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PROFANE ILLUMINATIONS AND THE EVERYDAY

The historical movement of surrealism continues to influence contemporary theories of everyday life even if its project of bourgeois self-transformation proved to be an epochal failure. The melancholic subjectivity associated with surrealist experiments is often regarded as a form of resistance against objective conditions of capitalist domination. This essay looks at Walter Benjamin's and Theodor Adorno's arguments about surrealism's radical attempts to transform the everyday. It reflects on the similarities and differences between the views of these two Frankfurt School thinkers, showing how Benjamin found surrealism to be ultimately inadequate to the purpose of social critique, while Adorno still located in its vision a source of possibility for overcoming the alienation of subject and object. Both Benjamin and Adorno took surrealism to be the site of an epistemological and political crisis, but they had differing interpretations of its critique of commodity culture. Benjamin emphasized surrealism's 'montage-like' strategies of estranging the familiarity of the everyday world but concluded that the 'profane illuminations' of surrealism never managed to transcend the realm of the imagination, or to serve as a call to action. Adorno, by contrast, saw in surrealism the potential to mobilize subjective aesthetic experience against the rationalizing imperatives of daily life, although he did not think the lessons of surrealism could be duplicated or reduced to a dogma about the efficacy of the unconscious. For Benjamin, particularly, the limitations of surrealism as a political and aesthetic movement revealed the ongoing necessity of organized political struggle, even as he understood its 'intoxicating' appeal. In this, he remains distant from contemporary modes of criticism that celebrate the ineffability of cultural margins and the oppositionality of subjective modes of being.

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For the German philosopher Walter Benjamin, the concept of 'aura' applied not only to artworks but also to ideas themselves and, in his collected writings, he credited his Weimar contemporary, Karl Kraus, with having captured the essence of aura as follows: 'The closer you look at a word, the more distantly it looks

back'.¹ Benjamin's use of a proposition that he borrowed from Kraus (although it has come to be associated with him alone) as well as the relay between the entire framework of Weimar thought and the discourse of cultural studies, gives us some indication of the distances – and misunderstandings – that today separate critical theory's materialist emphases from our own scholarly conversations. The problematic of everyday life represents one site of both distance and convergence, especially to the extent that the idea of everyday life has become self-evident and, at the same time, elevated into a concept-metaphor for social existence. The objective of this essay is to work out an adequate understanding of how their perspectives on the historical movement of surrealism informed, in particular, Benjamin's and later, his younger colleague Theodor Adorno's theorizations of the everyday. This objective is in keeping with ongoing efforts to provide an adequate historicization of the philosophical antecedents of cultural studies (as exemplified, for instance, by the Frankfurt School's social philosophy).

Recent cultural studies of consumption and lifestyle often privilege everyday life as the terrain of oppositional expression (a position I find conceptually vacuous and ultimately unrelated to the project of serious critique). Rather than addressing that literature, I will focus on Benjamin's and Adorno's powerful formulations regarding the necessity to *overcome* the charge of the everyday, with the hope that the 'unforced force of the better argument' – as Jürgen Habermas once put it – has something more (and still) to offer in the ongoing struggle to transform the present. Benjamin's 1929 essay, 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia' and Adorno's brief 1956 retrospection entitled, 'Looking Back on Surrealism' provide most of the bases for this discussion (although there will be occasion also to make reference to other writings that bear on the problem).^{2,3} The phrase, 'everyday life', invoking as it does the inimitably important ideas of Henri Lefebvre (and, to a lesser extent, Michel de Certeau) has more commonly been traced to various traditions of French Hegelian thought of the twentieth-century, so it may be useful – if only as an exercise in genealogy – to recall the ways in which Gallic formulations about *la vie quotidienne* come together with an older German tradition of 'natural history' that took its formative cues from Marx, received its most productive elaboration in the thought of Georg Lukács, and culminated in the still-unsurpassed theorizations of *Alltagsgeschichte* produced by Weimar critics such as Adorno, Benjamin and others.⁴

To return to the conceptuality of the phrase itself: in so far as 'everyday life' seems transparent, it is misleading and betokens just that auratic quality of words and ideas Benjamin wanted to capture with the proposition from Kraus (cited at the beginning of this essay). That is to say, the more closely one looks at the phrase and its intended objects, the more distantly and obliquely they look back: the idea of everyday life as well as the practices it refers to conjure up a certain mysteriousness that needs to be unmasked rather than aestheticized or

valorized.⁵ At the very least, it is difficult to enlist the likes of Benjamin in such aestheticization – although, by the same token, there are any number of critics who deploy Benjamin to support textualist readings of aestheticist values (looking to reinforce the early Benjamin invested in the legacy of German idealism as opposed to the mature critic who took many of his leads from Brecht and Marxism). Nonetheless, if one examines the overall span of his writings and more particularly at his ideas in *One-Way Street* (the volume of writing immediately preceding the surrealism essay), he firmly abjures the idealization of the mysteries of the everyday. In that venue, he writes: ‘histrionic or fanatical stress on the mysterious side of the mysterious takes us no further; we penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectic optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday’ (Benjamin 1978, p. 237).

