

**The Urban Pedagogy of Walter Benjamin.
Lessons for the 21st Century**

Part 1

By

Stephen Dobson

ISBN: 1 904158 15 3
Price: £2.50 (p&p free)

First published in Great Britain 2002 by Goldsmiths College, University of London, New Cross, London SE14 6NW.

Copyright: Goldsmiths College, University of London and Stephen Dobson 2002.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means without the permission of the publishers or the authors concerned.

Further copies of this publication are available from CUCR, Goldsmiths College, London SE14 6NW.

The Urban Pedagogy of Walter Benjamin: Lessons for the 21st Century, Part 1

Preface

Walter Benjamin was a literary critic, essayist, translator, a collector of fine books and rare toys. His interests spanned Surrealism, Communism and theology. He grew up in Berlin at the turn of the 20th century, with Jewish parents. As an adult he visited and published travel accounts of Naples, Marseilles, Moscow and he came to know Paris intimately in the 1930s. He committed suicide in 1940, while attempting to escape from France as the Germans increased the tentacles of their occupation. Of his acquaintances, Brecht is probably the most famous, to scholars of the social sciences his at times fraught friendship with Adorno is often mentioned. He wrote essays on Kafka, Baudelaire, Brecht, Karl Kraus, technologies of mass reproduction, language, violence, photography, the storyteller and Surrealism. He wrote two academic dissertations, one on Goethe and one on allegory and its role in German tragedy. The latter was never accepted as his *habilitationsschrift* and resulted in his never qualifying as a university lecturer. He turned his attentions elsewhere: made a series of radio programs for children, retreated to libraries to research his never completed *Arcades Project* and wrote pieces for a number of journals.

With such a varied set of concerns it is not surprising that since his death he has attracted the attentions of several generations of professional scholars and political activists, including media specialists, linguists, committed revolutionaries, theologians and students of urbanism. Modernists, anti-modernists and post-modernists have tried to claim him for their respective causes. This collection thus appears as one further attempt to appropriate his work for a distinct cause, the study of culture in an urban environment, where the weighting is towards pedagogy, But, not a pedagogy by any means limited to classroom studies, instead one spilling over, into the education and experience of urban life. To become in short a handbook, constructed after the principle of montage, for those wishing to explore urban environments, intoxicated and inspired by Benjamin.

How might educationalists and those interested in the study of cultural life read the work of Walter Benjamin? His essays, aphorisms and unfinished texts span numerous themes and can easily take on the appearance of a fragmented and esoteric set of concerns. The following entries have been crafted with the intention of developing insights drawn from these fragments and telescoping them into the present. Thus, generating a rupture or shock as the subsequent confrontation stops the time of the present, as we live it today, and an opportunity is created for the instigation of the educationally new and memorable. It is a mimetic project looking to found dialectical images not upon the return of the “educationally same”, but on the return of the “educationally new”. A critical commentary then, but only on the premise that Benjamin can, or should work for our particular historical juncture and interest in the role of urban pedagogy, the pedagogue and cultural studies.

The essays in the three parts of this series vary in complexity, some pre-suppose a certain familiarity with the work of Benjamin. The accompanying critical dictionary of fragments, with entries at the beginning of each part in the series, is most clearly an introductory text presenting several of Benjamin's key concepts, as well as applying them to a selection of contemporary socio-educational issues. The intention in the three parts is to present a number of suggestions, rather than a definitive set of final statements, on an urban pedagogy and what might have been Benjamin's contribution to such a pedagogy for the 21st century.

Contents

Critical dictionary of fragments:

- Cracking the code
- Violence
- The influence of friends
- Reading
- Knowledge
- The giving and reception of counsel

Essay:

- Translation, pedagogy and the destructive character

Critical dictionary of fragments

Cracking the code Prior to the First World War, the young Benjamin was active in the German Youth Movement. Influenced by Wyneken's views on the school as a community and school reform, the Movement advocated 'no corporal punishment, but rather a teacher-pupil relationship based upon mutual respect.' (Benjamin, quoted in Brodersen, 1996) They envisaged a wider goal for education: education was to support and create a youth culture interested not in the reception of received traditions, but with shaping a new future utterly alien to the mentality associated with the one in existence. There was a certain amount of idealism in the movement, as it directed its attacks upon the parental home and conservative school traditions. Its goals were close to many similar European movements of the time. That is, the call for progressive education in various forms, some more limited to the classroom and others more insistent upon societal reform. These youth movements, however, lacked the wider goals of the revolutionary socialist movements that would attract the older, more mature Benjamin in the late 1920s.

Perhaps, it is the case that each generation seeks to rebel against its parental generation and the power it holds. In order to do this, youth must *crack the code*, which exerts a strangle hold on existing conditions. In its place they propose and actively enforce an alternative *code*. Various intellectual instruments and tools of a more practical character are enlisted for these acts of *code breaking* and *code creation*. For the young Benjamin the code to be cracked involved parental conservatism and the need for school reforms. Their intellectual resources were taken from the ideas of Wyneken and practically they organised their youth movement into working committees, held meetings and organised conferences.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the less youthful Benjamin sought to crack a different code, namely the dominant capitalist code. In pursuit of this goal and also as a resource for an alternative code he enlisted the insights of the Surrealists (to enervate the powers of the unconscious), Klages (with visual as opposed to purely conceptual knowledge), Communism (emphasising criticism of commodity fetishism). The practical tools he looked to support his code cracking and alternative were not necessarily Party membership, mass movements and revolution on the barricades. He seems not to have opposed such forms of activity, but was himself not a card carrying party member. Instead, he looked to the potential contained in different media: the newspaper (with space for the printing of the reader's letters and other contributions), photography (revealing the taken for granted movements of the disciplined factory worker's body at work and in motion) and film (the viewer could develop their critical rationality in the course of viewing).

In the 1960s, youth desired to crack the code maintaining sexual, social, racial and political oppressions. The code they offered as an alternative, like Benjamin in his pre-war days, took as its starting point the energies contained in youth movements. Student revolts were connected with movements of

rebellion in a number of sexual, social, racial and political spheres. The intellectual resources came from writers and theorists such as Mao on the Cultural Revolution, Marcuse on sexuality, one dimensional man, art and socialism, and Feminists such as Greer, who radicalised and socialised the individualistic and somewhat subjectivist, existential views of de Beauvoir. In practical terms, alternative collective life styles were proposed, encompassing popular music forms, smoking dope and living in environmentally friendly ways.

What then of today? What codes are being cracked and what new codes are being proposed as alternatives in their place? As with Benjamin in his pre-war days, the enervating energy for changing codes is found in youth movements and cultures. Two can be mentioned as examples. The first is hip hop, evolving in the U.S.A. in the late 1970s and 80s, and still exerting an ever stronger global influence. The code it cracked was that of complacency and passivity, which had socialised successive urban youth cultures into accepting unemployment and racial and ethnic oppression. The code it proposed in its place was a mixture of rap, music, dance and graffiti, where in some forms, the affirmation of an oppressed identity was countered by violent, sexist and gun-mediated activities. The hip hop code shared many parallels with Wagner's *gesamtkunstwerk*, embracing many forms of expression in a total, manifold sense. Hip hop has had, however, a greater street following, with a less elitist style of life in itself. Intellectually it developed its alternative code through pop artists such as Snoop Dogg and Ice-cube.

The second example is that of the internet which cracks the code of communication restricted to more asynchronic forms, such as the surface or air-flight transported letter. Its global linkage of computers founds and supports a code, which is potentially more synchronic and capable of overcoming the limits of space and time upon communication. Its intellectual resources seem to develop more organically on the basis of its users practices and intentions. Users who don't necessarily intend a reproduction of the norms dominant in face-to-face communication. There are however a number of parallels, as in the e-mail practice where messages are designed to *flame* and *insult* their recipients. This is paralleled by the face-to-face version of the open, raised-voice argument where the intention is to offend the other party.

What does all this have to with Benjamin and the question of an urban pedagogy? Could it be the case that Benjamin as a writer and also in his daily life as an urban flâneur, proposed and lived according to a strategy based upon cracking the codes of restrictive existing conditions, and proposing the creation of different alternative codes in their place. Code breaking then, as a way of unravelling the darkened labyrinth of existing urban society, and proposing in its place an equally demanding set of codes, which have to be mastered by their users, if they wish to gain entry and acceptance, as well as power, in the society of adult and fully qualified citizens. A pedagogy then. not merely for the classroom, but extended to the act of code breaking and making in the course of everyday urban life.

Bernstein (1971-73) understood the code-based character of the pedagogic process, he coined the term restricted codes and their opposite, elaborated codes. Likewise, Bourdieu talked of cultural capital as a master code governing pedagogic activity and societal recognition and access to power. But, they both underplayed, or perhaps even lacked Benjamin's insight that codes can change with each new generation, in a dialectical process of opposition, where the breaking of one code and the imposition of its successor can be a violent and turbulent affair. This means that if pedagogy is to have more than a descriptive task limited to exposing and confirming existing codes in society, it must have additionally a political and emancipatory project: the breaking and making of new codes in an urban environment.

Violence All parties, not least teachers, refuse to condone violence. But, as Benjamin noted a distinction must be drawn between so-called sanctioned violence based upon the power invested in state laws, such as those covering the 'limits of educational authority to punish', and unsanctioned violence, when revolutionary masses threaten the very framework of a society. (Benjamin, 1979, p134)

The problem for society is that violence is an inherent natural capacity 'de facto' at the disposal of the individual, something noted by Spinoza and implicit in the conclusions of Darwin's biology. Benjamin argues that this leads society to see 'violence in the hands of individuals as a danger undermining the legal system.' (Benjamin, 1979, p135)

Sanctioned violence is to Benjamin synonymous with the etui-man looking for comfort and the preservation of their bourgeois domestic interior against unsanctioned violence. (Benjamin, 1979, p158) To counter this bourgeois desire for the repetition and reproduction of the re-assuring *ever-same* he evokes the *destructive character*, who 'knows only one watchword: make room; only one activity: clearing away.' (p157) Of this character he notes:

The destructive character is young and cheerful. For destroying rejuvenates in clearing away the traces of our own age... the world is simplified when tested for its worthiness of destruction. (Benjamin, 1979, p158)

Educationally, the *destructive character's* value is revealed most clearly in their pursuit of the situation as opposed to the power of property, wealth and capitalist reproduction, 'some pass things down to posterity, by making them untouchable and thus conserving them, others pass on situations, by making them practicable and thus liquidating them.' (p158) With this awareness, Benjamin was a forerunner of the Parisian Situationists of the 1950-60s and their psycho-geographical colleagues who attacked the society of the spectacle. Benjamin, the Situationists and the *destructive character* shared the desire to interrupt the increasing tendency for capitalism to commodify events, performances and instigate the society of spectators entwined in the society of the spectacle. The interruption had as its goal to increase

participation and therefore break the passiveness of the spectator. Street disturbances, disobedient pupils in the classroom – they have their value.

