Matter's Most Modern Configurations: Rivera, Picasso, and Benjamin's Dialectic Image

by AK Thompson

Human history is like paleontology. Owing to a certain judicial blindness even the best intelligences absolutely fail to see the things which lie in front of their noses. Later, when the moment has arrived, we are surprised to find traces everywhere of what we failed to see.

—Karl Marx
(*Letter to Friedrich Engels*, March 25, 1868)

I

When engaging in materialist analysis, conventional wisdom instructs us to pay attention to bread and butter, bricks and mortar. This is no doubt important; however, a more nuanced understanding of the precise attributes of "matter" demands that we come to terms with the fact that solid objects are—for the most part—empty spaces bound together by energetic relays. Such relays are at play in history as well. There, people struggle to assemble material fragments so that they might actualize the desires with which they've become infused through the course of the struggle for freedom. Foregrounding such relays does not put us at odds with materialist analysis. Quite the opposite: when properly understood, they reveal themselves to be constitutive of it.

II

In Convolute N of *The Arcades Project* and in his essay on the concept of history, Walter Benjamin provided a brief but compelling account of the dialectical image.[1] According to Benjamin, images became dialectical when they produced a moment of historical cessation in which a viewer could come face to face with "a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past."[2] By constellating the fragments of historical memory, these images enjoined the viewer to consider what would be required to act upon history as such. Here, the *promise* of finally fulfilling the desire for happiness and the *means* by which that fulfillment might be achieved become visible all at once.

For Benjamin, dialectical images reveal how the unrealized promise of the past—a promise often conceived in mythic or religious terms—might come to fruition through action upon the profane conditions of the present. And, as Susan Buck-Morss has pointed out, such a vision of reconciliation is "an ur-historical motif in both Biblical and classical myth." However, unlike other forms of engagement with mythic anachronism, dialectical images do more than rediscover past themes "symbolically, as aesthetic ornamentation." Instead, by impelling profane reckoning, they enjoin the viewer to actualize unrealized promise by forging a constellation between the past's wishful motifs and "matter's most modern configurations."[3] Thus it was that Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon under the sign of Apollo.

In what follows, I consider Diego Rivera's *Man at the Crossroads* (1933) and Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) to highlight how they intuitively gave Benjamin's conception a concrete visual form.[4] To be sure, these images did not produce the cessation of happening that Benjamin had hoped for. Nevertheless, from the standpoint of formal analysis, they are coherent visual approximations of the dialectical image. As such, they are useful reference points for those seeking to illuminate—and thus to make vulnerable—the properly architectonic dimensions of late capitalism's ersatz depthlessness. And, once this has been accomplished, we can begin to directly consider how an image worthy of Benjamin's concept might be produced *today*.

The need for such a production arises not solely from the fact that—as Frederic Jameson has noted—it is now easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism.[5] With the dialectical image, the very conception of "anti-capitalism" reaches a point at which the habit of positing resistance as a merely logical negation of the constituted world is repudiated once and for all. Because it forces us to recognize the extent to which everything is already present (the extent to which the problem is not one of "matter," but of its configuration), the dialectical image enjoins its viewers to confront the decision demanded by politics from a point wholly intrinsic to their own desires for freedom. Here, the collective subject of history finds its nominating "we" first and foremost through the encounter with an experience of lack that—though experienced individually—remains universal right up until the moment of its dissolution.

III

Man at the Crossroads was an enormous mural that stood nearly 5 meters tall and 11.5 meters wide. Gathered on the right side of the image are the forces of socialist revolution. Workmen look on from the bottom quadrant. Marx, Trotsky, and others gather behind a banner exhorting the workers of the world to unite. Immediately behind these figures, the viewer confronts a statue of Caesar holding a broken column emblazoned with a swastika. The statue's head has come off and the workers are using it as a stool.

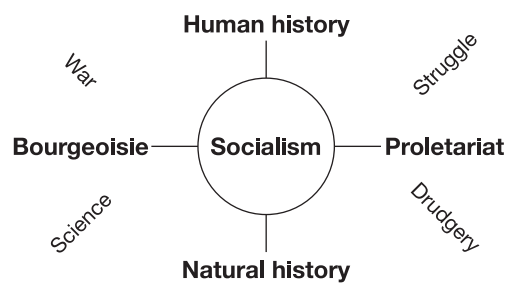
In the top right quadrant of the image, peasant women line up alongside workers carrying red flags as they march in procession.[6] In the space behind the statue, demonstrators confront soldiers in gas masks. Suspended mid-ground, a group of athletes looks leftward with determination and élan.

In the bottom left quadrant of the mural, seated spectators gaze into a kind of looking glass. Behind them sits a statue of Jupiter with its hands cut off. The lightning that these hands once wielded has been channeled into a machine displaying an x-ray image of a human skull. Beside the x-ray stands Charles Darwin surrounded by animals. Congregated on the same mid-ground as Jupiter, a group of men stand about pensively. Behind them, a conflict unfolds between demonstrators and police riding horses. A line of soldiers wearing gas masks consumes the top left quadrant of the image. Above their heads flies a squadron of bombers similar to those that will destroy Guernica in 1937—three years after Rivera's mural was itself destroyed.

