

*Blasting history into the present:*

*Performing utopian images of the past, present and future in a Welsh landscape.*

**Reuben Knutson**

Karl Marx noticed that:

‘Just when people seem engaged in revolutionising themselves and objects, in creating something that has never existed before - precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis, they anxiously conjure up to their service the spirits of the past.’

(Marx, 1852, *in* Buck-Morss, 1977: 115)

Marx observed this in relation to the French revolution gaining inspiration from the Roman republic, and copying its models of citizenship and liberty.

For me, it’s about a ‘back-to-the-land’ ideology – something which has been summoned regularly throughout history, and used to renegotiate a relationship with nature.



## **1. The history**

The focus, here, is a history of counter-cultural migration into North Pembrokeshire, in the 1970s. Individuals and communities moved from urban to rural spaces in order to fulfil their dreams, and experiment with going back to 'nature'. These experiments gave rise to new, or revised, social and economic structures, such as small-scale farming, the production of artisan foods, the establishment of ancient heritage sites, alternative schools, and a revival of craft skills. It looked forward with revolutionary

intent, while drawing on deeply ‘traditional’ values.



But people seeking to escape urban development arrived at a place - the countryside – which was suffering just as much as the cities under the weight of industrialization and the mantra of ‘economic growth’. A cow produced 200 gallons more milk than in the 1950s; a hen laid twice as many eggs; and an estimated £1.5 billion in subsidies went towards replacing people with fleets of combine harvesters, tractors and land rovers. The rural was being irrevocably altered in just the same way as urban planners were changing the cities. And, in the aftermath, it has been noted that such migrants who ‘returned to the land’ in the 1970s ‘Unwillingly ... facilitated another kind of commodification of rural space’ because of their ‘recovery of a rural cultural heritage, which made possible a symbolic change.’ (Horakova & Boscoboinik (eds.), 2012: 155) In other words, their attempts at radical change were simply brought under the spell of commodification.



## 2. Approach to history: Benjamin's dialectical image

So, I am attempting to identify where the original hopes might be embedded, and where traces of utopian desire might be contained. Historical returns and returning is key to this retrieval, this rescue process. Beginning with Marx's observation, noted above, that in moments of revolution the past is conjured for inspiration, I turn to Walter Benjamin – Marxist philosopher, critic, and writer – who developed a more complex way of looking at how the past exists in, and for, the present. His work is also particularly useful for me as a practice-based researcher, being tightly theoretical as well as poetic, suggestive, and containing praxis. It is, in particular, his notion of the **dialectical image** that I want to focus on.



To begin with Benjamin critiques conventional historiography because it simply accumulates data to fill what he calls ‘homogenous empty time’ and fails to make use of its revolutionary potential. He says that, on the other hand, ‘Materialist historiography is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad.’ (Benjamin, 1940: XVII)

In fact, Benjamin’s notion of recognizing the true potential of history, in the present, looks both forward, ultimately, to a kind of redemption (or monad), but which is rooted in an archaic prehistory. The historian Harry Harootunian writes that:

‘In Benjamin’s theory of redemption there is an effort to “rescue” phenomena from their “degraded, immediate state” by recombining them in a dialectical image, for the purpose of extracting a “prehistory” and, perhaps, a suppressed

dream of utopia which the dead and reified artifacts are still capable of emitting.’ (Harootunian, *in* Steinberg (ed.), 1996: 79)

Bound to this idea of objects, and experiences, containing a ‘prehistory’ that might be recovered in order to find their original utopian dreams, is the Marxist notion of objects shifting from a use-value to an exchange-value. Here, the value of an object is no longer determined by what it is useful for, but by its relation to money, to other objects, and dreams. Benjamin takes such a Marxist approach, but is fascinated with how the supernatural, and the mystical, play a part in this shift, and how such value (what he comes to describe as ‘aura’) is bound to ‘magic’. Hence the mystical way in which encounters, represented by objects, can emit meaning, phantasmagorically, for the present. The task becomes one of distinguishing the dreams themselves from the products of those dreams, which become fetishized.



