Introduction

Il faut confronter des idées vagues avec des images claires.

—Jean-Luc Godard, *La Chinoise*[1]

Walter Benjamin's essay "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century" exists in two versions, the first written in May 1935, the second in March 1939. Neither text was published until long after his death—at his own hand, by a morphine overdose, in the little Catalan border town of Port Bou on the night of 25 September 1940. The German-Jewish critic had fled France, where he had been living as a refugee since Adolf Hitler's rise to power in 1933, only to be informed on his arrival in Spain that he would be returned the next day to almost certain deportation to a Nazi concentration camp. Both versions of the exposé (as Benjamin called it) were written to solicit support from American sources—the German émigrés who had reestablished the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research at Columbia University in 1934, and the New York banker Frank Altschul—for the monumental project upon which he had been engaged since 1927. The aim of that project was nothing less than to recover the "prehistory of modernity" through an excavation of the "dreamworlds" incarnated in the material fabric and cultural artifacts of nineteenth-century Paris. "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century" was Benjamin's working title for the project as a whole, not just the exposé. The manuscript of the larger work, which Walter entrusted to his friend Georges Bataille before fleeing Paris on

13 June 1940—the day before the Wehrmacht entered the city—survived the war hidden in a vault of the Bibliothèque nationale de France. The mammoth, rambling, and terminally unfinished torso would be published for the first time only in 1982 under the title *Passagen-Werk*. It finally appeared in English in 1999 as *The Arcades Project*, just in time to illuminate the turn of a new century.

The delay in publication may have been a blessing in disguise, for there is much in *The Arcades Project* that seems closer to the spirit of our times than to Benjamin's own. What above all distinguishes a "postmodern" sensibility, according to Jean-François Lyotard, is "incredulity toward metanarratives"— the various "grand narratives" of modernity that confer a progressive and singular sense on the course of human history.[2] Like many European intellectuals of his day Walter Benjamin considered himself a Marxist, and his interest in nineteenth-century Paris was not just antiquarian but (as he would have seen it) emancipatory. At the same time (and less usually) he emphatically rejected any identification of history with the forward march of progress, and his distaste for totalizing narratives, whether Marxist or otherwise, is evident in the very form of *The Arcades Project*. The apparent incompleteness of the work is not just the result of its being unfinished; its montage style was foreshadowed in earlier texts like "One-Way Street" (1928), whose coherence emerges—insofar as it emerges at all—only out of the accumulation and juxtaposition of a multitude of fragments.[3] *The Arcades Project* is made up of hundreds of verbatim quotations garnered from the most heterogeneous of sources, interlaced with Benjamin's own difficult, poetic, and often aphoristic reflections. His object, he says at one point, was "to develop to the highest degree the art of citing without quotation marks."[4]

Benjamin organized these "Notes and Materials" into thirty-six convolutes (from the German *Konvolut*, which literally means a "sheaf" or "bundle"), each composed of numbered and cross-referenced passages. Foremost among their subjects were the new technologies (iron construction, artificial lighting, railroads, photography), urban milieus (arcades, boulevards, interiors), cultural artifacts (fashion, advertising, exhibitions, museums), social types (the collector, the *flâneur*), and modes of experience (boredom, idleness) brought into being by nineteenth-century capitalism. Benjamin's self-proclaimed materialism did not prevent him from attending equally closely to the dreams and desires fostered by modernity: Convolute K is titled "Dream City and Dream House, Dreams of the Future, Anthropological Nihilism, Jung," Convolute L "Dream House, Museum, Spa." Other folders are

given over to prostitution and gambling, painting and Jugendstil, mirrors, conspiracies, the Paris Commune, the stock exchange, the École Polytechnique, and automatons and dolls. Benjamin reserved individual convolutes for Saint-Simon, Fourier, Marx, Hugo, and Daumier, but by far the largest "sheaf" in the book is devoted to Charles Baudelaire, who first popularized the term *modernity* in his 1863 essay "The Painter of Modern Life." "By modernity," the French poet wrote, "I mean the ephemeral, the fleeting, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable." Forgetting that for Baudelaire "every old master had his own modernity," social theorists would before long appropriate this endless mutability as the feature that supposedly distinguishes "the modern world" from everything that came before it.[5]