In the middle of the image stands the time machine. Evoking the liberating potential of technology, the time machine also calls to mind Ezekiel's Old Testament vision, in which the development of productive forces is anticipated in dream form. According to Ezekiel, "when the living creatures moved, the wheels beside them moved; and when the living creatures rose from the ground, the wheels also rose." This was because "the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels."[7] Under capitalism, this dream would find a perverse—but potentially liberating—concretion.

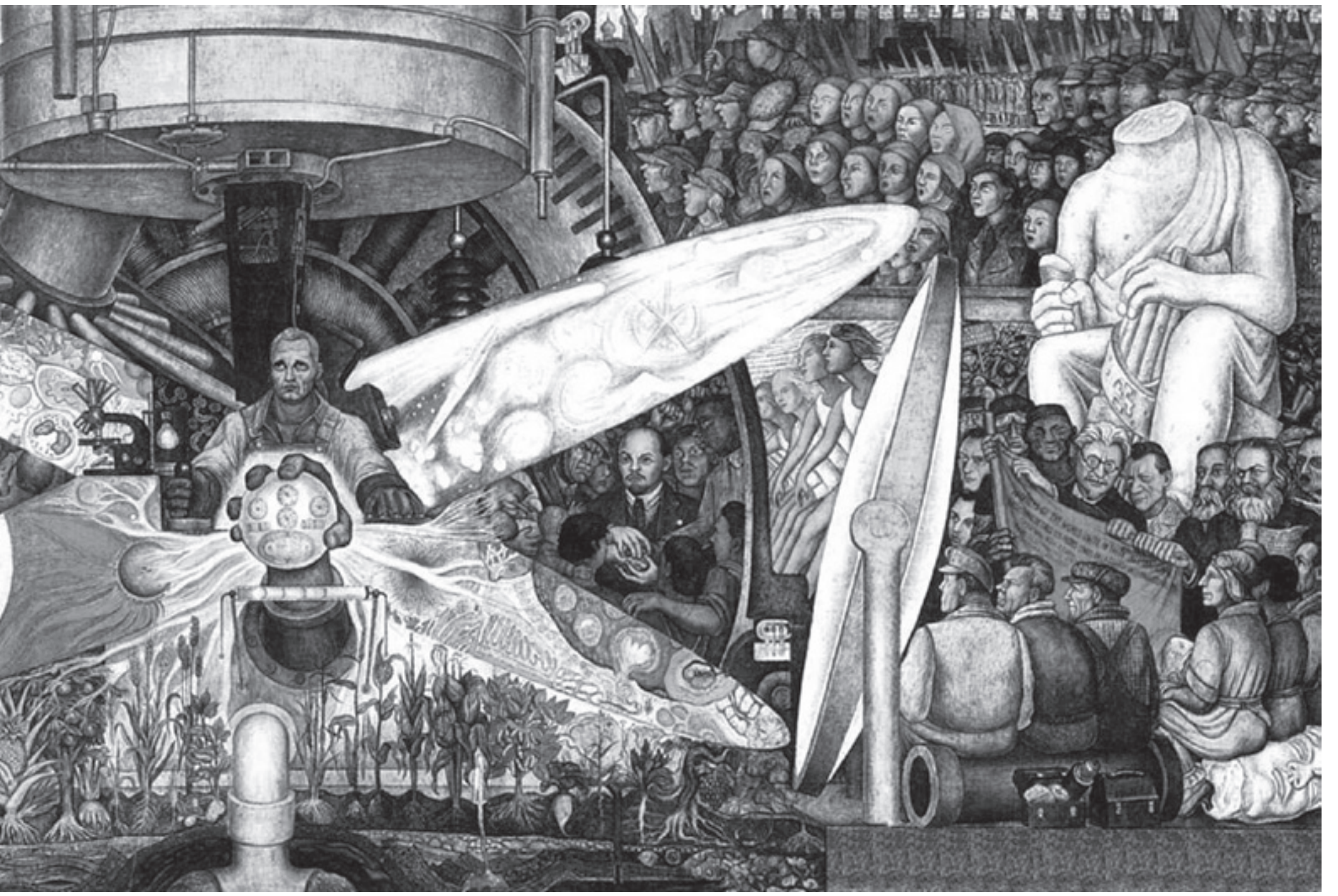
The time machine is set in a circular form bisected by two ellipses that divide it into four quadrants. In the bottom quadrant, plants from different parts of the world reach roots into the exposed geological substratum of natural history. The top quadrant comprises the bulk of the time machine's machinery. It appears to be assembled from components derived from different technological phases in the history of production. Occupying opposite poles, natural history is counterposed to the "new nature"[8] of human history while simultaneously being connected to it through the mediating figure of Man. In the left quadrant, representatives of the idle rich play cards and sip martinis. Opposite these figures, workers representing different races gather together with Lenin.

The ellipsis bisecting the image from top left to bottom right contains the microscopic elements of the world. Near the bottom of the ellipsis, a human fetus gestates inside a cell. In the ellipsis bisecting the image from top right to bottom left, a telescopic view replaces the microscopic one. The viewer is confronted with the enormity of the universe and its celestial bodies. In the centre of the image sits a worker with hands on a set of controls. Wearing overalls and heavy gloves, he turns his eyes upward and assumes a posture that suggests devotional painting, socialist realism, or both. Caught between the poles of natural and human history, the telescopic and microscopic expanses of the universe, and the antithetical terms of the class struggle all contracted to a single point, Rivera's Man occupies a space of absolute tension and non-resolution. Rendered in its barest schematic form, the mural looks something like this:



Considered in this way, *Man at the Crossroads* abides by the dialectical image's defining characteristics. For Buck-Morss, such images "can perhaps best be pictured in terms of coordinates of contradictory terms, the 'synthesis' of which is not a movement toward resolution, but the point at which their axes intersect."[9] The image's accumulated tensions cannot be resolved by teleological fiat. Instead, the task falls to the viewer who comes to realize that the moment of reckoning cannot be suspended indefinitely.

