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# TIMES OF UNREASON'S MANY UNHAPPY RETURNS

Esther Leslie

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## REASONS

Numerous treatises have been written on how reason is the core concept of philosophy, at least of Western philosophy from the Enlightenment onwards. What that Enlightenment is may be disputed. Adorno, for one, uses the term to “describe the general trend of Western demythologization that may be said to have begun in Greek philosophy with the fragments of Xenophanes that have come down to us.”<sup>1</sup>

This disenchantment comes through in Kant's efforts to “translate the forms inherent in reason into absolutes without reference to anything that is not identical with or inherent in them.”<sup>2</sup> This qualifies “Kant's supreme critical intention” as “in tune with that of the Enlightenment.”<sup>3</sup>

In one way or another, reason installs itself, is installed and endeavours to explain the world and people. Adorno speaks of a Cartesian ambition, which would wish to pin down items of knowledge' and identify them like things, “photographable.”

When consciousness does not conceive them as pinned down and identified like things-photographable, as it were-it finds itself of necessity in conflict with the Cartesian ambition. Reified consciousness freezes objects into things in themselves so that they can be available to science and praxis as things for others.<sup>4</sup>

The work of reified consciousness freezes things such that they might be measured and known. For Adorno, the task of philosophy is to expose the limits of rationality and the limits of philosophy. Philosophy is exposed in its inadequacy. Philosophical language, unlike other languages, is marked with the stigma of its impossibility: it struggles to deliver clarity in a world that is unclear, and yet it has no other task:

Of course one cannot grossly neglect the demand for clarity; philosophy should not succumb to confusion and destroy the very possibility of its existence. What we should take from this is the urgent demand that the expression fit the matter expressed

precisely, even where the matter at hand for its part does not conform to the customary notion of what can be indicated clearly. Here too philosophy is faced with a paradox: to say clearly something that is unclear, that has no firm outline, that does not accommodate to reification; to say it in such a way, that is, that the moments that elude the eye's fixating gaze, or that are not accessible at all, are indicated with the utmost distinctness. This, however, is not a merely formal demand but rather a part of the very substance philosophy is after.<sup>5</sup>

Philosophy is limited by what is not philosophy. Reason is limited by unreason. What limits are there to philosophy and reason? Reason is the exercise of human judgement over things, as opposed to the perpetuation of superstition or custom. Superstition and custom are the ways of thinking, being and knowing that belong to a world in which there are feudal lords and religious figures who determine what is done, how it is done and what is true and right. Reason belongs to a world in which people are beginning to feel that they can exercise their own judgement, independently even of these sources of power and wisdom. Kant's motto, from his 1784 essay, *What is Enlightenment?* takes up Horace's call, "Sapere Aude": dare to know.<sup>6</sup>

That is, dare to think for yourself. To think for one's self should bring about a new relationship to the world one that is founded on reason to be found innately, tautologically, inside the heads of reasoning people. To know the world, to know yourself, to dare to know becomes tangled with the project of mastering the world, mastering the self. Horkheimer and Adorno compare Kant's idea of maturity or independence to the amoral and ego-driven figures in the Marquis de Sade's writings. Later, in essays on Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, Adorno notes that Kant's philosophy is limited because it does not accommodate the social context of reason. *Sapere aude!*, dare to know! makes the achievement of enlightenment an individual decision. One person may or may not be daring. But what of the individual who is not lacking in courage, but rather is not capable of imagining the value of extending their consciousness, because there is no social context in which it makes sense to exercise rationality. Or, indeed, put otherwise, there is positively a social context in which it makes no sense to assert self-consciousness in the world. The chapter on the "culture industry" in Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* argues that it is possible for an audience to know and not know simultaneously, to understand and to stop

their ears. The audience may attempt to exercise reason and also be unreasonable.

