Dear PPW,

The following paper is an excerpt from the Introduction to a forthcoming monograph that I will plan to publish on an academic press. There are some experimental dimensions to the work, which is constructed at the intersection of critical theory, social movement studies, and the study of visual culture.

I’m interested in knowing whether the material and the format in which it’s presented is sufficiently compelling to keep a scholarly audience from becoming impatient with my disavowal of protocol, and I want to get a sense of how the evidence I marshal will be assessed by readers who may not ordinarily read material about social movements shaped by the additional considerations I bring to the table.

Other types of feedback are of course most welcome too!

With thanks, and collegially,
AK Thompson

PS: to provide some additional details about the project from which this chapter is excerpted, I include here the epigraphs to the work as a whole:

“Art is recollection.”
—Herbert Marcuse

“Even the most dehumanized modern fantasies depend on some older and simpler figure; the adventures may be mad, but the adventurer must be sane.”
—G.K. Chesterton

“How this work was written: rung by rung, according as chance would afford a narrow foothold, and always like someone who scales dangerous heights and never allows himself a moment to look around, for fear of becoming dizzy (but also because he would save for the end the full force of the panorama opening out to him).”
—Walter Benjamin
—Introduction—
Lost and Found

Sometimes the writing is on the wall. In Seattle, the writing said “we are winning.” In Genoa, it said “you make plans, we make history.” I first saw the writing on the wall during the mass social unrest that marked the demonstrations against the Summit of the Americas in Quebec City. Walking down the Cote D’Abraham, and just past the storefront where the street medic center had been before it was raided by riot cops, I came upon a patch of graffiti that made me stop. On April 21, 2001, the writing on the wall said “you expect it, we oblige.”

In retrospect, the slogan sounds suspect and ill advised. And, to be sure, neither the message nor its presentation seemed aimed to inspire. Nevertheless, at the time, it pulled everything into focus. I stopped. And the world around me seemed to stop, too. For an instant, it felt like time stood still. The teargas in the air simultaneously became more breathable and less bearable. In my mind, the riot cops, the police dogs, the water cannons, and the elite summit crystallized into a single image of confrontation. Both the situation and the response it required became absolutely clear. The germinal form of politics wasn’t dialogue; it was war. No assurance of representation would change it. No smile, however winning, could conceal it. Not any more.

I became still. Despite the tumult around me, I felt like I’d stumbled upon a point where the contradictions of the anti-globalization movement, a movement to which I’d committed my energies for the past several years, had reached a state of maximum intensity. What happened next no longer seemed bound by teleological fiat. Most importantly, it seemed that what happened next was up to us. Standing there in front of that hasty graffiti, I could almost feel it as we were drawn toward decision. What we did next would underscore our fidelity to (our betrayal of) a possibility that had flashed up briefly but—if not seized—might never be seen again.
Retrospection makes clear that we betrayed our moment. And mobilizations like the one that took place in Quebec City have for the most part become historical curiosities. Indeed, contemporary radicals primarily recall the anti-globalization demonstrations that marked the advent of the twenty-first century as examples of what not to do. The critique of “summit hopping” first elaborated by Holland’s EuroDusnie collective in 2000 quickly became the foundation for a new ethic of community organizing—an ethic considered antithetical to what had come before. But while this turn to “community” occasionally held out the promise of a mass base, it also deprived us of opportunities to rediscover the collective power of that “we” invoked by the writing on the wall.

For a brief moment in 2011, it seemed that this lost “we” might be revived. But even as Occupy Wall Street revitalized the inclinations that had animated our prior insurgency, it did so—for the most part—without ever recovering the violence that had brought the struggle against corporate globalization so close to the point of dead reckoning. For whatever else might be said about those ill-reputed and mostly forgotten days, one thing remains certain: the writing on the wall dispelled any illusions I may have had about either the meaning or the means of political struggle. Recent developments suggest that it’s now time to return to this point.

Recounting these skirmishes from a library carrel that seems to have been designed with daydreams in mind can’t help but cast doubt on my recollections. Matters are made still worse by the fact that, even at the time, I was sleep deprived and the stress of my tear gas holiday had begun to wear on me. In the three days prior to seeing the writing on the wall, I had helped to tear down a fence surrounding a security zone that authority had professed to be impenetrable. I had dodged cops and plastic bullets and helped to build barricades out of picnic tables and debris. I had gotten lost in a dangerous game of cat and mouse running through labyrinthine side streets as ominous grey vans circled.

By the spring of 2001, and after what felt like dozens of similar protests, experiences like these had begun to seem
normal. But that hardly meant I was prepared to deal with them. And it doesn’t take a therapist to point out that living in a constant state of hyper-vigilance tends to work against the world’s assimilability. Yes, my moment of reckoning on the Cote D’Abraham must surely have been delusion—and even if the reckoning had captured the essential, my recollection would always remain a doubtful guide.

