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Journal of Visual Culture 2002; 1: 325
DOI: 10.1177/147041290200100305

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Globalization, cosmopolitanism, politics, and the citizen

Susan Buck-Morss (in conversation with Laura Mulvey and Marquard Smith)

Abstract
Professor Susan Buck-Morss is the author of The Origin of Negative Dialectics (1977), The Dialectics of Seeing (1989) and Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West (2000). Through these and other writings, and as an active and influential political intellectual, her works have had a resounding impact on various fields of inquiry including Visual Culture, Critical Theory, Cultural Studies, and Government and Political Science, on topics including the Frankfurt School, the thinking of Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, theories of mass culture, and cultural histories of globalization. Here, Professor Buck-Morss speaks about these and other matters.

Key words
community • cosmopolitanism • globalization • history • politics • utopia

Visual culture as living methodology

journal of visual culture (JVC): Towards the beginning of Dreamworld and Catastrophe [2000] you say that this most recent book is an ‘experiment in visual culture’. It attempts, you go on to propose, to use ‘images as philosophy’ by presenting, both literally and metaphorically, a way of seeing the past that challenges common conceptions as to what this last [the 20th] century was all about. Would you tell us more about what lies behind this adventurous endeavour? It certainly seems to be a similarly intricate task to the one you set yourself in your previous book, The Dialectics of Seeing [1989]. Are such experiments born of a montage mentality, of a Benjaminian mentality, or is there something else going on as well? Is there perhaps something specifically Buck-Morsssian about it?
Susan Buck-Morss (SBM): Often I begin simply being fascinated with an image, particularly an image that doesn’t seem to fit, or that disturbs conventional understanding. There are 140 images in *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, and they are from many different genres. Some are paintings, some are photographs or film stills, some are clippings from newspapers – all kinds of visual data. They were the inspiration for the writing of the text, rather than being illustrations of the text, which would not have been written if the images had not been found. That is important to me. It leads to plundering film studies, art history, photography books, and whatever else I can get my hands on. I plunder visual culture for a certain theoretical use.

Benjamin worked that way too, more than we realize. Although he includes very few images in his work, many of his most insightful theoretical contributions are reflections on visual culture. My presentation differs in its dependence on images mounted directly in the text. The juxtaposition of images and text is meant to produce a cognitive experience in readers, who can see the theoretical point in a certain way, one that surprises and illuminates. Affect, as much as reason, is mobilized.

JVC: The Dialectics of Seeing and *Dreamworld and Catastrophe* are incredibly distinct from one another in all kinds of ways. Yet they are almost identical in their desire to start from the difficulty of making sense of the relationship between various images, between images and written texts, between images and their relations to history, philosophy, and aesthetics. Both books somehow manage to realize this in book form.

SBM: One of the most difficult things with the production of *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, even at MIT Press, was to bring the artwork and the text together in meaningful dialogue. They managed after a bit of a struggle to do a very good job. There are distinct points throughout the book when this image–text dialogue takes on particular forms. In chapter two, for instance, a straightforward story unfolds until a point where the text begins to speak about the shattering of the dreamworld of Modernity – about ‘history’ itself as shattered. At that point the book shatters, the actual presentation changes, so that then you get fragments of text and image, rather than sequential text. That took a lot of back-and-forth, as the art department was used to working separately from the copy editor. In some ways it would have been easier to produce the book on a home computer than at a university press. I still don’t understand why it should have been so difficult, or so expensive. For example, I wanted to have the ‘hypertext’ in chapter one printed in various colors, coded to keywords in the text. Although any modern laptop could have handled multiple colors with no problem, at the press we had to settle for alternate size fonts. That isn’t totally satisfactory from a conceptual point of view, because it re-establishes the hierarchical relation between texts that is characteristic of old-time footnotes, rather than the egalitarian relation provided by hypertext links. In other parts of the book, we treated text fragments as material blocks, as if they too were visual objects that could be moved about and altered in scale, and juxtaposed to image-objects. It worked quite well.

This book is an attempt to use visual methods and to use Benjaminian methods. It isn’t about Benjamin, or about visual theory so much as an attempt to practice both in a theoretical–historical context, looking back at the 20th century after the end of
the Cold War. It is difficult to have that intent register within the commercial process of book marketing, which segments the reading public in unhelpful ways. There is a desire to make something out of my book that is not there. If you go to bookstores in the United States, you will find it shelved under Political Science – because I am in a Government Department and the book is about the East and West. But there is no real discipline to place it into. And that makes some people in the profession extremely uneasy.

