up in the rhythm of work. “The more self-forgetful the listener is, the more deeply what he listens to is impressed upon his memory”. “Boredom is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience”: even a slight “rustling in the leaves will drive him away” (Benjamin, 2002[1936]: 149). Too much
emphasis on conscious perception will, in fact, impair the ability for the listener to absorb the stories of others and integrate them into his or her own experiences. Instead, the relaxed and distracted disposition that accompanies boredom proves optimal for *Erfahrung* “because it maximizes the sensitivity of mnemonic systems to the most comprehensive inscription of the story and its consequent linkages with other memories as opposed to its mediation and filtration through conscious perception” (Gunster, 2004: 94). Benjamin’s understanding of boredom as the ‘dream bird of experience’ thus refers to a cognitive and physical state of relaxation that remains open and receptive to the stimuli of the outside world, as well as to the internal workings of the psyche. Sensory experiences and events are able to flow freely between memory, consciousness, and the body, rather than being deflected away by the self-protective shield of consciousness hypothesized by Freud as the regulatory apparatus for shock. From within this full experience of the world, both individuals and the greater human collective are then able to absorb and transmit cultural experiences that remain fused to the mnemonic field maintained by tradition.

*Erfahrung* sponsors a greater connection between body, experience, consciousness, and memory. The centrality of themes such as memory and consciousness in Benjamin’s material is connected to his understanding of the correlation between the human mind and its bodily senses, which respond to the central nervous system (Buck-Morss, 1992: 11). Buck-Morss (1992) differentiates Benjamin’s approach to “sense-consciousness” from the “traditional conception of the human nervous system which artificially isolates human biology from its environment” (13). She argues that Benjamin theorizes the existence of a “synaesthetic system…wherein external sense perceptions come together with the internal images of memory and
anticipation” (13). This system obliterates the classical philosophical boundaries between body, consciousness, and the external world of stimuli (12). The human nervous system reaches beyond the limits of the body: “[t]he circuit from sense-perception to motor response begins and ends in the world. The brain is thus not an isolable anatomical body, but part of a system that passes through the person and her or his (culturally specific, historically transient) environment” (12). Alongside its openness to the external world by remaining attuned to the sensory organs, the synaesthetic system also remains receptive to “the nerve cells within body… They reach out toward other nerve cells at points called synapses, where electrical charges pass through the space between them” (13). There is a direct link between the human senses and internal consciousness, which is attached to perceptions of subject and object, as well as to the capacity for memory and experience (12). In Benjamin’s conceptualization of Erfahrung “[n]o single faculty is positioned architectonically to govern selectively how events are experienced; rather data from each sensory apparatus are placed on a fairly equal footing with consciousness” (Gunster, 2004: 93). Therefore events are part of a more holistic experience in which “individuals bring into play all of their perceptive, sensory, and cognitive faculties” (93). These “full and expansive” experiences are necessary in order for singular events to become “embedded in the mnemonic field that draws out the countless connections between themselves and the memories that are arrayed within this field” (Gunster: 93-94).

As noted, the human capacity to experience social and material environments has been transformed by the increase of technology and urbanization in modern capitalist society. As sensory shock and overload have become a common recurrence with the increase of technology, urban space, and the commodity form, the human
capacity to absorb the raw materials of experience and to assimilate meaning has become fragmented, distorted, and blunted. This serves to limit the ability for interchange between cognitive, psychic, and corporeal systems, and by doing so the generation of Erfahrung is fundamentally compromised (Gunster, 2004: 97). Benjamin draws upon Freud to explain how and why Erlebnis becomes dominant. In On Some Motifs in Baudelaire, Benjamin (2003[1940]) describes Erlebnis as a result of shock that has been “cushioned, parried by consciousness” so much so that it has been lent “the character of an isolated experience [Erlebnis], in the strict sense” (318). Gunster (2004) explains that in Benjamin’s conceptualization of Erlebnis, the cognitive perception of experience is abstracted to a linear trajectory of events, rather than remaining connected to a larger web of experiences existing holistically within collective forms of memory and tradition. “The weaving of events into experience requires their immersion in the mnemonic field: the world is no longer ‘experienced’ in such a way that it can enter memory…” (Gunster, 2004: 97). Like beads following one after the other on the string of a rosary, “[s]pecific experiences are sequentially inscribed in memory; each comes to occupy a compartment divided from the others” (97). Moment after moment remains ossified in a linear succession from the past, while time stretches ever forward into the future. The cognitive capacity for memory thus becomes a register filled with a series of hollowed out events that are either filed away and forgotten in the past, or recalled as fragments in the event of danger or opportunity (125). Susan Buck-Morss (1992) argues that, for Benjamin, “[i]n industrial production no less than modern warfare, in street crowds and erotic encounters, in amusement parks and gambling casinos, shock is the very essence of modern experience” (16). Benjamin adopts Freud’s hypothesis that consciousness parries shock as a self-protective measure. “Under extreme stress, the ego employs consciousness as a buffer, blocking the openness of the synaesthetic
system, thereby isolating present consciousness from past memory. Without the depth of memory, experience is impoverished” (Buck-Morss, 1992: 16). As Buck-Morss points out, Freud’s hypothesis arose out of his investigations into “war neuroses, the trauma of ‘shell shock’ and catastrophic accident that plagued soldiers in World War I” (16). Benjamin describes the trauma of shell shock as a “sort of dream that may afflict accident survivors….” (2003[1940]: 317). He likens the “physical shocks” that the human sensorium is exposed to in battle with the “psychic shocks” produced in the “technologically altered environment” of urban capitalist modernity: both have degraded the capacity for memory and experience within modern societies (Buck-Morss, 1992: 16-17). “Benjamin claimed this battlefield experience of shock ‘has become the norm’ in modern life” (Buck-Morss: 16). In On Some Motifs in Baudelaire Benjamin argues that the greater potential shock posed by particular impressions “the more vigilant consciousness has to be in screening stimuli; the more effectively it does so, the less these impressions enter long experience [Erfahrung] and the more they correspond to the concept of isolated experience [Erlebnis]” (2003[1940]: 319). With the shift from the human capacity for Erfahrung to that of Erlebnis, the connection between body, memory, and consciousness becomes defensively sterilized, thus restricting the ability for modern individuals to ‘fully’ experience their existence. “As a result, the fusion of sensory data with mnemonic impulses—a fusion required for an individual to ‘experience’ his or her existence fully—no longer occurs” (Gunster, 2004: 97). Stimuli from the surrounding environment “that might once have solicited conscious reflection and mnemonic immersion” have become so threatening that they are defensively blocked from fully entering the psyche to begin with (Gunster: 97). Buck-Morss (1992) describes this as a shift from a synaesthetic to an ‘anaesthetic’ framework of experience. The anaesthetic framework reorganizes the cognitive faculties in order to suppress data from the bodily
senses. Rather than reaching outward, to connect the bodily senses to the surrounding world, the synaesthetic system functions in reverse: “its goal is to numb the organism, to deaden the senses, to repress memory” (18).

Buck-Morss (1992) explains that this “has the effect of anaesthetizing the organism… through flooding the senses” (22). One example of such anaesthetic conditioning is the industrial factory. Quoting Marx’s Capital, she draws a parallel between what the senses might experience when surrounded by a symphony orchestra and what is experienced while on the factory floor. “Every organ of sense is injured in an equal degree by artificial elevation of temperature, by the dust-laden atmosphere, by the deafening noise, not to mention danger to life and limb among the thickly crowded machinery…” (Marx as cited in Buck-Morss, 1992: 27). How can such a potentially dangerous, shocking, and overwhelming barrage of the human senses be compared to activities that one might find pleasurable? The key equivalence can be grasped through the concept of “phantasmagoria” (Buck-Morss, 1992: 22). “Phantasmagoria” first appeared with new forms of “technoaesthetics” in the nineteenth century, in which “a narcotic was made out of reality itself” (22). Constantly flooding the bodily senses with stimuli, technoaesthetics provided a “compensatory reality” that “tricks the senses through technical manipulation” (22). Benjamin’s Passagen-Werk documents the proliferation of such forms which first appeared in the nineteenth century: world exhibitions, panoramas, bourgeois interiors, fashion, gambling, and rows of commodities displayed in the arcades. A prime example of early technoaesthetics can be found in his descriptions of the first use of modern technologies, such as iron, glass, and gas lighting to generate a dream-like effect for the newly formed public of bourgeois consumers (Benjamin, 1999[1935]: 5). Buck-Morss (1992: 22-23) explains that the simulated urban
environment is filled with all manner of sensory distraction, each of which contains the power to “alter consciousness, much like a drug”. “The perceptions they provide are ‘real’ enough—their impact upon the senses and nerves is still ‘natural’ from a neurophysical point of view. But their social function is in each case compensatory” (22). The presence of technoaesthetics is mind-altering on both an individual and a collective scale: “Everyone sees the same altered world, experiences the same total environment”. Hence, phantasmagoria become ‘objective fact’ and “the intoxication of the phantasmagoria itself becomes the social norm” (23).

