DAY FOR NIGHT

LANDSCAPES OF WALTER BENJAMIN

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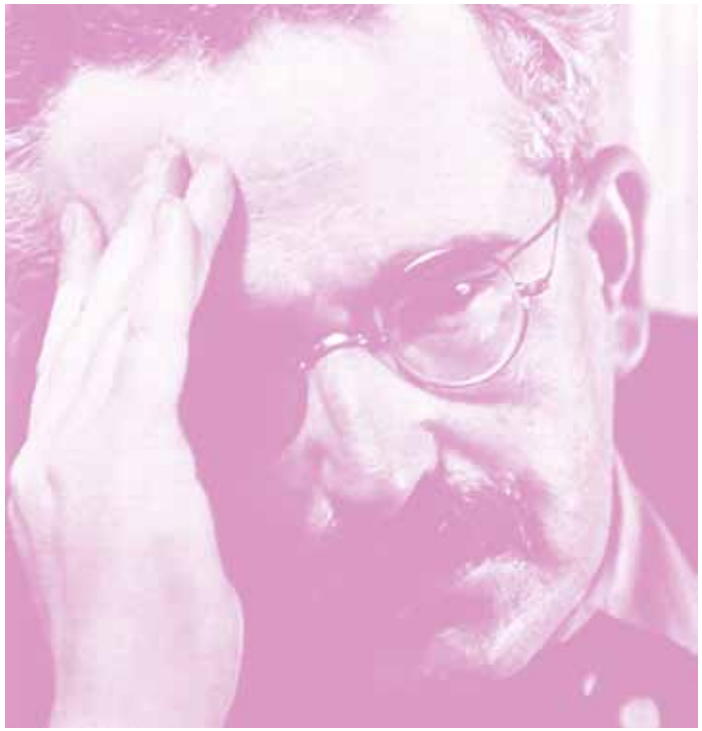
Catalogue edited by Jean McNeil and Julia Bell

Contents



Foreword: Walter Benjamin's Daydreams, Nightmares

Esther Leslie

Walter Benjamin persists. Benjamin is a lively publishing prospect, an art exhibition, a film, a radio programme, a PhD, a political thriller starring Colin Firth. Benjamin is never laid to rest, even if he was once interred, more or less, when, on 28 September 1940, a funeral following Catholic rites was held for a Dr. Benjamin Walter, the name reversed for a man in transit mistakenly assumed to be of Catholic faith. Benjamin was in transit. He keeps moving through the landscape. His perspective keeps changing. He is caught from many angles, like a landmark. Such persistence, such endlessly reconfigured existence, Benjamin himself identified in relation to a past that refuses to drop, conveniently, thing-like, into a lap. 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 if the enemy wins.

The past, history, departed people are clothed in the fabrics of remembrance. What has been is also what is being remembered, what comes into each present through what Benjamin calls the Penelope work of recollection, which is as much remembering as forgetting, a work of the mind, of the dreaming mind, in which night unravels what the day has woven, and the work of a wakeful mind of daytime, when the fragments collect together under new laws. History is never done, never done with. It opens up again and again. It 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 end differently? Benjamin's colleague Max Horkheimer challenged this perspective – observing blankly that the slain are really slain – and there is no Last Judgement in which the dead rise again. What is past is past. But Benjamin insisted that while under certain lights that may be so, under others it is not.

In repeated remembering, Benjamin remains incomplete, ever again openable to the contemporary world, with its changes and continuities, which change him, what he is, was and will be, or bring him into renewed relevance. Benjamin is not dead: he still crosses the border. Benjamin crosses a border that is the same border and a different one. It is the border that separated Vichy France from fascist Spain. It is the border that confronted people fleeing in opposite directions – some, like Benjamin and his fellow refugees, towards the Atlantic, moving west to a possible life in the Americas, others, revolutionaries and Republicans, reversing the route, fleeing from Franco's Spain to France.

The border persists. There, and elsewhere. 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 that drowns bodies in the attempt. Spain is the new destination for the rubber dinghies launched from North Africa, avoiding the nightmares of Libya. With luck, their fleeing passengers reach Spain. This is a Spain where memory is unsettled. Franco is to be 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. It holds some of the many dead of the Spanish Civil War, tens of thousands of who lie unidentified there. A Truth Commission is to be launched. Will the fascist night yield to a bright day through these investigations? Or will the new fascisms of our world first cast the past into another light, as it tortures the present? Walter Benjamin cannot be absent from this enquiry, for he is one of its witnesses. He must persist.

Esther Leslie is Professor in Political Aesthetics at Birkbeck College, University of London, and co-director of the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities. Amongst her many books are two seminal publications on Walter Benjamin: *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism* (Pluto, 2000) and *Walter Benjamin* (Reaktion, 2007).

Three Flights

Julia Bell

1

I'm flying to Berlin from Heathrow, First Class. One of my students who works in the travel industry arranged it: British Airways on a smallish passenger jet which means First Class is actually just three rows of slightly plusher leather seats at the front of the plane, bread rolls served from a basket lined with linen napkins, and as much free champagne as I can neck on the short hour and half hop from London to Berlin.

Boarding the plane, I'm already pretty drunk, as my companion has also taken me to the First Class lounge. In all my years on the planet I have never been in such a place before. I have seen anonymous looking men with briefcases and expensive watches scurrying through branded doors and idly wondered what was behind them, but considered that whatever was behind them wasn't for me and best not to think about it.

In the early days of aviation, flying was a luxury afforded only to the wealthy, a fact exploited in the 1950s and 60s with the expansion of mass tourism. Companies like Pan Am emphasised the connection between travel and glamour in their adverts, a mythology cemented by the luxury brands trying to sell us some airbrushed version of the sleek life at duty free.

Nowhere in the arcades of capitalism is it more obvious that we're being conned. Because air travel, especially budget, is anything but comfortable or luxurious.

Waiting for a flight, I normally tough it out in the shops and duty free like everyone else – usually outside a coffee joint or trying to avoid staring at overpriced branded goods. Once you get used to the dazzle of the lighting, the whole setting starts to emerge for the mirage that it is – the weird theatre of MDF shop fronts, designed to provoke desire and brand loyalty serviced by over attentive assistants with lanyards, and peopled by noise and the smell of other people's fast food and flight anxiety.

The First Class lounge is empty, quiet, air conditioned. Soft jazz and muted colours, brown with touches of gold. It has the atmosphere of an anonymous hotel with a stainless steel servery full of salads and sandwiches and drinks, and a shaded view down over the heaving plaza of shops below. The other thing I notice almost immediately is that the few other people in the lounge are all male, apart from one young girl with her father, who is playing on her ipad while he reads the newspaper. I peruse the pastries, coffee, salads, a menu of hot food, but I can't find a price list. My companion offers me champagne, to which I make some mumbled response of you really don't have to, that's a bit extravagant isn't it?

'But it's free!'

'Free?'

'Of course it's fucking free!' My companion says, slightly incredulous. 'It's First Class!'

A naivety that he still teases me for.

Three beers two glasses of champagne and a gin and tonic (not necessarily in that order) later, I roll towards the departure gate. I wanted to eat the whole damn servery and drink the place dry, in a kind of pointless dirty protest.

First Class. The words are like a knife. I am suddenly infuriated by the concept. A value system of me first because I'm worth it. The pomp and privilege I flick through a free in-flight magazine: Air India offers a Maharaja Class, Thai Airways a Royal First Class. What exactly is this privilege? Because anyone can buy in, there's something venal about the whole arrangement. This is not a category for the best of us, raised up by society. It sounds like a prize, but in reality, it's a self-appointed reward, a rented space away from the stinking stew. But if the plane fails, your class

status isn't going to help you any.

And here's the real con trick: the extremely wealthy – they're not even here at all. They bypassed this whole shit show a long time ago. The Rich Kids of Instagram don't fly First Class – they show us photos of Lear jets with leather interiors and bling accessories, and proper flat beds.

As the plane lurches out of its gate I can see hangars with private jets, the pointed insects of their nose cones. There is one on the apron outside, stairs down, being prepared or disembarked I don't know. There are some people getting out of a limo. Here are the super-rich and their shadow world that increasingly controls our own. Who are these people? I have a frisson of something, fear?

The plane wobbles a little in its turn to the runway, the roar and judder and then the lift, and we are airborne. Once the plane reaches cruising altitude a stewardess serves me first.

2

I'm queueing for check-in to a flight to Bangkok. Thai airways. In front of me, a couple – a Thai woman and a rather grey looking man – receding hairline, dull looking t-shirt. I don't pay them much attention at first, but then it becomes clear that they are arguing and that he isn't carrying any luggage.

I catch the general drift of things. She's leaving and he doesn't want her to – in fact he doesn't want her to go at all. But she doesn't even want him to be here. 'You can leave now,' she says, 'I'll be OK. Please.'

He doesn't leave, but trails along next to her, hangdog, his shoulders slanted. There are long silences interrupted when they both start speaking at once.

She says, 'I can't,' quite a few times.

He says, 'I'm sorry.'

They arrive at the head of the queue and peel off to a check-in desk. Soon, it's my turn.

At the desk the agent looks at me.

'Travelling alone?'

‘Er, yes.’

‘The airline would be interested to know if you would like to change your travel plans?’

I’m not sure what this means. ‘I have people waiting for me,’ I say lamely. ‘What would this actually mean?’

‘I’m sure Royal Thai Airlines would make it worth your while.’ His eyes flick to his computer screen. ‘The flight is overbooked.’

‘Will they bump me to First Class?’

‘I don’t know, you need to speak to the representatives at the desk.’ He holds my passport between his fingers like he is expecting to pass it back to me. There is a queue behind me. I want a coffee. I’m already two hours from home. I’ve prepared myself for a long haul flight, I only have three weeks in Thailand. I don’t really want to miss any of it.

‘I have people waiting.’ I say again, slightly dazed. I guess I’m bad at dealing with instant decisions. So many situations are like cloudy water, so polluted with elements that it’s only when things settle – sometimes years after the event – that it’s possible to see what was there all along, all the pressures, visible and invisible. This makes it hard to make choices, to take advantage. Best to stick as much as possible to what is known, which in this case, is Plan A. I don’t want to miss my holiday.

He sighs and weighs my luggage. When I ask him for a window seat, he laughs. My boarding pass says E: blootclot seats, right in the middle of the middle aisle.

I squeeze myself into my seat, which as it happens, is right next to the Thai girl who was in front of me in the queue. She acknowledges me with a raised eyebrow, but after that folds herself up as small as possible and seems to go to sleep. On the other side of me is a missionary type of woman – open toed sandals and socks, a plain blue dress and a large gold cross on a chain. She makes several overtures to a conversation, but I’m not interested, now so challenged by my lack of physical space that I’m wondering what Thai Airways would have offered me to wait a day. Instead, I must now endure eleven hours of regret.

I watch some movies, ignore the missionary woman’s attempts at conversation and eat some indifferently processed food from a tray that comes with a decorative purple orchid flower. The flower has drops of condensation on the petals. I look at it and wonder at the fact that the word orchid comes from the Greek for testicles. How do I know this? Then I fall

into an hallucinatory sleep punctured by moments of intense cramp. What value, space?