"One can read the real like a text,"[6] Benjamin maintains. He has in mind a reading that is both close and symptomatic, whose protocols are closer to those of psychoanalysis than positivist historiography. "The nineteenth century [is] a spacetime [*Zeitraum*] (a dreamtime [*Zeit-traum*])," he writes, "in which . . . the collective consciousness sinks into ever deeper sleep." He advises historians to follow "the dreaming collective" in order "to expound the nineteenth century—in fashion and advertising, in buildings and in politics—as the outcome of its dream visions."[7] Committed to bringing these nocturnal visions to the light of day, he conceived *The Arcades Project* as "an experiment in the technique of awakening" whose aim was to transform "not-yet-conscious knowledge of *what has been*" into "something that just now first happened to us, first struck us." He wished to illuminate "the darkness of the lived moment" with "the flash of awakened consciousness." The material residues the nineteenth century left behind it, he believed, "preserve this unconscious, amorphous dream configuration," appearing to "stand in the cycle of the eternally selfsame, until the collective seizes upon them in politics and history emerges."[8] "Remembering and awakening are most intimately related,"[9] he argues. "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 . . . what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation . . . the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but *image*, suddenly emergent."[10]

From Benjamin's perspective it is only by being made newly present as image that the past becomes *history* at all. "The dialectical image is an image that emerges suddenly," he asserts, "in a flash. What has been is to be held fast—as an image flashing up in the *now of its recognizability*."[11] It might help

us make sense of these gnostic formulations if we remember the pivotal scene in Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*) in which a chance encounter with the most everyday of objects—a cookie dunked in tea—triggers an unanticipated flood of childhood recollections. "As soon as I had recognized the taste of the piece of madeleine dipped in lime-blossom tea that my aunt used to give me," Proust's narrator relates, "all the flowers in our garden and in M. Swann's park, and the water-lilies on the Vivonne, and the good people of the village and their little dwellings and the church and all of Combray and its surroundings, all of this which is assuming form and substance, emerged, town and gardens alike, from my cup of tea."[12] "Just as Proust begins the story of his life with an awakening," says Benjamin, "so must every presentation of history begin with an awakening; in fact, it should treat of nothing else. This one, accordingly, deals with awakening from the nineteenth century."[13] He extends the childhood analogy to provide a striking metaphor for what *The Arcades Project* is all about: "What the child (and, through faint reminiscence, the man) discovers in the pleats of the old material to which it clings while trailing at its mother's skirts—that's what these pages should contain."[14]

Though *The Arcades Project* is extraordinarily rich in detail—in the convolute devoted to "Modes of Lighting," for instance, we learn that "When, on February 12, 1790, the Marquis de Favras was executed for plotting against the Revolution, the Place de Grève and the scaffold were adorned with Chinese lanterns"[15]—Benjamin neither mobilizes such minutiae to advance a chronological narrative nor marshals them to exemplify a theoretical argument. The fragments out of which the book is woven instead seem to communicate directly with one another within and across his convolutes, speaking a difficult language of association and allusion that the reader can learn only through total immersion. Benjamin provides no roadmap for navigating these thickets. Readers might take a multitude of crisscrossing paths through the maze, none of which are clearly signposted. Before long one suspects that the point is not the destination so much as what is encountered along the way. Insofar as there is a discernible Ariadne's thread running through the labyrinth it is Karl Marx's doctrine of the fetishism of the commodity, but the text constantly slips out of the confines of any frame we might wish to impose upon it, including a Marxist one. It is not just that the devil is in the detail. The devil *is* the detail.

