Salzani’s monograph was originally his PhD dissertation, which he completed at the Centre for Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies at Monash University, Australia. His topic is eminently suited to the field. Salzani actualises four figures that appear in Walter Benjamin’s scattered corpus: the flâneur, the detective, the prostitute, and the ragpicker. Salzani’s intention is to invoke the spirit of Benjaminian criticism, but not to ape it. He devotes a chapter to each of the figures, and the chapters are divided into two parts; the first reconstructs the figure under consideration from disparate texts by Benjamin, while the second introduces a contemporary, often postmodern portrayal of the same figure. These are the flâneur in Juan Goytisolo’s *Landscapes after the Battle* (1982), the detective in Paul Auster’s *New York Trilogy* (1987), the prostitute in Dacia Maraini’s *Dialogue between a Prostitute and Her Client* (1973), and the ragpicker in Mudrooroo’s *The Mudrooroo/Müller Project* (1993). The diverging renditions are brought into a constellation with one another, a term Salzani draws straight from Benjamin’s *Trauerspiel* book, so that the past is productively juxtaposed with the present, allowing the actuality of the figure to be read.
Salzani is quick to add a caveat to his approach, however. He assures us that his choice of figures is not representative of Benjamin’s work, which is of course full of many more. Salzani’s selection is, rather, “very personal and subjective” (33), as is his choice of contemporary texts to which he compares them. This all appears as it should be when tracing constellations, an image which itself connotes the caprice of individual fancy, when stars are connected into a meaningful relation in the night sky, even though they are in fact immeasurably distant from one another. Constellations screams perspectival finitude on the face of it. One of Salzani’s great services with his book is to remind us that Benjamin is resolutely anti-subjective. It is this point that is ignored by the postmodernists who seek to claim Benjamin as one of their own, as a precursor, truly a man ahead of his time. Paul de Man is mentioned on this score repeatedly.

Those who do make this mistake tend to fixate on the destructive aspect of Benjaminian criticism, without acknowledging its constructive corollary. In relation to historiography, the Benjaminian critic must first blast out historical phenomena from the fictive continuum that has been fabricated by the victors. But after this dramatic event, which can be characterised as apocalyptically messianic and even nihilistic, the materialist historian behaves like the ragpicker. The ragpicker in literature (and in the reality of Parisian squalor during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) wanders the city streets at night, cart in tow, sifting through the trash and detritus of modernity in order to salvage some vestiges of value, which might later be sold on for a meagre profit. Analogously, Benjamin’s materialist historian seeks out the newly liberated fragment from the rubble of history, using it to construct a *dialectical image*. Salzani rightly flags the “oxymoron” (249) of a dialectical image as highly problematic in Benjaminian scholarship. It is a term that appears in the incomplete *Arcades Project*, but never attains “terminological consistency” (33) so that it must remain something of a suggestive mystery. Nevertheless, Salzani argues that whatever else the dialectical image entails, it carries with it a strong whiff of necessity rather than contingency.

The materialist historian as ragpicker does not seize upon the spoils of history and rearrange them in an arbitrary way, so as to create constellative montages of temporality that are as shocking and estranging as they are deeply subjective, and thus always contestable. Rather, Benjamin implies that there is a “historical index” that guides the materialist, that after the obscuring effects of false consciousness have been swept away by the destructive critical act, the truth content of historical phenomena will be revealed. The truth is the recognition that the present has been intended by the past, that previous missed possibilities may be redeemed in the now.
The materialist historian must only be “attentive” (212) to such insights, seemingly passive after the destructive phase so as to avoid the contaminants of subjectivity and theory. It is difficult not to be disappointed when the constructive side of Benjamin’s methodology is put so baldly, and although Salzani’s account is more nuanced than mine, he does not shy away from indicating the limitations and failures of Benjamin’s project.

Indeed, this is the strength of the ragpicker chapter, the standout of the book, and which reaches its apotheosis when Salzani introduces Australian Indigenous historiography via *The Mudrooroo/Müller Project*. In marked contrast to Benjamin, the Indigenous historian as ragpicker does not downplay his or her subjectivity, but instead openly embraces it as a political gesture. Nevertheless, there are echoes of Benjamin here, even amongst the notable divergences, and Salzani brings them forth both in highly compelling and illuminating fashion. By telling his or her own story, the Indigenous historian “claims the right of the dispossessed to reappropriate their history,” contesting the methods of its preservation and transmission, and thereby reiterating “Benjamin’s claim of the superiority of politics over history” (237). However, the false continuum of colonial history is disrupted so that the “mythic continuum” of the Dreamtime may be re-affirmed (233), a goal that not only jars with Benjamin’s extreme suspicion of “continuums,” but which also seems incompatible with postmodernity’s disavowal of all “meta-narratives.” Salzani clearly favours Mudrooroo’s approach, but he also thinks that Benjamin can help to inform such an endeavour. This cannot occur if Benjamin’s method is slavishly adopted, but only by “mortifying, re-assembling, and thus actualising his thought” (237).

We can see why Salzani refuses to construct dialectical images of his own. They are deeply embedded within the modernist aesthetics of Benjamin’s time, but are also the product of an underhand trick. They imply a “historical index,” the “intelligent choice” of the ragpicker, which, although it is meant to subtitute theory with method, in the end conceals a theory, and consequently a subjective intention. This theory is theology, which is not kept out of sight because of its disfigurement, like the chess-playing, hunchbacked dwarf, but “because it would betray the subjectivity of the assembler and thereby disavow the objectivity of the construction” (230). Salzani leaves us with the inescapable conclusion that the dialectical image, for all its mystique, is not actual. As for the other Benjaminian figures on display, some fare better than others. The detective is shown to be the political outgrowth of the otherwise co-opted flâneur. The detective also serves as a model for the historical materialist, and is a mile away from Auster’s later portrayal of the “metaphysical detective,” who, having given up on the futile search for existential and political meaning in the world,
turns his gaze inward, indulging in what Salzani derides as a narcissistic search for self-identity. Benjamin’s use of the prostitute as an allegory of the fetishised commodity comes in for rougher treatment. When placed next to Maraini’s more indignant account of a prostitute’s lot, Benjamin comes off not only as a latent sexist, but as demonstrating an uncomprehending insensitivity by romanticising these figures of the powerless and the exploited, an act which is itself phantasmagoric.

Salzani’s book is not only a welcome contribution to Benjaminian scholarship, but is also a laudable study in comparative literature. It is highly recommended.

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