



Arcade/Border/City: Reading Benjamin's Passagenwerk in Hong Kong

The Arcade/Border/City reading group is an independent, cross-disciplinary collective set up in Hong Kong by graduate students and young scholars with the purpose of navigating critically Walter Benjamin's *Passagenwerk* through everyday life experiences in Hong Kong. We interrogate the ways in which the architectural forms of contemporary urbanism (the arcade, the border, the link, the street, and so on) are connected to, or disjointed from, the layered networks of mobility, media, affect, representation and desire that shape individual lives in metropolitan agglomerations.

This photographic essay, a collage of more or less loose visual narratives compiled by the authors and coupled with quotes from the

Passagenwerk, is the first report on our first months of forays into the text, urban wandering, and intellectual exchanges. The dialogic nature of this collage, combining personal points of view, digital imaging, individual trajectories and fragmented readings, wants to echo the unfinished, open-ended nature of Benjamin's text, and attempts a practical interpretation of the blurry concept of "dialectical image", in the belief that "only aphorisms or fragments allow for the evanescent moment in which utopian glimpses can be illuminated" (Bronner, 2011, p. 32).

Unless otherwise specified, the page numbers of all quotes refer to the following edition of Walter Benjamin's Passagenwerk:

Benjamin, Walter. The Arcades Project. Cambridge: Belknap press of Harvard University Press, 1999. Print.

The Arcade/Border/City maintains a constant collective output on its Tumblr blog: <http://amphibiousity.tumblr.com>

The Streets of Kowloon Tong (Tobias Zuser, Lingnan University)

Couples pass through wedding chapels. Lovers pass through hourly hotels. Children pass through international schools. Students pass through universities. Shoppers pass through malls. Not many can afford to live in this Hong Kong low-rise residential area, but everyone—sooner or later—must pass through these streets, where a Chinese military base is still besieged by British territory (Waterloo, Renfrew and Hereford, to be precise). With Walter Benjamin's chapter "The Streets of Paris" (Passagenwerk) in hands, this photographic stroll preys upon the signs and asphalt of Kowloon Tong, starting from its "landmark" (the shopping mall "Festival Walk"), along True Light Lane and Waterloo Road, to its prominent high-end properties.



“Forming a background to important streets, these buildings give their districts a center of gravity [...] the ruling nucleus of a neighborhood that appears to have gathered around it.” (526)



“But the person who travels the street, it would seem, has no need of any waywise guiding hand.” (519)



“How many street names, even today, preserve the name of a landed proprietor who, centuries earlier, had his demesne on their ground?” (516)



"Street names are like intoxicating substances that make our perceptions more stratified and richer in spaces." (518)



"It is not in wandering that man takes to the street, but rather in

submitting to the monotonous, fascinating, constantly unrolling band of asphalt.” (517)



“For what do we know of streetcorners, curbstones, the architecture of the pavement—we who have never felt heat, filth, and the edges of the stones beneath our naked soles.” (519)



“What a salmagundi! The first name calls to mind a cult object and a rustic landscape; the second offers military triumphs; the third, an ambush; the fourth, the memory of a nickname given to a monastic order.” (521)



“A nice description of elegant neighborhoods: ‘the nobility, silently bunkered in these cloistral streets as in an immense and splendid monastery of peace and refuge’” (523)

Bodily Transits (Ge Zhang, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University)

I am particularly interested in the tiny movements and events taking place in crowded transiting spaces such as Hong Kong's footbridges, train transfer tunnels and pedestrian lanes. These trivialities include the techniques people practice while passing through extremely condensed crowds, more or less disruptive public performances and their tolerance, as well as idling activities such as smoking, being drunk, or waiting.



