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## I Wanna See Some History: The Border, Identity, Writing

By Alan Wright  
University of Florida

### Passports

After an arduous flight across the Pacific, the traveler entering the United States lands at Honolulu Airport. Here, wings clipped, the grounded passenger conducts the official business required by law of all international travelers. Everyone must display their passport for inspection. Immigration authorities endorse or reject one's 'credentials', run a check on identity and intentions. At this point of the trip, the traveler recognizes the purely conditional terms of the contract that governs his or her passage through the skies. In order to pass beyond it, s/he must accept the existence of a boundary, the line of demarcation that institutes national borders.

Susan Buck-Morss credits the system of passport/visa control as instrumental in creating:

the appearance that state boundaries were substantive, that they really existed--that a particular state apparatus 'owned' a part of the world, in the same way as a private citizen 'owned' his home, a capitalist his business, a farmer his field, a person his or her own body--except that the state owned all of these first. (1993, 75)

The mandatory possession of a passport, to be produced upon entry or exit at the border of a foreign territory, marks a relatively recent development in the history of travel. It arose in the period immediately following World War I, alongside the entrenchment of the modern State and the expansion of its interests and influence. According to Buck-Morss, the stress placed on defining state borders fostered a spirit of national identity and patriotic affinity which could then be deployed to counter the threat of a Bolshevik inspired internationalist workers' movement. The passport served as a useful means of monitoring the spread of a "revolutionary idea which ignored state boundaries and challenged those of class" (75). It acted as a restrictive mechanism that limited the movements of known activists and their sympathizers while preventing the infiltration of the workers' ranks by socialist principles directly opposed to the State's interest. Initially legitimated as a response to the "continuing existence of a national emergency" and justified as a

reaction to a threat to the State, the passport assumed its currently accepted status as the tourist's most essential accessory and the primal document for world travel in the jet age. Buck-Morss invokes Paul Fussell, however, to remind us that "the wartime atmosphere which nourished the passport hangs about it forever" (n36, 75).

### Identity Papers

I stand, British passport in hand, facing the US immigration official. I have already been placed in a fraudulent position. This document indicates that I am a British national, a citizen of the United Kingdom. It records Belfast, Northern Ireland, as my birthplace.

The legitimacy of Northern Ireland's status as a political entity, however, is highly contested, as the current bout of sectarian warfare and military occupation, known locally as the Troubles, (1969- ), demonstrates. In 1921, after five years' violence and unrest, the British Crown, acceding to Protestant demands in the north, signed an Act of Partition which effectively divided Ireland. The recently formed government of the Irish Free State accepted the compromise, a decision which led to a civil war in the South and fierce riots and reprisals against the Catholic minority in the newly established nation-state, Northern Ireland. In *Belfast Diary*, John Conroy describes "the haphazard and artificially created border" that separates the north from the Republic of Ireland as it "runs through farms, lakes, barns and houses," even splitting a village in two, "so that during World War II, when Ireland was neutral and the North was part of the British war effort, half of the old town was rationed, and half was not" (1987, 23). The border traces a seemingly random, meandering track as it ascribes with a foreign hand the signature of nationalism across communities, bodies and the land itself. Its broken line literally marks the discourse of territoriality and colonialism on the surface of the earth, reconfigured as the flat plane of a map. In the map's north-east corner, a black dot at the mouth of a river indicates Belfast, a large ink blot or a spreading stain.

Ciaran Carson discovers that the experience of division and opposition which dominates Irish history, politics and everyday life also operates at the level of language, embedded deep in the roots of words. He reads the fortuitous crossings of chance and geography in the etymology of a street name. The Falls Road, or just the Falls, traverses the heartland of Catholic West Belfast, at times almost intersecting the main road of the neighboring Protestant stronghold, the Shankill. The close proximity of both factions insures that a constant climate of tension prevails, fueled by the presence of the British Army, and that raids,

riots and reprisals occur with predictable regularity. Carson notes that the Falls derives "from the Irish, *fál*, a hedge; hence, *any kind of enclosed thing*" (1989, 105). The name metaphorically reproduces the act of partition and writes it across the streets and districts of Belfast. *The Boundary Report* of 1924, a commission appointed to "determine the wishes of the inhabitants" in regard to the border, defines the term "fence" to include "walls, hedge banks, palings, or any structure erected for the purpose of dividing two parcels of land, whether of the same or different ownership, or for the purpose of separating a road from adjoining land" (O'Brien, 1992, 38). The pun yields a further significance "for *fál*," so Carson tells us, "is also frontier, boundary" (106).