The influence of friends Educationalists have always been anxious that their pupils were unreceptive and pacified by the knowledge taught. Take for example Dewey, well-known for his views on education and pragmatism, who sought to practically occupy pupils with sewing, carpentry and cooking. Acquiring skills through *learning by doing* was integral to an active reception and retention of knowledge, and it was also meant to instil a social spirit and a sense of community.

However, Dewey's strategy all too often leads to a reproduction of the status quo. Benjamin was an apologist for a different form of learning by doing. From his friend Brecht he learnt of the alienation effect, but without actually following his example and becoming a professional revolutionary. He learnt of the secrets of Judaism from his friend Gerhard Scholem without fulfilling his promise to join him in Palestine and complete his learning of Hebrew. Likewise, he listened patiently to the criticisms of his friend Adorno, but he made only slight alterations to, rather than abandoned, the emerging direction of his Arcades project. On one level, Benjamin appeared to have learnt from the example of his friends, to do as they suggested and threaten the status quo; on another level, he never fully adopted their examples, or realised their radical intentions. In such a manner, he limited the influence others had upon him as guides into new fields of disruptive knowledge, enlightenment and revolutionary commitment.

A strange learning by doing, where to do and to learn were separated. For Benjamin, learning by doing meant to be more a commentator of the radical and revolutionary deeds of others, than to be a doer of these actual deeds. And yet, to commentate was for him a form of intervention, and in this sense it represented a way of doing. He also learnt from his experiences of an extended visit to post-revolutionary Russia in the late 1920s. In his opinion, Russians editors were more than willing to encourage the written contributions of their readers:

The distinction between the author and public, which the bourgeois press maintains by artificial means, is beginning to disappear in the Soviet press. The reader is always prepared to become a writer (schreibender), in the sense of being one who describes (beschreibender) or prescribes (vorschbender). As an expert - not in any particular trade, perhaps, but anyway an expert on the subject of the job he happens to be in - he gains access to authorship... Authority to write is no longer founded in a specialist training but in a polytechnical one, and so becomes common property. (Benjamin, 1983a, p90)

Extending the application of this practice to our present situation, children as well as adults should be encouraged to write not only of their inclusion in the world of work on Saturdays, or their delivering newspapers on weekdays, but

also of their leisure time pursuits. Benjamin would have approved of the internet because it gives the child the chance to write and strike up friendships with fellow writers beyond the sphere of the workplace, the classroom and the jurisdiction of the employer, parent or teacher.

Readers, spectators and children are turned into *collaborators*. For Benjamin, and for Brecht in his reworking of epic theatre, it was essential that these collaborators shouldn't 'reproduce conditions', but disclose and uncover them. Action, adored by children, must be brought to a standstill in mid-course, so that the spectator is compelled 'to take up a position towards the action, and the actor to take up a position towards his part.' (Benjamin, 1983a, p100) The child as pupil thus gains the opportunity, training and authority to intervene in the course of events.

Reading So much educational effort expended through the centuries, with each successive generation learning, at times in a forced or secretive manner, to read books - works overburdened with text, emanating the aura of eternity and venerated accordingly. Benjamin identified a change:

Printing having found in the book a refuge in which to lead an autonomous existence, is pitilessly dragged out onto the street by advertisements and subjected to the brutal heteronomies of economic chaos. This is the hard schooling of its new form. If centuries ago it began gradually to lie down, passing from upright inscription to the manuscript resting on sloping desks before finally taking to bed in the printed book, it now begins just as slowly to rise again from the ground. The newspaper is read more in the vertical than in the horizontal plane, while film and advertisement force the printed word entirely into the dictatorial perpendicular. And before a child of our time finds his way clear to opening a book, his eyes have been exposed to such a blizzard of changing, colourful, conflicting letters that the chances of his penetrating the archaic stillness of the book are slight. (Benjamin, 1979, p62)

Accordingly, the return to the vertical has been embraced by capitalists advertising their commodities and by politicians marketing their allegiances and manifestoes in catchy captions. Teachers in the classroom are skeptical, reading the signs of the street is less easily controlled than reading from the blackboard. But, even they must admit that there exists a yet to be limited potential in the anarchist writing of graffiti artists and street gangs who mark their territory for future generations of psycho-geographers. This is to say nothing of the young surfer's of the global net, who read from their screens (sometimes vertical and sometimes tilted or mobile upon their laps or palms) – and the teacher who struggles in vain to control this potentially anarchistic activity, whether it be textual or iconic.

Is resistance possible? The 'dictatorial perpendicular' at every opportunity 'penetrating the archaic stillness' of those seeking refuge in the book, or

even of those walking in the street, accosted by the advertisement. It is said that the painter Edvard Munch at the turn of the century, while walking in European cities would look to the ground – the impressions and look of others were too strong and threatening upon his imagination and composure. Vietnamese culture has talked of the impoliteness of making direct eye contact with figures of authority. In a photograph of Benjamin, the melancholy of his expression has attracted remarks – he too looks to the ground and away from the intrusiveness of the camera and viewer.

Knowledge As a German it is not surprising that Benjamin at first felt compelled to ground his view of knowledge in the framework of Kant. But, he was always critical of Kant's desire to limit knowledge and its truth to the certainty provided by universal categories held by the subject, in their encounter with the object transformed from an object-in-itself to an object-for-us.

He did agree with Kant that some knowledge was generated by the subject's own category determined perception of the object, but his argument was that Kant calculated his yield on too narrow a concept of experience. An experience too wedded to the 'cognizing consciousness' of the ego placed in front of the object. The boundaries of the sane, healthy, Euro-centric ego can be crossed to gain entry to the Other's experience of knowledge:

We know of primitive peoples of the so-called pre-animistic stage who identify themselves with sacred animals and plants and name themselves after them; we know of insane people who likewise identify themselves in part with objects of their perception, which are thus no longer objecta, "placed before" them; we know of sick people who do not relate the sensations of their bodies to themselves, but rather to other creatures, and of clairvoyants who at least claim to be able to feel the sensations of others as their own. (Benjamin, 1983a, p44)

In Benjamin's later work the consciousness of the bourgeois, healthy, sane ego was transgressed in search of access to knowledge and truth held by the proletarian mass and street dwellers normally considered part of the lumpenproletariat, such as rag pickers or prostitutes. It was therefore not accidental that while he was on the pay roll of the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt, drawing a small stipend, he was also associated with the Collège de Sociologie in Paris. From 1937-1939, intellectuals such as Bataille, Leiris, Caillois, along with Benjamin and others, met in a Latin Quarter Café dining room to discuss and investigate sacred, ritual moments when 'experiences outside the normal flow of existence' sought collective expression. (Clifford, 1988, p141) If the Institute demanded more traditional presentations of knowledge in the form of articles for its journal, the Collège made no such demands and allowed Benjamin to pursue his interest in other forms and sources of knowledge. Could this be a clue to understanding the ambitions of his Arcades project?

Benjamin therefore refused to confine knowledge to the safe, secure, propertied domain of the institutionalised (social) scientist, teacher and member of the bourgeoisie, where the role of subject and object were unthreatened. The chance that a person on the street might suddenly tap you on the shoulder and say, "I know you", means that other, potentially anonymous people, can have knowledge of you. The scientist, teacher and member of the bourgeoisie are not therefore the only personages with access to knowledge. What of the police who appear, as in Kafka's *The Trial*, without prior warning one morning? And Benjamin notes, we are startled, knowledge of the world suddenly revealed - not having had time to breakfast, not having therefore made the rupture between the nocturnal and the daytime worlds...the fasting man tells his dream as if he were talking in his sleep.' (Benjamin, 1979, p46)

The giving and reception of counsel The teacher lecturing to a lecture hall full of students can agree to the democratic demand that all should have the right to attend and learn. For Nietzsche this was bound to result in a lowering of standards, equality rather than quality, such that the presumed existence of a few students of excellence was eclipsed in the desire to meet societal demands for more and more qualified workers and civil servants. (Nietzsche, 1990)

Dewey, a favourite of pedagogues, argued that instead of the lecture hall or blackboard classroom teaching, where students might be bored, unengaged and hardly motivated to stay awake and learn, *learning by doing* should be the goal. Students, could then work in groups to solve in project form, problems posed by themselves or their teachers. The students were to actively search for and acquire their knowledge, with the ambition of consolidating it in newly mastered skills.

The arrival of the internet and different information technologies has increased the student's opportunity to search for knowledge. Hence, the increasing relevance of project work and problem solving as a learning strategy, where access to knowledge is a vital ingredient. These new (computer mediated) communication technologies also increase the teacher's ability to address a large number of students, either synchronically through video-conferencing to different locations and lecture halls/classrooms, or through the asynchronic storage of the lecture for a later point in time to suit a potentially infinite number of students.

Benjamin lived before the time of the internet and he posed the question of teaching differently. For him it was a question of the communication of experience. Not just any kind of experience, but experience communicated in story form and experience for which, the hearer would find a future use. To put it differently, it was a question of the teacher being able to offer counsel to the pupil in an individual manner. Individual in the sense that it accorded with the pupil's own particular life, viewed as an ongoing story for them and for those around them.

Benjamin added, however, that in twentieth century information-saturated society it was less easy to offer counsel:

In every case the storyteller is a man who has counsel...but if today "having counsel" is beginning to have an old-fashioned ring, this is because the communicability of experience is decreasing. After all, counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding. (Benjamin, 1992, p86)

Benjamin, writing in the 1930s viewed the rise of the newspaper as typical of information society, 'every morning it brings us news of the globe, yet we struggle to integrate it so that it is relevant for our daily lives'. (Benjamin, 1983, p112-113; 1990, p89) That is, we don't readily, or easily, make it into part of our experience and life story, so that we can in turn make use of it and communicate it as counsel at a later date.

For Benjamin, there was no point sitting in a lecture hall, or doing different projects, if the knowledge had the character of information and wasn't integrated into the individual's reservoir of experience. This was the problem for soldiers returning from the ravages of the First World War – poorer, not richer in experiences considered worth telling. (Benjamin, 1990, p84) Furthermore for Benjamin, a student being in a position to search freely on the internet and select the knowledge considered suitable for their own experiences - this would not in itself have been enough: would the student in the course of their search or on attaining the required knowledge - would they receive the counsel they desire, and then in turn be in a position to offer counsel? Counselling defined as the communication of something more than just knowledge of the lecture hall or the completed project. Namely the communication of experience, with experience turned into knowledge.

For Benjamin, this desire for counsel was the connecting link between the knowledge taught and desired by the teacher and the motivated student. And, this explains why he expressed sorrow at the demise of the storyteller who could give counsel. Searching for knowledge on your own on the internet, to complete a set project or learn a skill, is not then the same as receiving counsel from another. There are those who offer counselling services on the internet, but are they willing to listen to the whole of a person's story, of the particular context in which the person finds themselves? What if the counsellor on the internet charges by the minute, or limits their availability to certain times in the week or day?