But why, then, did others nod knowingly whenever I described the cessation of happening I’d experienced? At the time, I couldn’t seem to find anyone who’d engaged in anti-summit confrontations without encountering that same moment of complete silence—a silence that was at once terrifying and elating. In such moments, “history” became a single point, an instant called “now” in which everything seemed present. In the silence that punctuated such moments, many of us became invested (perhaps for the first time) in the full consequentiality of our actions.

Reading the writing on the wall felt like awakening from a dream. It’s therefore not surprising that radicals have returned to these slogans and the moments in which they flashed up with feelings that have alternated between reverence and bewilderment. Fully eight years after the Battle of Seattle, radical publishing collective Turbulence organized a discussion about what it would mean to “win” in the lead up to the German anti-G8 protests of 2007. Alongside position papers by movement commentators like Stephen Duncombe, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and others, they reprinted the iconic Seattle-era snapshot that captured riot cops lined up against a wall bearing our profession of faith: “WE ARE WINNING” (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Photographer unknown (1999)
Struggling to capture the photo’s significance (and barely suppressing justified elation), Turbulence wrote: “‘We Are Winning’. This slogan, spray-painted on a wall, was one of the most iconic images of the protests against the Third Ministerial meeting of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in Seattle in 1999.” In their estimation, the photo’s iconic status owed to the fact that it “captured the sentiment of … that crazy rainy winter morning perfectly.”

Seemingly out of nowhere, a decade after the supposed ‘end of history’, a coalition of anarchists and communists, environmentalists and trade unionists, nuns and queers, and thousands of others had taken to the streets, and actually shut down the WTO conference in Microsoft’s and Starbucks’ home town.¹

Reprinted in countless publications and circulated widely over the Internet in the period immediately following Seattle, “WE ARE WINNING” quickly became an emblem of the movement’s new optimism, and of its new spirit of resistance. The snapshot was uncanny, and perfect—but it also filled me with doubt. In moments of paranoid reverie, I often wondered whether it might not have been too perfect. Was it possible, I asked, for it not to have been staged?

Riot cops don’t normally go in for photo ops. But, if you suspend disbelief, you might end up feeling the same vertiginous rush. After all, the row of cops (almost like the percussion section of some wild cacophony) seems to punctuate the syllables of the three-word phrase behind them. Reading the image left to right, the slogan belts out a rhythm on their helmets. WE ARE—two single beats like toms preparing for the cymbal crash of—WINNING, as the final cop trails off to some point beyond the frame.

Approaching the matter from the standpoint of one of its less improbable parallaxes, the snapshot all of sudden disclosed an eerie indebtedness to the same “spontaneous” convergence of desirable elements that had gathered around those celebrated American soldiers captured by Joe Rosenthal as they hoisted their flag at Iwo Jima (Figure 2). Although the World War II photographer insisted that his own take on the “we are winning” theme was not staged, viewers intent on taking him at his word still had to
contend with an uncanny composition caught somewhere between theater, allegory, and journalism.

![Figure 2. Rosenthal (1945)](image)

When considered alongside the Rosenthal, the pictorial evidence we marshaled to assert and confirm that “WE ARE WINNING” seems both stylistically and in terms of implication to pale in comparison. But despite the obvious differences in their historical weight, it was hard to deny that our own snapshot’s force owed something to the same strange admixture that went on to make Rosenthal one of the most celebrated photographers of the twentieth century.

Sometimes, celebration and reproduction coincide. For this reason, and as Rosenthal recounts, the Iwo Jima snapshot went on to become “the most widely reproduced photograph of all time.” Highlighting some noteworthy instances of this reproduction, Rosenthal recalls how “an
engraving from it appeared on an issue of three-cent postage stamps.” Moreover, “a painting of it was used as a symbol of the Seventh War Loan Drive, and appeared on 3,500,000 postcards, 15,000 outdoor panels and 175,000 car cards.” But there is more. Citing modes of visual reproduction that Walter Benjamin (who made a point of being concerned with such matters) had probably never considered, Rosenthal informs us that his image “has been done in oils, water colors, pastels, chalk and matchsticks…”

A float based on it won a prize at a Rose Bowl parade, and the flag-raising has been reenacted by children, by gymnasists of the University of Maryland, and as part of the Orange Bowl pageant in Miami… It has been sculpted in ice and in hamburger and, by the Seabees, in sandstone on Iwo Jima. A New Milford, Connecticut, man spent ten months making a wooden inlay of it using 10,000 pieces of veneer. A Washington, D.C., sculptor devoted nine and a half years to the $850,000 one-hundred-ton bronze statue that was derived from it and was dedicated as a memorial…

Despite regular online appearances and its reproduction in publications like Turbulence, the movement’s “WE ARE WINNING” never generated the mass-level excitement that befell Rosenthal. Nevertheless, whether owing to photojournalistic genius, mere chance, or something else entirely, it did ascend to a comparable status amongst the anti-globalization forces that converged regularly between 1999 and 2003. For activists breaking onto the scene in a context where (almost by definition) the possibility of “winning” seemed remote, “WE ARE WINNING” affirmed that perseverance would be rewarded in the end. Uniting the flag hoisting on Iwo Jima and the victory in Seattle was the promise that tenacity would prevail—regardless of what the mission might be.