The text I am writing casts Belfast as the heavily invested memorial site which supplies the point of departure and return for an exchange on, over, and across borders and boundaries of all kinds--between/within subjects, communities, institutions, discourses. Belfast offers a figure and *topos*, at once material and allegorical, for the writing of my own relation to history and the past. But, before outlining a method, let's return to the other border.

### Boundary Story #1: The Graduate Student and the Border Guard

*Honolulu Airport, Hawaii, 6.30am, July 29, 1991*

I handed my passport to the Immigration Official. He leafed through its pages in silence, scarcely acknowledging my presence. I remembered that a friend had been detained in an office here for two hours. He spent the time answering questions about his marital status and intentions toward his American friend, who anxiously awaited his return. I began to wonder how I should conduct myself. Appear unconcerned but obliging? The encounter began to exude the atmosphere proper to a bureaucratic interview or routine police harassment.

The Officer was inspecting my visa now. Without lifting his head, he asked what university I attended and what I studied. His tone didn't seem to encourage small talk and his face didn't register interest. I told him I was an English graduate student. Then, a hint of skepticism in his voice, he asked what exactly I intended to focus on. How does any rookie 'intellectual' with smatterings of undigested theory and a poorly developed repertoire of postmodern reflexes respond to such an intimidating question? I must have stuttered something about 'cultural studies' or 'sign-systems.' If I was more familiar with the term, "postcoloniality" would have been my reply. At any rate, I was shocked that, on the verge of my American adventure, I found myself in the absurd position of justifying what I do, or think I do, or what I think I want to do, to an unimpressed border guard. Typically, as the situation perhaps demanded, I presented an embarrassingly bad account of myself

and my putative discipline. With his authority completely reinforced, the Immigration Official acidly observed that I better decide what the hell it was I was interested in, or words to that effect. He dismissively waved me through. What a jerk, I thought!

### The Case

The student at the border failed to translate the value of his educational ambitions into receivable terms for the official, that is he did not succeed in transmitting his message in a recognizable or acceptable form. Gregory Ulmer observes, in opening "The Euretics of Alice's Valise," that "the assumptions governing most representations of knowledge in the liberal arts...are based on the concept of 'communication': teachers/authors sending meanings to students/readers through a channel" (1991, 3). The teacher has the knowledge which the student must obtain. The goal remains the acquisition of the content or kernel of the communicated message. The limits of the scene of instruction remain strictly defined and the transaction generally proceeds in one accepted direction. The exchange with the border official demanded confirmation of this structural dynamic; the expected response would have involved a recitation or recapitulation of previously attained knowledge, or a descriptive outline of a pre-constituted object of study.

The communication model, of course, often breaks down, or, more commonly still, never even starts running. Messages are prone to misinterpretation or interception, reception to static and interference. On the border, a permanent state of vigilance against such a possibility results in an edgy protocol of interrogative and explicative requests. On occasion, if suspicion or procedure warrants it, a customs official may search the contents of suitcases or valises.

Ulmer opposes the valise to the communication model as an image for orienting teaching and research. He releases the valise from its principal duties as *container*, as metaphoric vessel for conveying pre-packaged units of meaning to a distant destination. The case always carries a minor significance next to its contents. Imagine instead using the valise as *generator* for producing a series of encounters within a field of knowledge yet to be defined. In such a case, "what matters is not *what* I am putting in these containers, but *that* the boxes [themselves] are organizing the release of information" (1991, 6).