The most intimate reactions of human beings have been so thoroughly reified that the idea of anything specific to themselves now persists only as an utterly abstract notion: personality scarcely signifies anything more than shining white teeth and freedom from body odour and emotions. The triumph of advertising in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them.<sup>7</sup>

What self exists to dare and to imagine? The image that confronts the audience is a lie, or at least not truth. Image is a photographable thing, reified, fixed, even as it fleets across a screen. Image is not imagination. Imagination suggests another side, or the possibility of one, the counter side, of rationality and knowledge, which is to say it is like the stitching on the back of the golden cloth of knowledge, and rationality or tactics or strategy cannot appear in their full shininess without it. Imagination haunts rationality. Any dialectician knows that. Anyone who has succumbed to Adorno and Horkheimer's dictum knows that enlightenment is dialectical. The rational is haunted by the irrational. To go forwards we need to go backwards and forwards at the same time. That too is not rational—the rational is wrong. The irrational wrong too. Reason is unreason, just as "Wetter" (weather) is "Unwetter" (storm).

Adorno, in his later work, observes a distinction between the private and public uses of reason. This revolves around a kind of "identity thinking" that Adorno eschews:

Here, then, you find the definition of enlightenment restricted in all innocence by that disastrous word 'as' that plays such a dubious role in our age too. You find it when people say in the course of a discussion, 'As a German, I cannot accept that ...' or 'As a Christian, I must react in such-and-such' a way in this matter ...'. This predicative use of 'as' signals a restricting of reason in line with the division of labour in which human beings find themselves involved; the restriction imposed on enlightenment here is in fact a matter of the division of labour. The purely theoretical human being—and that means quite concretely, the independent writer, in other words, the writer who is not paid for specific services and for propagating opinions that serve specific causes to a greater or lesser degree—the purely theoretical human being

is free to be enlightened in a radical sense. The moment he has a particular function, the post of civil servant, for example, all reasoning is at an end. At that moment the unfettered use of reason becomes precisely what is concealed in the double meaning of 'reasoning', namely, a kind of unseemly grumbling, and hence to a kind of practical criticism of given institutions.<sup>8</sup>

It is arguable whether Adorno has fairly assessed Kant in this critical response, but the point is that he is quite clear on how reason is only a partial concept, as soon as it is embodied in an individual, who then reasons solely in accordance with his or her social—or partial—position. That position is in contradiction to other reasoning beings in other social positions, and so it cannot be universalised, and so it is not, in fact, reason. Reason is marked by the aspiration to universality in theory, and so much is dragged under its forceful movement in mass society, in science, in economic organisation. But that world in which it operates is made of competing parts, unevenness, individuals who push against subsumption. The result is a contradictory oscillation between rationality and irrationality. Adorno writes:

On the one hand, the world with all the resources at its disposal is caught up in a constant process of rationalization: in the production process, in its shaping of individual human relations, in bourgeois society generally. It is permeated with science to a constantly increasing degree. At the same time, the irrationality of the whole, that is to say, the blindness of the forces at work, and with that the inability of the individual to determine his own life in accordance with reason, remains intact. This peculiar oscillation between rationality and irrationality characteristic of bourgeois society at its very core is reflected in the ambivalent attitude of philosophy, especially the great philosophy, towards reason.<sup>9</sup>

Reason in such accounts is compromised. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* charges enlightenment reasoning with constant efforts to master nature. Reason demands the conquering and appropriation of the realm of the given. For enlightenment thinking, nature presents an obstacle to human freedom, a hindering of the human capacity to act and reshape the world along human lines, and for what are deemed to be human needs. Nature must be overcome, cut into. Humans are set against it, rather than recognising themselves as part of it, as natural beings. Reason comes to be associated with abuse of nature, with positivist science, with technology, with

rationality and rationalism, with the rise of the commodity economy, with capitalism. Reason, as it is characterised by a critical stance, which it cannot help but produce, is identified not with the flourishing of the individual, but its devaluation. It is especially identified with the demeaning of the suffering, the oppressed, and, at larger scale, given its focus on the self-possessed and possessing individual, the devastation of the community, in favour of the mechanisms that generate profits, cultivate alienation and propose a streamlined mode of existence. Reason forwards its opposite, its dialectical response, when forwarding various kinds of irrationalism and mythic thinking: the wonder of the commodity, the elevation of Hollywood superstars into gods, the worship of fast cars, the belief that one is unworthy of happiness because one is not rich, the insistence on social organisation according to unequal individual needs, rather than collective ones.