The experience of time itself is transformed in the transition from

Erfahrung
to

Erlebnis
(Gunster, 2004: 98). Recall Marx’s argument that the shocks generated by the machine mimetically conditions the human body to respond like that of an automaton (2003[1940]: 328). “Under conditions of modern shock—the daily shocks of the modern world—response to stimuli without thinking has become necessary for survival” (Buck-Morss, 1992: 16). For Buck-Morss (1992), then, exploitation must be understood “as a cognitive category” and not just an “economic one”: “The factory system, injuring every one of the human senses, paralyzes the imagination of the worker…memory is replaced by conditioned response…” (17). The repetitive switching, snaps, and jolts implicated in work on the factory floor have a shock-like effect on the central nervous system that can be “brutalizing”. This effect produces an equally brutalizing “psychic counterpart”, which is based in the “‘sectioning of time’ into a sequence of repetitive moments without development” (17). In On Some Motifs in Baudelaire Benjamin (2003[1940]) notes that “the special achievement of shock defense is the way it assigns an incident a precise point in time and consciousness, at the cost of the integrity of the incident’s contents” (319). He compares the fragmentation and repetition of the workplace to the isolated
moments of the gamblers in Baudelaire’s ‘Le Jeu’: “This process of starting all over again is the regulative idea of gambling, as it is of work for wages” (Benjamin, 2003[1940]: 331). Benjamin argues that, like the gamblers, all modern people are essentially “cheated” from experience, by the fact that they have been “forced to march to the beat of the second-hand” in a long sectioning off of time within capitalist social relations (332). It would be mistaken, however, to assume that just because the game contains the same fragmented and repetitive elements that are the product of Erlebnis that they will be directly experienced as such. Instead, the narcotic that the gamblers have used to dull their consciousness is the game itself. Gunster (2004) explains that, in Erlebnis, people have been conditioned to live “for and in ‘the moment’…Crudely put, Erlebnis wipes clean the slate of experience by reducing the density and breadth of both collective and individual memories…” (99-100). Despite a lifetime of experience of gambling, the memories of those (disappointing) experiences have been repressed: “The gambler returns again and again, eagerly lusting after the promise of novelty, change, and excitement, and he is able to live each identical moment again as if for the first time…” (Gunster, 2004: 100). Benjamin argues that this particular perception of time and experience has come to represent a generalized state in capitalist modernity, rather than simply applying to the gamblers alone. The constant desire for novelty through “practices, objects, and relations that never change” has been inscribed into the “entire cultural apparatus that is constructed around the commodity form” (Gunster, 2004: 100). The narcotic effect of the game upon the gamblers is emblematic of the endless fetishization of novelty in consumer culture, which, in turn, drives the endless pursuit of commodities.
In *Experience and Poverty*, Benjamin (1999[1933]) describes the traumatic shocks that soldiers experienced during the First World War. He asks: “Wasn’t it noticed at the time how many people returned from the front in silence? Not richer but poorer in communicable experience?” (731). In other words, the shocks generated by these events resulted in less communicative experiences than in the past. “What poured out of the flood of war books” in the decade that followed the First World War was “anything but the experience that passes from mouth to ear” (Benjamin, 1999[1933]: 731-732). Rather, these narratives reflected the “tremendous development” of technology in modern times, which had produced a “completely new” form of “poverty” now experienced by mankind (732). As Gunster (2004) explains, the novel and the newspaper had become “literary markers for changes in experience” that Benjamin connects to the dominance of shock in modern life (95). It is not that the moments lived and experienced in *Erlebnis* are completely forgotten (although many will be), but rather that even when they are remembered “it is only abstractly, as an incident whose impact on the individual is limited to a particular moment in time and space” (99). Each moment is experienced and recorded in isolation from other moments in one’s life, as well as from the lives and experiences of others. In *The Storyteller* Benjamin (2002[1936]) observes that the value of information, as opposed to experience, is that it does not “survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time” (148). When this form of memory is assimilated into personal and collective histories “narratives take the form of serial packets of information united only by the otherwise contingent fact that they describe events that happened to the same individual or group” (Gunster, 2004: 99). What is lost alongside the rise of the modern novel is the ability and desire to make experiences one’s own. “The birthplace of the novel is the individual in his isolation, the
individual who can no longer speak of his concerns in exemplary fashion, who himself lacks counsel and can give none” (Benjamin, 2002[1936]: 146). Although the novel may still possess the abstract capacity to communicate information about events that have occurred, they are not fused with memory and experience in the same way that occurs through the generation of *Erfahrung* in epic storytelling. Conversely, the novel “depicts existence in the form of detached, isolated fragments that are fundamentally dissimilar as well as permanently fixed in specific locations in time and space” (Gunster, 2004: 95). What the novel has done to the traditional passing on of experience through epic storytelling meets its triumph with the communication of experience as ‘information’ in the modern newspaper. “Every morning brings us news from across the globe, yet we are poor in noteworthy stories... by now almost nothing that happens benefits storytelling; almost everything benefits information” (Benjamin, 2002[1936]: 147-148). Gunster (2004) explains that, unlike storytelling, “the only cognitive operation a newspaper leaves to its readers is an external form of objective verifiability: the information may be true or false, but either way it remains closed and distant from the experience of its consumers” (95). Benjamin describes the preponderance of information in modern society as an “oppressive wealth of ideas that has been spread among people, or rather has swamped them entirely…” (1999[1933]: 732). An overabundance of information becomes part of the steady barrage of stimuli that floods the human senses to the level of an anaesthetic intoxication. The momentary value that is lent to information in this context depends upon novelty, just as the never-ending promise of the ‘new and exciting’ gives the pursuit of commodities the quality of an intoxicating addiction.
The poverty of experience should not be understood to mean that modern people have been left yearning for new and exciting experiences. Rather, they possess an intense but subconscious longing to free themselves from a surplus of such forms of experience, to find something that is truly meaningful for the realization of their inner hopes and desires (Benjamin, 1999[1933]: 732). Such poverty is not a function of ignorance or inexperience. People are hungrier for experience than ever before: "[t]hey have ‘devoured’ everything, both ‘culture and people’, and they have had such a surfeit that it has exhausted them" (Benjamin: 734). And yet, Benjamin argues, “No one feels more caught out than they by Sheerbart’s words: ‘You are all so tired, just because you have failed to concentrate your thoughts on a simple but ambitious plan’ " (1999[1933]: 734). This exhaustion produces a form of sleep that lulls the modern person into a dream: “Tiredness is followed by sleep, and then it is not uncommon for a dream to make up for the sadness and discouragement of the day—a dream that shows us in its realized form the simple but magnificent existence for which the energy is lacking in reality” (Benjamin, 1999[1933]: 734).

The modern subject ends up living in a dream world that generates illusory satisfaction of their hopes and desires. How do we understand a world in which our dreams are so ‘rich’ but the reality of our experience is so poor? “Indeed (let’s admit it), our poverty of experience is not merely poverty in the personal level, but poverty of human experience in general. Hence a new kind of barbarism” (Benjamin, 1999[1933]: 734). The desire for experience grows ever more intense as the impoverishment and narrowing of experience becomes more severe. Modern individuals and societies have become trapped in repetitious patterns that do not actually satisfy human needs, but ultimately leave people in an acute form of ‘inner’ poverty. Commodification sells the
modern individual the illusion of novelty and experience in every kind of fragmented
distraction one can imagine. From the interiority of novels to the shock and surprise of
fun fairs, from compulsive gambling to the aestheticized fragmentation of the bodies of
models selling fashionable wares, the promise of fulfillment is limitless. The problem is
that it never actually satisfies, because the possession of ‘things’ can never actually
deliver what it promises. Each of these experiences ultimately ends, leaving behind only
a momentary point of reference. Desires for true experiences of autonomy, pleasure,
happiness, community, identity, and so forth, remain disappointed. The consumer is
inevitably left dissatisfied and searching for the next ‘fix’. At its heights, the dominance
of Erlebnis enables individual and collective self-alienation to such a degree that
humanity “can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure”
(Benjamin, 2002[1936]: 122).

3.7. Dialectics of Shock: Alienation, Spleen, and the
Violence of Everyday Life

Benjamin (2003[1940]) opens On Some Motifs in Baudelaire with a description of
the type of readers that Baudelaire envisioned for himself while writing Les Fleurs du
mal. Such readers no longer have the ability to concentrate on the work produced for
classical literary genres, such as lyric poetry. Instead, Baudelaire’s new audience will be
more like himself, with an increasing appetite for direct forms of shocking and sensual
pleasure, as the all too familiar experience of ‘spleen’ will have killed any capacity for
prolonged interest and receptiveness in its absence (313). Such readers were not
common in Baudelaire’s lifetime, but would become familiar to future generations. “This
book, which the author expected would be read by the least indulgent of readers and
which was at first read by only a few indulgent ones, has, over the decades, acquired the stature of a classic and become one of the most widely printed ones as well” (Benjamin, 2003[1940]: 314). Baudelaire anticipated a future in which the effects of ‘spleen’ were no longer isolated. Instead, as experience had grown increasingly commodified, urbanized, and technologically oriented, more people could recognize themselves in Baudelaire’s arresting and often shocking portraits of modern life. As Benjamin (2003[1938]) points out: “Baudelaire wanted to be read like a classical poet” (55). It was Baudelaire himself who suggested that his primary audience lay in the future, and that it was his artistic mission to create works of modern art that would be as revered by generations to come as the great classics of antiquity had been during his own time. “He took the ancient claim to immortality as his claim to being read as an ancient writer someday… ’That all modernity is really worthy of becoming antiquity someday’—to him, this defined the artistic mission generally” (Benjamin, 2003[1938]: 49).