Finally, somehow, the eleven hours have passed, and the captain makes an announcement. Bangkok is a balmy 35 degrees. The girl beside me becomes suddenly loudly animated. Only as the plane begins to descend, do I realise she’s crying.

‘My people!’ she says, when I catch her eye. ‘My people!’ She claps her hands together. ‘My brother will kill me.’

She is sort of engaging me in conversation, but also using me as an audience. I don’t feel invited in but I hazard the obvious question.

‘Why?’

She nods behind her, into the past. ‘Him.’

So she knows that I was there, in the queue earlier, watching. And that I noticed what was going on. How do we know these things of each other? How much conversation happens in the ether? Wordless transactions: a nod, a wink, a shake of the head, a hard stare and something is actioned, something is transferred.

‘You left him?’

She bites her lip and nods. ‘You know High Wycombe?’ She curls her lip. ‘I cannot live there. My brother is going to kill me. But I can’t go back there!’ She starts crying again. ‘High Wycombe! Always rain rain rain rain, so cold!’

I ask her what she was doing there, and she shakes her head and mumbles something about a Thai restaurant and repeats the line about her brother wanting to kill her.

‘But why will your brother kill you?’

She rubs her fingers together and tuts.

‘Money for my family!’

The plane banks, for a second revealing the ground, the shapes of the city beneath me.

She ducks down to see better, the plane doing a full sweep of the toytown skyline, the city steaming in the heat, the glitter of water from the rice fields and shrimp farms.

She shrugs, suddenly composed. ‘Even if he makes me, I won’t go back. I can work in nail bar, anything! I want to be with my people!’

When we disembark I wish her luck. I pass her again the queue for

immigration but she is on her phone. My passport is stamped. I wonder about the conversation she will have with her brother, if she will go back to the grey, receding man in High Wycombe or if she will stay with her brother who wants to kill her. Two men, the bookends of her past and future.

3

I'm not even sure I'm at the right end of Athens airport. I'm miles away from the shops and services, searching for the check-in for a budget airline back to Luton – so budget it doesn't even have its own desk but uses a ground agent.

I stand in what I assume is the right queue but nothing is clear. I wait for the woman at the desk next door to be done checking in a huge family of about ten people and when I ask her I'm not sure she understands my question. I stay there a bit longer. A young man comes and stands next to me. He's black, wearing a fisherman's beanie and has a beard, I ask him if this is the right queue for my flight.

He rubs his hand across his face. 'I hope so.' He looks exhausted. 'I want to go home.'

I assume he's a tourist like me. 'Had enough of Greece?'

'You could say that. I slept in Athens last night. My transfers were all messed up.'

I ask him where he's come from. 'Moira.'

'Sorry?'

He repeats the name and looks at me like I should know. I can only think of Tolkein – the mines of Moria, the black chasm of Middle Earth – but then a dim remembrance of the news. 'Is that on Lesbos? The refugee camp?'

He flinches. 'Yeah.'

'What's it like?'

'Terrible.'

He tells me that there are over 9,000 people in a space made for 3,000. 'Half of them have got TB. It's not even sanitary, there's no toilets, the rubbish, the smells, and so many of them are just . . . traumatised, you know? Like proper . . . gone. They need professional help. There was this woman who couldn't leave her room, and she was lying there for days covered in her own shit . . . stuff like that . . . And that's not even the beginning of the worst of it. Some people have been there for years.' He shakes his head. 'Hell on earth.'

After this, we fall into a sudden and intense conversation. I question him and he responds in a series of pained monologues.

He tells me no one really wants to take responsibility for this situation, how news of it is being deliberately supressed, (something corroborated by a quick Google search later, which brings up only localised reports and condemnations of the conditions on NGO websites). This news blackout, he says is partly to stop right wing attacks, but also because no one has the will to deal with it. There are too many NGOs and the policy of confinement rather than resettlement is a fudge. If they keep people long enough in intolerable conditions, eventually they will take their intolerable selves elsewhere. Preferably home.

Meanwhile on the ground, these are people who have complex needs, the sick and impoverished, the traumatised, those who left too late, the ones without real resources, now re-traumatised by conditions in the camps. And then all the vultures, people trying to disappear, criminals, people traffickers. They are vulnerable to every type of exploitation. And the different religious and ethnic groups all have issues with each other. There are daily outrages, riots and fights. Rape is common.

We stand sideways to each other, almost as if face to face would mean having to confront the reality of his news. The whole scenario is giving me vertigo. I'm almost relieved when we're interrupted by some other passengers wanting to know if they are in the right queue and we separate. I don't know why, but I shake his hand.

Later, going through security, there is a woman in front of me trying to calm a wriggling, screaming toddler who she must leave in the care of a security guard while she goes through the machine that scans your entire body. It makes the wrong kind of noise. A couple of grim-faced uniformed security women take her aside, search her luggage and inspect the child's small shoes. The child screams even louder. The woman is wearing a hijab. In the end they extract some bottles of cream bigger than the allowed size and confiscate them.

While I wait my turn in the scanner I think about the people in Moira, and about the politics of now. The way there has been loosening of the social contract and a hardening of aggressively authoritarian opinions. It feels like a shift. Nowhere do the consequences of this shift seem more obvious to my heated mind than going through airport security. The symbolism of walking shoeless and beltless toward a machine which will look right through you and project a skeleton X ray image, more naked than when without clothes. Legally, what is this zone of security in airports? It feels like a border area.

I am beckoned through the scanner. A diagram instructs me to put my hands above my head, as if I'm waving an SOS to a passing aircraft. Two graphite beams rotate around me. They are literally trying so see through me.

What is clear is that, like it or not, we are part of a system, and that the functioning of that system also reflects the weather of the world. The refugees left to rot in Lesbos, in America, children separated from their parents, the hostile environment policy in the UK, boats in the Mediterranean turned back and the occupants left to drown. These terrible assertions of state power are actually made manifest by the small people in uniforms, and us, doing their bidding. We could all, if we decided, rebel.

Famously, Hannah Arendt expanded on this complicity in her record of the trial of Adolf Eichmann, the civil servant responsible for the Final Solution. Before he played a role in the extermination camps, Eichmann systematised extracting Jewish money and possessions, business and properties, and expelling Jews from Germany and Austria. He even learned Yiddish to enable him to perform his task better. In hours of testimony, Eichmann explained, in a rational tone, how he achieved his goals. Arendt's conclusion, which outraged those who needed to portray the Nazis as exceptional, monstrous, sub-human, was that evil is banal. Meted out by small people in uniforms doing their jobs, not by buffoons on TV or Twitter.

Once on the other side of security I look round the duty free and try to calm down. As if I'm going to feel better about the state of the world because I can buy three Toblerone for a tenner or get a deal on some Elizabeth Arden face cream. The learned behaviour of capitalism. I look around the luxury Greek products and remember that in Moira there is not enough food. 'The worst kind of cheap food. Really bad for you, just cheap, not the kind of stuff you can live on.' He had rubbed his belly. 'I'm looking forward to having some proper food.'

I buy some olive oil and go and sit at the gate. As the passengers fill up the seats, I look around to see if I can see him. I have some questions I want to ask him about Moira. About what will happen to all those people. Their wasted, chaotic, traumatised lives. When does he think anything will change? Will things change?

I used to think in a naïve, nostalgic way – which was in its own way the weather of the 1990s – that the forces of progress meant that the world could only get better. Now I recognise this thinking as a kind of propaganda, and that there are things coming at us that will need to be faced and endured. I think many people have this premonition. Everything seems so entrenched and empty of new ideas, our past utopias vanishing into silence.

They begin the boarding process and I stand in line behind a couple giggling over some photos on their phone. I take another scan around the room, but I can't see the NGO guy anywhere; nor did I see him on the plane, nor in the arrivals hall, eventually. As far as I can tell he never boarded the flight.

As the plane lifts I think about the systems we create and submit to. This plane – every single element of its design creating a mechanism that keeps me in the air. The thin metal wall between me and air which I can't breathe. If one element of it unravels, we all do. But for the few hours I'm in the air, I feel detached, like dreaming.

We hit a patch of turbulence and the plane judders. I think about Moira, and its hostilities and our anxieties. Anxieties about how we should live. About how we can live. Because we have agreed, mostly in an unconscious way, to live inside a system of values that privileges and protects money and the getting of it. Without a social contract – a collective agreement of our common human concerns – we are at the mercy of the system itself which just generates more anxiety. It is a feedback loop which puts us all on edge, like being on a plane with engine trouble. That's my country, our continent, right now. There was a time when the world felt lighter than this.

Julia Bell is a writer of novels, essays, poems and screenplays. Her most recent essay 'Really Techno' was published in *The White Review 22*. She has just completed a memoir in verse – *Hymnal* – and is currently working on a collection of essays. She divides her time between London and Berlin.

Image: Jean McNeil

Hannah Arendt's Refugee History

Lyndsey Stonebridge

As well as being one of the foremost political philosophers of the era, Hannah Arendt was a friend of Walter Benjamin. Before she fled Europe in 1941, Arendt went to Portbou, Spain, in the wake of Benjamin's suicide to search for his body and for news of the valise he was reportedly carrying with him when he died and in which Benjamin was apparently transporting his latest manuscript, but which has never been found. Here Lyndsey Stonebridge writes about the enduring relevance of Arendt's thought to current conceptions and experiences of exile, migration and statelessness.

Hannah Arendt was, in her own words, an 'illegal immigrant'. She had never been under any illusions about the capacities of the Nazi regime, but when she was caught doing clandestine work for a Zionist organisation in 1933, she knew she had no choice but to leave. In the late spring, she crossed the German-Czech border through a safe house. 'Guests' would arrive at the front door, in Germany, take dinner, and then depart through the back door, which happened to be in Czechoslovakia. Arendt would spend the next 18 years as a stateless person.

Arendt knew she was an 'exception' refugee, one of the fortunate. Others were unwanted, superfluous. Something shifted in the way vulnerable strangers were treated in the West in the first part of the twentieth century. In 1944 Arendt wrote: 'Everywhere the word 'exile' which once had an undertone of almost sacred awe, now provokes the idea of something simultaneously suspicious and unfortunate.'

Today, we live under the shadow of that change. For millions of the unfortunate that means misery and uncertainty; it means untimely and undignified deaths, chronic sickness, separated families, violence and poverty; it means tirelessly struggling to persuade yourself and the world that you, your family and your community still exist. It means being detained in airports and being taken off planes. And while all this endless work is going on, others watch with baffled and outraged dismay as the barely articulate forces of nationalist hate crash into the legal and political structures that were built to protect ourselves, and others, from the same barbarism that pushed Arendt's generation onto the refugee rat runs and into the detention and death camps.

Arendt took many lessons from her own refugee history that we might benefit from thinking about today. Here are three of them:

First, when you have a 'refugee' crisis what you also have is a political, existential and moral crisis about what a country is and who its citizens are. The First World War 'exploded' the community of European nations. The financial crash killed the prospects of millions. Civil and colonial wars, persecutions and pogroms followed. Then came the refugees; stateless, homeless, 'the scum of the earth' in Arthur Koestler's phrase, the 'rightless' in Arendt's. That refugee crisis revealed a horrible truth about human rights: they were only as good as the nation you happened to live in, that is, if you happened to live somewhere in the grip of nationalist racism, not very good at all. This is was particularly bad news when other nations were also scrambling to protect their own self-interest. 'The world', Arendt observed, 'found nothing sacred in the abstract nakedness of being human'. Refugees, then as now, were everybody's human rights crisis.