But while the formal confluence between Rivera's image and Benjamin's conception is striking, the mural's initial impact owed less to its composition than to the fact that it was denied an audience in the lobby of the Rockefeller Center. "Rockefellers Ban Lenin in RCA Mural and Dismiss Rivera," announced *The New York Times* on April 10, 1933. Almost immediately, diverse sections of civil society began to mobilize. According to historical journalist Pete Hamill, responses included "protests, picket lines, fiery editorials," and "press conferences." For his part, "Diego made an impassioned speech at a rally in Town Hall" while "liberals drew parallels between the brainless censorship of Stalin's 'socialist realism' and that of the Rockefellers."[10] On June 15, 1933, the socialist newspaper *Workers' Age* ran a photo of the mural along with an article by Rivera. At that moment—and as Benjamin predicted a dialectical image might—Rivera's mural threatened to



Diego Rivera, *Man at the Crossroads* (1933)

disappear irretrievably.[11]

For several months, the unfinished work lay beneath a heavy cloth that had been hung to conceal it. Then, under cover of darkness on February 9, 1934, Rockefeller had the mural destroyed. The image, however, did not disappear. For months, it remained an important point of discussion in Left and liberal circles both in New York and elsewhere. Later in 1934, Rivera reproduced the mural in the *Palacio de Bellas Artes* in Mexico City. Renamed *Man, Controller of the Universe*, the image began to find resonance amongst new audiences. No longer simply the focal point of a fight around artistic expression and no longer just an impressionistic trace caught by snapshot, the image began to come into its own. Around the same time, the liberal façade of the Rockefeller enterprise began to crack.

IV

From the standpoint of the present, the conflict between Rockefeller and Rivera appears inevitable. Why did a captain of industry imagine that a communist artist would produce an image appropriate for his building's lobby? In order to answer this question, it's useful to consider the circumstances that led to the conflict itself. On November 7, 1932, Rockefeller assistant Raymond Hood sent a telegram to Rivera requesting that he paint a mural in the Rockefeller Center. According to Rockefeller, the mural was to depict "Man at the crossroads" as he looked "uncertainly but hopefully towards the future." Rockefeller further indicated that the mural was to depict "human intelligence controlling the powers of nature."[12]

In a written submission for the project, Rivera described how he would address the theme: "my painting will show human understanding in possession of the forces of nature, which are expressed by a bolt which cuts off the fist of Jupiter and is transformed into useful electricity which helps to cure man's illnesses, unites men through radio and television, and gives them electricity and motive power." Further into his description, Rivera described how the right side of the image would be given over to "workers coming to a real understanding of their rights in relation to the means of production which has resulted in a plan to do away with tyranny, personified by a statue of Caesar which is disintegrating and the head of which lies on the floor."[13] Mesmerized (and already rebuked by Picasso and Matisse), Rockefeller allowed the plans to proceed.

By February 1934, the mural was destroyed. Justifying his decision, Rockefeller pointed to the image of Lenin that Rivera incorporated into the mural after the commission had been approved. And Rockefeller may indeed have felt duped. But even though Lenin was never explicitly mentioned in the written submission, it's hard to imagine how a mural that set out to depict proletarian cooperation and the liberating potential of electricity could have yielded anything else. After all, Lenin had proclaimed in 1920 that communism was "government by the Soviets plus the electrification of the whole land." For anyone taken by historical details, his appearance in Rivera's mural seems as inevitable as Rockefeller's bewilderment seems incomprehensible.

The conflict becomes clearer when considered from the standpoint of the dialectical image. Both Rockefeller and Rivera knew what it meant to be at the crossroads. Both knew that the relationship between labour and nature was of central importance when traversing the gulf between present and future. Agreement ended, however, when considering the precise *means* by which that gulf would be traversed. If Rockefeller had envisioned "human intelligence controlling the powers of nature," he could not envision how, at its logical conclusion, this control needed to extend to the "new nature" of technological forces—the means of production—as well.

V

Like *Man at the Crossroads*, *Guernica* is an enormous canvas, standing nearly 3.5 meters tall and nearly 8 meters wide. And, like Rivera's mural, *Guernica* is divided into three sections and cut into four quadrants by lines that seem to emanate from its center. On the right, a figure with arms outstretched screams from an open window. Flames engulf the building. Another figure stretches a long arm into the middle of the canvas. Holding an oil lamp, the figure illuminates the scene below. Moving from right to left across the bottom of the canvas, a woman hobbles along the ground. Her breasts are exposed and her knee is painfully contorted.

