Enter the Ghost

We generally measure the life of a thing, whether it be an object of art, a useful tool or a building in a city through a linear, temporal sequence as if using human life as our measure: production, consumption, disposal. We make things in factories, workshops and design studios, we consume them in our homes, offices and cities and they end up, depending on how they are valued, as either rubbish thrown into the gutter or as antiques conserved forever in the museum or gallery - too useless/precious to remain available to hand. Such a sequence not only brings temporality into the understanding of a thing but it does so through a language of the subject’s temporality: production, consumption, disposal is the palimpsest of birth, life and death.

And yet even in human terms the dead are rarely so fully disposed of (Marx, 1978). Time does not always flow in this way, “The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living” (1978: 9). Time’s ‘out-of-jointness’, as Derrida stresses, (1994) hints at the potential significance of the not quite disposed of: the anachronistic. The not quite disposed of has an illusionary quality - it continues to present itself when it shouldn’t be able to according to all representational conventions. It presents itself to us not in terms of the discursive but in terms of the figural; in ways that we cannot control in terms of representation. It presents itself to us as a ghost. In some senses the figure of the ghost is like the ruin. What has passed still has the power to haunt us because it has not fully gone away and because it can continue to come back - out of time but revealed in space (see also Simmel, 1959).

As a figure of unfinished disposal, the ghost’s power resides principally in its ability to fold and unsettle this linear sense of represented time by standing outside of any knowable sequence of events (Derrida, 1994). The idea of production, consumption and disposal is just one such sequence that is ruptured by this ability of disposal to linger and to return after it should have gone. Moreover, the figure of the ghost generally questions this issue of temporality through an unsettling of the order of space. To haunt is to remain where one does not belong - unheimlich (uncanny, but literally ‘unhomely’) - it is to blur the ordering of space through a folding of time. The ghost puts us in contact with another space, out of time, though the words it uses to do that do not come easily to it: ‘how can I say things that are pictures’ (Gordon, 1997: 175).

It is not just the specific question of the figure of the ghost that interests me here. It more a question of the broader issue of the manner in which the figural - that which is seen but not represented: the appari- tion, image, trace, spectacle - speaks or gives utterance, through the object, to that which cannot be spoken clearly as discourse. At this preliminary point we can suggest that, above all, ghosts want to give us a message; their very being is determined by this overwhelming desire to communicate. They want to put us straight, make us remember what we have forgotten - the debt we owe them - so that they can then rest in peace (Derrida, 1994).

Yet the ghost’s presentation of self usually has more to do with fig- ural appearance than it does with discourse. It is a figure that presents itself rather than something that comes as a representation (see Lyotard, 1984): ‘The ghost usually appears as a sudden and unexpected rupture into the field of vision. Certainly they mean and rattle their chains to get our attention but usually we only acknowledge their presence...
when we see them; often by running away, seeking their burial and exorcism in response. Only the bravest souls, like Horatio, are able to face the ghost in the anticipation that the apparition, the illusory image might speak, “But soft, behold, lo where it comes again! I’ll cross it, though it blast me! Stay illusion if thou hast any sound or use of voice. Speak to me (Hamlet, I.1, lines 126-130). But when a figure can bring itself to speak it will not be to just anyone. It will not speak to Horatio, nor to Marcellus, only to Hamlet himself - tardy and hesitant in his arrival to meet it as in so many other things. And when finally he does arrive he is beckoned away to one side by the ghost, away from the others into a conspiracy, an aside; only then will the ghost speak to him.

The manner in which the figure speaks, then, is through disclosure. This word implies an opening up: the conspiratorial revealing of some secret knowledge not accessible in obvious ways nor to all. It does not involve a bold and direct statement of fact but an unfolding of understanding through an unexpected gap - an absence made present. To disclose is to reveal, leak, confess, confide, divulge, whisper. It is not always done in private, as we shall see, and in this opening up there remains an aura of concealment, secrecy, even a hidden mimesis that defies the conventions of discourse and representation.