A passage from Convolute C, which sports the cryptic title "Ancient Paris, Catacombs, Demolitions, Decline of Paris," gives a flavor of Benjamin's style:

> One knew of places in ancient Greece where the way led down into the underworld. . . . But another system of galleries runs underground through Paris: the Métro, where at dusk glowing red lights point the way into the underworld of names. Combat, Elysée, Georges V, Etienne Marcel, Solférino, Invalides, Vaugirard—they have all thrown off the fetters of street or square, and here in the lightning-scored, whistle-resounding darkness are transformed into misshapen sewer gods, catacomb fairies. This labyrinth harbors in its interior not one but a dozen raging bulls, into whose jaws not one Theban virgin once a year but thousands of anemic dressmakers and drowsy clerks every morning must hurl themselves. . . . Here, underground, nothing more of the collision, the intersection of names—that which aboveground forms the linguistic network of the city. Here each name dwells alone; hell is its demesne. Amer, Picon, Dubonnet are guardians on the threshold.[16]

The Paris Métro recalls a mythical Minoan labyrinth even as it remains its unmistakably modern self; the everyday sights and sounds of the metropolis become a palimpsest of dream-images that it is the task of the historian to decode. Freud irresistibly comes to mind, patiently listening to his patients' ramblings on that famous couch in Vienna, ever on the alert for those slips of the tongue that reveal repressed childhood traumas—except that the unconscious Benjamin hopes to tap into is collective, and the infancy that of modernity itself.

A more immediate point of comparison, in the context of this book, is the surrealist poet Louis Aragon, whose excursions through the fading glories of the Passage de l'Opéra in his *Le Paysan de Paris* (*Paris Peasant*, 1926) triggered Benjamin's own engagement with the arcades. Though Benjamin had his differences with the surrealists ("whereas Aragon persists within the realm of dream, here the concern is to find the constellation of awakening," he sniffs),[17] he was happy to acknowledge his considerable debt to the movement that André Breton founded in 1924. "Balzac was the first to speak of the ruins of the bourgeoisie," he writes in the first (1935) version of "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," "but it was Surrealism that first opened our eyes to them."[18] *The Arcades Project* has much in common with the surrealist *dérive*, a meandering stroll through the highways and byways of the city that is *necessarily* directionless because it is driven by the hope of chancing

upon the marvels hidden in the mundane. "To construct the city topographically—tenfold and a hundredfold—from out of its arcades and its gateways, its cemeteries and bordellos, its railroad stations," Benjamin muses in what reads like one of many methodological notes to self, "and the more secret, more deeply embedded figures of the city: murders and rebellions, the bloody knots in the network of the streets, lairs of love, and conflagrations."[19] This is an exploration that could begin anywhere and has no terminus—not out of intellectual sloppiness, but on principle.

Benjamin's attempt to grasp his subject matter through a seemingly random proliferation of fragments was systematic, a *methodology*. He was seeking a mode of historical inquiry that would allow the Chinese lanterns lighting the Marquis de Favras's scaffold and the aperitif advertisements beckoning commuters into the Métro to signify in all their concrete particularity, rather than being reduced to mere examples of (supposedly) more general processes like "commodification" or "consumption." "In what way is it possible to conjoin a heightened graphicness [*Anschaulichkeit*] to the realization of the Marxist method?" he asks. His answer, which goes against the grain of most academic historiography as well as most Marxism then and since, is to elevate one of the most revolutionary inventions in twentieth-century art, the photomontage pioneered by the Berlin Dadaists and the Russian constructivists in the years following World War I, into an epistemological principle. "The first stage in this undertaking," he writes, "will be to carry over the principle of montage into history. That is, to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event."[20]

In the words of its English translators, the aim of *The Arcades Project* was less to produce an analysis or explanation of an epoch than to fashion "an *image* of that epoch . . . a historical 'mirror-world' " in which the era could recognize itself and wake from its dreams.[21] "I needn't *say* anything," Benjamin observes, echoing Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.[22] "Merely *show*. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, *to come into their own*: by making use of them."[23] He considered his "Copernican revolution" in historical method "comparable . . . to the process of splitting the atom."[24] An equally salient comparison might be drawn with the analytic cubism of Picasso and Braque, which shattered the illusionistic conventions of post-Renaissance painting with an explosion of simultaneous angles of vision and went so far as to collage bits and pieces of cloth, newsprint, and other *objets trouvés* directly onto the canvas,