Based on historical accounts of Baudelaire’s mannerisms offered by contemporaries, Benjamin (2003[1940]) identifies him as a ‘traumatophile’. “Baudelaire placed shock experience [Chockerfahrung] at the very center of his art… Psychiatry is familiar with traumatophile types. Baudelaire made it his business to parry the shocks, no matter what their source, with his spiritual and physical self” (319). Susan Buck-Morss (1992) argues that Baudelaire’s poetry “bears witness” to how the “technologically altered environment exposes the human sensorium to physical shocks that have their correspondence in psychic shock”. She describes Baudelaire’s recording of “the ‘breakdown’ of experience” as the real “mission” that defined his poetry (17). The artistic mission that Baudelaire (1964[1859-60]) describes in The Painter of Modern Life was to “distil the eternal from the transitory”, to seize from “‘modernity’… the ephemeral, the
fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable” (12). Consequently, he deliberately opened his mind and body to a steady barrage of shocks [Chockerlebnis]. Let us return to the urban epistemology created by Baudelaire’s poet-flâneur with this perspective in mind. Benjamin (2003[1940]) makes it clear that for the French poet “the masses were an agitated veil, and Baudelaire views Paris through this veil…. Baudelaire speaks of a man who plunges into the crowd as into a reservoir of electric energy. Circumscribing the experience of the shock, he calls this man ‘a kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness’” (323, 328). In The Painter of Modern Life, Baudelaire describes his own response to the cityscape as analogous to how a soldier encounters the shattering events of war. The poet turns to his surroundings as a source of both danger and opportunity, while he fights desperately to capture each impression garnered amidst the shocks of daily life. In order to be able to do so, he conditions himself to encounter each experience with the drunken abandon of an addict, coupled with the imaginative capacity for receptivity of a child at play. Benjamin (1999[1939]) writes: “The flâneur seeks refuge in the crowd. The crowd is the veil through which the familiar city is transformed for the flâneur into the phantasmagoria” (21). From the intoxicated perspective of an outsider, Baudelaire seeks ‘modern beauty’ through a form of novelty that can only be realized in death. “The linchpin of his entire theory of art is ‘modern beauty’, and for him the proof of modernity seems to be this: it is marked with the fatality of being one day antiquity, and reveals this to whoever witnesses it’s birth” (Benjamin, 1999[1939]: 22-23). Thus the ‘man of the crowd’— the “I” with an insatiable appetite for the “non-I” — utterly devours and destroys modern experience in order to preserve its properties for an eternity. In this sense, Baudelaire employs the same gaze as the snake-wreathed head of Medusa: “Here we meet the quintessence of the unforeseen, which for Baudelaire is an inalienable quality of the beautiful. The face of
modernity itself blasts us with its immemorial gaze. Such was the gaze of Medusa for the Greeks” (Benjamin, 1999[1939]: 23). The petrified impressions and scraps of experience that Baudelaire gathers throughout the urban landscape furnish the subject matter for his allegorical poetry, while *Chockerlebnis* provides the illumination for these scraps and fragments. Each scene that flickers past the poet’s gaze is petrified in such a way that any and all details can be extracted from their particular location in time and space. No matter how abject or obsolete such details may appear to the eyes of the adult observer, each one is encountered as though for the first time through the imaginative senses of the child. Hence, every object possesses the creative potential to become anything else. Rather than being part of a whole encounter, Baudelaire’s memory objects are frozen like a snapshot in time, souvenirs retained in the dream world between his conscious and unconscious ability for recollection.

Benjamin (2003[1940]) revisits the work of Freud to explain how the presence of *Chockerlebnis* functions within the creative process. Freud hypothesizes that consciousness acts as a shield that protects the fragile human psyche from shock. Benjamin argues that the more shocking an impression is, the greater the vigilance of consciousness as it works to screen and deflect stimuli. The more efficiently that this screening takes place, the more predominant the characteristics of *Erlebnis* will become, while the bodily and cognitive capacity for *Erfahrung* is impoverished (319). Freud hypothesizes that the protective guard of consciousness largely goes undetected by the psyche at first. However, in cases involving traumatized veterans of war, it becomes obvious that defenses against shock can fail as powerful stimuli become lodged in the body and the unconscious, and manifest themselves as neurotic symptoms over time. “Freud’s investigation was occasioned by the sort of dream that may afflict accident
survivors—those who develop neuroses which cause them to relive the catastrophe in which they were involved” (Benjamin, 2003[1940]: 317). Freud describes these types of dreams as one of the ways in which a traumatized individual will strive to “master the stimulus retroactively, by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis” (as cited in Benjamin, 2003[1940]: 318). Benjamin (2003[1940]) describes how, “[w]ithout reflection, there would be nothing but the sudden start, occasionally pleasant but usually distasteful, which, according to Freud, confirms the failure of the shock defense”. More importantly, he argues: “Baudelaire portrayed this process in a harsh image” (319). Baudelaire described the modern artist’s creative process as an experience equivalent to a ‘duel’ in combat: “He speaks of a duel in which the artist, just before being beaten, screams in fright. This duel is the creative process itself... he is combative even when alone, parrying his own blows” (Benjamin: 319). In this sense, there are two sides to Baudelaire’s experiences of Chockerlebnis. One side encompasses his struggle with the self-protective impulse of consciousness, which acts as a shield against “shocks” as traumatic stimuli. The other side deals with awakening “shocks” of recognition that break through the shield of consciousness to illuminate the disturbing realism of such stimuli. That the urban masses figure so heavily in Baudelaire’s work “is imprinted on his creativity as a hidden figure... the hidden constellation...is no doubt a phantom crowd: the words, the fragments, the beginnings of lines, from which the poet, in the deserted streets, wrests poetic booty” (Benjamin, 2003[1940]: 321). In Baudelaire’s ‘creative duel’, he battles more with the conflictive elements of the city and the crowd which have left in impressions upon his memory as psychic shocks, rather than as direct observations of them in ‘reality’. Shocking and disturbing implications about the true realities of the crowd are revealed to him through the stimuli that he has latched onto. By placing Chockerlebnis at the center
of his art, Baudelaire’s flâneur begins to perceive tears in the phantasmagoric ‘veil’ of capitalist modernity, and from this perception he is able to catch momentary glimpses of “an undistorted view of the big city” (Benjamin, 2003[1938]: 31-34).

Baudelaire’s poetry and prose give the fragments of alienated experiences the full weight of long experience. “Spleen...exposes the isolated experience in all its nakedness. To his horror, the melancholy man sees the earth revert to a mere state of nature” (Benjamin, 2003[1940]: 336). Benjamin’s description of gambling in On Some Motifs in Baudelaire positions the poet as a melancholy man who suffers from crippling ‘spleen’ as he stands at the margins watching the gambler’s game unfold before him. The poet remains an observer outside of the game, and yet it is clear that he is no happier or liberated than any of the players: “He too has been cheated out of his experience—a modern man. The only difference is that he rejects the narcotics the gamblers use to dull the consciousness that has forced them to march to the beat of the second hand” (Benjamin, 2003[1940]: 332). Benjamin does not perceive the poverty of modern experience as emerging autonomously from Baudelaire’s poetry, but rather that such poetry describes a form of experience that already exists. Baudelaire’s ‘spleen’ tears back the veil to expose the isolated experience of Erlebnis in its full desolation (Gunster, 2004: 141). Benjamin writes: “This is the nature of the immediate experience [Erlebnis] to which Baudelaire has given the weight of a long experience [Erfahrung]” (2003[1940]: 343).
3.8. Baudelaire, Allegory, and the Poetry of Commodification

Benjamin describes Baudelaire as a form of “allegorical genius”, who turns his gaze upon the city to reveal “a profound alienation” (1999[1939]: 21). It is from this position of alienation that Baudelaire draws parallels between his own situation as a poet and that of the ‘ragpicker’, who “makes frequent appearances” in Baudelaire’s work (Benjamin, 2003[1938]: 48). In *The Paris of the Second Empire*, Benjamin cites Baudelaire on the ragpicker:

Here we have a man whose job it is to gather the day’s refuse in the capital. Everything that the big city has thrown away, everything it has lost, everything it has scorned, everything it has crushed underfoot he catalogues and collects. He collates the annals of intertemperance, the capharnaum of waste. He sorts things out and selects judiciously; he collects, like a miser guarding treasure, refuse which will assume the shape of useful or gratifying objects between the jaws of the goddess of industry. (in Benjamin, 2003[1938]: 48)

Much like the ragpicker, the nineteenth century poet derived heroic subject matter from the “refuse of society” that he gathered from the streets. “Ragpicker and poet: both are concerned with refuse, and both go about their solitary business while other citizens are sleeping; they even move the same way”. The halting gait of the ragpicker, who stops every few moments to gather up the refuse he finds, is also the “gait of the poet who roams the city in search of rhyme-booty” (Benjamin, 2003[1938]: 48). But for the poet-flâneur who seeks asylum in the crowd, there is also a nightmarish agony that haunts his intoxicated fascination with it. In the lifelong search for the excitement of novelty and newness, he will in fact encounter nothing other than the phantasmagoria of that which is “always the same” (Benjamin, 1999[1939]: 22). For the real source of the “agonizing phantasmagoria” that lies “at the heart of flânerie” is nothing other than the commodity
itself. But it is also the commodity that provides the key to Baudelaire’s allegorical genius: “The singular debasement of things through their signification, something characteristic of seventeenth century allegory, corresponds to the singular debasement of things through their price as commodities” (Benjamin, 1999[1939]: 22).

What Benjamin admires most in Baudelaire’s work is his use of the allegoric form to shatter and challenge the otherwise totalizing myths of enlightenment and progress that tightly control the phantasmagoric representation of the world around him. Essentially, Baudelaire is highly skilled at blasting images out of their original context, and then using them to illuminate contradictions through the tensions created in their allegoric placement in relation to others. In the presentation of his poetry and prose, Baudelaire (re)arranges the fragmented scraps he has salvaged from the rubble of modernity much like the ‘ragpicker’. The effect is to fashion an *Erfahrung of Erlebnis* (Benjamin, 2003[1940]: 343).