Both *One-Way Street* and the surrealism essay represent Benjamin’s attempts to unveil the mysteries of the everyday, although the latter study is more explicitly taken up with strategic questions, in so far as it reflects on the dilemmas confronting radical intellectuals in the late 1920s. The essay on surrealism, published in 1929, was in fact composed in the previous year (that also saw the publication of *One-Way Street*). Benjamin’s interest in surrealism dated back to 1925, the year Breton’s first ‘Manifesto of Surrealism’ appeared. In a letter to Rilke, he wrote ‘in particular what struck me about surrealism . . . was the captivating, authoritative and definitive way in which language passes over into the world of dreams’ (Wolin 1994, p. 126). The surrealist fascination with dream life was endorsed by Benjamin and in his 1935 outline of the (unfinished) Arcades project, he would raise his obsession with the emancipatory potential embodied in dreams to the level of a methodological axiom. But for him the endorsement was also the basis of an immanent critique of the dream world – in line with Marx’s understanding of the commodity as a dream form. In this, as in many other instances, Benjamin’s conceptual investments reflect his debts more to Marx than Freud; his emphasis on the world of the everyday aimed at ‘dissolving’ myth into the space of history, just as his interest in dreams stemmed from the imperative to unearth the aspirations and desires that humanity is denied in the sphere of material life.

The problem of penetrating the everyday’s mysteries relates to the concept of ‘aura’, which Benjamin (following Kraus) elaborated as the ‘unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be’ (Benjamin 1968, p. 222). Providing its most picturesque enlargement in his famous ‘Artwork’ essay, Benjamin uses an utterly everyday activity or scene of relaxation to formulate it: ‘If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch’ (Benjamin 1968, pp. 222–223).⁶ Of relevance to us is that, for Benjamin, the philosophical programme of dialectics and historical materialism represented the key to getting beyond the lure of auratic

discourses; it also was the key to politicizing all aesthetics, including the aesthetics of the everyday. This, we may recall, was the central challenge of an era in which Fascism had, according to him, aestheticized politics – a mode with which we ourselves have become all too familiar in the context of the over-the-top theatrical stagings of George Bush *filis* as superhero of America. Aura, as an aspect of perception (rather than of the art object), does not disappear altogether under the regime of mechanical reproduction but is transposed onto mass-produced representations such as films and other ‘phantasmagoric’ forms; moreover, as we can glean from Benjamin’s description of a mountain scene on a summer afternoon above, it pertains to everyday experience as well. Thus, despite its appeal, aura is in fact constitutive of ‘cult value’ (with all connotations of Fascism’s mode of address intended here) and for this reason the aura of the everyday world needs to be undermined, not reinstated – first, through the painstaking and fraught work of criticism, but above all, by the ‘energies of the revolution’ (Benjamin 1978, p. 190).⁷

Only in the context of this overall framework of ideas do the specific arguments of the surrealism essay come into clear focus. Read out of place or too hastily, the essay may seem to endorse the propensities and worldviews associated with surrealist strategies of estranging and defamiliarizing the everyday as capable of bearing the burden of a radical aesthetic and political practice. Read together within Benjamin’s general predilection for *Denkbilder* (‘thought-images’), he appears quite far from suggesting that the recuperation of the quotidian can take place in the name of validating a space of subjective practice where the vicissitudes of capitalist existence are somehow bypassed or escaped. To lead with this contention is to agree entirely with Gilloch’s estimation that ‘Benjamin’s essay on Surrealism is not a paean to its “heroic phase” . . . but rather, a critical intervention in its brief afterlife so as to tease out and redeem its own revolutionary truth content’ (Gilloch 2002, p. 110). Benjamin (unlike many of his latter-day, poststructuralist interpreters) was invested in the aesthetic outlook of surrealism only to the extent that it provided him with a theory of revolutionary practice – as opposed to a theory of subjectivity that contented itself with gazing inward upon subjective or cultural fragmentation. Along these lines, Pensky has suggested that ‘much of Benjamin’s “materialist” work – above all his appropriation of the surrealists – was the attempt to articulate a methodology that could appropriate the mode of insight peculiar to melancholy subjectivity while avoiding its paralyzing effect’ (Pensky 1993, p. xi).