Considered from the standpoint of their affective weight, the images’ shared status as emboldening references for their respective audiences makes sense. When considered from the standpoint of their captured content, however, it becomes clear that the reasons for their resonance are completely different. In the Seattle snapshot, it is the
juxtaposition of incommensurable elements rather than the valorization of heroism that produces the dramatic effect. Unlike Rosenthal’s image, ours was not a picture of valor. Instead, we opted for a snapshot taken just prior to the moment when the world might be turned upside down. The actor entrusted to bring this about is outside the frame. It just might be the viewer herself.

Forcing activist aspirations to confront state power through a composition that fused the image’s antithetical poles in a dialectic of extremes, “WE ARE WINNING” seemed to demand that we come to terms with what winning might mean and what victory would require. In this way, and as a kind of spontaneous montage, the emblematic assemblage of slogan and cops yielded responses that mixed intoxication with dead reckoning. Victory, yes! But how, and at what cost? It was precisely this beguiling, stereoscopic perspective that animated Turbulence’s 2007 stocktaking. If the writing on the wall gave activists a glimpse of the human community lying in wait beyond the neoliberal nightmare, “WE ARE WINNING” also made clear that such a state could not be gained without a fight.

Visions of a redeemed humanity are inherently seductive; however, they do not come into being simply for having been wished. In order for victory to see the light of day, fantastic visions must land upon the profane means by which they will be realized. At its best, and in its very composition, “WE ARE WINNING” enjoined us to resolve the seeming (but unseemly) antinomy between the slogan and the cops. In contrast, the only acceptable course of action available to viewers contemplating Rosenthal’s treasure (whether in sandstone or hamburger) is emulation; and the only acceptable affective posture, awe. Within the bounds of the Iwo Jima snapshot, human activity is reduced to repetition, and history gets hermetically sealed.

Despite its significance for movement participants, however, the glimpse of what lay beyond made visible by “WE ARE WINNING” could not be seen by everyone. For those who had not been engaged in the struggle, it may as well have never happened. And even for those who had become enthralled by anti-summit action, the explosive mix of intoxication and reckoning remained rare. Most of the time, our slogans and images seemed less concerned with awakening (with coming to terms with what victory might
mean) than with living vicariously through resonant dreams. We found ourselves standing closer to Rosenthal’s admirers than many of us would have cared to admit.

Ever since the first meeting of the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in 2000, activists have insisted that “another world is possible.” Comprised of what Zapatista chronicler Gustavo Esteva described as “one no, and many yeses,” this world did not yet have a fixed content. But that was the point. So long as people could imagine a future that accorded with their desires (and so long as those desires were conceived as being antithetical to capitalist globalization), the precise content of the “yes” did not matter. Like the Darling children in J.M. Barrie’s _Peter Pan_, movement participants took for granted that, if we could dream it, somehow it could also be real.

Throughout the modern era, social movements have been consistent in their willingness to acknowledge the power of dreams. For the New Left struggles that blossomed along the path that Civil Rights cut through the very heart of Jim Crow, King’s famous March on Washington speech provided the template. Four decades later, global justice activists conceded that the new world would be brought into being by “actions that have not yet been dreamed of” but that might be discovered through experimentation. In 2011, wish fulfillment bolstered the movement of the squares as impassioned activists around the globe met their enemies with rough music: “if you won’t let us dream, we won’t let you sleep!”

Looking back now to the beginning of the twenty-first century, it seemed that optimism itself enjoined us to believe that, if we assembled our wishful “yeses” in spaces like the World Social Forum, we would discover that—inevitable differences in detail (and heated disagreements about means) notwithstanding—these “yeses” could all somehow be made to coincide. In this, too, Barrie proved prescient. “Of course,” he recounted, “the Neverlands vary a good deal.”

John’s for instance, had a lagoon with flamingoes flying over it at which John was shooting, while Michael, who was very small, had flamingos with lagoons flying over it … but on the whole the
Neverlands had a family resemblance, and if they stood in a row you could say that they have each other’s nose, and so forth.iv

Porto Alegre, Neverland: another world is possible. Only in retrospect does the full extent of the “family resemblance” become clear. Like the Darling children, our Neverlands gained shape by drawing on myths and moments to which we rarely had direct connection. At one extreme, these citations included visions of the kinder, gentler time that social democrats recounted endlessly in their senile anachronism. For movement icon Naomi Klein, this Keynesianism would eventually become explicit. “It is eminently possible,” she argued, “to have a market-based economy that requires no such brutality and demands no such ideological purity.”