Second, if you want a politics committed to democracy and human rights, you must be historically and actively vigilant. Totalitarian regimes are easy to spot; they exist in history books and far away places. It's more difficult to recognise the totalitarian elements in one's own place and time. In the 1950s, amid the 'make America more American' campaign, the McCarran-Walters Act proposed a revised immigration model. This was a Cold War piece of legislation designed, from one perspective, to improve foreign policy by appearing to change the race bias of the quota system, whilst actually battening down the hatches in the name of national security and keeping America safe from communists and other undesirables. Truman thought it discriminatory and vetoed it. He was over-ruled by Congress. Arendt was appalled and frightened by this turn of events in the adopted country she admired, if not uncritically, for its democratic processes.

America would not be more American by keeping or throwing certain people out, based on their race or their beliefs, she pointed out, it would be committing a crime against humanity: 'As long as mankind is national and territorially organized in states, a stateless person is not simply expelled from one country, native or adopted, but from all countries … which means he is actually expelled from humanity.'

How you police your borders is not just about strangers, in fact, a lot of the time it is hardly about refugees or migrants at all. It's about citizenship. Start on that category, Arendt taught, and nobody is safe: 'It seems absurd, but the fact is that, under the political circumstances of the century, Constitutional Amendment may be needed to assure Americans that they cannot be deprived of their citizenship, no matter what they do.'

Third, beware of making hasty historical comparisons. One thing her own history had taught Arendt was that the impossible can become possible, with mind-defying brutality and alacrity. Trying to grasp the unprecedented through the precedented, she discovered, risked not understanding how a different number of elements have to be in place in order for atrocity to happen. The 'punishing' of refugees for things they haven't done doesn't happen just because of racism, uncontrolled global expansion, imperialism, financial crises, and nasty nationalisms, it arises out of a particular constellation of all these things. To ascribe 'obvious' causes, to say that this state of affairs is 'easily explained', is to is to normalise the politically and morally abhorrent.

Arendt's experience of history as a refugee in the last century was not 'just like' the experience of being a refugee today, nor is our contemporary fascism like the old fascism – if only because they are all part of the same history. The bitter events of recent years in Europe are the latest chapter of a refugee history that is in fact everybody's history, and its latest challenge to our historical, moral and political imagination.

Lyndsey Stonebridge is Professor of Humanities and Human Rights at the University of Birmingham. She is the author of *The Destructive Element* (1998), *Reading Melanie Klein* (1998), *The Writing of Anxiety* (2007), *The Judicial Imagination: Writing after Nuremberg* (2011) and most recently *Placeless People: Writing, Rights and Refugees* (2018).
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Jean McNeil holding the image of Water Benjamin, the summit of the Pyrenees, July 2017.
Image: Diego Ferrari

Exile from the Stage

Jean McNeil

1. The Coast

The train glides above deep sudden coves which fall away underneath us so quickly for a second it seems the train is suspended in the air. We curve around the stretch of coast in the crook of the Mediterranean where France becomes Spain. At dawn the sea is windless. Waves lick black basalt rock. The visible volcanism of the landscape and the silver light return the Med to its original cast: an old ocean, fiercer and more elemental than you might think.

I have travelled by overnight train from Paris, on a line soon to be discontinued now that a high-speed TGV hastens passengers to Barcelona in six and a half hours. The sleeper service is antiquated and uncomfortable – you can't even buy food or water during a ten hour journey – not to mention twice as expensive as Ryanair. I don't dislike flying but sometimes I want to feel the bulk of the land beneath me.

Approaching Port-Vendres in southern France the Pyrenees make

themselves felt in a series of tunnels. So begins a slideshow of dark, light, dark, light, as we slice in and out of the mountains. France becomes Spain mid-way through one of these tunnels. I take note of the formalities within a technically borderless Schengen zone: our train is stopped and shunted into sidings just south of Cerbère/Cervera, the last town on the French side. French police move through the suddenly silent carriages, checking passports, shaking passengers awake. At the train's terminus we tumble out onto the platform at Portbou's gargantuan and empty station, dishevelled from a bad night's sleep.

My destination is Port de la Selva, a seaside town 14km south of Portbou. The taxi from Llança to Port de la Selva leans into the 60 degree turns along roads lined with white glassy houses perched above the sea like albatrosses – apparently these are mostly owned by French engineers who have made their fortune working for Airbus in Toulouse.

As we switchback along the coast in and out of the reach of the rising sun I think of the tunnels we passed through on the train, emerging into light only to be swallowed into another lozenge of darkness. The effect was like having a blindfold removed at intervals: light, dark, light, dark, until the suture of one element to the other begins to stich a narrative that felt very much like memory, in that way that one's memories can be poorly apprehended glimpses, almost intuitions, of someone else's consciousness. Whose can they be?

On July 15th 1940 Walter Benjamin, the Jewish German writer and literary critic, turned 48. He had been on the run from Nazi Germany since 1932; in just over two months' time his pursuers would catch up with him, although not quite in the manner he feared.

By the time of Germany's declaration of war in 1939, Benjamin's reputation was grounded in his penetrating and meticulous, if eccentric, essays on literary figures such as Kafka and Proust, and a vast output of book reviews, fragments, memoir, stories and recollections. He had left Germany in 1932; even in the increasingly hostile atmosphere toward Jews, intellectuals, liberals, cosmopolitans and communists (Benjamin ticked all these boxes) he had to tear himself away from his homeland. Paris was the natural site for his exile. He spoke French and had described the city as his greatest inspiration.

When the Nazis turned their attention to the western front in May 1940,

they made supernaturally fast progress, gaining the surrender of Holland in just four days, striding through Belgium and routing the British, forcing the mass evacuation at Dunkirk. The sense of impending entrapment in Paris was acute, Benjamin later wrote. He fled the capital, travelling to Lourdes on June 13th, only a day before Panzer tank units arrived in Paris. Only a few hours after Benjamin had shut the door of his apartment for the last time, the French, acting on orders from the Gestapo, broke it down, leaving no doubt that his capture was a priority for the invaders.

As the Nazis fanned out across France and the Vichy collaborationist government consolidated its power, escape routes began to close. While holed up in Lourdes Benjamin learned that his friend and Frankfurt School colleague Max Horkheimer, now settled in America, had been successful in persuading the United States to issue him an entry visa. Benjamin needed to present himself at the US consulate in Marseille, then find a way out of Vichy France. In August 1940 he set off for the port city.

This year, 2017, happens to be my 48th year. It is an age at which the kind of life you have lived impresses itself on your body, your face: some people look implausibly young while others may look prematurely aged. At 48, Benjamin's face showed the stresses of life in exile: constant moving of house and uncertainty bolstered by chainsmoking and a heart condition. Forty-eight is long enough in the world to get used to being alive and perhaps to think that such a state is secure, even permanent. But at the same time you are becoming aware that time really will run out: not today, hopefully, but the black sunrise of your oblivion has begun to nudge the horizon.

It is also young enough to begin anew – just. At the end of the summer of 1940 another life was poised on the lip of Benjamin's horizon, within reach via neutral Portugal: the Americas. All he needed to do was cross the border into Spain, and his eight long fugitive years would be over.

2. Life in the Shadows

Port de la Selva's mussel-shell shaped bay faces north, a mouth held open to the intermittent and fierce Tramontana wind. It is the wind that shields

Port, as it is known among its inhabitants, from the fate of Cadaquès on the southern side of the peninsula of Cap de Creus, where BMWs queue for an hour to enter the narrow streets and oyster-and-champagne restaurants are booked up a month in advance.

For the last three years fine art photographer Diego Ferrari and I have been collaborating on a project about this dramatic, precipitous corner of northern Spain. In 2014 Ferrari began photographing a group of Senegalese migrants who have made their home in Port. The result is a visual narrative of their lives in the small resort town's off-season, its summer flats shuttered, the migrants left to find work tending vegetable patches or fishing, titled 'Life in the Shadows'.

Port de la Selva, Summer 2017. Image: Jean McNeil

On the terrace of Ferrari's rented flat in a residential area looking out over the sweep of the bay I interview Bouba Diedhiou, one of the subjects of this narrative. Bouba has been working as a fisherman since he was fifteen years old; he is now somewhere in his mid-Forties. Unlike many of his fellow migrants, Bouba has a passport, but this is currently in the hands of the Guardia Civíl, the Spanish police. It was taken from him, illegally, when he was apprehended recently walking from Port de la Selva to Llança. He takes out a sheaf of papers in legalese mottled with purple stamps. He has a lawyer who is trying to get his passport back while he awaits residency documents, which can take up to three years to receive, or longer.

'In town they know me,' he says, in his recently acquired Spanish. 'Here people are very friendly. They want us here. They say, "Bouba, he is a good person". But if I leave town…' he shakes his head at the memory of what happened to him on the path to Llança. Bouba prefers being in a small community. 'I've never been to Barcelona,' he admits, 'but I know it would be too big for me. I'm from a small village in Senegal, a fishing place like Port. That's why I feel at home here.'

I ask about his life before he made the journey to Spain. What unfolds is a story of arbitrary encounters, casual chicanery, dashed hopes and dramatic about-turns. There is the Belgian man who he fished for when he was fifteen years old and who did not pay him after three months' work, but who ultimately gave him the idea of trying to reach Europe. There is the story of another Belgian, or perhaps Frenchman – Bouba is unsure of his nationality – who promised to take him to Europe to find work but who disappeared.

More anecdotes follow about Europeans appearing in Bouba's life offering possibilities and opportunities only to renege or disappear or both. But his encounters with unreliable foreigners planted an idea. It was less a place than another realm entirely; 'another planet', as he says.

Four years ago Bouba set off for Planet Europe. His passport enabled him to skip the treacherous journey across the western Sahara, instead flying from Dakar to Morocco. There he remained for a few months, gathering intelligence on how to cross the Strait of Gibraltar. He made the journey in a small inflatable zodiac 'like a child's toy' he says, and shows me a picture hastily taken on his mobile phone of an alligator chevron pattern on one of the gunwales, his half-clad leg strewn across it. He estimates there were about twenty men crowded into a boat meant to carry four. He had to swim the last hundred meters, although he can't in fact swim – his fellow migrants pulled him through the surf.

In his new life in Spain Bouba has had to rely upon his charm and ingenuity, which is arguably all any of us would have were our identity

papers, contacts, family and legal status to be forfeited. He is older than his brethren and has assumed an avuncular role in his small community. I can see how his calm, measured disposition would put others at ease.