### MARX'S AMERICAN GHOSTS

The phrase “instrumental reason” is a name for reason that is embedded, ostensibly, in industrial capitalist society.<sup>10</sup> Marx had already developed another vocabulary to say something similar. Revolutionaries of the bourgeois stripe regarded themselves as rationalists and pitched themselves as being far from the realm of spirits and superstition. But their gods were capital and class privilege. They were as enamoured of the irrational fetish, or even more so, than those they despised and oppressed. Marx's account of revolutionary movements in France and the New World, in 1852, in the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, saw into bourgeois shadows.<sup>11</sup> There, where rationality rejected old rule, feudal power, fostered new superstitions and misperceptions. Of North America, Marx wrote that, owing to the youthfulness of the nation, there was a different quality of existence to that in Europe. It was one in which people were too busy acting, building, eradicating, settling, to spend time dealing with the past, so that past lingered like a pile of rubbish that no one bothered to chuck out. It stayed behind, because it was not confronted and brought into any actual, genuine scheme of reason. In this situation, Marx notes that,

where, though classes already exist, they have not yet become fixed, but continually change and interchange their component elements in constant flux, where the modern means of production, instead of coinciding with a stagnant surplus population, rather compensate for the relative deficiency of heads and hands, and where, finally, the feverish, youthful movement of material

production, which has to make a new world of its own, has neither time nor opportunity left for abolishing the old spirit world.<sup>12</sup>

North America has not carried through the kind of decisive revolution that happened elsewhere in the world through bourgeois agitation. In other revolutions, the past had, Marx argued, been evoked, to bring into being a newness that became its other face and existed as a stimulus to vast change. In America there was only an embedding in the past, an evasion of the contemporary world and its exigencies.

the resurrection of the dead in those revolutions served the purpose of glorifying the new struggles, not of parodying the old; of magnifying the given task in the imagination, not of fleeing from its solution in reality; of finding once more the spirit of revolution, not making its ghost walk about again.<sup>13</sup>

And so, now overlooked in the bustle, the old baggage of superstition and class society and myth and religion rotted on. The past is not dealt with. The USA became a place of proliferating spiritualist movements, table-knockers and aura photographers. But these were themselves remnants, part of an old world. Indeed, Friedrich Engels underlines Marx's point about insufficient rationality in the midst of modernity, in a letter some decades later to F.A. Sorge in 1886,

the Americans are worlds behind in all theoretical things, and while they did not bring over any medieval institutions from Europe they did bring over masses of medieval traditions, religion, English common (feudal) law, superstition, spiritualism, in short every kind of imbecility which was not directly harmful to business and which is now very serviceable for making the masses stupid.<sup>14</sup>

Ghosts dog the bourgeoisie, even when they revolt, and break with the past. The past does not break with them. And everyone and everything, even the spectral, is drawn into the business of making money. Revolutions and hauntings: the past haunts the present, the old ghosts of oppression, who are to be immured, trapped so that they might not wreak havoc in the world again. The ghosts of the past—ancient inequities in spectral form—loiter. The Jacobin Saint-Just stated, “Those who make revolutions by halves do but dig their own graves.”<sup>15</sup> And he was to fall into his own freshly dug one, when

his wing of the French Revolution was defeated. Marx pushed on the revolutionary process to insist that the proletariat was the gravedigger of the bourgeoisie: they would intern the wielders of capital and hope to keep them in the ground, not haunting ideas or practices. But post-bourgeois–Communist–revolutions too, have long seen themselves as a spooking; for Marx and Engels, after all, spoke of Communism as the spectre that haunts Europe.