On the left side of the image, a woman holds a dead infant close to her chest. Its eyes are slits. Evoking Michelangelo's *Pietà*, the woman's head is thrown upward in a cry of anguish. Her eyes are frantic. Behind the woman stands a placid bull staring into the space occupied by the viewer. To the right of the bull, a bird flutters in agitation on top of a table that's barely distinguishable from the background against which it's set. Beneath the woman with the dead infant, the viewer confronts the outstretched hand of a fallen soldier. Moving toward the center of the canvas, the arm gives way to the soldier's head. His eyes are frozen. His mouth is a scream. Moving still further rightward, the viewer discovers that the soldier's head has been severed. He is a statue. His other arm has likewise been severed. In his hand, he still clutches a broken sword.

A horse takes up the center of the image. Pierced by a lance and about to fall over, it's depicted with its head thrown back, mouth open, and eyes staring wildly. The woman crawling right to left across the bottom of the canvas has the horse's head in her sightline. The figure staring with arm outstretched from the window looks down upon the same scene in horror. Distinct from all the other figures in the image, the horse is covered in vertical brushstrokes. Nearly uniform in their execution, they occupy a connotative space caught somewhere between horsehair and ledger marks tallying the dead. Above the horse's head glows an incandescent light. Both visually and connotatively indeterminate, the light is a blazing sun, an explosion, an eye, a suspended bare light bulb.

Although the arrangement of *Guernica*'s contents suggests a plausible foreground, mid-ground, and background, the image itself remains nearly completely flat. Prying its figures from the scene in which they find themselves is difficult. One is left with the impression that there is no space to breathe. For Robert Hughes, this kind of visual organization was a defining characteristic of early cubism. During this period, Picasso's images had "very little air in them."[14] And though *Guernica* was not cubist in any conventional sense, its reiteration of certain cubist representational strategies nevertheless manages to give the whole scene an airless, claustrophobic, and "topographical" quality. For art historian Frank D. Russell, *Guernica* "brought Cubism into the open and evoked a broad concern with the language of modern art."[15] Practically speaking, this meant that the viewer was drawn into an indeterminate zone in which distinctions between inside and outside, content and context, began to fall apart.

The institutionalization of the avant-garde during the postwar period made *Guernica's* topographical perspective commonplace. And, as Frederic Jameson has noted, Picasso's work now tends to strike postmodern viewers as more or less "realistic."[16] Nevertheless, when it first appeared in 1937, *Guernica*'s claustrophobic topography was shocking. Describing the scene at the Paris World s Fair, Spanish Pavilion architect Josep Lluís Sert recalled that, when confronted with *Guernica*, "the majority didn't understand what it meant." Nevertheless, "they did not laugh…They just looked at it in silence."[17]

As its title affirms, *Guernica* is a historical painting; however, the depicted events stand in relation to the history they refer to in an indeterminate way. For John Berger, *Guernica* is striking because "there is no town, no aeroplanes, no explosion, no reference to the time of day, the year, the century, or the part of Spain where it happened." Moreover, there are "no enemies to accuse" and "no heroism" to admire.[18] But despite this indeterminacy, Berger is convinced that even an uninitiated viewer would know that *Guernica* was a work of protest. How?

> It is in what has happened to the bodies…What has happened to them in being painted is the imaginative equivalent of what happened to them in sensation in the flesh. We are made to feel their pain with our eyes. And pain is the protest of the body.[19]

Although Berger goes on to recount a number of misgivings about the work, his assessment of *Guernica* coincides with Benjamin's conception of the dialectical image in several important respects. This is so not least because, in *Guernica*, the title (which refers to a concrete, profane reality) becomes a kind of caption that turns the image as a whole—an image

Pablo Picasso, *Guernica* (1937)

that, for Berger, was "a protest against a massacre of the innocents at any time"[20]—into what Benjamin would have understood as an allegorical emblem, "a montage of visual image and linguistic sign, out of which is read, like a picture puzzle, what things 'mean.'"[21] Illuminated in this way, the unique event provides passage into the realm of a more universal meaning. The fragment becomes metonymic, and decisive action becomes action on history as such.

Even though the specific details it recounts have begun to recede from memory, *Guernica* has continued to speak to people. This resonance no doubt owes to the fact that its illuminated fragments contain traces of a more universal experience. According to radical arts collective Retort, "the experience and preserved memory of blast and firestorm is one of the central strands of 20th-century identity." Consequently, by depicting this scene, *Guernica* stimulates "the repressed consciousness of modernity's ordinary costs."[22] April 26, 1937 thus becomes constellated with our own catastrophic present.

VI

How did Rockefeller—the man who destroyed Rivera's mural—end up donating *Guernica* to the UN? Recounting how he came to buy a tapestry reproduction of the image in 1955, Rockefeller remained silent on the question of political content and instead weighed in on the merit of reproductions. Having learned from architect and collaborator Wallace Harrison "that a huge tapestry…had been made from a maquette which Picasso had designed after the original painting," Rockefeller could not help but to respond in conventional bourgeois fashion:

> When I saw the tapestry, I bought it immediately. [Art historian and first director of the Museum of Modern Art] Alfred Barr was disturbed by my purchase of what he had heard was just a distorted copy of one of the greatest paintings of the 20th century…However, when Alfred actually saw the tapestry for the first time, he completely changed his mind.[23]