Bouba with Ferrari, Port de la Selva, March 2018. Image: Jean McNeil

We scroll through Ferrari's images of Bouba and his countrymen on the laptop. In Ferrari photographs, his subjects' faces are obscured for two reasons: this is a metaphorical study, rather than portraiture; the lack of identifiable faces mirrors the migrants' quandary. In their legal shadowland, to call attention to themselves or to be too easily identified could mean deportation. In the photographs we can't identify the boundaries of the bodies, the exact place where their lineaments dissolve into space; night sculpts both bodies and darkness from the same substance. The obvious reading of this elision is that the camera is a proxy for the scrutinising gaze of society, the machine that insists upon creating frontiers and edges by

which we orient ourselves in space, separating the visible from the invisible, which is to say the legitimate from the clandestine. In these images night is not only a temporal experience, a nocturnal interlude, but a dimension which provides refuge, cover, salve.

We watch the sun arc behind the Pyrenees. Shadows insert themselves in the clefts and coves of the coast. From Port de la Selva we can see the Col de Bellitres, the mountain on the border between Spain and France.

'I will go back home, definitely,' Bouba says, his gaze straying out to sea. 'I will stay here for ten years, maximum.'

The twilight Bouba and his friends live in is not the dimension of constant threat and danger that Walter Benjamin faced, but their decision to emigrate to a continent which does not want them has placed them in a perpetual departure lounge, a realm of waiting and entrapment. Their lives are not their own. In a way Bouba is back where he started as a fifteen year-old fisherman in Senegal, beholden to the whims of Europeans, whose temper changes faster than the weather.

3. A Puzzle

In Port de la Selva Ferrari and I walk along the seafront with two friends, Koke (Koke's nickname is now so entrenched that none of his friends, including me, know is real name) and his wife Sandra.

Koke is a manufacturer of furniture; Sandra is an heiress, recently charged with dispensing of her industrialist father's estate. This has created tensions she fears could blow her family apart.

'It's a puzzle,' Sandra says. I think she is speaking of the task of being executor. But it turns out she means the disappearance of her father. 'He was old, he'd been unwell.' She purses her lips. 'I was prepared for his death. Still. Where has he gone?'

The conundrum of our own extinction is one of the main engines of storytelling among humans. The modern European short story has its roots in 19th Century Germany, specifically in the work of the Brothers Grimm, ETA Hoffman and TW Schlegal, whose work explored the uncanny. One of the antecedents of the modern short story is 'Godfather Death'

by the Brothers Grimm. A sort of macabre 19th Century flash fiction, its protagonist is a doctor whose father asks Death to make the doctor his godson. In this way, the father reasons, his son will find protection, perhaps he will even gain immortality. But the doctor, seeing the advantages of being under Death's wing, becomes overconfident. He tries to cheat Death, with lethal results.

I assign this story for the short story seminar I teach on a Masters programme in creative writing. I ask students to read 35 diverse short stories I have chosen for a variety of reasons, some of them about form, structure and technique. At the end of the course I ask the students to do a tally of the stories we have studied which are about death or in which someone dies. The punchline is: all of them.

Walter Benjamin considered storytelling to be a form of analysis. Our eventual estrangement from ourselves provides a rich territory for such scrutiny. 'Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death,' Benjamin writes in *The Storyteller*, a miscellany of his short fiction. The writer might be death's advance sentry, scouting out the consequences of our mortality before it arrives.

Benjamin's own death (of which more later) was an unusual vanishing act, even in the arcade of disappearance that is death. Lisa Fittko, the woman who guided him over the Pyrenees on what would be his last journey, remembers him lugging a large briefcase which Benjamin said was 'more important than my life.' It likely contained a manuscript of his latest work. I recognise the writerly melodrama: what you are working on now is always your best work. What became of it? Some say it never existed, others say that he entrusted it to someone before his death, and that person lost it on a trail between Barcelona and Madrid.

Benjamin's death casts a shadow of speculation, even fabulism, over his life. As anthropologist Michael Taussig has written, there has been among intellectuals a certain fetishisation – Taussig likens it to a 'cult' – of his death, which has somehow become more important that his life, even if his demise was not exceptionally tragic for the time. Many émigrés, thwarted in their efforts to leave France after the Nazi occupation, ended their lives in a homemade gallows, or by poisoning or opiate overdose, as Benjamin did.

It has taken decades and several translations for Benjamin to take his place among the pantheon of Frankfurt School thinkers who were his friends and colleagues, among them Hannah Arendt, Arthur Koestler,

Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse, all of whom survived the war. Now, Benjamin is regarded as one of the most important literary and cultural critics of his era. Perhaps he needed to die, otherwise his work would not be so spectrally oracular. It was as if he could see the future. 'Sacrifice consecrates what it destroys,' writes Taussig, quoting Georges Bataille.

*

In the summer of 2016, just after the Brexit referendum, we return to the coast to start the second chapter of our project. We have acquired a photograph of Benjamin from the *laissez-passer* (a lesser form of passport) he was carrying when he died, which we have taped onto a bamboo beach mat of the kind used by backpackers.

The image was taken in 1928, when Benjamin was 36 years old. Benjamin's deep-set eyes are encased in round wire-rimmed spectacles. He has a healthy tuft of hair and a straight, authoritative nose. His small ears are set unusually low in his head. The photograph bears the stamp confirming the place of issue, Berlin.

Ferrari has enlarged the original image by several hundred per cent and in close-up the photograph is fractured by pixels. It is the perfect simulacrum for a writer who foresaw an era of infinite reproducibility of images enabled by technology. In this form Ferrari and I take Walter everywhere we go: to the streets of Portbou, to remote *calas* near Cap de Creus national park, up the winding highway leading to the San Pere de Rodes monastery perched high above the coast. His image is even propped up beside our table as we eat lunch on our terrace in Port, a silent guest. We roll Walter out and photograph him suspended in the middle of the road, or from 300 million year old rock formations, their igneous slouch toward the sea still visible, then we roll him back up again.

In the streets of Portbou Walter's apparition bears extra weight. Two women emerge onto the balcony of their dilapidated watermelon-coloured house and stare. Pedestrians stop in their tracks, white bags of shopping swaying in their arms like jellyfish. 'Who is that?' a man asks us. When we tell him, he looks confused. 'I think I heard something about him.' Ferrari and I point across the street. 'He died there,' we say. I feel as if we are mounting protest, but against what? Death is not given to compromise. With

the body dies the fount of its subjectivity, and so Benjamin is definitely dead, but in the narrow streets of Portbou, truncated by the looming Pyrenees or the sudden apparition of the Mediterranean, it seems especially true that his thought persists, that it pervades all matter, even time; that everything is in fact made of thought.

4. Some Reversals

On September 25th, 1940 a small group of refugees made their way along a trail a few kilometres south of Banyuls-sur-Mer in southeastern France. It was early morning. The group wore light jackets and espadrilles, the uniform of workers in the vinyards that coat the hills on the northern face of the eastern Pyrenees.

Lisa Fittko, centre, and her husband Hans, right, in 1941. Image: unknown source.

The trail began easily enough, winding along gravel paths, but when their guide Lisa Fittko signalled that they were to veer off to the left and join a stony trail Benjamin must have realised the easy stretch was over. The group took a short break to drink from a mountain spring used by goat herders. Two kilometres beyond the spring the trail became more rock than soil. Planar, thin, vertical, the rocks were a hazard. Each step had to be considered. To the right a sharp drop through scrub awaited anyone who put a foot wrong.

At one point Benjamin had to be pushed up a near-vertical section of the path. He announced that he could not go on. But the group pressed him, even saving him from a possible incipient heart attack when his face went deathly pale and he began to sweat. German photographer Henny Gurland, who, with her 15 year-old son José, was among the group, later described the journey as 'a horrible ordeal'.

They struggled into Portbou in the early afternoon, passing through a seemingly endless viaduct underneath the railway sidings. When they emerged from its darkness they saw a small avenue lined by pollarded plane trees and, in the distance, a flash of indigo sea.

It took all their remaining strength to ascend the steep staircase into the station. They were badly dehydrated but agreed that it was best to present themselves to the customs office to get their papers stamped for onward travel as soon as possible.

The border officers told the group that the Spanish government's position had changed. Spain would no longer recognise the papers of those who had crossed the border clandestinely. The officer told them they would be returned to France the following day, where the group would face immediate internment by the Vichy regime. The women cried and pleaded, Gurland recalled, but to no avail. The group was put under armed guard in the Hostal España that night.

Some time that night Benjamin took from his pocket the morphine he had been carrying with him since he left Marseille – he had 'enough to kill a horse', according to fellow émigré Arthur Koestler. At seven in the morning on September 26th Benjamin was still alive. He called to Gurland and gave her a letter for his friend Adorno. Very soon afterwards he lost consciousness.

A doctor was called. He recorded the cause of death as cerebral haemorrhage, identifying the deceased as 'Benjamin Walter', possibly to

throw the authorities off the trail of his Jewishness and suicide and to allow him to be buried in the town's Catholic cemetery.

A few hours later, while awaiting deportation, Henny Gurland and her son received the news that the Franco government's policy had changed. They would be allowed passage after all. Although, as Gurland recalled, 'a lot of money changed hands' before the necessary permits were issued to the refugees: freedom was not free.

*

I am an immigrant myself; I came to Britain when I was 21 years old and spent most of my twenties working my way up to Indefinite Leave to Remain and then, eventually, citizenship. I now have two passports. Both are issued by countries near the top of the list for those whose nationals require the fewest visas for travel, a reliable index of your country's economic stability and political clout.

Until Britain voted in 2016 to leave the European Union, my UK passport, with its gold embossed lion and unicorn coat of arms, was my most cherished possession, never mind the lynchpin to my entire existence. If it were to be taken away there would be another country I could legitimately live in, I would hardly be a refugee, but my life as I know it would be over.

The referendum vote to leave the European Union on 23 June 2016 and the Conservative government's determination to carry through its advisory result has stripped me of a citizenship, that of a European. Soon I may well be required to swap the gold and maroon for a blue-covered passport (I am old enough to remember when British passports were dark blue mini-valises). And in the future, who is to say that new laws and norms may be created for those like me who are naturalised citizens? I live in an increasingly punitive police state, where disabled deportees are dragged in chains to airports and overstaying grandmothers are summarily dispatched to the distant states of their birth.

I never thought I would ever have to draw a line between being British and European. I still struggle with my anger, to quantify what has been taken away from me. The truth is, although I have travelled widely in Europe and speak three European languages, I've only ever made my living in Britain all these years. It takes me awhile to calculate what I, along with

66 million other people, counting for the moment only the UK's population – have been divested of by what seems increasingly a random quirk of history: identity; possibility.

Where else can I live? Lately this thought has installed itself inside me, for the first time since I came to live in Britain 27 years ago. Recently a close friend has moved to Paris. Another has bought a house in rural Cataluñya. Another close friend, a fellow writer has moved, initially part-time, to Berlin, the city of Benjamin's childhood. My friend lives in Germany in part because she finds the political climate easier to stomach. Germany has re-written its 20th century narrative, establishing its credentials as a tolerant nation, admitting in 2016 the highest number of refugees (1.14 million) in its post-war history.

This friend has quickly installed herself in a community of genial neoliberalism refuseniks who live on twenty euros a day. I visited her recently in her flat near the old Tempelhof airport, a still down-at-heel neighbourhood. Berlin is becoming a polyglot city of mostly young foreigners avoiding learning German. I can see how the city – scruffy, still cheap, communitarian, feeds a nostalgia that certain people of my generation have for London of the late 1980s and early 1990s, before the bankers and the café lattes took over. In Berlin, friends still assemble without the obligatory three-week notice period we issue each other in London, separated as we are by the pressures of careerism to the point where we have largely expedient relationships.