Benjamin, in evoking the role of 'experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth', was undoubtedly looking back to a presumed golden age when Greeks, like Socrates, could hold dialogues with pupils or strangers in the street. Asking them questions and refusing to provide ready-made recipes and answers to their desire for counsel.

The dialogues of Socrates are presented in the form of unhurried dialogues, where Socrates shows a willingness in the course of the dialogue to admit that he might in fact have been mistaken and must revise a point of view. For example, in his dialogue with Cratylus on the origin of words, he argues that they arise in the naming of objects and actions according to their usage and nature. Later, Socrates has to revise this and admit that some names are derived from convention and traditional, so that the object or action can be recognised by the listener.

Some teachers utilising the internet and new information technologies want these technologies to increase the amount of dialogue they have with their students. They also believe that internet communication is more effective if there has at some earlier point in time been face to face communication between the parties involved. But, is it more effective communication which is desired, if by this we mean the quick and cost-effective attainment of knowledge and skills? What is arguably required, as Benjamin would insist, is the opportunity, as teacher, to give counsel in a slow, unhurried fashion, where experiences can be communicated in such a manner that they are only slowly accommodated to match the needs of the recipient. Accordingly, the recipient must be called upon to interpret the counsel given, they aren't to passively accept it as necessarily true and valid. And, if the knowledge has been received under the guidance of a counsellor, then there will be a greater probability that it can be communicated by its recipient to others, who have themselves benefited from experiencing the counsellor-counselled relationship.

So, has the arrival of new technologies changed the teacher's role and the demands made upon it? In the perspective of Benjamin's interest in counselling, communicating knowledge as experiences attuned to the ongoing story of the student, the teacher using the internet and new technologies as a medium will not necessarily be content with video conferencing to lecture halls, or setting students to independently work on projects to enhance and realise their *learning by doing*. They will still desire to enter in an unhurried dialogue with the student. This means that the teacher's role will demand not a new didactic, but the recovery and re-actualisation of the dialogue, as proposed and practiced by Socrates.

To bring about what has fashionably been called, *collaborative learning* through the medium of the computer. Popular at this moment as a term, collaborative learning is but a re-working and revaluation of the presence of Socrates to mean: a counsellor who contextualises, monitors, prompts and most importantly weaves the different threads of a person's life or of their knowledge into a story. (Sorensen, 1997, p72)

Put concisely, a pedagogy of dialogue based upon the communication of experiences and not information; where information stands for knowledge less easily, and never fully, integrated into the life story of its recipient.

Translation, pedagogy and the destructive character

Could it be that pedagogy is simply the question of translation between teacher and pupil: from the teacher's textbook to their spoken word, and from there again a translation to the exercise book of the pupil and their minds? Translation in the widest sense of the term, for pedagogues referring to the communication of texts, events and experience as knowledge between generations or between teacher and pupil, and building upon the experiences of what is more narrowly understood to be translation. Namely, the translation of languages, texts, linguistic utterances and their meanings. Put differently, could it be that the art of translation, as much as the knowledge contained in texts, events and experiences communicated, is what the educationalist should study? In a phrase the existential condition of the *pedagogue as translator*. And let it not be forgotten, the underlying, if under-stated assumption in the argument that follows is that, Benjamin in his urban wanderings, in his seeking the company of dramatists, Marxists, Surrealists, theologians, in his academic works was to all intensive purposes exploring this existential condition.

Directing the focus of the pedagogue towards translation between generations of knowledge contained in texts, events and experiences is further justified by the recognition that attaining knowledge of the original as it is actually brought forth in a foundational manner for the benefit of future generations is difficult, if not impossible. The original is always open to re-interpretation by future generations, it decays or the context of its original production and consumption change, the context of its present or future consumption may also differ. The original refuses to be fixed. (Cadava, 1997, p92) It's consumption and communication therefore requires a re-interpretation, or better still what could be called a translation. A continual translation without the revelation of an endpoint.

Part I: Respecting the foundational, original text, event or experience to be translated as knowledge

Benjamin wrote an essay, the *Task of the Translator*, where he argued that the translator's object of concern wasn't so much the information contained in the original, what we might call knowledge of the foundational text, event or experience as referent. The translator's object of concern was instead the language of the original. But, neither was the translator out to reproduce the language of the original in a new language with such mirror-like consistency and efficiency that the original's language should become obsolete.

He proposed the following:

The task of the translator consists in finding that intended effect (intentiona) upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original... The intention of the poet is spontaneous, primary, graphic; that of the translator is derivative, ultimate, ideational. (Benjamin, 1992, p76-77)

The translator should expose and echo how the poet has achieved his graphic experiences, hence the derivative project. (Jacobs, 1993, p137) Or, to put it differently and to extend the argument to the practice of the pedagogue, the translator and the pedagogue, should desire to echo and show the methods used by the original to communicate its content. And such an endeavour will of necessity lead to a focus on language itself. Hence Benjamin's point:

A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully. This may be achieved, above all, by a literal rendering of the syntax which proves words rather than sentences to be the primary element of the translator. For if the sentence is the wall before the language of the original, literalness is the arcade. (Benjamin, 1992, p79)

In other words, the translator works with the words of the original language, such that 'a literal rendering of the syntax' in a new language will permit an insight into precisely the language effects of the original and its content. Hence his view that the sentences of the original are in fact a wall or barrier preventing a deeper contact with the original language. It is necessary to break down these sentences and reconstruct them through a literal syntax (ordering) in the new language. Such a literal syntax will reveal language, that of the original and of the new, not to be a walled, restrictive barrier, but an arcade permitting numerous encounters and effects.

Steiner is skeptical of Benjamin's literal translation because he understands Benjamin's goal as the pursuit of the spirit of the original. Nevertheless, he seems to agree on the importance of emphasising the necessity of a dislocation between the original and the translation, and if anything suggests precisely some essence or spirit of the original. His definition of the 'supreme translation' therefore emphasises the importance of the translation being similar to, rather than the same as the original:

Supreme translation... it can illuminate the original, compelling it, as it were, into greater clarity and impact... by deploying visibly, elements of connotation, of overtone and undertone, latencies of significance, affinities with other texts and cultures or defining contrasts with these – all of which are present, are 'there' in the original from the outset but may not have been fully declared. (Steiner, 1996, p206)

To summarise, the translator, and by extending the argument, the *pedagogue as translator* concerned to translate texts, events or experiences as knowledge for a new generation, should according to Benjamin concern themselves with echoing and showing the methods of the original. Through literalness for example, the intention to reproduce in mirror-like fashion and make obsolete the individual language would be thwarted. The original language and the new language would then remain separate, and the content

of the original language would also have its own place, connected more directly with the original language and more indirectly with the new language.

To repeat, should the pedagogue therefore attempt to make themselves invisible and let the light of the original shine ever more brightly? Drawing on Benjamin's line of argument the answer would be that this could only be desirable if the pedagogue intended to reproduce totally the language and content of the original in the new teaching language and context. And this is impossible, to begin with, the context of the now will never exactly mirror that of the original. One argument in support of this is that there can be no eternal return (Nietzsche) or return of the ever same (Benjamin), which is other than a mythical illusion designed to deny the flow of time and history. Hence the view that the original and the translation should remain, for the pedagogue, as two recognisably different entities, separated by context and also by time.

And yet, the pedagogue might regard their task differently: as analogous to the professional translator working to translate a contract of law for a foreign company, or, a person desiring that their school diplomas should be translated to assist their application to a foreign university, such that the content of the text is important. The pedagogue with such tasks of translation in mind then has to strive to make themselves and the difference between their text and the foundation text invisible. It may be the case that the translation Benjamin had in mind dealt not with meeting the pragmatic demands of the capitalist in an enterprise or the university registrar, but with the less overtly utilitarian demands of the aesthetic work of art. The subtitle of his essay on the translator was *an Introduction to the Translation of Baudelaire's Tableaux Parisiens*.

If this is correct, the pedagogue is therefore faced with a choice: to translate and strive not to overlap and make obsolete the language and content of the original. That is, a goal whereby the teacher is determined to leave their mark upon the original and mark their differentness. Alternatively, the pedagogue must strive to leave no trace of their presence: to communicate both the language and content of the original with such a strength and intensity that the flame of independent identity uttering them has been extinguished.

The latter type of pedagogue may provide a path into Benjamin's reflections on the destructive character, 'the destructive character obliterates even the traces of destruction'. (1979, p158) Take for example the following experience: some may have experienced teachers who communicated knowledge and experience we have had cause to return to at a later date, but can't remember their names or faces. All that remained was the aura of the original and not a mark of the translation or the translator.

To strive after not leaving a mark of presence upon the translated and communicated knowledge in such a manner will require a destructive act in the sense that the pedagogue or translator must actively destroy their presence. But, it can also be argued that the destructive character is also necessary where the teacher as translator desires to leave their mark of differentness on the original. In this latter case, the distancing from the original and its inclusion in a new language, text or for a new generation will

destroy the real or imagined context of the original to make a space for the context of the new one. Older or previous meanings and turns of phrase may also have to be destroyed in the process of wrestling this space and context for the new translation.

As Nietzsche put it, it is a case of creative destruction, and this will then characterise the task of the translator and *pedagogue as translator*.

...the destruction of phenomena, now appear necessary to us, in view of the excess of countless forms of existence which force and push one another into life...(Nietzsche, 1969, p104)

However, it is important to note that this destruction in order to create doesn't necessarily have to lead to the final imposition or choice of one new version to the exclusion of all alternatives. The necessary choice of a new version is always re-negotiable at a later point in time. Or, to put it differently the closure is never permanent. In Benjamin's phrase(1979), perhaps inspired by Nietzsche, 'the destructive character sees nothing as permanent...no vision...few needs, and the least of them is to know what will replace what has been destroyed.'

This has not stopped those who have regarded the *creative destruction* involved in the translation of and communication of knowledge across generations as a type of nation building project, if by nation it is meant an enclosed set of meanings and delimited experiences, that is, the imposition of a unity founded upon a closure for socio-political purposes. For example, to Germanise the foreign and thereby create a culture and tradition more in keeping with the everyday needs of Germans lay behind Luther's translation of the Bible, 'to translate was for Luther to Germanise'. (Ulriksen, 1991, p 208) But, this maybe more of an ambition and stated goal than a realised project. With Luther's Bible, different interpretations of the text arose and with them the desire for new translations.

In other words, each translation will be the desire to create a space for the new translation, at the same time as this new translation, however momentary, in its very emergence leads to a certain closure. Heidegger called such a presencing a clearing of the space of Being(Ge-Stell – letting-come-forth-here), and he connected it with the desire for closure and concealment at the same time, the 'conflict of clearing and concealing'. (Heidegger, 1971, p55, 84) It is precisely this concealment as closure, which Benjamin (1971) would deny, 'the destructive character sees nothing as permanent'. Respect for the foundational, original text, event or experience to be translated as knowledge therefore entails a number of choices about destructive intentions and *the pedagogue as translator's* intention to erase or alternatively mark their presence.