**JVC:** For me, it’s very straightforward. It goes in Visual Culture, when and if that exists in a bookstore. And it goes next to books that do similar kinds of things – methodologically, thematically, topologically – with a huge diversity of different and distinct material. Surely this isn’t so much to do with the issue of categorizing books on shelves per se as it has to do with the question of sensibility, as a working method, as a series of strategies, a modality even, for dealing with the fraught relations between words and images. And making sense of them. Or failing to do so. There’s perhaps something about a Visual Culture sensibility that’s different from a Political Science sensibility, or from an historian’s sensibility, or an art historian’s sensibility even. Maybe that sensibility itself is very much of Benjamin?

**SBM:** When *The Dialectics of Seeing* was published, my emphasis on the visual in Benjamin’s thought was seen as ‘inaccurate’ because although Benjamin did look at images in the Bibliothèque Nationale – and there are a few places in his published works that include images – his piece on Russian toys, for instance – for the most part there are none in his essays. So why do I make so much of the visual in Benjamin? He says at one place in the arcades project [1999] that the present surrounds his text like ‘invisible ink’ – a present that is clearly the material world in which he lived, the places in Paris where he worked, the arcades where he strolled, the metros he rode, and the sidewalk cafes where he wrote on the back of cocktail napkins (some of these are saved in the archives).

When I was doing research on Benjamin’s arcades project, I spent time in Paris, but not only in the Bibliothèque Nationale. I made pilgrimages to all the surviving arcades. I would go to the old magazine stores and look at the illustrated magazines from the 1930s to get an idea of what he was seeing, what formed the visual context for his writing. There was a Daumier exhibition and a Grandville exhibition in Paris in the 1930s – artists who appear importantly in the arcades project. There was a world exposition in Paris in 1937, while he was writing about the first-world expositions of the mid-19th century. All of the figures – the flâneur, the prostitute, the collector – were visible to him in Paris, which is why he interpreted them as urforms of the present. If I hadn’t discovered these visual cues, I would not have gotten anywhere with *The Dialectics of Seeing*. Now that Benjamin’s book on the arcades is out in English translation, you hear people saying: ‘Oh, it is so fragmentary! It is just a mélange of quotations and commentary, without any coherent order.’ But I do think there is a rigor in his way of working that you can only discover if you develop a method that comes out of visual studies or visual culture. Only then can you begin to see that there is more than random interest in Benjamin’s choice of texts, and in their arrangement under keywords. Or, the other way around: the struggle of trying to interpret Benjamin’s arcades project leads to the development of a visual methodology.
Even we mere mortals who are no Benjamin-type geniuses can learn from him a visual method of theorizing. That’s what method is, a set of tools that can be used by other people. It is the strong part of Benjamin’s work from a philosophical (as opposed to literary) point of view. If it were purely a case of the genius Benjamin writing wonderful things, then we wouldn’t be able to enact and re-enact the methodological possibilities that his work makes available. Benjamin’s texts visualize ideas. He is clearly fascinated with images. But the visual metaphors he creates, that so impress us with his literary brilliance, are never simply metaphors. They are also objects in his world.

**JVC**: So, it’s a living methodology ...

**SBM**: Or a materialist praxis, a way of working – a way of thinking. We describe how art moves ‘into life’ in the early 20th century. Perhaps the same could be said of a variant of philosophical thought ...

**JVC**: It demands that one pay attention to the visual, the archival, and other material one’s working with, and realize that the material itself offers certain ways of engaging one with it. One has to hear the way material presents itself, and respond to it accordingly. It’s being sensitive to the sound of its grain – to mix metaphors – that’s what tells you how it’s possible to write it. And in a sense, and to that extent, it’s a methodology which demands that to hear it right is to do it some kind of justice.

**SBM**: One needs all of one’s senses to do justice to material reality. Benjamin speaks about ‘fragments of the past’. Now what is a fragment of the past? Is it a piece of text? An image? Proust’s taste of the madeleine? A melody remembered? All of these. Everything, even a textual fragment, has a sensory component. Working in the old Bibliothèque Nationale, I took out the books that Benjamin found there, and looked through them to find the piece of text he pulled out … it’s interesting, never the topic sentence of a paragraph or the lead idea of a chapter but, rather, some obscure fragment that resonates with his own thought, not in an abstract, intellectual way, but sensorily, concretely.

I have had discussions with postmodernists who are content to ignore the archive, who criticize reverence for archival truth as fetishistic. ‘Don’t bother with the archive,’ they tell me, ‘It is not the source of truth.’ And of course they are right, if one treats the archive as the traditional historian would. The ‘archive’ of a ‘living methodology’, as you call it, consists of the material remains of life stored – rescued – in libraries, museums, second-hand stores, flea-markets. Obviously, the fact that only certain material objects survive, even as photographic traces, is part of their ‘truth’ – from a critical-historical point of view, perhaps the most important part. But I am working as a theorist rather than a historian. And why do I think the historical material matters? It’s a good question, if truth is an impossible category, why would material matter?

