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**The colonies in concrete: Walter Benjamin, urban form,
and the dreamworlds of empire**

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While a number of scholars have sought to lift Walter Benjamin's urban writing out of its original European context and to re-appropriate it for studies of postcolonial cities and cultures, few have attempted to situate Benjamin's original analyses of urban consumer culture within the wider context of European colonialism in the nineteenth century. Yet, Benjamin's montage of the Parisian capital in the Arcades Project captures a key moment in the integration of metropolitan consumer publics into new global markets, and, with its plethora of exotic commodities, imperial spectacles and world fairs, records popular imaginative constructions of the colonies as spaces of leisure, luxury and abundance. This paper suggests that, in linking these images to the abstract and mysterious properties of the commodity form, and in underscoring the forms of abstraction at work in the 'dreamworlds' of metropolitan consumer culture, Benjamin's work can be seen to expose a colonial politics of the visible at the heart of nineteenth-century metropolitan consciousness. His theoretical interventions, moreover, give shape to an alternative mode of reading the metropolis – one that brings traces of the uneven histories and structural legacies of colonial exchange into the field of vision.

Contemporary urban theory has been deeply influenced by Walter Benjamin's analysis of the spectacular consumer cultures of the nineteenth-century European metropolis and their impact on urban sensory experience. That these cultures were shaped by colonial commercial activity in the same period, in regions as diverse as West Africa and urban China, has been the subject of less critical attention among Benjamin scholars – perhaps understandably so, given the European focus of works such as the *Arcades Project* (*Passagenwerk*). Thus, while Benjamin's writing on urban culture has been deployed for speculative studies of postcolonial metropolises such as Mumbai, São Paulo and Hong Kong (Patke 2002; Bolle 2009; Goebel 2011), few studies have focused on the colonial context of the *Arcades*. This critical oversight is surprising in the context of continued scholarly interest in colonial commodity culture and its effect on consumer identity in the nineteenth century (McClintock 1995; Ciarlo 2011; Short 2012). Moreover, far from neglecting colonial spaces altogether, the *Arcades* can be seen to trace their mediation within the European metropolis: among such urban fragments documented by Benjamin, for example, we find an abundance of colonial curiosities in shop-window displays, advertisements depicting exotic landscapes, and the public spectacles that were captivating

urban audiences – from the colonial wars depicted in imperial panoramas to the ‘native villages’ reproduced at world trade fairs. Nor are such cultural representations of the colonies mere oddities within the text; rather, they can be seen as central to Benjamin’s analysis of the integration of urban citizens into new consumer markets as they swelled to planetary proportions, expressing the collective fantasies of material abundance and world progress lodged within the re-encharmed ‘dreamworlds’ of metropolitan culture. Indeed, one might go so far as to claim that the traces of colonial culture to be found in the notes and essays that make up the *Arcades* represent one of its most overlooked aspects, the recovery of which remains crucial to an understanding of metropolitan identity in Benjamin’s late work.ⁱ

More specifically, as this paper will argue, it is precisely through greater attention to the mediated, colonial dreamworlds of the *Arcades* that new methods emerge for approaching the text’s central theoretical problem: that of *metropolitan abstraction*. This problem was a subject of concern as early as 1935 for Adorno, who critiqued Benjamin for what he took to be his ‘overly abstract’ representation of the commodity form, one Adorno felt could be ‘greatly concretized by the specifically modern categories of world trade and imperialism’ (2007: 118). Adorno thus proposed that Benjamin reformulate the ‘arcade as bazaar’, the antique shop as ‘world trade market’, and the problem of ‘compressed distance’ as a consequence of ‘imperial conquest’ (114). Implicit within Adorno’s critique is the idea that the transformation of Parisian consumer experience in the nineteenth century should be understood within the context of the wider circuits of the French Empire to which the city was connected. Yet as John Kraniuskas has more recently pointed out, the ‘colonial unconscious’ invoked here was to be almost immediately forgotten by both writers (2005: 357).

It is this historical overlooking that the following paper seeks to address, not simply in an attempt to broaden the project’s Eurocentric focus on commodity culture, but rather also to re-situate Benjamin’s analysis of the socio-spatial forms of abstraction at work in the modern metropolis – as mediated by its visual spectacles, architectures and financial cultures – within the entangled histories of colonial exchange. The paper will suggest that Benjamin’s project, in attempting to give a heightened ‘graphicness’ to urban history, can be seen on the one hand to record traces of colonial violence at the heart of modern metropolitan life, while also offering – through moments in which colonial exotica, spectacles and subjects become visible among the fragments – a mode of reading the city that remains attentive to the distant, invisible and complex social relations from which it cannot be extricated. The *Arcades*, with its embedding of collective memory in the urban

landscape, thus offers an alternative mode of reading the metropolis today – one that brings traces of the uneven histories and structural legacies of colonial exchange into the field of vision.ⁱⁱ

Colonial curiosities

While the various themes of the *Arcades* converge on the consumer cultures at the height of urban and industrial growth in Europe, and specifically France, the period of focus also coincides with the rapid expansion of the French colonial empire, which, in the years following 1830, stretched across Africa, the Middle East, India, South-East Asia, the South Pacific, and parts of China. The metropole was subsequently transformed by flows of exotic commodities and resources, including cocoa, bananas, coffee, tea, chocolate and tobacco, while exclusive luxuries such as ivory, cashmere and mother of pearl came within greater reach for urban populations. Benjamin excavates traces of the early colonial curiosities that found their way into the centre of Paris, piecing together fragments on the shops ‘selling products from the colonies and emitting a curious fragrance of exotic plants, spices and fruits’ (46, citing Dubreton). The *Arcades* catalogues the Indian shawls, porcelain vases, silk handkerchiefs, Arabesque and Chinese artworks, rare birds, mahogany furniture, tobacco pipes and jewels lining the glittering shop windows, and in tracing the early visual history of these displays, Benjamin evokes the sensuous combination of luxury and curiosity that such goods appeared to embody. In doing so, he captures an early sense of the mysterious power of wealth extracted, or seemingly *conjured*, from colonial territories. The Parisian arcades, like the richly furnished bourgeois interiors before them, provide an exotic escape fantasy for the middle classes. Yet, as Susan Buck-Morss has suggested, the colonial exotica on display also served to transform the colonies into ‘an abstract, ornamental surface – a kind of cosmopolitan gloss that covered over the realities of imperial domination with a dream-form of cultural internationalism’ (1995: 11).