It has been said that the defining question of our era is, which bodies can move where? Since coming to the UK I have lived more than half my life in a regime of free movement, if that's not too much of a mixed metaphor. To quote Theresa May's famous 'citizens of nowhere' statement, perhaps it is time that relatively well-resourced people like me understand that only the very wealthy can live wherever they want. Most of us mortals are ordinary prisoners – of the circumstances of our birth, of economic inequality, of the nation state, of an intensifying neurosis about borders and controlling who crosses them.

In Ferrari's work I see an abstract rumination on borders – physical and metaphysical – and their capacity to restrict and rewrite our existences. His photographs are not documentary depictions of bodies crowded onto tugboat freighters, of women and children being plucked from the shallows of Greek islands or internees in trafficker warrens in Tripoli. Rather they

refer to the metaphorical dimensions of the upheaval we are now living through now and which is bearing all of us in different ways toward an unfolding, possibly permanent, exile.

5. Portbou

Chemin Walter Benjamin. The lemon-hued sign is half-hidden under tree branches. The path is innocuous, leading alongside a house in the hamlet of Puig del Mas, two kilometres southwest of Banyuls-sur-Mer. The early July morning is already hot. Ahead, in the foothills of the Pyrenees, we see the steep vinyards of the Côte-Vermeille, a wine-growing area which produces the heady dense Côtes du Roussillon variety.

We start at 8am – late, considering the heat, as we have had to prepare equipment and props for the film we will make about the crossing. Ferrari will also produce a series of photographs of Benjamin's work in the form of fragments taken from his essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', which we will scatter through the landscape.

At first the path is a gentle ascent, winding through vinyards of a plastic, almost fluorescent, green. Once above these the path rises steeply, zig-zagging up the mountain. We ascend five hundred metres in two hours. Parts of the trail are near vertical and we have to scramble on hands and knees.

We have brought Walter with us, in the form of our poster-placard. I hold this aloft as Bernard Arce, our director, videos me walking, hiding myself behind Benjamin's face. The idea is not to stage a solemn procession of his effigy (it's all too obvious from my North Face walking shoes that a more contemporary creature is propelling him forward). Rather the poster is an avatar for the many refugees who have walked this path before us.

We film Walter emerging from hollows, from the other side of tree trunks and around corners, to advance and walk the route once more. Various things go wrong – Walter becomes entangled in tree branches, or I trip over a stone I can't see coming, or the light is too bright and I must re-angle the image, so I do many takes at Bernard's behest. While we do the takes Ferrari documents us – a very Benjaminian exercise, one image-making apparatus recording another: photographs of the filming of a photograph.

Ferrari's signature as a photographer is his frequent use of tungsten light. In the analogue age tungsten film was manufactured in order to produce accurate colours and tones for filming under tungsten – filament bulbs, rather than halogen, fluorescent or LED – and daylight. To an eye accustomed to the floodlit clarity of the digital age Ferrari's images often appear underexposed, giving them the effect known in filmmaking as *la nuit américaine*, 'American night' – a term which still retains its jolt of glamour from the height of the analogue era in which it was coined, the 1960s and 1970s. Surely an American night must be a liberation, an episode of squalor, a righteous, solitary dimension.

In English the term is characteristically cooler in tone, and more literal: Day for Night. It refers to the practice of filming in daylight using film stock appropriate for indoor light and underexposing it and adding a blue tint, or adjusting the film in post-production to look as if it were shot at night. The images have a marine density, a solidity and graininess difficult to capture in digital imagery and its brusque precision.

We reach the summit. The wind is thin and cool and cuts through the 30 degree heat. Succulents and cactus line the lip of the mountain. The only sound apart from the wind is the drone of bees as they perambulate from cactus to cork-oak to flower. In the sky two jets race each other, flying parallel, to Madrid or Barcelona, perhaps.

In the distance the peninsula of Cap de Creus fingers out into the Mediterranean. Portbou is only visible as a long cylindrical tube glinting in the sun – these are the station's vast railway sidings, built to accommodate thirty freight trains at once. The town seems to be almost vertically below us. I wonder how will we get down this ski-slope descent.

In her memoir, Lisa Fittko recorded the moment she, the Gurlands and Benjamin reached the spot where we stand: *'Finally we reached the summit. I had gone on ahead and I stopped to look around. The spectacular scene appeared so unexpectedly that for a moment I thought I was seeing a mirage … the deep-blue Mediterranean … "There below us is Portbou!"'*

*

The summer before we make the film, in 2016, Ferrari and I went to see the monument to Benjamin in Portbou for the first time.

In a curve in the road that leads to Portbou's cemetery we come across

a rusting metal panel. The iron panel turns out to be an entrance. We stare down what looks like a steep staircase in the same russet hue as the entrance. At the bottom of the staircase is a small square of blaring light. The sculpture, by Dani Karavan, is called 'Passages', after Benjamin's unfinished work *Passagenwerk* (eventually published as *The Arcades Project*), which he had had to abandon when he fled Paris in June 1940.

The structure is a camera obscura; all light is concentrated at the end of the staircase, which seems to dissolve into a white rectangle. The stairwell is claustrophobic, yet we are beckoned toward the light. As we descend the sea coheres. Etched in German on a plexiglass panel (the only thing stopping the visitor from pitching into the shoreline of the Mediterranean some ten metres below) is an inscription taken from 'On the Concept of History', Benjamin's last essay, which he was still revising at the time of his death: *"It is more arduous to honor the memory of anonymous beings than that of the renowned. The construction of history is consecrated to the memory of the nameless."*

Passagenwerk, Dani Karavan Image: Diego Ferrari

Benjamin's preoccupation with memory, a theme he returned to over and over in his varied sketches, essays, memoirs and aphorisms, is not so much centred on personal memory as how individual lives and historical memory intersect. As Benjamin saw it history was itself a vortex, the annihilator of subjective individual experience. Eventually, it might remember you, but to do so it must first forget. 'Even the dead will not be safe if the enemy wins,' he wrote. His fascination with memory, light, performance and history can be encapsulated in one of the text fragments from 'Art in the Age' Ferrari and I have made use of in our work: *exile from the stage*. In the section on the difference in performing for theatre and film, Benjamin quotes the Italian playwright Pirandello: "The film actor," Pirandello writes, "feels as if exiled. Exiled not only from the stage but from his own person.' If we pan out and observe this statement's metaphorical dimension, the exile is death and the stage is history. We are all pre-exiles, waiting for our curtain call.

We ascend the metal stairs and emerge into the light. In the graveyard is a monument to Benjamin, although his body now lies in the *fosa común*, the communal graveyard, where he was taken after the lease on his niche in the cemetery – paid for by Henny Gurland before she departed Portbou – expired, and another corpse was given his slot. There he lies, in what Michael Taussig has called the 'melée of the dead.'

I think again of the bizarre reversals of Benjamin's death: Franco's supposed edict on returning refugees that killed him; how Walter Benjamin became Benjamin Walter by a stroke of the doctor's pen, the Jew turned Catholic, a conversion of kindness in order to facilitate his burial; suicide became a haemorrhage on his death warrant – another face-saver – and finally how the unwanted clandestine émigré was converted, over time, into a symbol of the caprice of war, where luck was a real, solidified force in peoples' lives and not something we wish for idly, herding the living and the dead into their separate quarantines with a toss of its golden head. Hannah Arendt later wrote: *"One day earlier Benjamin would have got through without any trouble; one day later the people in Marseille would have known that for the time being it was impossible to pass through Spain. Only on that particular day was the catastrophe possible."*

You can start again, at 48. See Benjamin in Lisbon; it is October and he marvels at the slant of early autumn Atlantic light in the narrow streets that nurtured the poetry of Fernando Pessoa. He spends a week awaiting passage on a ship, holed up in a hotel. The streets are lined with *azulejos* which make

the city a giant echo chamber, voices ricocheting off porcelain. He takes a streetcar to the port and boards a freighter that has seen better days. He tips into wretched seasickness, which makes him forget his fear of the torpedo. See Benjamin with a life preserver slung ridiculously around his neck as he and the other passengers are mustered into safety drills.

Then Benjamin on the Upper West Side, welcomed by his friend Horkheimer who has been newly granted US citizenship. Benjamin is dazzled by the thrumming verticality of the new world city. He follows Horkheimer to California, he delivers a lecture on Baudelaire at Stanford, his startled expression mistaken by the students for the shock of the new, but which is a kind of appalled rapture that the faces he addresses in his audience should be so unencumbered, expectant, like an alternate race of men.

We arrive in Portbou in the afternoon, exhausted and dehydrated from our eight hours in the mountains. On the outskirts of town we begin to see signs: 'Private Property, Keep Out'. A particularly bad-tempered sign reads: 'Private property; this has nothing to do with the Walter Benjamin Path. You've gone wrong. Turn around.'

We pass semi-abandoned houses and small allotments and emerge at the mouth of the viaduct which passes under the railway station and sidings. In the winter and spring it is used to channel meltwater but in the summers the tunnel doubles as a parking lot. Renaults and Citroens with French licence plates crouch inside its darkened hulk.

The building where Benjamin died and which once housed the Hostal España is still there. Now it is a café and a shop selling cheap beach towels and bikinis to Portbou's largely working-class holidaymakers. Only two stories high, it was a tiny hotel. In fact everything in Portbou has a miniature quality, as if it is an architect's scale-model for a much larger city: the cursive beach, the mini-Ramblas at the end of the giant tunnel, the streets strangled by mountains on either side; everything that is except the train station and its 'Nietzschean' (Taussig's word) dimension, how it perches over the town like an outsize vulture.

We drag ourselves up the steep staircase to the train station. The ticket office is permanently closed and the ticket machine is out of order. Nor is there a vending machine where we can buy water and snacks. On the platform a group of tanned backpackers sit lounging on their bedrolls.

Across the tracks freight wagons oxidise in the sun. I remember our friend Koke's estimation of the town: *'es un pueblo muerto, muerto, muerto'*: 'It's a dead, dead, dead town.'

We return to the platform to find our train waiting. Inside are several men slumped in their seats, asleep, smelling of sweat and alcohol, and a family with small children and a couple who have gone to Banyuls-sur-Mer to do their shopping – prices in Spain are lower but the quality and choice produce in France is better. The train's screens blink to life with a recitation of the stops on the way to Barcelona and its ultimate destination, Passeig de Gracia. We lurch forward and are swallowed into the tunnel.

*

There is a density to the atmosphere in border zones. The air itself seems to close around you. I feel it coming through the automatic passport gates in British airports, which I have learned to take in order to avoid half an hour's queueing. Although I prefer to be scrutinised by a human being, maybe due to nostalgia for the days – how long ago now and when did they end? – when people with EU passports would march single file past a desk while flashing their passport covers to a single immigration officer.