It is precisely through the ‘draining’ of history and social context out of objects that they are then able to serve as the ingredients for allegory. Rather than allowing the shocks of modern experience to be dissolved in the depths of the unconscious, Baudelaire preserves an impression of each of them. Arranging these fragments in poetic form, he creates an aesthetic portrait of isolated experiences that is charged with much deeper meaning than any single fragment might have on its own. On the one hand, this echoes the intent of the great epic storytellers and lyrical poets to fuse events into a larger mnemonic web. On the other hand, it also retains the individual characteristics of each fragmented object as it has been ossified through the experience of *Erlebnis*. The use of the frozen objects of *Erlebnis* leaves the potential for his allegories to contain timeless and transferable meanings. Each object is set out on
display as part of a larger collection of fully ossified entities. In this presentation, there is room for interpretation about the associative potential from one object to another.

Gunster (2004) argues that Benjamin’s initial interest in allegory as a poetic form can be traced to his earlier work on the *Trauerspiel* or German ‘mourning plays’. In the *Trauerspiel*, playwrights often used allegory as an aesthetic device to portray the complete devaluation of a world ruled by natural history (141). McNally (2001: 174) explains: “The *Trauerspiel* encounters the messianic in the very depths of the profane, among the decaying ruins of an abandoned world. On a landscape of the dead and dying, it retrieves imitations of a life which once was”. The historical condition of *Trauerspiel* is catastrophe. It mourns a world in which ruin and death are the only truths. There is no culminating point in history toward salvation in *Trauerspiel*. The Baroque dramatists were denied “effective means of religious self-expression in a political context” and that offered no room for reform; instead, they could do nothing but “lament their fallen state”. The baroque mourner is “subject to the nether world” and secured in the realm of “creaturely things”. “Inhabiting a world of extreme reification, people in the baroque drama had become estranged from all natural life, including their bodies” (McNally, 2001: 174). Nevertheless, there were also “glimmers of redemption” contained within this dramatic form. These were only in the “hopelessness of earthly condition” and not through any “divine plan of salvation”. God has so completely abandoned the world of the *Trauerspiel* that the human condition is “bereft of hope” and “dead objects” hold absolute power of human life. In the melancholy “loyalty” that humanity affords to the “world of things”, redemptive fragments can only be perceived through “an extreme absorption in things” that “…embraces dead objects in its contemplation, in order to redeem them…” (Benjamin as cited in McNally, 2001: 174).
As McNally (2001: 173) explains, Benjamin argues that *Trauerspiel* “expresses the truth of a catastrophic human situation by engineering a collision between extremes such as history and nature, life and death, salvation and ruination. The practice of criticism thus tries to ‘effect a synthesis between extremes’”. One performs “a burning up of the husk”, or external form, of an object in the practice of criticism, in order to ‘illuminate’ its “latent truth”. Criticism searches for the “forgotten fragments” of the “original unity” that once existed between human and nature, and this theme is at the core of every work of art. These fragments of utopia, however, can only be released by “destroying (burning up) ‘the false appearance of totality’ that the work projects”.

In allegory, Benjamin explains, “any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else”, which, literally, constitutes the devaluation of the natural, social, and human landscape (as cited in Gunster, 2004: 141). Benjamin finds striking similarities between Baudelaire’s use of allegory and that of the Baroque, except in the former case he argues that the poetic form reflects the rapid expansion of commodity exchange rather than the devastation of endless war. Just as the use-value of objects is destroyed by the logic of exchange in capitalism, allegory displaces objects from their social and historical context, leaving them as empty signifiers to be filled up with other meanings. Baudelaire’s allegorical intention, then, is read by Benjamin as a revealing literary expression of the relentless and all-consuming commodification of everyday life in nineteenth century Paris. Susan Buck-Morss (1989: 182) observes how Baudelaire’s poetry rips apart the harmonizing pretensions of the phantasmagoria that took shape in the commodified world of nineteenth century Paris. In contrast to the Baroque, Baudelaire’s allegories bear the mark of rage. “The Baudelarian allegory—unlike Baroque allegory—bears traces of the rage needed to break into this world, to lay
waste to its harmonious structures” (Benjamin, 2003[1939]: 174). The destructiveness of allegory tears away the harmonious façade of the Haussmannized and commodified world that surrounds him. “If Baudelaire did not fall into the abyss of myth that constantly accompanied his path, it was thanks to the genius of allegory” (Benjamin as cited in Buck-Morss, 1989: 182). Consider the images he presents of the city’s most marginalized inhabitants, the portrayals of mechanized human bodies alongside the humanization of the commodity, the archetype of the prostitute, and his fierce hatred for the neo-classical and pagan themes in the advertising of the period (2003[1939]: 181).^4^ In *Central Park* Benjamin (2003[1939]) writes that his own work “will need to furnish the historical projection of the experiences underlying *Les Fleurs du mal*” (176). Indeed, there are clear parallels between Baudelaire’s work and the form of Benjamin’s own work on the Arcades.

We must not, however, fall into the trap of glamorizing the power that Baudelaire’s work has against myth. It was certainly not Benjamin’s intention to do so. Baudelaire’s destructive power is limited to tearing back the façade of the phantasmagoria by using allegorical poetry to illuminate the contradictions of capitalist society (Buck-Morss, 1989: 183). Recall the allegoric devices Baudelaire uses in his prose poem ‘The Eyes of the Poor’ (1970[1869]: 52-53). He describes the glitzy, neo-classically decorated café on the newly Haussmannized boulevard as an emblem of commercialized love disrupted by the gaze of the poor family, thereby showcasing glaring contradictions of social inequality and difference. Yet Baudelaire does not actually call the system lying behind it into question. As Gunster (2004: 139) points out,

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^4^ For example, in Central Park, Benjamin describes Baudelaire’s hatred for the use of the neo-classically celebrated chubby cheeked cupid as a symbol of commercialized love.
this epistemological trait recalls Benjamin’s description of ‘the destructive character’ who blasts his way through anything in the present which poses an obstacle to the forward momentum of its progressive trajectory through time:

The destructive character sees nothing permanent. But for this very reason he sees ways everywhere. Where others encounter walls or mountains, there, too, he sees a way. But because he sees a way everywhere, he has to clear things from it everywhere. Not always by brute force; sometimes by the most refined. Because he sees ways everywhere, he always stands at a crossroads. No moment can know what the next will bring. What exists he reduces to rubble—not for the sake of rubble, but for that of the way past it. (Benjamin, 1999[1931]: 542)

In this case, Baudelaire’s desire for creative immortality is what relentlessly drives him as a modern artist. The path of destruction he pursues is not simply for the sake of producing the rubble left behind it, but as the only means to carve a path through to his future audiences.

Gunster (2004: 142) argues that, for Benjamin, Baudelaire’s poetic allegory becomes an aesthetically mediated expression of the experience of the commodity. Like the illustrative figure of the prostitute with whom Baudelaire identifies himself as a writer seeking a buyer, Benjamin recognizes the body as a critical nexus in which use-value and exchange-value come crashing together. The transformation of oneself into a commodity is the core image that embodies the permanent catastrophe of modern experience. By depicting the nakedness and degradation of the subject as it actually is, the soul of the commodity is experienced as Hell. This shock holds the potential to interrupt the phantasmagoria that holds the market and its crowds under its sway. But such moments of demystification are not enough for revolutionary innervation. Benjamin also discerns a theological impulse that transcribes the wide arc of redemption he first encountered through the use of allegorical devices in the Baroque plays of mourning.
3.9. Proust and Memory: Mémoire involontaire and the Image

By the time Benjamin arrived in Paris in the 1920’s and 30’s, the nineteenth century shopping Arcades were in ruins. Baudelaire was long gone though his allegoric poetry and prose lived on. And the ‘man of the crowd’ had lost himself to the labyrinth of commodities in the increasingly popularized department store (Benjamin, 2003[1938]: 31). Perhaps the only territory left for the flâneur to explore were the landscapes of time, memory and history. Consider, for example, Léon Daudet’s projection of his life biography onto a city map for the volumes of *Paris vécu* (Benjamin, 1999[1932]: 597). By turning his life into a city (and vice-versa), Daudet explores how the internalized aspects of his memories and experiences have been imprinted onto the urban topography of Paris. The city is explored as a site of memoration, influenced not only by the events of Daudet’s era, but also through the historical landmarks and literary expressions of the nineteenth century (Benjamin, 1999: [C4], 90-91). The great task of the writer thereby shifts from the gathering of immediate impressions to the memory work of recreating experiences long after they have passed (Benjamin, 2003[1940]: 316; Benjamin, 1999[1929]: 238).

Perhaps the greatest example of this form of autobiographical expression was Marcel Proust and his magnificent eight-volume *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Among the most famous elements of this novel was Proust’s concept of the *mémoire involontaire*. In a crucial scene, Proust describes his frustration at being unable to recall any clear memories of the town where he spent his childhood. His *mémoire volontaire*, which works “in the service of the intellect”, is utterly useless in remembering his childhood (Benjamin, 2003[1940]: 315). But when Proust encounters the hauntingly
familiar taste of a _madeleine_ biscuit soaked in tea, a series of memories buried within his subconscious are suddenly and powerfully triggered. A floodgate to the past opens such that he is able to momentarily, yet fully, experience childhood memories as though he were living them once more (315). Based upon this experience, Proust speculates that _mémoire involontaire_ cannot be willfully brought to consciousness through the use of rational and intellectual processes of thinking. The most powerful memories are not stored in our conscious minds but in our bodily unconscious. “Traces of it lodge in objects or, more properly, in the sensations they can arouse in the human body itself. Certain tastes, smells, textures, and sounds, for example, have the capacity to release powerful memories that otherwise lie forgotten” (Gunster, 2004: 120). Conversely, _mémoire volontaire_ functions more like a registry, classifying, sorting and cataloguing memories into data, facts or information; archiving isolated and often abstract records of experience rather than the full experience itself (Gunster: 120). For Proust, the use of conscious intellect in memoration can only go so far in recovering traces of the past. Instead, he argues that the past remains situated “somewhere beyond the reach of the intellect and its field of operations, in some material object…though we have no idea which one it is” (as cited in Benjamin, 2003[1940]: 315). Such objects, he explains, are largely stumbled upon by chance. The material used by Proust to stimulate experiences of _mémoire involontaire_ becomes the primary catalyst for each of his stories, and an overarching theme in _À la recherche du temps perdu_ (Benjamin, 1999[1929]: 238).