This transformation of the colonies into an ‘abstract, ornamental surface’ is understood theoretically in the *Arcades* according to the ‘fetish-character’ of the commodity.ⁱⁱⁱ For Benjamin, the nineteenth century is viewed as a key moment in the transformation of relations between objects and men. Just as the ‘world of things’ begins to actively shape human consciousness, so new forms of autonomization are reflected in the language of commodity exchange: in the discourse of global trade, ‘cotton “soars”, copper “slumps”, corn “is active”, coal “is sluggish”, wheat “is on the road to recovery”, and

petroleum “displays a healthy trend” (181, citing Rühle). The magical life of things is captured visually in the proto-surrealistic artwork of J. J. Grandville, in which we find, for example, the moon reposing on a bed of fashionable velvet cushions; musical instruments playing themselves; and combs, wigs and mirrors growing from the seabed. Benjamin explores this Grandvillian universe with Marx and Adorno as his guides, citing the latter’s definition of the phantasmagoric commodity as a magical object, which must ‘look as though it had never been made, so as not to reveal that the one who sells it did not in fact make it, but rather appropriated to himself the labor that went into it’ (670). Benjamin hints at the social relations hidden from view by products that ‘grow of themselves’, ‘spring up’ or ‘flood in’ as natural phenomena, suggesting that the ‘enthronement of the commodity, with its luster of distraction, is the secret theme of Grandville’s art... Its ingenuity in representing inanimate objects corresponds to what Marx calls the “theological niceties” of the commodity’ (2). Just as here the mysteries of merchandise conceal the social relations that have made it available for inspection, so Grandville’s world resembles a giant shopping arcade, where relations between men are obscured by the magical ‘adventures of the strolling commodity’ (367). Benjamin declares that ‘Grandville’s fantasies confer a commodity character on the universe. They modernize it’ (8). Thus, the abstract ‘gloss’ found in the arcades now becomes a feature of the world as such: the harmoniousness of Grandville’s celestial shopping mall – with its interplanetary balconies serving as platforms for strolling *flâneurs* – manifests a cosmopolitan desire for integration that rests on a precarious fantasy of unmediated and peaceful commodity exchange. That this was a narrative with little bearing on the geopolitical realities of the time, especially during the Opium Wars, is evident in Grandville’s more satirical works.^{iv}

This nineteenth-century dream of cultural and commercial integration is also exemplified in the *Arcades* by the utopian projections of Charles Fourier, who, as one of the first ideologues of globalization, ‘speaks of a *transmission miragique* which will make it possible for London to have news from India within four hours’ (639). Fourier envisages a future in which the seas will turn to lemonade, humans will become amphibian, and the climate of Senegal will be as moderate as a French summer (621). For Benjamin, Fourier’s optimism is characterized by a Saint-Simonian faith in progress, as seen, for example, in the verse: ‘Yes, when the entire world, from Paris to China / O divine Saint-Simon, will come to embrace your doctrine / then must the Golden Age return in all its brilliance, the rivers will flow with chocolate and tea’ (7, citing Langlé and Vanderburch). The global spread of Saint-Simonian principles here unleashes floods of tea and chocolate, with animated roast meats subsequently wandering into the city and fish cooked in butter

‘navigating the Seine’. Benjamin identifies in these images a fantasy of pure exchange without the drudgery of labour, and, as such, a longing for a ‘classless society’ without exploitation or scarcity. Yet in their free flowing, magical apparition, products such as tea and cocoa are abstracted from the specifically *colonial* processes of their acquisition, and the Parisian ‘capital’ of modernity is separated from the colonial trading posts and plantations that are nevertheless implicated in its social and economical life.

In several of the exoticist narratives found in the *Arcades*, France’s colonies are imaginatively constructed as dream-spaces or Blochian ‘wish-landscapes’ of leisure, luxury and abundance. Benjamin cites the French journalist Du Camp in 1855, for example, on the descent of English, French and American locomotives into Asia’s ‘uncultivated, unused lands’ (748), as well as an 1848 colonial pamphlet recommending expansion into Patagonia:

These men, the tallest on earth; these women, of whom the youngest are so alluring after an hour's swim; these antelopes, these birds, these fish, these phosphorescent waters... all this is Patagonia, all this a virgin land rich’ (720, citing Arago).

This language of wealth and fecundity casts the proposed French colony as a veritable goldmine of untapped resources. Similar language can be found in Balzac’s 1832 imaginary journey from Paris to Java, with the then-titular French colony appearing as a ‘perfumed jungle’ of pleasure and abundance and a ‘fairyland’ rich with tea, opium, precious cloths and gold, as well as wealthy, attractive widows and ‘bejewelled slaves’: ‘this admirable land, always green, always varied, a meeting-place for all nations, eternal bazaar, where pleasure grows of itself, where the greatest freedom reigns’ (2010: 37). Such visions of the colonies as uncultivated treasure troves played into popular orientalist fantasies at this period, and as Sharae Deckard has suggested, they provided an imagined source of immediate wealth that legitimated colonial domination, disavowing the fact that it was ‘forced labour [that] enabled the persistence of the fantasy of work-free production and profit’ (2010: 8). The dream of acquiring raw materials from colonial ‘treasure lands’ without work, which Deckard illustrates through popular representations of the ivory-lands of the Congo and the pearl-beds of Ceylon, concealed the forced and indentured labour practices that continued even after the abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century (9).