A free market in consumer products can coexist with free public healthcare, with public schools, with a larger segment of the economy—like the national oil company—held in state hands. It’s equally possible to require corporations to pay descent wages, to respect the rights of workers to form unions, and for governments to tax and redistribute wealth so that the sharp inequalities that mark the corporatist state are reduced. Markets need not be fundamentalist.v

In the face of neoliberalism’s monopolistic claim on the future, positions like Klein’s had their use. Still, even as they assured that there were many yeses and that another world was possible, they precluded acknowledgment that Keynesianism was itself a form of market fundamentalism designed to safeguard capital. And though social democracy had historically yielded succor, the concessions it served up as its bread and butter had primarily been wrested through the historic threat of class violence.

Given this reality, and owing to their temperament, the forces drawn toward the movement’s radical wing disavowed quaint welfare-state visions. Instead, they opted for citations that, when considered from the standpoint of a world triumphantly declaring itself bereft of exteriority, may as well have been off the map.
Neverland had its “Redskins,” and neither the Darlings nor their Victorian readers could conceal their fascination. We, in our own way, were fascinated too. Commenting on the extensive interest in Indigenous sensibilities she noted among movement participants, activist scholar Amory Starr proposed that these “advanced traditions, developed in societies in which the market (to the extent it existed) was subordinated to social criteria,” allowed activists to “redefine progress as something other than surrendering history, culture and life to business.” For this reason, the “survivors of postmodern capitalism” that filled the movement’s ranks embraced these traditions to satisfy their “most sophisticated aspirations for sustainable, accountable, diverse and engaged social life.”

Because Starr’s account is brief, it’s hard to know which activists and which “advanced traditions” she’s referring to. Indeed, the single note included in this section of her text refers not to particular Indigenous traditions but rather to the corporate patenting of indigenous knowledge through “biopiracy.” Nevertheless, and despite their apocryphal character, Starr’s observations remain well founded. For even as the movement to which her study refers falls into obscurity, the activist identification with those who refuse to surrender “history, culture and life to business” has not. Indeed, recent struggles against extractive industries and cross-continental pipelines seem only to have intensified Indigenous people’s radical allure.

Reviewing Starr’s observations outside of the context that had initially made them seem self-evident, what stands out most strikingly is how the activist search for a substance with which to fill our wishful “yes” produced a fascination with “traditions” considered antithetical to capitalism’s “history, culture and life.” Like a boomerang, “progress” takes a detour through the (traditional) past to bolster its energetic élan. As far as Starr was concerned, this conjoining of “old” and “new” was inevitably. Indeed, by her account, our very “confidence that another world is possible” was “rooted in the recuperation from centuries of ridicule of the social and economic methods of indigenous peoples.”

The “new” of “another world” (the world for which the “survivors of postmodern capitalism” so desperately long) is thus bound to the promise of the “old,” which needs to be
rescued from the “ridicule” threatening to entomb it. As Rousseau’s appeal to “the noble savage” makes clear, this dynamic is foundational to the Euro-American political tradition. And even as glosses like Rousseau’s have become objects of scorn, they nevertheless foreground an enduring ur-historical reality for which people long. This longing is exacerbated by the fact that it seems so difficult to fulfill.

“To become a colonizing culture, Europe had first to colonize itself,” claimed Ward Churchill. For this reason, people who “hated the idea of being Europeans” did not need to “disassociate themselves” by appropriating Native American traditions in a sad burlesque. Instead, they could work to reconnect with those forms of culture and resistance that were indigenous to Europe prior to its monstrous auto-cannibalism. In opposition to people’s “compulsive hedge against … what they really are,” Churchill thus proposed a more brutal but also more redemptive form of reckoning. It’s a seductive proposition. Still, as the shadow dance in Plato’s cave makes clear, sometimes myth is all that circumstance affords—at least in the first instance.

It’s therefore significant that, while movement citations may not always have been conscious or accurate, they did manage (as Starr suggested they might) to stimulate action by providing an image of what could be that stood at odds with neoliberal barbarity. For a generation declared irrelevant by Fukuyama’s “end of history,” and for claustrophobics smothered by the feeling that neoliberalism had reduced the world a “finished piece of work,” the value of this could be cannot be overstated. Whatever its shortcomings, it remained buoyed by the fact that—one upon a time—it had been.