Although the experiential aspects of Proust’s work remain noteworthy and compelling for furthering the discussion around flânerie, the circumstances of Proust’s _À la recherche du temps perdu_ bear little resemblance to the public milieu of the nineteenth century flâneur. Indeed, the darkened, cork-lined room where Proust does
his primarily nocturnal creative work insulates him from any direct contact with the city that had originally inspired the flâneur (Parkhurst-Ferguson, 1994: 38). Proust reconfigures flânerie as a private exercise of memory and experience rather than a public exploration of social and physical geography. It requires an absolute withdrawal into the privatized interior and the self, where the stimulation of unconscious memory is used to release creative energies toward the recovery of a lost past. Proust’s writing and epistemological goals were highly influenced by his reactions to the literary work of his nineteenth century predecessors (Benjamin, (1999[1929]): 242). One might even describe him as a kind of literary detective delving into the texts of earlier writers to better grapple with the Paris that he experienced as an intensely isolated upper-class individual. Before À la recherche du temps perdu, Proust was best known for revisiting the works of writers such as Balzac, Flaubert, Sainte-Beuve, Henri de Régnier, the Goncourtts, Michelet, Renan, and even Saint-Simon as a part of his collection of mimicry and parodies called Pastiches et mélanges (Benjamin, (1999[1929]): 242). Proust’s mimicry of nineteenth century literary expressions for his Pastiches et mélanges might also have influenced some of the later styles that he continued to develop and hone in his own works. Included among this list was the work of Baudelaire. Benjamin explains, “Proust was an incomparable reader of Les Fleurs du mal, for he sensed that it contained kindred elements. Familiarity with Baudelaire must include Proust’s familiarity with his works” (2003[1940]: 332).

5 As Benjamin points out, Pastiches et mélanges often delivers a small shock to the reader suddenly recognizing another level of meaning lingering beneath the humorous veneer of his parody (1999[1929]: 242).
Much like Baudelaire’s description of the flâneur’s reliance upon memory and a return to child-like perception in order to absorb his daily experiences of modernity, Proust similarly places great emphasis on forms of memory that involve a return to childhood (Benjamin, 1999[1929]: 239-240). Yet these two forms of memory have very different epistemological objectives. In Central Park Benjamin (2003[1939]) writes, “The interior, in Baudelaire’s poems, is often inspired by the dark side of the bourgeois interior. Its opposite is the transfigured interior of Jugendstil. Proust, in his observations, touched only on the former” (180). Baudelaire’s ‘man of the crowd’ sets out with heightened senses each day in order to gather the raw materials of experience en-masse. The most useful impressions for him are distilled from the reserves of his nocturnal memory as he captures them on the page. He is driven to give permanent shape to each ‘fleeting and contingent’ element of modern experience that he fears will otherwise slip into oblivion. Baudelaire’s allegorical poetic form intentionally aims to leave pieces of the work in isolated fragments. In this sense each piece remains deceptively timeless, and divorced from any overarching narrative. Baudelaire’s Paris, as it emerges in his poetry and prose, remains elusively vague and nondescript: his words could be taken as descriptive of any modern city (Benjamin, 2003[1940]: 332-333). Proust’s work with the mémoire involontaire engages with modern experience a step further down the road, through the piecemeal recovery of memory traces deeply submerged in the space of the bodily unconscious (Benjamin, 2003[1940]: 318). Unlike the shock-like correspondences that flash more immediately into focus for the ‘man of the crowd’, the memory traces dislodged by Proust’s mémoire involontaire have slipped from conscious memory (Benjamin, 2003[1940]: 315). The mnemonic residue of these events exists within the human body, to be unearthed through an object-induced shock of recognition. Once the mémoire involontaire has been triggered, Proust’s aim is to
reintegrate isolated events back into a larger life story, to reclaim them once more as part of his own experience (Benjamin, 1999[1929]: 244). Only then, he argues, can an individual begin the process of piecing together a true image of himself.

In Benjamin’s later work, the increasing urgency of awakening the collective to memories, wishes and experiences otherwise forgotten or repressed drew him to Proust’s obsession with the relationship between past and present. Proust’s work was enormously influential upon Benjamin’s speculative exploration of how the lost and forgotten fragments of capitalist modernity could be redeemed through a form of dialectical montage. The secret to redemption lay in the ‘shock-like’ reactivation of submerged traces through a process of memoration. In The Image of Proust, Benjamin (1999[1929]) explains that Proust did not aim to describe his life as it actually was, but rather as a life remembered by one who has already lived it. Benjamin calls this process “the Penelope work of recollection. Or should one call it, rather, a Penelope work of forgetting?” For, he wonders, “Is not the involuntary recollection, Proust’s mémoire involontaire, much closer to forgetting than what is usually called memory?” (238). The image of Penelope’s endless labour of weaving and unweaving of her tapestry in the classic Greek myth The Odyssey remains intimately connected to those dreams woven together in sleep that we find unravelled in a state of wakefulness. Penelope stalls the advances of her new suitors by telling them she cannot choose one of them until she has completed the tapestry. In doing so, she is able to generate the illusion of time progressing, when it is really standing still as she hopes that her husband Odysseus will soon return home from his epic journey. Each day she weaves the tapestry, and each night she secretly unravels what had been completed the day before. In the phantasmagorical dream world of capitalist modernity, this cycle functions in reverse.
“Here the day unravels what the night has woven. When we awake each morning, we hold in our hands, usually weakly and loosely, but a few fringes of the carpet of lived existence, as woven into us by forgetting” (Benjamin, 1999[1929]: 238). This ongoing memory work of remembering and forgetting is what Benjamin finds so compelling in Proust’s epistemology. It operates as the restorative counterpart to Baudelaire’s destructive urban epistemology. Whereas Baudelaire’s poetic form represents the destructive state of modern alienation and ‘spleen’ in modern experience, Benjamin describes Proust’s unearthing of memory as caught up in a “dual will to happiness” (239).

Benjamin (1999[1929]) explains that the drive for “happiness” which governed Proust’s writing can be understood from a “dialectical” standpoint: on one side, there is the “hymnic form”, while on the other side, the “elegiac form”. Benjamin describes the “hymnic” form of happiness as “the unheard-of, the unprecedented, the height of bliss”, and the “elegiac” as “the eternal restoration of the original, first happiness”. Proust focuses his energies on the restorative side of this dialectic for the development of his dream-like narratives, and thereby “transforms existence into a preserve of memory” (239). As David McNally (2001) points out, Proust’s emphasis on the elegiac is both his strength and weakness: “His strength because it commits him fanatically to the pursuit of childhood desires, and his weakness because it traps him in a compulsion to repeat rather than to connect past desires with action in the present” (185).

Benjamin’s excavations as a historical materialist borrow from the strengths of Proust’s elegiac epistemology. But, unlike Proust, Benjamin believes that the full redemption of memory must be a collective social and historical task. Benjamin conceives of his urban epistemology as both methodology and praxis in relation to
collective experiences of capitalist modernity. As Frisby notes, archaeologist and
allegorist come together in the figure of the historical materialist who enters the
subterranean caverns of the city in order to excavate the explosive collective memories
that lie buried beneath the dreamworlds of modern capitalism (1994: 98). In *Berlin
Chronicle*, Benjamin (1999[1932]) argues that memory “is not an instrument for exploring
the past but its theatre. It is the medium of past experience, just as the earth is the
medium in which dead cities lie buried. He who seeks to approach his own buried past
must conduct himself like a man digging”. Benjamin explains that he has extracted each
of the memory fragments from the “dark loam” of his own life history in order to explore
how they might alternatively interconnect in the now (611). The ultimate purpose of this
excavation is not the unearthing of the fragments themselves, but rather the process of
dialectical awakening that emerges through the labour of sifting through history that
would otherwise be forgotten. As a historical materialist, then, Benjamin adopts Proust’s
epistemology as a guide to digging through the soil of modern experience, and
excavating the *Ur*-history of modern capitalism. Because such *Ur*-history still resonates
in the ‘now’. Proust’s *mémoire involontaire* is especially important in this regard.

Benjamin’s experimentation with Proust’s techniques is most evident in the
allegorical montages of autobiographical exploration in *Berlin Chronicle* (1999[1932]:
595-637), *Berlin Childhood* (2002[1938/1934]: 344-413), and *One Way Street*
(1996[1928]: 444-488). Benjamin uses the objects and signs that line the spaces of the
city and bourgeois interior to take his reader on a promenade through the labyrinthine
twists and turns of the early memories of an urban childhood. Mundane advertisements,
street signs, city districts, statues, gardens, buildings, and the forgotten household
objects and toys of youth are used as triggers for memory and free association. The
literary form and methodology he uses in these texts recalls a suggestion Benjamin initially offered in a review of Franz Hessel’s autobiographical urban memoir Spazieren in Berlin. Here Benjamin writes of the city as a “mnemonic” for the solitary walker: “it conjures up more than his childhood and youth, more than its own history. What it reveals is the endless spectacle of flânerie that we thought had been finally relegated to the past” (1999 [1929]: 262-263).

