

Review Article

Paris and Berlin: On City Streets and Loggias

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Towering over the city of Brussels, visible from almost anywhere on the ground and seemingly oblivious to its surroundings, the Palace of Justice is surely one of the most notorious buildings in Europe. With a twenty-four thousand ton dome of more than a hundred meters high and a built ground surface of more than twenty-five thousand square meters, it is bigger than St. Peter's Basilica in Rome and was for a long time considered the largest building in the world. Its construction took almost twenty years, from October 1866 until October 1883, sparking all kinds of legends about architect Joseph Poelaert losing his mind (and the construction plans along with it). Poelaert, in fact, had died in 1879 and thus did not even make it to the day of the building's inauguration.

Its enormous size and eclectic style are detrimental to the skyline of Brussels but they have spurred the imagination of various artists and writers. The Palace of Justice in Brussels, for instance, plays an important role in W. G. Sebald's novel *Austerlitz* (2001) and it is a key element in Francois Schuiten and Benoit Peeters's famous historic-futuristic graphic novel *Brüsel* (1992).¹ Somewhat unsurprisingly, Sebald describes it as 'a singular architectural monstrosity' and 'the largest accumulation of stone blocks anywhere in Europe'.²

At least one fascinating element in this building connects it to something that was hugely important to Walter Benjamin's views on the city and,

as we will see, illustrates important issues that go beyond it: the use of iron and steel in the construction of large buildings. A mere ten years before the construction of the Palace of Justice commenced, in 1856, the Bessemer converter was invented, an oxygen furnace that converts iron into large and commercially interesting quantities of steel and thereby drastically revolutionised the architecture of big buildings. Ample use of this new technique and these new materials was made for the construction of the Palace of Justice but, strangely, none of the iron and steelwork was kept visible. Huge blocks of stone cover up the steel and iron, confining these newest of all materials to the darkest of areas within the building's internal structure.

Benjamin's interpretation of Paris as the so-called 'capital of modernity' helps us to understand what was truly going on in such instances. For in his essay 'Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century (Exposé of 1935)', Benjamin states that 'iron is avoided in home construction but used in arcades, exhibition halls, train stations – buildings that serve transitory purposes'. The invisibility of steel and iron in the Palace of Justice, in other words, can be read as a disavowal of any semblance of transitoriness, specifically because this building needed to be presented as a genuine *monument* to what is just and right (it is, after all, a *palace* of justice).³ The visibility of steel and iron, that is, could have been regarded as detrimental to the self-presentation of the state as an *absolute* power.

Picking up on such examples, this review article will investigate a conceptual duality central to two of Benjamin's works: the essay on Paris mentioned above and his autobiographical text *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (1932–1938). On the one hand, Benjamin renders numerous analyses and descriptions of buildings and experiences that present themselves as absolute and internally unified, giving the impression of being autonomous and immutable. On the other hand, Benjamin focuses objects and perceptions that present themselves as transient and in flux and are therefore experienced as contingent and incomplete. These latter objects and perceptions derive their significance from something that is inevitably *external*.

The first striking feature of the essays, *Berlin Childhood around 1900* and 'Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century' is that both titles combine a *spatial* reference (in both cases a city) with a *temporal* one. This is not at all a coincidence since it reveals something that is dear to Benjamin's heart, namely the idea that the true meaning of a given historical period, in this case the nineteenth century, can only come to the surface through the careful analysis of what was left behind in space, that is, buildings and streets. In line with what Benjamin, in his unfinished magnum opus *The Arcades Project*, describes as 'dialectical images', in both the Berlin and the Paris essays it is made clear that, in his view, the past only becomes legible through the present, that is, through something that it cannot in any way have anticipated and that inevitably remains alien to it. Benjamin writes:

It is not that what is past [*das Vergangene*] casts its light on what is present [*das Gegenwärtige*], or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been [*das Gewesene*] comes together in a flash [*blitzhaft*] with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill [*Dialektik Im Stillstand*]. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal

[*rein zeitliche*], the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural [*bildlicher*].⁴

For Benjamin, the genuine meaning of the past can only be understood by turning to what has remained behind and to that which has outlived its own moment.⁵ This notion of 'remains' can be understood in the double sense of the word. Firstly in the sense that the German art historian Aby Warburg (1866–1929), who was an important influence on Benjamin, makes of it, that is, as a *Nachleben* or 'survival' of the past within the present and as a force that is, against all odds, still at work in and through it. 'Historical "understanding"', writes Benjamin, 'is to be grasped, in principle, as an afterlife of that which is understood'.⁶