Marcel Duchamp's *Valise* gives Ulmer the formula for organizing a text designed less as an act of communication than as an instructional resource for the development of a pedagogic practice based on inference, invention and interference. The *Valise* provided Duchamp with "a memory theater, a mnemonic device,

reminding him of work accomplished...from whose surface he could read a program" (1991, 5). This strategy, when applied to the production of knowledge, transforms the student's relation to the institutional practices which define his/her position vis-à-vis the object of study. The resonances and potential insights afforded by identification and desire, memory and the imaginary enter the pedagogical arena. "The student's valise is most likely to include metonymies or fragments of cultural information," which display "in miniature" the material for a "poetic" or "euretic," as opposed to hermeneutic, engagement with knowledge. Research conducted according to euretic principles imports methods from other disciplines (in this instance art) and mobilizes discourses and logical procedures (myth, gossip, anecdotes, oral narratives, jokes, puns, images drawn from the popular/communal imaginary or the personal/familial album) which are normally excluded from the scene of instruction or suppressed by the apparatus of literacy.

### Method: Mnemonic Scene/Intellectual Object

Ulmer presented his article as a "verbalized valise" whose items provide "a set of heuristic rules for setting the contents of a discourse in motion" (1991, 4). In *Barthes by Barthes*, Roland Barthes describes his method of composition by fragments in similar terms:

'Take the words: *fragment, circle, Gide, wrestling match, asyndeton, painting, discourse, Zen, intermezzo*; make up a discourse which can link them together.' And that would quite simply be this very fragment. (1977, 93)

Barthes seeks a knowledge-effect which depends upon the suggestive connections and combinations released in the interstices of his text. The effect of his writing consists in dramatizing the experience of discovery, as the constellated terms he gathers coalesce to form what he terms an 'intellectual object,' which simultaneously exhibits the qualities of theory, criticism, fiction and pleasure (1977, 90). The composition of an intellectual object may delineate a field of knowledge or provide an approach to a critical problem the researcher didn't know existed.

What would your valise contain? Where are you going with it? What would the selection, arrangement and manipulation of its elements allow you to say?

The impasse at the border indicates that I need to carry a case, a kind of instant travelling-theory-kit, which speaks for itself, only packed with articles that occupy an important place in my 'image-repertoire' or memory theater and demonstrate the concepts, arguments and theories that define my activities as a student

and teacher of writing. The objects contained in the valise would serve as models or props for a performative and descriptive, rather than expository or declarative, presentation of knowledge.

### Inventory

My valise contains the following items:

- passport
- fragments of debris from Belfast bomb-sites
- various accounts of the myth surrounding the suicide of Walter Benjamin
- punk, situationist, republican slogans and posters
- copies of Benjamin's autobiographical texts and "Theses on the Philosophy of History"
- a tin can
- the Berlin Wall
- the Sex Pistols' single "Holidays in the Sun"
- graffiti scrawled across a Sydney Harbor shed--"Nervous System"--along with Michael Taussig's accompanying text.

Together, these articles help in assigning a frame for the problem under investigation. How does our culture locate and define borders, how does the apparatus of classification work? The text reveals my collaboration with and interiorization of those same processes. How have they shaped my life and thought, desires and prejudices? What is the nature of the mnemonic scene and the patterns of identification which return to direct this writing project?

### Evacuation Order

To try to pick up this bag introduces one into a "routine"--the mistaken suitcase. The valise you need is not mine, not the one opened here, but your own. None of my things fit you. So you look around for your own case. How to decide what to pack, given the necessity of traveling light? Let's say you are in your study, the water rising outside, a tropical storm approaching the coast, and the word comes to evacuate your neighborhood. Or the intellectual equivalent; the valise is your memory, the storm is history, and you have to leave the house in the next five minutes. (Ulmer, 1991, 9)

Walter Benjamin faced this categorical imperative. As German troops occupied Paris, he fled southward able, according to Gershom Scholem, "to take nothing with him but his gas mask and toothbrush" (Witte, 1991, 203). His final text, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" testifies to the impending crisis. It contains

a now famous description of Paul Klee's "Angelus Novus," an image which served Benjamin as an emblematic representation of History as Catastrophe. The Angel, irresistibly propelled backward into the future by the force of the storm called Progress, perceives historical events as shattered fragments of the continuum of messianic time. Under this sign, the materialist historian searches the rubble of the past, scrutinizing its abandoned objects, in hopes of discovering amongst them the explosive agency of the dialectical image, as Benjamin calls it, whose illumination permits the past to be seized in the form of "a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (Benjamin, 1969, 255).