What also remains crucial is how Proust influences Benjamin’s notion of the image as a ‘trigger’ for the bodily unconscious. Gunster (2004) explains that Proust’s literary efforts informed Benjamin’s thesis about the human capacity to perceive sensuous similarities between past and present. They explain how such similarities can trigger explosive and powerful processes of memory which allow experiences from the past to come flooding back over the threshold between body and consciousness. “He shows, in other words, the pivotal role that mimesis plays in the practice of genuine remembrance” (Gunster, 2004: 121). For Proust, these correspondances are stumbled upon by chance. Drawing upon Freud’s account of shell-shock, Benjamin (2003[1940]) argues that the human body protects itself from shock by preventing full awareness of the shock from entering, and being processed by, consciousness at the time it occurs. Such ‘shocks’ are registered in the body and the unconscious. With the right kind of stimuli they may periodically erupt into consciousness, often in the distorted form of a variety of psychological symptoms (317). Gunster (2004) explains that what most resonates with Benjamin from Freud’s account, however, is that the body and the unconscious have the capacity to store memories of experience that are not fully ‘experienced’ at the time that they occur. The presence of these submerged memories suggests that they can be ‘unearthed’ and reactivated in a future moment (119).
How can such memories be (re)activated? One of the central themes in Benjamin’s writings about Proust, Baudelaire, as well as the surrealists, is the exploration of boredom and distraction in the waking-dream as a form of consciousness. “In the ‘forgetting’ sponsored by sleep and, above all, by daydreaming—just as in boredom which serves as the dream bird that hatches the ‘egg of experience’—consciousness is temporarily displaced as the gatekeeper of internal and external stimulation…” (Gunster, 2004: 120). The emphasis upon distraction as a means of enhancing recollection parallels Freud’s arguments about the need to suppress the critical faculty in the psychoanalytic setting. States of relaxation or boredom, or the ‘forgetting’ brought on by sleep, help reduce the rational filters of consciousness that otherwise regulate the mental traffic between the conscious and the unconscious mind. This ‘relaxing of the guard’ allows memory fragments which have been deflected and repressed to emerge into consciousness, though often in a distorted form. Recall Benjamin’s description of the Penelope work of remembering and forgetting. Memory fragments that appear to the dreamer are described as the fringes of the tapestry of lived experience which one holds in one’s fingers in the semi-consciousness of the dream (Benjamin, 1999[1929]: 238). To Benjamin, the most important memory fragments are those that act as ‘triggers’ to link past with present. “Our life, it can be said, is a muscle strong enough to contract the whole of historical time” (Benjamin, 1999: [N13a,1], 479). Gunster (2004) explains that these memory traces that have been submerged in the bodily unconscious serve as ‘access points’ through which we can enter the subterranean tunnels that lead back to our collective pasts. Yet the tunnels are often only marked by distorted traces that need to be further ‘read’ and interpreted in order to trigger the correspondances that can open them (123).
Enter the figure of Ariadne, whom I argue stands as the dialectical counterpoint to Penelope in Benjamin’s theorization of memoration. Whereas Penelope weaves the fragments of memory into a process of remembering and forgetting, Ariadne represents the dialectical switching point between (capitalism’s mythic dream) sleep and (revolutionary) awakening. The labyrinth, like Penelope’s ceaseless labour of weaving and unweaving, represents mythic time. “The essence of the mythical event is return. Inscribed as a hidden figure in such events is the futility that furrows the brow of some of the heroic personages of the underworld (Tantalus, Sisyphus, the Danaides)” (Benjamin, 1999: [D10a,4], 119). Penelope’s weaving gives the illusion that time continues to move forward when it actually stays still; the very same pattern repeats each day. The labyrinth is literally a cyclical pattern that leads to repeated return. In the classic Greek tale of the *Labyrinth*, Ariadne is the holder of the magical ball of thread that has been woven by Daedalus, the architect of the labyrinth. (In this scenario, however, Penelope is more accurately the architect of the labyrinth, through the weaving and unweaving of memory that creates mythic time.) Ariadne’s ball of thread offers the only chance of escaping the labyrinth. She gives this ball of magical thread to Theseus, who is among the youth of Athens that are to be sacrificed to the Minotaur at the core of the labyrinth. With Ariadne’s ball of thread, Theseus is able to liberate the youth. He defeats the Minotaur and then leads the way back out of the labyrinth. In other words, they are able to break free from mythic time, and “leap” into “the open air of history” (Benjamin, 2003[1940]: 395). So how does the figure of Ariadne inform one’s ‘reading’ of the traces that can trigger the ‘access points’ to our collective pasts? Through Benjamin’s concept of the dialectical image.
Benjamin argues that full, true access to the past only comes through the use of the mimetic faculty. In his paralipomena for *On the Concept of History*, he writes that “the dialectical image can be defined as the involuntary memory of redeemed humanity” (2003[1940]: 403). “As we pass through those tunnels, our conventional experience of time is shattered as the months and years that divide present from past are momentarily swept aside in the instant of *Jetzeit* or ‘now-time’” (Gunster, 2004: 123). Like that which occurs in Proust’s *mémoire involontaire*, it is through these flashes of cognitive and bodily perception that the past can be experienced in the present. It is not the memories themselves that bring about ‘now-time’, but rather the dialectical images that are contained within them. The “sober rooms of our later insights”, that Benjamin (1999[1932]) describes in *Berlin Chronicle*, hold “the real treasure hidden within the earth: the images, severed from all earlier associations, that stand—like precious fragments or torsos in a collector’s gallery” (611). In *On the Concept of History* Benjamin explains how he identifies the quotes and images from the past, using the dialectical image as a form of revolutionary pedagogy in order to “brush history against the grain” (2003[1940]: 392). He strives to radically destabilize the ‘necessity’ of the present through the “synthetic generation and delivery of a ‘progressive’ shock”, thereby challenging current conventional and social structures, such as, “narratives of bourgeois ideals of historical progress, relations of exchange and identity” (Gunster, 2004: 129). By tearing the image of the past out of its context, the present is similarly faced with the dynamic tensions of its own. “Thus is one able to catch a momentary glimpse of a different future which shows that things need not be as they are and prompts one to wonder why things did indeed turn out that way” (Gunster, 2004: 126).
Chapter 4. Historical Awakening and the Dialectic

4.1. Conclusion: Toward a Copernican Revolution

We have covered a lot of ground, exploring many different aspects of the flâneur and flânerie that are integral elements of Benjamin’s broader critical project. The significance of the flâneur only intensified as his work on the Arcades took shape throughout the 1930s. We have established that the flâneur which most occupied Benjamin’s attention is one who perceives the Haussmannized and commodified world of nineteenth century Paris as a ruin. Like the once popular Arcades, this flâneur has been mercilessly stripped of any aura of bourgeois idealism. He no longer exists as a legitimate force in the eyes of the public. He has been abandoned by the crowd just as a discarded commodity becomes trash. His public identity rests under the sign of creative failure, and his role as a cultural producer has been both marginalized and proletarianized. He has become, in the fullest sense of the word, a commodity. But a commodity gifted with unique powers of critical reflection and self-expression. The archetype of the flâneur thereby embodies for Benjamin a critical nexus, where human experience meets the alienation of (self) commodification in the modern capitalist city. The unique vantage point generated by Baudelaire’s marginal and transient position, both within the city and within his own social class, provides Benjamin a point of entry through which to redeem the flâneur as a resource for revolutionary awakening. In this manner, the figure of the flâneur illuminates the glaring contradictions that lie between bourgeois hopes and idealism, and the reality of alienation within capitalism. Indeed, he
is a figure with whom everyone can identify at some level, and that shock of recognition can spark a critical reflexivity about the nature of lived experience in capitalist society. For Benjamin, the significance of the flâneur is as a dialectical image that can blast open the continuum of history and bring the ruins of the nineteenth century into an explosive juxtaposition with his own time.

Much of Benjamin’s work on the flâneur was done while living in exile as a Marxist German-Jewish intellectual. McNally (2001) argues that Benjamin experienced Hitler’s rise to power and the failings of the Left as not only a historical and political disaster, but also as a profound personal catastrophe (162-164). As such, the failure of the French revolutions of 1830 and 1848, followed by the brutal suppression of the Paris Commune in 1871, were not simply historical events, but had deep personal resonance for Benjamin and many of his contemporaries (Buck-Morss, 1989: 308-316). Similarly, the failure of the German revolution of 1918 had a strong impact upon the formative experience of his youth. The retrenchment of the Bolshevik revolution, coupled with the victory of fascism in Spain weighed heavily upon him as he was setting to work on the Arcades (McNally, 2001: 163; Buck-Morss, 1989: 317). Beyond excavating the origins of modern capitalism, then, Benjamin’s focus on the Paris of the Second Empire illuminated ominous parallels between the reactionary populism of Louis-Napoléon and the contemporary political landscape of the 1930s. Susan Buck-Morss (1989: 308) argues that it was not merely coincidence that Benjamin begins to heavily cite Marx’s history of *The 18th Brumaire* to explain Louis Napoléon’s ‘coup d’état’ during this period. In other words, Benjamin’s own social and political context would have immeasurably heightened the historical ‘legibility’ of the Paris of the Second Empire. Just as Napoléon III had strategically organized a plebiscite to legitimate his coup, Hitler deployed similar
tactics as President of the Reich in 1934. Such historical parallels extended beyond the vagaries of political strategy. They also informed his analysis of new cultural technologies as instruments of propaganda and social control. Just as Benjamin positions the flâneur as Ur-form to the modern cultural producer, nineteenth century Paris anticipated many of the elements which served as the social cement for fascist regimes (Buck-Morss, 1989: 308). It is for this reason that the flâneur held such a recurring and significant role, and yet also occupied a deeply ambivalent position within Benjamin’s larger body of work around the Arcades.