**JVC**: So why does materiality matter for Susan Buck-Morss?

**SBM**: Because it is an anchor against my own subjective and presentist fantasy. It intervenes as a counter to purely subjective interpretation. And it forces you to curtail speculation for its own sake. It demands a certain rigor.
Critical archaeologies of globalization

JVC: The question is: what kind of material allows us to rescue the utopian hopes of Modernity – as a Leftist project? You talk about rubble in *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, which is very much a book about visual culture. So what kind of residue, historical and visual, might we address to take this utopian project seriously?

SBM: The project of the Constructivists, for one example, particularly their quite serious attempts to create ‘socialist objects’, industrial–aesthetic products that would be ‘comrades’ of people in their daily life, avoiding the fetish character of bourgeois commodities. Then there is the dreamworld of Soviet cinema. I refer in the book to the movie, *Circus*, directed by Gregorii Alexandrov (who worked with Eisenstein in the 1920s), but I hadn’t had a chance to view it until more recently. It is absolutely extraordinary, not only for the Busby Berkeley look-alike musical finale, but for the enlightened way that race is handled, mixed marriages, the whole gamut. It was released in 1936! You don’t find racial integration thematized so progressively in the West in the mid-thirties.

‘Residues’ useful for a utopian project in our own time can also be facts that challenge our entrenched Cold-War imaginaries of East vs West, by showing that the cultural connections were more fluid than is generally supposed. In the book I put together a story, a coherent story, from pieces found in disparate places – the fact that US engineers built the factories of Stalin’s first Five Year Plan, and the fact that the US public has a National Gallery of Art in Washington DC. How do these facts fit together? Stalin needed hard currency to pay the engineers, and he got it by selling – secretly – European masterpieces from the Hermitage museum to the US Secretary of the Treasury, Andrew Mellon, who, to avoid prosecution for tax evasion, willed to the Government both the paintings and money to build a museum. So the US got ‘socialized art’ – the National Gallery – and the USSR got capitalist steel mills from the Mellon family fortune! I found the first part of this story in the literature of an extreme Right-wing think tank; I found the second part in the art history library. But no one had put them together. The images for this section include photographs of Magnitogorsk taken by Margaret Bourke White, who traveled to the USSR in the 1930s.

The goal is not to tell a newly definitive history. The pieces can be pulled apart and put together to express another idea. But the constellations are not arbitrary. The ideas they create are not fictional. To move these pieces of the past around is a bit of a gesture of Der Grübler, the figure of allegory who tries to piece together what past history has split apart. And the politically utopian interest in these historical fragments comes from the fact that they are all we’ve got! Where else but to the past can you look if you give up the myth of marching joyously forward, counting on the inevitability of progress? So the rescue of history is not out of nostalgia for the past, but to make the past useful. Really useful. Useful for thinking on the Left today.

The problem with using historical facts is that people want you to weight them in a way that tells history ‘as it actually was’. The book has been criticized for not putting enough emphasis on the horrors of the Soviet situation – Stalin’s mass
murders, or the disasters of peasant collectivization. But remembering the victims is not a sufficient strategy for the Left today, particularly if recollecting these horrors is used as a way of discrediting the tradition of socialism in its entirety. For us, it is the Cold-War telling of history that needs to be brushed against the grain. My strategy is a pragmatics of time that avoids chronology in order to place historical fragments in useful juxtaposition. I really have in mind as a model the method of photomontage, the political photomontages of John Heartfield and others.

**JVC:** So this is the way in which the piece you published recently in *Critical Inquiry* [2000] on Hegel and Haiti works, for instance?

**SBM:** Absolutely. It’s the same method. Thank you for seeing that. After *Dreamworld and Catastrophe* appeared, people tended to conclude that I ‘do’ Soviet Studies. But then I tell them I just wrote on Hegel and Haiti, and they protest. ‘You’re not supposed to hop about like that.’ Obviously you can be accused of dilettantism here [laughter]. But the method is the same. In both cases I am putting together fragments of the past with the political intent of transforming our historical imaginaries. With the Hegel and Haiti project, it was a task of restoration, putting the historical facts together to restore a picture that the splicing of the story by different disciplines – Philosophy, Caribbean Studies, French Revolutionary History, Art History, Print Media History – had obscured and made impossible to see.