Skeptics might say, “where do we find this ghost, then, other than on the battlements of an ancient Danish castle?” We find it in the haunted house. But this is just a figure of speech for any number of ‘ruined spaces’. We find it wherever the dead are not fully disposed of, where they remain unburied, where the sheeted dead did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets…” (Hamlet, I.1, lines 115-116). We find the ghost within the materiality of social life; a repository of overlooked social relations, outmoded utopian wishes and half forgotten memories now discarded or put to one side. One important space in our modern world where we find such ghosts is in the city - we find them in the fractured panoramas and consumer abundance of the capitalist city. That would be my answer to the skeptic. It is also Walter Benjamin’s answer too and my debt to his ghost should become clearer later.

Why no surprise? Phantasmagoria is a nineteenth century neologism, “a name invented for the exhibition of optical illusions produced chiefly by the magic lantern, first exhibited in London in 1802” according to the Oxford English Dictionary (1989). This was a term that quickly took off among poets and novelists. It was later to be appropriated by Marx in Capital and later still by Benjamin to allude to the visuality of the capitalist image of a utopia of progress, wealth and abundance created by commodity fetishism that finds its full expression in the urban commodity culture of mid-nineteenth century Paris and its arcades, department stores and world fairs (see Buck-Morss, 1989). This is the space of voyeuristic flanerie captured so well by Baudelaire’s image of that city as a site of the fleeting, ephemeral and contingent (1964; also Benjamin, 1983, see also Frisby, 1985). But ‘phantasmagoria’ is not just the illusion created by commodity fetishism it also suggests something else. It is also ‘phantasm agora’. As Derrida notes, the word phantasmagoria means literally ‘ghostly meeting/speaking place’ where ‘’ (1994: 108). It is in the space of illusion, of image and spectacle that the ghost appears as it to speak. Phantasmagoria/phantasm agora: the image, expressed through the materiality of unfinished disposal, has a voice - a voice quite different to that of the discoursing human subject.

The agora was the ancient Greek public square at the centre of Athens where the public would come to speak and listen. A Socratic space, so to speak, it was the site of their public sphere. That public space has not only become a place of spectacular ruin in the modern city in which the ghost can muster the strength to speak but also the ghost of the agora itself, all but ‘Haussmanized’in the nineteenth century capitalist city, the (unfinished) disposal of past utopian dreams in the modern times of the 1950s and 1960s that can be found in that city. She does not speak of ghosts as such but they are there all the same - in the photographs that accompany her text (1970-71). Not green figure numbers or discussed directly, these photographs are not called on as mere illustrations or evidence but as ghosts to speak, disclose, their message through the ‘phantasm illumination’ of the image itself.

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Spatial Hauntings

Notes

1Jacirie Jaquebite uses the modernist buildings in Rio de Janeiro to explore the issues of the ruins in the city (1999). Following Benjamin, she sees these buildings as skeletal images that reveal the failed disposal of past utopian dreams in the modern city of the 1950s and 1960s that can be found in that city. She does not speak of ghosts as such but they are there all the same - in the photographs that accompany her text (1970-71). Not green figure numbers or discussed directly, these photographs are not called on as mere illustrations or evidence but as ghosts to speak, disclose, their message through the ‘phantasm illumination’ of the image itself.
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Exeunt the Ghost. For the moment at least. We need to think further on the space that is there as its precondition. This anachronistic figure - out of time - is not encountered in the daily routine of our lives but precisely in their suspension - in particular in the suspension of time or duree through which we move along unnoticing the spirits that inhabit the world around us. It is the kind of thing we normally might find in a museum or in any site, including parts of the city, that take on a museum-like quality. The ghost is the enemy of becoming - of the world as a sequence of events that flow in a single direction, a world of new-time, of capitalist time - of the time of the bustling city. Such a time treats the issue of disposal in a casual manner. For some the antithesis of this becoming of events is the museum and it is often seen in a negative light.

