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Rewriting Walter Benjamin's "The Arcades Project"

by KENNETH GOLDSMITH

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For the past five years, I have been working on a rewriting of Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* set in New York City in the twentieth century called *Capital*. As of this writing, the book is about 500 pages long, approximately half way to the 1000+ pages that constitutes Benjamin's book. The idea is to use Benjamin's identical methodology in order to write a poetic history of New York City in the twentieth century, just as Benjamin did with Paris in the nineteenth. Thus, I have taken each of his original chapter headings (*convolutes*) and, reading through the entire corpus of literature written about NYC in the twentieth century, I have taken notes and selected what I consider to be the most relevant and interesting parts, sorting them into sheaves identical to Benjamin's.

I've tried to maintain as perfect as possible a mirror of Benjamin's project. Major figures and themes in his book have been updated in mine: his Baron Haussmann is my Robert Moses; his Baudelaire is my Robert Mapplethorpe (my Mapplethorpe chapter begins with the citation "Mapplethorpe was the 1970s leather-clad equivalent of the great dandies and decadents of the nineteenth century — Beardsley, Oscar Wilde, Huysmans, Baudelaire"); his arcades are my World's Fairs (1939 and 1964 — mimicking the historical trajectory of NYC during the twentieth century, which arcs from the utopian to the corrupt & from the local to the global), but to name a few. While I began with the identical set of Benjamin's convolutes, over the course of time, only a few remain relevant. Many of them — for example, "The Barricades" or "Marx" — have been replaced by or updated for NYC in the twentieth century: "Excitement, Restlessness, Fame, Ambition" or "Shopping, Mall, Consumerism" are two new *convolutes* (see below for a complete list of my *convolutes*). Naturally, the flavor of my book is different than the original. New York in the twentieth century has a much glossier surface. In fact, it's all about surface: a city without history just coming into its own, beaming with optimism and jazz, Harlem, Madison Avenue, Andy Warhol, The New York Schools (music, art, dance and poetry), the skyscrapers, the influx of immigrant populations and so forth. It's a far cry from the dark psychological recesses and fervent socio-political battles of Paris in the nineteenth century.

This is an exercise that is as much about reading as it is about writing. In fact, it's a book that proposes reading as writing. While many other authors could have written Benjamin's book, why is it that his is so successful, so endlessly fascinating? It's about what he chooses. In lesser hands, such a work would've been dreary, dull, tedious, pedantic and loquacious. Instead, we have a book that is arguably one the most readable works ever written, yet very few words were actually written by Benjamin himself; it's an act of conceptual writing where what one chooses — one's taste — either makes or breaks the book. While there was much Benjaminian gloss and "voice" in his book, I take it to the next level: nowhere is a single word of my own present — not a thought, not a commentary, nor a sentiment — instead, reflecting contemporary concerns, my task is merely appropriative.

In the end I want this to be neither reference nor history book: it can only be literature. What it should do is to poetically illustrate the Sisyphean impossibility of attempting to read through and describe the magnitude and complexity of the New York City in the twentieth century, as dictated by the subjective way one person reads through this particular mass of literature. As such, the book — in an ontological sense — will fail: Can a megapolis such as this truly be described? Absolutely not. Can history really be written objectively? No. Yet art cannot fail. What emerges instead is a compendium of fleeting impressions as dictated by one's whim and curiosity, while engaged in the act of reading and note-taking. And so, it's a unique work of art; one that anyone could do. But if you were to read through the corpus of literature written on NYC in the twentieth century, you would clearly come up with a completely different book. How you would navigate through this thicket of information is entirely unique.

My research thus far has been limited to university and neighborhood public libraries containing books with a general focus on my subject. I have also been scouring second-hand bookshops for out-of-print titles, while also unearthing the occasional magazine article from yellowed journals. This is a book-based project; thus I have avoided web-based research. Digging through shelves of books, stumbling across page-bound treasures, and unearthing analog documents from the period the way Benjamin did seems an appropriate way to honor his unassailable methodology and spirit.

Convolutes

As of today, these are the *convolutes* I'm working with. I'm only half way through — the book will be done when it hits the exact length of Benjamin's — so they will continue to evolve radically according to the primary materials I have to work with.

Abstraction

Advertising, Signage

Alcohol, Bar, Drugs, Prohibition
Amnesia, Rootlessness
Ancient, Primitive, SciFi
Apocalypse
Architecture
Art
Body, Hygiene, Pleasure, AIDS
Bohemia
Bridge, Brooklyn Bridge
Building as City
Capital of the 20th Century
Celebrity
Chronicle, Mundane
City as Sentence
Class, Social Unrest, Politics
Classicism
Coney Island
Cosmic, Celestial
Crowds, Congestion, Traffic, Density, Speed
Danger, Seedy, Crime
Death, Decay, Obsolescence, Downfall
Depletion
Depopulated
Description
Détournement
Documentary
Dream, Sleep, Night Unreal City
Empire
Empire State Building, Chrysler, WTC
Eternal Return
Fame, Ambition, Excitement, Restlessness
Fashion
Flaneur, Idleness, Boredom, Perambulation
Food
Garbage, Dirt, Trash, Waste
Gentrification
Global, World City

Graffiti
Grid, Map, Cartography
Harlem
Image
Interior
Invisible, Unreal, Ghost
Labor, Work
Language, Speech
Light, Lighting, Color, Air
Literature
Logic, Reason
Loneliness, Singularity
Luxury
Manners, Customs, Mundane, Routine
Mapplethorpe
Media
Memory, Nostalgia
Money, Stk Exch, Economics, Wealth, Market
Movement, Mobility
Museum, Spa
Myth
Names, Ethnicity
Nature
Neighborhood, Structure
Old New York
Palimpsest
Paris, Europe, Old World
Photography, Reproduction
Politics, Leftism
Poverty, Squalor, Abuse
Power, Narcissism
Prison, Punishment
Progress (Theory of)
Psychogeography
Psychology
Purity
Real Estate

Reinvention, Invention
Religion
Robert Moses
Scale, Magnitude, Proportion
Sex, Romance
Shopping, Mall, Consumerism
Signage, Semiotic, Symbolic
Simulacra
Skyline (Panorama)
Smell
Social
Soho
Sound, Noise
Spectacle
Speed, Nervousness, Iron, Fire
Statue of Liberty
Steam, Plumbing
Streets, Street Names, Names
Suburbs
Surreal
Technology
TimesSq, Bway, Gamb, Prost, Night, Prohibition
Underground
Unrealized NY
Unrest, Radical
Violence
Voyeur, Window, Mirror
Water, Plumbing
Weather, Air Conditioning, Atmosphere
World's Fair 1939
World's Fair 1964
Writing

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