A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of Communism. All the powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this spectre: Pope and Tsar, Metternich and Guizot, French Radicals and German police-spies.<sup>16</sup>

The ghosts of old Europe enter into a ghostly alliance to purge the new ghost, which is only a ghost from their point of view. From Marx’s point of view, this is not a ghost, but the gust of rationality and righteousness, the real ghost, the one that will scare off the false ghosts, gods and idols, and introduce a fully human era. Communism was, in Marx’s poetics, the spectre that haunted Europe, in a fateful struggle of the dead undone, the bearers of endlessly dying labour, congealed as forms of values more important than themselves, and condemned to work against the vampiric undead who sucked the life from them as fast as they replenished it, as the metaphors of *Capital* put it.<sup>17</sup> Marx conceived of communism as a ghost to end the ghostliness of capital’s rule.

#### THRESHOLDS OF PAST AND PRESENT

There is an operative phrase, borrowed from Elizabeth Freeman, in Magda Schmukalla’s book about post-communist art in Eastern Europe, *Communist Ghosts*: “temporal drag.”<sup>18</sup> It tallies with the various statements on time in *Communist Ghosts*, such as that what is under examination is an exploration of a “a paradoxical temporality that breaks with any modern teleological logic.”<sup>19</sup> Schmukalla wrenches the phrase into quite a different context. For Freeman, in *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, “temporal drag” signals,

a countergenealogical practice of archiving culture’s throwaway objects, including the outmoded masculinities and femininities from which usable pasts may be extracted. My name for this practice, as well as for the set of feelings that informs it, is temporal drag.<sup>20</sup>



Freeman describes a complex relationship in activist histories, in which the past is dragged into the present (with all the connotations of drag and its specific queer history), and continues to pull various presents back into unresolved pasts, which unfurled under different promptings, different theoretical frames and concerns.<sup>21</sup> What to do with these outmoded frames—here, lesbianism before queer theory—that drag apparently anachronistic contents concerns into the present. What remains? What remains remain: and this also brings in the terrain of Freud’s *Nachträglichkeit*, or “deferred action,” a re-enactment, in a displaced form of events that could not be rationalised or brought into some sort of reasoning at the time of their first occurrence. This aspect of “temporal drag” and *Nachträglichkeit* invoke Hegel’s Owl of Minerva, flying at dusk, too late, for all think that what has been can only come to be known once it is not gone, but buried deep in the present.

Temporal drag, teleology, time: Schmukalla’s book is about a geographical area—the Eastern bloc—about bordered states, about geographical, political entities—but anyone, post-Einstein, would not separate space from time—and in many profound ways, this book is about the splintering of time. It hovers around the “post” in post-communism, a temporal marker—an “after” that demands a focus on a “before” and on the moment of transition—from one state to another—the in-between.

Schmukalla’s *Communist Ghosts* opens with the time we hold in our minds, with the sense of time we carry in our memories. What were those days, those times, like, Magda asks her father, in an awkward, semi-formal situation? What is the time of the parents, compared to the time of the daughter—and then the daughter’s daughter? What is the time we carry in us, but remember barely, or not at all? What were those times in which we did things, took part, or things were done to us, happened around us and we have no recall as to how we participated in them? What are the times that are not from the history book, but in our memories, our lives, our families? And this is also where the drag or lag may come in: for our memory and our felt time in history do not mesh like perfect clockwork mechanisms, we carry the old in ourselves, carry trauma, and history is fractured and splintered and shattered and uneven. This book knows that—and shows it—and it argues that art has some access to this complex, layered dragging, lagging times and rhythms. And things may never stop or never start to happen, for us, or for others. Time is unevenly distributed. Memory is partial and multiple at once.

Outlined here in *Communist Ghosts*, but in fragmentary form, is history, big history, historical times in which history promised to end—post-communism meant post-history. The promise was of an afterwards—but history resumed quickly—in “new world orders” and their wars. There was an after, states collapsed, statues crumbled—but it was not the promised one. Time is nestled tightly in all this. History came to be about breached borders, space overcome, a hole in the wall, a movement from West to East—impeded or not—and the discourse was about overcoming the border in the mind, “der Mauer im Kopf.” Over the decades, real borders opened and closed to Europeans, and Europe became a fortress. But that all came later. In the moment of the wall’s breaching and the post-communism that began to flood across states, it was possible to grasp something—about time and memory and selfhood—in real time, as it happened. It was not reason versus faith that mattered here, but whose rationales, whose persuasions and which new gods to install. Is there a new rationale? Is there a *Staatsraison* to be installed, which replaces the old one?

