

## **Constructing Dialectical Images in Sound and Space: Adapting Walter Benjamin's The Arcades Project**

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### **Abstract**

In November 2014 a specially created audio walk, A Roving Soul: Walking the City with Walter Benjamin, was presented as part of the School of Advanced Study's Being Human Festival of the Humanities. The piece invited listeners to put on headphones and take a walk through an urban environment of their choice, guided by the critical thought of Walter Benjamin.

Focusing specifically on Benjamin's late work on the Paris arcades, the audio material was designed to be experienced as a fragmentary collage – echoing the form of his uncompleted research. The piece placed commentary from leading Benjamin scholars alongside proposals and suggestions that encouraged listeners to re-assess their habitual engagement with urban space.

This article will examine the process of adapting Benjamin's work, considering how the participatory and interactive framework used within the audio walk encouraged listeners to recognise and construct dialectical images during their individual journeys through urban and imagined space. It will analyse how the dramaturgical approaches employed within the audio walk attempted to highlight the listener/participant's role as a maker of meaning – creating conditions of reception that can be used to invoke the kinds of dialectical thinking developed by Benjamin.

## Introduction

In November 2014 I created an audio walk for the University of London's School of Advanced Study's national public engagement festival Being Human. A Roving Soul: Walking the City with Walter Benjamin (Edinburgh 2014) invited participants to walk through urban space for an hour while listening (via headphones) to a specially created mp3 file. The mp3 placed commentary by an international group of Benjamin scholars alongside suggestions from a narrator designed to guide the participant's approach to thinking about and experiencing her environment. In essence, A Roving Soul borrowed the fragmentary collage of voices found in Benjamin's unfinished work on the Paris arcades, The Arcades Project (2002), and placed it in the context of an audio piece that would accompany the walker on a journey through a contemporary city.

When explaining to others that I wanted to adapt The Arcades Project, the looks I received suggested scepticism regarding the text's suitability. However, I would like to argue within this article that the method of dialectical analysis developed by Benjamin in the 1920s and 1930s can be used to establish a dramaturgical model that is relevant to participatory art and performance. I will argue that this is because Benjamin's method encourages participants to encounter space not as a fixed environment for action, but as a socially constructed phenomenon--constantly undergoing revision in relation to the agents of change that it accepts and rejects.

## **Interactive, Immersive and Participatory Aesthetics**

The last ten years have seen significant development in the popularity of interactive, immersive and participatory forms of performance. While the history of such performance forms dates at least as far back as Richard Schechner's experiments with 'environmental theatre' (Schechner 1994 [1973]), and can be argued to have antecedents in a wide range of older historical and culturally specific practices, it is only in this century that these forms have broken into mainstream and commercial theatre. (The British company Punchdrunk is, perhaps, one of the most notable examples.)

The growing popularity of interactive, immersive and participatory forms of performance has also been accompanied by a developing interest in articulating and defining the aesthetics that guide their use (Bishop 2012; Machon 2011; Rancière 2011; White 2013, 2015). Such analyses address a wide range of theoretical issues related to the question of how incorporating the audience as a physical and authorial presence within the work alters the conventions of aesthetic experience. While the context and aims of this short article do not allow me to review this literature in detail, I am interested in thinking about how the aesthetics of participation might be connected to an assessment of Walter Benjamin's theoretical method, in order to help us understand how we might, in practice, encourage the participant's self-awareness as a maker of meaning within the artwork.

To begin this analysis, it is important to unpick (briefly) some of the common problems associated with discussions of interactive, immersive and participatory performance. Despite the rigour of the texts referenced above,

my experience of the discourse surrounding interactive, immersive and participatory performance has tended to be dominated by an unhelpful binary between passive and active modes of engagement. This binary usually associates conventional modes of theatrical spectatorship with passivity (the audiences sit quietly in the darkness), while immersive, interactive and participatory modes are associated with active engagement.

