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## The Rise and Fall of Mass Utopias: Critical Production and Political Hope in Susan Buck Morss's Dreamworld and Catastrophe

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## Review Essay

### The Rise and Fall of Mass Utopias: Critical Production and Political Hope in Susan Buck-Morss's *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*

David T. Johnson

Susan Buck-Morss. *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*. MIT Press, 2000.

When we think of critical movements in the humanities, we tend to imagine the underlying philosophies that fuel them. We might also recall specific figures who have been instrumental in shaping those philosophies. Rarely, however, outside of the most influential critical theorists, do we consider the rhetorical strategies that such movements draw upon. Typically, these strategies are fixed. Most academics use traditional argumentation in the form of a written essay; cultural studies has been no exception to this practice. A very few scholars, however, are beginning to test not only our underlying philosophies but the writing strategies we use to convey them. These authors submit that if they are to challenge current critical perceptions, they must offer not only new insights but change the context in which they are received.

Susan Buck-Morss's *Dreamworld and Catastrophe* embodies this emphasis on innovative writing strategies within cultural studies. The text presents itself, simultaneously, in many different frames of critical and historical reference. It is, as Buck-Morss writes in her "Notes on Method," "a theoretical argument that stresses the commonalities of the Cold War enemies, suggesting that socialism failed in this century because it mimicked capitalism too faithfully." It is also "a compendium of historical data that with the end of the Cold War are threatened with oblivion."

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Insofar as the book engages in the use of images, it “attempts to use images as philosophy, presenting, literally, a way of seeing the past that challenges common conceptions as to what this century was all about.” If all of these statements about the text appear discrete, Buck-Morss offers a final summation of her general intentions: “The purpose of the book is to provide the general reader with a cognitive experience that surprises present understandings, and subverts them. It is a warning that the evaluation of the twentieth century should not be left in the hands of its victors” (xv). Perhaps the greatest surprise to our present understandings is the sense of hope that emerges throughout these investigations, though Buck-Morss is far from naïve about the ways in which we are likely to find it.

Her foregrounding of method allies Buck-Morss with Walter Benjamin, a subject of past study who appears also in this text, and more broadly with avant-garde aesthetic movements. Form and content are inseparable for the latter, as they are for this writer. The book has four sections, and each section makes use of more traditional materialist analysis mixed with an experimental urgency. In the first sections, the two methods are explicitly separate, but as the book continues into its latter half, they become more difficult to distinguish. This admixture is by design. By the end, as she recounts her collaborations with Soviet intellectuals, Buck-Morss offers a way in which even autobiography might function critically; here, the book “shifts the focus, making visible the invisible present that surrounds the book’s writing. Constructed at the *intersection* between lived time and historical time, it is the author’s version of a feminist strategy” (xvi). What is this feminist strategy, and how does it relate to the other experimental strategies already at work in the text? How do any of these strategies recover a sense of political hope while revealing the dead-ends of so many utopiac dreams? Buck-Morss’s book is one that asks more questions than it answers, and readers are likely to find themselves returning to it repeatedly for its rich intellectualism, powerful use of images, evocatively written passages, and methodological experimentation grounded in materialist analysis.

Part I, “Dreamworlds of Democracy,” contains only one chapter, titled “The Political Frame.” This chapter is subdivided further into two sections: a theoretical discussion called “text” and a section called “hypertext,” in which Buck-Morss presents longer discussions of certain key terms in the “text.” Both sections appear, however, simultaneously; text runs along the top half of pages as hypertext appears at bottom. At first, one thinks the chapter has a very ambitious footnote section. But footnotes correspond to same-page references. What makes this hypertext different is that it jumps forwards and backwards across page divides; “Cold War Enemies,” for instance, the first topic of hypertext that begins on page 2, does not appear in the text until page 35. Interestingly, the general argument could easily be more traditionally written and would, in many ways, still be a powerful one. Buck-Morss suggests that both the United States and the Soviet Union had ideological roots in the French Revolution: the United States, in its desire for the nation-state, conceptualized in terms of space; the Soviet Union, in its desire for revolution, conceptualized in terms of time. The disruptive form of text and hypertext, however, goes one step further than a more traditional argument; it *enacts* the very kinds of historical disjunctions which she will use throughout the

book. The effect is to put our normal reading strategy in jeopardy, and this challenge to our reading complacency is a challenge to our critical one as well. Strangely, however, Buck-Morss does not condone merely leaping from one point in her text to the next; she wants the book to be read, more or less, from beginning to end. As she writes in her “Notes on Method”: “Although written in fragments, this book is meant to be read as a whole, as the argument cannot be divorced from the experience of its reading” (xv). Again, form and content are inseparable. Part I/Chapter 1 thus, from the beginning, dramatizes the tension between the experiment, embodied by the fragment, and traditional materialist analysis, embodied by the sequence. This tension is one on which Buck-Morss continues to build in attempting to break us free of our historical assumptions.