*Communist Ghosts* refers to thresholds in its subtitle: *Post-Communist Thresholds, Critical Aesthetics and the Undoing of Modern Europe*. Threshold is another name for border, but it takes on a particular meaning when proximate to Walter Benjamin’s thinking. He wrote of a “Schwellenzauber,” magic of the threshold, and “Schwellenerfahrungen,” experience of the threshold. Something happens at the border, at the threshold, that is not fully captured by terms of reason. This border, or “Schwelle,” is not a “Grenze”, the term for a nation’s border. It is instead a demarcation between dreaming and awakening, between the light of day and its shadow side. In that regard, it is a reimagined capacity of a boundary line that concentrates imagination and possibility.<sup>22</sup> This threshold generates a force, certainly for Benjamin, who suggests that the threshold is a place that forces us to question not only where we have been and where we are going, but also to question who that ‘I’ or ‘we’ is, that moves from one area to another. As he puts it, in notes for the *Arcades Project*, referring to out-of-town worlds, leisure zones, spaces without and within the city, but not quite of it:

In front of the doorway to the ice rink, the local pub at those day-trip resorts, the tennis court: *penates*. Guarding the threshold: The hen who lays the praline-eggs of gold, the vending machine that punches out our names, machines for games of chance, the automated fortune teller. Strangely enough, such

machines do not flourish in the town, but are more likely to be found as something at places where day trips happen, such as beer gardens in the outskirts. And, on a Sunday afternoon, out and about on the hunt for a little greenery, one is also heading to enigmatic thresholds. P.S.: coin-operated automatic scales—today's *gnothi seauton* (Know Thyself).<sup>23</sup>

This space outside the everyday, or devoted to discovering its other aspects, its desire for magic, for intoxication and enigma, is a threshold that invites threshold experiences. But what threshold is produced. not by the fall of a wall, the end of a border, but by the absencing of a physical marker in space, which also meddled with the expected unfolding of time?

Time was the matter when the walls fell in Eastern Europe. Time posed the question of who lurked in the past, who could match the demands of the present, the presentism of the new West-authored present. Time's part may be illustrated by a document of the time, which is about time, by filmmaker Ulrike Ottinger. This was a film made in relation to the Berlin that she had fabulised from the 1970s onwards. She grasped how Berlin is a historical palimpsest. A once and perhaps ever-divided city, it faces back into horrific pasts which, through acts of negation, meld with expanded possibilities of experimental, non-fascist life. In Berlin, historical event upon historical event piled along the fold of the line of division, until that line was erased or forcibly breached. Ottinger marked the results of the joining of two German states in a long documentary film, located in Berlin and in the surrounding area of Brandenburg: Its title is *Countdown*. *Countdown*—a temporal term—was not directed at the geographical merging of a city or its divided national zones combining into one but at its economic reflection: monetary union, or the specific day—a D-Day—when the German D-Mark would become the sole currency of a (re)united Germany. The film's concern is with everyday life, the non-dramatic events of existing in a space that changes around the people within it. Documented are extraordinary experiences—to step on what was once a death strip, to chip away at a wall that for decades had cut a city apart. There is also banality, the quotidian, which may have brought with it tinges of exoticism for some, as they experienced it for the first time, or again after a long time: adults developing their consumer selves, queueing at cheap stores that sell goods that were impossible to get for so many years, or setting up legal and semi-legal markets, and there are children playing in the streets, as they always have done. The picture

produced is less a smoothed one of ideological and political unity, and more a chaotic but germinating, future-oriented disunity. Times are inside time. There is a proliferation of histories that diverge from one or the other state-authored, capital-authored versions.