Such fantasies also supported political and commercial agendas at the domestic level: through exoticist and primitivist imagery in particular, items such as chocolate or tobacco were advertised in ways that tapped into collective desires at home. Anne

McClintock, for example, has documented the quintessential example of soap, whose manufacture by the end of the nineteenth century ‘had burgeoned into an imperial commerce; Victorian cleaning rituals were peddled globally as the God-given sign of Britain's evolutionary superiority, and soap was invested with magical, fetish powers’ (1995: 129). Soap generated consumer desires precisely because its so-called civilizing function fed into nationalist discourses and forms of ‘commodity racism’. Yet, as David Ciarlo has shown in his study of colonial advertising, many of these products had little or nothing to do with the colonies: ‘One might reasonably ask what an African native or Orientalized black figure has to do with cigars manufactured in Cuba, with soap manufactured in Austria, or with chocolate manufactured in Germany’ (2011: 10). Enmeshed in the visual logics of commercial colonialism, such campaigns interpellated consumer identities by harnessing and reproducing not only collective national and racial anxieties, but also individual and class-based hopes for social transformation, inasmuch as they provided an exotic escape fantasy from the everyday monotony of working life in European factories. As such, the colonies can be seen to form empty dreamscapes for the projection of European hopes and desires, smoothing over the harsh realities of colonial extraction with the ‘abstract, ornamental gloss’ of an unmediated and friction-free process of commodity exchange.

Urban dreamworlds

In piecing together fragments of social and political content from the consumer cultures of the modern city, Benjamin exposes the unsustainable or ‘mythic’ foundations on which it was built. The architectures invoked in the *Arcades* can be seen to express – or more precisely to *mediate* – the city’s collective ‘dreamworlds’, a term whose meaning refers both to the utopian and the phantasmagoric qualities of experience under global capitalist modernity. For Benjamin, the nineteenth century constitutes the ‘dream’ from which we must wake: with the rise of industrial capitalism, society’s dream-visions come to reflect the promises of industry, technology, consumerism, and empire as they alter the ‘sensorium’ of urban citizens. In this ‘spacetime’ (*Zeitraum*) or ‘dreamtime’ (*Zeit-traum*), ‘the individual consciousness more and more secures itself in reflecting, while the collective consciousness sinks into ever deeper sleep’ (389). Benjamin applies a psychoanalytic method of dream-interpretation to the urban lifeworld, unearthing in the city’s promenades, exhibition halls and panoramas the ‘residues of a dream world’, and

perceiving in such structures as the Parisian railway station a ‘dreamworld of departure’, whose glassy architecture speaks to collective desires for transition and transformation (844). The dream-space is therefore a contradictory one. In a positive sense, it articulates the desire for mass utopia lodged in the collective unconscious, which stores unrealized fantasies of social change. Yet just as, for Bloch, the desire to ‘dream ahead’ is appropriated by the powers of modern advertising, so Benjamin associates the dreamworld with the return of a mythic conception of fate: capitalism, he claims, ‘was a natural phenomenon with which a new dream-filled sleep came over Europe, and, through it, a reactivation of mythic forces’ (391). In presenting itself as a natural and indestructible force, capitalism substitutes wish-image for historical analysis, casting a collective, fairytale sleep over society. Hence, as Buck-Morss (2002) has convincingly argued, the dreamworld comes to embody not only a poetic description of a collective mental state, but also an analytic concept central to Benjamin’s theory of capitalist modernity as the re-enchantment of the world.

For Benjamin, the dreamworld finds its material expression in the transient and phantasmagoric spaces of the Parisian arcades: these enact a symbolic fusion of private and public life through commerce, forming the stage upon which flows of global trade migrate from the domestic interior into the realm of mass culture. Benjamin understands the heyday of the arcades to have coincided with the military campaigns of the First French Empire and its spread of free trade principles (55). More specifically, as Brian Elliott has shown, he viewed them as the result ‘of small-scale private capital’ and the ‘intense growth in the markets for luxury items brought to western Europe from colonized territories’ (2009: 125). Even the newest arcade, Benjamin observes, was ‘built by an American pearl king’ (37). These productive origins materialize in the architecture of the buildings. The Passage du Caire, which was erected after Napoleon’s return from Egypt, contains ‘evocations of Egypt in the relief’, for example, with sphinx heads looming over the entrance (55, citing Berthet). Empire in this way is seen actively to shape metropolitan architectures and modes of public consumption – from the trend of French coffee shops emulating mosques after the Algerian invasion, to the oriental pavilions erected for exhibitions after the Opium Wars. Indeed, the arcades herald the development of internationalist architecture, and Buck-Morss has aptly defined them as the ‘hallmark’ of the modern metropolis that formed part of the ‘lived experience of a worldwide, metropolitan generation’ (1991: 39-40). As she suggests, in placing these buildings at the centre of his project, Benjamin anticipates their significance to the normalization of trade flows on a planetary scale.

The *Arcades* also recovers nineteenth-century global imaginaries in visual and commercial spectacles such as the panorama, diorama, wax museum (*Panoptikum*) and the magic lantern show. Of these, the imperial panorama offers a particularly evocative example of colonial culture, with its huge screens displaying locations around the world, and derivations like the georama, cosmorama, and carporama specializing ‘in the plants, flowers, and fruits of India’, the landscapes of the Bosphorus, and the ‘savages’ of the South Seas (538). As sweeping views of colonial territories unfold before the paying spectator, the contours of the world flash past like the exotic commodities in shop windows. John Philip Short has suggested that commercial spectacles like the panorama and the magic lantern show (from which the word ‘phantasmagoria’ is derived) were part of the broader dissemination and production of colonial knowledge, which initiated the masses into ‘a modern market worldview’ (2012: 3). While Benjamin acknowledges the political function of such displays, with their ‘imaginary colonial wars’, he also claims that the light of the magic lantern show ‘insinuated itself... into residences that were still poorly lit’ (531). Such spectacles altered the social fabric of the city according to the dictates of the market, projecting a panoramic consumer worldview onto even its most provincial neighbourhoods.