blurring the boundaries between the real and its representation. Whether in the writing of history or the visual arts, such a twist of perspective does not produce an immediately legible surface. There is work for the reader to do. But the fragmentation of the field of vision may in the end give us a much firmer grip on what Milan Kundera, following the surrealists, has called "the density of unexpected encounters."[25] I have not attempted to emulate the architecture of *The Arcades Project* here—I tell a story, albeit a story that is woven from of a multitude of *petites narratives*—but such has been my intention too. I am not interested in the grand narratives that discipline so much as the details that derail.

"Every epoch," wrote Benjamin in his conclusion to the first (1935) version of "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," "not only dreams the one to follow but, in dreaming, precipitates its awakening. It bears its end within itself and unfolds it—as Hegel had already noticed—by cunning."[26] The era in which Benjamin lived and died is now as distant, and as close, to us as the Paris of Louis Philippe, the Second Empire, and the Third Republic were to him: the "recent past," a time hovering uncertainly on the boundaries between memory and history. Its monuments litter the landscapes we inhabit without quite belonging to *our* world any more. This book tries to do for our recent past—which is to say, for Walter Benjamin's present—what *The Arcades Project* did for his: to rummage amid the rags and refuse of yesterday's modernity in the hope of uncovering the dreamworlds that continue to haunt what we fondly believe to be today's waking state. The epoch from whose dreams I wish to awaken is the twentieth century, and more particularly what Eric Hobsbawm has called "the short twentieth century" between the outbreak of World War I on 1 August 1914 and the collapse of the Soviet Union on 31 December 1991[27]—a period that was incidentally, and probably not coincidentally, the bloodiest in recorded human history. The nature as well as the magnitude of that carnage is one of the reasons why I have less confidence than Benjamin did in humanity's capacity to live by "the whetted axe of reason" alone.[28] I do not identify a postmodern awakening with a Hegelian "end of history" in which the real and the rational finally coincide.[29] The postmodern era will no doubt dream up phantasmagorias of its own, of which the conviction of its own postmodernity may well turn out to be one.

Hobsbawm's age of extremes was dominated politically by the conflict between liberal-democratic, fascist, and communist visions of modernity, set against a backcloth of the disintegration of the great European empires that

still ruled much of the world in 1900—a process that begun with the collapse of Romanov Russia, Hohenzollern Germany, and Habsburg Austria-Hungary on the battlefields of World War I and continued with the decolonization of Africa and Asia after World War II. In architecture and the arts *modernism* was the watchword of the day, even if what it meant to be modern was much disputed and seldom a question that could be severed from the ideological struggles of the age. My main concentration will be on the first half of the century, when the struggles were at their peak and the visions fresh and new, although there are plentiful diversions into the Cold War years that came after and occasional glances back to the *fin de siècle*. Like Benjamin I choose a single city as a setting for this excavation. Prague is a less glittering capital for a century, to be sure, than *la ville-lumière*, but then it was a very much darker century. At first sight this nomination may strike many as absurd—at one with the black humor beloved of both surrealists and Czechs, perhaps, but scarcely a fitting homage to Benjamin's magnum opus. But consider: in what other city, apart perhaps from Berlin, can we witness, in the course of less than one hundred years, such a variety of ways of being modern? Certainly not London or Paris, and still less Los Angeles or New York.

Prague entered the twentieth century as the capital of a restive province of Austria-Hungary, energized by a recent Czech "national revival" that transformed Bohemia's German-speaking inhabitants—who then made up around one-third of its population—into an "ethnic" minority. In the course of the next hundred years the city on the Vltava successively served as the capital of the most easterly democracy on the continent (1918–38), a Nazi-occupied Protectorate (1939–45), a westerly outpost of the Soviet gulag (1946–89), and a reborn post-communist republic (1990–). The borders of these polities have shifted as frequently as their regimes. The historic Czech Lands of Bohemia, Moravia, and Czech Silesia were joined with Slovakia and Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia to form an independent Czechoslovak Republic in October 1918. Twenty years later a third of the country's territory and inhabitants were lost to Germany (and Hungary) as a consequence of the Munich Agreement of September 1938 at which Neville Chamberlain and Edouard Daladier tore up the guarantees given to Czechoslovakia by Britain and France at the Treaty of Versailles in the name of "peace in our time." Six months after that Slovakia became a nominally independent state under German tutelage and the Czech Lands disappeared into the Third Reich. Prague was occupied for longer during World War II than any other European capital. After the war Czechoslovakia's former territory was restored, with the exception of Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia, which was summar-