“Moving through this traffic involves the individual in a series of shocks and collisions. At dangerous crossings, nervous impulses flow through him in rapid succession, like the energy from a battery.” (Benjamin, Baudelaire 121)

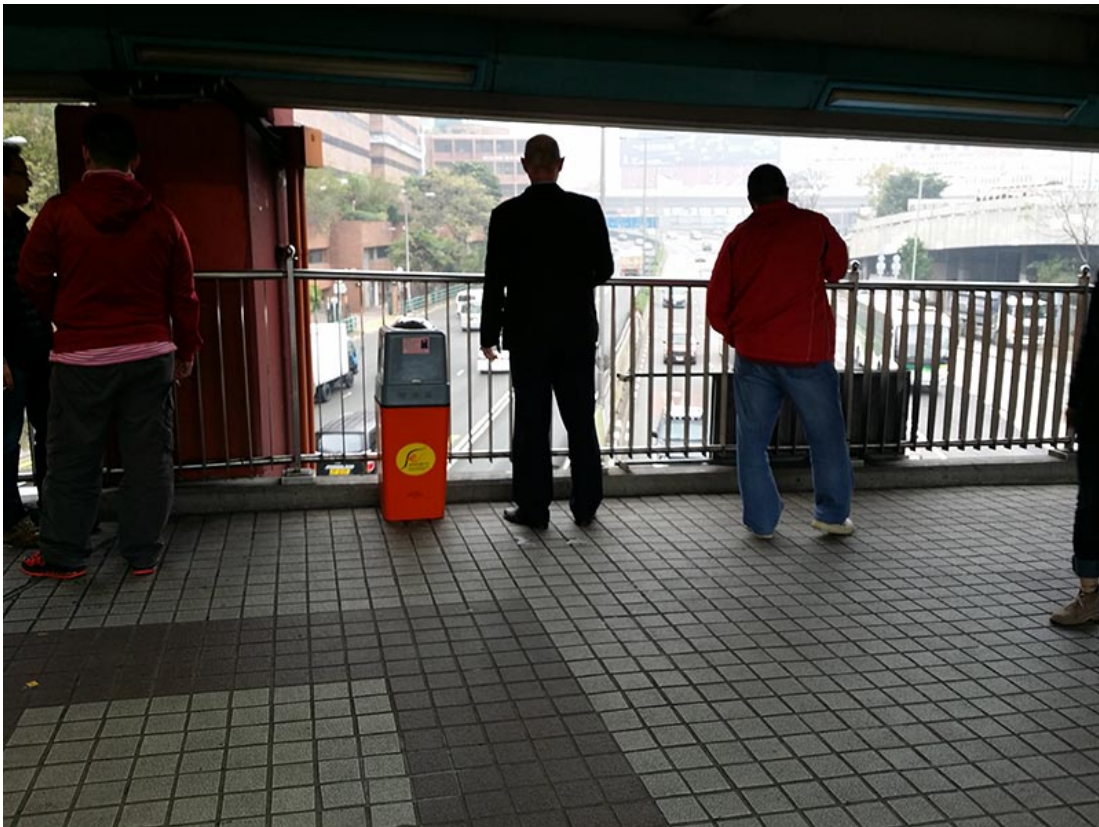


“To recognize yet disregard the invisible boundaries of the cityscape – this is the desire of the child and the regret of the adult... Playfulness and dreaming are part enchantment, part disenchantment, of the adult world.” (18)



“Something different is disclosed in the drunkenness of passion: the landscape of the body... These landscapes are traversed by paths which lead sexuality into the world of the inorganic. Fashion itself is only another medium enticing it still more deeply into the universe of

matter.” (28)



