

Guided Readings on Thinking With Fragments: The Allure of the Broken, Discarded, and Disjointed in Urban Space

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a guided reading list on texts chosen for discussion at the Gregynog Theory School on 'Thinking With Fragments: The Allure of the Broken, Discarded, and Disjointed in Urban Space,' held at Gregynog Hall in Powys, Wales, on the 19th and 20th March 2024. The Gregynog Theory School is an annual event for postgraduate research students and early career researchers, as part of the 'Human Geography' pathway of the ESRC Welsh Graduate School for the Social Sciences (WGSSS). The event is structured around a set of readings, curated by Human Geographers at Aberystwyth, Cardiff, and Swansea Universities in Wales, and a keynote speaker. The readings are discussed at length by participants at the event. The keynote speaker for this event was Professor Colin McFarlane, Professor of Urban Geography at Durham University in the UK.

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CRYNODEB

Mae'r papur hwn yn cyflwyno rhestr ddarllen dan arweiniad ar destunau a ddewiswyd i'w trafod yn Ysgol Theori Gregynog ar 'Meddwl Gyda Darnau: Atyniad yr hyn sydd wedi Torri, wedi'i Daflu, a'i Ddi-gysylltiad mewn Gofod Trefol,' a gynhaliwyd yn Neuadd Gregynog, Powys, ar 19 a 20 Mawrth 2024. Mae Ysgol Theori Gregynog yn ddigwyddiad blynyddol ar gyfer myfyrwyr ymchwil ôl-raddedig ac ymchwiliwyr ar ddechrau eu gyrfa, yn rhan o lwybr 'Daearyddiaeth Dynol' Ysgol Graddedigion Gwyddorau Cymdeithasol Cymru ESRC (YGGCC). Mae'r digwyddiad wedi'i strwythuro ar sail darlleniadau penodol, wedi'u curadu gan Ddaearyddwyr Dynol ym Mhrifysgolion Aberystwyth, Caerdydd, ac Abertawe, yn ogystal â phrif siaradwr. Trafodir y deunydd darllen yn helaeth gan gyfranogwyr y digwyddiad. Y prif siaradwr ar gyfer y digwyddiad hwn oedd Yr Athro Colin McFarlane, Athro mewn Daearyddiaeth Drefol ym Mhrifysgol Durham yn y DU.

KEYWORDS

Fragments, Fragmentation, Fragmentary writing, Spatial theory, Urban space, Walter Benjamin.

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Article 2.2



THE 2024 GREGYNOG THEORY SCHOOL ON THINKING WITH FRAGMENTS

... knowledge comes in lightning flashes. The text is the long roll of thunder that follows.

Walter Benjamin, *The arcades project* (1999: 456 [N1,1])

In Walter Benjamin's (1999) *Arcades Project*, he explores the fragments and detritus of consumer capitalism, the discarded infrastructures and leftover shards of commodities no longer coveted but still present in the material fabric of the city, whose ruins and remains bear witness to the hollow promises of a golden future made to the masses. His project involves exploring these fragments and the various ways they continue to elicit desire, even though time and context change. The fragment, it seems, has a peculiar kind of attraction: a capacity to draw our attention by not being fixed to any particular meaning, overarching narrative or lost totality. As such, it allows Benjamin a means to contemplate the fluidity between mass consumerism and the seductive nature of the singular. The fragment attracts precisely because it is a leftover, a remainder, a residual: i.e., it is unattached, a curiosity to be amused over.

The aim of the 2024 Gregynog Theory School was to explore the idea of the fragment and what it can tell us about the forming and reforming nature of urban space. As the world becomes increasingly urban and growing numbers of people inherit infrastructure, housing, and neighbourhoods that are broken and fragmented, the Theory School explored what these piecemeal shards could tell us about how people create worlds, satisfy desire, and engender meaning. By engaging with fragmentary thinking from Walter Benjamin and William S. Burroughs to Colin McFarlane and Forensic Architecture, the Theory School examined the role of the fragment in spatial production and the fragmentation imminent to every spatial formation: how the broken and discarded can be used and reconfigured; how the city itself can be seen as a conglomeration of fragments; and how fragments can be attended to both intellectually and methodologically.