When the term museum signifies essentially conservation, tradition, security, and when everything collected in this place is there only to be preserved, to remain inactive, harmless, in this particular world - which is that of conservation itself, a world of knowledge, of culture, of aesthetics, and which is as far from the questioning of art as the archival work that assures the life of a poem is far from the poem itself (Blanchot, 1997: 49, original emphasis)

Blanchot, like many nineteenth century critics of the museum before him (see Maleuvre, 1999), contrasts the becoming of art as pure event of creativity to that of spaces like the museum given over to preserving the creative impulse in its material form. He bemoans its lingering stasis that stands against a notion of experience as something vital and lived as real only in the moment. For him the museum ‘not only ruins the idea of art’s origin in the creative event, it ruins the idea of origin itself (1997). Museums, indeed any space in which things endure as if out of-time, are spaces of disposal. But not disposal in the usual sense of rubbish and waste but of total availability - as in something being ‘at your disposal’. For Blanchot, such availability not only ruins the idea of origin but in so doing it also stabilizes art in a space of suspended time. It does this by creating a space of duration and endurance and thereby ruins the idea of an end as well as origin. Art in the museum and the traditions created around it are constituted as art in a space of suspended time. They become spaces of a-temporal duration. The objects of art, in this view, the museum and the traditions created around it are constituted as art in a space of suspended time. They become spaces of a-temporal duration. The objects of art, in this view, have no origin and are preserved in perpetuity as if they can never be allowed to die.

Perhaps. But there is a big assumption being made here. Art in spaces of suspended time is not always available, it can be withdrawn, be forgotten or become lost. That happens in cities all the time. It happens in museums too. Disposal can be about absence as well as presence, and it can in particular be about an oscillation between these two provision-al states of being. 

If we imagine the city as a kind of museum we encounter availability, duration and the suspension of time in the conserved architecture, monuments, parks and civic spaces. The past is indeed all around us available to hand. But we also encounter the forgotten, the rubbed, the overlooked and the unconserved that is falling into decay. We encounter ghosts in this space because the suspension of time - of the eternal city is an illusion, we find instead many times, distantly past, alongside aspirations for an imaginary future as well as the dull routine of the everyday present. We not only encounter a represented past – a heritage and a monumental history but also a figural past, more ghostly and less certain, blurring the boundary between presence and absence.

Enter the ghost again. Disposal and disclosure. To get rid of ... almost. It is the not-quite-fully-gotten-rid-of that raises itself up to speak to us in the form of a ghost. Therein lies its power to haunt (Gordon, 1997). Its language is veiled and not easily given but it knows it can only rest when it has finally spoken and we have understood. It is found in the voracious appetite to consume expressed in the transformations of the urban form of the city (in the consumption/failed disposal of tropical rainforest also, remaindered as tree stumps). Not to acknowledge that is to leave disposal unfinished and to invite the prospect of haunting. To be haunted is to encounter the figural outside of discourse. The effects are those of shock. But any incongruous figure can shock (see Lyotard, 1984). It is the half remembered half disposed that move from simple shock effect to a more potent haunting.

We understand haunting as an unacknowledged debt. It is a debt that we, heirs to past consumption, owe for the failure to dispose of in the appropriate manner. This is not just a matter of recycling our waste and being careful consumers but of recognising that time does not always flow in a line from birth to death. We live in many times at once and our debt is to acknowledge that. It is not a question of being ethical when we consume but of consumption as a way of doing ethics. As Derrida puts it,

That we are heirs does not mean that we have or that we receive this or that, but that some inheritance enriches us one day with this or that, but that the being of what we are is first of all inheritance, whether we like it or know it or not. And that, as Hölderlin said so well, we can only bear witness to it. To bear witness would be to bear witness to what we are insinuous as we inherit, and that - here is the circle, here is the chance, or the infinitude - we inherit the very thing that allows us to bear witness to it (Derrida, 1994: 54, original emphasis).