Memory develops belatedly into understanding, just as a photograph snatches an image from time and presents it to the world again only after the process of development. Memory deposits are shocked belatedly into knowledge, blasted, as Benjamin notes into “the now of recognizability”<sup>24</sup>—“in which things adopt their true—surrealistic—face.”<sup>25</sup> This is no reasoning, but instead an aesthetics of unreason. This formula of unreason holds within itself negation, the negation of reason, in the name of reason. Surrealism is the truth of the thing. It can access the temporal drag, that is to say, it suggests a method for confronting the ‘prehistory’ of modernity, in which “Historical ‘understanding’ is to be grasped, in principle, as an afterlife of that which is understood.”<sup>26</sup> The past drags on into the shaping of the present, as a survival, a living on or after that makes itself legible. But equally, the present exists already in that past, a groundwork laid, wheels set in motion. Origin is the goal. Echoes of the future are deposited in the past like timebombs, and Benjamin is hunting out the detonated and detonatable mines of the fin-de-siècle, which will come to explode in his present.

Benjamin further develops a contorted presentation of historical time in his “On the Concept of History,” a final piece of writing, a simultaneously finished and unfinished piece of writing.<sup>27</sup> It is a set of thoughts, images, a series of short paragraphs, thesis-like, in the sense that, like other theses, it is comprised of short paragraphs, dense formulations of diagnosis and proposition. These theses diagnose and prescribe. But not in a straightforward way—the images that they evoke have given rise to more speculation than can be imagined—tigers leaping, mechanical Turks, new angels, heliotropic plants, subduers of the Antichrist and weak messianics, braids and grains and beads on a rosary, and victory parades and shot clocks. How to turn these theses into something practical to effect change in the world. Why number each one? Is this a manual, a guide, a reasoned set of political propositions? Is there some progression at work here? Do the numbers, or Roman numerals, signal a linearity that moves forwards one by one, imposed in spite of all the philosophizing contained therein. Do the numbers counteract the theses’ contents which describe coils and convolutions in history, in thinking, and sudden stops, a cessation of happening, emergency

brakes on rash or corrupted concepts? Is this part of a joke on the reader, or an art of politics that would recompose all that we think we know about the workings of time and history, and what it means to move forward and onwards and upwards? Or were the theses never meant to be read, not by us or anyone much? But of course, they have been read, intentioned or not. And Benjamin is caught, immobilised, amongst his words: perceived from many angles, but like a landmark, the memorial that marks the space of no longer having to remember. Such persistence, of Benjamin's presence is one that is multiply re-configured. Something in this leaves the theses—and his legacy—open, allowing, perhaps, for a productive and revolutionary relationship to a past, one that refuses to drop, conveniently, thing-like, into a lap, or be photographable and pinned down. The past springs out of time, in order to be re-constellated, at moments of danger or opportunity. The experience of joy that eluded us might yet find its moment, its reintegration into the flow of time—or, from a negative side, Benjamin observes that even the dead will not be safe—in the recounting of history, if the enemy wins. Even the ghosts are to be murdered again. The enemy, he notes, at the time of his writing the theses in 1939/40, has not ceased to be victorious.

The past, history, departed people, are clothed in the fabric of remembrance: they are haunted by what has been and cannot shake it off. What has been is also what is being remembered, what comes into each present through what Benjamin calls, in his essay “The Image of Proust”, the Penelope work of recollection, which is as much remembering as forgetting.<sup>28</sup> It is a work of the mind, of the dreaming mind, in which night unravels what the day has woven, and it is the work of a wakeful mind of daytime, when the fragments of insight are collected under new laws. History is never done, is never done with. It is always being made and could ever be made differently. What history could be opens up in wishful thinking: if it were only otherwise, if only day were night, or night day, the day after this night, when everything, or the important things at least, like visa restrictions, are of a different order. How can this all end differently? How can it not end with Benjamin's death on this border, on a day on which the timing was just all wrong and so unlucky? Benjamin's colleague, Max Horkheimer, challenged such a perspective on imagining history unfinished—observing blankly that the slain are really slain, and there is no Last Judgement in which the dead rise again.<sup>29</sup> What is past is past. But Benjamin insisted that although from some perspectives that may be so, from others it is not. Some glimmers of other thinking and being persist, and they convey a

weak scintillation into each present. This glimmer is the scintillation of possibility. Benjamin refers in his “Theses on the Concept of History” also to avenging, a task undertaken from the energies of hate, which take revenge for the amassed injustices of so long.<sup>30</sup> History *is* never finished.