In 1985, Rockefeller's estate bequeathed the tapestry to the United Nations. Hung outside the Security Council chambers in New York, the offering was no doubt meant to be emblematic of Rockefeller's commitments. Those commitments were idealistic. But they were material, too: the Rockefeller family had been directly responsible for financing both the Museum of Modern Art (which housed the *Guernica* canvas between 1958 and 1981) and the Wallace Harrison-designed United Nations compound, which was built on the ruins of a slaughterhouse worthy of Upton Sinclair. Reporting on the area in the real estate section of *The New York Times*, Jerry Cheslow recounts how, "by the turn of the 20th century,"

> Turtle Bay had become a seedy, overcrowded warren of tenements and deteriorating row houses, many of them homes to German, Irish, Polish and Italian immigrants. Many of the residents toiled in the stock pens, garages, coal yards and slaughterhouses on what is now the site of the United Nations.[24]

In this way (and in truly Benjaminian fashion), Rockefeller's "cultural treasures" cannot be contemplated without horror. "They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries."[25]

On February 5, 2003, Colin Powell presented U.S. plans for war on Iraq at a press conference outside the United Nations Security Council chambers. Instead of *Guernica*, however, the backdrop for the event was a blue shroud that could not help but announce what it concealed. As with the veiling of *Man at the Crossroads*, the veiling of *Guernica* brought the image to the attention of millions.

As before, people responded with outrage and incredulity. In the February 5, 2003 edition of *The New York Times,* columnist Maureen Dowd commented that Mr. Powell couldn't "seduce the world into bombing Iraq surrounded on camera by shrieking and mutilated women, men, children, bulls and horses."[26] The problem was no less evident to activists on the street. Scanning the anti-war scene, Retort took note of how "many a placard on Piccadilly and Las Ramblas rang sardonic changes on Bush and the snorting bull."[27] Shrouded and in danger of disappearing irretrievably, *Guernica* flashed up at a moment of danger like *Man at the Crossroads* had before it.

VII

Investigating *Man at the Crossroads* and *Guernica* together in this way highlights a number of important points concerning materialist analysis. First, it shows how these two works, although rarely considered together in the literature of art history, are nevertheless bound to one another through an intriguing historical relay. Even at their inception, both works lived a double life caught somewhere between original and reproduction. Both mediated controversy and both became tied in various ways to the legacy of Nelson Rockefeller. As part of this legacy, both works were also shrouded at a moment of danger. In both cases, the act of shrouding led to significant political commentary and mobilization.

In addition to these biographical connections, the works also share a number of significant compositional features. Most evident among these is the significant role that scale plays in their perceptual organization. Here, the viewer is immediately confronted with the fact that both images approach dimensions akin to those of the cinema's famous silver screen. This is no small matter since, as Berger has noted, film was the dominant art form of the early 20th century.

> Technically, the film depends upon electricity, precise engineering, and the chemical industries. Commercially, it depends upon an international market…Socially, it depends upon large urban audiences who, in imagination, can go anywhere in the world: a film audience is basically far more *expectant* than a theatre audience… Artistically, the film is the medium which, by its nature, can accommodate most easily a *simultaneity of viewpoints*, and demonstrate most clearly the *indivisibility of events*.[28]

If there's anything that can be said about *Man at the Crossroads* and *Guernica*, it's that they are cinematic in precisely these ways. As popular monumental works conceived for presentation in the Rockefeller Center and at the Paris World's Fair, both engaged with sites designed to foster mythic identification with the promise of the commodity form. These sites owed their existence to the integration of world markets and the advent of the mass urban audience. Epistemologically, both images convey the simultaneity of viewpoints and the indivisibility of events. Finally, both images place the viewer in a position of unbearable tension and expectation.

However, unlike in cinema (which has temporal duration), the cessation of happening engendered by the images' single frame execution places responsibility for resolving this expectation squarely on the viewer's shoulders. Because there is no "after" to which the viewer can orient except the one that she herself creates, cinematic expectation gives way to expectation of one's self.

But Rivera and Picasso did more than reiterate cinematic gestures. Had they restricted themselves in this way, their efforts would likely have remained quaint but fruitless attempts to refurbish easel painting and its supernova outgrowths in the face of their inevitable decline. But this is not what happened. Instead, Rivera and Picasso fused cinematic conventions with those of the medieval triptych. By holding the two forms in tension, they discovered (as Benjamin did around the same time) that "the materialist presentation of history leads the past to bring the present into a critical state."[29]

In other words, by finding traces of contemporary desires for self-realization buried in the refuse of the mythic past, and by showing how these desires might at last be actualizated through matter's most modern configurations, Rivera and Picasso discovered the trick of contracting historical time to a single, decisive moment. Here, the religous is not an antithesis to the material (as is normally assumed) but rather its wishful anticipation.

The triptych was popular in European religious art during the 14th and 15th centuries. As with religious art more generally, it fused the devotional with the instructive. During the early 20th century, surrealist identification with Dutch painter Hieronymus Bosch (1450–1516) revived interest in the form. Painting at the end of the 15th and beginning of the 16th century, Bosch depicted the human struggle with sin. In contrast to other Renaissance thinkers, he did not see earthly struggles leading to angelic ascent. Instead, Bosch saw corporeal desire lowering people to the level of beasts. In his work, sinners occupy the same plane as demons.