### Boundary Story #2:

#### *Final Act: the Last Days of the "Last European"*

Benjamin's flight from the Nazi advance, his attempt to cross the Franco-Spanish border and his subsequent suicide have attained mythic status. The story exists in a number of versions. In the "Afterword" to *The Dialectics of Seeing*, Susan Buck-Morss presents the first-hand accounts of Mrs Henny Gurland, Benjamin's traveling companion, and Lisa Fitko, their guide across the Pyrenees. The latter's statement dates from 1980, forty years after the event. She reports that Benjamin was carrying a large black briefcase:

It looked heavy and I offered to help him carry it. "This is my new manuscript," he explained... "I cannot risk losing it. It is the manuscript that must be saved. It is more important than I am." ... Today, when Walter Benjamin is considered one of the century's leading scholars and critics—today I am sometimes asked: What did he say about the manuscript? Did he discuss the contents? Did it develop a novel philosophical concept. Good God, I had my hands full steering my little group uphill; philosophy would have to wait till the downward side of the mountain was reached... Old Benjamin: under no circumstances would he part with his ballast, that black bag; we would have to drag the monster across the mountains (1989, 323).

The group safely reached the Spanish border town of Port Bou where, as Hannah Arendt reports in her introduction to *Illuminations*, they learnt "that Spain had closed the border that same day and that the border officials did not honor visas made out in Marseilles... during the night, Benjamin took his own life, whereupon the border officials, upon whom this suicide had made an impression, allowed his companions to proceed to Portugal" (Arendt, 18). Bernd Witte closes by noting that:

The briefcase with the manuscript, which Benjamin was concerned above all to save during his flight, has since disappeared. His companions, who after his death were permitted to travel on in freedom, arranged for his burial. His grave in the cemetery of the little town is no longer identifiable. (Witte, 205).

The black bag may or may not have contained a text on the Arcades Project, otherwise known as the *Passagenwerk* or *Passagenarbeit*.

### The Lost Object

Benjamin, his case and his manuscript disappear without a trace. The tale invests the memorable scene with the charm and suspense of a classic adventure story, the spectacular banality of an 'unsolved mystery,' the farcical hopelessness of an absurdist comedy, the fateful inevitability of a tragic drama, the melancholy pathos of a particularly depressing hard luck story. From the standpoint of a certain cultural-historical narrative, the incident at the border has acquired legendary status. Like a ghost-story, solemnly repeated at conferences, in seminars and books, between students and teachers, the circumstances surrounding Benjamin's death continue to fascinate academic discourse. But what information does this story provide about how our culture remembers and how we assign meaning and limits to the experience of the past?

For Buck-Morss, the responsibility of memory necessarily entails the work of mourning and the acknowledgment and articulation of loss. She appends her account of Benjamin's last days with an anecdote from a conference on his work at the University of Frankfurt in 1982:

I remember nothing of these debates, perhaps because they have been so often repeated. The wisdom came not from us that morning, but from a German student who suddenly spoke of those missing from the room--the German Jews who might have been a part of his generation of students. He felt their lack, and expressed sadness at their absence. All at once the room filled with ghosts. We shivered. (1989, 335)

The student summons the repressed events of history into the present, recalling the silence at the core of his speech, the unspeakable inheritance buried within his generation's collective unconscious. His voice carries the mute appeal of the Holocaust victims. The conference provides the occasion for a memorial address to the dead, while Benjamin himself or, perhaps, his sublimated corpse, occupies the site of the crypt. He acts as metonymic representative and mythic emissary for the incorporated Other.