Considered prima facie, such observations may sound like concessions to petit-bourgeois reverie. Lest we conclude that this wishful-mythic tendency is unique to privileged radicals in the global north, however, it’s useful to recall that Frantz Fanon highlighted a similar dynamic among the colonized. For, while “the passionate quest for a national culture prior to the colonial era can be justified by the colonized intellectuals’ shared interest in … taking a hard look at the Western culture in which they risk becoming ensnared,” the search itself tended to yield “serious
In the anti-globalization movement’s investment in the promise of the imagined outside becomes evident upon consideration of the images we used to depict resistance and promote action. Indeed, the illustrations that filled our magazines and the posters that cluttered our walls all had a tinge of the mystical about them. This sensibility stood in stark contrast to both the constructivist grammar of early communist propaganda and the softer humanism of WPA-era artists like Lynd Ward. Oblivious at the time, it seems odd to me in retrospect that so many of our images were ransacked from Neverland. On countless movement posters and in countless publications, pirates, fairies, and lost boys mingled amidst medieval scenes of castle sieges (Figure 3). Even the black cat of anarchy seemed to don a Cheshire grin.
Why did these images come so easily to mind whenever we sought to express our desires for change? And how did they relate to the writing on the wall that had transfixed me on the Cote D’Abraham? It did not take long before these questions revealed two distinct image types marked by two distinct relations to time. Although both referred to past, present, and future, their orientation to these points seemed wildly divergent. If our lost boys summoned the past to help us anticipate an unknown future freedom, the writing on the wall pulled past and future to a standstill in a moment called “now.” While our lost boys pointed to a future happiness, the writing on the wall plagued us with a cognizance of opportunities that could be seized but might
be missed. Engrossed, I resolved to conduct a thorough investigation.

The methodological challenges piled up quickly. If my concern was with movement images, how would I determine what belonged to the category? And, if my concern with these images arose from the citations that made them resonate (and if the chain of citation was, at least theoretically, infinite), how far back would I go and what would I look for? Peter Pan didn’t know the answer, but I was reassured to discover that its author had been familiar with the problem: “I don’t know whether you have ever seen a map of a person’s mind,” wrote Barrie, but it “keeps going round all the time.” What’s more, because the means of determining what even belongs to the map are themselves never self-evident, the researcher must first uncover the habits of thinking that enable its assemblage. For this reason, and as Barrie made clear, the map of Neverland is inseparable from:

first day at school, religion, fathers, the round pond, needlework, murders, hangings, verbs that take the dative, chocolate pudding day, getting into braces, say ninety-nine, three pence for pulling out your tooth yourself, and so on; and either these are part of the island or they are another map showing through, and it is all rather confusing, especially as nothing will stand still.”

Among other things, Waking Up at the End of History is an attempt to map the Neverland traversed by contemporary radical movements. By revisiting the struggles against corporate globalization that marked our passage into this new, tumultuous century, I have devised an operational account of the means by which images might be harnessed by movements. Given our precipitous global slide toward fascism, this objective is more important than ever. Concerning methodology, the heuristic and improvisational nature of what follows owes less to an intellectual conceit than it does to the challenges that arise when we concede that, even for materialists, the energetic relays between objects are as important as the objects themselves.

Echoing W.J.T. Mitchell, who believed that images might be made to reveal “a kind of relay connecting … art, language, and the mind with conceptions of social, cultural,
and political value, xvi I demonstrate how image trajectories—when we commit to following them the length of their hazardous course—can open onto majestic vistas from which movement prospects can be assessed. However, since not all vistas afford the same view, I note the differences between the lost boys of movement posters and the writing on the wall that shook me from slumber. Once this distinction is established, the means by which awakening occurs begin to become clear.

Analytically significant though it may be, this last concern is primarily political. If the conditions that enable awakening can be outlined, then it may be possible to induce the process. Concretely speaking, this means devising an approach to politics capable of eclipsing the “ought” of our resonant dreams. Beyond this “ought” stands reckoning. Although both resonance and reckoning are stimulating, the former tends toward (runs the risk of affording) succor. In contrast, the latter makes the present unbearable. It compels decisive action while highlighting the extent to which every present can become the point from which revolution might erupt. Far from voluntarism, what is proposed is instead a means by which opportunities might become recognizable, and by which recognition might become the prelude to decisive, consequential action.

Social movement analysts have often been surprised by the events that compel people to break decisively with the status quo. In most cases, the catalyst is only identified retrospectively. Incidental to bread-and-butter issues, such sparks can seem as enigmatic as the “collective effervescence” to which Durkheim attributed our social cohesion. The Arab Spring begins with a suicide in 2010; rancor over dorm rules in a Parisian suburb ignites a near-revolution in 1968. The corollary: since the spark doesn’t seem to abide by any clear logic, those committed to nurturing revolution must either accept that they are beholden to chance or concede that meaningful intervention must be restricted to spheres in which “cause” and “effect” maintain a tangible, self-evident relationship.

