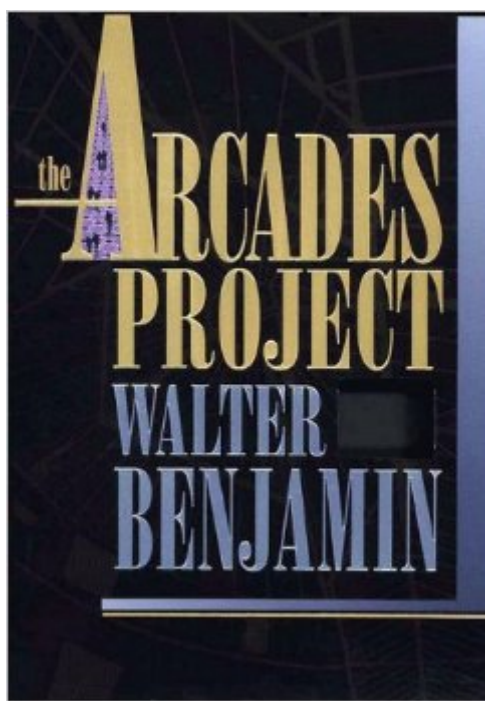


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The Arcades Project



Synopsis

"To great writers," Walter Benjamin once wrote, "finished works weigh lighter than those fragments on which they labor their entire lives." Conceived in Paris in 1927 and still in progress when Benjamin fled the Occupation in 1940, *The Arcades Project* (in German, *Das Passagen-Werk*) is a monumental ruin, meticulously constructed over the course of thirteen years--"the theater," as Benjamin called it, "of all my struggles and all my ideas." Focusing on the arcades of nineteenth-century Paris--glass-roofed rows of shops that were early centers of consumerism--Benjamin presents a montage of quotations from, and reflections on, hundreds of published sources, arranging them in thirty-six categories with descriptive rubrics such as "Fashion," "Boredom," "Dream City," "Photography," "Catacombs," "Advertising," "Prostitution," "Baudelaire," and "Theory of Progress." His central preoccupation is what he calls the commodification of things--a process in which he locates the decisive shift to the modern age. *The Arcades Project* is Benjamin's effort to represent and to critique the bourgeois experience of nineteenth-century history, and, in so doing, to liberate the suppressed "true history" that underlay the ideological mask. In the bustling, cluttered arcades, street and interior merge and historical time is broken up into kaleidoscopic distractions and displays of ephemera. Here, at a distance from what is normally meant by "progress," Benjamin finds the lost time(s) embedded in the spaces of things.

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Customer Reviews

Benjamin worked on mountainous piles of notes, for about thirteen years beginning around 1928 for

his infatuation with les passages, those passageways, girded with black iron canopies where we buy umbrellas, tobacco, shoes, books, and women. It was a microcosm of the most important city in the world, the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. It was the only city Benjamin preferred to live in despite the economic hardships of a struggling writer to do that. He found Paris at the edge of technology, much like our Silicon Valley is today, it was the beginning of progress so to speak, but with Washington and New York thrown in, all mixed in a fantastic quagmire of innovation, invention, excitement, and where the old preserves the new. Layers of cultural artifact, burdened with the scraps of history, all to be explained. Iron, for instance, a building material is a focus, on architecture and the Eiffel Tower, the feathery like weightlessness of the mammoth black innovative girders seen just about from anywhere in Paris. It was a step backwards for no one knew how to develop it, simply display conceit for the colossalness of it, much like Victorian England, its bridges with giant sized rivets, thousands of them. Architecture, technology, photography were all items for Benjamin to spend his imagination here, discovering the ends of things, the values of the old. You learn French history in great detail, with notes copied as well from 1878, The Paris Commune is a chapter, one of revolution, as seen from a reader of Marx, rather than a staunch Marxist. Still Benjamin drew on the progress of capitalism and where it fell down profoundly resulting in World Wars, and the emergence of some of the darkest pages in European history.

If one had to choose only one text by Walter Benjamin that would most nearly encapsulate the totality of his overlapping theories of art, society, politics, literary criticism, and many of the social sciences, one would be hard-pressed to overlook The Arcades Project. For fifteen years, Benjamin trudged over most of Europe like one of Baudelaire's flâneurs, seeking and commenting in his wake, but it was in Paris that he felt especially at home. Benjamin had read Le Paysan de Paris by Louis Aragon and had been entranced enough to reconfigure the city in his imagination in a manner that grew by slow accretion such that even he could not predict the outcome. As one today reads The Arcades Project one is immediately struck by its massive length, which even weighing in at more than a thousand pages is admittedly incomplete. The images that Benjamin limns range from what seems like one phantasmagorical archetype after another: arcades, boulevards, chimneys, shops, in short the daily detritus of quotidian Paris existence all of which seem to hover somewhere between a dream state and semi-alert consciousness. Given the book's meandering nature, it would have been startling had Benjamin actually found a coda to close it. There is currently considerable controversy over what Benjamin expected his readers to make of his book. There is little doubt that his incessant focus on Paris' capitalist underpinning in the generations before his own should be the

starting point whereby his readers could view that point either as an entry into the past or an exit from that past into the present. If the former, then the memories and images of the Paris at the time of his writing would converge and overlap with the concomitant images of the prior Paris.

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