Benjamin imagines the possibility for a profoundly emancipatory relationship to develop between humanity and technology: assimilation and enslavement by the machine are not our only possible future. In particular, he desperately hoped that new cultural technologies would finally provide the masses with a sense of their own potential historical agency. Similarly, Benjamin perceived emancipatory potential in the latent individualism of Baudelaire’s work, as a potentially disruptive source to illuminate the glaring contradictions of phantasmagoria. Benjamin’s later work parallels Baudelaire to revolutionary Louis Auguste Blanqui, who acted as a major agitative force during both the Revolutions of 1830 and 1848, as well as the Paris Commune in 1871. In his exposé of 1939, Benjamin describes how Blanqui wrote his book L’Éternité par les astres [Eternity via the Stars] while imprisoned at the time of the Paris Commune (and nearing the end of his life). “The conception of the universe which Blanqui develops in this book, taking his basic premises from the mechanistic natural sciences, proves to be a vision of hell... ” (Benjamin, 1999[1939]: 25). Blanqui describes his Hellish vision of the transformation of the universe as history without progress, locked in cycles of the eternal return of the ever same. “In the end, Blanqui views novelty as an attribute of all
that is under sentence of damnation” (Benjamin: 26). Benjamin (1999[1939]) equates Blanqui’s obsessive fixation upon a theory of the eternal return to two factors. The first is Blanqui’s “resignation without hope” to the oppression of a society that has left him defeated. The second is Blanqui’s perception that the nineteenth century had utterly failed to realize the utopian possibilities embedded within the extraordinary technological progress of the time (26). Benjamin draws a parallel between Blanqui’s vision in *L’Éternité par les astres* and the alienated experience of ‘spleen’ from which Baudelaire bids farewell to “a world in which action is not the sister of dreams” (2003[1938]: 63). He explains, “the irony of this scheme—an irony which doubtless escaped the author himself—is that the terrible indictment he pronounces against society takes the form of an unqualified submission to its results” (1999[1939]: 25).

Benjamin (2003[1938]) criticizes both Blanqui and Baudelaire for mistakenly investing their hopes for social transformation in what Marx describes as the “*conspirateurs de profession*” (4). In the *Brumaire*, Marx criticizes Blanqui’s political agitation and propaganda around the theme of a ‘permanent revolution’ as a form of professional conspiratorialism, with no aim other than the immediate overthrow of existing powers (Benjamin: 6-7). The *professional conspirateur* understands revolution as emerging from the organization of conspiracies (which he also depends upon for his livelihood). Such figures possess a keen ability to sense and respond to early revolutionary developments. But they do so only with a series of putschist tactics. These tactics inevitably fail because the broad social and historical conditions for revolution are not yet in place. At the same time, the *professional conspirateur* is ignorant of or neglects more ‘theoretical’ matters, such as advancing the revolutionary consciousness of workers toward their own class interests (4). The problem that
Benjamin pinpoints is that both Baudelaire and Blanqui prove disappointingly unable to recognize the political consequences of their reactive putschism, namely, how such tactics divert attention away from the need for a massive collective overhaul of the system. Spectacular amounts of cathartic energy are wasted in conspiratorial projects that invariably amount to little more than aestheticized politics. Vital opportunities to divert the means of production were missed. But such missed opportunities also hold the potential for redemption for Benjamin as they are transformed into dialectical images.

In The Author as Producer, Benjamin notes that “the bourgeois apparatus of production and publication can assimilate astonishing quantities of revolutionary themes—indeed, can propagate them without calling its own existence, and the existence of the class that owns it, seriously into question” (1999[1934]: 774). This type of expression stands in direct contrast to revolutionary class-consciousness, because of how it gathers all social classes into a single, indistinct mass of homogenized consumers. It glosses over and de-politicizes the very significant and real tensions of class and inequality that continue to exist therein. Most ominously, Benjamin fears that the failure to awaken from the capitalist phantasmagoria – even when the dream is recognized as a nightmare – foreshadows the political phantasmagoria of the Nazi state in which the masses are fashioned into the Volksgemeinschaft of the Reich.

In fact, this collective is nothing but appearance. This “crowd”, in which the flâneur takes delight, is just the empty mold into which, seventy years later, the Volksgemeinschaft <People’s Community> was cast. The flâneur who so prides himself on his alertness, on his nonconformity, was in this respect also ahead of his contemporaries: he was the first to fall victim to an ignis fatuus which since that time has blinded many millions. (Benjamin, 1999: [J66,1], 345-346)
The “final incarnation” that Benjamin attributes to the flâneur in the *Passagen-Werk* is “the sandwichman” (1999: [M17a,2], 448). Just as the modern department store is the flâneur’s last haunt before he is completely subsumed by the world of mass consumption, the sandwichman-flâneur represents the endpoint of mass-marketed flânerie. The sandwichman has been completely stripped of any remnants of bourgeois aura, to the point where he is literally taking the idea of being on sale out for a walk. Susan Buck-Morss (1986) describes the sandwichman as a “double exposure” that illuminates critical tensions between present and past to Benjamin’s own time: “The sandwichman was a denigrated, yet familiar figure in Paris in the 1930s, one which would have entered the perceptive range of most city-dwellers. Human billboards, they advertised and publicized the products and events...of bourgeois consumer culture” (109-110). As Buck-Morss notes, Benjamin also follows up with this association in one of his later notes: “Flâneur—sandwichman—journalist-in-uniform. The latter advertises the state, no longer the commodity” (as cited in Buck-Morss, 1986: 115). She argues that Benjamin connects the salaried flâneur to the police informer, because he “profits from following the ideological fashion” (1986: 115). Much like the sandwichman is paid to wear a billboard as walking advertisement for mass culture, the flâneur-in-uniform now turns a profit by promoting the ideological agenda of the state. As advertiser to the state, the flâneur-in-uniform no longer embodies the commodity, but is instead entirely instrumentalized to the phantasmagoria of state propaganda. In *The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire*, the ‘naturalization’ and ‘depoliticization’ of the masses in the physiologies anticipates the mythic images of National Socialism (Buck-Morss, 1992: 38; Buck-Morss, 1989: 312).
Buck-Morss argues that, in Benjamin’s work, “sensory alienation lies at the source of the aestheticization of politics, which fascism does not create, but merely ‘manages’ (betreibt)” (1992: 4). When Benjamin talks about the ignis fatuus\(^6\) that first the flâneur, and then many millions have been blinded by since, he is referring to the complex crisis of perception that keeps people locked into the “mythic anguish” of the phantasmagoria (1999: 346, 15). Fundamentally, this returns to the question of ‘Einfühlung’, or ‘empathy’, with the soul of the commodity. Benjamin asks: “Should it be Einfühlung in exchange value which first makes people capable of the total Erlebnis [of fascism]?” (as cited in Buck-Morss, 1986: 116). Buck-Morss (1986) points out that, “[w]hile condemning the contents of modern culture” fascist propaganda utilizes the same models as those that have already been proven through mass marketing: “The psychic porosity of the unawakened masses absorbed the staged extravaganzas of mass meetings as readily as it did mass culture” (117). In order to begin to conceptualize how the effect of the mass audience translates into Nazi Germany, consider Buck-Morss’s description of Leni Riefenstahl’s 1935 film Triumph of the Will: “the mobilized masses fill the grounds of the Nuremberg stadium and the cinema screen, so that the surface patterns provide a pleasing design of the whole, letting the viewer

\(^6\) An ignis fatuus is a form of ghostly light comprised of natural gasses that hovers over decaying organic matter, often in forests or bogs, where it will appear uncannily transient and luminescent. Several cultures have built folklore around the ignis fatuus, but a suitable image for Benjamin’s larger body of work might be the gas lanterns that lined the Parisian Arcades at night, so that neither the moon nor stars could be seen past their reflections on the glass covered roofs. Perhaps un-coincidentally, the ignis fatuus is also considered representative of a ‘fool’s light’, an illusion, which, as Bainard Cowan (1981) describes, lights up within the ideal of a symbolic other that is free from all conflict, but is nothing more than the un-oppositional reflection of an allegory without recognition of its source (112). Like the fiery head of a Medusa that petrifies anyone to stone who looks into it too long, on the one hand, or a roving soul with no body/aura, on the other, this is the kind of ‘fairy’ that one could imagine truly represents the uncanny terror of the phantasmagoria to Benjamin.
forget the purpose of the display, the militarization of society for the teleology of making war” (1992: 38). Buck-Morss (1986: 117) explains that the Fascist propagandist picks up on mass culture as a readymade model, and takes advantage of the way in which consumers have already been preconditioned to respond. The political phantasmagoria of fascism manages and manipulates the mass audience in an already intoxicated state. The mold into which the masses are poured in the phantasmagoria of the fascist state, however, is one of total war.