Derrida is speaking here of the debt that he, indeed all of us, have to the ghost of Marx. If we fail to honour that debt, to continue to think that we have disposed of him when we haven’t, he will not rest but will continue to haunt us. Debt is the message too of Avery Gordon’s powerful discussion of the sociology of haunting (1997). Through three illustrative case studies of ghosts: of Sabina Spielrein - a woman left out of a foundational conference photograph at the beginnings of psychoanalysis, of the haunting presence Argentina’s
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Phantasm agora. Phantasm, son of Hypnos, was one of the ancient Greek gods of dreams. The other two were Iklos and Morpheus. Iklos sent dreams in animal forms, Morpheus dreams of people. Phantasm was responsible for sending dreams to people of inanimate objects, or things. In the city, the ghost does not present itself so much in human or animal form as it does through the guise of the object (see Benjamin, 1983).

What, then, of the Athenian agora? This important public square was surrounded by both sacred and public buildings such as the main council chamber. On one side also were the fountains that supplied the town’s water. The agora was a central place for meeting and especially for speaking. It was also often the site of a market and a place for honouring the memory of the dead. But there was more than one agora. The first Athenian agora was destroyed in war. It became a ruin early on. The second was built on the site of an old cemetery. Already in 600 BC that city’s public sphere is haunted. The foundation, the object, is always already in a state of anticipated ruin (see Serres, 1991). It is a time out of time - anachronistic, uncanny, connecting different worlds within the simultaneity of space. That ruined agora has haunted European culture ever since. The ghosts did not rise up from the graveyard beneath the agora but they were present in another form. In that second agora we find an early example of the European tradition of erecting statues to honour, or bear witness, to the (ghostly) heroes of the city’s past for their great deeds. We first meet the phantasm of the agora in our present cities in the statue. A statue can stand as a metaphor for the ghost in every object.

We meet that ghost not only in Athens but again two and a half thousand years later in Paris in the writings of a group of people who were prepared to listen to what such a ghost had to say. Here is an extract from the statue’s speech in Louis Aragon’s Le Payant de Paris.

Unshakeable human positivism: you never ask yourselves, you whose hair floats lightly on your heads, what your phantom witnesses on their plinths engraved with famous names think of your trickeries, positive or not. We, who speak with the sky, we covered with dew, the mineral dancers feared by the nights, we, the tuners of breezes, the charmers of birds, the guardians of silence, beneath the mind’s adorable chandelier that illuminates our irremediable attitudes, divine princes prisoners of our concrete liberty, we specific emanations of a great breath of inspiration, negations of time inundated by the sun, we, vagrant idols, vagabonds of metaphysics, we dominate with all the athletic stature of thought the formless swarming of the nations of insomnia. (Aragon, 1987: 149-170)

The Surrealist Louis Aragon was amongst the first to listen to what the ghostly object had to say. In this extract from the Statue’s speech we find a disclosure after Aragon, like Hamlet has been beguiled and led aside by the ghosts on their plinths standing alone, all but forgotten in the Buttes-Chaumont at night. The ‘phantom witnesses’ to ‘the nations of insomnia’ tells of how the ghost never sleeps but keeps a watchful if critical eye on the world, bemoaning the fact that people take no notice, that they do not listen to the past that they think they have done with it; disposed of, left behind in the ruin of past times. The statue is a memory to that time, and of its displacement out of time, often put up in the immediate aftermath of the death of a hero. But years later no one remembers all but a few of those honored in this way. All the same, their ghost lives on in the statue - a monument to incomplete disposal and to the powers of the anachronistic.