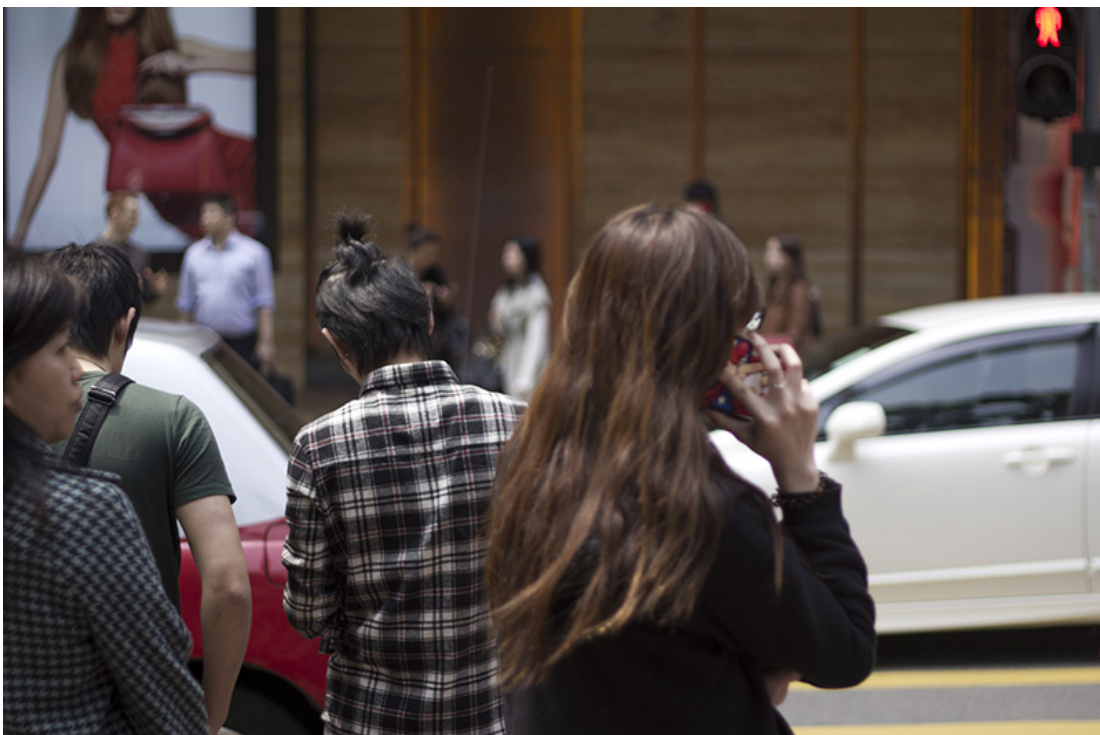
“Boredom—as index to participation in the sleep of the collective.”
(108)

The Masses (Anneke Coppoolse, Lingnan University)

An icon of density, a first impression features high-rises and people. Hong Kong's central areas seem to be designed for masses to take shape, for crowds to shuffle. Lacking quiet corners, Hong Kong's urban grid guides people along flyovers, subways, MTR platforms and zebra crossings to and through spaces of commerce. Such spaces, both alienating and familiar, seduce people to perform a common act: consume. As I plunge myself in the crowds, I follow with this photographic exploration Walter Benjamin's impressions of the modern city and of the masses it produces.



“The historical signature of the railroad may be found in the fact that it represents the first means of transport-and, until the big ocean liners, no doubt also the last-to form masses.” (602)



“A theater audience, an army, the population of a city comprise masses which in themselves belong to no particular class. The free market multiplies these masses, rapidly and on a colossal scale, insofar as each piece of merchandise now gathers around it the mass

of its potential buyers.” (370-371)



“In these constructions [railroad stations, exhibition halls, department stores], the appearance of great masses on the stage of history was already foreseen. They form the eccentric frame within which the last privateers so readily displayed themselves.” (455)



“...within the labyrinth of the city, the masses are the newest and

most inscrutable labyrinth. Through them, previously unknown chthonic traits are imprinted on the image of the city.” (455)