The spectacular staging of the world for metropolitan audiences continued into the second half of the nineteenth century with the advent of the world trade fair, an event in which European metropolitan centres vied for the position of cultural and ‘civilizational’ capital. Paris witnessed the construction of previously unimaginable exhibition halls of iron and glass, whose domes and minarets gave the city a cosmopolitan character. One spectator of the ‘World-Tour Panorama’ building in 1900, for example, recalls the ‘bizarre’ cacophony of Indian gallery, Chinese tower and pagoda (533), while spectators at the ‘Tour du Monde’ observe ‘a changing panoramic background with living figures in the foreground’ and wax dolls displaying ‘the costumes of various peoples’ (73). Noting that ‘the exhibition salons were full of oriental scenes calculated to arouse enthusiasm for Algiers’, Benjamin shows how the atmosphere of the fairs oscillated between a kind of nationalistic jingoism, on the one hand, and the more cosmopolitan agenda advanced by Louis Napoleon on the other (215, citing Gutzkow). As various studies of the world exhibitions and ethnographic displays have demonstrated, these imperatives were in fact remarkably compatible, with the products of empire offering a ‘panacea for all ills’ that promised an end to scarcity and unemployment and helped to cement national identity and class unity (Coombes 1988: 57; Davidson 2010; Greenhalgh 1988, 2011). As Ciarlo has recently shown, the chauvinistic climate at such events also resulted from the seemingly

innocuous imperatives of entertainment. After Bremen's 'Commerce and Industry Exhibition' in 1889 received largely negative reviews, for example, efforts were made to ensure the next exhibition would be 'visually exciting', with organizers hoping to boost ticket sales with the addition of vivid murals of 'darkest Africa', 'strange masks' and 'other startling artefacts of the primitive world' (2011: 32-6).

Both these political and commercial imperatives can be seen to converge, in the *Arcades*, around the subject of free trade. The exhibition halls, like the passageways before them, reflect broader cosmopolitan trends in architecture and entertainment in the city, which for Benjamin are expressive of a deeper dedication to the intoxicating promises of world trade. The Crystal Palace – described by Marshall Berman as 'one of the most haunting and compelling of modern dreams' (2010: 236) – is especially relevant in this context. After it was erected to house the first World Exhibition in London 1851, the sheer monumental proportions of glass spread a fairy-tale fantasy through Europe, offering a 'bazaar of universal progress' and a 'festival of emancipation' for the working classes (7). Benjamin reads in the architecture of the palace a mythic and triumphalist celebration of free trade that aligns universal progress with the spectacle of unfettered exchange (183). At the level of form, the architecture of the exhibition hall promotes an optics of passive spectatorship: 'the world exhibitions glorify the exchange-value of commodities' and offer 'training schools' in which the masses 'learn empathy with the exchange value. "Look at everything; touch nothing."' (201). Benjamin finds this command inscribed into the mirrored halls of the building, whose strategic embellishment dazzles the consumer-spectator into submission. Indeed, with its overwhelming sensory impact, the exhibition becomes a total work of art (*Gesamtkunstwerk*, 175). By such means, it normalizes a culture in which the lack of genuine economic and political participation of all is obscured by a visual feast of naturally unfolding progress.

Yet it is in the 'colonial unconscious' of this narrative that its contradictions become most apparent. The colossal cast-iron hall for the 1862 London exhibition, as Benjamin notes, is filled with the loot amassed from colonial campaigns, bearing treasures from the Peking Summer Palace after it was burnt down by French and British troops (187). The harmony established in the exhibition halls exists in the realm of things only: the glittering trinkets, costumed dolls and 'primitive' murals from the colonies, in effect, smooth over the tumultuous social relations between centre and periphery. At the fair, spectators enjoy a sanitized version of free trade without expropriation, without protectionism, without violence. Yet a narrative of imperial progress constructed on such mythic foundations was always precarious, and the destruction of the Crystal Palace in

1936 must have seemed emblematic for Benjamin. Its literal ruin, in the context of the *Arcades*, signals both the collapse of the nineteenth century dreamworlds of empire and the immanent crisis of inter-imperialist rivalry to come. It is thus in the dire political climate of the 1930s that Benjamin formulates his discussion of political aesthetics, which responds both to the rise of fascism in Europe and attendant geopolitical events elsewhere, including the colonial war in Ethiopia. Before arriving at his discussion of aesthetics, however, this paper will turn to the theoretical problems of urban form and colonial visibility that are presented by the *Arcades*.

‘The city made of markets’

In recent decades, scholars working from a postmodern framework have drawn attention to the prescient features of Benjamin’s urban imagination, with its emphases on cultural appropriation and recycling, porosity, inauthenticity, and the problems of navigation. Benjamin’s city is hybrid and culturally diverse, to be sure: in ‘One-Way Street’ he observes a leveling process at work in the metropolis, whereby ‘all things, in an irreversible process of mingling and contamination, are losing their intrinsic character while ambiguity displaces authenticity’ (1996: 454). In the *Arcades*, this loss of character is anticipated in nineteenth-century urban fantasies, in which the city limits are seen to extend to the ‘Land of the Papuans’, while the public gardens incorporate the ‘savannahs and the pampas and the Black Forest’ (137, citing de Rattier). Such projections reflect the midcentury political climate of megalomania and imperial ambition; yet they also echo the growing cosmopolitanism of the urban populace (a condition captured imaginatively by Baudelaire, with his street view of ‘Kalmucks, Osages, Indians, Chinamen, and ancient Greeks, all more or less Parisianized, 199). Specifically, this loss of character has its origins in Haussmann’s large-scale reconstruction of the city and its formal integration into the national and global economy. Benjamin reports that Paris after Haussmannization ‘ceased forever to be a conglomeration of small towns, each with its distinctive physiognomy and way of life’, becoming instead an ‘artificial city’ and ‘cosmopolitan crossroads’, where the ‘deracinated’ Parisian no longer felt at home (129, citing Dubech). The process described here, of uprooting citizens from the specificities of their geographical and sociocultural setting, anticipates later concepts like that of ‘disembedding’, as the mode by which social relations under global capitalism are lifted from their local context of interaction. Amid rapidly expanding circulations of people,

goods and culture, Benjamin foresees the cosmopolitan rootlessness of the twentieth century, which, he claims, will ‘put an end to dwelling’ (221).