**JVC:** To clarify, and without wanting to simplify too much, the article on Hegel and Haiti concerns how, historically, Hegel began to develop a particular model of history at a particular historical moment, and how this model, this account, becomes a guiding principle in understanding the emergence of Modernity. But it is more than this, because you shift the story very far away from its more familiar iconographical, historical, cultural, and geographical milieu, and pivot it through Haiti to show not only that Hegel’s philosophy of history has a concrete historical whereabouts but also that the master–slave dialectic is very much always already a question of and for the postcolonial, as well as a question of class. What part, then, does the Hegel and Haiti configuration play in the beginnings of your new project, a cultural genealogy of globalization?

**SBM:** *Dreamworld and Catastrophe* is about the end of the modernist landscape of East vs West. The disintegration of this geopolitical map is, let’s say, the end of Modernity. So now, if you go back to the beginning of the modern era, you have to think without the map that is now destroyed. You’re thinking back into the space of the origins of Modernity, without presuming that it is going to end up with the Cold-War map that you know! That frees you for other kinds of intellectual projects. So for me it was absolutely logical to move to Hegel and Haiti, as key to a genealogical mapping of the origins of globalization, and of movements that are resisting it in its present form. Our new reality, unlike Modernity, is not inherently Eurocentric.

Basically, the project hinges on an archival find that I would not have looked for if I hadn’t already had a hunch that it must be there. That is, the first mention of the master–slave dialectic by Hegel was in the Jena manuscripts of 1803–5; these notes immediately preceded the writing of the *Phenomenology of Mind*. 1803 was the year Napoleon arrested Toussaint-Louverture, who had liberated the slaves of Saint-
Domingue and forced the French Revolutionary Government to abolish slavery throughout the colonies. In 1804–5, Dessalines took up the struggle in Saint-Domingue, and succeeded in liberating the colony, establishing the ‘black Empire’ of Haiti. Hegel formulated the master–slave dialectic in precisely these years. So I thought there must be a connection, although academics in the specific disciplines hadn’t seen it. Only one scholar, a philosopher from West Africa living in Paris named Franklin-Tavarés, has speculated about a connection.

And it turns out – this was the archival find – that the leading political journal in Germany at the time by the name of Minerva – which Hegel read, we know that – had in 1803, 1804, and 1805 hundreds of pages on the Haitian revolution, telling the whole story of 10 years of struggle against slavery and colonialism. In fact, every press in Europe was full of the story (except in France, where Napoleon censored the news from the colony). Wordsworth, who was born in the same year as Hegel, wrote a sonnet to Toussaint-Louverture that was published in the Morning Post in 1803. The significance of the Haitian revolution for literate Europeans was that ‘freedom from slavery’, the root metaphor of European political philosophy in Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, was suddenly shown to be no longer merely a metaphor, but an actual event in world history, and this is precisely what inspired the young Hegel. The inner-historical approach to political philosophy in Hegel’s dialectic of master and slave replaced the ‘state of nature’ narrative as justification of freedom. Hegel made a note to himself: ‘Robinson Crusoe and Friday’ – in the ‘state of nature’, the slave was already there, with Crusoe. So if you just shift the whole story geographically off-center, it becomes clear how our disciplinary boundaries and the Eurocentrism underlying them have made that original connection, evident to everyone at the time, impossible for us to see.

Now, that’s where visual culture comes in. The presence of blacks in Europe is documented repeatedly in paintings of the 17th and 18th centuries. What has been invisible in textual history becomes visible in images, including the illustrated books on Haiti at the time, and in the iconography of freemasonry that extends from Haitian voudou symbolism to the watermarks on Hegel’s writing paper!

JVC: Surely this conjuncture (Hegel and Haiti) is something that emerges out of a European intellectual engagement with the problem of colonial slavery? Eurocentrism? I’m often not quite sure what it means exactly. Britain, for example, was an Imperial country that also had a tradition of Leftism, even liberalism, which has often been forced into existence by Imperial politics about liberation struggles, questions of colonialism ...

SBM: Yes, but the story of colonial liberation still keeps Europe in the center, whereas work by, for instance, Linebaugh and Rediker – The Many-Headed Hydra – tells a very different story. ‘Hegel and Haiti’ put me in contact with scholars from multiple disciplines who are doing what I would call a genealogy, or a critical archaeology of globalization. In other words, it is global history, but not in the triumphalist mode that leads to an affirmation of the present global arrangements of power. Rather, the project charts the kinds of resistance that existed historically in the margins, in a space that was not nationally defined. If you look at Haitian history as a national story, it’s a disaster, a classic case of failed development and political dictatorship under the influence of foreign capital and the US Government.
But if you look at the impact of Haiti’s slave revolution on Latin America, or how it frightened the slave-owners in the United States, or how the Polish viewed the events there as well as other Europeans, not only Hegel, the impact is enormous. So it is not just another struggle for colonial liberation. It’s a global story, one of radical cosmopolitanism, in which Enlightenment thought is already in protest against European hegemony. It has a different valence than thinking in terms of colonies against the mother country.