Figure 1. Gregynog Hall. Photo credit: Aled Singleton (CC BY 04)

SESSION 1: FRAGMENTS AND THEORY

For Walter Benjamin, the fragment is something easily overlooked because it no longer belongs. It is the forgotten or erased part of the city, discarded or dismissed by the remorseless inventiveness of consumer capitalism. And yet what makes a fragment a fragment is that it is not so easily erased. Indeed, its materiality continues to instigate new possibilities as it is incorporated into new or altered contexts. In this sense, the word ‘fragment’ should always be read as a noun and a verb; a process more than a thing: fragments fragment. This is why the fragment is not simply a (residual) part of a (lost) totality, but the gift and promise of an open multiplicity continuously in the making and remaking. According to Hannah Arendt, Benjamin’s fragments have the twofold task of both ‘interrupting the flow of the presentation with “transcendent force” and at the same time concentrating within themselves that which is presented’ (Arendt 1986: 39).

The readings below introduce Benjamin’s concept of the fragment as well as illustrate the fundamental tension they introduce into urban life. They also give a flavour of how Benjamin adopted the fragment as a style of writing.

Texts discussed:

- **Benjamin, W.** (1968). Theses on the philosophy of history (1940). In H. Arendt, (Ed.) *Illuminations* (pp. 253–264). New York, NY: Schocken.
- **Benjamin, W.** (1999). *The arcades project*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Convolutes A, K, and N: ‘Arcades, *magasins de nouveautés*, sales clerks’ (pp. 31–61); ‘Dream city and dream house, dreams of the future, anthropological nihilism, Jung’ (pp. 388–404); and ‘On the theory of knowledge, theory of progress’ (pp. 456–488).
- **Buck-Morss, S.** (1989). Natural history: Fossil. In *The dialectics of seeing: Walter Benjamin and the arcades project* (pp. 58–77). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- **McFarlane, C.** (2021). Political framings. In *Fragments and the city: Making and remaking urban worlds* (pp. 111–173). Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

SESSION 2: FRAGMENTS, INVENTION, AND METHOD

The readings in this session attend further to the tension in fragments – how they tend to pull us away from the apparent holism and systematicity of the city, while simultaneously offering new opportunities for radical reorganization. While some of the authors below celebrate the fragment as a catalyst for new forms of inventive (or resistant) ordering, invention or ‘truth telling,’ others want to hold on to the intrinsic disruptiveness of the fragment and its enduring capacity to facilitate breakage and disturbance.

Texts discussed:

- **Forensic Architecture.** (2023). *Investigation of the Port of Beirut explosion*. <https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/the-beirut-port-explosion-the-welders>

- **Jazeel, T.** (2019). Singularity: A manifesto for incomparable geographies. *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 40(1), 5–21. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/sjtg.12265>
- **Marshall, C.** (2019). How David Bowie used William S. Burrough's cut-up method to write his unforgettable lyrics. *Open Culture*, 7th May 2019. <https://www.openculture.com/2019/05/how-david-bowie-used-william-s-burroughs-cut-up-method-to-write-his-unforgettable-lyrics.html>
- **Simone, A. M.** (2004). People as infrastructure: Intersecting fragments in Johannesburg. *Public Culture*, 16(3), 407–429. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/173743>
- **Thieme, T.** (2021). Beyond repair: Staying with the breakdown at the interstices. *Environment & Planning D: Society & Space*, 39(6), 1092–1110. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/02637758211013034>

SESSION 3: FRAGMENTED EXPRESSIONS

Benjamin vacillated between defining himself as a philosopher, a critic, and a poet, and his writings often seem to combine all three. From the enigmatic *One-Way Street* to the graphical *Outline for a Habilitation Thesis*, he uses lists, notes, montage, aphorisms, etc. to find a mode of writing that breaks the systematic constraints of philosophy while embracing the interpretative possibilities of poetry. The term he sometimes uses to describe this style is the 'thought-image' or 'thinking image' (*Denkbild*), often using poetic imagery to present an idea (for example, his notion of the 'angel of history' that draws inspiration from Paul Klee's 1920 monoprint, *Angelus Novus* [*New Angel*], and his characterization of the commodified and consumerist city as a phantasmagoria). In adopting this new style of fragmentary writing and literary montage, Benjamin was freed from some of the conventions of academic writing, and these shorter, punchier interventions came to represent a distinctive and refreshing approach that was unique to him. Such experiments have had a far-reaching influence, not only in social theory (e.g. Guy Debord and Susan Sontag) but also in geography and spatial theory more broadly (e.g. Henri Lefebvre and Gunnar Olsson).

