

WEEK 1 & 2
mise en place
&
the moment

How to begin?

This first week of classes, we orient. We take a look around. We familiarize ourselves with our basic tools. We get comfortable in the kitchen. And then we start chopping.

For our first class meeting (our “Week 1”), our main task is to orient. To get to know each other a bit, to come into relation, to start to be in community. We will have a relatively brief first session – if you are reading this, that first session may likely have already happened – and your main task thereafter, ideally before the day is up, is to make sure to log onto the Canvas page, read the syllabus, read this document. Ask any questions you like. Get settled. Make sure your knives are sharp. Put on your apron. Then, reflect: Why are you here? Why and how have you thought (or not!) about time as it infuses or shapes your work? What are you already cooking? What ingredients have you brought with you? And would you like to make, in our time together?

Then we proceed.

Because, before you know it, we’ll be heading into Week 2.

And Week 2 is all about understanding how to slow down, how to stop, and how to think about and move within the moment.

THE INGREDIENTS.

Some of what you’ll be working with this week is what you’re bringing with you. (Your project, your current work) We will be starting small. We will expand out as we progress through the semester.

The idea this week is to spend some serious time and attention on a relatively small, focused object.

We will all be reading:

- (1) Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”
- (2) The discussion posts of at least two of your colleagues (it doesn’t matter which two)

PREPARE FOR CLASS.

Please make sure, asap, to sign up to co-lead discussion twice during the semester! You can sign up at the Google sheet. And see below!

GET IN THE KITCHEN: EXPLODED VIEW DIAGRAM

“To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’ (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.”

- Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 255

Benjamin’s text is concerned with a lot of things, but significantly among them is the significance of the idea of an individual unit of time: the event, the flash, the instant, the citable moment. We’re going to consider that in our seminar discussion, and to prepare for that we’re going to experiment with that in our writing and reading practice.

Before you can start experimenting with your ingredients, you have to understand them. In that spirit, this week's assignment is all about asking you to slow down, and to spend some time reflecting on what you're already bringing to the kitchen, the tools you have with you, the ingredients in your pantry.

To help you do that, we're going to focus on slow reading this week, and explode moments from two texts. Here's what you do:

1. Read the entirety of the Walter Benjamin text that's available on Canvas for you. (Use whatever process "read" means to you that allows you to come into generous conversation with the text, to make it matter to you, to bring your relationship with the text into generous conversation with your peers. For me, that means reading it at least twice. The first time through, I read it slowly and mark areas with a simple check that I want to go back to. The second time through, I read only the areas that I've marked, focusing on the moments of the text that I want to think more about. I leave ample time for this. Then, if I am preparing to talk or to write about the text, I will make notes to guide that conversation.) This is going to look deceptively short, but please start early, for reasons that will become clear, below.
2. Choose one section from Benjamin's text (I-XVIII, A-B) that seems particularly alive to you in its thinking about time and temporality, a section of the text that creates a space in which you'd like to dwell for a while.
3. Choose a moment from within that section – and this "moment" can be anything from a phrase to a sentence to the entire section, depending on your interest and what strikes you – and explode that moment. Read very very very slowly, break the moment into its constituent parts – its basic living components, *for you* – and do a close reading of them in a way that helps us see or appreciate something about those parts in a new way, so that when we put them back together again we understand something about the moment that we might not otherwise have done. We're aiming, here, for a kind of [exploded view diagram](#) in textual form (but don't get too hung up on the definition on the Wiki page). You do not have to be comprehensive, here: choose elements from your moment that particularly interest you, especially for what they seem to be saying or assuming about time.

For example, I might choose the following moment (emphasis mine to indicate the elements that I want to explode, here): "As **flowers turn toward the sun**, by dint of a secret heliotropism the past strives to turn toward the sun which is rising in **the sky of history**." (255). In exploding this moment for you, I might break this down and reflect thoughtfully and creatively on the following components, and see where they take me if I dwell with them for a while:

- The idea that history is a sky with a sun, and perhaps also with other stars, with planets, with constellations (What would it look like for us to write a history as a kind of guide to constellations? What are other implications of thinking about history as a sky? Is there a cycle of day and night? Etc.
- The idea that the past is a plant, the idea of the past as vegetal (What happens when we think about the past vegetally? How is that different from a creaturely understanding of the past? If the past is a flower, what happens if it doesn't get enough

sun, what would that mean? Can the flower of the past wilt? What kind of historical practice would involve cutting blooms of the past like a bouquet and displaying them, and at what cost? (Can I put this understanding of history into conversation with *The Intelligence of Flowers*? What would that look like?)

- Ok, so I could leave it there, or continue – what makes the heliotropism “secret”? why is there only one sun, why is it rising, and what are the implications? – depending on what felt like a generative stopping point for me. If I had time, because this is part of my practice (and this would look different, depending on what your practice is!) I might see about playing with a short story as a way to think with these ideas. But that’s only if I had oodles of time.
 - Ultimately, I would go back to the moment that I chose to explode and reread it, and perhaps the exercise I’ve just undertaken helps me to see new things in it.
4. Now, with the benefit of that generative reading, consider: does this help you to think differently about some aspect of your own work (ideally your major graduate project)?
 5. Please post the results of this exercise – the diagram itself, and your reflections on it – to the Week 2 discussion board **by Monday January 17th at 10 am**, so that the class has time to read them before class.
 6. Before class, please read **at least two** colleagues’ posts.

Have fun! No stress! Just open yourself up to the experiment, and see where it takes you!