**JVC:** Historians here in the UK have recently been pointing out that there is a history that starts in the colonies and then impacts on the mother country. It cuts both ways. In many cases there would have been radical reform movements that would have also necessarily been, if not anti-Imperialist as such, certainly forced to consider British power inside the country as part and parcel of its Imperial status. Thinking about maps, one of the things about Empire is that there is a physical map, a graphic map, and I think it’s very interesting the way you pointed out that Napoleon censors what should actually be used and what would be of great interest to France.

**SBM:** You are right, of course. The Putney Debates are an excellent example of what you are saying, and they figure centrally in Linebaugh and Rediker’s book. But if you look at, say, Robin Blackburn’s book, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery* [1988], it ends up being a story about how the support, let’s say, inside Britain or the United States for the Haitians played into the Abolition Movement. But that’s still a European story. C.L.R. James’ classic work, *Black Jacobins* [1963], is still a book about how Haiti was having a French revolution. The title of the book tells you that. In moving away from Europe, I was brought into contact with the work of people like Linebaugh and Rediker – and Walter Mignolo, author of *The Darker Side of the Renaissance* (1997), and also Joan Dayan, whose book *Haiti, History and the Gods* (1998[1995]) examines voodoo as a modern philosophy. Sibylle Fischer has just finished an extraordinary manuscript, ‘Modernity Disavowed’, that insists on the centrality of Haiti for the modern history of liberation. A decade ago, Paul Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic* (1995[1993]) initiated this decentering of the historical discussion. He was one of the first to replot the territory of the globe and tell its history in a way that does not privilege nation-states, or national liberation movements. All of these books can be said to be examples of an archaeology of knowledge. They are genealogies of the urforms of global resistance.

**JVC:** To pick up on the issue of maps, and the geography of East and West in particular, we have a cultural geography or topography-type question. Picking up on discussions in *Dreamworld and Catastrophe* again, we’re interested to know if changes in the global landscape, both literal and metaphorical, make continuing to think about East and West redundant? How valuable is it to still be able to think about East and West as locatable, as mappable, as articulatable through the directions of visual mapping?

**SBM:** I don’t believe that geography lines up with politics, not today, and probably never. There is no space today where the Left has a home, not even Cuba or China, where lack of democracy corrupts the socialist goals. A real problem for the Left is the fact that there is no geographical base outside of global capital – although Cuba is courageously attempting to enter the global economy on altered terms. The Soviet
Union played an important role because even when the Left was strongly anti-Soviet, the very existence of the ‘East’ was evidence that capitalism was not some sort of natural phenomenon that emerged necessarily out of industrial civilization. This bifurcation of Modernity, East vs West, also made possible progressive politics on a global level – Left-international support for the Republic in the Spanish Civil War, to name just one example.

JVC: I think about the changing colours of maps. And watching the geographical transformation over the last 12 years or so, they’ve been quite profound as a visual experience. To understand where boundaries lie, is to recognize how the world begins to redefine itself from, say, East and West to North and South. For example, the US looks south towards Mexico, not east towards the former Soviet Union. The formulation of the East and the West as a geographical metaphors seems very much of the Cold War, very European even. The East–West doesn’t exist in the same kind of way, doesn’t signify as demandingly or as singularly as it once did. So, really, it’s a question of trying to imagine what a map looks like when it starts changing. There are some great maps, of Australian origin for instance, that have Australia center-stage, and the other way up. And that’s exactly the way the world is from an Australian’s point of view! Maps generally seem to reflect, affirm our Eurocentrism. But as the centers of power, interest, and significant activity shift, it’s imperative that we learn how the world works through an alternative set of co-ordinates that were always already in place, and were already mappable, but somehow simply not registered by the majority of us.

SBM: Seeing the globe from the perspective of Haiti is liberating in that it makes the familiar appear strange. Haiti is particular, but not unique in the way that it opens up new perspectives. It is not just re-mapping per se, not just that East–West maps are being replaced by North–South co-ordinates, but rather that there is a real effort to visualize the globe without a center. It is very exciting, but it is also problematic from a political point of view. Hardt and Negri’s book *Empire* (2001) makes the important point that contemporary globalization means immanence: there is no place outside of ‘Empire’s’ political and economic reach. But it also means that resistance cannot remain local, or even national, much less nationalist. Even anti-globalization movements have to work on a global level today. That is the challenge for the Left in the 21st century.