This quality of rootlessness finds its expression in the city’s transitory architectures and phantasmagoric surfaces. The role of advertising in particular is crucial to the delocalizing or ‘flattening’ of space in the *Arcades*, where we witness for example the encroachment of whiskey and cocoa advertisements onto the walls of cafés; the posters for salt and ‘sea baths’ transforming dingy streets into deserts and oceans full of dolphins; and the city-wide proliferation of wandering sandwich-boards. Imprinted on the urban landscape, these commodity-signs allude to their own status as ‘unreal’ linguistic-symbolic signifiers whose meaning is no longer connected to any intrinsic notion of ‘use’ as such, but rather to the wider systems of value in which they circulate. Hence, Gilloch and Dant (2004) have read the *Arcades* in conjunction with theorists such as Baudrillard, for whom urban commodity culture is understood in terms of a profusion of signs and the hollowing out of meaning that this entails. The *Arcades*, however, employs Marx directly to align this process not so much with the proliferation of signs as with capital itself. Benjamin quotes Marx at length on the ‘ghostly objectivity’ of the commodity form, which, after escaping the producer and entering the global circuits of the marketplace, acquires a ‘life of its own’ as ‘a vexed and complicated thing’ whose reality is no longer governed by human beings (181). Benjamin shows how life in the metropolis becomes overdetermined by the magic of money: the real estate expropriations carried out under Haussmann, for example, call forth ‘a wave of fraudulent speculation’, transforming the city into a dreamworld that thrives on the hopes, fears and anxieties of its inhabitants (12). In this context Benjamin suggests that finance has become imbued with a quasi-religious character, citing Victor Hugo’s description of the stock exchange as a temple of ‘high religious solemnity’ dedicated to the modern structures of belief on which it depends (165). Likewise in Benjamin’s exhibitions and panoramas, reality is mediated not so much by subjective structures of thought as by those values explicitly connected to the universalizing logic of the money form. Hence, as we recall, the world exhibitions are seen to ‘glorify the exchange-value of commodities’ and to train the masses to ‘learn empathy with the exchange value’ (201).

It is also this primacy of exchange value in the metropolis that shapes its perceptual and representational possibilities. Benjamin frequently draws on the work of Georg Simmel, for whom the degradation of the individual significance of objects through exchangeability (however indirect and imaginary) is key to the difference between life in the medieval town and the modern city. In the latter, Simmel claims, it is not the commodity that is the centre of interest but the price (661). The urban man, under these

conditions, becomes subject to ‘the vast overwhelming organization of things and forces’ that make up the ‘seat of the money economy’: where relationships are abstracted and rendered unemotional according to the logics of exactitude and enumerability; where sentiments are replaced by interests; and where all value is flattened to the value of exchange (Simmel 1997 [1903]: 176). Consequently, by organizing human relationships into imperceptible relations of interdependence, money produces uncontrollable and seemingly ‘irrational’ eruptions and conflicts, which, because of their abstract nature, take the appearance of natural forces. Perhaps because of this tendency of the economy to resemble a kind of natural disaster, or an external ‘second nature’ to use the Lukácsian term, the city appears as a dense and primordial jungle in the *Arcades*. Benjamin notes Hugo’s equation of forests and cities, for example, with ‘dens in which all their vilest and most terrible monsters hide’ (415), as well as Balzac’s urban ‘monsters’ of a modern sort: bankers, usurers and attorneys who resemble Fenimore Cooper’s ‘ruthless Mohicans’ and who move among laws, snares and betrayals ‘as a savage in the New World moves among reptiles, ferocious beasts, and enemy tribes’ (440-7). In this way, reductive stereotypes of Native American communities are deployed to critique the legal and monetary ecosystems of the modern city. The result is captured by Engels, who laments the ‘brutal indifference, the unfeeling isolation of each in his private interest’ and the ‘narrow self-seeking’ that has become ‘the fundamental principle of our society everywhere’ (428). This leads, more generally, to a crisis of intelligibility in the *Arcades*: one of Engels’ associates insists that after property is ‘arrayed in the impersonal collective form of the joint stock company’ and caught up in the ‘whirlpool’ of the Stock Exchange, the successes and failures of individuals appear to arise ‘from causes that are unanticipated, generally unintelligible, and seemingly dependent on chance’ (497, citing Lafargue). It is thus the figure of the gambler that becomes emblematic of the urban man for Benjamin, insofar as, like the so-called ‘savage’ in nature, he remains subject to ‘inexplicable forces’.

Although this jungle metaphor rests on problematic assumptions about the survivalist character of societies in the tropics, it also suggests certain continuities between territorializing processes within and beyond the city, and, as such, it adds a colonial dimension to the problem of urban representation. As Fredric Jameson (1990) has argued, the difficulty of ‘cognitively mapping’ individual experience onto the wider social relations and processes that shape (and are shaped by) this experience can be understood historically as a result of the growing interdependency between metropolitan Europe and her colonial territories in the late nineteenth century. This matrix of relations forms what Jameson has referred to as the ‘unrepresentable totality’ of the colonial world system, in which the

‘truth’ of one’s limited daily experience of London, for example, is seen to lie ‘in India or Jamaica or Hong Kong; it is bound up with the whole colonial system of the British Empire that determines the very quality of the individual’s subjective life’ (1990: 349). Simply put: the city becomes all the more impenetrable and unrepresentable because of the wider global economy of which it is a part. Yet while, for Jameson, these structural coordinates are no longer accessible to immediate lived experience, this does not imply that members of pre-capitalist societies had access to a total picture of social life. Rather, it reflects a new state of depersonalization brought about by the colonial process, which, according to Jameson, ‘is objective, and is impersonally achieved, or at least set in motion, by the penetration of a money economy’ (1981: 216).