This polarization of different modes of audience engagement is understandable. Within the theatres of Punchdrunk, You Me Bum Bum Train or Blast Theory, audience members are forced to move, interact and explore--making decisions that shape their experience of the performances. Similarly, intimate, one-to-one performances of the kind made by Adrian Howells focus on the specificity of the relationship established between performer and audience--a relationship that demands the audience contribute to the performance's realization. Applied and socially engaged participatory theatres also require active engagement by rooting the outcomes of the work in the concerns of their constituents. However, these facts about form do not necessarily establish meaningful criteria for judging the level of personal and psychological engagement with the themes and content of a work of art. In purely anecdotal terms, I can say that I have, at times, found myself considerably more engaged while sitting quietly in the dark than I have when sitting face-to-face with a single performer, or when walking through a cold, abandoned warehouse.

While such a claim might seem glib, the tendency for contemporary artists and audiences to suggest that variations in the demand for physical and social interaction can be used as measures for judging depth of

engagement needs to be treated with scepticism. Not least because the more dominant claims in favour of physical participation as an indicator of spectatorial investment tend to ignore the more imagination-based means of engagement used to activate the spectator's interest, criticality and empathy within more conventional forms of spectatorship.

Many of the more celebrated examples of interactive performance draw on paradigms of spectatorship and participation that are framed predominantly with reference to the work's materiality. Josephine Machon has, for example, argued that promenade and installation-based performances of the kind created by companies such as Punchdrunk invite a mode of spectatorship/participation rooted in the visceral and sensual nature of the audience's affective response to the performance (Machon 2011: 13--3). When audiences attend such performances, the spectators/participants encounter dramatic worlds that are designed to be indistinguishable from the material environment they share with the performers. In this way, the spectator/participant's imaginative engagement with the work's dramatic content is established in relation to the material reality of the spaces, artefacts and bodies encountered during the performance. However, the question of whether the materiality of the spectator/participant's experience prompts a more active form of imaginative engagement than that found within more conventional forms of theatrical performance--which rely on the suspension of disbelief--is open to question.

As someone interested in both modes of performance, I do not want to suggest that one form is better than the other. Instead, I would like to argue that in order to establish the spectator's presence within the work of art as a

maker of meaning and agent of change, it is helpful to incorporate both cognitive and materialist forms of immersion and interaction within performance. I believe that Walter Benjamin's critical method is uniquely useful in this regard, because it situates the process of critical thinking within a materialist, experiential framework.

### **The Creative Potential of Dialectical Images in Walter Benjamin's Critical Method**

Walter Benjamin was concerned with the relationships between critical thinking, perception and experience. As such, his work seems highly pertinent to theatre-makers--whose practice is founded on the integration of material and imagined space. Benjamin sought a way of thinking that was adequate in its response to modernity. He sought a way of thinking that echoed the rhythm and complexity of modern life, but which also enabled the critical distance necessary for a radical break with the negative patterns of social interaction imposed by the technologies of early twentieth-century capitalism. His philosophy aimed to establish an approach to critical thinking that would facilitate the development of a consciousness suitable for seeing beyond the capitalist phantasmagoria of the modern city.

In order to do this, Benjamin's method sought out dialectical images that could hold opposing realities in dialogue. [The Arcades Project](#) is full of images and ideas that pull the reader's attention in different directions in order

to establish a productive space for questioning the ways in which our experience is shaped by the material world. To take an example referred to directly in A Roving Soul we might consider Convolute M3, a4:

Streets are the dwelling place of the collective. The collective is an eternally unquiet, agitated being that--in the space between the building fronts--experiences, learns, understands, and invents as much as individuals do within the privacy of their own four walls. For this collective, glossy enamelled shop signs are a wall decoration as good as, if not better than, an oil painting in the drawing room of a bourgeois; walls with their 'post no bills' are its writing desk, newspaper stands its libraries, mailboxes its bronze busts, benches its bedroom furniture, and the cafe terrace is the balcony from which it looks down on its household. The section of railing where road workers hang their jackets is the vestibule, and the gateway which leads from the row of courtyards out into the open is the long corridor that daunts the bourgeois, being for the courtyards the entry to the chambers of the city. Among these latter, the arcade was the drawing room. More than anywhere else, the street reveals itself in the arcade as the furnished and familiar interior of the masses.