**Politics, history, utopia**

JVC: Let’s return to the question of time that we touched upon earlier. In *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, particularly Section II, entitled ‘Dreamworlds of History’, you discuss the crisis of history, the question of how ‘history has failed us’. We’re hoping you could say a little bit more about this failure of history as it shows itself to be a question about the perception of time. Rather than being interested in how history has failed as such, we’d like to know how you conceptualize the problem of reading back against history. (And not just in a Benjaminian sense.) In light of this, and your way of looking back across the concept of progress, do you, perhaps, believe there will be a moment when the Left is going to have to think in terms of a past rather than a future? In addition, different
configurations of time emerge across Dreamworld and Catastrophe. You talk about revolutionary time, and debates around the end of history – from Alexandre Kojeve to Francis Fukuyama’s The End of History and the Last Man [1992], and so on. And then of course you talk about global time. How do these three modalities of time interact with one another?

JVC: It seems to me that you are also drawing attention to the idea of a perceived crisis in history – the conjunction of the success of neo-liberalism with the collapse of the former Soviet Union is produced by the success of a Right-wing political and economic agenda. So that if we accept that ‘history’ has been divided across these crises, isn’t it perhaps the case that intellectuals, however much these crises might exist, must find ways of knitting the lost continuities of the Left back across them?

SBM: If the utopian dreamworlds of the 20th century are shattered, if cynicism now dominates political thinking, then we on the Left need to work for a kind of restitution. If fragmentation has occurred, then the question is: how do we actually knit, or in some way heal, a broken tradition of politics that was based on the hope that our technological and scientific knowledge can actually make the world better – and not just for the wealthy few?

JVC: If one accepts that this tradition is completely broken, then there are pieces of rubble – as you suggested earlier discussing questions of methodology – that we can pull out, look at again, and think again across this supposed unbridgeable gap. So, what interests me is that, as well as the juxtapositions of montage, that this is also addressing the question: to what extent does one accept the fact that the Right can announce the end of History? Or, for instance, that, with the decline of the Soviet Union, the kinds of utopian aspirations that you speak of having seen still active there in 1991 actually can’t be sustained, or at least it’s very hard for them to be sustained, when the dominant thinking is that this is now relegated to the past. So that’s the kind of utopian thinking, an engagement with a tradition of Socialism, and the Left, ‘the radical aspiration’, as Annette Michelson has called it.

SBM: Yes, but, of course, precisely because the Soviet experiment is in ruins, we can think of returning to re-appropriate aspects of it. Otherwise, we would be bound by its use of state terror to continue to protest against it. The defusing of the dangers posed by the Soviet Union was signaled by the artists of the pre-glasnost’ period, who began to recycle the Soviet symbols as irony and parody – but also, it must be said, as nostalgia, for a dreamworld of socialism that was supposed to be.

JVC: Whereas, I suppose you could argue that the art works of Komar and Melamid and the other Satirists of the Soviet Union are, in their satire, making an engagement which is both a montage and also has something to do with a restitution that you would think is appropriate?

SBM: What I want to insist upon with this notion of montage is that if the Left returns to the past, it is not to redeem some sort of original ideal world from which we have been banished. Not at all. So the nostalgia is really for the possibility of something else today, not for what in fact existed in the past. The shattering of time is key, describing ‘history’ – the dreamworld of historical ‘progress’ – as shattered, and consequently a destruction of the conception of time-as-progress on both sides, East and West. The Right calls this the ‘end of history’ and celebrates it. But what
about the Left, which looks to the pieces of a shattered past? How can we reassemble them in ways that free us from the triumphalism of the present?

JVC: What’s so gripping about this section of Dreamworld and Catastrophe is that it discusses historical method, the juxtaposition of these past practices, the juxtaposition of these past fragments with our present concerns which, as you say, might have the power to challenge the complacency of our times. As a political task I thought this was so striking.

SBM: Striking, maybe, but at the moment I’m not terribly optimistic. There is a political question here, and it is part of the pathos of our present historical moment. Benjamin was working on a project about the 19th century, while the world was being destroyed around him. There was not time for his ‘big book’ about the Paris arcades; a decade of working on it didn’t help to defuse the political emergency of Nazism and World War II. The same holds true today. From a Leftist perspective, going through the rubble of past history is a dubious enterprise given the urgency of the present global situation. I would be hard-pressed to justify it as an effective political weapon at this moment.

