UNPLENARY: AN INVOCATION

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In my plenary talk at the 2023 BALEAP Conference, I invoked a number of ghosts who continue to cast long shadows over contemporary critical theory. The first of these was Walter Benjamin, the German-Jewish essayist and cultural critic, famous for the unfinished Arcades project, which was an attempt to uncover the "messianic"[1] elements which lay buried among the cultural objects and artefacts of the nineteenth century. The second was Jacques Derrida, the French Algerian-born philosopher and founder of "Deconstruction", our conference theme. Like Benjamin, Derrida calls for radical change, for social justice – for what he calls a "messianic without messianism" (1994, p. 74), meaning a complete openness to the future, to the radically different and unanticipated "other" (1994, p. 112). This is accomplished through a process of endless deconstruction – an endless critique of society, culture, language, politics.

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And linking them both, the spirit – or "spirits" (for as Derrida points out, there are more than one) of Marx.

In Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, he asks the question, "Whither Marx?" Where is Marxism going? He was writing this in the 1990s: the Soviet bloc had fallen and writers such as Fukuyama were sounding the death-knell of communism and proclaiming the triumph of liberal democracy and the free market – the new promised land, and thus, the "end of history" and radical transformation. So, what of Marx? Are we in mourning for – or celebrating – the death or a spirit whose time has now passed? (This, says Derrida, is different from the original spectre that was haunting Europe in the *Communist Manifesto* – a spectre whose time was still to come). Are we too hasty in certifying the death of a certain critical spirit that is part of the Marxist legacy to which we are heir and whose time may still be to come? (ghosts can always come back!).

[1] The elements required for radical change. In his essay, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', Benjamin writes of "a *weak* Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 246).

So, we live with these ghosts and revenants – ghosts of the past who may suddenly and unexpectedly return and those that seem to herald a future, whose time is still to come. From where or which place? To where? We could ask the same questions of our field: Whence EAP? Whither EAP? (Or should that be "Wither" now that academic language and writing can be generated by artificial intelligence).

Why, you might ask, am I focusing on two thinkers (Benjamin and Derrida) from the previous century? First, because any assessment of the current state of EAP would in Benjamin's view involve a critical examination of the past. Of the history of the field, the pre-history of the present.

Like Benjamin's compelling image of the Angel of History – facing the past, eternally, looking back at the ruins and destruction of history, but blown ever forward in time by the "storm [that] we call progress" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 249) – we need to keep one eye firmly on the past to see through what Susan Buck-Morss calls "the futurist myth of historical progress [which] can only be sustained by forgetting what has happened" (Buck-Morss, 1991, p. 95). This seems particularly necessary at the present time as we face a dangerous new futurism in the form of generative AI, which requires not only our continued vigilance, but that we do not forget or lose sight of the past (I am thinking specifically of the gains already made in the field, which have not always been recognised – the efforts by colleagues to help students find their own voice and identity as writers and thinkers, efforts which artificial intelligence may be in danger of undermining and eroding). And so, I think it's important that we look back – as well as forward - and take stock.

So whither EAP? Where did we come from? Where are we going? What can Benjamin tell us about our field?

In his essay 'Paris – the Capital of the Nineteenth Century', Benjamin invokes Michelet's "Chaque époque rêve la suivant" ("Every epoch dreams its successor") as a maxim for his Arcades project (Benjamin, 1997, p. 159). He was writing this in the 1930s, but looking back to an earlier place and time, to the consumer culture of the previous century: the Parisian shopping arcades of the 1830s.

The word "dreams" is important – for Benjamin, history is a kind of sleepwalking. Whatever age we're living in now is the materialisation of a collective dreaming of previous generations – what people were thinking, hoping, wishing for 30, 40 or 100 years ago gradually sediments and

becomes material history. The age we're living in now is dreamed up out of the past.

Except that the unconscious wishes – for example, for a classless society, for justice, are shaped by other forces and emerge in a twisted, distorted form.

To wake up from the dream, we not only have to recover what was good about the future seen in the past, from which the present and all history derives its impulse, but also to compare critically past and present forms, in a dialectical image – this according to Benjamin, will produce a shock, a moment of consciousness that allows us to see things as they truly are. Thus, to understand why history has failed to deliver its promise of justice and change requires us to undertake a kind of cultural archaeology.