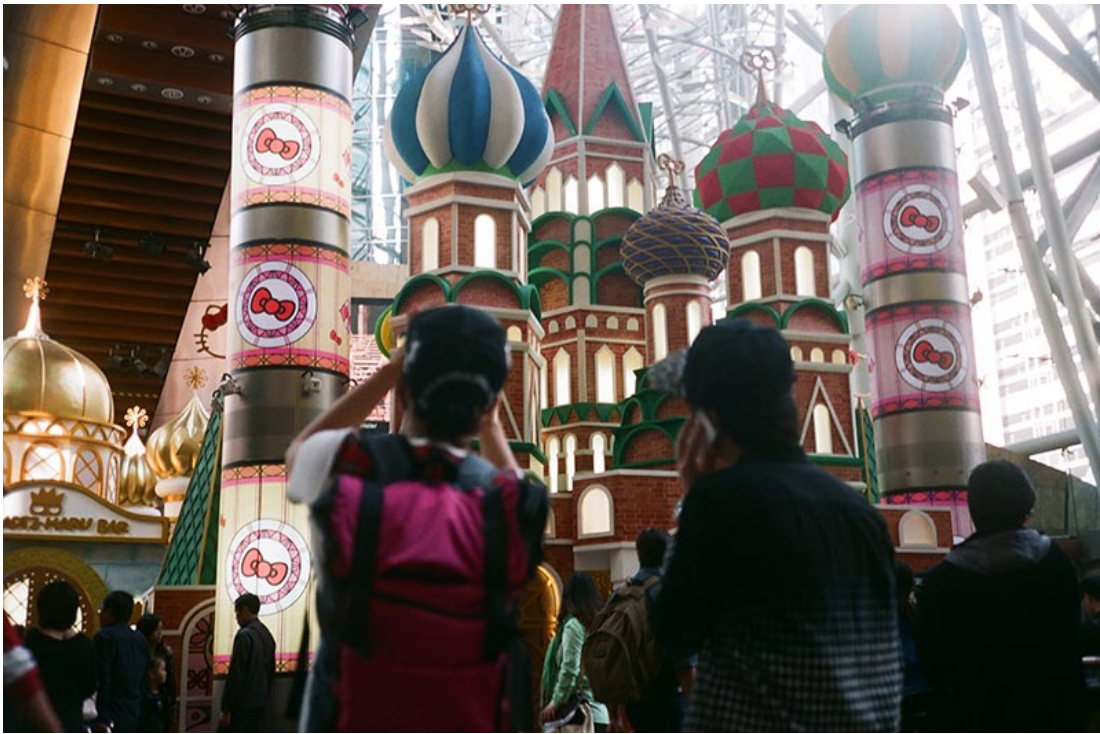
“One of the most powerful attractions of prostitution appears only with the rise of the metropolis—namely, its operation in the mass and through the masses. It was the existence of the masses that first enabled prostitution to overspread large areas of the city, whereas earlier it had been confined, if not to houses, at least to the streets. The masses first made it possible for the sexual object to be reflected simultaneously in a hundred different forms of allurements—forms which the object itself produced.” (339)



“For the first time in history, with the establishment of department stores, consumers begin to consider themselves a mass. (Earlier it was only scarcity which taught them that.) Hence, the circus-like and theatrical element of commerce is quite extraordinarily heightened.”
(42)



“More than anywhere else, the street reveals itself in the arcade as the furnished and familiar interior of the masses.” (423)



“The department store as the last promenade for the flâneur. There his fantasies were materialized. The flânerie that began as art of the private individual ends today as necessity for the masses.” (895)



“The entertainment industry refines and multiplies the varieties of reactive behavior among the masses. In this way, it makes them ripe for the workings of advertising.” (201)



“For the flâneur, the ‘crowd’ is a veil hiding the ‘masses’” (334)

A Coffee in the Border (Jonathan Burrow, University of Oulu)

It's ten thirty in the morning, I'm sitting about fifty meters away from the immigration counters on the Hong Kong side, using Starbucks complimentary seating and enjoying my 'Coffee of the Day'. Given that it took me about forty-five minutes of standing in line in order to cross the border, this is a worthwhile rest for my legs.



From my chair, I can see the rail bridge of the Hong Kong-Guangzhou train, the taxi drop area on the Shenzhen side, the local People's Liberation Army's laundry, and the King building in the distance. Behind me I can hear the recognizable beep of turnstiles from the MTR station. On my right, there is a Hong Kong cha canting (tea restaurant), and a 7/11 selling Hong Kong newspapers which are not sold across the bridge. On the left is a public seating area where groups are gathering and chatting as they rest their legs and go through their purchases. Is the border in the city, or the city in the border?