Benjamin’s own attempt at dialectical imagery is embodied in the *Arcades Project*. It was a work conducted between 1927 and 1940, which, while never

finished, was compiled from his well-organised notes and documents. It attempted to bring together theory and praxis via an exploration of the covered arcades of nineteenth century Paris. Within the history of these arcades – the history of their architecture, commodities, designs, and uses - Benjamin hoped to separate dreams from wishes, production from consumption, and use-value from exchange-value, in order to reveal hidden utopias. He writes of his method:

‘In what way is it possible to conjoin a heightened graphicness [*Anschaulichkeit*] to the realization of Marxist method? The first stage in this undertaking will be to carry over the principle of montage in history. That is, to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moments the crystal of the total event.’ (*Arcades*, 461; N2, 6)

Here, there is a clear link with Surrealism, a movement which, very much alive during Benjamin’s time, had grown out of a rebellion against a history of art which glorified the individual - the ‘author’. The surrealists wanted to displace this idea, and place significance back with the objects themselves. Hence they developed methods such as automatic writing, montage and collage, which were designed to remove subjectivity.

Collage (images placed alongside each other) and montage (images following each other, in succession) were strategies developed by the surrealists because by recontextualising, and reappropriating, imagery, those images were given new meaning (a new ‘total event’). Benjamin’s strategy is to give his assemblage of images a new context via, firstly, removing them from any historical ‘survey’ – ie

removing them from connections with any commentary about the ‘progress’ of history; and, secondly, by placing them within a context where they can only reflect, as isolated moments, on each other. In this way, he is also concerned with bestowing the ‘insignificant’ objects of culture with new significance, affirming a new, equal, status of all things via a disavowal of any status at all. This approach is evident even in the way his *Arcades Project* is structured, with the chapters, or ‘convolutes’, given titles such as ‘Iron Construction’, ‘The Collector’, ‘Mirrors’. And within each of these contains a collection of paragraphs which range from poetic description to technical details. For example, convolute ‘T’, entitled ‘Modes of Lighting’ contains notes about the number of street lamps in Paris, descriptions of the significance of new electric lighting systems, as well as more abstract reflections on ‘illumination’.



So the dialectical image is a tense image, looking both backwards and forwards, whilst also devoid of any notion of history as a form of ‘progress’. It is an image of rescue, in which we might recognize the resonances still contained in an abandoned past – a ‘vanishing beauty’. It was also seen as an image that is

momentary, presenting itself during ‘times of danger’. Benjamin says ‘The past must be held like an image flashing in the moment of recognition. A rescue thus achieved, can only be effected on that which, in the next moment, is already irretrievably lost.’ (1940: V)

But how can something so transient, so fleeting, be useful? How can recognizing the past’s meaning, only for it to disappear and ‘never seen again’ provoke contemplation? It is the concept of an ‘image’ that is important here: reading across Benjamin’s works we can see it as something both fleeting, but which also fossilizes; where a ‘flash’ of recognition leaves a residue. As anthropologist Michael Taussig notes, we should ‘reach towards an understanding of ‘image’ as imprint – something that can be imprinted on our eyes, ears, nose, mouths, brains. It can be synaesthetic, and exchange imprints between the senses.’ (2000: 259) In other words, pertaining to all the senses, as well as bound to, and informed by, a history which reaches back to the archaic. These ‘imprints’ integrate commodity forms, technology, the supernatural, physiognomic experience, the now and the ever-past, in a way that is both poetic and theoretical. Art, if you like. The magical potency of such dialectal imagery is emphasized by Taussig in relation to his own anthropological studies. With reference to Benjamin’s proclamation that ‘In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it’ Taussig says that ‘the blocking of experience by political oppression and psychic repression can entail a subsequent process whereby that experience becomes unblocked, animated and conscious, by means of myths and mythic images.’ (1984: 88) He demonstrates this in relation to the way in which people draw on their own

cultural magic to overpower colonial oppressors, via a mimicry of dance, ritual, and images.



### **3. Constructing a history of the future: ethnographic processes**

So, from the ‘rags and refuse’ of this alternative culture that took place in Pembrokeshire in the 1970s, it is ethnographic methods I turn to in order to recover a history of ‘myths and mythic images’ – such that were conjured to disrupt, or sidestep, repression. I draw on original accounts spoken by those who were part of the movement, as well as archive material, and move back and forth between the material collected, created, and recreated, reaching towards what film scholar, Catherine Russell, sees as a ‘discursive structure’ within ethnography, where ‘memorialization, redemption, and loss become a rich source of allegorical possibility.’ (1999: xviii) Such ‘allegorical possibility’ is evident in Benjamin’s work, and ethnographer James Clifford places it within an ‘ethnographic surrealism’ because of an approach to

collecting material for the purpose of spatial and temporal re-siting, and reconfiguring the 'real' with the fictional in order to provoke new meaning - allegorical meaning.