JVC: Surely challenging our present’s complacency by any political means available to us is a necessity. One way does seem to be through this sense of looking for the materialities of history as a way of seeing into the future. That people can’t read your most recent book without saying you’re a Stalinist, that people can’t think about 11th September without seeing it as a ‘things will never be the same’ afterwards – which is one of the most objectionable pieces of rhetoric, that sense of always trying to make a crisis after which nothing will be the same – when it seems to me that one of the things that the Left has to do now is that, instead of building towards the future, it has to build towards the future by trying to rescue the past from these cataclysms.

SBM: I have actually used that objectionable phrase, that things will never be the same after September 11, because of the authoritarian US response. I have used that phrase because I wanted to say to Left intellectuals, ‘stop writing as if only academic politics were at stake! We need to get back to the material, political world.’

JVC: Yes I absolutely agree. But I think you’re going back to the material world in the sense of a kind of political, historical, material sense which implies that one shouldn’t necessarily accept mythologies in which time is figured in these moments, gaps ...

SBM: I’m thinking of an image, a photograph of Trümmerfrauen in Berlin after World War II – women who set about cleaning up the ruins after the military devastation, dusting off the bricks from shattered buildings, piling them up to be recycled as material for rebuilding. Sometimes I feel I am doing the same ...

JVC: Two things. One, you’re in a Department of Government in a top US university, and that puts you in a much stronger position to be able to respond more directly via whatever media and other forms are available. Directly. And two, one doesn’t have to write about particular topics, politics let’s say, to have their impact, the impact of politics, infuse one’s writing.
Figure 1 Trümmerfrauen in Berlin, salvaging material from the ruins at the end of the Second World War.
SBM: Let’s not be utopian. I’m in a Political Philosophy subfield of a Government Department, and some of my colleagues wish that I wouldn’t write about Soviet Studies, which is not my field, but, rather, teach and write intellectual biographies of the Frankfurt School. That is, I shouldn’t use critical theory, I should teach it. The fact that I do use it may be a strength of my work, but it is also its academic vulnerability.

JVC: In old-fashioned terms that means you’re functioning as an intellectual and not an academic.

SBM: I would like to think so. As far as is possible. But the way neo-liberalism has affected university culture, at least in the United States, is to discourage one from being an intellectual who contributes to public debate, and to train ‘professional’ academics instead. There’s a world of difference between the two. Neo-liberalism’s idea of intellectual life is that in the great marketplace of ideas, everyone expresses her or his ‘opinion’, no matter how ignorant it is, while academics are useful only as human data-banks.

JVC: I like the idea of academic vulnerability. It seems to have something to do with leaving yourself open, which can bring on two very different potential responses: the first is that it might instigate dialogue, which is nice, while the second is the inevitable attack and subsequent mauling of the one making themselves vulnerable, defenceless. But the idea is the right one.

SBM: Well, let’s look at that possibility. Assuming that there is a political advantage in developing a methodology that avoids a certain kind of academic culture, what, then – getting back to the question of the Left, and of its disappearance, or its impotence – can a method that looks backward do? Can it have an effect on the present situation?

JVC: I would say that this is very much what it has to do. It has to reverse its presumption. That is, it has to reverse the presumption that out of a utopian expectation you look towards the future. To a certain extent now I think your implication is that if the utopian aspiration can no longer be a driving intellectual force, then to a certain extent it’s progressive to look backwards. And that gets you away from nostalgia and so on. Although nostalgia itself always has a bad press, it might just mean a more sentimental side of the desire to try and recuperate moments of hope from the past.

Media, the global public sphere, community

JVC: What impact do you think new communication technologies, from email to hand-held video cameras, are having on our sense of experiencing the contemporary world as a specifically global environment?

SBM: If we take the example of September 11, we can certainly speak of a global media, as opposed to a transnational media. The difference is that the space of global media is immanent, which means that you cannot separate or segregate national publics. In World War II, governments pretty much had control over the means of production of propaganda for their own people, and they generated propaganda specifically to demoralize the other side. Today there is no longer a
geographical dividing line between 'sides'; these media spaces are integrated, overlapping, and multiple. As a weapon of resistance, the medium of the internet can operate at low altitudes, connecting people under the radar screen of Government censors, while satellite TV flies in above the censors. The very existence of al-Jazeera, the Arab version of CNN, has had a tremendous impact in shaping what we can call a global public sphere. Not only are 35 million people in the Middle East watching it, but increasing numbers of people through satellite connections inside the United States (and elsewhere) as well. Even if the language is Arabic, the images are accessible to a global public, and the US Government can’t do anything to destroy its impact. This is new since the Gulf War, when the US monopolized global representations of international politics far more successfully. I don’t know of any political occasion prior to the present when we’ve experienced such a superimposition of media spaces, such a lack of a controlling center.