Bosch's work—and especially his *Garden of Earthly Delights*—resonated with the surrealist desire to explore the dark side of human experience. And since this desire occasionally led Bosch to depict judges, clergymen, and the propertied classes in a critical fashion, his work remained open to radical interpretations. In the *Garden*'s "hell" panel, the seven deadly sins directly embody the failing that defeated them. Sitting amidst the condemned, greed shits coins, gluttony is forced to throw up again and again, and pride

Hieronymus Bosch, *Garden of Earthly Delights* (1503-1504)

becomes transfixed by her reflection (supplied by a mirror affixed to another figure's ass).

Neither Rivera nor Picasso produced triptychs in the conventional sense; nevertheless, both drew heavily on the form's structure and thematic organization. Commenting on Picasso's understanding of the triptych's significance, Russell recounts how "a hinged panel is by its nature a sort of dismemberment, a planned rupture."

In *Guernica*, this aspect of triptychs is brought to the surface in theme as well as in form, the one panel hinged at the pinched neck of the lightbearer, the other at the shrunken and hacked-off neck of the warrior—neither personage permitted to cut across the boundaries, the painter preferring to lop heads rather than cover over the formal clarity of his plan, part of the plan being of course these acts of mutilation.[30]

Proceeding in a somewhat different fashion, Rivera's use of the triptych is no less deliberate. In *Man at the Crossroads*, the partitioning of the picture plane allows for a formal and spatially coherent organization of the image's key antagonisms. But despite these novel strategies for realizing the simultaneity of viewpoints and the indivisibility of events, what remains most significant about these formal citations is that by invoking the triptych both Rivera and Picasso managed to infuse their images with significant (though significantly profaned) religious connotations.

Indeed, it's hard to ignore the extent to which both *Man at the Crossroads* and *Guernica* are saturated with the Passion. As ambassadors of the Christian mystery of death and resurrection, Rivera's Man and Picasso's horse (figures occupying the central "panel" of their respective images) are illuminated by a kind of stereoscopic process. The "old" sacred is enlisted to fill the "new" profane with consolidating meaning. In the process, both reach a point of unbearable tension. It is the point at which a materialist analysis capable of grasping the energetic relays that coarse between the constellated fragments of historical memory inevitably deposits us—whether we're ready or not.

VIII

Describing Rivera and Picasso's works in theological terms may seem fanciful, an unfortunate side effect of trying to find a common interpretative basis for wildly divergent subject matter; however, a broader appraisal of their work confirms that they were no strangers to religious citations. For Rivera, the origins of this affinity can be traced back to Mexico's Chapingo chapel where, in 1927, he painted what many consider to be his greatest work. According to Rivera biographer Patrick Marnham, the reasons for such a characterization are self-evident: "The ingenuity of Rivera's blasphemy is due to the way in which…he adapted the technique of Renaissance devotional art to the desecration of a religious building and its transformation into a place of anti-religious devotion."[31]

Although Marnham doesn't mention Benjamin, he nevertheless reveals the extent to which Rivera's work approximates Benjamin's "messianic" materialism. Here, the dream forms of an unfulfilled past discover the means by which they might be actualized through matter's most modern configurations. At Chapingo, Rivera "came closest to recreating the medieval function of religious art: art as an instrument of conversion, the highest form of propaganda…"

> Rivera's images in Chapingo were…intended to remind people of their past, to direct their conduct in the present, and to describe their future. If, in the Middle Ages, the past was evoked in legends and visions, the present was divided into virtuous and vicious behaviour, and the future contained punishments and rewards, in Rivera's art the same pattern was applied, but the visions were moved from the past to the future since the system he was advocating was Utopian rather than Arcadian.[32]

Drawing deep from the archive of mythic symbols, Rivera forged a bond between religion—what Marx, in his critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, called the "general theory" of the world—and the profane means by which the promise of that "theory" might be actualized. God thus gives way to man, who comes face to face with his "*weak* Messianic power."[33] But no *telos* will guarantee the outcome. Because figures like Rockefeller remain invested in mythic resolutions (since these underwrite the logic of the commodity form), the very promise of the "new nature" must itself be wrested from myth through decisive action.

Rivera made his understanding of this dialectical relationship explicit in 1932's *Detroit Industry* murals. There, an infant's inoculation is depicted in a style reminiscent of Renaissance-era Nativity scenes (complete with three wise men—now medical scientists—in the background). On the south wall's "automotive production" panel, Rivera incorporated another mythic citation by rendering an industrial stamping press in the likeness of the Aztec goddess Coatlicue. In Aztec mythology, Coatlicue nurtures humanity even as she demands sacrificial victims. From the vantage of the assembly line, it's hard to not recognize her as a mythic anticipation of the brutal contradictions of industrial production. Like Benjamin—who was fascinated by the "correspondences" that arise "between the world of modern technology and the archaic symbol-world of mythology"—Rivera seized upon figures like Coatlicue to illuminate the dangers (but also the promise) trapped in matter's most modern configurations.[34]

Like Rivera, Picasso did not shy away from mythical citations. Along with his regular recourse to Greek mythology, he also drew both directly and indirectly on Christian themes.[35] Russell fully grasped the significance of these citations when he described *Guernica* as a "modern Calvary…detonated by sudden entrances and exits."[36] Here, the old and the new enter into an explosive admixture. Consequently, "the picture in its episodes is timeless, archaic. The timetable of the Spanish Republic is here widened to include all time." Furthermore, it's "in certain Biblical outlines" that *Guernica* is to be "uncovered."[37] It therefore follows that the image is "a dedication to the past and to the future."[38] Russell concludes by observing that *Guernica* might be best understood as "a structure salvaged carefully from the rubble of the past, dedicated to the idea of a resurrection and to a future."[39] An assessment more in keeping with Benjamin's insights would be difficult to produce.