I began this process with oral history interviews, while also collecting, or appropriating, photographs and documents. A festival, called Meigan Fayre, which took place in 1975 became a centre-piece for a number of reasons. It was organized, or at least attended, by all those I spoke to; happened to be filmed by a small production company from London; and has come to embody, for those involved, what they were trying to do: it was free, experimental, a community undertaking, and sought to foster new relationships with the land, with 'nature', and with each other. So, working with methods of montage, I re-presented their voices, commentary, and images to the whole group within a discursive space. Elements from the past and present (*their own* past and present) were pitched together to disrupt the complex relationships between referent and origin, time and space, and to interrupt a linear sense of history. In this way, the symptoms of historical crisis might be identified as unique moments and placed directly in contact with their redemption. Memory and

fantasy are conjoined, and ethnography moves towards a performative space, where a history of the future can be enacted again.



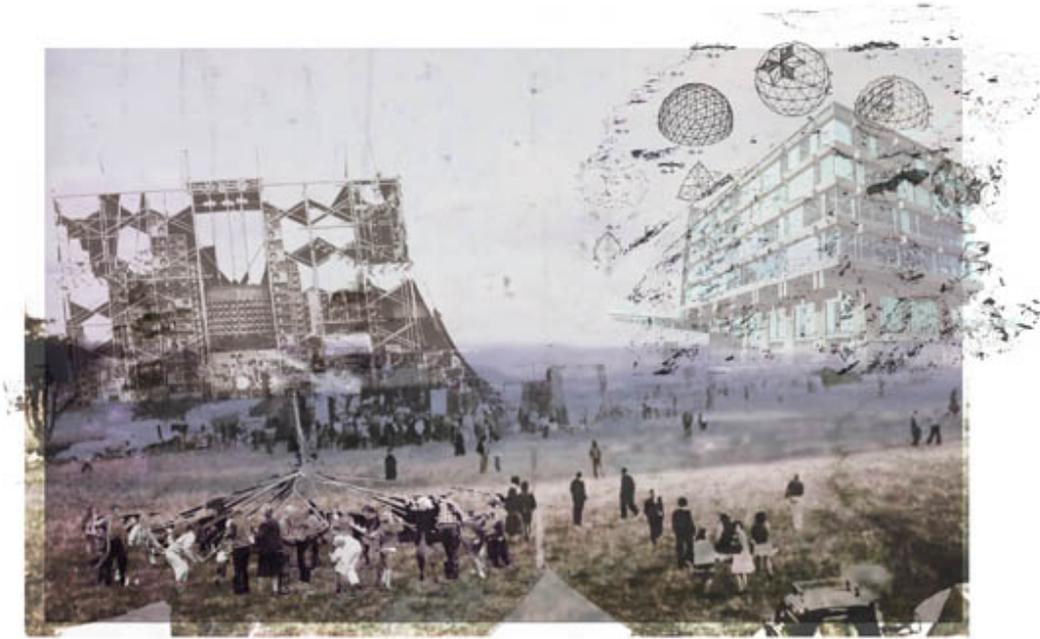
#### **4. Resurrection of dialectical images as re-enactment**

The field where Meigan Fayre took place in 1975, can be seen as a site of fantasy, a festival site that celebrated the utopian dreams of a young generation. Can such a site become, to quote Taussig again, ‘A messianic moment of stillness in the flow of time, ... in search of another and until then unacknowledged history, in what often seems to be a political fight over the past and its meanings.’ (2000: 259) Might there be redemptive possibilities? Can the reification of such imagery cast a ghostly spell over the present?

And just to relate my task back to Benjamin, who says:

‘In the dialectical image, what has been within a particular epoch is always, simultaneously, “what has been from time immemorial.” It is at this moment that the historian takes up, with regard to that image, the task of dream interpretation.’

(2002, ‘N’: 10)



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### **Acknowledgements**

All film stills, above, from *Meigan Fayre*, 1975, a film produced by Aurum Films.

*Meigan Field*, 2013, collage by the author.

Accompanying film combines clips from the 'Meigan Fayre' film, 1975, and oral history interviews conducted by author in 2012.

## **Reuben Knutson Biography**

Reuben is currently undertaking a practice-based PhD at Aberystwyth University, whilst also teaching on film/media modules. Previously, he worked in Bristol, producing films and live events as part of the artist duo *Artic*; and was working for the national arts organization *Axis* presenting work, critique and discussion with visual artists, critics and curators.