I feel anxious now coming into the UK, even though I am a citizen, or technically a subject. I have not been able to accommodate Britain's vote to leave the European Union over time. I may not feel the nausea and dread I felt on June 24th 2016, but still I feel we have swapped day for night. On I go, into a nocturnal future with my minimal dilemma evidenced by my two passports, driver's licence, birth certificates, certificate of naturalisation, my National Insurance Card. I could, if divested of my right to be a subject of a monarch, return to a version of the American night Benjamin never knew: the ragged sundown caw of the Blue Jay, a snarl of freeways, the continental density of summer heat, ruthless, itinerant cities.

Entering the UK Border with its signs that flense UK/EU Passport holders from All Other Passport Holders, my heart is in my throat not because I fear being apprehended, but because my body knows it is entering a liminal zone, a threshold where future and past, death and life, are wagered away and bets are called in. The fact that this happens in airport arrivals halls is now only symbolic. Borders are no longer merely physical zones of contact and transit, of expulsion and admission. Technology

has dispersed borders across space and time, via drone surveillance, GPS tracking, thermal imagining cameras and integrated databases.

The African continent's population is projected to rise 40 per cent by 2100. What will Europe do to keep all those people like Bouba and his fellow migrants out? Will there be an electronic border installed across the Mediterranean, programmed to read in-body biometric chips and to alert a SWAT team, will there be a walled border across the Pyrenees, manned checkpoints at Europe's every partition? How to cross borders clandestinely when they are everywhere? Not only that, they will be sentient. The border will recognise you. The border will see you coming.

In the airport at Girona little girls ride on top of wheeled pink miniature valises, their fathers wear checked shirts, their mothers flat sandals whose straps are studded with small flowers.

The referendum in Cataluñya and the Catalan Parliament's daring break for independence is months in the future. All summer no-one we know has spoken about it in serious terms, it is just one of those tests of civic duty on the horizon. No-one anticipates the tumult that will erupt on the streets of Barcelona and throughout the region in the final days of September and early October.

On the Ryanair flight I dodge the offers of overpriced coffee and scratchcards, steeling myself for arrival. I have to reconcile my anticipation of being home with the feeling that it is a country under foreign occupation – in this case by the Conservative party and its agenda of prising Britain away from its neighbours. I tell myself a story, these days, of how I am only an insignificant individual, living at an awkward juncture of my own narrative in one of history's crepuscular zones.

'People with small children or travelling with assistance, this lane.' A man in a pale blue vest shouts above the din in the abattoir-cum-cathedral *mien* of the Stansted arrivals hall, herding able-bodied passengers like me toward the electronic passport gates while families and people in wheelchairs are funnelled toward human beings in black and silver stormtrooper mufti.

Travellers trudge up to the electronic gates and present their documents. From time to time the machine refuses to transmute the red cross on the barrier to a green tick mark. The rejected traveller retreats and is shunted sideways to confront the humanoids.

I approach the machine. The green arrow invites me in. A few seconds, or perhaps it is a minute – it feels longer – passes while the machine decides. Then gates slide open with a whoosh and I am admitted, this time.

Image: Diego Ferrari and Bas Losekoot

Jean McNeil is an award-winning author of 13 books of fiction, non-fiction, poetry, essays and travel. Her most recent book is *Fire on the Mountain* (Legend Press, 2018), a novel. She has been writer-in-residence in Antarctica, the Falkland Islands, aboard ship-based expeditions to Greenland, Norway and Iceland and across the Atlantic ocean. She teaches at the University of East Anglia where she is director of the creative-critical PhD programme.

Neither/Nor

Jonathan Kemp

The morning of September 1st 1939, I remember, was beautiful. Awakened by the sound of successive explosions, I ran to the balcony at the rear of the house, from where I could see over the gardens, lush with late summer flowers, the trees bursting with ripening fruit, the entire scene so peaceful but for the unfamiliar aircraft strafing the area around the railway station.

Soon the entire family had gathered in the drawing room. Father switched on the radio and within minutes we learnt that in the early hours of the morning German troops had crossed the Polish frontier in several places. The President of the Republic - who for so long had served the clique of the 'Colonels' - testified 'before God and History' that Poland was the innocent victim of a brutal invasion. The nation, which had been ruled without any democratic consultation for decades, was now called upon to defend its freedom. Over the next few days the mechanised columns of the *Wehrmacht*, riding their armour against the heroic but hopelessly inadequate Polish Cavalry, made swift progress and in the conquered localities the

ruthless invader seized leading citizens as hostages.

Just as you would judge a friend's sanity by the letters they wrote, or the statements they made, so too can we judge a society's by the culture and values it expresses. Nietzsche was right: for too long the world has been a lunatic asylum.

We have learnt nothing from history, cursed as we seemingly are with a psychology intent on piling horror upon horror as time moves inexorably on. All of our culture and knowledge, our sciences, and our arts, our centuries of discovery and exploration into the world, all of our so-called intelligence, count for nothing. Our sacred Reason had brought us to this.

This impasse.

This denial.

This barbarism.

History and consciousness stand with antlers locked. And we mock our own intellect, crushing rationality beneath impervious tanks.

Another war. Already?

Yes, already. Nothing learned but how to kill better, faster. How to administrate death and eradicate human life more efficiently. Conflicting ideologies are burning up the world. Blood runs because we cannot agree on anything. Least of all when it comes to answering that ancient question: How shall I live?

How shall I live?

I shall live according to that which is true. For me.

I shall live according to that which is true for me.

The first of September was a Friday. By Sunday the fall of Krakow was imminent. If it was true, as rumour claimed, that male citizens were liable to instant detention once the soldiers arrived, then something had to be done to remove those in jeopardy. It seemed certain that father would be one of the very first to suffer internment. Up until 1933 he had traded vigorously with Germany, but with the advent of Hitler he cut all business contacts with German manufacturers. We had to reckon with the possibility that the change in his attitude had not gone unnoted. We could not take a chance.

He wasn't the only male whose life was at stake and by the afternoon a fair crowd of relatives, near and distant, had gathered at our home. Grave decisions had to be taken at once. There was no time to lose. Hopeful speculation was countered by horrifying reports arriving with each new

caller at the house.

Uncle Youzek and Auntie Mala came over from across the road. He, as an Officer, felt it was right that he should move away from the advancing hordes in the hope of being useful should the Polish troops form a defense line further east. With him would go his family. His brother-in-law, the wealthy jeweler Mr. Vogler was willing to leave his family behind and seek safety away from the frontline. None of the poorer Uncles saw any point in leaving (all of them are dead now, undoubtedly). We were in no doubt about the need to see my father dispatched away as soon as possible. But was he to go alone, or was the entire family to go with him?

Mother decided against the latter feeling that the estate left unguarded would soon disappear. She said she hoped things would not be quite so bad after all; that perhaps it would all settle down and return to normal. Nat was to stay with mother as he was the eldest son. So it fell to me to escort father to safety.

I had, after all, my own reasons for fleeing the Teutonic invaders.

Only one suitcase was to be taken: the soft, medium-sized one mother had bought not quite two years earlier to take to Paris.

'Put into it the best clothing we have and wear the best you can put on', Mother said, 'You never know when you will have a chance to buy any again. A fairly presentable appearance might be an advantage. And then again, should you need to sell a piece of clothing you will get more for something relatively new.'

Good practical sense, as always.

We were packed in minutes. Dropping warm tears, father kissed his beloved wife and his eldest son goodbye. Whether he saw them again I have no idea; no idea who has survived, if anyone.

Then came my turn to kiss and be kissed and exchange tears. Sobbing, mother pleaded, '*Help your Father.*'

I gave Nat an envelope addressed to Edel containing all I had written so far of *Neither/Nor*. I gave him money for postage and made him promise to dispatch it as soon as possible, that very morning; and then father, Mr. Vogler and I were on the road, ready to walk, run or ride as fast as we could from the advancing plague.

My motherland, which had at any rate only ever been a cruel stepmother, was ablaze from one end to the other.

'Oh, let the house burn with the bedbugs,' said Mr Vogler bitterly.

We proceeded directly to the railway station, which by now was beleaguered by thousands upon thousands, all hoping to get onto a goods train, all of which were now of course filled to capacity with human cargo. We managed to shove our way onto one but it took some time before the train moved, only to travel a little way before coming to a halt at an intersection in order to give way to a Red Cross train overloaded with wounded soldiers. The impression of this train was one of miles of bandages through which blood was visibly oozing. So, this was war. My first contact with it was as shattering as it was unforgettable, but much worse was yet to come.

To watch a defeated army in retreat, preceded as it invariably is by an interminable procession of disorientated, disorganised, demoralised and fear-broken civilians, has to be one of the saddest spectacles on earth. How infinitely sadder it is, however, to be one of the refugees, a bewildered and innocent victim of man's continued inability to direct his destiny rationally. Those pathetic shadows of what only a day earlier were self-assured, proud citizens, full of purpose, rights and privileges; people who in a single hour lost the very meaning of life. Fathers without children, wives without husbands, children without parents, all with a past and none with a future. Plenty of questions and no answers. Plenty of yesterdays and no certain tomorrows.

What thoughts crossed their minds as each night they put their heads down by the roadside on their little bundles, souvenirs of past joys? What gave them the will to wake up at sunrise to start their aimless trek over again? They only knew the horror they were running away from, but not the nightmare they were moving towards. Some were resigned and pushed their tired legs mechanically, not thinking; others schemed and hoped. One or two would have some relations in a distant place in front of them where the enemy would not penetrate. Some had generous friends who would tide them over until the cataclysm blew itself out.

The heavy strafing of the railroads had brought the rail transport to a virtual standstill. Whatever there was in the way of alternative means of travel was requisitioned by the fleeing army personnel. Civilians were left to fend for ourselves.

The outstandingly good weather, which lasted without interruption throughout the ordeal, helped the invaders much more than it did the brave defenders. As for the refugees, no kinder weather was possible. But it did

not help. Ours was not a pleasure trip. Slogging away, mile after mile, in the scorching heat of the day, snatching a few hours' rest in the barns or with a bit of luck, a friendly house, moving on and on and on, hoping to catch yet another, possibly last train east.

We parted ways with Mr. Vogler at some point, and by the ninth day of our exodus father and I were at Sambor, an important junction station. We had been stranded for some hours, lying on the bales of hay inside the cattle trucks, unable to proceed any further, but still hoping beyond hope that the train might move. The morning was splendid with bright sunshine and warm air but around noon a squadron of Stukas appeared on the horizon like storm clouds and within moments the planes began to dive bomb the station, and the earlier peace was replaced with a blazing inferno. We lay flat, burying our heads in an intuitive gesture of protection in the hay.

I don't know how long the attack lasted. It could have been three minutes; it could have been half an hour. Time stood still.

Then it was over. The buzz-whine of the engines, the planes so like angry bees, eventually subsided. We raised our heads to see that bombs exploded to the left and right of the train, several hitting the station building, but we, onboard, in our straw beds, were miraculously untouched. Acrid smoke filled with the screams of the wounded, a bloodied corpse here and there as the smoke cleared. It was quite clear that our train would not be moving for some time, so we walked into the town and breakfasted in a small cafe, where I made enquiries regarding possible lodgings. Presently, we were accommodated in a pleasant villa, which the owner had just vacated.

Our journey for the time being had come to an end.

We sat there in comfortable armchairs listening to broadcasts from Warsaw on the wireless the previous occupants had thoughtfully left behind. The news was not good, but did not seem utterly hopeless, my father said, though I had an uneasy night's rest.