IX

Concurrent with their remarkable synthesis of the cinematic and the religious, *Man at the Crossroads* and *Guernica* also resolve the antithetical terms of the early 20th-century conflict between the "formalist" strategy of montage and the narrative conventions of socialist realism.

By forcing relationships between discrete and discontinuous objects, montage highlighted social relations that might otherwise have gone unnoticed. Skeptical of its potential, Georg Lukács nevertheless conceded that montage could, on occasion, become a powerful political weapon.[40] Nevertheless, Lukács doubted that the mere organization of fragments could ever yield a clear conception of the social totality. At best, montage was an epiphenomenal expression of the *experience* of fragmentation that seemed to define capitalism at the advent of consumer society. In contrast, and because it was specifically concerned with reflecting social relations, Lukács felt that realism avoided succumbing to whatever manifests itself immediately and on the surface.[41]

These tensions are not easily resolved, and it's beyond the scope of this investigation to work them out in any detail. However, it's important to note that Rivera and Picasso's images suggest a plausible means of overcoming the impasse. Although mobilizing different representational strategies, both works successfully incorporate formalist and realist attributes into singular, unitary constructions that nevertheless remain replete with tension.

In Rivera's mural, figures occupying different historical moments and discontinuous geographical spaces are brought into improbable proximity. Similarly, the figures populating *Guernica* look like outcasts from the morning paper. For art historian Ellen Oppler, these figures are "paper cut-outs, posterlike, resembling the stark images of news photos or flickering newsreels."[42] In both cases, discrete fragments are filled with new significance as a result of relationships established between nodes in the constellated whole. But alongside these experiments in montage, both works achieve the kind of narrative cohesion favoured by realists.[43] In order to understand how, it's necessary to move beyond the picture plane to consider the means by which the viewer becomes implicated in the depicted scene.

Here, it becomes evident that—though neither work has a protagonist in the conventional sense—both achieve narrative coherence by forcing the viewer to assume "protagonist" responsibilities. In other words, by outsourcing resolution, they induct the viewer. Whether confronting the absolute non-resolution of the world's accumulated contradictions or witnessing the catastrophic aftermath of aerial bombardment, the viewer is given nothing with which to identify except her own *weak* Messianic power. Expressed synchronously with montage's fragmentation, realism's encapsulating anthropological narrative seems to move the scene toward a cessation of happening that can only be resolved through the viewer's decisive action on history itself.

Of all the attributes conspiring to make these murals dialectical images, the viewer's placement before the depicted events is perhaps most significant. In his consideration of *Guernica*, surrealist artist and Picasso biographer Roland Penrose gives us a sense of why this might be the case; in his estimation, Picasso had found a "universal means of conveying the emotions centered around a given event" and "arrived at a timeless and transcendental image."

> It is not the horror of an actual occurrence with which we are presented; it is a universal tragedy made vivid to us by the myth he has reinvented and the revolutionary directness with which it is presented.[44]

As a description of profane illumination, Penrose's account highlights the point at which the depicted event opens onto the universal and makes history itself the object of a redemptive labour process. Both the challenge and the possibility of redemption fall solely upon the viewer. Nothing in the image itself can resolve the tensions it unleashes. The demand is unsettling. It explains the tremendous resonance that *Guernica* continues to enjoy. It also explains the denunciations that began circulating even before the paint had dried.

In *Man at the Crossroads*, natural history and human history confront one another at a moment just prior to their potential resolution. Overlying this temporal synchronicity is a spatial one. Antagonists in the class struggle are brought to the point of inevitable confrontation. As "controller of the universe," the Man in *Man at the Crossroads* must resolve the tension. However, because he is caught at a point of absolute historical arrest, he can only fulfill this mission if you, the viewer, intercede.

X

As I've made clear, Rivera and Picasso's murals closely approximate aspects of Benjamin's dialectical image. For this reason, they are central reference points for anyone interested in producing such an image today. However, despite the fact that they became important rallying points in the struggle against constituted power, the murals themselves never prompted the "leap in the open air of history" that Benjamin had hoped for.[45] In other words, if the murals were dialectical images from the standpoint of analysis, they did not yet constitute such images from the standpoint of politics.

Based on this assessment, it may be tempting to conclude that Benjamin's conception—though provocative—is ultimately unsuited to the unforgiving world of *realpolitik*. However, since the proverbial moment "when the chips are down" underlying Benjamin's philosophy is not yet upon us (and since, in Benjamin's estimation, that final instance would have "retroactive force"), it remains more fitting to see these images as *one more* ruin, *one more* fragment, *one more* unrealized promise in need of actualization. What, then, in matter's most modern configurations, would allow us to rise to the occasion?