Secondly, one can understand the concept of 'remains' in a more common-sensical manner, namely as denoting something that is purely material, that is, as a left over or residue. For Benjamin true meaning resides not in what is immediately understood or experienced as meaningful but in those things, remnants, ruins, detritus, that are revealed as not *being* meaningful *in themselves* but as *having been made meaningful* by way of the unsuspected presence of something *external*. In a 1935 letter to Gershom Scholem, for instance, Benjamin writes that it is possible to 'capture an image of history' in 'the detritus of present existence'.⁷ Similarly, in *The Arcades Project*, he writes that 'the interest which the materialist historian takes in the past is always, in part, a vital interest in its *being* past – in its having ceased to exist, its being essentially dead'.⁸

Upon first view, such a connection of time and space (time becoming spatial) is reminiscent of Benjamin's famous definition of the aura as 'a strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be'.⁹ It may even evoke the famous

scene in Richard Wagner's *Parsifal* (1882) when the old knight Gurnemanz leads Parsifal, *der Reine Tor* (the immaculate Fool), to the site of the Holy Grail Ritual and the two men cross an enormous distance in but a mere number of steps. What is at stake in these two examples, however, is the opposite of what is at stake in the connection of time and space in the Berlin and Paris essays. In the concept of the aura, and in Wagner's opera, the dynamic of a time-becoming-spatial entails a dynamic of *purification*. In such instances, a given object, however banal it may be, resonates with an ambiguity of meaning and with a strange distance that renders it untouchable and seemingly turns it into an autonomous unity. What matters in the Berlin and Paris essays, conversely, are experiences (in the first essay individual ones, in the second collective ones) that are incredibly *precise* and *distinct*. These experiences have a presence that is acutely perceived by or manifest to the Self and, moreover, they are revealed as *incomplete* and as *unfulfilled*.

An example drawn from the Berlin text can make clear what is at stake here. In a paragraph titled 'News of a Death' Benjamin recalls an experience from his youth that can be called 'an involuntary memory in reverse', that is, an experience that, at the moment of its taking place, was already perceived to refer forward to a future moment of legibility. Benjamin writes:

I may have been five years old at the time. One evening [...] my father appeared [...] [and] gave me the news of a cousin's death. I did not take in everything he said. But I did take special note, that evening, of my room, as though I were aware that one day I would again be faced with trouble there. I was already well into adulthood when I learned that the cause of the cousin's death had been syphilis.¹⁰

What is remarkable in this example is that a moment in time, in the past, seems to have migrated to a place in space, namely a room, and that it, for

that reason, has managed to keep itself intact. In other words, the part of information that Benjamin's father left out of the story, the cause of the nephew's death, is not at all absent from Benjamin's memory but, to the contrary, it has become an element of 'excess' in the past or a dimension of 'too much' within history that has by that token managed to survive all the way until the present. To recall his memories, therefore, Benjamin has to turn to material things that have nothing to do with what is truly at stake in the story and somehow retrieves, in and from these objects (which are hardly interesting in themselves and outlive the visit of the father), that which is most essential to this visit.

Two things are important here. Firstly, a Proustian element rings throughout Benjamin's memoirs. What is truly meaningful to the Self cannot but come as a shock to it. The most significant form of memory is considered that type of memory that seemingly comes from without, not having been appropriated by the narrative individuals tell about themselves and build their identities from. What genuinely speaks to the self is thus believed to be *heterogeneous* to it: it does not seem to originate in the same place as our conscious ego but it has seemingly survived of its own accord – *alongside* but not mastered by the faculty of our voluntary memories.

Secondly, this past that has preserved itself in, as Gilles Deleuze would have it, a 'pure' state, has managed to do exactly this because it has become displaced, that is, because it has lost its most proper abode and because it was, instead, kept or maintained by a material medium it obviously does not have a natural connection with.¹¹ For this reason, such moments of the past resonate with a sense of dislocation, of incompleteness or a lack of fulfillment: they are not autonomous or unified, not enclosed in themselves, but they are still, for some reason or another, at work or dynamic. Such moments of the past have not simply passed: they

are still in movement and they have the power to affect things and moments that they seemingly have no affinity with at all.

The same way of thinking underlies the Paris essay where the experiences analyzed by Benjamin are collective and the past that is commemorated is no longer a private or individual one. In the Paris text as well, what is at stake is not the past 'as it has been' but the past to the extent that it still is, history to the extent that it is still at work within the present. 'A given state of affairs', writes Benjamin somewhere, 'becomes historical posthumously, as it were through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years'.¹²

The manner in which the nineteenth century *becomes* historical, in the twentieth century, is determined by the material remains that it has left behind; not on account of the initial grandeur of its buildings and the original splendor of its avenues but through the ruins of the former and through the over-used and worn-out state of the latter. Thus, on a collective level as well, what is truly meaningful first comes as a shock to the self-understanding of a given state of affairs and, in the public realm as well, it is perceived as residual, that is to say, as a dimension of 'excess' or as a 'too-much' of the past. It is for this reason that Benjamin introduces, in the Paris text as well, the view that certain technical inventions create things that are, in origin, artistic but subsequently 'outgrow' the context of art and cannot be fully absorbed by it. In the Paris text we see something that is similar to the way in which, in the Berlin text, little five-year-old Walter did not absorb all of what is father told him but thereby left open a dimension of too-much in the past through which it became unfulfilled and could therefore subsist all the way into the present.