Before succumbing to such fatalism, we would do well to consider whether the logic of the spark is in fact as unfathomable as appearances first suggest.

■
My interest in these questions could perhaps have been foreseen. Having worked as a graphic designer in movement contexts since the early 1990s, I joined the struggles that marked the beginning of the twenty-first century with reasonably developed ideas about images and the role they sometimes played in political struggle. Prior to 2001, however, the focus of my considerations had overwhelmingly been on problems related to form. Questions of content, such as those considered briefly above, were rarely on my agenda.

Reflecting on how acute my formal focus had been, I’m reminded of an incident in which I became embroiled in a debate with comrades at a campus-based newspaper about whether there was something inherently counter-revolutionary about fonts—like this one—designed with serifs. Apart from their status as a form of ornamentation that somehow looked inherently bourgeois, I couldn’t help but wonder whether there was something about the way that serifs helped to track baseline and mean line (about the way they became a constant accompaniment shaping the “how” of reading) that made the productive process of seeing and translating letters recede from consciousness as words made their imperceptible leap toward meaning.

Fond of unlikely semblances, it was a short step from there to deciding that the serif was to typography what the escalator had been to the shopping mall. True, the escalator seemed far more implicated than the serif did in capitalism’s perceptual and spatial organization; but even after conceding this key point, it remained impossible to ignore the fact that—as homologous responses to technical problems arising in their particular contexts—both the serif and the escalator conspired to passage people through space in an immediate way by diminishing opportunities of attending to its construction.

Robert Bringhurst’s magisterial Elements of Typographic Style did little to dissuade me. According to Bringhurst, the serif was a “transitive” innovation that—like an escalator, I thought—worked to “smooth” entry or exit from a particular stroke. As the painstaking work of typeface development makes clear, such innovations have a significant aesthetic dimension; however, artistry shouldn’t prevent us from recognizing that they have an important epistemological one, too. As the ease of reading increases,
conscious awareness of the form that enables it begins to dissolve. Eventually (and like a speaker who loses the thread of his thoughts when instructed to listen to the sound of his words), attention to form becomes an inconvenience, even a material obstruction. Wanting badly to avoid this outcome, I typeset my first book in Gill Sans, a sans serif that Bringhurst regarded as “a very clean piece of design.”

Alongside their design implications, formal concerns were also highly instructive when it came to criticism. Here, I concluded that assessing a work’s revolutionary status meant determining whether its form helped to reveal the labor process that had made it possible and whether this labor process coincided with progressive or reactionary developments within society’s productive forces. Based on these premises, it followed that my most scathing indictments were to be reserved for works that made a fetish of their anachronism or that concealed the labor process through technical-ideological sleights of hand like the single-point perspective (Figure 4). Feeling confident in my analysis, I hung a copy of Lissitsky’s Red Wedge above my desk and considered the matter settled (Figure 5).

The anti-globalization movement changed my mind. Although the movement’s visual lexicon didn’t exhaust form-related questions, it was impossible to ignore the fact that its resonant images were notable first and foremost for the particularity of their content. A formal analysis can reveal many things; however, it would never disclose why it was that activists at the beginning of the twenty-first century became enamored with the heart. Why did the heart, of all things, seem to become the movement’s ascendant sign? How did this once-maligned icon (this icon that previous generations had surrendered to Hallmark or...
ensnared in the cruel grip of a thousand barbed wire tattoos) become as important to anti-globalization activists as the star had been to previous insurgencies?

To get a sense of the heart’s importance, it suffices to recall the haunting and ubiquitous block print that Dalia Sapon-Shevin produced around the time of the 1999 anti-WTO actions in Seattle (Figure 6). Like many other riffs on the heart motif, this image circulated widely and has since become a familiar visual reference point in the North American radical scene. Even though, politically speaking, Seattle was before their time, Sapon-Shevin’s heart hung on my roommates’ door throughout 2010, the year they were taken away by the state on conspiracy charges. Across town, in the café where I sometimes did my writing, a Sharpie-wielding Occupy-era activist improvised a version of it on the bathroom wall as 2011 drew to a close. Around the same time, folk punk icons Ramshackle Glory turned “Your Heart is a Muscle the Size of Your Fist” into the undisputed radio hit off their masterpiece Live the Dream.
As content citation, the movement’s heart was a mystery to me. But it wasn’t the only one. How, for instance, was I to account for the great regularity with which images by Eric Drooker and Banksy appeared on movement posters and in movement publications? Like Sapon-Shevin, Drooker and Banksy became common reference points within activist visual culture at the beginning of the twenty-first century. With respect to the anti-globalization movement, they can be understood as major figures. In seeking to understand their resonance, it is tempting to foreground their respective virtuosity. However, such an account fails to recognize that movement artists have always furnished us with accomplished work. Meanwhile, many of the works that have resonated most strongly (and here we might think of
Sapon-Shevin’s heart) have remained aesthetically crude. The reasons for Drooker and Banksy’s resonance must therefore be sought elsewhere.

