

poetryfoundation.org

# Rewriting Walter Benjamin's "The Arcades Project"

---

by KENNETH GOLDSMITH

By Kenneth Goldsmith

For the past five years, I have been working on a rewriting of Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* set in New York City in the twentieth century called *Capital*. As of this writing, the book is about 500 pages long, approximately half way to the 1000+ pages that constitutes Benjamin's book. The idea is to use Benjamin's identical methodology in order to write a poetic history of New York City in the twentieth century, just as Benjamin did with Paris in the nineteenth. Thus, I have taken each of his original chapter headings (*convolutes*) and, reading through the entire corpus of literature written about NYC in the twentieth century, I have taken notes and selected what I consider to be the most relevant and interesting parts, sorting them into sheaves identical to Benjamin's.

I've tried to maintain as perfect as possible a mirror of Benjamin's project. Major figures and themes in his book have been updated in mine: his Baron Haussmann is my Robert Moses; his Baudelaire is my Robert Mapplethorpe (my Mapplethorpe chapter begins with the citation "Mapplethorpe was the 1970s leather-clad equivalent of the great dandies and decadents of the nineteenth century — Beardsley, Oscar Wilde, Huysmans, Baudelaire"); his arcades are my World's Fairs (1939 and 1964 — mimicking the historical trajectory of NYC during the twentieth century, which arcs from the utopian to the corrupt & from the local to the global), but to name a few. While I began with the identical set of Benjamin's convolutes, over the course of time, only a few remain relevant. Many of them — for example, "The Barricades" or "Marx" — have been replaced by or updated for NYC in the twentieth century: "Excitement, Restlessness, Fame, Ambition" or "Shopping, Mall, Consumerism" are two new *convolutes* (see below for a complete list of my *convolutes*). Naturally, the flavor of my book is different than the original. New York in the twentieth century has a much glossier surface. In fact, it's all about surface: a city without history just coming into its own, beaming with optimism and jazz, Harlem, Madison Avenue, Andy Warhol, The New York Schools (music, art, dance and poetry), the skyscrapers, the influx of immigrant populations and so forth. It's a far cry from the dark psychological recesses and fervent socio-political battles of Paris in the nineteenth century.

This is an exercise that is as much about reading as it is about writing. In fact, it's a book that proposes reading as writing. While many other authors could have written Benjamin's book, why is it that his is so successful, so endlessly fascinating? It's about what he chooses. In lesser hands, such a work would've been dreary, dull, tedious, pedantic and loquacious. Instead, we have a book that is arguably one the most readable works ever written, yet very few words were actually written by Benjamin himself; it's an act of conceptual writing where what one chooses — one's taste — either makes or breaks the book. While there was much Benjaminian gloss and "voice" in his book, I take it to the next level: nowhere is a single word of my own present — not a thought, not a commentary, nor a sentiment — instead, reflecting contemporary concerns, my task is merely appropriative.

In the end I want this to be neither reference nor history book: it can only be literature. What it should do is to poetically illustrate the Sisyphean impossibility of attempting to read through and describe the magnitude and complexity of the New York City in the twentieth century, as dictated by the subjective way one person reads through this particular mass of literature. As such, the book — in an ontological sense — will fail: Can a megapolis such as this truly be described? Absolutely not. Can history really be written objectively? No. Yet art cannot fail. What emerges instead is a compendium of fleeting impressions as dictated by one's whim and curiosity, while engaged in the act of reading and note-taking. And so, it's a unique work of art; one that anyone could do. But if you were to read through the corpus of literature written on NYC in the twentieth century, you would clearly come up with a completely different book. How you would navigate through this thicket of information is entirely unique.

My research thus far has been limited to university and neighborhood public libraries containing books with a general focus on my subject. I have also been scouring second-hand bookshops for out-of-print titles, while also unearthing the occasional magazine article from yellowed journals. This is a book-based project; thus I have avoided web-based research. Digging through shelves of books, stumbling across page-bound treasures, and unearthing analog documents from the period the way Benjamin did seems an appropriate way to honor his unassailable methodology and spirit.

### *Convolutes*

As of today, these are the *convolutes* I'm working with. I'm only half way through — the book will be done when it hits the exact length of Benjamin's — so they will continue to evolve radically according to the primary materials I have to work with.

### Abstraction

Advertising, Signage

Alcohol, Bar, Drugs, Prohibition  
Amnesia, Rootlessness  
Ancient, Primitive, SciFi  
Apocalypse  
Architecture  
Art  
Body, Hygiene, Pleasure, AIDS  
Bohemia  
Bridge, Brooklyn Bridge  
Building as City  
Capital of the 20th Century  
Celebrity  
Chronicle, Mundane  
City as Sentence  
Class, Social Unrest, Politics  
Classicism  
Coney Island  
Cosmic, Celestial  
Crowds, Congestion, Traffic, Density, Speed  
Danger, Seedy, Crime  
Death, Decay, Obsolescence, Downfall  
Depeletion  
Depopulated  
Description  
Détournement  
Documentary  
Dream, Sleep, Night Unreal City  
Empire  
Empire State Building, Chrysler, WTC  
Eternal Return  
Fame, Ambition, Excitement, Restlessness  
Fashion  
Flaneur, Idleness, Boredom, Perambulation  
Food  
Garbage, Dirt, Trash, Waste  
Gentrification  
Global, World City

Graffiti  
Grid, Map, Cartography  
Harlem  
Image  
Interior  
Invisible, Unreal, Ghost  
Labor, Work  
Language, Speech  
Light, Lighting, Color, Air  
Literature  
Logic, Reason  
Loneliness, Singularity  
Luxury  
Manners, Customs, Mundane, Routine  
Mapplethorpe  
Media  
Memory, Nostalgia  
Money, Stk Exch, Economics, Wealth, Market  
Movement, Mobility  
Museum, Spa  
Myth  
Names, Ethnicity  
Nature  
Neighborhood, Structure  
Old New York  
Palimpsest  
Paris, Europe, Old World  
Photography, Reproduction  
Politics, Leftism  
Poverty, Squalor, Abuse  
Power, Narcissism  
Prison, Punishment  
Progress (Theory of)  
Psychogeography  
Psychology  
Purity  
Real Estate

Reinvention, Invention  
Religion  
Robert Moses  
Scale, Magnitude, Proportion  
Sex, Romance  
Shopping, Mall, Consumerism  
Signage, Semiotic, Symbolic  
Simulacra  
Skyline (Panorama)  
Smell  
Social  
Soho  
Sound, Noise  
Spectacle  
Speed, Nervousness, Iron, Fire  
Statue of Liberty  
Steam, Plumbing  
Streets, Street Names, Names  
Suburbs  
Surreal  
Technology  
TimesSq, Bway, Gamb, Prost, Night, Prohibition  
Underground  
Unrealized NY  
Unrest, Radical  
Violence  
Voyeur, Window, Mirror  
Water, Plumbing  
Weather, Air Conditioning, Atmosphere  
World's Fair 1939  
World's Fair 1964  
Writing

2011-04-30

Posted in Books on Saturday, April 30th, 2011 by Kenneth Goldsmith.

## **Original URL:**

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2011/04/rewriting-walter-benjamins-the-arcades-project/>