(Benjamin 2002: 423)

This dialectical reading of city space enabled Benjamin to perceive and articulate the tension between empowerment and disempowerment, poverty and wealth, public and private. In recognizing tensions within the images he collected Benjamin found a moment in which the construction of the present could be contextualized in relation to the past--perhaps illuminating lost choices passed over in the process of creating the status quo. In Benjamin's thinking, when space is perceived dialectically it is no longer experienced as a single material point, but as one possibility within a constellation of historical and social options (Benjamin 2007: 253--64). In this way, the entrance to an arcade could be understood as an architectural structure, the threshold of a dream space where consumers seek to become whole through their pursuit of commodities, or the place where a homeless man might make a bed for the night.

Through encouraging the perception of dialectical images, Benjamin's method seeks to shape our critical thinking in two contiguous ways. The first encourages us to experience space with reference to its movement in time, recognizing the frequently imperceptible nature of our temporality by attending both to its manifestation in material objects and our relationship to them. Secondly, the dialectical image focuses our attention on the relational contexts that drive the creation of objects and space, encouraging us to perceive the ways in which space and architecture privilege certain viewpoints while occluding and oppressing others. If we go back to the imagined entrance of the Paris arcade, we might look at it as a structure made possible due to a particular moment of technological development (the arcades were a result of iron's and steel's emergence as a building material), or we might look



at it as a threshold between public and private life--a concrete separation between having and not having, or privilege and the absence of privilege.

[[figure1]]

While Benjamin's use of dialectical thinking was rooted in a Marxist tradition, it went beyond the traditional boundaries of philosophical method by drawing on the influence of modernist aesthetics. One of my collaborators, Mike Jennings, has noted that the publication of One Way Street in 1924 marks a revolution in the form of Benjamin's writing (Jennings 2006: 18--34). The book combined anecdotes and aphorisms with critical essays and travelogues all blended together as a kind of collage. Benjamin's writing rejected the monological anchor of a coherent authorial voice--responding not only to the relational, materialist economics of Marx, but to his engagement with Proust, the Surrealists and the radical perspectival inventions of the cubists. One Way Street encourages the reader to drift from one perspective to another, negotiating the relationship between texts on fancy dress, arms and ammunition, paper and writing materials. In this tangle of associations we are forced into an authorial collaboration with Benjamin, with each page creating a liminal space that seeks to connect the memories and associations of the writer with those of the reader. Indeed Jennings notes that the text foreshadows the Roland Barthes of Mythologies (2006: 23).

The unfinished fragments of Benjamin's The Arcades Project take this perspective-shifting collage one step further by including quotations and images gleaned during Benjamin's daily trips to the national library in Paris. The reader not only seeks to establish the logic driving Benjamin's curation of

quotes and ideas, he is also invited to empathize with the lost voices pulled from the archives: the unknown faces held for eternity in a fading daguerreotype, or the people that Baudelaire drifted by on the streets of Paris at dawn.

This effect places a clear emphasis on the reader--inviting a conscious production of meaning through reflecting on the multiplicity of voices and perspectives found within the text. It also highlights the text's status as a contested space, in which different voices vie for the reader's attention and empathy. It was this quality of dialectical attention that I wanted the walker to echo when listening to A Roving Soul.