Between 1999 and 2004, Drooker’s work was regularly featured in movement publications, including the Chicago-based *LiP* (now sadly defunct). The magazine regularly ran contributions by key movement commentators including Vandana Shiva, David Solnit, and Elizabeth ‘Betita’ Martinez. In a similar fashion, Banksy’s work pervaded the radical scene and deeply affected its adherents. According to movement scholar and participant S Sullivan, the very spirit of the movement coincided with Banksy’s “brilliant image … of a masked protester with arm raised to violently throw—not a molotov, but a bunch of flowers.” Indeed, according to Sullivan, this canonical image neatly captured “the engaged anger and … celebratory creativity” of a movement with “its feet planted firmly in the 21st century.”

In addition to the strong resonance they enjoyed among anti-globalization forces, Drooker and Banksy also went on to have successful mainstream careers. In the decade following the movement’s decline, Drooker became a regular cover art contributor to *The New Yorker*. For his part, Banksy became a celebrated *enfant terrible* within the fine art world. In both cases, work that had initially been conceived and produced for movement audiences began disclosing a broader appeal.

Why did these artists make such a strong impression? Although both were conversant in the stark high-contrast gestures of the “activist aesthetic,” when considered formally and from the standpoint of art criticism they
remained more different than similar. The basis for their resonance becomes clear, however, when the work is considered from the standpoint of its content. Indeed, both artists seemed indebted to citations culled from the nineteenth-century Romantic archive. Drawing liberally from Blake, Goya, and Millet, Drooker was not shy about these debts. And though Banksy’s citations seemed more oblique, his output nevertheless disclosed a strong identification with that cast of Romantic types who, beset by circumstance, seemed destined to reveal the full magnitude of the human spirit.

The movement audience for these images was not primarily comprised of art history majors. As a result, there’s little reason to believe that the citations upon which Drooker and Banksy relied were recognized as such. Because they mostly remained imperceptible (and were thus prone to yielding neither delight in recognition nor the smug satisfactions of being in on a joke), their resonance cannot be attributed to postmodern irony. To discover its source, we must turn instead to the circumstantial, epistemological, and affective dimensions that unite the nineteenth-century Romantic rebellion against capitalist ascent to the struggle against its anxious unraveling in the global north at the beginning of the twenty-first.

If Drooker and Banksy’s citations suggest a connection between nineteenth-century Romanticism and the anti-globalization movement, then other elements (like Sapon-Shevin’s heart, and the fascination with Indigenous traditions noted by Starr) begin to seem less desultory and more coherent, more significant both analytically and politically. Still, the inclination to identify with Romantic images raised many questions still in need of answers. By what means did images from the past inscribe themselves on the present, and how did anti-globalization activists draw on these images to give form to “another world”? What were the implications of the movement’s identification with the content citations at work in these particular images, and—especially given the movement’s ultimate failure—what other kinds of image citations might have fostered the forms of reckoning that could have pushed our struggles further?
In an effort to answer these questions, I begin this work by making my methodological debts to Walter Benjamin explicit. Concretely speaking, this means reading the themes of dreaming and awakening considered above in relation to Benjamin’s corresponding analyses of wish images and dialectical images. My treatment of Benjamin also considers his analysis of Romanticism and addresses the main controversies underlying the reception of his work. In every instance, my objective has been to show how his insights might be operationalized with the aim of improving social movement prospects. Subsequently, I explore the significance of Romanticism as an ambivalent oppositional movement situated both within and against the bourgeois political sphere. In particular, I foreground how Romanticism’s historic emergence both coincided with and helped to shape the development of modern social movements. This connection becomes the basis for my analysis of the strong movement identification with the Romantic works produced by Drooker and Banksy.

In order to make sense of Drooker and Banksy’s Romanticism and their movement appeal, I draw on Benjamin’s analysis of wish images. In brief, such images arise when a reminder of the past’s unfulfilled promise lands upon the means of its possible realization in the present. In this way, wish images provide a concrete (but unconscious) point of cathexis for human dreams of redemption. By identifying with wish images drawn from the Romantic archive, I argue that anti-globalization activists foregrounded a bond uniting their struggle to the one mounted against bourgeois-industrial ascent more than a century earlier.

As social movement scholars like James M. Jasper have made clear, such an orientation is not unusual. However, while the movement’s orientation to Romantic references was politically stimulating (and while it encouraged activists to exceed the limits of inherited circumstance), it also obscured the practical demands of their anti-capitalist stance. At its worst, it enlisted the movement as a kind of loyal opposition to bourgeois rule. In order to overcome this impasse, I devote subsequent chapters to an exploration of images that Benjamin would have considered dialectical. Like the wish image, the dialectical image augurs a future happiness; however, it does not do so by depicting anachronistic mythical approximations with which the
viewer might identify. Instead, the dialectical image invokes the future by pointing out the means by which obstacles obstructing the path to happiness might finally be overcome through activity carried out under profane, present-day conditions.