Even the title of Benjamin’s essay gives away something of his intentions: ‘Surrealism: the *last* snapshot of the European intelligentsia’ (emphasis added). Evoking the Hegelian sensibility of Minerva’s owl only taking flight at dusk, Benjamin charges the surrealists with belatedness and decadence: they are what *remains* of the European intelligentsia, of its pretensions to a genuine liberatory movement. As an aside, we may note that such a charge is hardly a celebration; on the contrary, it is what ultimately prevents the surrealists from embodying

much more than the effete sensibility of the outsider (as opposed to the organic imperatives of the revolutionary). Immediately into the essay, Benjamin adduces himself as ‘the German observer’, who understands the true stakes of surrealism’s endeavour for, he says, ‘he has had direct experience of its highly exposed position between an anarchistic *fronde* and a revolutionary discipline, and so has no excuse for taking the movement for the “artistic”, “poetic” one it superficially appears’ (Benjamin 1978, pp. 177–178). Caught in the ambivalent position between avant-garde posturing and the disciplined *work* involved in organizing a political transformation of the bourgeois order, the surrealists can retrospectively be seen as (perhaps unnecessarily) surrendering to the melancholia of an aestheticized subjectivism in the face of objective political constraints. Surrealism, in other words, must be reckoned with in terms of what it has to teach those who are situated down the stream of time from it about consolidating ‘a matter-of-fact, profane struggle for power and domination’ (Benjamin 1978, p. 178). And, based on their historical example, this includes lessons in both how to and how not to wage those struggles – since in the end surrealism proved to be a ‘false overcoming’ (Habermas’s phrase). The ‘profane illumination’ (Benjamin 1978, p. 179) that Benjamin suggests as the precise method by which ‘a materialistic, anthropological inspiration’ can be arrived at for theorizing experience, represents, as Pensky clarifies, ‘the only alternative that offered the possibility of relating the act of critical construction immediately to the prospect of revolutionary practice’ (Pensky 1993, p. 189). But it is also important to emphasize that this prospect of an alternative suggested by the profane illuminations of surrealism were reckoned by Benjamin to be ineffective and unrealised – an emphasis that Habermas captures best in his famous retrospection on one of his predecessors at the Institute for Social Research:

In the nonsensical acts of the surrealist, art was translated into expressive activity; the separation between poetic and political action had been overcome . . . Nonetheless, the illustrations of pure violence offered by surrealism found in Benjamin an ambivalent spectator. Politics as show, or even poeticizing politics – when Benjamin saw these realizations, he did not want after all to close his mind to the difference in principle between political action and manifestation: ‘This would mean the complete subordination of the methodical and disciplinary preparation for revolution to a praxis oscillating between training for it and celebrating its imminent onset’.
(Habermas 1991, p. 119)

This talk of revolutionary theory and practice may well sound *passé*, accustomed as we have become these days to hearing about the alleged subversiveness of everyday practices such as shopping, reading romance novels, rap music or whatever, and, similarly, about the oppositionality of everyday existence (particularly when it comes to the ‘consuming passions’ of female or queer subjects).⁸

Likewise, the language of dialectics appears so old-fashioned and stodgy when compared to its borrowings in the pages of cultural studies journals as 'theory lite' – which, in the words of the advertising jingle, tastes great but is less filling.⁹ Nonetheless, the form and substance of Marxist dialectics, however pre-post-modern it may sound, is the language to which we must have recourse. More pertinently, it colours the utterances of the Frankfurt School thinkers – not in some flatly nihilistic or elitist way (as has sometimes been caricatured) but as the hallmark of a genuine materialist criticism that cannot be satisfied merely with esoteric theory but with *actualizing* the potential for remaking the world that everyday objects hold out but do not guarantee. For Benjamin, then, surrealism could not provide a model for revolutionary thinking and it is quite surprising to find latter-day enthusiasts who, in reprising the idea of 'profane illumination' exemplified by surrealist strategies of defamiliarization and aesthetic *dégonflage*, use him to authorize their proclamations about cultural subversion.¹⁰ According to Benjamin, however, 'This profane illumination did not always find the Surrealists equal to it, or to themselves, and the very writings that proclaim it most powerfully, Aragon's incomparable *Paysan de Paris* and Breton's *Nadja*, show very disturbing symptoms of deficiency' (1978, p. 179). One might, with some justification, muse on the irony of our own theoretical milieu in which it is no longer uncommon to write off all attempts to conceptualize political praxis in terms of class struggle or organized opposition as the stuff of a 'vulgar' Marxism or as Judith Butler has accused, of 'Left Conservatism'. By any attentive (rather than ideological) measure, Benjamin would certainly be equally guilty of exemplifying such a tendency, especially in his later writings. Habermas goes on in his essay to show how, from the point of his encounter with Brecht onwards, Benjamin in fact 'regarded the relationship of art and political praxis primarily from the viewpoint of the organizational and propagandistic utility of art for the class struggle' (Habermas 1991, p. 119).