To what extent, then, might the phantasmagoric spaces of Benjamin’s ‘city made of markets’ in the *Arcades* (838) attest to processes that are abstract or ‘objective’ in character, as Simmel and Jameson would have it? A similar question has been posed in the context of urban visual culture by David Cunningham, who, in view of the ‘actuality of abstraction’ that defines contemporary metropolitan existence, calls for a politics of the visible that brings into the “field of vision”, via a spatial re-ordering in the image, what is otherwise invisible or ‘unknown’, abstracted or anonymous, from the position of either producer or consumer’ (2013: 50). Yet equally, following Jameson, Cunningham questions the extent to which abstract systems of exchangeability and dependency can in fact ever be ‘seen’ – especially if, as for Marx, commodity fetishism displaces the *desire* to see.^v It thus becomes necessary, as Julian Murphet has recently suggested, to grasp the simultaneous appearance of a plane of immanence where all is enumerated and equivocated, on the one hand, and the sudden impasses presented by concrete historical situations, on the other (2013: 5). It is in this context that I want to return to Adorno’s 1935 letter, which advocates an understanding of abstraction that is grounded in precisely this ‘concretizing’ process, but which is at the same time related to the specific history of ‘imperial conquest’. A politics of the visible, along these lines, might necessitate not only a spatial re-ordering of the image to include relations of production, but also a historicizing gesture that takes into account the material channels, circuits and networks of exchange established during the process of colonization (evidence of what Marx calls ‘previous labour’). Benjamin, significantly, takes as his methodological starting point the ‘perceptibility’ of history as such, asking: ‘in what way is it possible to conjoin a heightened graphicness (*Anschaulichkeit*) to the realisation of the Marxist method? The first stage in this undertaking will be to carry over the principle of montage into history’ (461). While much has been written on the subject of this method in the *Arcades* – which attempts to bring ‘the

entire past ... into the present in a historical apocatastasis' through 'dialectics at a standstill' (459-62) – there has been less focus on how Benjamin's method adds a heightened graphicness to the history of colonial exchange specifically.

To a certain extent, the *Arcades* can be seen to render visible the spatial means by which capitalism reconstitutes itself – the moment when capital 'hits the ground' as it were. In documenting the devotion of the Saint-Simonians to the principles of transnational credit and foreign investment, for example, Benjamin shows how institutions like the *Crédit Mobilier* advanced the 'industrialization of the earth' with 'wild speculations in everything – railroads, hotels, colonies, canals, mines, theaters' (585, citing Friedell). On the one hand, then, the conditions for financial opportunism are seen to lie in the expropriation and gentrification of real estate in Paris (as David Harvey [2003] has shown); on the other, this involves the construction of infrastructural 'arteries' – the highways, railroads and gas tanks that for Benjamin constitute the 'energies of the big city' – by which the 'healthy' metropole is linked to the wider circulatory system of the empire. Technologies like the telegraph, for instance, connect metropolitan desks to colonial offices in Africa, Asia, the Americas, with thousands of miles of cables, wires and subsea pipelines drawing distant territories into an emerging global-financial matrix (567). Moreover, for Paris to become a networked 'global city', of the kind that contemporary urban theorists trace back to the nineteenth century, planners had to develop strategic sites for global capital around the world (Sassen 2005: 41). The French public of the 1830s and 40s was therefore summoned 'by' the Orient to 'irrigate its deserts' and to erect the 'towers of the *ville nouvelle*' (398):

Our flag has lost patience with the sky of France;
Over the minarets of Egypt it now must wave
....
With our ribbons of iron
Subduing the desert sands;
Cities, like palms, will spring up everywhere (720, citing Maynard).

As fantastical as these plans appear, they were to some extent realized in the militarized redevelopment of cities such as Algiers or in 'ribbons of iron' like the Suez Canal, which dismantled older trade networks to make way for new economies of extraction (572). The 'planetary enterprise' of Haussmannization, in the *Arcades*, is seen to reflect the wider logic governing the empire as a whole, which, to quote le Corbusier, was of a 'financial and military character' (125, emphasis added). Fragments such as these make visible both

the colonial foundations upon which modern exchange relations and capital mobility were established, and the circuits through which they were to be maintained thereafter.^{vi} Here it should be noted that while Marx explicitly rejects the conflation of abstract values in motion with the physical circulation of commodities (the speculative value of a house, for example, ‘circulates’ only in an abstract sense), in other work he attests to the more ‘concrete’ spatial history of finance (he notes, for example, the incorporation of China and India into a single ‘internal financial system’ during the Opium Wars).^{vii} It is the question of the historical *visibility* of this circuitry that lies, above all, at the heart of the *Arcades* in a formal and aesthetic sense, and it is here that we find possibilities for an alternative spatial history of the metropolis.

The colonies in concrete

With his plan to ‘construct the city topographically’ from ‘its arcades and its gateways, its cemeteries and bordellos’ and ‘the bloody knots in the network of the streets’, Benjamin hints at a foundational or ‘structural’ violence at the heart of the modern metropolis (83). Just as a detective uncovers traces of past violence in the urban landscape, so Benjamin, when scrutinizing Atget’s street photographs, asks: ‘is not every square inch of our cities the scene of a crime?’ (2005: 527). He contrasts this with the kind of ‘creative’ photography that encourages a purely appreciative response, and that in aiming to increase salability rather than knowledge can ‘endow any soup can with cosmic significance but cannot grasp a single one of the human connections in which it exists’ (526). He follows this with Brecht’s observation that a photograph of a Krupp factory no longer reveals anything of its ‘reality’. Merely *seeing* a photograph is no longer sufficient if we wish to grasp the abstract relations, processes and historical contingencies that have come together to make it visible in the first place. Surrealist photography, which for Benjamin anticipates more radical techniques in film and theatre, gives ‘free play to the politically educated eye’ (519), enabling the ‘literate’ reader of images to make connections between objects, spaces, and the narratives that bind them.^{viii} Benjamin’s own project arguably constitutes an attempt to do just this: he takes as his subject matter and method the *form* of the city itself, with its ‘remarkable propensity for structures that convey and connect’, and suggests that ‘this connecting or mediating function has a literal and spatial as well as a figurative and stylistic bearing’ (125). It was thus primarily through ‘dialectical images’ that the *Arcades* was to set about generating cognitive sparks and flashes of recognition in the minds of its

readers, altering the contours of their political lifeworlds with fragments of collective memory – or what Bloch called ‘debris from an exploded totality’ (1979: 95).