The authors below provide examples of some geographers who have attempted to adopt and adapt Benjamin's 'montage' style.

Texts to discuss:

- **Cresswell, T.** (2019). Writing place. In *Maxwell Street: Writing and thinking place* (pp. 1–19). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- **McFarlane, C.** (2021). Writing in fragments. In *Fragments and the city: Making and remaking urban worlds* (pp. 85–110). Oakland, CA: University of California Press.
- **Pred, A. R.** (1995). For(e) montage: Swedish modern and the recognition of European modernities. In *Recognizing European modernities: A montage of the present* (pp. 11–29). Abingdon: Routledge.

FURTHER READING FOR ADDITIONAL CONTEXT

- **Benjamin, W.** (1999). Paris, the capital of the nineteenth century (1939 version). In *The arcades project* (pp. 14–26). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- **Benjamin, W.** (2009). *One-way street and other writings*. London: Penguin.
- **Brigstocke, J.** (2013). Artistic parrhesia and the genealogy of ethics in Foucault and Benjamin. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 30(1), 57–78. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276412450467>
- **Chatterjee, P.** (1993). *The nation and its fragments: Colonial and postcolonial histories*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- **Closs-Stephens, A.** (2009). Walter Benjamin. In J. Edkins and N. Vaughan-Williams (Eds.), *Critical theorists and international relations* (pp. 77–88). Abingdon: Routledge.
- **Dubow, J.** (2020). The Second Commandment in the Second Empire. In *In exile: Geography, philosophy and Judaic thought* (pp. 47–72). London: Bloomsbury.
- **Frisby, D.** (1985). *Fragments of modernity: Theories of modernity in the work of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin*. Cambridge: Polity.
- **Goldsmith, K.** (2015). *New York, capital of the twentieth century*. London: Verso.
- **Löwy, M.** (1996). Walter Benjamin and surrealism: The story of a revolutionary spell. *Radical Philosophy*, 80: 17–23. https://www.radicalphilosophyarchive.com/issue-files/rp80_article2_walterbenjaminsurrealism_lowy.pdf
- **Simone, A. M.** (2021). Ritornello: ‘People as infrastructure.’ *Urban Geography*, 42(9), 1341–1348. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2021.1894397>

MORE EXAMPLES OF MONTAGE AND FRAGMENTARY WRITING IN GEOGRAPHY:

- **Brigstocke, J.** (2021). The aesthetics of sand: Reclaiming Hong Kong’s unsettled grounds. *GeoHumanities*, 7(2), 370–390. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2373566X.2020.1847679>
- **Freeman, C.** (2020). Multiple methods beyond triangulation: Collage as a methodological framework in geography. *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, 102(4), 328–340. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/04353684.2020.1807383>
- **Sharp, L., & Smith, S. L.** (Eds.) (2014) *You Are Here: The Journal of Creative Geography, XVII: The Montage Effect*. <https://repository.arizona.edu/handle/10150/668465>
- **Till, K. E.** (2005). *The new Berlin: Memory, politics, place*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- **Williams, A.** (2023) What remains? Salvaging meaning from ‘dementia friendly communities’ using cut-ups and collage. *GeoHumanities*, 9(1), 170–190. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2373566X.2022.2150260>

AGO RIAD

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Agoriad (meaning *Openings* in Welsh) is a diamond open access journal exploring theoretical and philosophical ideas in Human Geography and associated fields, published annually. Each volume explores a key theme, linked to the annual Gregynog Theory School which is hosted by the Welsh Graduate School of Social Sciences.

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