Having established time’s centrality to Bolshevik ideologies, Buck-Morss explores the subject further in Part II, “Dreamworlds of History.” Like Part I/Chapter 1, Part II contains a single chapter: Chapter 2. This conflation of subdivisions is not redundancy so much as a traditional manuscript pushed to the breaking point. Chapters threaten to overtake parts, just as parts threaten to overtake the entire book. Fragment and sequence are caught in a dialectic, one which Buck-Morss uses towards rethinking history. Like Chapter 1, Chapter 2 presents two subparts, one devoted to traditional materialist analysis, the other devoted to a more experimental mode. The first section “assembles historical facts of Bolshevik cultural politics around the armature of revolutionary time to show how this structuring of the imaginary field caused perceptual distortions within it” (41). Here, she explores the history of the Soviet avant-garde and vanguard movements. What is so fascinating about this investigation is that Buck-Morss is not just presenting her examples to make larger historical claims; she is also culling her methods from the objects of her study. Consider the following description of the avant-garde approach to time:

These artists’ practices interrupted the continuity of perceptions and estranged the familiar, severing historical tradition through the force of their fantasy. Progress for the early Russian modernists meant stepping out of the frame of the existing order—whether toward the “beautiful East,” back to the “primitive,” or through to the “eternal,” no matter. The effect was to rupture the continuity of time, opening it up to new cognitive and sensory experiences. (49)

Elsewhere in this section, Buck-Morss laments that “‘History’ has failed us” (68). She argues that the fall of the Soviet Union is not isolated from the future of the United States, as it demonstrates that the “modernizing project” which underscored both nations’ ideologies is no longer valid—nor, as a result, is the “cult of historical progress” (68). In the face of such rupture, how can history be conceived in a politically progressive manner? We must, like the Russian avant-garde, step “out of the frame of the existing order,” which, for us, is traditionally written histories. As she states in the closing of the first section of Part II, “To be engaged in the historical task of surprising rather than explaining the present—more avant-garde than vanguard in its temporality—may prove at the end of the century to be politi-

cally worth our while" (69).

After foregrounding the Russian avant-garde in the first section, Buck-Morss adopts an experimental style of her own. "Time Fragments" is a collection of four parts which "rescues the past in fragments, accessible to us in disparate images rather than the total picture, in order to challenge the accepted version of the twentieth century and reopen the case" (41). "Mythic Time" is a chronology of Lenin's body from his death to the present; "Reverse Motion" examines the building and eradication of monuments; "Against Time" asks why Kazimir Malevich false-dated so many canvases; and "A Short History of the Square" traces the abstract square in painting, from Russian Futurism to American Abstract Expressionism. These investigations would make worthy studies in their own right, yet Buck-Morss goes one step further by using the surprising juxtapositions of these normally separate histories to complicate our usual ways of conceptualizing the past. All the while, as promised, images function "as philosophy." A photograph of the toppled statue of Alexander III appears on the same page as a photograph of the toppled statue of Feliks Dzerzhinskii. The message, at first, appears to be that the Tsar's collapse mirrors that of the Soviet Union's. Pulling against the desire for analogy is the historical particularity of each photograph, taken from completely different contexts. In this exchange we find, perhaps, what Buck-Morss is after: not a simplistic historic comparison that elides over material differences, but also not a juxtaposition that suggests the images are discrete. The relationship is somewhere between these two poles, a dialectic of shock amid the rubble of history. It is small wonder that Walter Benjamin has been a recurring figure in Buck-Morss's scholarship.

Avant-garde forms not only set themselves against more traditional contexts but set themselves against *themselves*. Such artists create rules only to break them, often in the very same work. The avant-garde experimenter is thus always refining strategies lest any regulatory rhythm be established which might prevent the shock of the new. True to form, Buck-Morss, having established a neat pattern in the first two parts, turns against it in Part III. "Dreamworlds of Mass Culture" has three chapters, rather than one, and is subdivided into three parts, rather than two. By using three as the organizing number, Buck-Morss not only challenges her former organization based around two but challenges Western Culture's preference for the binary. Here, also, the sections are no longer so neatly divided between traditional scholarship and avant-garde experiment; the two modes intermingle in each section. Chapters are imagined as "constellations" that "are not history in the traditional sense. They are concerned less with how things actually were than with how they appear in retrospect. They reshuffle the usual ordering of facts with the goal of informing present political concerns" (97). Adding another metaphor, Buck-Morss writes, "The goal is to blast holes in established interpretations of the twentieth century, liberating new lines of sight that allow for critical reappropriations of its legacy" (97).

The dynamicism of the previous chapters pales in comparison to the rapid succession of images and historical moments we encounter in Part III. Chapter 3 touches on studies of the brain; a history of the term *aesthetics*; painting in early medicine; World War I injuries; Ford's assembly line; machine culture; Benjaminian

“shock”; the plans for “Green City”; machine fantasies; and Vadim Sidur’s machine people. Chapter 4 focuses on mass media developments; mass spectacle; the masses in cinema, both Hollywood and Stalinist; exchanges among filmmakers of both the US and USSR; and, finally, exchanges in steel and technology before World War II. Chapter 5, attempting to “blast” larger holes in traditional history, weaves even more disparate discussions and images together, including the coupling of King Kong and Lenin as figures atop buildings; domestic life in the Soviet Union; the difficulties women have faced in professional life; communal apartments and the ideology of the nation as family; and the “awakening” of the nation. Every chapter, historical moment, and image work off one another to produce the kind of shock effect Burk-Morss is after. It is appropriate that Sergei Eisenstein, whose theories of montage operated off similar juxtapositions, should appear throughout the book.