If there remain any quarters of intellectual opinion in which cultural theorists retain the responsibility to submit their theoretical arguments about aesthetics and culture to the test of political accountability (and by that I mean of course oppositional political accountability), the deficiencies of surrealism are surely only magnified by history. The movement's strategies of disruption – the slogan, manifestation or counterfeit – are revealed as failures in relation to their political goals to the precise degree that they ended up being institutionalized within the canon of modernist art practice and, one might equally add, those versions of populist cultural theory in which the distinctions between high and low art are removed by fiat (so that, for instance, Disney can be regarded as equivalent to Proust). Yet, for Benjamin the point was not to fixate either on the means or ends that surrealism might have reached, but on the possibilities that remained in shadow within the very medium of its failures. According to him, what continues to be valuable as a model for materialist criticism is the outlook of surrealism, an outlook that sought to trace 'the revolutionary energies that

appear in the outmoded: the first factory buildings, the earliest photos, the objects that have begun to be extinct'. Indeed, he took this commitment directly from Louis Aragon, one of the most influential figures in the surrealist movement – who, in his novel, *The Peasant of Paris*, makes a claim on behalf of 'places that were incomprehensible yesterday and that tomorrow will never know' (quoted in Abbas 1989, p. 48).¹¹ Taking the surrealists as his conceptual point of departure – but, crucially, *not* as his point of arrival – Benjamin proposed that the most seemingly trivial phenomena could be used, once reassembled in the 'dialectical image', to deduce the most profound aspects and the innermost truths of bourgeois society. Wolin has persuasively argued that 'the purpose of this intention was not to attempt to discover rudiments of archaic life in the modern per se, but to unmask the idea of the modern itself – i.e. the idea of an endless stream of consumer goods or fashion – as that of eternal recurrence or the always-the-same' (1994, p. 129). The modern, characterized as eternal recurrence, in turn revealed its coalescence with the idea of mythical repetition, which dominates life in prehistory. Paraphrasing Adorno's recollections of Benjamin's own description of his interest in such a 'materialist anthropology', Wolin says: 'Thus prehistory returns to dominate the modern era under the mythical guise of commodity exchange, in which the self-identical perpetually presents itself as the new' (1994, p. 129). The surrealism essay constitutes Benjamin's first significant attempt to delineate this theoretical problematic, and it continued to represent the core of his intellectual project throughout his life ultimately terminating in the unfinished study of the Parisian arcades.

The line of thinking I have been tracing so far in relation to Benjamin's arguments about surrealism is consistent with more historically attentive discussions of his project, albeit contrary to the ways in which they have been read by critics invested in promoting a view of Benjamin as, so to speak, a post-structuralist *avant la lettre*.¹² By contrast, Howard Caygill's theoretical enlargement of Benjamin's arguments about experience is among the more careful and comprehensive assessments of Benjamin's writings. Caygill suggests that the convolution of memory Benjamin traced in his essay on Proust, finds its complement in the convolution of objects in his surrealism essay (Caygill 1998, p. 66). Acknowledging that it is 'perhaps one of Benjamin's most ambivalent essays', Caygill adduces Benjamin himself as stating that 'it at once celebrates the surrealist intoxication with 'the revolutionary energies that appear in the outmoded' while seeing them as remaining 'enmeshed in a number of pernicious Romantic prejudices' (1998, pp. 66–67). Quoting this statement from a letter Benjamin wrote to his friend, Gershom Scholem, Caygill underscores Benjamin's critique of the remnants of a Romanticist worldview within surrealism's own tendencies, noting that Benjamin described his relation to the surrealist movement as that of a 'philosophical Fortinbras' (Fortinbras, we may recall, is the figure who remains on the stage of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* at the end of all the destruction). Thus, what

we are left with, what we have to recognize, is Benjamin's self-designation as the inheritor of surrealism's legacy *after* its destruction; a destruction that can only be regenerative *après coup*. In summing up Benjamin's historical evaluation of surrealism Caygill states:

