



## *Constellation and dialectics at a standstill*

How does Benjamin “make use” of these ruins and fragments, how does he lead them to function allegorically?<sup>47</sup> For Benjamin, the allegorical function rests in something called the dialectical image. The dialectical image contains both its fore-history and its after-history within itself, as opposed to past and future. Past and future are referential to the present, implying a kind of development from one into the other. The allegorical (dialectic image), on the other hand, is non-referential. Instead of images that refer to a past and a future, Benjamin presents an idea of the “dialectical image” or the “constellation”, which contain the tension of time in a single moment on the *border* between past and future. On this border, there is no chronology, or perspective. 100 years ago means the same as 5 years ago. There is only the “what-has-been” crashing against “the now”:

“It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what-has-been comes together in a flash with the now to form a *constellation*. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent.- Only dialectical images are genuine images (that is, not archaic) ; and the place where one encounters them is language.”<sup>47</sup>

When ideas function as an image, there is no movement between them, they are stuck, but there is a tension of meaning permanently between them: like a constellation in the sky. Benjamin consistently traces different dialectical images as constellations. This allows him to relate materials across history and set them in tension with one another. For example, in the Arcades Project, Benjamin identifies and delineates a number of constellations such as the “constellation of awakening”<sup>48</sup> or the “constellation of phantasmagorias”.<sup>49</sup> This is not simply an “organizing strategy”, it is a form of writing or art.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 462.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 458.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 25.

Numerous essays by Benjamin are composed by numbered fragments: “Moscow”, “One Way Street”, and what we know of *The Arcades Project*. I think that people’s lack of understanding of Benjamin’s work *in his own terms* has led to wide-spread misunderstanding. Perhaps Walter Benjamin’s writings have more in common with the collages of Max Ernst, the sound-objects of Pierre Schaeffer or the ready-mades of Méret Oppenheim than they do with the philosophers of the Frankfurt School with whom he is often associated.<sup>50</sup>

Benjamin’s method of constellation often appears as simple juxtaposition. Whether they are two of his ideas, or ideas of other individuals, the positioning of ideas in constellation allows them to maintain their distinction and tensions while simultaneously giving them new meaning in light of each other. The constellation is a creative method which allows for seemingly infinite use of the same materials – placing them in new positions and thus illuminating new aspects of each idea.

The form of the constellation also problematizes the author function. Benjamin discusses constellations as something which already exist, implying that he is merely drawing attention to them and not actively “using” constellation as a method. *A form without author?* This certainly seems to be the case. If we view the Arcades Project as a finished work, even if it is debatable how finished sections of this are, attributing authorship to different passages is difficult. The work is an assemblage of fragments, quotations, and quotations of quotations. This form is particularly interesting for my project because its questioning of the author function changes works’ relationship to immortality and death. According to Michel Foucault, the “writing act” is a sacrificial act:

“Writing is now linked to sacrifice and to the sacrifice of life itself... Where a work had the duty of creating immortality, it now attains the right to kill, to become the murderer of its author. Flaubert, Proust, and Kafka are obvious examples of this reversal”.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Benjamin was a friend of Theodor Adorno until the two had a falling out over *music*. Adorno did not like the influence of Brecht and Weill on Benjamin’s work, and was hurt by Benjamin’s criticism of his own opera. (See Adorno’s Letter to Benjamin from London on March 18, 1936).

<sup>51</sup> Michel Foucault, “What is an Author”, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), p.102.

Following the general trends in Western language use discussed earlier, the author function sacrifices life to meaning which can exist over time. Benjamin's work and methods seems to an extent to elude this. Instead of giving up his own life to attain "authorship" of the text under his name, Benjamin allows the text to retain a certain independence through problematizing the author function:

"Cyrano de Bergerac become a pupil of the astronomer Arago" Journal des Goncourt, July 16, 1856. no. 3 "If Edgar Poe dethroned Walter Scott and Merimee, if realism and bohemianism triumphed all down the line, if certain poems about which I have nothing to say (for fairness bids me be silent) were taken seriously by ... honest and well-intentioned men, then this would no longer be decadence but an orgy." Pontmartin, *Le Spectateur*, September 19, 1857; cited in Leon Lemonnier, *Edgar Poe et la critique française de 1845 à 1875* (Paris, 1928), pp. 187, 214.<sup>52</sup>

One could look at this through the traditional lense of citation and attribution, but the citations are more often than not citations of citations, or even citations of citations of references, spinning into a labyrinth of referral. And what of Benjamin himself? It seems that his name, least of all, has a "grasp" over his work. Constellation brings the connotation of astrology, and with astrology *fate*. This becomes a key topic for Theodor Adorno, but Benjamin seems to avoid the term astrology in *Arcades* project. This is further indication that the constellation as a form already has its significance *in its image*, not in the interpretation of this image. The constellation functions allegorically, and not referentially or hermeneutically. Astronomers and hermeneuticians abuse these forms and do not allow the constellations to function as such.

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<sup>52</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 303.