#### BENJAMIN'S GHOSTS

We are stranded in history still, with our ghosts, in the grey zone, an ever in-between. It dwells in the “in-between space that is characterized by intensified privation and displacement, and here, attuned to what is not directly visible, we might discern images, encounters or spaces in which any preformed, coherent and dogmatic narration of history implodes, opening the present moment to images of unexpected constellations between past and present catastrophes—and hopes.”<sup>31</sup> Benjamin, for his part, is clear, when taking his line from Marx, that the oppressed are constantly robbed of what would constitute their history—encouraged instead to empathize with those deemed safe by their rulers—and their memory is always “in danger” of eradication, undermined, in favour of the grand and official narratives of power: “Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate.”<sup>32</sup> In this process, historical memory is “handed over as the tool of the ruling classes.”<sup>33</sup> In a preparatory note for “On the Concept of History,” Benjamin criticises historical recounting that depends on recounting the acts of glorious heroes of history in monumental and epic form, and is a history that is in no position to say anything about the “nameless,”<sup>34</sup> those who are the toilers in history, as much as those who suffer punishment from those who tightly and brutally hold on to historical agency.

In repeated remembering into our present, Benjamin remains incomplete, ever again openable to the contemporary world, with its changes and continuities, which change him. His repeated returns bring him into renewed relevance. Benjamin is not dead: he still crosses the border, just as the border that was between East and West persists, and other borders persist, which means they are both crossable and uncrossable. In his time, Benjamin crossed a border that was one border and a different one. It was the border that separated Vichy France from fascist Spain. It was a border that confronted people fleeing in opposite directions: some, like Benjamin and his fellow refugees, moving towards the Atlantic, moving west to a possible life in the Americas, others, revolutionaries and Republicans, taking the reverse route, fleeing from Franco's Spain to France.

Borders persist: the border Benjamin killed himself on is not a threshold or “Schwelle,” but a “Grenze.” There, where Benjamin died, and elsewhere, the border persists. The Mediterranean that swirls through and below the scratched-up glass of Dani Karavan’s memorial to Benjamin at Portbou is a border that is breached, or where people drown in the attempt. Spain is one destination for the rubber dinghies launched from North Africa. With luck, their fleeing passengers reach Spain. Twenty thousand refugees have died crossing that sea since 2014. In 2023, 2000 died while trying to reach European countries. They come from Sudan, Pakistan, Tunisia, Morocco, Mali, Guinea, Eritrea, Egypt, Ivory Coast, Senegal, Syria, Iran, and Afghanistan. Many die in the sea. If Spain is reached, it is a Spain where memory is unsettled. Not long ago, Franco was exhumed from his grave at the Mausoleum of the Valley of the Fallen, a fascist monument in sixteenth-century sepulchral style, built in part by Republican convict labour, beginning the year Benjamin died.<sup>35</sup> Beneath the Fascist crypt are buried some of the many dead of the Spanish Civil War, tens of thousands of which lie there unidentified—one corpse was recently given back its name when a glass eye was discovered. The ghosts return. History continues to reveal itself. But will the new fascisms of our world cast the past in another light, as it tortures the present? This reanimated, monstrous possibility hangs over us—the ghosts addressed are also the non-Communist ghosts—the fascist monsters, the enemy, the ghosts that were only partly captured and entombed in the years of Soviet rule, and escaped as quickly as they could in its ruins. The thought of these ghosts is of course particularly contorted in our present, the unpredictable present—the one in which fascist bullies stomp across the land in military boots, in the name of anti-fascism.