Jacques Derrida understands this phenomenon as the return of "the ghost, *le revenant*, the survivor, [which] appears only by means of a figure or fiction, but its appearance is not nothing, nor is it a mere semblance" (Ulmer, 1989, 203). It is the very precondition for the encounter with history and the past. Note the resemblance between Derrida's description of the 'uncanny temporality' of ghostly possession and Benjamin's historiographic method as outlined in the "Theses on the Philosophy of History":

Ghosts always pass quickly, with the infinite speed of a furtive apparition, in an instant without duration, presence without present which, coming back, only *haunts*. (203).

and:

The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again ... For every image of the past that is not recognized by the

Ann McKinley notes that "often Benjamin appears not as theoretician of history, but as its figure: specifically as figure for the Holocaust..." (1993, 8). She perceives to what extent the ingredients of his specific story--the lost text, the brief closure of the border, his suicide--support the general cultural task of mourning for the Nazi's extermination of the Jews:

And the theorists who labor on and around the Benjaminian corpus--are they not engaged in a sort of Antigonean labor, giving the body a decent burial, repatriating the corpse even as they break the laws of the city to do so? (6)

When Hannah Arendt arrived in Port Bou several months after Benjamin's death, she could find no trace of his grave (Buck-Morss, 1989, 475). The return of his ghost provokes an uneasy desire on the part of the critical establishment to administer the last rites *in absentia*, to erect a monument in place of his empty tomb. But what does Benjamin's crypt serve to conceal? Can

present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably. (Benjamin, 1969, 255)

### Allegorical Image

The ghostly figure or fiction which animates the funerary discourse over Benjamin's missing grave views the troupe of mourners, Benjamin's interpreters and executors, with a mischievous eye. It understands the joke. By no means a serious spirit, it passes its time in pranks and play. Benjamin called it the *bucklicht*. *Mannlein*. "A Berlin Childhood" ends with the little hunchback's appearance and Walter Benjamin's eventual disappearance is predicated on his presence. He often stood before Benjamin--"Only I never saw him. He saw me. And the more sharply he saw me, the less I saw myself" (Benjamin, 1965, 44). The focus of Benjamin's gaze was the "pile of fragments" on the floor, the smashed pot, the debris left in the little man's passage. And why does the hunchback pay his visits--"to collect his half of oblivion from everything that happened to me."

The little man teaches that the proper exercise of memory is preserved in the act of forgetting. The discarded objects and images of the past conserve in fossilized form the explosive potential of the present. It takes just a spark of recognition to ignite it. As Benjamin says, alluding to the story of Rumpelstilzchen, it is only *today* that he knows the hunchback's name [my italics]. It is never too late, although time is always running out. The temporality of catastrophe is today. Accordingly, any monument raised to the past finds its future in the ruin. The construction of a wall structurally implies its fall.

Even in death, Benjamin paid the hunchback his due. The Arcades Project does not exist in book form, nor is his grave marked by a funerary monument. The Benjamin myth circumvents the stasis of monumentalization by refusing to assign the remains (the shards of the pot, the fragments of the past, the 'wreckage' of History) any redeemable value within an economy of loss and incorporation. In lieu of an epitaph, a memorial inscription written in stone, can one imagine a response to Benjamin's historiographic project, freed from the threat of arrested mourning? What does Walter Benjamin's vanishing act allow me to write about 'today'?

the Benjamin myth be read other than monumentally? Yes, allegorically. It teaches an object lesson in how to think and write theoretically.

### Writing On The Wall

#### I: The Arbeit Medallion

Walter Benjamin's "A Berlin Chronicle" and "A Berlin Childhood" literally involve a tour of the places of memory. Memory "is the medium of past experience, as the ground is the medium in which dead cities lie interred" (1965, 314). He excavates both, directly encountering the memory of childhood in the exploration of a disappearing space, Berlin circa 1900. His text presents a 'tactile' knowledge rather than one gained through interpretation or analysis. The images of a lost world, its streets and buildings, cafés, corners and meeting-places are treated as material indices of desire or mined for the cultural information they contain.