Part II: the question of the untranslatable

To connect the actions of the translator and the *pedagogue as translator* with violence, destruction and the obliteration of traces would be anathema to

either of these figures as professional occupations, even though there might be talk of a *creative destruction*. Their argument would be that to teach/translate can hardly involve destruction and all its connotations of undesired force and will to power; on the contrary it involves creation, in an ever more distilled and cultured manner. But to side-step their argument somewhat, connecting destruction and violence with pedagogy and translation is to draw attention to the role played by the emotions.

In most discussions of translation the emotions engaged in the activity are brushed over. Thus, in typical fashion Paz directs attention to the question as to whether everything is translatable. His conclusion:

...translation of the denotative meanings of a text is possible; on the one hand, opinion is near unanimous that translation of the connotative meanings is impossible...I confess that this idea repels me...the lists of words are different but the context, emotion, and meaning are analogous... Hugo and Unamuno show that connotative meanings can be preserved, if the translator-poet succeeds in reproducing the verbal situation, the poetic context in which they are set... similar effects with different means. (Paz, 1991, p190-191, 196)

Apparently addressing the issue of the emotions, he does in fact seem to leave untouched one of the most important emotions, and it provides the implicit background for his comments. This is namely a certain *anxiety* that there might be texts, events and experiences which are untranslatable as knowledge. The translator, and by extension the *pedagogue as translator*, become then the first to encounter the foreign words, culture and knowledge and thus the first to meet the presence of this *anxiety*. As a consequence, much responsibility rests upon their shoulders to alleviate this *anxiety*. This is how I would like to read Paz's comments on the act and art of translation and also by extension the activity of pedagogy.

Of course, there have been others who have met this challenge and *anxiety* head on and refused to find arguments or means to alleviate its emotional force and consequences. Joyce in *Finnegans Wake* is a case in point. A text which draws upon over sixty different languages. Instead of translating and removing their mutual presence and the formation of one text in one master language he follows several strategies, such as crafting portmanteau words comprising many mother tongues. Mother tongues of course in this context is a misnomer. Joyce lets the many languages run riot, like disobedient and rebellious pupils in a classroom where the teacher is absent. Joyce thus refuses to translate one language, culture and knowledge into another. And there are no indications of his feeling overwhelmed by an *anxiety* for the untranslatable and the cultural imperative for its control and discipline.

Here is an example from the scene in the book, where the children in the act of doing their homework reflect upon history as the movement of conflict and war, sexual intrigues and the motive of money or profit:

da, da, of Sire Jeallyous Seizer, that gamely torskmester, with his duo of druidesses in ready money rompers...(Joyce, 1975, p271)

(From the Russian *da* means yes; *Jeallyous Seizer* is a pun on Julius Caesar immersed in jealous intrigues; *gamely* meaning in the game of, but also from the Danish meaning the old man; *torskmester* meaning task, master and leader, but also meaning cod master and fisherman; and *money rompers* referring to the role of money as a motive in history, as well as sexual desire in *rompers*, revealed in one of Joyces' notebooks as connected with a woman's skirt)

If anything, Joyce seems to enjoy the experience of unresolved difficulties in the encounter between different cultures, languages and generations. A second example can stand as a further illustration, this time taken from his earlier novel *Ulysses*. Instead of the Catholic belief in *transubstantiation*, a form of translation in itself, whereby bread and wine in the Eucharist actually become the body and blood of Christ, and instead of *consubstantiation*, a refusal of translation, favoured by Lutherians, where the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are of the same substance, but result in bread and wine co-existing rather than becoming the body and blood of Christ, Joyce favours his own variant, namely *substantiality*. In his novel, *Ulysses*, this is found in the debasement of the substance of bread and wine through episodes of bestiality. Specifically, in a discussion of the Virgin Mary's immaculate conception and Léo Taxil's view that Mary's pregnancy could be traced to copulation with a sacred pigeon. (see the Oxen Episode in *Ulysses*. Joyce, 1992)

So, long before he completed *Finnegans Wake*, it seems Joyce envisaged not the translation of substances into the one and same substance (for example, in our context, the pedagogue's belief in a mirror-like translation, what Benjamin warned against) or their co-existence despite the sharing of some substance (for example, in the context of pedagogy this could be the pedagogue or father/mother's recognition that the next generation belong to the same culture or linguistic group, but won't receive through translation an exact reproduction of its texts, events and experiences as knowledge), but their debasement, or to put it differently the necessity of respecting differentness prior to the potential debasement or decay of one or both of the substances in their encounter.

Joyce was therefore throwing down the gauntlet and challenging those who feared the *anxiety* of the untranslatable. In the context of the *pedagogue as translator*, Joyce met this challenge not in the view that texts, events and experience as knowledge from another time was absolutely incomprehensible, or that contemporary society can have no insight into how things really were, rather he looked to the mixing of languages used to represent these events and how this might give a fuzzy, clouded conception open to dispute. But, in refusing a mirror-like translation or its opposite, of an absolute difference between the text/event/experience and its translation as knowledge, he was also refusing Paz's confidence that the denotative, emotive and connotative could be translated to achieve 'similar effects with different means'. Where Paz desired to overcome the untranslatable and the

implicit *anxiety* presented by the threat of the untranslatable, Joyce lets language communicate the approach towards - without falling into it - the abyss of untranslatable knowledge of texts, events and experiences between generations and people.

This mixing of languages may be enjoyable and not a source of *anxiety*, it may also represent how languages develop by borrowing and transforming words and phrases, but the suspicion is that Joyce on occasions actually enters the abyss of the untranslatable. And, once in this abyss it is doubtful if people will be able to communicate with each other at all. Instead of a pedagogy translating texts, events and experiences as knowledge between generations, the student and the teacher will remain apart in their separate worlds. The result will, then not be a dissemination of knowledge and insight for the benefit of the student and coming generations, but the isolation of students and their potential stagnation - unless some form of Rousseau inspired perspective on learning naturally and independently is promoted.

Part III: Translation as experience

What needs to be addressed, and even here perhaps Benjamin takes it for granted, is the very experience of translating and what it might mean for the translator and the *pedagogue as translator*. I shall argue that to translate, and by extension the activity of the *pedagogue as translator*, involves a mix of five far from exclusive experiences.¹ Two of the five experiences of translating have already been discussed above. Firstly, the translator having to make choices on their degree of anonymity in the language and content of knowledge communicated; and secondly coming to terms with the not necessarily removable presence of an emotion of *anxiety* connected with the possibility of untranslatable texts, events and experience as knowledge.

Both of these experiences will carry with them consequences for the *pedagogue as translator*. If the pedagogue attempts to erase their presence then students might under-estimate or neglect their role as guides into the acquisition of this translated knowledge. In other words, to erase their presence might undermine the respect and authority which students have of them. Alternatively, the pedagogue desiring to leave a personal mark upon the knowledge of texts, events and experiences translated might face a different, almost apposite consequence. Namely, that the pedagogue's presence takes over and eclipses the very knowledge translated. Secondly, if the pedagogue expresses their *anxiety* over the threat of the untranslatable, then the student might adopt this *anxiety* themselves, or, alternatively lose respect for a pedagogue regarded as too emotional and subjective, lacking in the ability to deal objectively with knowledge.

The act of translating as both translator and pedagogue also involves a third experience. This is anger or perhaps even resentment, to use Nietzsche's term. For Nietzsche (1969) resentment was found in the emotional condition

¹ The criteria for their selection is based upon my inductive experiences of translating over a number of years, predominantly involving texts from Norwegian into English.

of a subordinate who plans and cultivates projects of revenge upon those leaders above them who have acted unfairly towards them or set them tasks which they regard as unjustified. The person consumed by resentment becomes incapable of acting spontaneously.

Anybody who translates a demanding text where the writer or speaker is not present risks feeling a certain anger towards the writer of the text who it is felt hasn't made the same choices that as translator, are regarded as obvious and necessary. Alternatively, the translator might feel overwhelmed by the sheer brilliance of the text and that it is impossible to produce even the 'similar effect with different means' suggested by Paz. As a consequence the translator and *pedagogue as translator* will experience a feeling of resentment towards the author as a source of anger or admiration.

However disquieting and unsettling the feelings of anger, admiration and resentment experienced in the course of the act of translating might be, it is not necessarily the case that they should be removed. It is arguably better that the translator is emotionally engaged in the perpetual attempt to create 'similar effects with different means'. If the translator and *pedagogue as translator* is emotionally cold to the text, the recipient of their efforts may sense a lack of engagement and interest and hence reproduce this rather than the intended effect of the original writer or speaker. In other words, the pedagogue's lack of engagement will result in a lack of engagement in the student, and the latter will lack a motivation to accept the knowledge communicated by the pedagogue.

The fourth experience of translating varies according to whether the task is the translation of a written text or the simultaneous translation of a verbal utterance. In the former case, the *pedagogue as translator* may work alone and face the experience of isolation. In the latter case, the translator may work in the presence of others, such that translation becomes a visible and shared social activity. Of course, in the latter case, the student can witness the efforts of the pedagogue. This will provide for the foundation of learning by example and perhaps the opportunity to engage in a collaborative act of translating along with the pedagogue.

A variant of this translating alone and translating in a more collective and social context can be found in the pedagogue as translator who prior to the teaching activity makes a partial translation alone, only to later complete it in a collective manner with the students. Such a movement between isolation and sociability suggests the necessity of a fifth experience while translating. This is the experience of concentration. The translator of written texts often talks of how demanding it is to maintain concentration on the task at hand. The translator of verbal utterances also expresses the need to not let their concentration drop for a moment. It is thus, not without surprise that professional translators engaged in both these types of translating activity value their breaks and the chance to do a different activity.

To summarise, it is the case that the *pedagogue as translator* should accept the presence of emotions such as anxiety, anger, admiration and resentment when texts, events and experiences are translated and

communicated as knowledge to students. They should also negotiate the isolation – sociability dilemma and the anonymity –presence dilemma as they privately decide and prepare knowledge translated for its subsequent social dissemination. The *pedagogue as translator* will have the need for intermissions in teaching and in preparing lessons, when the company of others teachers may be sought.

Discussion

The main argument presented in this essay is that pedagogy is at base a question of translation, and more specifically the existential experience of translation. A point made by Paz:

To learn to speak is to learn to translate; when the child asks his mother the meaning of this word or that, he is really asking her to translate the unknown term into his language. In this sense, translation within a language is not essentially different from translation from one language into another...
(Paz, 1991, p184)

It has been argued in this sense that translation, referring in the narrow sense to language, texts, linguistic utterances and their meanings, and by extension to the activity of the *pedagogue as translator* with respect to texts, events and experiences as knowledge to be translated involves a related number of activities and experiences.