The next morning, in the light blue quiet, we looked out of the windows. The streets of the town were deserted. The Poles were gone, but the Germans had so far not showed up.

In our flight from Krakow to the east we had crossed the frontier which, ever since the Spa Conference of 1920, had been known as the 'Curzon Line' and, according to the Conference, was the limit of ethnic Poland. East of this line, the Poles formed majorities only in one or two large towns. Outside the cities, in the countryside, the Poles were outnumbered by as

much as eight to one by other nationalities. In the case of Sambor, it was the Ukrainians who held sway.

What do you do when one enemy kicks you up the arse and then another stands in front of you to hit you in the face? What do you do when you run out of places to run to? It then dawns on you that you are caught, and you stay put. You calm down and you wait for them to come for you.

They nearly always do.

The next day passed without incident, but the blind silence of the following night was shattered by the noise of advancing mechanized columns moving in front of the German infantry. When the machines came to a halt, the sound of commands could be heard above the barking of dogs. Next morning, sneaking a look through the curtained windows, we spied a group of helmeted Huns, busy at their morning toilet. Soon, three German soldiers presented themselves at the villa.

My father spoke, or speaks German fluently (I find myself incapable of using the past tense; even if he is dead, he is still alive to me). The soldiers demanded to be let in. Once inside they wasted no time searching the place for things to steal. In the end they settled for the wireless. Father explained that the set was not his, and two of the soldiers were almost persuaded to leave it alone, but the third one, with an angry gesture, ripped the wires out and, cursing, carried away his spoils. We spent the rest of the day inside the house, not keen for further encounters.

A couple more days went by with no particular developments. I made what I could of the food that remained in the pantry. I soaked stale bread in water and added herbs and pepper to make it more edible.

Then one night, with all the noise that had accompanied their arrival, the Germans moved out. Once again, we were puzzled. Once again filled with fear. The mystery however was resolved the following day when we spotted the tanks of the Red Army.

Yet another act in the everlasting rivalry between the Poles and the Russians.

With the appearance of the Red Army any feeling of fear dissipated. The streets were soon lined with crowds of curious onlookers. The Soviet Army had none of the hateful aggressiveness of the Nazis. If the Russian soldiers meant harm it was certainly not evident in their behaviour. They were positively friendly, briefed to think of themselves as Liberators.

Whatever the Poles may have felt on seeing the Red Army on the ex-Polish soil, a great many Ukrainians and Jews were quite warm in their welcome of the new regime.

The Soviet occupation took place with virtually no resistance from the dumbfounded Poles. In consequence, no large-scale damage to either lives or property was suffered, so that everyday life returned to normality, more or less, in next to no time.

Now we were free to plan our next step.

Less than fifty miles North East of Sambor lies Lvov, which is claimed by the Ukrainians to be the capital of the abortive Western Ukrainian Republic, and is dear to every Polish heart. It's the largest city in the entire southeast of Poland. It also harbours a large, thriving Jewish community. Lvov seemed to my father and I the most ideal place to pull up and acquire a measure of safety. Father had an old friend there, Mr. Berman, who for many years had also proved to be a trustworthy client. He told me that they both came from the same small town.

On our arrival in Lvov, we proceeded straight to Berman's shop, which was situated in the centre of the town, inside an attractive arcade. Although not very large, it was certainly one of the more prosperous shops, selling general goods, food and household appliances. When we walked into it in the late afternoon it was full of customers. The influx of the refugees had created new needs everywhere. For the moment, it was easy to buy goods, any goods, though later on all the shops became empty as supplies dried up.

Sam Berman was a couple of inches shorter than my father, though much slimmer. His tanned complexion matched his lively brown eyes and he had a happy disposition and a ready smile, and he welcomed us warmly and seemed genuinely pleased to see us.

To Berman, my father was a big fish. But he must have also been well aware that his old friend was now in a tough spot and needed help. Along with many thousands of refugees, we were trapped. The competition for accommodation was very keen indeed and we considered ourselves fortunate to have been received with such generosity.

At the stroke of seven, he shut the shop, loaded us into a taxi and took us to his home in a block of flats on the outskirts of this small town. Normally, I was to discover, he travelled to and from work on a tramcar.

The flat consisted of three bedrooms, with a smallish dining room abutting the kitchen. All the rooms were modestly but adequately furnished.

Mrs. Berman, somewhat taller than her husband, was no less cheerful and obliging, indefatigable in her solicitations on our behalf: she gave up her dining room to accommodate us on two fold-up beds; she cooked for us, cleaned the place, did our laundry and still found time to cheer us up when we were depressed. A cook, a maid, a companion and a ministering angel all rolled into one, the like of which it is not easy to find.

The Bermans had two teenage children: a daughter, Helzia, eighteen, and a son David, seventeen. Helzia was not only the spitting image of her mother, but also quite as lovely and as happy. David was perhaps a quieter, somewhat diffident version of his father. Neither seemed to know what to make of me, the saturnine philosopher and for my part I kept to myself.

At the Bermans we settled into what we hoped would be a short period of time, but in the event was to resolve itself into a prolonged tragedy. Some lucky souls, like myself, merely lost their liberty for the duration of hostilities; most lost their lives. Once again, the incomprehensible irony of life intervened. It was for me an exciting and poignant time. It is necessary to consider with the utmost seriousness how, in a hopeless situation, an individual can be so overwhelmed by the larger issues that they create around themselves an acceptable, even a pleasant world within which they can ignore the immense and insoluble dilemmas of mankind. For if you can't do that, you perish.

The heavy hand of Soviet authority did not manifest itself in the initial period of the occupation. I found this temporary anarchy very stimulating. Emotionally, I am anti-authoritarian, therefore anti-conservative. I may not have known much about politics and understood even less, but I hated the past and welcomed the change. Above all, I felt happy to be liberated from the claustrophobic narrowness of the exclusive Jewish middle-class set up, where the vast numbers of 'the others' were represented only by menials. After my time in Berlin, to be back home had felt like an aggressive regression. I was stifled, almost infantilised by my return to the nest, and was constantly pecked at by both parents to get a job, earn a living. Writing became my only outlet.

So now, in Lvov, in some peculiar way I felt glad of the change of circumstances and, at that point at least, energised and elated. Even though life had recently been too disruptive even to think about writing, I had taken with me a blank notebook and several pencils. Now that I was settled – however temporarily - I spent my days in the university library whilst my

father traipsed the streets looking for work.

It never occurred to me to get a job. My work was here, in my head, on my page. Yet I wasn't able to produce a single word. I would sit in the library, in the hope that there, in those books, lay the inspiration to generate words and thoughts of my own. But the life of the mind requires more than books; it requires life. And I was about to receive a large amount of that.

Jewish students were increasingly maltreated, attacked and scores seriously injured. At Lvov University I heard about two courageous Jewish girls who refused to be chased out of the classroom, whereupon their gallant opponents proceeded to drop their trousers, exposing their genitals in an attempt to scare the girls off. The girls refused to budge, knowing that whatever the louts had to show down below, they had even less in their heads. Professor Bartel, the ex-Prime Minister, protested strongly and was pelted with eggs and tomatoes for his trouble.

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule. For us, the Chosen, all roads were closed. Centuries of bitter experience have armed the Jews with a prophetic vision of the approaching doom. But it was hell waiting for it. The walls of human bigotry, stupidity and malice cannot be scaled. The best we could for was what Samson prayed for, when blinded and deprived of his strength, he was forced to perform in front of the Philistines: the deadly foe destroyed together with oneself.

The purpose of knowledge is to inform. If knowledge conflicts with ideology then it is ideology which is wrong and must change.

I can only hope. I cannot hope. There is no hope. And yet there must be hope.

I have to believe that I am better than the gods who have placed me in chains.

Jonathan Kemp is a writer and teacher who lives and works in London. This is an extract from his forthcoming novel, *Neither/Nor*.

Image: Jean McNeil

Image: Jean McNeil

Night by Day

Sogol Sur

Borders are hoarders, collecting
corpses, parents and children.
Borders are brown
like our skin is called brown –
but what is the real colour of our skin?

The skin of people who are interrogated,
rejected, and rummaged.
Borders in the east and the west,
above, centre, underneath.
Reminding us that we are not worthy of space.

What is our impossible colour?
They say we are brown but I think we are blue,
blue in the face.
Battered, stripped, shivering
blue skin and scarlet eyes.

We, the blue people, are sometimes purple,
the colour of an army of bruises
being separated from love,
we shed tears until we're blue in the face.
When being told our right to remain

has been rejected, we hold our tears
until we're red. When being asked where
we are 'originally' from,
we radiate black smiles and
murmur the name of an evil and illegal place.

Our latent pride is emerald,
the colour of a storm in spring –
our skin is yellow with fear and loss,
departure, return, disappearance.
We are the coloured people.

Sogol Sur is the author of the poetry collection *Sorrows of the Sun* (Skyscraper, 2017). She is currently undertaking her doctorate at Birkbeck, and working on her short story collection titled *The Ministry of Guidance*.

Diego Ferrari with Bouba Diedhou in Port de la Selva, 2017. Image: Bas Losekoot

Interview with Diego Ferrari

Conducted on August 4th, 2018 at the artist's studio, 40 Landmann House, London.

Diego Ferrari and Jean McNeil have worked closely together on several projects over the last twenty years. Here they discuss the inspiration and concepts behind the work exhibited in Day for Night.

Jean McNeil: How did this body of work evolve?

Diego Ferrari: Around 2014, I began to be aware I was hearing more and more in the news about the arrival of migrants on the southern coast of Spain, and in the Spanish territories in North Africa. At the time the migration was exclusively from Africa, and those who were coming were economic migrants rather than refugees. I was struck by their plight once they reached Spain. They seemed to face a scenario of almost complete disarray and lack of coordination. I began to have a personal relationship with the issue soon after. For a few years now I have been going to a small seaside town in northern Cataluñya, Port de la Selva. It is very much a resort town; its population in the off-season is only around 900 people; in the summer it triples. I noticed that there were several new arrivals in the town, all men from Senegal. I made contact with them and asked if I could do some portraits of them and of the conditions they were living in.

At the time they were four men living in a two-bedroom apartment. They invited me for a dinner. Our communal meals were fascinating – they would cook a large amount of food in a single pot, and we would eat this together, ranged around the food, eating with our right hands instead

of cutlery. They were open and receptive to being photographed. They willingly talked about their experiences in leaving their country and making the arduous journey to Europe.

I proposed to photograph them in the empty streets of wintertime Port de la Selva. At the time, their legal status was uncertain, so I photographed them in a way they could not be identified. I also asked them to all bring an object that was important to them, which they had perhaps brought with them on their journeys to Europe. My interest was not to depict the migrants in a documentary manner, but to work from a concept of performance – photography as performance, and as a way to transcend the moment. I wanted to let them enact an experience which for them had been very difficult; leaving their country and making the journey across the Mediterranean. I titled the resulting series 'Port: Streets of the World' as it was to be included in an international exhibition, 'Streetopolis', in 2015.

JM: How did Walter Benjamin become a subject?