Walter Benjamin took notice too. Not so much of the statue itself but of Aragon, who’s ‘novel’, in paying attention to the outmoded and the ruins in the city opened up the space for the ghost to speak the discourse of a ‘mythology of the modern’ (see Aragon, 1987: 14). Looking out for a surreal imaginary in the objects of the run down and, by the 1920s, rather seedy arcades and the deserted parks and gardens at night, Aragon found this mythology of the modern in the disclosures of ghosts, the once heroic and new that had now been all but forgotten and turned into trash. In trying to suspend time, the monumentalism and museum-like quality of the modern city erases its own past, disposés of it, but (contrary to Blanchot) in an incomplete way. Aragon, along with his contemporary Andre Breton, realised that the mythology of the modern could be found in the city’s trash, in that left behind in the rush to embrace the ever new and monumentalize it as eternal. For Benjamin, the Surrealists had found something in the ruin that spoke not only of the failure to dispose of the dead time of the past but also of its ability to come back as an

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anachronistic and haunting presence within the blind logic of the commodity within capitalist society.

Inspired by the Surrealists, he did not forget his own debt to Marx. He found a way of thinking about the idea of the ruin in what Marx had to say about the 'phantasmagoria' of commodity fetishism. Marx says of it, 'It is only the particular social relation between people that here takes on the phantasmagoric form of a relation between things' (quoted in Benjamin, 1999: 184). Fetishistic - the word we now use, since Marx, when we speak of a reified relation with things, where we treat the object as in the manner of a subject with which we try and have a meaningful relationship. Benjamin recognised that this reification of social relations within commodity fetish does not fully dispose of the dreams and wishes of its original human producers. The issue for Benjamin became one of finding a way of letting their ghosts speak, thereby shattering the illusion of a dead past and promising future that had no ghosts.

This mythology of progress disposes of the hopes and dreams of the past. But they reassert their presence in this material phantasmagoria of the city. Benjamin saw this, bore witness to it we might say, in acknowledging this latter day Surrealist flanerie, not here accommodating itself to the still novel arcades of Baudelaire’s 1850s (1983) but to their ruin some seventy years later in the 1920s of post First World War Paris. First in Breton’s Nadja (itself a ghost story of the city) (1961) and then in Louis Aragon, Benjamin found a novel source of (disclosed) knowledge that he called, ‘profane illumination... a materialist, anthropological inspiration’ (1985a: 227). He went on to say that the Surrealists had reveled in their attention to the (ruined) object,

He [Breton] was the first to perceive the revolutionary energies that appear in the ‘outmoded’... No one before these visionaries and augurs perceived how destitution - not only social but architeconic, the poverty of interiors, enslaved and enslaving objects - can be suddenly transformed into revolutionary nihilism ... They bring the immense forces of ‘atmosphere’ concealed in these things to the point of explosion (1985a: 229).

He goes on,

The Surrealists’ Paris, too, is a ‘little universe’. That is to say, in the larger one, the cosmos, things look no different. There too, are crossroads where ghostly signals flash from the traffic, and inconceivable analogies and connections between events are the order of the day. It is the region from which the lyric poetry of Surrealism reports (1985a: 231).

Most perceptive of all, though, is not Benjamin’s understanding of the Surrealist treatment of the ghost within the object as such but the manner in which it discloses, or the way in which the figural uses language. It is that ghost that leads us to profane illuminations offered up by the ruins of the city. The truth of disclosure resides not in the appearance of the object - even though that is all we see, but in its taking us aside like Hamlet’s father (through profane illumination) and disclosing to us utterances in a language before the subject and outside of representation.

Language takes precedence. Not only before meaning. Also before the self. In the world’s structure dream loosens individuality like a bad tooth. This loosening of the self by intoxication is, at the same time, precisely the fruitful, living experience that allowed these people to step outside the domain of intoxication (1985a: 227).

Despite the veneer of psychoanalysis in Benjamin’s text, it is clear that not only Surrealism but also much of post-structuralism is summed up in this one sentence - a search for the language of ghosts or the language of language before the subject. The language of ghosts is the language of language revealed not in words but in images; images found in the not fully disposed, the ruin, the juxtapositions that we encounter in the anachrony of mixed up temporal sequences. This is clearly not the language of the subject. It is not the language that you or I use, English, Portuguese, Spanish. No one is supposing that ghosts, or the objects in which they are manifest, actually speak in the way that we do. They do not even whisper behind our backs in the Buttes-Chaumont late at night. But what Aragon suggested, and Benjamin too following him, was to suspend disbelief that there could be a language outside of the subject, a language of the figural object and thereby hear witness to that phantasm in the city’s ruined agora.