JVC: About access to information in the USA, on the one hand there’s a shutdown on the part of the Government which prevents information from flowing freely, and there seems to be quite a lot of support for the Government’s rhetoric – the 'either you’re with us or against us' position – but on the other hand there are people watching al-Jazeera because they want the information. Of course these may well just be different groupings of people!

SBM: Or the same people, increasingly schizophrenic! If you get your news from alternative sources on the net, you would think you were in a different world from the one presented to the US by commercial media. I receive emails from Egyptian feminist organizations and from RAWA, the revolutionary feminists of Afghanistan, with information that cuts through the PR nonsense of the Bush administration posing as the liberator of Muslim women. We don’t know how widely these messages are being disseminated. It takes a local demonstration to bring all the net-radicals out of the closet, but when that happens it gives a glimmer of the enormous potential. There is considerable Left-organizing power via the web that is only now being tested. The Chiappas revolt used internet communication successfully to create global solidarity. With September 11, the stakes are higher, while communication is more difficult, given the appalling ignorance in the US regarding Islamism and the Arab world. And the dangers are greater, given the extreme potential for violence. Of course, internet publics can be monitored, but with millions involved, how realistic is that? There is so much information on the web, and no-one to read it all. I find the excess comforting. It’s a political safety feature.

JVC: Do you believe that we can think about this whole area of exchange, of letter writing, messaging, as a modern public sphere? Is it a new form of the public sphere? What, also, about this question of the global public intellectual. Is it possible for something like this to exist? And what does it mean for you as an intellectual, as someone who tries to be a practising public intellectual, and works on globalization, to be involved in a global public sphere?

SBM: We need to work with this concept – a global public sphere – as a place for politics. Since September 11, it seems vital to question the ‘think global, act local’ slogan of Left politics in the 1990s. We have to act globally as well. But this is an extremely difficult matter, as there is no agreement regarding the discursive terrain. There is no already-existing global space that one might enter in order to engage in
violence-free communication, to use Habermas’s phrase. We need to build that space, and one way is, performatively, to address it. What does the ‘Left’ look like in a global public sphere? Can we even use this term?

To speak of the global is to speak about media. And, of course, a mediated community is not a community in the traditional sense of living together, working together. The collective spirit produced by media is fairly superficial. Empathic identifications are instantaneous, but they can just as instantaneously disappear. Without language in common, the global public sphere will have to rely heavily on images. It will be a visual culture – or musical, perhaps, but not a dominantly print one.

If we are talking about a global Left today, the 1960s is surely the precursor. The music, for example – John Lennon’s song ‘Imagine’ was censored from the airwaves in the US after September 11! The V for victory sign was appropriated as a peace sign in the ’60s; the raised fist signified growing radicalization. You saw these visual markers in demonstrations (in photographs of demonstrations) in Mexico City, Athens, Tokyo, Berkeley, Berlin. And you had the sense that with the mimetic spread of even this very small gesture, global solidarity was being built around a set of issues: anti-Imperialism, anti-racism, pro-national liberation. It might be argued that if the demonstrators had actually been in the same room together, they might not have understood each others’ concrete concerns – although I’m not so sure. The imagined community of the 1960s was indeed a global social movement. Political solidarity transcended national boundaries. When the African-American medal winners at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City raised their fists on the winners’ podium, this image, in this context, was montaged with images of demonstrating students shot by government troops on the streets of Mexico City the week before – that was a very powerful media intervention. I am not aware of research in visual culture that has dealt with this prehistory of today’s global public sphere. Such a study would be valuable. Again, this is history-writing with a political function ...

Such a history would show that global and local politics are not necessarily in contradiction. Today’s media magnify the potential for synergy. Ithaca, where Cornell is located, is a Left-political, small town, where community newspapers, distributed for free, combine articles downloaded from the web with political commentary by local writers – and reprints from the past (Marx’s ‘11 Theses on Feuerbach’ appeared, with the suggestion that readers clip it for their refrigerator doors!) After September 11, faculty and students organized a Cornell Forum for Justice and Peace with a website and listserv. We are a documentation and information collective that serves as an interface connecting global and local action. This kind of politics is being established all over the world, producing a counterculture that might support a global Left with strong roots in local communities. We don’t know at the moment how successful such a movement might be, whether it can resist the global hegemony that has such a dominant position within commercial media. This is the first great political test of the new media, and I am optimistic ... but cautiously.

References


