When engaging in materialist analysis, conventional wisdom instructs us to pay attention to bread and butter, bricks and mortar. This is no doubt important; 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, too, materialist images produce themselves as symbolic of desires long actualized, which might actualize the desires with which they have 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 revel themselves to be constitutive of it.

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 un-historical motif in both Biblical and classical myth.” However, unlike other forms of engagement with materialist images in their own terms, dialectical images do more than reproduce past themes “symbolically, as aesthetic ornamentation.” Instead, by impelling prototypical reckoning, they envision the viewer to actualize unrealized promise by forging a constellation between the past’s wishful motifs and “matter’s most modern configurations.” 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 of the Crossroads (1933) and Pablo Picasso’s Guernica (1937) to highlight how they intuitively gave Benjamin’s conception a concrete visual form. 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 our present and to make vulnerable—the very archetypic dimensions of late capitalism’s erstwhile depthlessness. And, once this has been accomplished, we can begin to uniquely 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 Fredric Jameson has noted—it is now easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism. What makes the dialectical image, the very conception of “anti-capitalism” reaches a point at which the habit of picturing a mere logical negation of the constituted world is repudiated once and for all. Because it forces us 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” as a concrete visual form. In the ellipsis bisecting the image from top right to bottom left, a teleological 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, social realism, or both. Caught between the poles of natural and human history, the teleopic and microscopic expanses of the universe, and the antithetical terms of the class struggle all contractual 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:

![Image](image-url)

**III**

Man at the Crossroads was an enormous mural that stood nearly 5 meters tall and 11.5 meters wide. Gouache on the right side of the image are the forces of socialist revolution. Workers look on from the bottom quadrant. Marx, Trotsky, and others gather behind a banner extolling 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 door. In the top right quadrant of the image, peasant women line up alongside workers carrying red flags as they march in procession. In the space behind the statue, demonstration confront soldiers in gas masks. Suspended mid-ground, a group of athletes look 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 tightening that these hands once wielded has been channelled 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 comprising the top left quadrant of the image. Above their heads flies a squadron of bombers similar to those that would 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 Erasil’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.” 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” 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 ellipse bisecting the image from top left to bottom right contains the microscopic elements of the world. Near the bottom of the ellipse, a human fetus gestates inside a cell. In the ellipse bisecting the image from top right to bottom left, a teleological 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, social realism, or both. Caught between the poles of natural and human history, the teleopic and microscopic expanses of the universe, and the antithetical terms of the class struggle all contractual 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:

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**Considered in this way, Man at the Crossroads’ abstraction from 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.” 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 overwhelmed 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 Peter 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 Rockefeller.”

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...
disappear irrevocably.1,1

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, 1933, 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. Returning 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.

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.”

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 moving toward the center 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. Her eyes are dilated. Looking 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 herd 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 goes 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 comparative 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 blinding sun, an explosion, an eye, a suspended hare’s 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.” And though Guernica was not cubist in any conventional sense, its creation 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 andcocked a broad common sense with the language of modern art.” 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.” 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 didn’t laugh... They just looked at it in silence.”

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 shocking because “there is no town, no semblance, 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.” 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.”

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, prototypical reality) becomes a kind of caption that turns the image as a whole—an image
that, for Berger, was “a protest against a massacre of the innocents at any time”—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.’” 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 stimulated “the repressed consciousness of modernity’s ordinary costs.”

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 seaming of Man at the Crossroads, the seaming 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 “sew the world into bombing Iraq surrounded on camera by shrieking and mutilated women, men, children, bulls and horses.” 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 sarcastic changes on Bush and the snorting bull.” Shrouded and in danger of disappearing irreversibly, Guernica flashed up at a moment of danger like the Man at the Crossroads had before it.

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.

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. These 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 1938 and 1981) and the Wallace Harrison-designed United Nations compound, which was built on the ruins of a slaughterhouse worthy of Pyton 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 coal yards and slaughterhouses on what is now the site of the United Nations.”

In this way (and in truly Benjaminian fashion), Rock-efeller’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.”

If there’s anything that can be said about Man at the Crossroads and Guernica, it’s that they are so precisely in these precise ways. As popular monuments works conceived for pre-resentation 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 dura-tion), the cessation of happening engendered by the images’ direct frame execution places responsibility squarely on the viewer’s shoulders. Because there is no “after” in which the viewer can orient except the one in which she herself creates, cinematic expectation gives way to expectation of one’s self. But Rivera and Picasso did more than reiterate cinematic narratives. Had they restricted themselves in this way, their eff-orts would likely have remained quaint but fruitless attempts to refresh an old and its superficial showcases in the face of their inevitable decline. This is not what happened. Instead, Rivera and Picasso fixed 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.”