The surrealists' insight into how 'not only social but architectonic [destitution], the poverty of interiors, enslaved and enslaving objects – can suddenly be transformed into revolutionary energy' was very close to Benjamin's own concept of experience, *but for him their insight remained auratic*. . . . By casting himself as a 'philosophical Fortinbras', Benjamin gives a negative answer to the question he put to surrealism: 'are they successful in welding this experience of freedom to the other revolutionary experience that we have to acknowledge because it has been ours, the constructive dictatorial side of revolution?' Just as Fortinbras takes on the heritage of a court devastated by spectres, and commences its reconstruction so Benjamin sees himself entering into the heritage of auratic phantasms of surrealism, and recommencing their reconstruction in epic recognition.

(Caygill 1998, p. 67, emphases added)

Let me turn now to the second of the major points of contact for this discussion: Adorno's later views of his friend (and sometimes intellectual opponent) Benjamin's meditations on surrealism's potential for rethinking questions of art and politics. However, before I do so, it may be instructive to have at least one indication of exactly how far we have travelled down the road of idealist, recuperative readings of Benjamin's work on the issue of surrealist practice. In a book that specifically takes up this topic, Cohen has argued that Benjamin's thought can be read as an attempt to reconstruct a 'surrealist Marxism' (1993, p. 3). She asserts that underlying Benjamin's writings is the influence of 'modern materialism', itself a derivation of Andre Breton's desire to 'reconcile Engels and Freud' and Engels's own nineteenth-century critique of mechanical materialism. However, according to her, in Benjamin's hands, this modern materialism becomes even more hybrid – a project of integrating 'the psychological, sensual, irrational, and often seemingly trivial aspects of life during the expansion of industrial capitalism which such monolithic Marxist categories as base and superstructure tend to obscure' (Cohen 1993, p. 4). Cohen's enterprise is to recuperate Benjamin's use of psychoanalytic language and surrealist conceptions from the criticisms of his colleagues at the Frankfurt School as well as Brecht – who, as she puts it, regarded this as 'the place where he [Benjamin] substitutes the smoke and mirrors of writerly technique for critical analysis' (1993, p. 8). Elevating writerly technique itself *into* critical analysis – in keeping with much of the tenor of contemporary textualist criticism – Cohen ends up producing a portrait of Benjamin who, far from being associated with any sort of revolutionary Marxism, is rendered a *surrealist* Marxist, an appellation Cohen uses to

describe his interest in issues of interiority and subjectivity, mingled with his attempts to recombine a theory of art and experience. Against the grain of his own writings, Benjamin is transformed from a thinker concerned with both the theoretical and practical applications of a revolutionary Marxism (which he himself credited to his reading not only of Marx, but also Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*) to being the bedfellow of Jean Baudrillard and post-Marxism (Cohen 1993, p. 11). Cohen's book is a virtuoso exercise in abstracting much of Benjamin's preoccupation with the conceptual terrain of the constitution of social relations under capitalism – the 'untranscendable horizon' of Marxist thought as Fredric Jameson has put it – to elaborate notions about what one of the blurbs on Cohen's book lauds as 'the historicity of the imagination'.¹³ What she also, and symptomatically, leaves unaddressed is the question of why we should be persuaded that Benjamin is closer to Althusserian and post-Marxist apologetics than to his associates at the Frankfurt School (Leo Lowenthal, Eric Fromm, Herbert Marcuse and Ernst Bloch among others) all of whom had a great deal to say about psychoanalysis and materialism (modern and otherwise), not to mention the irrational aspects of modern life – without having to renounce or revise their Marxist affiliations and, moreover, precisely because the historical materialism of Marx and Engels (to name only the principals) was already capacious enough to encompass their arguments.¹⁴