Perhaps, at times, the shadow of an obstacle blocked the course of Benjamin's *flâneries*. One night, on his way from the Tiergarten to the Viktoria Café, distraction or a poor sense of direction led him into a dead-end street. He became lost in a tangle of blind alleys. At every turn, he faced the same impassable barrier. The Berlin Wall.

The Wall went up in early August, 1961, two weeks after my birth in another divided city. A generation accepted it as the most visible monument to the Cold War. The Wall made legible the logic of binary opposition our culture employs to draw the line between order and disorder, self and other, same and different. It served as a concrete, as well as conceptual and ideological, representation of the apparatus of categorization and classification which governs, for better or worse, political, ethical, emotional and rational assumptions and actions.

Against and alongside this deep structure of meaning, Elaine Scarry reads another story, with another modality of sense, off the wall's surface. The cold, hard fact of the wall aroused a colorful response. It was covered with graffiti, images, messages and murals:

Yet the very obdurate surface on which the paint insisted also seemed to dissolve, as though the saturated colors could soak their way into the center and make it disappear. The porousness of the wall was sketched and scrawled all along its 110-mile circumference. (Scarry, 1992, 341)

What appears immovable and impermeable acquires an imaginary mobility, swathed in "big bands of color" and "unstoppable stripes." The wall unravels with all the vibrancy and animation of a comic strip or film.

Scarry isolates one painted panel, the Arbeit Medallion, and utilizes its alle-

gorical potential to smash an opening in the wall's defenses. She discovers the familiar spirit of the little hunchback in "Die 3 Bruder Arbeit" who, similarly, mediates the passage to sentient awareness of "catastrophistoric" possibility. The Arbeit Medallion delivers a lesson in materialist pedagogics:

The prophetic Arbeit siblings lift the wall with their mimesis of aliveness, then go on to reveal how the magic trick is done. They seek not only to animate but to make the act of animation inimitable. Their own bodies pass easily back and forth between inanimate and animate. The left arm of the first turns into a rake; the left arm of the second, into a sickle; the left arm of the third, into a hammer. The right arms of all three become blocks of raw material to be worked by the tools of labor--pieces of stone to reshape or panels of wall to be broken apart and written on. Their kit of tools includes not just rakes and hammers but pieces of language (*ar, be, it*, and a floating arrow), and the effortless continuity with the mental labor of dream and thought is asserted in the giant heap poised in alert reverie nearby. (1992, 342)

Benjamin and Brecht had a favorite epigram: "Whoever wants to make the hard thing give way should miss no opportunity for friendliness" (1983, 74). *Arbeit* is German for work and the three friendly arbeiters—Jürgen, Ralf and Sibylle—exhibit the reserves of energy necessary to materially fulfill, as Scarry puts it, "the first counterfactual wish--to make an impassable object passable" (342). The secret of "Arbeit Magic" consists in the desire "to make insensate surface sensate" (342). Scarry labels its writing style "Fast Form Manifest," a form of lapidary inscription which possesses the qualities of brevity, speed and freshness and endeavors to produce an "acuity of sentience" which announces a bright and alert refusal "to let [the wall's] concrete surface blend into the gray-brown masonry of the neighborhoods it divided" (341). The Arbeit Medallion converts the monumental solidity of stone into a graphic memorial to "the skilled rapidity of motion that produced" the shapes and lines, streaks and strokes which cover the wall from end to end. Such tactile writing replaces the culturally determined script of authorized discourse with an essentially anonymous gesture, "the gesture of a slogan scrawled in haste on a plank fence by a man being pursued" (Benjamin, 1983, 66).

from *The German War Primer*:

On the wall was chalked  
They want war.  
The man who wrote it  
Has already fallen.  
- Brecht

## II: Collected Slogans

The grid of abandoned houses and old neighborhoods collapses under the weight of a difficult history. Ciaran Carson's Belfast exists as much in recollection and imagination as in brick and mortar, the evocation of demolished slums or vanished streets dredging up the memory of other landmarks and personalities, further stories. In the same way "the very city," built on and from tidal mud, "recycled itself and disassembled buildings...were poured into the sleet of the lough to make new land" (1989, 73).