Benjamin’s dialectics at a standstill also constitutes a mode of reading not as passive, sensory immersion, but as an ‘actualising’ process that lifts phenomena out of the abstract and systemic patterns of meaning with which they have been apprehended. What is subjected to scrutiny, above all, is the web of *a priori*, already-configured patterns that make up capitalist historicity, and which, like a woven tapestry whose skeins are tightly spun together, construct a mythic narrative of the ‘natural’ social order of things. Against this, Benjamin celebrates de-familiarising moments in which objects are lifted from the continuum of their codified meaning; yet this is not to say that we access a fragment of the ‘real’ in so doing. Rather, as Jameson shows, following Althusser, objects are always-already mediated, and it is precisely this liberation from the empirical object that displaces ‘our attention to its *constitution* as an object and its *relationship* to the other objects thus constituted’ (1981: 287). Tellingly, Jameson illustrates the importance of this positionality by invoking Benjamin, for whom every document of civilization is at once a document of barbarism.^{ix} Indeed, despite his involvement with the Collège de Sociologie, Benjamin can be seen to eschew ‘base materialism’ in favour of the ‘truth of illusion’ espoused by his project’s central protagonist, Charles Baudelaire. For Baudelaire, the truth lies precisely in the abstract, illusory and inauthentic dreamworlds of the modern city: writing on the illusions of the diorama, for example, he claims that ‘these things, because they are false, are infinitely closer to the truth’ (536). This is an urban reality mediated by forms, but as Benjamin shows by drawing on the work of Karl Korsch, these forms are no longer ‘natural’ and ‘eternal’ but consist entirely of ‘a social *matter* mediated and transformed through human social activity... capable of further change and modification in the present and the future’ (483). The role of the historian in this landscape – like that of the rag-picker or collector, sifting through objects once they have become outmoded – involves actively and radically re-appraising the given meanings of cultural texts.

The same can be said for the systems of value established in the commodity dreamworlds of empire. Benjamin writes that ‘When he went to meet the consumptive Negress who lived in the city, Baudelaire saw a much truer aspect of the French colonial empire than did Dumas when he took a boat to Tunis on commission from Salvandy’ (327). In contrast to Dumas (who is seen to give French citizens ‘a taste for colonialism’ with his travel writings from Algeria, 750), Baudelaire finds the ‘truth’ of the empire in the heart of the city, and, more specifically, in the commodified, consumptive body of a colonial subject. Stripped of exotic, fantastic and naturalizing narratives, the destructive

undervaluation of colonial life and labour is laid bare. Yet while Baudelaire ‘feeds on the sensory data taking shape before his eyes’, for Benjamin this ‘often possesses itself of abstract knowledge – indeed, of dead facts – as something experienced and lived through’ (417). Baudelaire’s imagery, as modern allegory, enables one to see not the ‘real’ behind the ‘dead facts’, but to recognize the constituting power of the facts themselves – specifically, here, the power of capitalist markets to subject matter (and life) to the regime of exchange value. These ‘dead facts’ also transform Benjamin’s impression of Marseilles, a ‘world of images’ caught up in global commodity flows, yet where ‘invisible lines’ divide the city ‘into sharp, angular territories like African colonies’ (1999 [1929]: 232). Observing the ‘black and brown proletarian bodies’ thrown into the city by shipping companies ‘according to their timetables’, Benjamin maps the abstract domination of colonial and racialized bodies onto the urban terrain. Polemically speaking, this technique threatens to disrupt the fictions of a market that demands active compliance yet which rests on mythic – and ultimately debilitating – narratives of naturalness and inevitability. Perceiving the truth of illusion thus creates a window to alternative, not-yet realized worlds of meaning and value. Moreover, Baudelaire renounces ‘the magic of distance’ (331), like the opium-smoker who ‘experiences the power of imbibing at a glance a hundred sites from a single spot’ (Benjamin 2006: 85). In doing so, the dreams holding spaces apart collapse under the immense pressure of the circuits connecting them.

One such moment occurs when Benjamin walks past the rows of crumbling tenements in the Place du Maroc: suddenly, the street transforms into a ‘Moroccan desert’ and ‘a monument of colonial imperialism’, where ‘topographic vision’ is ‘entwined with allegorical meaning’ (852). Such fragments in the *Arcades*, in precisely this way, can be seen to spark moments that unravel the skein of colonial history, exposing traces of the violence that has ‘governed the ordering of the colonial world’ (Fanon 2004: 5). Another example takes place when Benjamin visits an unfamiliar part of town to pay customs duty on some china porcelain. With a violent shock of force, he recognizes a signboard advertising ‘Bullrich Salt’ and is transported back to his childhood. The salt, set against the background of a desert landscape, spells out its own name as a trail on the ground in an ‘orchestrated predestination’ (174). For Benjamin, the objects encountered in childhood belong to a mythic world that seems predetermined by that of the parents; in the same way, this poster appears just as mythic and natural as it did to Benjamin’s childhood self. In the *now-time* of its re-appraisal, however, it is lifted from the continuum of its naturalized meaning. In this case, as Merrick Burrow has shown, we see the true nature of the commodity form: the name ‘Bullrich Salt’ spelled out on the sand projects ‘the most

advanced element of pure exchange value – the logo – onto the landscape itself’ (2004: 116). Yet, as Wulf Hund (2012) has further revealed, the *actual* image shows not salt spelling its own name but a black figure emptying it into the sand. While the literal context – of former German East Africa, Mount Kilimanjaro and the salt deposits surrounding it – are lost to Benjamin’s memory, its recovery upon re-reading adds a new dimension to his allegorical method and the way we employ it today.

Postcolonial dreamworlds

As we have seen from the images amassed in the *Arcades*, the colonial imaginary of the nineteenth century – with its fantasies of cities that ‘spring up’ like palm trees in the desert, or of tea and chocolate that flows magically into the Seine – stages a spectacle of difference that reconstructs the world according to the logic of colonial marketing: as an exotic, colorful bazaar and a haven of consumer choice. Through Benjamin’s theoretical interventions, however, we see how such imaginaries objectify and fetishize colonial space as a pure, ontological and unmediated social order, in a mode indispensable to Europe’s self-identification as a locus of progressive agency and the sole driving force of industrial modernization – the ‘capital’ of modernity so to speak. As such, the dreamworld of empire leaves only traces of the contested and marginalized histories of capitalist modernity, traces which are, as I have tried to show, recoverable among the urban fragments of the *Arcades*.