Adorno cannot, of course, be mistaken for the intellectuals inspired by post-war French ideas – despite aspects of his work (the emphasis on subjective experience, the embrace of an aesthetic sublime, and so on) that seem to resonate with poststructuralist motifs. In his estimation, the difficulty in assessing Benjamin's oeuvre has less to do with a vexed relationship to Marxism than that we encounter with Benjamin a thinker whose 'thought sought again and again to free itself of all impulse to classify, the prime image of all hope for him [was] the name, of things and of men, and it is this that his reflection [sought] to reconstruct' (Adorno 1995, p. 231). Notwithstanding this difficulty in classifying Benjamin's overall work, his allegiance to the Hegelian-Marxist tradition was abundantly clear. As Adorno says, 'The Hegelian concept of "second nature", as the reification of self-estranged human relations, and also the Marxian category of "commodity fetishism" occupy key positions in Benjamin's work' (1995, p. 233). Reification, estrangement, commodity fetishism: these are all concepts that suffuse Benjamin's later writings and both *One-Way Street* and the surrealism essay represent key points in his turn away from philology and the philosophy of language to the mature and more complex terrain of historical materialism. By the time of his writing, this body of ideas, far from the supposed 'monolith' of Marxism's dependence on base-superstructure relations, was developed to a very nuanced extent (under the auspices of Marxism itself) by the likes of Lenin, Lukács, Bloch, Karl Korsch, Siegfried Kracauer and others in the German tradition. Benjamin was intimately familiar with this tradition, to say nothing of work done in Italy, England or France, with which he was less well acquainted.

Contrary to the ways that Benjamin has sometimes been rendered – as a thinker who elicited an aesthetic sublime from the everyday banalities of ‘mere’ history and economy – Adorno makes it clear that the fetish of subjective aestheticism had very little appeal for Benjamin in his mature phase (an aestheticism that was associated with the revelation or unconcealment of being ushered in by Heidegger and his followers). The subject of an entirely different discussion, let me simply note here that the Heideggerian return to ‘being’ was proclaimed under the sign of a revitalized attention to the concrete aspects of existence and to the essences of daily life – that took the psychoanalytic ‘subject’ out of the equation while reinstating it as *Dasein*. Adorno represents Benjamin as completely opposed to such philosophical moves: ‘He saw through them [phenomenology and the ontological schools] as the mere mask of conceptual thinking at its wits [*sic*] end, just as he also rejected the existential-ontological concept of history as the mere distillate left after the substance of the historical dialectic had been boiled away’ (1995, p. 231). Adorno goes further to state forcefully that, ‘His [Benjamin’s] target is not an allegedly over-inflated subjectivism but rather the notion of a subjective dimension itself’ (1995, p. 235). So, finally, in Adorno’s reading of Benjamin’s theory of the everyday, he portrays the latter as ‘drawn to the petrified, frozen or obsolete elements of civilization, to everything in it devoid of domestic vitality’ (1995, p. 233). Within this overall perspective, surrealism was the tinderbox that lit the flame of Benjamin’s ‘conceptual liquidation’ of the everyday, which he regarded as the scene of objective petrification rather than subjective salvation.

There are differences in interpretation between Adorno’s own view of surrealism and that of Benjamin, in the place given to the importance of surrealist shocks. This emphasis is vividly brought home in the image Adorno uses in ‘Looking back on Surrealism’, to characterize the surrealists’ artistic technique: ‘The house has a tumor, its bay window. Surrealism paints this tumor: an excrescence of flesh grows from the house’ (Adorno 1991, pp. 89–90). For Adorno, surrealism, coming as it did on the eve of the catastrophe of World War I, emblemized both the prefiguration of this catastrophe, as well as its aftermath – thereby including within it the kernel of a prospective vision of the future because the catastrophic event, in laying bare the destruction of everything in its wake, also makes renewal possible. Consequently, surrealism is to be ‘looked back on’ as a Janus-faced, double-sided movement, simultaneously betokening attempts to awaken from the nightmare of the nineteenth century and to penetrate the realities of twentieth-century daily life. In his words, ‘After the European catastrophe the Surrealist shocks lost their force. It is as though they had saved Paris by preparing it for fear: the destruction of the city was their center. To conceptualize Surrealism along these lines, one must go back not to psychology but to Surrealism’s artistic techniques’ (Adorno 1991, p. 87). Putting more distance (than did Benjamin) between psychoanalytic modes of understanding subjectivity and surrealist practice, Adorno says: ‘Reducing

Surrealism to psychological dream theory subjects it to the ignominy of something official' (1991, p. 86); and further: 'Surrealist constructions are merely analogous to dreams, not more' (1991, p. 87). In other words, even though Adorno held in esteem the surrealist principle of returning art back to ordinary life, he did not think that this was because surrealism – like psychoanalysis – provided insights into the processes of the unconscious (or embodied them). Rather, Adorno upheld the conventional modernist belief that the artistic techniques of the surrealists, based on the principle of cinematic montage, intensified the fossilized terrain of everyday life – 'gathering up', as he put it, 'the distortions [that] attest to the violence that prohibition has done to the objects of desire' (1991, p. 90). In so doing they not only 'salvaged' (a word Adorno uses to describe the surrealist act) what is out of date but looked forward to a future in which the subject could once more experience authentic forms of art and life. This opinion, representing a kind of homeopathic theory of experience, is of course in line with his interpretation of lyric poetry, Schönberg's music or Kafka's fiction, all of which he sought to interpret as resisting the reification of everyday life.¹⁵