Maybe there is not much more to the modern city than a series of arcades, Walter Benjamin's 'passageways' – a type of urban poetry, both beautiful and perverse, at the scale of human construction.



Arcades are places of escape and pleasure. But they can also be places of entry and exit; a perverse beauty that binds together the edges of the city. Arcades as Borders or Cities as Arcades?



Benjamin wrote about the arcades being tribute and reflections of modernity, the creation of a new space, a new era of old commerce. When I write about Hong Kong & Shenzhen, I imagine myself sitting at the checkpoint's Starbucks, looking back across the muddy river that marks the land border of Hong Kong.



Inside the arcade, a tunnel connects the two malls. Traveling through it, one participates in an air-conditioned triage of bodies.



Borders, Cities and Arcades make possible bodily and commercial arbitrage, the movement of value through and beyond the border: arcade and city as one. Objects moved change value in the hands of the beholders. Maybe this is the nature of accumulation?



A while ago, the authorities found a tunnel under the river not far from here, claiming it was used for smuggling luxury goods, and perhaps even people. I think Benjamin would have appreciated the irony.



Borders, Cities and Arcades cities are built of regulated flows. Like Benjamin's passages, the arcades of Hong Kong require continuous maintenance and repair: an army of sweepers constantly collecting the scraps of the patchwork quilt of history that is still being written.

Small World Phantasmagorias (Gabriele de Seta, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University)

Throwing together images of the contemporary city of Hong Kong and decontextualized snippets from Walter Benjamin's oeuvre is not a new idea – already seven years ago Anson Mak, in her *One Way Street on a Turntable*, spliced historical footage with quotes from Benjamin's *Einbahnstrasse* and dreamy symbolic sequences. Yet, hybridizations of this kind might appear naïve: are we saying that Hong Kong is just like the Nineteenth Century Paris perceived by Benjamin as a decaying ruin of the bourgeoisie? Are we espousing certain moves of criticism towards capital, globalizing markets? Are we portraying Hong Kong as an historical moment of urbanism, scratching its surface in search of utopian moments, or snapping gloomy pictures of its dystopian panoramas? I hope we are not. What I imagine us to be doing is practicing the *Passagenwerk* as a strategy of knowledge, as an exercise in theoretical freedom and speculative epistemology. What if the giant shopping malls of glass and fake marble I walk through everyday function just like Benjamin's phantasmagorias of time and place? What if the catalog of the world's architectural forms are miniaturized and return as small worlds enshrined into these new temples of consumption and transit? How to rethink utopias, dystopias, dialectical images and the sleep of the collective in the hypermediated sociocultural context of tomorrow?



“[...] a recent invention of industrial luxury, are glass-roofed, marble-paneled corridors extending through whole blocks of buildings, whose owners have joined together for such enterprises. Lining both sides of these corridors, which get their light from above, are the most elegant shops, so that the passage is a city, a world in miniature” (3)



“Our investigation proposes to show how, as a consequence of this reifying representation of civilization, the new forms of behavior and the new economically and technologically based creations that we owe to the nineteenth century enter the universe of a phantasmagoria” (14)



“[...] they create a framework in which its use value recedes into the background. They open a phantasmagoria in which a person enters in order to be distracted.” (7)



“We must follow in its wake so to expound the nineteenth century – in fashion and advertising, in buildings and politics – as the outcome of its dream visions” (389)



“Could the metropolis of consumption, the high ground of bourgeois-capitalist culture, be transformed from a world of mystifying enchantment into one of both metaphysical and political illumination?” (23)



“When and how will the worlds of form which, without our assistance, have arisen, for example, in mechanics, in film, in machine construction, in the new physics, and which have subjugated us, make it clear for us what manner of nature they contain?” (396)

Works Cited

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Bronner, Stephen Eric. *Critical Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Print.

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