ily annexed by the Soviet Union (and is now part of an independent Ukraine). For the next four decades Prague found itself in "Eastern Europe," even though the city lies to the west of Vienna (which is one of the reasons why most of the artists discussed in this book will be unfamiliar to most Anglophone readers). With the fall of communism in the Velvet Revolution of November 1989 Prague took itself "back into Europe," but within two years tensions between Czechs and Slovaks came out into the open again[30] and the country split into separate Czech and Slovak Republics at the stroke of midnight on 31 December 1992.

At least the Velvet Divorce, as the separation became jokingly known, was amicable; the same cannot be said of Bohemia's earlier changes of borders and populations. Czechs constituted a bare majority of the population of interwar Czechoslovakia, a ramshackle creation in which Bohemian Germans—who were incorporated into the new state at gunpoint—outnumbered Slovaks and there were substantial minorities of Hungarians, Jews, and others. The resultant conflicts between "nationalities" provided the justification, if not necessarily the reason, for the events that led to Czechoslovakia's destruction in 1938–39. Prague's Jewish community, one of the oldest and largest in Europe, was largely eradicated during the Nazi occupation; most of those who survived the Holocaust emigrated after the war. The Czechs in turn expelled the three-million-strong German population in 1945–46. They were calling the action *čistění vlasti* (cleansing of the homeland) half a century before the term "ethnic cleansing" entered the political vocabulary of the English language by way of the former Yugoslavia.[31] There was abundant brutality and thousands of deaths. Add to this the waves of political emigration caused by the Munich crisis of 1938, the communist coup of "Victorious February" 1948, and the Soviet invasion of 21 August 1968, and it becomes evident that we are talking of a part of the world in which modernity has been exactly what Baudelaire said it was: *le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent*.

It should already be evident that Prague offers slim pickings for grand narratives, least of all for grand narratives of progress. The city's twentieth-century history frequently brings to mind Max Weber's observation that "since Nietzsche we realize that something can be beautiful, not only in spite of the aspect in which it is not good, but rather in that very aspect. You will find this expressed earlier in [Baudelaire's] *Fleurs du mal*."[32] This is not "modern society" as generations of western social theorists have habituated us to think of it,[33] but a Kafkan world in which the exhibition may turn into a show trial, the interior mutate into a prison cell, the arcade become a shooting gallery, and the idling *flâneur* reveal himself to be a secret policeman at the drop of a

hat. Prague furnishes a very different vantage point on the experience of the modern than London, Paris, Los Angeles, or New York; a perspective that—as with Braque or Picasso's cubism or the Dadaists' photomontages—challenges our familiar fields of vision. It is the contention of this book that this surreal world, as it appears to *us*, is every bit as deserving of the title "modernity" as any of the more familiar spectacles we might encounter on Fifth Avenue, Rodeo Drive, or the Champs-Élysées. It is time we recognized that the gas chamber is as authentic an expression of *l'esprit moderne* as abstract art,[34] and acknowledged that Václav Havel's ethnography of the rituals of knowing complicity that upheld communism is as insightful an analysis of modern power as anything in Foucault.[35]