Perhaps a secondary point for us to remember is that the contemporary critical warrant, first, for subjecting all social and discursive forms to psychoanalytic readings and second, for making wide-ranging associations between these expressions and the artistic explosions of the surrealists does not receive much support from Adorno. For him, '[t]his kind of decoding would force the luxuriant multiplicity of Surrealism into a few patterns and reduce it to a few meager categories like the Oedipus complex, without attaining the power that emanated from the idea of Surrealism if not from its works of art' (1991, p. 87). If Adorno disparaged the idea that any kind of analogue exists between the image-language of the unconscious and either theory or practice of surrealism, it likewise followed that for him a responsible theory of interpretation had to avoid the temptation to reduce the historical successes and failures of surrealism to programmatic formulations about the effectiveness of the unconscious. This is stated very clearly towards the beginning of his essay:

Were Surrealism in fact nothing but a collection of literary and graphic illustrations of Jung or even Freud, it would not only duplicate, superfluously, what the theory itself says rather than giving it a metaphorical garb, but it would also be so innocuous that it would hardly leave room for the scandal that is Surrealism's intention and its lifeblood.

(Adorno 1991, p. 86)

Moreover, although Adorno and Benjamin both shared a critique of the ways that the nineteenth-century embodied *par excellence* an era of bourgeois 'inwardness', itself highlighted by the over-abundance of decorative and ornamental elements in everyday objects (the velvet and plush of furnishings and the carapaces and

coverings of everything from shaving kits to Fabergé eggs), Adorno regarded surrealism's lessons as a form of sociohistorical critique that looked both backwards *and forward* in time. It is in their specific understanding as to whether surrealism's images were hieroglyphs of an archaic past (the terrain of psychoanalysis) or montage-like encapsulations of the futural dimension of sociohistory that Adorno and Benjamin differed in their efforts to resurrect the 'world-rubble of Surrealism' (Adorno 1991, p. 87). In the end, though, Benjamin was perhaps the better dialectician – despite the fact that Adorno accused him of being inadequately dialectical – because he had less faith in surrealism's prospective capacities, a position amply evident in the way he assessed the overall place of the movement:

In just how inconspicuous and peripheral a substance the dialectical kernel that later grew into Surrealism was originally embedded, was shown by Aragon in 1924 – at a time when its development could not yet be foreseen – in his *Vague de rêves*. Today it can be foreseen. For there is no doubt that the heroic phase, whose catalogue of heroes Aragon left us in that work, is over. There is always, in such movements, a moment when the original tension of the secret society must either explode in a matter-of-fact, profane struggle for power and domination, or decay as a public demonstration and be transformed. Surrealism is in this phase of transformation at present.

(Benjamin 1978, p. 178)

By contrast, Adorno continued to uphold the 'negative vision' by means of which surrealism mounted its attack on bourgeois life: 'Surrealism is akin to photography. Surrealism's booty is images, to be sure, but not the invariant, ahistorical images of the unconscious subject to which the conventional view would like to neutralize them; rather, they are historical images in which the subject's innermost core becomes aware that it is something external, an imitation of something social and historical' (Adorno 1991, p. 89). Notwithstanding Adorno's faith in the power of forms of aesthetic practice (such as that of the surrealists) to overcome the limits of everyday reification through intensifying the sociohistorical contradictions of capitalist existence, we have still to understand that this was never a matter of the personal becoming political or of the individual escaping the command of capital to become the expression of a free multitude.¹⁶ In the context of the growing popularity of hypostatic theorizations of the supposed spontaneity of the masses, we would do well to recall one of the more memorable propositions in Adorno's revaluation of the historical role of surrealism: 'The dialectical images of Surrealism are images of a dialectic of subjective freedom in a situation of objective unfreedom' (Adorno 1991, p. 88). As one can readily agree, in many ways this statement continues to be at the crux of the dilemma we face as oppositional cultural critics in that it is difficult to come to grips with the ineluctability of our predicament under capitalism: our