How, then, by way of conclusion, might Benjamin’s project of historical graphicness offer new insights for urban imaginaries in a ‘postcolonial’ age? More specifically: how can his thought be brought to bear on the preoccupations of scholars of his own work within this context, and particularly those who apply it to discussions of the postmodern metropolis? In a recent essay on Benjamin and the global city, Rolf Goebel identifies a current tendency among Benjamin scholars to go beyond the ‘historical-critical analysis of Benjamin’s works in their original context in order to reread his theories in terms of disciplinary paradigms and cultural situations that he did not (fully) recognize’ (2011: 488-9). In the case of his essay, this context is the global metropolis of financial and specialized services, transnational corporations and hybrid flows of goods and culture, a city that is epitomized, for Goebel as for others, by contemporary Hong Kong. In this context, Benjamin’s Paris becomes a ‘historical site that anticipates the accelerated hybridization and virtualization of culture characteristic of today’s global cities’ (489). Yet while Hong Kong is no doubt an exemplar of this cultural logic, the city can also be seen to

insist, strikingly, on the territorializing, colonial processes that have constituted both its own history and that of global finance more generally. Indeed, one might go so far as to suggest that contemporary visions of the ‘postmodern’ metropolis under globalization, as one characterized by virtualization, autonomization and financial flows, are in some ways *unsettled* by the case of Hong Kong – a city with a large portion of the world’s factories just across the border, and in which we find, in a metaphorical sense at least, the modern, Chinese ‘reality’ of the Krupp factory. A Benjaminian fusion of historical memory thus complicates the forms of abstraction – both temporal and spatial – that are necessary if we are to endorse Hong Kong’s capitalist identity as a site of historical ‘disappearance’ or a ‘virtual’ space of flows.

Benjamin famously saw something anticipatory or prophetic in the ‘dreaming collective’ when he claimed that every epoch dreams of the one to follow. While his extension of the abstraction of labour at work in the commodity fetish to the logic to the commodity-producing society more generally was critiqued by Adorno, Benjamin was concerned not with how society ‘is’ but with how it ‘represents’ and ‘understands’ itself.^x From the perspective of colonial uneven development, it might well be possible to identify a more *collective* process of abstraction in modern metropolitan life. Take, for example, Benjamin’s attentiveness to the permeability and porosity of the glass and iron architecture pioneered in the arcades: to what extent does this anticipate the future-aesthetics or ‘wish-landscape’ of a metropolitan Europe that has dematerialized into a global hub of strolling commodities and financial flows? The Crystal Palace dreams of a time without dark satanic mills – or, at any rate, a time when traces of industry have been purged from metropolitan consciousness. Then as now, in a spatial sense, such visions threaten to obfuscate the sites of labour and industry that exist just beyond the city limits, and, when considered historically, they gloss over the structural deficit or ‘debt’ – to borrow from Fanon (2004: 57) – incurred by the violent ordering of the colonial world and its enduring racial ascriptions. In an era that Buck-Morss has defined as one of ‘global immanence’, Benjamin’s call to forge connections between the objects, places and processes that constitute the web of capitalist reality seems a productive alternative. Indeed, his materialist historiography of the city might enable us to move in directions that undermine – rather than reinforce – the false harmony of the commodity dreamworld, recovering networked and hidden sites of agency beyond the trading room floor. Benjamin claimed famously that the spoils of history and its cultural treasures owe their existence to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. As both ruin and construction site, the *Arcades* gives us a critical

architecture of urban modernity, and, among the fragments, it makes visible the colonial foundations on which it was built.

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Notes

ⁱ Here it is important to note the hermeneutic struggle over conflicting 'Benjamins' within contemporary scholarship. As various critics have observed, elements of Benjamin's linguistic, mystical and messianic thought have tended to sit uneasily with his later materialist and unorthodox Marxism (see Esther Leslie 2000). In any case, as Benjamin's biographers have noted, his work towards the end of the 1920s made a

departure from the concerns of Weimar academic circles under the influence of the militant avant-gardism of the Surrealists. The beginning of the *Arcades* marked, in his own words, the 'end of an epoch of careless, archaic, philosophizing... [and] rhapsodic naiveté' (1994 [1935]: 488-9).

ⁱⁱ In this way, the historiographic method proposed by Benjamin has already proven useful for the kind of postcolonial scholarship that has sought to excavate traces of the cultural and economic inequality that persists under contemporary globalization. In a recent essay, which begins with Benjamin's *Angel of History*, Neil Lazarus has called for a suitably materialist engagement with global history in all its complex and persistent unevenness (2013: 534).

ⁱⁱⁱ Benjamin's explicit if unorthodox use of Marx throughout the *Arcades* calls for an understanding of the commodity that remains to some degree subject-centred. For a critique of contemporary locations of agency in objects, see Janet Wolff's 'After Cultural Theory' (2012: 3-19).

^{iv} One satirical cartoon from 1840, for example, shows the British army forcing crates of opium onto the Chinese (Renonciat 1985: 294).

^v For Marx, the 'concrete relationships of cooperation and dependency between different types of labour that are needed to produce commodities are invisible. They have no discernible social expression', Osborne (2005), as cited in Cunningham (2013: 49). Nevertheless, Cunningham affirms that 'it is the metropolis which, above all, spatializes this displacement in its 'concretizing' of that abstraction inherent to social relations of exchange' (50).

^{vi} Hardt and Negri outline the structural forms of violence through economic dependency that this entailed (2000: 298).

^{vii} This colonial history led to the establishment of territorial enclaves for finance and trade such as Hong Kong, and, in a contemporary sense at least, cannot be entirely separated from the machinations of international property markets. See Marx *Capital Vol. 2* (1981) and 'Trade or Opium?' (2007 [1858]).

^{viii} As Buck-Morss has shown, Benjamin diverged from the Surrealists in his reluctance to rest revolutionary hope directly on the capacities of the individual imagination (1991: 114).

^{ix} Benjamin, as Jameson explains, acknowledges that all 'great' documents of 'civilization' that have survived and have been transmitted through 'the various museums, canons and "tradition" of our own time, are all in one way or another profoundly ideological, have all had a vested interest in and a functional relationship to social formations based on violence and exploitation' (1981: 289).

^x Benjamin suggests in the *Arcades* that the commodity's 'fetish character attaches as well to the commodity-producing society-not as it is in itself, to be sure, but more as it represents itself and thinks to understand itself whenever it abstracts from the fact that it produces precisely commodities' (627).