The ancient Greeks did believe in such a language, they believed that the gods actually spoke to them in their dreams - Ikelos, Morpheus and Phantasos. Surrealism bears witness to the language of dreams and its access to the punctum of the blind field that exists beyond the language of reasoning subjects. But what they refused to do was treat that blind field simply as the interior of the unconscious - the only place that Freud would allow for the possible existence of ghosts (1953-64). They believed that the ghost could be found not only in the not fully disposed of that haunts our unconscious but also in the object world of the city. It was left to Benjamin to bring this insight into contact with a materialist understanding of the capitalist city.
At various points in his writing Benjamin uses different concepts to account for the language of the phantasm agora. For Benjamin, we encounter knowledge in the form of disclosure, expressed through the concepts of the monad, the dialectical image and dialectics at a standstill (see Benjamin, 1985b; 1999; for secondary commentary see especially Wolin, 1982; Buck- Morss, 1989). We see in these terms a theory of relation: the relation between seeing and saying that provides a possible access to this language before the subject.

In his original use of the term monad, Benjamin is more Kantian than he is Marxist in his understanding of how we can grasp the image as a basis for this language outside of representation. In his epistemo-critical prologue, the monad consists, for Benjamin, as the realisation of the phenomenal world in its noumenal being (1985c). That realisation, furthermore, takes on a redemptive character for Benjamin (see Wolin, 1982), his series of aphorisms collected together as One Way Street, the essay quoted above on Surrealism, and his studies on Baudelaire, he shifts to a more materialist approach to the disclosure, expressed through the concepts of the monad, the dialectical image and dialectics at a standstill (see Benjamin, 1985b; 1999; for secondary commentary see especially Wolin, 1982; Buck- Morss, 1989). We see in these terms a theory of relation: the relation between seeing and saying that provides a possible access to this language before the subject.

The idea is a monad - that means briefly: every idea contains an image of the world. The purpose of the representation of the idea is nothing less than an abbreviated outline of this image of the world (Benjamin, 1985c: 48).

In opening up the idea to the image that it conveys, the phenomenal world can bear witness to its noumenal ghost. Finding the language for doing that is a central part of Benjamin’s Trauerspiel study. He finds such a language in allegory. In his arcades project, his series of aphorisms collected together as One Way Street, the essay quoted above on Surrealism, and his studies on Baudelaire, he shifts to a more materialist approach to this question of the disclosures of language than can be found in the concept of the monad.

Using the terms ‘dialectics at a standstill’ and especially ‘dialectical images’, Benjamin is still after the same quarry but now recognises he must account for it in terms of social relations rather than the noumenal being in the world of phenomena. Both of these later terms convey the ‘shock effect’ that emanates from Surrealism’s profane illuminations in letting the object, the not quite disposed of object, speak. Benjamin, following the Surrealists, believed that the construction of dislocated images emanating from the anachronistic character of these objects would allow them to speak in a language that took precedence over both meaning and the self. The aphoristic images of his One Way Street (1985b) is perhaps the closest he gets to this in his own work - leaving aside the incomplete and monumental (that is ruined) arcades project (1999).