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

The triptych was popular in European religious art dur-ing the 14th and 15th centuries. As with religious art more generally, it fixed the devotional with the instructive. During the early 20th century, surrealist identification with Dutch painter Hieronymus Bosch (1450–1516) revealed interest in the form. Painting at the end of the 14th century, Bosch depicted the human struggle with sin. In contrast to other Renaissance thinkers, he did not see earthly struggle leading to universal salvation. Instead, Bosch was concerned with revealing 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 surrealists’ desire to explore the dark side of human experience. And since this desire occasionally led Bosch to depict judges, clergy, and the purported classes in a critical fashion, his work remained open to radical interpretations. In the Gardner’s “hell” panel, the seven deadly sins directly embody the failing that defeated grace. Sitting in the center of the cross, gluttony’s glutinous is forced to throw up again and again, and pride

**Materialism**

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**Scapegoat**
Furthermore, it’s “in certain Biblical outlines” that Gauguin is to be “uncovered.”® It therefore follows that the image is dedicated to the figure of Jesus and the future of humanity. Benjamin concludes by observing that “Gauguin might be best understood as a structure safeguarded carefully from the rubble of the past, dedicated to the idea of future, and to a future.”® 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, the Man at the Crossroads and Guernica also resolve the artistic technique of the early 20th-century conflict between the “formalist” strategy of montage and the narrative conventions of socialist realism.

By forcing relations between contradictory and discontinuous objects, montages highlighted social relations that might otherwise have gone unnoticed. For example, Georg Lukaç nevertheless conceded that montage could, on occasion, become a powerful political weapon.® Nevertheless, Lukaç doubted that montage made it possible to ever yield a clear conception of the social totality. At best, montage was an attempt to recreate the experience of fragmentation that seemed to define capitalism at the advent of consumer society. In contrast, and because it was specifically concerned with infusing their images with significant (though significantly multi-dimensional) signification, Lukaç felt that realism avoided succumbing to whatever manifests itself immediately and on the surface. The cinematic vision is much more easily resolved, and it’s beyond the scope of this investigation to work them out in detail. However, it’s important to note that Rivera’s and Picasso’s figures in Guernica appear to be offering different historical moments and discontinuous geographical spaces are brought into impossible proximity. Similar to the way in which Gauguin looks like outcrops from the morning paper. For art historian Ellen Opplinger, this is what is meant by “dialectical images, the viewer’s placement before the depicted scene. Presenting artworks—actual pictures that Rivera produced at Chapingo, the Man at the Crossroads and Guernica are characterized by a sense that what emerges from the con- stellated fragments of historical memory inevitably departs us—whether we’re ready or not.

VIII
Describing Rivera and Picasso’s works in theological terms may seem tautological, an unfortunate side effect of trying to find a common interpretative basis for widely divergent subject matter. As Michael Löwy points out in their work confirms that they were not stranger to religious citations. For Rivera, the origins of this affinity can be traced back to Mexico’s Christian past.® It’s worth noting that in his New Testament was to create a political art, one which, poetically, resembling the stalk of images news of flickering novels.®® In both cases, discrete fragments are filled with meaning, and a sense of how this might be achieved through the transformation of species of God.®® For Lomnicz, the subject of considerable debate and commentary—and for good reason. As with many of Benjamin’s most significant critical arguments, criticism focused on the triumph of new knowledge, new technology, and the subject of categories of self and society.®

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However, since the proverbial moment “when the chips are down,” there’s no denying that the viewer can only get a sense of the future that’s to come.®® The viewer can only get a sense of the future that’s to come.

III
In the years leading up to the first World War, Benjamin’s ideas were at least partially validated. In the wake of the First World War, the triumphant processions of opulent revolutions were met with the realization that—after endless searching and frustrating detours—the Messiah was conceived as a redeemer.®® Messianic power. Expressed synchronously with rationalization most acutely.

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. In the Middle Ages, the past was evoked in legends and visions, the present in the promulgation of virtues and vices, 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.®

Drawing deep from the archive of mythic symbols, Rivera forged a bond between religion—what Marx, in his critique of Hegel’s philosophy, identified as the “general theory” of the world—and the prophetic meaning of the promise that the future is to be actualized.®® Thus gives the one who comes faces with his “weak Messianic power.”®® But no heirs will guarantee the outcome. Because figures like the Indian Christ remained in mythic resistance (and were thus the objects of ideological struggle, and were thus the objects of ideological struggle), they were unlikely to produce the kind of revolution that it would have been possible for them to, assuming that the future was to be actualized.®®

Rivera made his understanding of this dialectical relationship with the divine an integral part of his innovative political thought.®® Like Cézanne, RiveraPicasso was moved by the idea of men—men who were self-confidence to creating his vocation as an artist, and to the extent that he was able to work in a revolutionary directness with which it is presented.®

As a description of profane illumination, Irenicon’s presence accentuates the highlight at the point of the depicted event opens onto the universal and make history itself the object of a redeemed labour process. Both the challenge and the possibility of redemption fall solely in the hands of the viewers.®® But the viewer of the image cannot resolve the tensions it unleashes. The demand is un- setting. It explains the tremendous rebound that Guernica continues to enjoy. At its core, this new medium was one that began circulating even before the paint had dried.

In Man of the Crossroads, the relationship between the secular and the religious history confront one another at a moment just prior to their inevitable confrontation. As “controller of the artistic sense, I have chosen to look for Benjamin’s autobiographical gem”®® that—after endless searching and frustrating detours—the Messiah was conceived as a redeemer.®® Messianic power. Expressed synchronously with rationalization most acutely.

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