A number of points arise as points for additional discussion. First, Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, talked of a type of inner war in each individual between the instinct to love, 'perpetually attempting and achieving a renewal of life', and the death instinct assuring 'that the organism shall follow its own path to death'. (Freud, 1991, p311, 318). He also talked of the inner conflict between internalised disciplinary paternal and maternal figures, represented in the superego to use his terminology, and other instances in the psyche, such as the id and the ego. Potentially these Freudian ideas on the psyche's topology could be usefully re-conceptualised as a question of the translation of experiences and normative guidance and prohibitions between different instincts or different instances of the psyche. This would mean that the ego and id are forced to translate the imperatives and experiences of the superego, just as the instinct of love must be translated and come to terms with the instinct to kill or destroy. This would entail enlisting the pedagogue to map and understand translation as an intra-psyche phenomenon and not simply as an inter-psyche phenomenon between generations or between peer group members.

The point for discussion and research is therefore to widen the task of the *pedagogue as translator* to include not only inter but also intra-psyche phenomenon and experiences. And here, the understanding of Freud might have to be widened or criticised to include how the warring instincts or warring topological instances should also refer to the desire of the child to resist change from the known and familiar to the unknown and new imposed

by the internalised desires of the adult world and figures of authority such as the teacher. This is not to imply or argue for the view that every pedagogue should be versed in the world of psychology and psychiatry, but that the pedagogue should envisage and anticipate a widening of the sphere of their concerns to include the practice of translation between people, an inter-psyche activity, and also the practice of translation as an intra-psyche phenomenon.

A second issue of discussion is the argument that the pedagogue as translator's activity envisaged as emotionally weighted towards anxiety, admiration, anger and resentment, as a choice between sociability and isolation, as a destructive activity, as in general the social and experiential context of the activity, has ignored what translation is basically about. Namely, the translation of meanings from one language or generation to the next, and in this respect, the search for *metaphors* to replace those of the original and/or the creation of *metonymic* meanings to create chains of association. For example, refugees arrive in Norway and substitute new signifiers of meaning for known and familiar ones. For instance the Norwegian mountain hotel, used as a reception centre, becomes a metaphorical signifier of isolation in place of the Iranian coastal hotel in the homeland as a familiar signifier of pleasure. On the level of metonym, the red envelopes given by Vietnamese parents to their children at autumn parties signify larger, more inclusive, connected chains of meaning associated with the homeland, rites of passage into teenage years, happiness and good luck. Just as the metonym Bordeaux for Frenchmen is part of a chain of meaning associated Bordeaux as a place, as a colour, as a type of wine.

However, two extensions of this recognisably Lacanian framework are required. (Lacan, 1977) Firstly, metaphorical and metonymic systems of meaning are the site of hegemonic struggles. This is also the case when new signifiers of meanings arise: Norwegians and refugees themselves seek to consciously impose different meanings and signifiers in the struggle to define experiences. For example, in 1986 there was a sudden influx of Iranian asylum seekers into Norway. They were temporarily accommodated in expensive mountain hotels. The refugees disliked the hotels, regarding them as signifiers of isolation a long way from towns and other refugees and Norwegians. The Norwegian population refused such signifiers of meaning. To them mountain hotels were signifiers of luxury, privilege, peace and tranquillity.

Secondly, the concepts of metaphor and metonym are often applied to an analysis of signs, symbols and meanings divorced from their embodied connection with speakers and their life worlds That is, it is on the level of language that 'each word draws its meaning from all others.' (Merleau-Ponty, 1993: 117) Instead of this it is necessary to identify the corporeal medium used in the living of signifiers and their assignment of meaning, as well as the general context and activity into which they are being inserted and from which they have been taken.

To paraphrase the later Wittgenstein, as opposed to the earlier Wittgenstein (with his concern to limit each word to a specific meaning and picture of the

world), it is not meanings per se which become the focal point, a typical concern in a text-bound conception of translation, but their use in *language games* and accompanying *forms of life*:

...the multiplicity of language-games in the following examples, and in others:

Giving orders, and obeying them –

Describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements –

...Making a joke; telling it –

Solving a problem in practical arithmetic –

Translating from one language into another –

Asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying. (Wittgenstein, 1994 §. 23)

And, when the second extension is made, the activity of *the pedagogue as translator* is no longer restricted to a narrow definition based upon metaphoric and metonymic shifts of meaning on a textual plain. Translation and pedagogic activity then necessarily includes the topics that have been discussed: the emotions of those involved, such as anxiety, the violence of destructive characters attempting to create, the question of the sociability or isolation of those involved.

With this the argument of this paper reaches its main goal, a goal which was perhaps evident at the outset to those experienced in translating as an experience: the *pedagogue as translator* is an existential condition giving rise to language games and forms of life.

An illustration: The storyteller as an image of the *pedagogue as translator*

Benjamin in his essay, the *Storyteller*, traces the lineage of the storyteller from its verbal beginnings to its later textual form in the novel, 'which neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it'. (Benjamin, 1992, p87). He is somewhat ambivalent: with the First World War and its after effects he identifies a decline in the ability of people to tell stories, in the context of the previous discussion, this would be a decline in the ability to translate experiences for the following generation. He discusses how it is not only the content of World War I experiences which are considered less worthy of being communicated (stag inflation, accounts of war, poverty and so on); it is also the very act of communicating experience, in the context of our discussion the translation of experience, which is becoming difficult, distorted or thwarted. In his famous essay on the reproduction of art, which he was also working on at about the same time, such a development was connected with the manner in which different media competed over the opportunity to transform experience into new forms of consumption: the cinema film, the radio and the newspaper, to mention a few.

As suggested he was ambivalent about these developments, even if the decline of the story and the storyteller was imminent, he refused to give up a

belief in the potential which remained in the story and the activity of the storyteller. The storyteller always demonstrated an orientation towards practical interests: Hebel 'slipped (in) bits of scientific instruction for his readers', some inserted a moral. What all aspired to was the giving of counsel, in the words of Benjamin, 'counsel woven into the fabric of real life is wisdom'. (Benjamin, 1992, p86-87)

However the giving of counsel, in this context the activity of translating experience, is not as straightforward as it might seem. Consider the way one of Benjamin's sentences in this essay has been translated from the German into Norwegian and English. Or to put it differently, the consequences are far from without consequence:

In Benjamin's mother tongue (1961, p413):

Rat ist ja minder Antwort auf eine Frage als ein Vorschlag, die Fortsetzung einer (eben sich abrollenden) Geschichte angehend.

In English (Benjamin, 1992, p86) this has been translated as:

After all, counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding.

In Norwegian (Benjamin, 1991, p182), the German source has been translated as:

Et råd er jo ikke så mye svar på et spørsmål som et forslag som har å gjøre med fortsettelsen av en historie, som i alle fall går sin gang.

Note how the English translation has the phrase, 'which is just unfolding', which appears in the source German sentence as, 'eben sich abrollenden', meaning 'at any rate roll on', or, 'at any rate occur'. It is present in the Norwegian, 'som i alle fall går sin gang', which can refer to how the recipient's own story, their life as experience, will continue on a course to an end, even if the counsel is not heeded. In other words, what Benjamin seems to say, according to the Norwegian version, and which the English translation glosses as unfolding, is the manner in which counsel can be heeded or ignored, but irrespective, a person's life story will reach and move onwards to an end. So, even if the life story is unfolding, and the counsel ignored, it will reach an endpoint. This carries the wider implication that humans must acknowledge their fundamental mortality. And, talking of death and mortality - providing counsel upon it - is one of the things Benjamin explores in later sections of in his essay on the phenomenology of the storyteller.

Highlighting the two different translations might seem to be an insistence upon the content of the translation, in this case the presence or absence of a reference to a person's own life story with an endpoint. However, attention must also be directed to the manner in which the translators have formed the communicated sentence and thus also its experiential content. Here it is not so much a question of the literal translation of the German and preserving a

respect for its language, as Benjamin proposed. Neither is it a question of the untranslatable, the German phrase, 'eben sich abrollenden', received a translation. Nor is it a question of the translator's resentment or admiration for the source text, the mentioned and translated German phrase hardly gives rise to one of these motives.

What is at issue is the way in which translating is the opening up of different, often competing, horizons of meaning. It is to highlight the translator and their craft as wavering in commitment – having to make choices, selections and as a consequence omissions, glosses or additions. It is an illustration of what was referred to above as the translator and *pedagogue as translator's* character as committed or wavering in selection of one word or phrase rather than another. Thus, when Benjamin is translated in a different way in different languages, the point is not necessarily to arrive at the conclusion that one of the translations is correct and another incorrect and by implication false, but that his work is enriched in the ensuing discussion about the allocation of meaning and meanings. If meanings are multiplied, so too is our understanding of experience – and this is surely a goal for *the pedagogue as translator* who is seeking to communicate to new readers and generations. That is, to highlight the infinite expansion and enrichment of our language games and forms of life.

Bibliography

Walter Benjamin references:

- Benjamin, W.: *Illuminationen*. Ausgewählte Schriften. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1961.
- Benjamin, W.: The Destructive character (1931). In, *One-Way Street*, 1979
- Benjamin, W.: *Gesammelte Schriften*. (Edited by Schweppenhäuser and Rolf Tiedemann) Frankfurt: Frankfurt am Main, 1974-89.
- Benjamin, W.: *One-Way Street*. London: New Left Books, 1979.
- Benjamin, W.: *Charles Baudelaire. A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*. London: Verso Books, 1983.
- Benjamin, W.: *Understanding Brecht*. London: Verso, 1983a.
- Benjamin, W.: *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. London: Verso Books, 1985.
- Benjamin, W.: Central Park. In, *New German Critique*, Fall 1985a.
- Benjamin, W.: *Moscow Diary*. Edited by Smith, G. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1986.
- Benjamin, W.: Program of the Coming Philosophy. In, *Benjamin. Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*. Edited by Smith, G. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- Benjamin, W.: *Kunstverket i Reproduskjonsalderen og andre essays*. (Art in the Age of Reproduction and Other Essays) Oslo: Pax Forlag, 1991.
- Benjamin, W.: *Illuminations*. Contains essays: The Task of the Translator, The Storyteller, Theses on History. London: Fontana, 1992.
- Benjamin, W.: *Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994.
- Benjamin, W.: *The Arcades Project*. Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- Benjamin, W.: *Selected Writings vol 2. 1927-1934*, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999a.

Other references:

- Benjamin, A. and Osborne, P. (editors): *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy. Destruction and Experience*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Bernstein, B.: *Class, Codes and Control*. 3 volumes. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971-73.
- Brodersen, M.: *Walter Benjamin. A Biography*. London: Verso, 1996.
- Cadava, E.: *Words of Light. Theses on the Photography of History*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997.
- Clifford, J.: *The Predicament of Culture, Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988.
- Freud, S.: Beyond the Pleasure Principle. In, volume 11: *On Metapsychology*. London: Penguin books, 1991.
- Heidegger, M.: The Origin of the Work of Art. In, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, by Heidegger, M., New York: Harper and Row, 1971.