Susan Buck-Morss’s own reconstruction of the arcades project helps us here in understanding what Benjamin was trying to achieve (1989). She places considerable emphasis on the idea that, for Benjamin, every object contains a utopian wish image from the past (1989: 114). In our terms, the wish image is the language of the ghost and for Benjamin that is encountered in the objects of commodity culture in which the outmoded can become that which was made not just a thousand years ago but yesterday. The phantasmagoria of commodity fetishism found expressed by the ruined object and in the city spaces in which we encounter it, conceals within itself an unfinished disposal of the dreams of the past that have been turned into rubbish or ruin. But they have not gone away. Still there in the tattered remains of the outmoded city, when taken out of the everyday routine and turned into images that shock us through the strangeness of that displacement, the phantasmagoria reveals, as an aside, the language of the phantasm agora - the ghostly speaking place - a language of the figure rather than a discourse of the subject. To honour the debt we owe to that and to redeem that past, thereby underlining the illusions of commodity fetishism is central to Benjamin’s Marxist vision of the desire for an end of capitalism.

There is irony here. One does not just read Walter Benjamin, a man martyred by Fascism, one is expected to bear witness to him. For the last thirty years we have encountered him as a ghost too - a ghost of the academy. We are presented with Benjamin’s insights into the mythology of the modern and its profane illuminations in the form of ruins. His greatest work on the city consists only of the fragments that make up the Baudelaire study (1983), a few essays where these ideas are barely but suggestively sketched (1985d) and in the greatest ruin of all, his arcades project. In social science in recent years, we have become familiar and some what accepting of the idea that objects can be actants - that they can act, albeit through effect rather than intention (see Callon, 1986; Law, 1986; Latour, 1988; 1993). * To say that the object can also ‘speak’, as I have done here, might still be a little disconcerting. That is because we tend to think in terms of the subject’s language: as parole - as the speech of the subject. What I am referring when I speak of the ghost in the object is how that parole is never fully disposed of but is left behind as a trace within the object that is a product of social relations - relations of production, consumption and disposal. The object continues to utter what

* I am referring to the tradition within science and technology studies that is known as actor-network theory.
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In its melancholy, its baroque fantasies, its fatalism and its sadness to create a mimetic
ject, is, as Benjamin recognised, the language of allegory. Allegory is about talking
outside representation, might speak by coming into view through disclosure. It seeks,
this strategy nor unique in his method. While some of his interest comes, no doubt, from
its art of
representing one thing under the guise of another - a hidden mimesis. It uses represen-
tations between them (see Foucault, 1970; 1983). But Foucault was not the first to deploy
moments, the city, (1985d) to his incomplete arcades proj-
et (see Buck-Mors, 1989), Benjamin illustrate his allegorical mode of writing and its
representational economy, a folded topology of representation/non-representation whereby
connections can be made between seeing and saying indirectly (see Deleuze, 1988).

But of all twentieth century philosophers, there are none more than Benjamin who
have made allegory their own. From his work on the Trauerspiel (1985c) through his
various essays on forms of modernism, the city, (1985d) to his incomplete arcades proj-
ject - making visible what is unseen - profane illumination - and giving
voice to those who are not heard without giving in to the idea of direct correspondences.

Through these dialectical images, Benjamin sought to hold time still so that the
materiality and spatiality of human history could be crystallised in an image that, when
apprehended, might shatter the illusion of progress and linear time. For Benjamin, these
distilled images are the vehicle for allegory. They can reveal a lost historical memory,
memory of the defeated and the oppressed, the unrepresented Other and redeem them
through visibility. For Benjamin, allegory opens up, through the constitution of such
dialectical images, the conditions of possibility for a redemptive criticism that frees both
the past and the present and allows them to proceed into the future together. The dialect-
cal image is an appearance. It is a figural ghost (see also Gordon, 1997: 65).

We see this most clearly in Benjamin’s now famous discussion of the ‘angel of his-
tory,’ an allegorical interpretation of the picture Angelus Novus by Paul Klee that he
purchased in 1921. In the well known and often quoted ninth thesis of his Theses on
the Philosophy of History - the last essay he wrote during his lifetime - he says,

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A Klee painting named ‘Angelus Novus’ shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurling it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress (Benjamin, 1973: 249).