*The city is a map of the city...a necessary condition of the city was its eventual destruction...*

To Carson, "it seems that every inch of Belfast has been written on, erased and written-on again: messages, curses, political imperatives, but mostly names, or nicknames..." (52). The ephemeral blazons of posters, murals and graffiti correspond on the pictorial plane to the gradual or sudden shifts in the city's image of itself.

TIOCFADH ÁR LÁ. OUR DAY WILL COME	
FOR THOSE WHO	FOR THOSE WHO
BELIEVE	DON'T BELIEVE
NO EXPLANATION	NO EXPLANATION
IS NECESSARY	IS POSSIBLE

WELCOME TO NAZI OCCUPIED IRELAND

and other slogans from other programs from other walls...



NE TRAVILLE PAS  
 WHAT ARE THE POLITICS OF BOREDOM ?  
 NE CHANGEZ PAS D'EMPLOYEURS  
 CHANGEZ L'EMPLOI DE LA VIE  
 UNDER THE PAVING STONES, THE BEACH  
 CLUB MED--A CHEAP HOLIDAY IN OTHER PEOPLE'S MISERY

NO FUTURE NO FUTURE  
 NO FUTURE NO FUTURE  
 NO FUTURE NO FUTURE  
 FOR YOU FOR ME

### III: I Wanna See Some History

The happy marriage of tourism and history results in the spectacular rise of the monument, The Sex Pistols designed numerous cheap and irreverent stunts around this union of tradition and sensation. They signed a record deal outside the gates of Buckingham Palace. During the Jubilee celebrations, they floated down the Thames on a barge, past the Houses of Parliament, Big Ben and the Tower of London, performing their scandalous new release, "God Save the Queen." They called Texans "cowboys." In *The Great Rock n'Roll Swindle*, Sid Vicious somehow makes a mockery of Parisian boulevards simply by strolling down them. The punk as *anti-flâneur*.

Punk—we don't give a fuck. Strangely, this gestural provocation finds an analogous expression within Walter Benjamin's philosophical-political system. Historical consciousness arises from purely destructive activity. Benjamin describes the destructive character as having "no interest in being understood," indeed he [sic] provokes misunderstanding and disorder. "He sees nothing permanent," just ways everywhere, even through walls or mountains, and has "an insuperable mistrust of the course of things and a readiness at all times to recognize that everything can go wrong" (1985, 158). Rotten plays the Anti-Christ to Benjamin's Messiah as, screaming and snarling, he breaks a way through the wall. From this end of the century, the Sex Pistols' "no future" throws back a distorted answer to Benjamin's theory of History as Catastrophe, voiding it of its utopian elements and putting it on the stage.

How might Johnny Rotten react on a mad spree through Berlin? "Holidays in the Sun" records Rotten's encounter with the Wall (understood also as the monolithic and monotonous structure erected by "boring old farts" Pink Floyd). His

vision of History won't permit any attractions beyond the confines of a concentration camp ("I don't want a holiday in the sun. I want to go to the new Belsen.") His furious desire for sightseeing consumes itself in a stand-off at the Wall ("I'm lookin' over the wall, and they're looking at me"). The gaze of the Other drives him toward an intense burst of insight ("They're staring all night and they're staring all day. I had no reason to be here at all. Now I got a reason, it's no real reason and I'm waiting. The Berlin Wall"). Is this the Mirror Stage backwards or inside-out? He wants to go over or under the wall. What's he waiting for? He doesn't understand this bit at all but waves of sonic force compel him.