- Jacobs, C.: *Telling Time*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1993.
- Joyce, J.: *Finnegans Wake*. London: Faber and Faber, (1939)1975.
- Joyce, J.: *Ulysses*. London: Penguin, 1992.
- Lacan, J.: *Écrits. A Selection*. London: Routledge, 1977.
- Merleau-Ponty, M.: Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence. In, *Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*. Edited by Johnson, G. Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1993.
- Nietzsche, F.: *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*. New York: Vintage Books, 1969.
- Nietzsche, F.: *Twilight of the Idols*. London: Penguin Books, 1990.
- Paz, O.: Literature and Literalness. In, *Convergences. Essays on Art and Literature*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Pub., 1991.
- Sorensen, E.: *Learning in Virtual Contexts. Navigation, Interaction and Collaboration*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Volume 1. Aalborg University, Denmark, 1997.
- Steiner, G.: *No Passion Spent. Essays 1978-1996*. London: Faber and Faber, 1996.
- Ulriksen, S.: Oversettelse som Språk – og Kulturskapenede – Glimt fra en Historie. (Translation as Language – and Creating Culture – Glimpses from a History). In, Qvale, P. (ed.) *Det Umuliges Kunst. Om å Oversette* (The Impossible Art. Translating). Oslo: Aschehoug, 1991.
- Wittgenstein, L.: *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1994.

**The Urban Pedagogy of Walter Benjamin:
Lessons for the 21st Century**

Part 2

By

Stephen Dobson

ISBN: 1 904158 16 1
Price: £2.50 (p&p free)

First published in Great Britain 2002 by Goldsmiths College, University of London, New Cross, London SE14 6NW.

Copyright: Goldsmiths College, University of London and Stephen Dobson 2002.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means without the permission of the publishers or the authors concerned.

Further copies of this publication are available from CUCR, Goldsmiths College, London SE14 6NW.

Preface

In Part I, the emphasis was on Benjamin's understanding of language, on how his views of translation might have relevance to our contemporary desire to communicate across generations and cultures. Taking these interests in communication as given, Part II is devoted to the question of change. Specifically, to how Benjamin experienced and recognised change, and most importantly, how he prepared for its interruption. He suggested the term dialectical image as a tool to achieve this latter goal. To the question of who experiences this change one of the dictionary entries suggests that it is necessary to understand Benjamin's concept of the self. Also that, in order to understand in what direction change is going, that it is necessary to understand Benjamin's concept of home.

The essay in this Part takes up the question of violence. It is not viewed through dialectical images, which could have been a chosen strategy. Instead, the essay examines Benjamin's personal and political understanding of violence. But, the essay does more than re-visit Benjamin, it considers how relevant his reflections, dearly paid for in an attempted suicide in the early 1930s, might be to the contemporary violence we experience in urban and other contexts and to the much voiced debate on post-modernism.

Contents

Critical dictionary of fragments:

Dialectical images
Experience
Allegory
The self
Time
Home
Naming
The visual and the textual

Essay:

Contemporary Violence and Walter Benjamin's Conception of the
Destructive Character

Critical dictionary of fragments

Dialectical images Benjamin proposes dialectical images as a way of directing attention towards on the one hand, the human faculty to make images, and on the other hand the dialectical manner in which two or more opposing entities can be drawn together to bring about a shock with creative consequences. Thus, in the *Arcades Project* (1999) he suggests the following:

The dialectical image is a lightning flash. The Then must be held fast as it flashes its lightning image in the Now of recognisability. The rescue that is thus - and only thus - effected, can only take place for that which, in the next moment, is already lost. (9,7)

Telescoping of the past through the present. (7a, 3)

The materialist presentation of history leads the past to place the present in a critical condition. (7a, 5)

The shocking experience is meant to stop time and hence disrupt precisely, how the way 'things "just keep on going" is the catastrophe.' (9a,1)

But, dialectical images, acting and enervating more swiftly than the slowness of conceptual thought (in symbolism the image was able to bypass conceptual thought with its allegiance to universals and the paraphernalia of transcendentalism), are not limited only to a consciousness of time. Take for example his observations on Atget's surreal photographs of Paris:

Atget almost always passed by the 'great sights and so-called landmarks'; what he did not pass by was... the Paris courtyards, where from night to morning the hand-carts stand in serried ranks; or the tables after people have finished eating and left, the dishes not yet cleared away – as they exist in their hundreds of thousands at the same hour... Empty the Porte d'Arceuil by the Fortifications... They are not lonely, merely without mood; the city in these pictures looks cleared out, like a lodging that has not yet found a new tenant. It is in these achievements that surrealist photography sets the scene for a salutary estrangement between man and his surroundings. (Benjamin, 1979, p250-251)

The dialectical image here presented is between the normal hustle and bustle of the city and its utter silence as objects rather than people gain the upper hand.

Different types or persona can also be experienced as dialectical images. For Benjamin, the female prostitute is seller and commodity in one; a human subject displaying value (as well as exchange value) and an object selling herself as waged labour. Money procuring the services of the prostitute also takes on the character of a dialectical image, 'it buys pleasure and at the same time, becomes the expression of shame'. (Benjamin, 1999, p492)

The shock, the dialectical clash of opposites, the making sure that things don't keep on going – these are the shared urban, pedagogic goals of dialectical images. It is seen on silent, empty Norwegian streets after 2pm on Saturdays when according to custom shops close for the weekend. It is seen in the financial district of the City of London on Saturdays: the commuters are absent and their sandwich bars, pubs and restaurants remain closed. The experience of weekend silence clashing with the weekday bustle yields a premonition of the end of capitalism, or suggests another way of doing business for example, the home office as dream, such that financial transactions no longer take place in the City.

The dialectical image is the shock or the estrangement, which compels the viewer to take a second more detailed look at their everyday life, and in so doing gives 'free play to the politically educated eye, under whose gaze all intimacies are sacrificed to the illumination of detail'. (Benjamin, 1979, p251) This has wider implications for history, which will be made in the present, rather than viewed and regarded at a distance as some finished product, waiting to be revealed for future generations. (Cadava, 1997, p72) Telescoped into the present, the past is then in effect immersed in and part of the present; its detail illuminated for political as opposed to academic purposes.

Experience

The art of storytelling is coming to an end. Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly... It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences.

One reason for this phenomenon is obvious: experience has fallen in value...Every glance at a newspaper demonstrates that it has reached a new low...Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent – not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? ...For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, economic experience by inflation, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body. (Benjamin, 1971, p83-84)

Benjamin, writing in the aftermath of the First World War, was drawing attention to how not only had the content of experience become eroded, but also to how our ability to communicate it had been impeded. Thus, the newspaper, communicating events each day is occupied by novelty and the new, 'to convey happening per se, which is the purpose of information'. (Benjamin, 1983, p113). Little of what it reports has an after-life. Benjamin's desire is that meaningful experience should precisely have an after-life and remain memorable, to become embedded in 'the life of the storyteller in order to pass it on as experience to those listening.' (Benjamin, 1983, op. cit)

With this in mind he suggests that the experience of little value is *erlebnis*. (Benjamin, 1983) By this he means it is lived in the here and now and forgotten. It can be repetitive, but the point is that we assign little long-term value to it. Against this he suggests our often thwarted desire for *erfahrung*. That which involves the experience of something worth recollection and reminiscence, such that it breaks with the continual return of the ever same of empty experiences, *erlebnis*.

Another way of putting it is to say that he desires historically valuable experience, the founding of what Nietzsche called in a memorable phrase, *monumental history*. At the level of society, it is the desire for shared historical experiences. At the level of the individual, it is the desire that the individual reflect over their many experiences - collecting them, sifting and sorting through them. The goal is to become a person who has cleared a space and made time for what might be called in that equally memorable phrase, *the life of the mind*; in order to reflect over these experiences, which are by no means only mental and by no means merely lived as perpetual experiences of *erlebnis*.

It is also the desire to focus on the form and content of collective experiences, such that the dominant manner in which they are normally consumed and manipulated by capital and opinion makers in different bourgeois public spheres can be opposed. (Negt and Kluge, 1993) For example, so that spectators of movies are already regarded as producers, and not merely consumers, through the required labour of emotion and fantasy, which assimilates and also negates any intended manipulations. This was Benjamin's point, the masses in reception were to critically evaluate mass produced films, and in this manner to become collectively and on a personal level 'the author as producer'. (1983a)

Allegory To Benjamin allegory was a way of seeing and experiencing the world. (Benjamin, 1985; Spencer, 1985) He found it in Baroque German tragic drama, but he also regarded it as a valid way of experiencing the modern capitalist society, where people treat each other increasingly as objects of a purely monetary or instrumental value. The prostitute on street corners was an allegory for the corporeal experience of commodities trussed up with nowhere to go.

The allegorist was opposed to symbolists who looked for signs of correspondence with ancient times and their artifacts for example, in their epic myths and religious rituals. Such symbolists sought a crisis-free, timeless, transcendental experience shielded from the new of genuine historical *erfahrung*. Shunning the symbolist's repetitive empty time, *erlebnis*, and in search of *erfahrung*, the Baroque allegorist sought motifs of death and mortality for example, in the macabre and its inherent mortification of phenomena – to thus intensify the experience of human wretchedness in architecture, in the human body, in wars and historical events.

If contemporary urban society betrays an insatiable desire for *erlebnis*, achieved through repetitive, entertaining, cathartic spectacles, then the pedagogic goal of today's allegorist is to deny catharsis as a strategy of socialisation into acceptance and accommodation with the present state of affairs. To thus interrupt the periodic, cathartic repetition of the entertaining ever same and create instead a space (surely, urban, social and cognitive) and a moment for the institution of the new. But, not the new of the fashionable or the novel, since these merely confirm the return of ever same cycles of capitalist production, reproduction and entertainment. Nor, to patiently wait for the tarnishing of the fashionable and novel and their encouragement of the collector's delight in the obsolete. Instead, the new,

in the sense of a radical break with what has been and the necessity of the violent embrace of mortification, the allegory of future life found in death.

The self The Kantian view of the self and its specification as a source of knowledge is based upon a transcendental experience, which places the subject before objects and commands that their sensuous and intellectual content be grasped. A similar demarcation lurks behind the view that what is required is a separation of the sovereign subject from their surroundings. Such a view is found in G. H. Mead's desire to follow the ontogenesis of the self, as the *I*, internalised *me* and internalised significant *other(s)* remain separated from, and yet dependent upon external others.