So, to understand the failings of capitalism in his lifetime, Benjamin looks at consumer culture of the previous century, which he designates "the era of high capitalism" (Benjamin, 1997). He's looking specifically at Paris, which he calls "the capital of the nineteenth century" – the capital of modernity and chooses the shopping arcades as the site of his excavation (Benjamin, 1997, pp. 155-76). By the time he's writing, the arcades have become obsolete and outmoded. They're being replaced by modern department stores, some are facing demolition, about to be erased from history. It's a twilight world, the twilight of the nineteenth century. As Buck-Morss puts it, the "consumer dream worlds" of the nineteenth century have become "commodity graveyards" in the twentieth century (Buck-Morss, 1991, pp. 37-38). The fading objects may have lost their original value as commodities. However, in the process, they have acquired a new kind of value. Wandering through this once enchanted, now petrified forest, Benjamin, the Marxist critic, regards these objects as concrete evidence of the material forces of history.

Marx and Engels may have written about historical materialism as a theory, but for Benjamin, the first time we can actually observe this, empirically, is by studying the remnants of the nineteenth century, a previous consumer culture, which have survived into the twentieth century. We have something like fossils – the never fulfilled dreams and desires of previous generations – preserved within the arcades. We can look at and study these objects – the once desired, now discarded commodities and trace the evolution of capitalism.

From where do these objects derive their power, which even in Benjamin's time still exists as a kind of faded aura?

From the reactivation of myth.

For Benjamin, capitalism has appropriated the forces of myth from antiquity. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, you have neoclassicism, a revival of classical Greek architecture in many capital cities. Like a second renaissance. And with this, you get a recurrence of the motifs and symbols of antiquity. So why has this happened in the nineteenth century – the era of high capitalism, the age of modernity?

We no longer worship the old gods, the Olympian gods – nor did consumers in the nineteenth century. But these gods still have a power, even though their temples have been vacated or reduced to ruins. They embody abstract ideals – perfect forms that can never be attained, in the same way that the product promises the consumer a perfection that always remains beyond reach.

What capitalism has done is to take the power of myth and use it to re-enchant the modern world. The arcades are modern temples, built in the new materials of glass and iron rather than stone, but with many of the same features of classical temples – columns, friezes and other motifs. However, these are not temples of the gods, they are devoted to the new cult of the consumerism; the commodity is its object of worship, its sacred relic; the consumer its worshipper. Far from being an age of enlightenment, the nineteenth century, according to Benjamin, has again fallen under the spell of myth.

This is not unexpected – in his notes for the Arcades project, Benjamin writes that "the essence of the mythical event is return" and cites mythological figures – Tantalus, Sisyphus, the Danaides – who were doomed to repeat certain tasks: rolling a boulder up a hill only for it to roll back down, reaching for fruit and water which forever recede, filling with water a vessel full of holes (Benjamin, 2002, p. 119). History is like this, Benjamin is saying, humanity is trapped in the same cycle of repetition. We may think we're enlightened, liberated from myth, but actually, there is just this endless recurrence – the old gods have not disappeared, they have simply taken on new forms to re-enslave mankind.

How do we free ourselves and break the spell of myth? What is required, says Benjamin, is that we recognise that we think of as new and modern is not modern at all, but the old masquerading as the new. This recognition does not come about gradually, by degrees. Instead, it requires a shock – a moment when past and present are perceived simultaneously, like a juxtaposed, or superimposed image. A dialectical

moment which exposes both the myths of the recent past (the promises that were never fulfilled) and the soon-to-become myths (those that never will be fulfilled). This will produce a shock that will end the dream-sleep of myth and bring about historical awakening:

> The utilization of dream-elements in waking is the textbook example of dialectical thought. Hence dialectical thought is the organ of historical awakening. Every epoch not only dreams the next, but while dreaming impels it towards wakefulness. […] We begin to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled. (Benjamin, 1997, p. 176)

How does all this relate to EAP, you might ask?

The arcades in the Arcades Project are just a microcosm of something larger. The same arcades – part of an international style of architecture – can be found in cities all over the world. But so too can we find alienation, commodification, exploitation, imperialism, inequality and injustice.

What Benjamin is really interested in is ways of seeing and critically examining phenomena that uncover the "revolutionary energies" within them (Benjamin, 2009, p. 148) that compel us to act and disrupt the status quo. This is something that I hope will resonate with EAP colleagues.

In the spirit of Walter Benjamin, I propose the following questions for and of our field:

1. Are we as enlightened as we like to believe?
2. How do the past and present illuminate each other?
3. What myths are we enslaved to? Are we sleepwalking, and if so, where?
4. Are we locked in a cycle, doomed to repeat? If yes, how do we break the cycle?

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Notes

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