private expressions of protest (whether as social actors or as critics) are subject to the fate of all efforts at rescuing ‘subjective freedom in a situation of objective unfreedom’. To say this is neither to bemoan our paralytic existence nor is it to escape responsibility by admitting complicity with the ‘system’ (though that too has become something of a critical commonplace). Rather, it is to acknowledge that the search for adequate models of cultural and political, not to mention analytic, opposition can neither reside nor be dressed up in the guise of the failed gestures of yesterday. Attempting to replicate the ‘shock’ of surrealism’s original intentions in the hope that, somehow, it will prove to be the escape hatch – at the level of the body and technologies of the self – that takes us beyond capitalist domination partakes not only of the effete-ness of historical surrealism, it redoubles our error. For, in doing so, we are perhaps more guilty of ‘freezing the moment of awakening’ (Adorno 1991, p. 89). Instead of learning from the example of their obsolescence, we wrap ourselves in the illusion that in surrealist conceptions lie the kernels of our own critical agency. However, derailing or deranging the familiar, whether through the tactics of shock (rendered less shocking through repetition) or the aesthetics of *flânerie* does nothing to undermine the structure of social relations. If this is seen as the stuff of contestation, as a redoubt against power, this is only because we live in a historical moment in which the inherited categories of transformative social analysis – of class struggle, exploitation, reification – are smugly rejected as ‘determinist’ or ‘reductionist’ (against the anarchistic, ambiguous, and polysemic potentialities of the ‘event’). At best, this is an aestheticist solution to historical problems; at worst, it betokens the self-satisfied politics and poetics of conservatism masquerading as the rhizomatics of a new radicalism.

Notes

- 1 From Benjamin’s *Gesammelte Schriften* (1.2: 647 n; 200, n. 17), quoted in Weber (1996).
- 2 ‘Surrealism’, in Benjamin (1978), and ‘Looking Back on Surrealism’, in Adorno (1991).
- 3 Although my discussion does not take up this essay, many of Benjamin’s propositions about surrealism are also expressed his 1931 meditations on photography entitled, ‘A short history of photography’ (Benjamin 1972).
- 4 In addition to German and French elaborations of the concept of everyday life, there is also the Russian notion (and related discussion) of *byt*, which captures the sense of the everyday as banal and commonplace, above all else. An interesting, historical (though somewhat tendentious) enlargement of *byt* can be found in Boym (1994).
- 5 See, for instance, the sublime preoccupations of Chambers in his ‘Signs of silence, lines of listening’ (1996).

- 6 'The artwork in the era of its technical reproducibility' (Benjamin 1968).
- 7 Weber's essay (cited in note 1) elaborates on the ways that Benjamin counterposes the decay of aura in the 'traditional' work of art with its continuation within the image-sphere in general.
- 8 I am referring less to the book by Williamson, with the title *Consuming Passions* (1991) – which provides a trenchant critique of popular cultural mores – than to the annual conferences designated by this name where much of this brand of scholarship is on display.
- 9 I owe this usage to James Kavanagh (who was the first to use it to describe the new pop culture studies, though the idea of 'theory lite' has travelled quite a bit since then and seems to have lodged itself as the mode *du jour* in many cultural studies departments).
- 10 See, for example, many of Taussig's vertiginous (and quite inapposite) formulations in *The Nervous System* (1992) and more moderate (though perhaps equally dehistoricized) renderings of surrealism's potentialities in Clifford's (1988) 'On ethnographic surrealism'.
- 11 See Abbas's (1989) stimulating essay, 'On fascination: Walter Benjamin's images'.
- 12 Cadava's book *Words of Light* (1998) seems to me to be a typical representative of this tendency; a somewhat earlier iteration of it would take us back to Nägele's (1988) *Benjamin's Ground: New Readings of Walter Benjamin*. Readers may also be interested to look at Agamben's (1988) 'Language and history in Benjamin'.
- 13 From a blurb by George Steiner on the back cover of Cohen's book.
- 14 In this, as in so much else in the book, Cohen falls into what can only be called the 'vulgar poststructuralist' formula of reducing the complex heritage of modern Marxism to the '68ist shibboleths first proclaimed by the likes of Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze and now recited as articles of faith by the literary-critical establishment in the name of 'critical theory'. This is a symptom, as Brennan (2001) has argued, of the 'transformism' of radical Left thought into contemporary anti-Communist theoretical reaction.
- 15 The best discussion of Adorno's theory of aesthetic experience is by NicholSEN (1997).
- 16 See the important criticisms of this strand of thinking in the special issue on empire and imperialism in *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, particularly the theoretical dismantling of contemporary post-Marxist thought offered by Parry (2003).

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