Although concrete examples of dialectical images remain rare in Benjamin’s work, I argue that Diego Rivera’s *Man at the Crossroads* (1933) and Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937) can be viewed as compelling approximations. Working in the context of fascist ascent, both artists produced images containing features capable of yielding the decisive reckoning demanded by Benjamin’s concept. As such, they remain important reference points for those interested in operationalizing Benjamin under current fascist conditions. However, because the dialectical image is by definition context specific, and because capitalist developments now separate our era from what came before, neither Rivera nor Picasso can be expected to serve the role they once did. Although we might learn from their gestures, it remains necessary to transpose them into our contemporary register.

To this end, I review the dramatic transformations that have transpired between the 1930s and our own endless present. As a result of these transformations, to which Fredric Jameson’s canonical work on postmodernism continues to provide unique insight, certain aspects of the dialectical image must be revisited. With this aim in mind, I consider the work of two postmodern artists—Mark Lombardi and Cindy Sherman—whose images seem, despite obvious formal and aesthetic differences, to derive from Benjaminian insights while supplementing them to address the peculiar epistemological challenges posed by late capitalism. I show how, through their work, they discovered means of revitalizing the revelatory power of shock by conjoining it to seductions both epistemological and aesthetic. Despite the value of these contributions, however, I argue that—from the standpoint of their desired effect—neither Lombardi nor Sherman produced the kind of image that Benjamin would have hoped for.

For this reason, I conclude my investigation by advancing a series of propositions concerning how this impasse might finally be overcome. Concretely, this means conjoining the important epistemological strategies observed in Lombardi and Sherman to achieve Benjaminian effects in the context
of late-capitalism. By demonstrating how people might engage in decisive action without succumbing to the Romanticism that has historically prevented social movements from achieving their aims, a late-capitalist dialectical image might finally prompt us, collectively, to wake up at the end of history.

In assembling this construction, I’ve been aware of the distance that can sometimes exist between the demands of investigation and those of presentation. For readers of Marx, this struggle is well known. As noted in the Afterword to the Second German edition of Capital, the process of inquiry must “appropriate the material in detail, to analyze its different forms of development, to trace out their inner connexion.” Indeed, “only after this work is done successfully ... then it may appear as if we had before us a mere a priori construction.”xxiv For his part, Benjamin sought to close the interval between the two moments. Consequently, for Benjamin, “the materialist presentation of history” was itself the force that would lead “the past to bring the present into a critical state.”xxv Here, the mode of presentation becomes a vital component, not only of the mode of investigation, but of the revolutionary strategy too.

Following suit, I have sought to preserve the heuristic character of my investigation while assembling this construction. Nevertheless, the transposition between the two registers has occasionally demanded that I reorganize material to facilitate comprehensibility. But while I have taken care to provide the intellectual touchstones required to move sure footedly, such efforts can only lead the past to bring the present into a critical state. Presentation is not yet production, and even the most illuminating constellation requires decisive action if its implications are to unfold. For this reason, the resolution afforded by my conclusion will likely feel unresolved to those longing for revolutionary change. Such change, however, requires another kind of activity—and it’s for this very reason that Benjamin proposed that, when presenting materialist investigations, it was best to give them “a truncated ending.”xxvi Let me conclude, then, by conveying my hope that the following pages make the need for such activity self-evident.


† Mike Hudema (2005). *An Action A Day (Keeps Global Capitalism Away).* Toronto: Between The Lines, p.1


‖ ibid. p.52. In keeping with her text’s easy informality (and despite the fact that the cited neologism appears in quotation marks), Starr does not even mention Vandana Shiva’s *Biopiracy: The Plunder of Nature and Knowledge,* which first appeared in 1999.


" Ibid., p. 213

$x$ Ibid., p.215


$x$ Ibid., p.154


$x$ When Campus Resists: The Politics of Space, Power, and the Culture of Resistance in the Guelph Occupation Movement (1997) was a self-published multi-contributor effort that aimed to capture the significance of a semester-long anti-tuition mobilization. Proceeds from the sale of the book went toward legal defense costs for activists arrested during the campaign, which included an occupation of the university’s presidential offices. Despite lengthy discussions about the political implications of various aesthetic choices, the book remains an eyesore.


$x$ This position turned out to be a ham-fisted approximation of an argument laid out with much greater precision by Walter Benjamin in “The Author as Producer” (1971:222-223).

$x$ https://ramshackleglory.bandcamp.com/album/live-the-dream


ibid., p.473