Benjamin writes that 'architecture, with the first appearance of iron construction begins to outgrow

art' and uses iron as that element of excess which is to be found within the past but is not absorbed by it and thus allows it to survive until the present.¹³ For Benjamin, it is important to realise that our understanding of the nineteenth century as a historical force is tied to an analysis of these things that cannot be reduced to the period in which they originated: what is at stake is to understand the meaning of buildings, images, texts and so forth, however old they may be, as still unfinished and open to change and to grant them a renewed life and significance through our interpretations and readings of them. This is why he emphasises that steel and iron are important because they are 'transitory' (they are used for tracks and roads, that is, for things that serve as a mere gateway for other things), why he focuses on the idea that glass is indispensable because one cannot leave behind traces on it (glass does not have a status of its own: it is a medium, both opening up to external reality and shielding us from it), why he makes so much of the invention of photography (capable of 'making' discoveries: a photographic image is no mere registration but it creates something novel and this something is a part of reality) and, most important of all, why he named his unfinished magnum opus *Passagen-Werk*.

The English translation of this book, *The Arcades Project*, is misleading because it misses both the idea of movement and transition (*Passage*) and the idea that such change and flux can be 'put to work', that is to say, that movement and transition are not mere chaos or differentiation but that a specific type of significance can be retrieved from *within* it. The *Werk* in *Passagen-Werk* denotes that what is in movement or transition is not by that token to be reduced to mere variation or change. What is at stake is the discovery that what is in movement can for that reason create a network of relations and connections with other things and only in this way actualise its meaning. Of central importance to *The Arcades Project* are these phenomena from

the nineteenth century that are not *reducible* to their past-ness because they have somehow survived into the twentieth century (and continue to survive into the twenty-first century). Benjamin is, in other words, drawn to phenomena that, through this survival and on account of these alterations, make legible or understandable what was most essential to the nineteenth century and, moreover, what might still be of crucial importance to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. For Benjamin, solely what is excessive and residual is still unfulfilled and open to change and can therefore render an experience of the past that is truly meaningful or significant to the present. But this can only happen on the condition that we find the means to really grasp such experiences and develop the tools to understand and comprehend them for what they are.

Now, the question arises: what spaces, in both the Berlin and Paris texts, are most equipped as the starting point for this quest to discover meaning and significance from *within* change and movement? In the Berlin text, Benjamin focuses on the loggia. The loggia, Benjamin emphasizes, is a type of covered balcony that is to be regarded as part of *both* the interior and the exterior of an apartment. As Benjamin writes, loggias 'mark the outer limit of the Berliner's lodging' and they both grant the lodger a view on the hustle and bustle of the outside world, while also protecting him from this seeming chaos.¹⁴ It is telling that Benjamin describes the loggia at the outset of his biographical essay because it denotes a viewpoint from which, indeed, things and experiences that are alive and unfinished, in movement and still changeable can *nevertheless* be studied, understood and made meaningful. A loggia 'allows space and time [to] come into their own' because it is sufficiently isolated from outside forces to not get fully caught up in them, yet it is also sufficiently immanent to them to make a viewpoint possible that releases one from all too rigid accounts of the Self and identities that are fixed and immobilised.¹⁵ The

loggias give 'solace' but this solace lies precisely in 'their uninhabitability' and it only works for someone 'who himself no longer has a proper abode', that is, for someone who has dared to distance himself from his normal self-understanding and is open to the feeling that something revealing about the ego can be found precisely in what lies outside of it.¹⁶

In the Paris text, this same duality underlies, of course, Benjamin's views on the arcades which, as covered streets, are a strange combination of both the private and the public sphere: as streets, they share in the dynamism, anonymity and unanticipated movement that mark the city, but, because they are covered, they do not merely signal chaos or change but they open up a circus of visibility and a festival of gazes in which phenomena and processes can be studied and made meaningful. The arcades thus constitute a 'world' in themselves but one that is 'miniaturised', that is, one that can be made to yield meaning *in* its very anonymity, contingency and multiplicity.