There have been many interpretations of this densely argued thesis (see for example Wolin, 1982; Tiedemann, 1989; Schollem, 1991; Buci-Gluckmann, 1994). We know that with it Benjamin was trying to restore to historical materialism (against Marx) an ability to see the dialectical unfolding of history while refusing to accept the idea that history necessarily progressed in a linear fashion. He was also, through this figure, trying to show that in holding time still, rather than moving with its flow/ideology of progress, we see the catastrophic conditions that it has created and will create. We might add, that we also see in it the coming back to haunt of all that is supposed to have gone away.

The angel is an allegorical figure, an image that discloses a message, that allows us to see what is not normally seen and to say what we see rather than remain silent. What has gone unrecognised, though in most recent Benjamin scholarship, is that the power of Benjamin’s interpretation of this figure lies above all in the way he depicts this relation between seeing and saying, between the figural and the discursive. The angel is caught in the blast of human history, it sees all as catastrophe and ruin. Its eyes are staring in horror at the wreckage that humans do not see. It sees the whole host of human dead, not fully buried, in front of its eyes in the ruins of history. And yet in that very act of seeing, the angel - the metaphor that above all things stands for communication, communication between heaven and earth - is unable to say anything. This angel is mute, struck dumb by the shock of what it sees; its mouth, like its staring eyes, are open in horror and amazement. Not only can it not stay because its wings are open and it is propelled backwards into the future, it can say nothing either, it cannot awaken the dead; it is difficult to speak, let alone be heard, when one has such a gale blowing in one’s face.

The angel is generally a messenger who speaks because it can see all. Yet this particular angel, a modern angel, is caught between seeing and saying; between the figural and the discursive. That is the space that Klee’s image and Benjamin’s reading of it invites us to imagine. What the angel sees is the host of ghosts. It has entered through the punctum into the space of the phantasm agora.

Through the figure of the Angelus Novus, Benjamin rather than the angel, is able to give us a message about how, though allegory, figures, things, materiality and practice have indirect ways of telling us stories, theoretical stories about power, agency, history that we could never grasp through more direct forms of representation. These images have their own language. We can never fully know it but we can come close to a good approximation of it through allegory’s folded way of knowing. Allegory brings closer together two points that might not otherwise be connected. A point of seeing and a point of saying. Yet, if we were to draw a line between those points it would not be a direct, straight line but a languid, looping meander of a line. The message of allegory is that two points can only be brought that close together through the fold, through mimesis, through disclosure, because until there is a language between what is seen and what is said, that connection can only be made indirectly, it has to create a way of translating what is seen into what is said indirectly, figuratively through figures and images.

The message in the ninth thesis is that there is a space, a tension between the discursive and the figural, that is inhabited by ghosts, and that we can come close to understanding what it has to disclose to us through allegory. Because of its own attempt at a suspension between a direct language of the subject and an indirect language of the figure, allegory offers us a means of enriching our own social scientific language of the social. We can use it to develop a form of sociological disclosure that does not have to draw on the naturalist and realist representational economies inherent from nineteenth century descriptions of the social (see Law and Hetherington, forthcoming). We can learn to speak about materiality, spatiality, temporality and subjectivity - what make up the social by taking account of the disclosures of ghosts and develop a sociology of the (discarded) figure.

In this other sociology, which is willy-nilly another politics, the ghost gesticulates, signals, and sometimes mimics the unspeakable as it shines for both the remembered and the forgotten. This other sociology stretches at the limits of our imagination and at the limit of what is representable in the time of the now, to us, as the social world we inhabit (Gordon 1997: 150).

That then is my own attempted disclosure: as social scientists we should pay attention to the object and its phantasm agora; step forward bravely like Horatio in a suspension of disbelief to meet it. It is not just humans that have memory and oral history,
things too can tell us something about their past, and our possible future that we cannot find in our own representations of that past. We owe it to that past to bear witness, because as Derrida points out (1994), as this inheritance is part of our being, we lay ourselves open to the possibility of being haunted by the disclosures it offers us if we choose to ignore it.

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