Benjamin was no supporter of those who would delimit the self to strictly demarcated subject - object experiences and a self separated from external others:

We know of primitive peoples of the so-called pre-animistic stage who identify themselves with sacred animals and plants and name themselves after them; we know of insane people who likewise identify themselves in part with objects of their perception, which are no longer objecta, "placed before" them; we know of sick people who do not relate the sensations of their bodies to themselves, but rather to other creatures, and of clairvoyants who at least claim to be able to feel the sensations of others as their own. (Benjamin, 1989, p4)

Such statements, written when Benjamin was still in his youth, amount to a declaration of intent for his later explorations: the desire to widen the boundaries of the self, for example, to include experiences under the influence of hashish. To spatialise the self in city wanderings and to equally let the utopian energies of religion, Surrealism and Communism course through him, represented additional ways for Benjamin to dismantle the traditional boundaries of self.

Instead of a transcendental experience of the self (Kant) or a social-psychological internalised self (Mead) he professed support for the four temperaments: the phlegmatic (cold and wet), the sanguine (hot and wet), the choleric of yellow bile (hot, dry, irascible and angry) and the melancholic. He regarded himself as melancholic, interested in the ruins of experience, the ways of the collector and the aesthetics of tragedy.

However, even though he derived consolation from his belief in the four temperaments, this did not mean he was a person without character and a

unique sense of self. Acting as a channel or turntable for many different forms or schools of thought and interests (Communism, Surrealism, theology and so on), merely meant that at times his own, more egotistical concerns retreated into the background. Thus, in *The Berlin Chronicle* he noted the importance in writing of having rarely used ‘the word “I” except in letter [ensuring] endless interpolations into what has been, but also, at the same time, the precaution of the subject represented by the “I”, which is entitled not to be sold cheaply.’ (Benjamin, 1979, p 304-305) Not then, as many post-modernists presume, that it is important to abandon the belief in an authentic self and its self-directed, egoistic concerns. Rather, the more personal self and its private reveries must accept that other interests (Communism, Surrealism, religion and so on) can exist alongside and at times touch the unique character and life of the individual. In other words, without the one refusing the existence of the other for a single moment: the skin of the I made porous and sensitive to the non-I.

Time For Benjamin the catastrophe of history was that things just kept on going in a repetitive manner, in a continuum lacking for the most part important events, which could act as a source of non-repetitive experiences and landmarks. This repetitive time was forced to march to the beat of the capitalist production cycle.

It was the time of the *ever same*, dominating the everyday life of people. Capitalism and the everyday work ethic left their mark upon individuals, both bourgeois and proletarian. Another way of saying this, is that the circle of repetitive routines into which people are socialised, shares an emphasis upon production and the accumulation of experience through time. So, even if these experiences are repetitive and result in nothing new, they represent an accumulation and time as accumulation.

In Benjamin’s call to halt time in moments of crisis, he sort to institute revolutionary change, such that the direction of the *ever same* could be changed, or disrupted on a more permanent basis. In effect, accumulated time was to be halted, and the experience instead, was to be that of suspended time.

Benjamin operated with a dichotomy: a reversible movement between the accumulated and yet ever same time of capitalist and repetitive experiences, what he termed *erlebniss*, and the halted or disrupted time when the new could be instituted and the participant could live historically meaningful and non-repetitive experiences, what he termed *erfahrung*. That is, a move between accumulated time and suspended time. However, it could be asked if his dichotomy should be extended beyond the merely

dyad to become a triad, where the inclusion of a third kind of time could yield both repetitive and revolutionary experiences. This third kind of time might include consumed, lost, disappearing time.

By this it is meant the individual's experience of time spent consuming not just the necessary food and drink to survive, but the repetitive time used to purchase and consume commodities. This experience would include the use-value and also the exchange value of commodities, but the point of focus would be upon how the experience of time as a commodity is consumed in a repetitive manner in the course of everyday life. However, the consumption of time could also take on the form of a suspension of daily commodity purchase and use. For example, while standing in bus queues, squinting at the departure times of trains or waiting for the lover (late again), the person as an individual and as a member of a collective irrevocably lose time. It is experienced as disappearing, and they might feel compelled to instigate a different, potentially revolutionary use and experience of their time. That is, as time is lost or disappears, it can be done with, forgotten, and something new can take its place.

In other words, to Benjamin's time of production (*erlebniss*) repetitive and empty of historically non-repetitive meaning, and time of revolution, in moments of *erfahrung*, a third distillation and mixture of these experiences of time could be added, time consumed and lost, and yet providing the opportunity for changing the course of time and activity in a revolutionary manner. As time is lost or disappears, it is done with, and a moment is created for the *new*.

Home As noted, Benjamin prided himself on rarely having used the term 'I' in his texts. (Benjamin, 1979) Post-modernists might celebrate this as an inclination to deny narcissistic tendencies. That is to embrace the loss of the 'I' and personal attributes. Jewish commentators might argue that he was trying to eliminate and refuse his Jewish heritage and its obligations.

Yet, Benjamin preserved a stubborn desire to work on his *Arcades Project* when Hitler and fascism invaded France. In the 20s, he had been invited to emigrate to Palestine and Adorno now clearly wanted him to go into exile and escape this invasion of French territory. He had projects which belonged to him and he to them, and he was far from intent on becoming a post-modern self, lacking any vestiges of a unique 'I'. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that Benjamin remained a figure who transcended national territories and any accompanying sense of belonging. He shared Nietzsche's view, choosing to quote him:

This seeking for my home... was my affliction... Where is – my home? I ask and have sought for it; I have not found it. (Nietzsche from Also Spoke Zarathustra, quoted in Benjamin, 1999)

Some retreated to the domestic sphere and sought their home in the interior, ‘the house becomes the plastic expression of the personality’, but Benjamin argued that such decorative trophies were a fictional framework and ‘the true framework for the life of the private citizen must be sought increasingly in offices and commercial centres’. (Benjamin, 1999, p20) In other words, the self and the ‘I’ were, or should be, dragged into public view, for the office bureaucrat and the capitalist, and made thereby into a spectacle. A person’s sense of ‘I’ would then have to be based upon non-domestic foundations.

Benjamin for example, was one who seriously contemplated becoming a travel writer – not to collect trophies for the cultivation of an interior ‘I’. But to widen the horizon of his experiences. As a melancholic he refused to accept any one place as his homeland:

In a love affair most seek an eternal homeland. Others, but very few, eternal voyaging. These latter are melancholics, for whom contact with mother earth is to be shunned. They seek the person who will keep them far from the homeland’s sadness. (Benjamin, 1979, p75)

He would have wholeheartedly agreed with Novalis’s desire that man should be at home everywhere, and thus nowhere in particular.

Naming Wittgenstein argued for and then abandoned a correspondence theory of truth, where the speaker had a name for and named each object. (Wittgenstein, 1984) He later developed the view that each shared form of life developed its own way of naming objects, and this was based upon the basis of the form of life’s culturally determined and delimited set of activities. That is, what might be called a consensus theory of truth, more accepted and practiced than actually debated - by those involved at least. (Wittgenstein, 1994)

Benjamin too espoused a view of truth based upon naming. Early in his career he envisaged a primordial state where the naming and truth giving of individual objects was an act carried out by God, but after the Fall language and naming became the province of man; a naming concerned with sets of signs referring to each other, rather than to the uniqueness of the object, as had been God’s creative intention. In the middle of his career he developed the view that truth was based upon what he called a *mimetic*

faculty, capable of naming and founding sensuous (such as through onomatopoeia) or non-sensuous correspondences (such as in the act of writing) between words and objects. (Benjamin, 1979, p160-162)

Later in his career, he continued to view truth as a naming activity, but this was from within the dialectical image used to halt and disturb, if only for a moment, the accumulated culture and mores of naming, and institute new names for new experiences, as the shock of *the what-has-been* flashed into a constellation with the *now*. (Benjamin, 1999, p463)

This 'dialectics at a standstill' was never to be carried out once and for all. As Benjamin phrased it, 'each "now" is the now of a particular recognizability', and there will always be new moments to recognise. (Benjamin, 1999, p463) This open-ended stream of possibility perhaps accounts for his insistence that the destructive character ceaselessly desire to disturb the status quo of accumulated phrases, truths and life-styles.

The truth of the object had to be revealed, as the 'representation of truth', rather than as a neo-Kantian project based upon 'the acquisition of knowledge'. (Benjamin, 1985, p28) The latter as a propertied class, all too willing to build a walled garden around their most recent acquisitions – for fellow academics, closest family and friends. As he graphically put it, through a dialectical image bringing together love and the child/woman:

And truth refuses (like a child or a woman who does not love us), facing the lens of writing while we crouch under the black cloth, to keep still and look amiable. Truth wants to be startled abruptly, at one stroke, from her self-immersion, whether by uproar, music or cries for help. (Benjamin, 1979, p95)

The aura of Heidegger Benjamin once noted in correspondence (1931), 'we are planning to annihilate Heidegger.' (Benjamin, 1994, p 365) But, he never lived to carry out this plan. He did however provide some indication of how this might be done:

What distinguishes images from the "essences" of phenomenology is their historical index. (Heidegger seeks in vain to rescue history for phenomenology abstractly through "historicity.") These images are to be thought of entirely apart from the categories of the "human sciences," from so-called habitus, from style, and the like. For the historical index of the images not only says that they belong to a particular time; it says, above all, that they attain to legibility only at

a particular time ...Every present day is determined by the images that are synchronic with it: each “now” is the now of a particular recognizability. In it, truth is charged to the bursting point with time. (This point of explosion, and nothing else, is the death of the *intentio*, which thus coincides with the birth of authentic historical time, the time of truth.) It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present casts its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural *bildlich*. Only dialectical images are genuinely historical...(Benjamin, 1999, N3, 1 p362-3)

The accusation of historicity is directed towards Heidegger who voiced too abstract a view of history, without mention of concrete dates, classes or events. Like Jung and Klages, and many Fascist ideologues, he cultivated a mythical view of history. Evidence to confirm this can be found in Heidegger’s speeches as university Rector, where he stated the view that it was necessary for the German *volk*, under the guidance of a leader to reclaim their sense of purpose and Being. (Wolin, 1993, p40-61) In his writings he talked of the need to approach history ontologically, as a certain attitude to historical events, such as the need and willingness to pursue the concretely historical of events, the ontic, as a question of collective fate and destiny. (Heidegger, 1962, p436) ; Wolin, 1993) After he retired as Rector of the University in 1934, he increasingly developed an abstract, ontological view of history, preferring to wait for change, rather than actively *willing* it (by military, authoritarian or other means). This would be to impose technology and man upon nature, society and the environment, and risk the destruction of all parties through the *will to power*.

Benjamin’s alternative proposal involved experiences of dialectical images located in the legibility of the moment. These would stop history remaining an abstraction and would permit people to intervene and change its course. In searching for dialectical images, where the past is fused with the present in critical moments, Benjamin’s intention might also have been to break the *aura* of history as some monumental, ever distant entity governed by elites. Benjamin defined the aura in the following manner:

To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return...the unique manifestation of a distance. (Benjamin 1983, p148)

So Benjamin was refusing the view that history should be the province of an elite set of leaders, destined to lead at a distance from their subordinates. Another way of putting this, is to say that the aura of the leader and of Heidegger was to be denied. History was to be concrete, without abstraction and the *aura* of distance; it was to be the province of the masses in their local struggles.