### IV: Nervous System

Michael Taussig feels the sting of recognition, the power of an image to galvanize thought, and leave its highly charged imprint on the mind and body. His composure is unsettled, an insignificant detail pierces through the pressurized atmosphere of the big city and disturbs him, stays with him all day, every day. A piece of graffiti shocks him into the acknowledgment of impulses and forces beyond his control:

*Nervous System.* That's all it said, scrawled across a shed I passed on the ferry, gliding over the green waters of Sydney Harbor, whenever I went into the city, reading about the terror of the early 20th-century rubber boom in the lower Putumayo River in south west Colombia. It was the early 1980's. The signs in the street were of unemployment, purple hair, and postmod anarchy. Apocalyptic omens. An underground doing time. And over there and far away, Colombia was in a state of siege. Torture by the State was commonplace. Paramilitary squads were on the make. Whenever I got up from my desk to cross the sunlit bay away from my other world over there and back then in Putumayan forests, the Nervous System stared at me in the fullness of its scrawled, enigmatic, might. (Taussig, 1992, 1).

The nervous system connects the inside and the outside, the 'primitive' and the postmodern, the mind and the body. It controls and organizes our responses to stimuli, functioning somewhat in the manner of an intelligent machine, but also acts as a warning device against perceived or imagined threat, a jangly, unmanageable bundle of electrically charged wires. The Nervous System can turn on you. It is not properly yours. Nor is it all together safe or reliable. The seeming order on the surface belies a seething disorder beneath.

Taussig applies this metaphor, this worrisome, nagging, *nervous* image, to

the social body. He anatomizes the State's manipulation of terror and the individual subject's response to it. Taussig makes use of Benjamin's proposition "that 'the state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule," in order to understand history as a state of siege, and recognize everyday life as constituted by a series of shocks and "moments of danger." Aside from designating a condition of reality, such as exists, for instance, in Belfast, Baghdad or the Bronx, Benjamin's and Taussig's formulation demands the rethinking of "our notions of order, of center and base, and of certainty too.... For our very forms and means of representation are under siege. How could it be otherwise?" (10). How reconcile the apparent normality of life, regular trips to the shops and visits from friends, with the arbitrary threat of a terrorist attack or a bomb blast, a police raid or evacuation order? How distance oneself from reports of 'ethnic cleansing' and images of racial violence? As Taussig notes, talking terror is precisely "a question of distance" (11).

I want to end with two arresting images from Ciaran Carson's *Belfast Confetti*. They tell me, from the distance of a past not wholly mine but not entirely other, what to listen and look out for in the future.

#### The Tin Can

Someone is telling the story of a policeman who was shot dead outside the National Bank at the corner of Balaklava Street in 1922; but the story does not concern the policeman; rather, it is about the tin can which was heard that night rolling down Balaklava Street into Raglan Street, and which was heard again for years after, whenever there was trouble in the offing. Someone else produces a week-old copy of *The Irish Times* which gives another slant to the story; the tin can has not been heard since the streets concerned were demolished; this is hardly surprising, since even ghosts must have somewhere to live. Someone else again ventures the notion that the ghost is only a by-product of the elaborate version of hide-and-seek known as *kick-the-tin*, and they all start to remember more, their favorite hidey-holes in entries and alleyways and back yards, till they are lost in the comforting dusk and smog and drizzle of the Lower Falls, playing: games of imitation, games of chance, of luck, of initiation; the agglomerate tag or *tig* called *chain-tig*.

A Photograph: Bosnia Street, Belfast, 1970

This one, for example, of Raglan Street, showing  
*...a sight that was to become only too common to a generation of British soldiers as rioters stone 'A' Company, 2nd Battalion, The Queen's Regiment, during the savage Lower Falls riots of 3-5 July 1970 which left five civilians dead and*

*eighteen military casualties...*

But the caption is inaccurate: the camera has caught only one rioter in the act, his stone a dark blip in the drizzly air. The others, those would-be or has-been or maybe rioters, have momentarily become spectators, as their protagonist does his David and Goliath act; some might be talking about the weather, which seems unusually drab for July, or maybe this is a bad print; some others are looking down Bosnia Street at what is happening or might happen next. The left hand frame of the photograph only allows the 'nia' of Roumania Street, so I don't know what's going on there, but I'm trying to remember—was I there that night, on this street littered with half-bricks, broken glass, a battered saucepan and a bucket?

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