Notes

1. The term "dialectical image" does not appear in "Theses on the Philosophy of History." However, terms like "monad," "true image of the past," and "constellation" are used to denote the same thing. In line with Michael Löwy's reading of the "Theses"—where he points out that "in a first version of [Thesis XVII] to be found in the *Arcades Project*, in place of the concept of the monad there appears that of the 'dialectical image'" [Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On The Concept of History'* (London: Verso, 2005), 132]—I treat these terms as synonyms; see Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 462. For the sake of clarity and convenience, I restrict myself here primarily to the term "dialectical image," which I feel most closely captures what Benjamin was aiming at.
2. Walter Benjamin, "Theses On the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1968), 263.
3. Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991), 46.
4. There's little evidence to suggest that either Rivera or Picasso were familiar with Benjamin's work. However, given the intellectual terrain within which they operated, and given the indirect connections they shared through mediating figures like Georges Bataille and Leon Trotsky, it's likely that Benjamin's ideas were at least partially available to Rivera and Picasso through the informal structure of feeling that pervaded the early 20th-century radical scene. Presenting artworks—actual painted images—as dialectical images is somewhat out of keeping with Benjamin's own eclectic use of the concept. However, while I acknowledge that dialectical images do not have to be images in the artistic sense, I have chosen to focus on artworks because they help to pose the question of operationalization most acutely.
5. Frederic Jameson, "Future City," *New Left Review* 21 (May-June 2003): www.newleftreview.org/?view=2449
6. These images were based on sketches that Rivera produced while attending the 1928 May Day Parade in Moscow. Abby Aldrich Rockefeller found these images so compelling that, while Rivera was working on *Man at the Crossroads*, she bought his sketchbook. See Andrea Kettenmann, *Diego Rivera: A Revolutionary Spirit in Modern Art* (New York: Taschen, 2000), 52.
7. Ezekiel 1:19-21 New International Version.
8. Susan Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing*, 70.
9. Viewing dialectical images in this way is justified on the grounds of a note Buck-Morss found in the Bataille Archive, in which Benjamin recounts his own thinking in the schematic terms of intersecting axes. See Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing*, 215.
10. Pete Hamill, *Diego Rivera* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999), 166.
11. The only one known to exist, clandestinely shot by assistant Lucienne Bloch after Rivera's dismissal (Frida Kahlo ran interception). The image presented above is a reproduction of *Man, Controller of the Universe* (1934). See also Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 255.
12. Irene Herner De Larrea et al., eds. *Diego Rivera: Paradise Lost at Rockefeller Center* (Mexico City: Edicupes, 1987), 42.
13. Ibid.
14. Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New: Art and the Century of Change* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 29.
15. Frank D. Russell, *Picasso's Guernica: The Labyrinth of Narrative and Vision* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), 3.
16. Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 4.
17. Quoted in Ellen Oppler, *Picasso's Guernica* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1988), 199-200.
18. John Berger, *The Success and Failure of Picasso* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 169.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., 166.
21. Susan Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing*, 161.
22. Retort, *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* (New York: Verso, 2005), 191.
23. William S. Lieberman, *The Nelson A. Rockefeller Collection: Masterpieces of Modern Art* (New York: Hudson Mills Press, 1981), 17.
24. Jerry Cheslow, "If You're Thinking of Living In: Turtle Bay," *The New York Times*, April 26, 1992, 7.
25. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 265.
26. Maureen Dowd, "Powell Without Picasso," *The New York Times*, February 5, 2003, 27
27. Retort, *Afflicted Powers*, 16.
28. Berger, *The Success and Failure of Picasso*, 70.
29. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 471.
30. Russell, *Picasso's Guernica*, 92.
31. Patrick Marnham, *Dreaming With His Eyes Open: A Life of Diego Rivera* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 192.
32. Ibid.
33. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 254; Benjamin's "*weak* Messianic power" has been the subject of considerable debate and commentary—and for good reason. As with many of Benjamin's concepts, *weak* Messianic power is an allegorical profanation in which a category of religious thought finds its point of actualization in matter's most modern configurations. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Messiah was conceived as a redeemer who would make the shattered world whole. Extended to apply to materialist concerns, Messianic power takes our accumulated historic failures to attain happiness as its object. For this reason, rather than lulling us with visions of a utopian future (where all men are angels), Benjamin enjoins us to consider what must be done to save *the dead* from the ongoing deferral of their dreams or—worse—from their induction into the triumphant processions of oppressive victors. In Benjamin's formulation, Messianic power is qualified as "*weak*" to make clear that it pertains to a material and not a mythic-religious phenomenon. As with Michael Gold, who concluded his autobiographical gem *Jews Without Money* with the realization that—after endless searching and religious doubt—the Messiah was in fact none other than the "workers' Revolution" [Michael Gold, *Jews Without Money*, (New York, NY: Carroll & Graff Publishers, 1930), 309], Benjamin imagined that the claims of the past could only be settled through organized, decisive action.
34. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 461.
35. Such recourse can be seen in his regular deployment of figures like the Minotaur in works like 1935's *Minotauromachy*, an obvious visual precursor to *Guernica*.
36. Russell, *Picasso's Guernica*, 10.
37. Ibid., 5.
38. Ibid., 9.
39. Ibid., 10.
40. Georg Lukács, "Realism in the Balance," in Adorno et al. *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 2002), 43.
41. Ibid., 33.
42. Oppler, *Picasso's Guernica*, 47.
43. It's solely on this basis that we can understand how—despite its cubist inflections and claustrophobically topographical character—some early commentators went so far as to conceive *Guernica* as a work of "social realism." See Roland Penrose, *Picasso: His Life and Work* (London: Gollanez, 1962), 277.
44. Ibid., 277-278.
45. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 261.

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