### **The Dialectical Image in Participatory Practice**

When considering Benjamin's use of the dialectical image, I found that the most inspiring aspect of his method related to the way in which his juxtapositions of present and past experience, visible and invisible, lost and found, demand a process of active reflection. The participation demanded by the dialectical image is not simply engagement in an organized activity, but a process of taking a position in relation to the objects, people and places that one encounters. As another of my collaborators, Scott McCracken, perceptively noted within the piece, Benjamin's fascination with history was an invitation to untangle the ways in which the potential of the present moment might be tapped in order to lead us towards a better future (Edinburgh)

2014: n.p.). Within A Roving Soul McCracken also reflected on Benjamin's links to Bertolt Brecht--who was so aware of the need for the spectator to take a clear position in relation to the art object--thus avoiding its reification, or succumbing to the power of its illusions (ibid.).

It is here that the value of Benjamin's use of the dialectical image becomes more obviously relevant to the artist interested in the aesthetics of participation. Through drawing attention to the participant's agency as a maker of meaning, Benjamin's method allows the participant to recognize their presence as a contributor to the shifting spatial and social dynamics that are often occluded by the consensus that guides our habitual use and experience of spaces and objects.

When planning A Roving Soul, it struck me that by demanding that the participant takes responsibility for choosing the location and route of her journey (with the caveat that it takes places in an urban environment), I would be able to encourage the listener to engage in a more conscious process of co-authorship. The benefit of an mp3 download or podcast is that it lives in one's pocket. The audio walk can be, and has been, experienced on walks to work or the gym (allowing participants to consciously reframe a habitual activity in a well-known environment). With reference to the audio walk's intended effect on the participants some of the most pleasing feedback came from individuals who had noticed something new that had previously seemed concealed in their everyday use of urban space. An unusual building considered in relation to its possible original function, or a quiet canal considered in relation to a bygone industrial age.

By moving beyond the material specificity of one site in favour of illuminating the specificity of Benjamin's dialectical method, the piece allowed me to resist exerting deliberate control over an audience's movements. Instead, I focused on the listener's cognitive and emotional engagement with their surroundings. This removed the second-guessing and distrust that can arise during performative interactions within immersive theatre--where intimacy can feel manipulative and conversation can become layered with unintended meta-levels. In the process of writing and editing, I focused on creating minor interventions to direct the listener's gaze and experience, leaving the commentators to provide accounts of specific themes in Benjamin's late writings (phantasmagoria, commodity fetishism, Baudelaire, photography and history). At one point in the walk my narration asks listeners to think about who might have built the places that they were walking through, and how much of the site's history might have been effaced over time. At another point I ask the listeners to question how many of the things in their eyeline are for sale (Edinburgh 2014: n.p.).

In one sense A Roving Soul is constructed using fairly conventional audio documentary techniques. In order for the piece to fulfil its remit as an accessible piece of public engagement with the humanities, a good deal of time had to be given over to explaining the complexity of Benjamin's thinking. Fortunately, the use of collage or montage conventionally found in audio production already echoes Benjamin's technique--providing an invitation for the listener to become the detached soul that Benjamin recognized in Baudelaire's poetry (Benjamin 1997: 50). Equally, the subtle sound design by Hana Walker-Brown sought to blur the distinction between the noises within

the piece and those heard beyond the listener's headphones. For example: recorded birdsong layered over a section of commentary by Susan Buck-Morss related to the process of breaking through the veil of commodities, or a tube train fading into the distance in a section describing the flaneur.

The combination of these two effects in the context of Benjamin's philosophy invited the listener to drift between the discussion of the writer's ideas and those that emerged spontaneously in reference to the sites being traversed. In one piece of feedback a listener wrote:

I enjoyed the simple paradoxes of stillness and silence in a teeming place full of inward shoppers. It felt like an almost mischievous observant mission, as people passed, loudly and speedily around me. People didn't have the time to be suspicious of the blatant difference of our rhythms. This also saddened me to be reminded of the myth that so many of us are slaves to, the hollow expectation of 'stuff' that will makes us happy. (It was Christmas Shopping.)