The most illustrative inhabitants of the arcades are, therefore, of course the *flâneur* and the solitary walker. In his review of Franz Hessel's *Spazieren in Berlin* (1929) Benjamin describes the city as 'a mnemonic for the lonely walker: it conjures up more than his childhood and youth [but also] more than its [that is, the city's] own history'.¹⁷ The *flâneur* submerges himself in the very randomness, arbitrariness and chaos of the city but he nevertheless meets it as endowed with a relevance to his own particular existence. The meaning encountered by the *flâneur* is therefore neither a quality of the city (it does not teach him new facts about the city) nor does it allow for a restored possession of the Self: it arises in the very movement that relates the city to the Self and vice versa and it remains permanently dis-lodged between both. The anonymous nature of the city is thus a part of the very experience of its being meaningful to the Self. Put differently, what

is so puzzling and overwhelming for the *flâneur* is not *what* he encounters in the city or *what* he learns about himself but the sentiment that something anonymous, collective and public like city life has *something at all* to say *about* his most intimate ego.

This same structure underlies the closing paragraph of the Berlin text, entitled 'Sexual Awakening'. *Berlin Childhood around 1900* starts with the relatively safe environment of the loggia but it drops the reader, at the end of the text, in the middle of the bustling life of a big city street. This environment is, however, in its very dynamism and life made meaningful because Benjamin describes how it is only by loosening one's firm grasp on one's surroundings and by allowing the outside world to break through the shell of one's whole self to firmly established identities that one's most intense desires can be awakened. 'In one of those streets I later roamed at night', Benjamin writes, 'in wanderings that knew no end, I was taken unawares by the awakening of the sex drive'.¹⁸ Describing the moment in which he understands that he will be irredeemably late for a Jewish New Year service, Benjamin discovers a moment of liberty and genuine freedom in the heart of the sentiment of being lost.

Suddenly, in the midst of my perplexity and dismay, I was overcome by a burning wave of anxiety ('Too late, I'll never make it to the synagogue!'), but also, at the very same moment and even before this other moment had ebbed, by a second wave, this one of utter indifference ('So be it – I don't care').¹⁹

The structure of pleasure and desire is here described as distinctly *non-auratic* because they relate to a reality that has lost all semblance of being self-enclosed or autonomous. What awakens one's desires is here described, moreover, as not self-identical or interesting in its own right, but as part of a movement of constant flux and change. 'The two waves', Benjamin writes, 'converged irresistibly in a dawning sensation of pleasure, wherein

the profanation of the holy day combined with the pandering of the street, which here, for the first time, gave me an inkling of the services it was prepared to render to awakened instincts'.²⁰ This movement, therefore, does trigger a feeling of anxiety but also, and at the very same moment, a sensation of pleasure because it provides proof for the irreducibility of the chance that the object of one's desire will at some point become available to the self.

Notes

1. Francois Schuiten and Benoit Peeters, *Brüsel* (the seventh volume of the chronicles). The story was published in *À Suivre* issues 158, 159, 160, 171, 172 and 173; from March 1991 to June 1992. The Casterman album was published in 1992.
2. W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Random House, 2001), 29. For more information about the Palace of Justice, see <http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5357/> (accessed on June 20, 2015)
3. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 4.
4. Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, N3,1.
5. For further context, see also Benjamin's essay 'On the Concept of History', trans. Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings* Vol. 4, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). In this way, as Friedlander writes, 'one might say that Benjamin brings together the two senses of "realizing" – realizing as making something real or actual on the one hand and recognizing or seeing something clearly on the other. This is strikingly put by emphasizing how knowledge of a historical object is not "knowledge about" it but actually part of being an object itself', in Eli Friedlander, *Walter Benjamin. A Philosophical Portrait* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 63.
6. Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, N2,3. For more information on the connection between Warburg and Benjamin, see, amongst other texts, Sigrid

- Weigel, 'Bildwissenschaft aus dem Geiste wahrer Philologie. Zur Odyssee des Trauerspielbuchs in der Kulturwissenschaftlichen Bibliothek Warburg'. *Walter Benjamin. Die Kreatur, das Heilige, die Bilder* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2008).
7. Walter Benjamin, *Briefe 2* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1978), 685.
 8. Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, J76a,4.
 9. Walter Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography' in *Selected Writings* Vol. 2, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 519.
 10. Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, transl. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 85–86.
 11. For Deleuze's ideas on the 'pure past' see his *Proust and Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (New York and London: Continuum, 2000), 59.
 12. Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', 397.
 13. Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 5. For more information on this issue, see Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).
 14. Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 42.
 15. Ibid.
 16. Ibid.
 17. Benjamin, *Selected Writings* Vol. 2, 262.
 18. Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 124.
 19. Ibid.
 20. Ibid.

Biography

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