In the Work of Art essay, Benjamin (2003[1939]) argues: “All efforts to aestheticize politics culminate in one point. That one point is war. War, and only war, makes it possible to set a goal for mass movements on the grandest scale while preserving traditional property relations” (269). What begins as the assimilation of the worker to the capitalist machine now becomes the assimilation of the masses to the imperialist war machine. The inanimate forces of technological production are turned upon the fragile human body. Benjamin’s critique foregrounds the failure to use technology to master the elemental forces of society (rather than nature), as well as the fundamental immaturity of society that has not yet made technology its central origin. Rather than transform the system, the imperialist state goes to war. War solves the problem of unemployment as well as the lack of markets for commercial goods. “Imperialist war is an uprising on the part of technology, which demands repayment in ‘human material’ for the natural material society has denied it” (Benjamin, 2003[1939]: 270). Empathy with the commodity creates the conditions for the aestheticization of politics. The increasing proletarianization of the population generates increasingly explosive social and political tensions that demand expression. The symbolic mobilization of the collective, in the form of the ‘national community’, provides such a
‘channel’ for the energy of the masses. As demonstrated by Benjamin’s conceptualization of the shift from 
_Erfahrung_ to _Erlebnis_, the experiences of large-scale industrialism and commodity culture have had an alienating effect on the bodily and cognitive faculties of modern day people. They have become both alienated from themselves as well as from one another. The aestheticized spectacle of war by the fascist state introduces yet another extreme degree of alienation. A kind of submersion in the spectacle of war takes place such that one can be overcome with the ‘beauty’ of collective power and remain indifferent and oblivious to the ends to which that collective power is put, and this indifference results in self-destruction (Buck-Morss, 1992: 37).

“Humankind, which once, in Homer, was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, has now become one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached the point where it can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure” (Benjamin, 2003[1939]: 270). In the _Passagen-Werk_ Benjamin describes how “the _Volksgemeinschaft_ <People’s Community> aims to root out from single individuals everything that stands in the way of their wholesale fusion into mass consumers” (1999: [J81a,1], 371). In order to assimilate opponents who might call the system into question, the struggle against class immiseration is turned into an object of mass consumption. In _The Author as Producer_, Benjamin (1999[1934]) points to the picture anthology ‘The World is Beautiful’ by photographer Renger-Patzch, whose photographs of abject poverty had been turned into an object of fashionable enjoyment. “For if it is an economic function of photography to restore to mass consumption, by fashionable adaptation, subjects that had earlier withdrawn themselves from it…it is one if its political functions to renew from within—that is, fashionably—the world as it is” (775). The plight of the disenfranchised becomes an object of aesthetic contemplation. Expressions of ‘_Einfühlung_’ [empathy] with others are mediated through the commodity form, thereby
generating a naturalization and even glorification of poverty as a source of aestheticized pleasure.

In the *Passagen-Werk* Benjamin argues that the only force that truly holds the revolutionary power to overthrow the system is the proletariat. “This latter dispels the illusion of the mass through the reality of class” (1999: [J81a,1], 371). And yet this revolutionary power has been blunted by the integration of the working class within the phantasmagoria of exchange. Thus Benjamin challenges the conventional Marxist wisdom that economic immiseration, which is the inevitable by-product of capitalism, will necessarily generate revolutionary struggle. As the nineteenth century came to a close the spectacular pleasures and distractions of consumer culture were increasingly available to the working class (even when direct consumption of consumer goods remained out of reach for many). As McNally (2001) points out, the assimilation of the working class into commodity culture first became “an economic and political project for the ruling class” in the nineteenth century. He argues: “It is not lost on Benjamin that the French state made a concerted effort to recruit workers (including foreign workers) to attend the World Fair of 1867 by distributing free tickets…” and this was during the same year that Marx’s *Capital* reached publication. From out of this background, “Paris comes to epitomize the dilemma of modern working-class consciousness” (201). During Benjamin’s own lifetime this process was even more advanced and the cultural and ideological assimilation of the population into the capitalist marketplace was well underway. What is the fate of revolution if the proletariat never *fully* experiences the reality of capitalism? If most people remain asleep in the intoxicating dreamworlds of modern capitalism, how can the immiseration that is also a product of the system ever generate the desire for change?
By the 1960s, Herbert Marcuse (1964) concluded the working classes no longer held enough of an oppositional position from which to effectively challenge the system. Instead, Marcuse suggested that one needed to look to those who remained on the margins of society as a source oppositional power. Marcuse was referring to outcasts and outsiders, those who have been persecuted because of their race or gender, those who were unemployed and unemployable. Because they exist outside of the democratic process, these are the people who are best equipped to perceive and understand the need to change the system. “Their opposition is revolutionary even if their consciousness is not. Their opposition hits the system from without and is therefore not deflected by the system” (Marcuse, 1964: 256-7). These are the players whose very presence violates the rules of the game, and from this position of marginality they can call the whole system into question.

In the essay ‘Dialectics at a Standstill’, Rolf Tiedemann states “The Passagen-Werk was supposed to bring nothing less than a ‘Copernican revolution’ of historical perception” (1999[1988]: 941). This historical perception is clearly connected to the emancipatory vantage point offered by Benjamin’s ‘angel of history’. In On the Concept of History Benjamin explains, the angel of history’s wings have become entangled in a storm of ‘progress’ which keeps driving him toward the future. But the angel keeps his face “turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet” (2003[1940]: 392). Benjamin’s ‘angel of history’ is the historical materialist. He refuses to accept conventional notions of progress given the violence and suffering upon which they have been built. Instead, the angel sees all of history as a catastrophe that hurls piles of wreckage upon wreckage at his feet. The empty time of history appears before
him in all of its desolate horror, consisting of nothing but the rubble of shattered lives and the broken dreams of the dead. Gunster (2004) explains how, echoing Benjamin’s earlier work around the Baroque allegories in German ‘mourning plays’, it is amidst these ruins of history, surrounded by the inert objects of capitalism, that Erlebnis is finally experienced for what it is (143). The gaze of the ‘angel of history’ stands witness to the desolation of Erlebnis and the empty, deadening world of capitalism in which objects, people, and events are reduced to nothing but ruins (143). As a historical materialist, Benjamin does not initiate the destruction that renders fragments meaningful for use in dialectical images. Instead, like the collector and ‘ragpicker’, he sifts through the wreckage produced by capitalism itself. This is why the destructive and reconstructive impulse underlying Baudelaire’s poetic form becomes absolutely invaluable to him (139). It becomes the prototype for the dialectical image, which contains the potential for redemption from within a state of absolute ruin. Benjamin hopes that dialectical images will enable us to come to share the historical perspective of the angel of history (141). For only such a shock, in which we recognize the experience of capitalism as Hell, is capable of awakening people from their slumber amidst the phantasmagoric dreamworlds of consumer culture (142). On their own, however, such sobering encounters with capitalism as Hell are more likely to produce an anesthetizing melancholy or a paralyzing nihilism than a collective revolutionary innervation (143). Recall Benjamin’s primary criticism of Baudelaire: his consciousness never truly progresses beyond the point of nihilist separatism and he is thereby left politically crippled and immobilized. He bids farewell to “a world in which action is not the sister of dreams” (Benjamin, 2003[1938]: 63). Thus Baudelaire’s brooding and melancholic perspective represents only one side of the dialectical mode of seeing required for a truly revolutionary understanding of history. What is truly redeeming and oppositional in
Baudelaire’s position is exactly what that one-dimensionality generates once it has been stereoscopically aligned with the political aims of the historical materialist.

As Buck-Morss (1989) illustrates, Benjamin understands his perspective as historical materialist to be based in the ‘now-time’ of the present. “The present as ‘now time’ keeps the historical materialist on course. Without its power of alignment, the possibilities for reconstructing the past are infinite and arbitrary” (339). The past becomes the dialectical point of development that contains the revolutionary potential for an awakened consciousness. The aim of the historical materialist is to illuminate the ‘now of recognisability’, or *Jetzeit* that can progressively shock modern subjects into catching momentary glimpses of what the angel of history sees. He intends to ground the two points between the ‘Now’ and the ‘Then’ through the use of the dialectical image. While the historical materialist gains redeeming power from what the ‘angel of history’ sees, he also refuses to get swept up in the storm of progress. “He remains in control of his powers—man enough to blast open the continuum of history” (Benjamin, 2003[1940]: 396). It is, therefore, not enough for us to simply adopt the gaze of the ‘angel of history’, we must also take part in its desire. This becomes clear in *On the Concept of History*, where Benjamin explains: “The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed” (2003[1940]: 392). In this case, the irreconcilable opponent exists in Benjamin’s challenge that we hold fast to the images of the past, which will unexpectedly appear in the now to the historical subject in moments of danger. “One reason fascism has a chance is that, in the name of progress, its opponents treat it as a historical norm” (Benjamin: 392). The irreconcilable opponent can therefore potentially be found in each and every historical subject that necessarily poses a challenge to this historical norm, whose very presence ultimately disrupts the
bourgeois phantasmagoria of Enlightenment and historical progress. This opponent exists in the marginal scraps and mute accounts of those who have been the most oppressed and therefore did not make it into the final cut of the factual story we now know through historicism. This opponent exists outside of the democratic system and remains irreconcilable by default, because historicism has only ever sympathized with the accounts of the victor (Benjamin, 2003[1940]: 391). Therefore, whoever has emerged victorious continues to participate to this very day in that “triumphal procession”, where current rulers step over those who lie historically mute and prostrate (Benjamin: 391). As the ongoing readers and interpreters participating in Benjamin’s “Copernican revolution”, we are thus challenged to find our own way through the subterranean tunnels that mark the way between the ruins of modernity and the opportunities of the present: To ‘brush history against the grain’, to read the signs, and to mimetically take part in assembling a form of meaning that reconsiders the centrifugal forces of the universe.
References