In this unusual text, perhaps the most surprising passages occur in the very last section. Frankly autobiographical, Part IV, entitled “Afterward,” consists of one chapter, Chapter 6. Here, Buck-Morss delivers a personal account of her work in the Soviet Union with Soviet intellectuals, a collaboration prevented by political circumstances until only recently. The narrative reads like a gradual awakening from innocence, as though the utopiac dreams which failed for the Soviets gradually did so for the intellectuals as well. As she says in the “Note on Method” preceding the chapter, “In the story told here, actors seized the chance, but missed their lines” (213). The story begins in May of 1987, when “even a foreigner could sense that the myths of revolutionary history were lifting like a mist” (214). Figures such as Valerii Podoroga, a senior researcher at the Sector of the Philosophical Problems of Politics; Mikhail Ryklin, another philosopher; and Elena Petrovskaia, a translator and intellectual contributor, were among the first people Buck-Morss worked with. Podoroga had begun holding “underground seminars” on European continental Philosophers previously considered bourgeois. At the same time, Western intellectuals like Jacques Derrida, Fredric Jameson, and Jürgen Habermas made contributions to the collaboration through visits to Moscow. “This was,” Buck-Morss reports, “the heyday of East-West exchanges” (223).

But as Buck-Morss continues to leave from and return to the former Soviet Union, the country continues its demise with every visit, as does the collaboration. The analogous disintegrations refract personal experience through larger social forces, and vice versa. In addition, this chapter presents another radical gesture: a materialist metaphysics. “Metaphysics here does not mean *above* the physical but *within* it” (257). If ideology works “directly upon the bodily senses in order to contain this rebellious potential,” then “the sensory circuit of the body, as a critically perceptive agency, *is* consciousness.” One liberates human beings ideologically not through a critique of the “world” in the general sense but through the “world as it is encountered directly by the cognizing body, experienced by the entire sensory apparatus against the grain of cultural preconceptions” (257). Here, Buck-Morss’s discussion of feminist strategies seems most clear in its accounting for the individual, bodily encounter with the actual world. Such a strategy would require an author to explore the individual experience: hence, this use of autobiography at the end of the book.

The chapter continues with a critique of Jeffrey Sachs's economic policy of "shock therapy," in which communist Europe was asked to change very rapidly to a market economy. Such a strategy does not work, as Buck-Morss illustrates—or, it works at the expense of its people. And the people, at least insofar as they have been constructed as a "mass," no longer have their utopian dreamworlds: "in the current system of global power, even the idea that the masses need placating is being tossed away as outmoded" (276). She concludes, however, despite the death of such dreamworlds, on a note of hope:

Oppositional cultural practices, if they are to flourish at all, must work within the present structures. But at the same time they can and do create new cartographies, the contours of which may have little to do with the geopolitical boundaries that confined culture in an earlier epoch . . . . In ways that diffuse their power but also have the potential to multiply it, the masses are being transformed into a variety of publics—including a virtual global humanity, a potential "whole world" that watches, listens, and speaks, capable of evaluating critically both the culture of others and their own. (277)

If Buck-Morss has signalled the end of mass utopias in this text, then, she has not dispensed with optimism. Perhaps, in the end, the book's greatest contribution to our discipline will be less the coupling of traditional analysis with experimentation than a greater sense of hope.

Such hope, however, must be earned by encountering the past in all of its fragmentary apparitions. No set of images and text illustrate this point better than a series at the end of Part III. On a left-hand page appears Aleksandr Rodchenko's poster for Dziga Vertov's film *Kino-Glaz* (1924). A small text accompaniment under the poster, featuring a large eye, describes the eye as "young and alert" (210). On the opposite page, to the right, one sees a photograph of Dmitrii Prigov's installation, *For the Poor Cleaning Woman* (1991). Again, a large eye figures prominently in the photograph, this time with the figure of an old woman bent over in front of the eye, which is shedding a single tear. Both images are in black-and-white, and the eyes are the same size. The juxtaposition of past and present in a simultaneous moment is clear—new and old, innocence and experience, utopian dream versus catastrophic awakening. But the images go one step beyond this juxtaposition. Looking closer, one sees that both eyes have their tear ducts facing the book's spine; in other words, it's as though one is looking at an anatomically correct pair of eyes. This shocking, momentary anthropomorphism is the text—and history—gazing back at us. As Buck-Morss writes under the Prigov installation, "Paired, these eyes form a face that spans the distance between dream and disillusion—the face of this century" (211). Like the eyes, Buck-Morss has borne witness to cultural history through her innovative critical strategies. We can only hope to do as much in our own work, no matter what rhetorical frames we use.