Marx’s spectre found a spectral form, known as actually-existing socialism in the states of the Eastern bloc. That communism is now dead, a ghost in history, something once embodied that died, and, even if it appeared as seemingly alive, as rosy as the tint on Lenin’s mummified cheek, it would be but an illusion. But now that dead history lives on, refuses to be buried for once and all, it is subject to reanimation. Nothing was laid to rest. Instead, animas from the past came forcefully back and keep coming back. It is not always Communist ghosts, unburied spectres of Europe and elsewhere, that return to demand an end to bourgeois rule or the overturning of disappointing democracies or forms of new right rule. The new haunters of the present are the remnants of older, defeated forces. When, for example, the transnationalism of Yugoslavia crumbled in wars and



investment decisions on the part of the West, the ghosts of ultra-nationalism were stirred up to make mischief in that situation. And they agitate still: indeed, in May 2021 there were rumours of a document or “non-paper” in which Slovenian authorities suggested the redrawing of Bosnia’s borders along so-called ethnic lines, meaning that Serbia would take over one of Bosnia’s two regions with a large ethnic Serb population. The Croatian-majority cantons would join Croatia, and Albania would annex Kosovo and Northern Macedonia. *L’Espresso* newspaper commented on the likelihood of war emerging from this plan, that its clandestine methods and impossible demands did not rule out impossible things that often become true in the former Yugoslavia, where ghosts, once they are evoked, take shape quickly.<sup>36</sup> And what other ghastly returns, eternal returns, reruns, are happening? Too many to enumerate.

Imagination is a haunting. Communism haunts still the perimeter and parameter of critical practice, of revolutionary overthrow, or emancipatory struggles today: of reason and unreason, state rationale and anti-state resistance to that reasoning, which meld rationality with imagination, reason with fantasy, unreason with fanciful force. We want another haunting, a haunting that spooks the bourgeoisie, overturns capital and acts in the name of universal liberation and solidarity. We who seek something more equitable, that is we who demand a revolution in property relations, have had a century or more of learning lessons. We have been betrayed too many times by ideologues, sham allies, party leaders, compromisers. The future seems cut off. How does it feel here? Where I live, in England, we are running out of hope and on the defensive, and we know well how even the most modest of proposals must be brought down and pulverised in a hail of lies and a cyclical mobilisation of accusations of antisemitism and any other unreasonable shit that can be thrown at it. We have lost a lot and are losing more, to corruption, cronyism and the rampant spread of enclosure or privatisation. It is all so unreasonable. If the future seems barred, there is only necromancy and the release of ghosts from past promises. Their hellfire keeps us minimally warm.



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- 2 Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 65.
- 3 Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 65.
- 4 T.W. Adorno, "Skoteinos, or How to Read Hegel," in *Hegel: Three Studies* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 100.
- 5 Adorno, "Skoteinos, or How to Read Hegel," 100.
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- 7 Max Horkheimer and T.W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 136.
- 8 Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 63.
- 9 Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 64.
- 10 See, for development of this concept, Max Horkheimer, *Critique of Instrumental Reason* (London/New York: Verso, 2021).
- 11 First published in a New York based magazine, *Die Revolution*, 1852.
- 12 Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1984), 19.
- 13 Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 12.
- 14 *Marx and Engels Correspondence 1846-1895* (London: Martin Lawrence, 1934), 451.
- 15 Louis Antoine de Saint-Just, *Discours et Rapports*, ed. Albert Soboul (Paris: Éditions Sociales, 1957), 145.
- 16 Karl Marx, *The Revolutions of 1848* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 67.
- 17 See, for example, Karl Marx, *Capital, A Critique of Political Economy: Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 342.
- 18 Magda Schmukalla, *Communist Ghosts: Post-Communist Thresholds, Critical Aesthetics and the Undoing of Modern Europe* (New York: Springer: 2021), 37.
- 19 Schmukalla, *Communist Ghosts*, 22.
- 20 Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), xxiii.
- 21 Freeman, *Time Binds*, 62.
- 22 For further work on this, see Wilfried Menninghaus, *Schwelkenkunde* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1986).
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- 24 Walter Benjamin, "Central Park," in *Selected Writings Volume 4: 1938-1940*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Others (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 183.
- 25 Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 463-4.
- 26 Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 473.
- 27 Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Selected Writings Volume 4: 1938-1940*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Others (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 389-400.
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- 30 Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 394.
- 31 Schmukalla, *Communist Ghosts*, 21.
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- 33 Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 391.
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