DF: I have always been fascinated by the story of Benjamin's lost suitcase. Apparently, he was carrying a suitcase which contained what would be his final work of literature when he died. He managed to drag it over the Pyrenees. I also knew he had taken his life in Portbou, a town which is only 14km from Port de la Selva. You and I had been there a couple of times, passing through, and we both found it a sinister, troubling place. We discussed how incredibly tragic Benjamin's death was. The lost manuscript seemed to symbolise the losses of the Second World War, particularly those of Jewish people like Benjamin: lost lives, works of art, lost futures. With this dual loss of his life and work it seemed Benjamin had fallen into a void. In that empty space we can find any immigrant's experience, certainly those who make the dangerous journey to Europe as 'illegal' immigrants.

JM: I remember the first time we went to Portbou expressly to do a project on Benjamin, in 2016. We had always been astonished by the oddity of this tiny seaside town presided over by a Gare du Nord-sized train station. That summer we wanted to experience the place, photograph the streets where Benjamin had walked his last steps.

We were also reeling from the result of the Brexit referendum. It was that summer we first had the concept of Day for Night – deliberately

underlighting the images. Because it felt as if Britain, in voting to leave the EU, had done just that: exchanged day for night.

DF: In Portbou that summer I also had the idea to print a large-scale image of Benjamin's photograph from his laissez-passer document. We took this photograph (carried in my suitcase – speaking of suitcases) into the streets of Portbou. I photographed you holding this portrait in various places in town: in the streets, in the train station, on the seafront. People started asking us, who is this man? They didn't recognise his image, even though his name is everywhere in Portbou – on the signs pointing to the monument, the monument itself, on a still-abandoned site which may one day be turned into a museum. Once we said his name they made the connection. But the interesting thing was they didn't recognise him.

JM: The subject of our work in his exhibition is the relationship between landscape and place and Benjamin's work. Why is this relevant?

DF: As an artist, I am very interested in the relationship between the body, performance and space. In Benjamin's best-known essay, 'The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction', amongst other topics he writes about the distinction between the actor's performance on stage and that on film. Benjamin writes that in the theatre, there is an exchange of sorts, a symbiosis between performer and audience. In the case of acting for film the performer is acting for an apparatus. The theatre is a place where things happen in time and space. The film's story is constructed in the editing suite, before it goes to the masses.

This is one of the earliest conceptualisations of the difference between space and place. Benjamin is saying that the theatre is a place, which means things happen there in time, lived version. Film is more a space, a metaphorical arena where time is on a loop, eternally accessible. Both modes are experiential, but one is more mediated. We now live in a mediated space, in the mechanical – better said the digital – age, wherein time and place are assembled in the image via technology. It is all representation, all performance. You could say we live our daily lives as if they were cinema, aware of a gallery of watchers on the other side of a portal: Facebook or Instagram.

Thinking of this, there is a strange simplicity – not very Benjaminian

as his writing is notoriously intricate and complex – in us photographing Benjamin's image in some of the landscapes and places that defined his life. We were particularly interested in wild places, because he was drawn to them – he gravitated to Capri and to Ibiza, both Mediterranean islands, looking for inspiration and solace. He died in one of the most rugged and elemental landscapes in the Mediterranean. This is perhaps a neglected theme in scholarship and biography on Benjamin: he was susceptible to natural beauty, he enjoyed the outdoors, he was attracted to a Mediterranean way of life. When he defines the 'aura' in 'Art in the Age…', he refers to a tree branch. The last journey of his life was an odyssey, a crossing via a rough and demanding path of the Pyrenees. We were interested in returning Benjamin to these wild places, particularly with the re-enactment of his final walk in our film 'More Than a Sign.'

JM: As you have mentioned Benjamin wrote incisively about the importance of the image to consciousness and history. In many of these photos we have inserted his image into the landscape. What are we investigating or trying to articulate with this simple tactic?

DF: It is a resurrection. We both realise this is emotive. But this is what we mean to do: to return his memory to the places which perhaps have forgotten him. His image returns you and I, as respectively an artist and writer, to the memory of the past, as well. We are confronted with the Second World War, the tectonic displacement and loss of life it caused. His image encourages us as artists to remember Benjamin's contribution to art, to thought, which was basically a critical prediction of the shift from the analogue era to the digital.

We were thinking of Benjamin's life and his aesthetics more than using his image as a political statement. But in light of the Brexit referendum of June 2016, the Catalan referendum in 2017 and an increasing migration crisis and fraying political stability in Europe, we increasingly feel that Benjamin's image is a political statement. We are in a new era when borders are hardening, millions are stateless, and there is increasing surveillance and bureaucratic superstructure around nationality and citizenship, unlike anything experienced since the Second World War and its immediate aftermath.

JM: We then had the idea of using fragments and phrases of Benjamin's writing throughout.

DF: Yes, we first had the idea of using the fragments – they are all from 'Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' – as a way to engage the public, starting with people we encountered randomly in Portbou. As an artist, I have often come across references to Benjamin's work in my studies. It was a great opportunity to return to his work, not in the context of my degrees, but in a spirit of creativity. As with his image, the idea was to return his thinking and writing to the place where it was finally extinguished.

At university I teach photography as performance: engaging with audience, and the notion that photography is itself a performance. The word fragments unite me, the photographer, the public as co-performers, and resurrect Benjamin's contribution to thought all in one act. Also, crucially, I asked the subjects we approached to choose the words they would hold. In this way they resonate with their own lives and personae. In that moment the words take on new life in the lives of those individuals.

JM: Our project started at the point of Benjamin's personal end, in Portbou, but then became a pan-European project. What is relevant about Benjamin's thought given the contemporary political situation in Europe?

DF: That's right, from 2016 to 2018 we took Walter in his image form across Europe. The work in the exhibition has been made in Berlin, Paris, Capri, Naples, London and Tallinn as well as in the Pyrenees on both sides of the Franco-Spanish border. All these places have some resonance with his life: he was born in Berlin, Paris was his greatest inspiration, he spent formative periods and wrote about Capri and Naples, and as we know he died in Portbou. London is not part of Benjamin's biography, nor is Tallinn, but it is part of mine, and of yours: we have both lived and worked in London for 30 years. Tallinn came about because, in September 2017, I was awarded a residency with Urbiquity in Tallinn. Benjamin travelled to and was influenced by, Soviet communism. Estonia is a key country in Europe; it borders a newly assertive Russia, and also to an extent represents the tremendous influence on Benjamin's life exerted by Asja Lacis, a theatre director from bordering Latvia.

It's not accurate to say that Europe is fracturing – really only the

United Kingdom can be said to risk a formal disintegration as a result of repudiating its formal relationship with Europe – but certainly the European project of progressiveness, enlightenment and cooperation is under scrutiny as never before in the post-war era. The writings of Hannah Arendt (which Lyndsey Stonebridge writes about in this catalogue) and of Benjamin on fascism and how it blured of the boundaries between politics and public theatre until they were indistinguishable, complicity with authoritarian bureaucracies and, especially, rights and statelessness are relevant to our situation today.

JM: For us Benjamin functions as a personage but also as metaphor. The significance of his writing and his personal life story is obvious in a situation in which mass migration is causing a hardening of citizenship laws, and of the state's determination to enforce these through displays of power. Millions of people are being 'exiled from the stage' (to quote one of the fragments we have used from 'Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction') of history. It's also a personal meditation on exile: you and I are both immigrants to Britain. In fact all of us who worked on the Port de la Selva sections of the project are migrants; none of us are Europeans by so-called birthright. We are a Senegalese, an Argentine, a Canadian, a Costa Rican and a Russian.

DF: Although at the beginning we were using the phrase as a direct homage to Benjamin's curiously oracular writings about performance. 'Exile from the Stage' is taken from the section of the essay in which Benjamin writes about the actor's predicament in front of the camera. In our work we began to see exile everywhere: internal exile, enforced migration, the self-exile that constitutes the migrant's experience, and all the permutations in between. It was also locally relevant. The Catalan independence referendum profoundly changed the mood and political landscape of the area in which we made much of this work. Northern Cataluñya has been fiercely *independentista*. When we were making the film in March 2018, we had the fragments from the essay on pieces of paper floating in the sea. People walking on the path above could see clearly what we were doing. They would stop and clap and cheer us on, thinking that 'Exile from the Stage' was a comment on the predicament of Carles Puigdemont, who was at that time held by the police in Germany.

JM: What is the series 'Luminosity' about? It depicts light in landscape, using mirrors and survival blankets – the latter look very much like the mineral seams of quartz and feldspar which run through the rocks of Cap de Creus.

DF: It is a poetic sequence about our relationship with the aura, interpreted with the help of Bouba Diedhou, one of the migrants depicted in Life in the Shadows. Light lives in landscape, in the form of minerals as you mention, but also in the vectors between sea, land and sky. Light and darkness are the two constitutive elements of photography, and the series is also a comment on their interplay.

Also it is a comment on how the light gets in: what was fascinating was how, by photographing these men, others in the town, including friends of mine, saw them as legitimate, and began to employ them as gardeners and decorators. I showed my friends the images I was doing, and they could see their artistic merit. Somehow seeing these men through the eyes of an artist their attitude of suspicion changed. The migrants – Bouba especially – are now quite well integrated in the town: they have jobs, and some now have legal status. We are pleased with this outcome, and very grateful for their participation in our project.

On the pervasiveness of light to our whole body of work, the history of photography is a history of enlightenment in every sense. The alliance between light and philosophy is so well reflected in Benjamin's work. He tells us that the history of knowing is a history of light. As Eduardo Cadava writes in his excellent book on Benjamin, 'knowledge comes only in flashes, in a moment of simultaneous illumination and blindness.' This is what we are trying to capture in this exhibition.

Diego Ferrari was born in Argentina and was educated at the Llotja school of fine art in Barcelona, at Goldsmiths College, London and at the University of Canterbury. His work has been exhibited widely around the world and he has held artist's residencies in China, Germany, Romania, Hungary and Estonia. He teaches at Elisava University in Barcelona, at Goldsmiths College and is Senior Lecturer in Photography at Kingston University.

Day for Night: Landscapes of Walter Benjamin

Diego Ferrari and Jean McNeil

An exhibition at the Peltz Gallery, Birkbeck College, London
21 September – 27 October 2018

We would like to thank the following institutions and individuals for their invaluable help in mounting this exhibition:

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Credits

Diego Ferrari – concept, photographic work, films
Jean McNeil – concept, texts, films
Diego Ferrari and Bas Losekoot – photographic collaboration, Portbou
Matei Mitrache, M.Arch, Bartlett School of Architecture – exhibition design and installation
Specialist framing and mounting – A.Bliss
Bernard Arce – film direction and editing
Polina Nagareva – film production assistant
Julia Bell – co-editor, catalogue and institutional support
Sam Ratcliffe – catalogue design and production

In Port de la Selva we are grateful for the participation of Bouba Diedhiou, Cheikh Sane, Apa Sagna and Salif Sadio. We extend our heartfelt gratitude to those who have participated as performers by holding Walter Benjamin's image and words from his writing. We also thank Bas Losekoot for his collaboration on the images for 'More than a Sign' taken in Portbou.

We dedicate this exhibition to the memory of Hamad Butt (1962-1994)