We shall see plenty of evidence in the pages that follow that Prague's location at "the crossroads of Europe" (I quote the Czech writer Karel Čapek, introducing the PEN-Club Congress in June 1938) provided its artists and intellectuals with abundant fuel for modernist dreaming.[36] The situation of Central Europe during the earlier part of the twentieth century put modernization high on national economic and political agendas, in ways that often proved unusually propitious for the arts. Kenneth Frampton's observation on the extraordinary vitality of Czechoslovakia's architecture between the wars holds more generally; this was "a modernity worthy of the name"[37] whether in film, theater, literature, music, or the visual arts. Until recently this "other modernity"—to paraphrase Milan Kundera[38]—has been in large part forgotten because of the way Cold War geographies have shaped the writing of histories on both sides of the erstwhile Iron Curtain. Contributing to retelling that story would be sufficient justification for writing this book, whether or not readers are persuaded by its wider arguments. But what, to my mind, makes Prague a fitting *capital* for the twentieth century is that this is a place in which modernist dreams have time and again unraveled; a location in which the masks have sooner or later always come off to reveal the grand narratives of progress for the childish fairy tales they are.

It is no coincidence that twentieth-century Prague has given world literature the grim comedies that are Franz Kafka's *The Trial* and *The Castle*, Jaroslav Hašek's *The Good Soldier Švejk*, Bohumil Hrabal's *Too Loud a Solitude*, Václav Havel's *The Memorandum*, or Milan Kundera's *Laughable Loves*—or that the Czech capital should have become the world's second center of surrealism after Paris, though it should be said at the outset that Prague's surrealism has generally been both less mystical and less romantic than its French counterpart. The city's modern history is an object lesson in *humour noir*. Where better to acquire an appreciation of irony and absurdity, an enduring

suspicion of sense-making grand theories and totalizing ideologies, and a Rabelaisian relish for the capacity of the erotic to rudely puncture all social and intellectual pretensions toward rationality? This is quintessentially the territory explored in this book, and it is not always pretty. The Prague on display here is a town for grown-ups who (in André Breton's words) would rather walk in darkness than pretend they are walking in daylight.[39] To look out on the twentieth century from Charles Bridge is rather like looking out on the nineteenth from Matthew Arnold's Dover Beach—a convulsively beautiful prospect, to be sure, but one that leaves us in no doubt as to the shakiness of the ground on which we stand.

If Walter Benjamin's objective was to uncover the prehistory of modernity, this book might be regarded as a contribution to the prehistory of postmodernity. In his first (1935) version of "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," Benjamin looked forward to an awakening in which "we begin to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled."[40] My concern is a very different one.[41] It should by now be clear (except, perhaps, to a few big children in university chairs)[42] that Marx's commodity was far from the only fetish to bewitch twentieth-century imaginations. The monuments that I seek to recognize as ruins are those of *modernity itself*; or at least, to be a little more modest, of what has been construed as modernity in the grand narratives that have been so central to the self-consciousness of the age. Interestingly, toward the end of his life Benjamin himself came close to concluding that far from being the defining feature of the bourgeois era, modernity was (in Karl Marx's phrase) the illusion of the epoch. The second (1939) version of "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century" replaces the final paragraph about a Hegelian awakening with a brief meditation on the "vision of hell" presented in Auguste Blanqui's *L'Éternité par les astres* (Eternity through the Stars)—a work, Benjamin makes a point of telling us, that Blanqui wrote while imprisoned in the fortress of Taureau during the Paris Commune of 1871. The Commune, as he was well aware, was an event hailed by Marx as the first example of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" that was supposed to usher in the brave new world of communism.[43]

Blanqui's text, claims Benjamin, "presents the idea of eternal return ten years before *Zarathustra*—in a manner scarcely less moving than that of Nietzsche, and with an extreme hallucinatory power." "There is no progress," writes Blanqui, the permanent revolutionary despairing at the last; "the universe repeats itself endlessly and paws the ground in place." "Blanqui . . . strives to trace an image of progress that (immemorial antiquity parading as up-to-date novelty) turns out to be the phantasmagoria of history itself,"

comments Benjamin. He ends: "*The world dominated by its phantasmago-rias—this, to make use of Baudelaire's term, is 'modernity.'*"[44]

It may or may not be coincidence that on 15 March 1939, the same month that Benjamin revised the text of "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," Adolf Hitler's armies marched into Prague.