(Anonymous 2014)

Perhaps most interestingly with reference to my aim for the participant to make active choices in selecting their environment the same listener noted:

How was I choosing my direction? Am I being lead by association with what I hear, or by where the flow of people are or aren't. Am I subconsciously routing out a journey for myself? To places I already know or don't know?

(ibid.)

In place of the second-guessing about how the performer or scenography of an interactive piece might be manipulating one's experience, the listener was invited to question how the real (as opposed to theatrical) spaces of the city shaped their decisions.

### **Constructing Benjamin's Biography by Describing his Method**

Perhaps the most unexpected outcome of the project for me was found in the way that the process of destabilizing the perception of a fixed authorial voice encouraged participants to take an active position in relation to the flux and process of experience. In making the piece I discovered, somewhat ironically, that this conscious dialectical dislocation brings us closer to Benjamin himself.

Benjamin's method demands a process of empathetic engagement in order to work heuristically through a series of different perspectives held in tension within space and society. He didn't write effusively about his own emotions or experiences (despite the many highs and lows); however, the

process of engaging with the dialectical images he illuminated enables us to approximate the complexity of his thinking as he walked through Europe's great cities.

Perhaps the main problem of the fixed author is that our identification with him cannot contain the polyphony of our subjective experience. Although it was not intended, I think a positive outcome from my attempt to condense and integrate my own reading of Benjamin with material from seven 40-minute interviews with seven different scholars was found in the unearthing of different versions of Benjamin's subjective experience of the city. By inviting different scholars to provide commentary, I was able to hold multiple perspectives on Benjamin's thinking in tension with each other.

The project was subtitled 'Walking the City with Walter Benjamin' somewhat flippantly. However, as I reflected on the question of what a dialectical image was for Benjamin, that description became more apt. As I edited, I began to understand the listeners' walking as a form of archaeology. It struck me that Benjamin's experience of the city could be revealed through the listeners' imaginative responses to the images they encountered during their journeys. By prompting the listener to respond imaginatively to the contested spaces they encountered, it seemed that Benjamin's own experience of the city could be echoed and briefly recaptured.

## **Conclusion**

This short account of my dramaturgical process has not been written (entirely) as a piece of self-advocacy. Instead, I hope that this article has begun to outline some of the ways in which materialist and cognitive modes of engagement might be combined through the use of dialectical thinking in interactive, immersive and participatory performance practices. Perhaps the most important thing to consider is that the dialectical quality of an image, in Benjamin's thinking, is established at the point of reception. It is formed through the mode of critical engagement brought to bear on the experience of an image. In this way, Benjamin's thinking proposes that critical distance is held in productive tension with material experience.

Perhaps ironically in an article about immersive and interactive dramaturgy, this dialectical mode of thought and experience is not too far away from that used by the psychologist Jerome Bruner to describe our imaginative engagement with more conventional forms of dramatic representation. Bruner writes:

story must create two landscapes simultaneously. One is the landscape of action, where the constituents are the agents of action: agent, intention or goal, situation, instrument, something corresponding to a 'story grammar'. The other landscape is the landscape of consciousness: what those involved in the action know, think, or feel, or do not know, think or feel. The two landscapes are essential and distinct: it is the difference between Oedipus sharing Jocasta's bed before and after he learns from the messenger that she is his mother.



Bruner's dialectical reading of the narrative imagination is not dissimilar from that proposed by Benjamin. Although Benjamin's focus was, of course, pointed towards historical and political concerns, both he and Bruner recognized that meaning is constructed in the dialogue between the different landscapes of experience, action and reflection. With this in mind, I would suggest that while it is certainly important to establish the specificity of immersive, interactive and participatory aesthetics, it is equally important to find ways of connecting these discussions of participation to existing models of aesthetic experience. Through reflecting on making A Roving Soul, I recognize that while we need to understand the process of audience immersion in material terms, questions of participatory engagement need to be balanced with reference to the paradigms of cognition that explain how meaning is made across the broader spectrum of performance practices.

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