The aura of Benjamin If Serres (1995; 1997, p5-7) will be remembered as the pedagogue of the *aquatic* medium, where the pupil is always to swim between the two riverbanks of science and art in search of experience and knowledge, then Benjamin will be remembered as the pedagogue of the *auratic* medium, where the pupil is always looking to rescue experience and knowledge from its *auratic* decay and permanent loss, beyond the realm of the memorable.

Benjamin's name is swiftly recalled when the discussion is about the conceptualisation of media such as film, television and the inter-net. His concept of the decline of the *aura* and its connection with reproduction highlights the different experiences entailed in consuming the unique or mass produced work of art, and the role of the different media in this consumption. However, Benjamin had greater, or rather different ambitions for the experience of the *aura*.

He derived his understanding of the *aura* from Klages the symbolist, who insisted that the power of images, an *auratic* power, bypassed in a more direct manner the source of knowledge acquired slowly and methodically through concepts, universals and the stance of transcendental subjects.

Benjamin declared an interest in the question of meaningful experience, what he called *erfahrung*, and how it could be made memorable for future generations. He noted, in the spirit of Baudelaire, how people mixing in urban crowds or employed on repetitive factory lines no longer had access to meaningful experience. Their experiences were lived and forgotten, what he termed *erlebnis*. Benjamin argued that they required not merely regular annual, monthly or weekly rituals, where they could come together and celebrate a shared sociability, but historically revolutionary experiences when participants could determine their own history in a collective manner. This is what he meant by meaningful experience, *erfahrung*.

Benjamin did not however stop there. He then asked how the historically meaningful experience could be communicated to future generations. Or to

put it differently, how might this experience be remembered, by what activity? Voluntary memory was considered too inexact and unreliable a means, and he supported Proust's view that involuntary memory was the issue. Shifting the concern to involuntary memory meant locating the memorable not in the desired voluntary memory of the individual subject, but in the objects, people and situations in which they were immeshed. And, this is where Benjamin found a use for the experience of the *aura*.

The aura was 'the sensation which an object arouses in us.' (Benjamin, 1983, p112) Proust had talked of a pastry, the Madeleine, which when he ate it, transported him back to memories which he hadn't previously been able to recall. In other words, the sensation of the object, its *aura*, opened the person to the recall of meaningful experience – not necessarily of a revolutionary character for Proust, a spokesman for the bourgeoisie and the maintenance of its status quo. Nevertheless, Benjamin's point was that access to memorable experience required looking to the world around the person; an intellectual desire and practice of voluntary memory wasn't enough.

Benjamin developed this view of the sensation which an object arouses in us to include not only the tasted, as in the pastry, but also the visual. This is how most readers have become acquainted with the *aura* of Benjamin. Specifically:

To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return...the unique manifestation of a distance. (Benjamin 1983, p148)

Here, Benjamin was developing his use of the *aura* to encompass the active role of the viewer, who no longer merely waited for the chance encounter with the object, as was implied in Proust's conception. But, note the role of distance. In order to be seen and have something or someone look back at us in return, a distance is required between the viewer and object. If the distance disappears then the object can emit no *aura* (whether actual or perceived).

He also envisaged a different scenario for experience of the *aura*: the object, in this case the person encountered, who no longer looked back, would make an unbridgeable distance or barrier. A barrier and distance which additionally refused to share and found communication and a sense of the social. And, where might a person experience such? In the city on buses and trams where people could, as Simmel noted, 'stare at one another for minutes or even hours on end without exchanging a word.' (quoted in Benjamin, 1983, p151) Another example is supplied by Joyce in

his novel *Ulysses*, as he describes a young woman under the gaze of Bloom, a male character:

The eyes that were fastened upon her set her pulses tingling. She looked at him a moment, meeting his glance, and light broke in upon her. (Joyce, 1992, p475)

The young woman in question had to decide if she would continue to return the gaze, or turn away and thus brake the power of the aura and its invitation to communication and the social.

The *aura* for Benjamin and also the *aura* of Benjamin are thus basically about communication and the preconditions of the social, and these shouldn't be narrowed to merely an encounter with the work of art and the question of its reception in a unique or reproduced form. And yet, it was such a narrowing that worried Benjamin: Fascist politicians cultivated their *aura* in front of the camera - in order to manipulate the viewer into passive contemplation as they presented and turned themselves into living *auratic* works of art.

The visual and the textual With the rise of computer mediated communication and different types of viewing screen (such as the television) the fear has been voiced by some pedagogues that the young will increasingly neglect the reading of texts and books. They will instead live in an image based culture, with video games and different forms of pictorial surfing on the internet. A veritable privileging of the 'imaginary over the symbolic' and a shrinking of the public sphere based upon dialogical interaction (Gilroy, 2000, p191). But, it is by no means clear that such developments will result in cultural impoverishment, or that children will cease to read texts.

It is more the case that those highlighting the rise of the visual and the neglect of the textual draw the lines of battle too sharply. It is to simplify the issue by positing an either/or choice: either the textual work to be read, or the visual to be seen. Surely, even looking at images and the pictorial requires a development of the ability to read the image? It is surely not the case, that looking at the image gives simultaneous knowledge of its whole content. As Litz has noted in her book on Joyce:

Even in the visual arts our apprehension of an 'Image' is the result of an accumulative process. Simultaneity can only be obtained after we are familiar with all the components and their relationships with each other. (Litz, 1961, p55-54)

This is not unlike saying that the image has to be *read* in a cumulative manner, just as a text has to be *read* in a cumulative manner, along its line. To read is thus to accumulate from either text or image, to gain a familiarity with the components of the image, just as a familiarity is gained with the meaning of the words in a sentence.

There are of course Chinese characters, ideo-grams, where the signs written in texts contain traces of the image they are meant to represent. The televised image often contains written signs or so-called sub-texts, the song can contain talk of images, the touched surface can be shaped in a series of letters for the blind person. The implied opposition between the different media, textual, visual, heard, touched with the intention of fueling an opposition is therefore a mistake.

When Joyce writes, ‘television kills telephony in brother’s broil’ (Joyce, 1975, p52) it could be taken to mean that television and telephony are two brothers fighting in clear opposition with each other. But, Joyce continues the passage, ‘our eyes demand their turn’, meaning not necessarily the act of turn taking, instead sentences are to be written in the presence of an accused presenting his case *viva voca* (by the living voice and for the ear) and visually to the court. It is thus a simultaneous doubling or layering of the media, in this case the visual and the aural, and thereby reinforcing their combined impact. Similarly, the rise of the visual on the computer screen can be a new layer imposed upon the textual or the touched.

However, it is perhaps Benjamin who makes the strongest case for discounting the fears of those who envisage the end of textual reading and of reading in general. In his unpublished reflections on the doctrine of the similar and the mimetic faculty he speculates on the correspondences made long before poets such as Baudelaire. Early man imitated the movement of the stars in dance and on other cultic occasions. Man was using a mimetic faculty, creating a sensuous similarity. Today this mimetic faculty has been transformed, it is now evident in the way we create a non-sensuous similarity connecting a word to a meaning, or an event:

For if words meaning the same thing in different languages are arranged about that signified as their centre, we have to inquire how they all – while often possessing not the slightest similarity to one another – are similar to the signified at their centre. (Benjamin , 1999, p696)

The answer to the inquiry rests upon the necessity of revealing similarity, what Benjamin terms non-sensuous similarity, or the transformed mimetic faculty of earlier times.

Could it be the case that the rise of the visual image, layered upon and intermixing with other media, such as the text to be read, the song to be heard, or the touched to be deciphered, requires the same effort in each case. That is a mimetic action connecting the sign (image, textual, sound, touched) with a meaning? Thus, the stars seen in the sky, on the computer or television screen require an act identifying a meaning based upon similarity or correspondence. A non-sensuous similarity has to be established between 'what is said and what is meant...between what is written and what is meant', between what is touched and what is meant. (Benjamin, 1999, p697) The act of creating a similarity opens for endless permutations for example, a non-sensuous similarity of meaning is required to tie the spoken to the written.

The rise of the image, upon and intermixed with the textual is not therefore something to be feared. Children will learn to read the image as they have previously learnt to read the text. And as Benjamin speculated, in all cases where there are different signs (visual, heard, written, touched) the same mimetic faculty, even if continually transformed from the sensuous to the non-sensuous and back again, will be required to create and identify the connections between the signs and their purported meanings.

One further speculation is possible, one only partly anticipated in Benjamin's view that graphology conceals the unconscious of the writer. Or, to put it differently, the view that graphology conceals the mimetic act connecting the writer of the text to their own personal unconscious experiences. And the connecting link is through images, since this is what handwriting entails – either in the way a letter's shape or curve mimes the shape and movement of an animal for instance (the body of handwriting – the Mendelssohn theory of handwriting), or the way a letter mimes the writer's spiritual vision of warmth, plentitude and so on (the expressive, vitalist aspect of handwriting – the Klages theory of handwriting).

To read the graphology of a person will then reveal their unconscious experiences deposited as image traces in their handwriting, and as a consequence reveal truths about their normally hidden or repressed existential state. (Benjamin, 1999, p722) Reading the unconscious, existential state of a person will today have to include the way they express themselves in images, when speaking, touching or being touched. Heidegger began the investigation of this when he asked that one should be attentive to the tone of a person as they replied to the question, 'how

one is faring?' (Heidegger, 1962, p173) In an age of mechanical and electronic reproduction this may become difficult, as the signature or voice confirmation increasingly rests upon computer mediated communication and loses the corporeal mark of the unique author.

Contemporary Violence and Walter Benjamin's Conception of the *Destructive Character*ⁱ

Is the *destructive character* typical of periods of perceived and experienced decadence, or *forfall* to use the Norwegian word? Periods such as ours? Do we then seek to escape its consequences – viewed by some to be mediocrity, egalitarianism, feminism, mass society, abandoned projects of revolutionary socialism and solidarity – through the exertion, promotion and imposition of a logic of elitism, the superman (*overmennesket*) and the individual right, or group demand to be destructive?

Destructive characters represent not a submission and admission of melancholy in the face of such decadence. On the contrary, their destruction knowing no boundaries is a resistance to such melancholy and to an accompanying sense of resignation and fatalism. In other words, to fight precisely decadence with destruction of the old, and to make in the process a clearing or *ground* (Heidegger) for the new. Heidegger's (1971, p76) phrase was a bestowal of the *ground-laying grounding*.

To understand the *destructive character* in such a manner requires understanding it as a pure means – this being Benjamin's project – without reducing it in a reductive manner, to the status of a means supporting the production of commodity or gender relations and their associated institutions. To reduce and hence define the destructive character in terms of such ends, would be to risk overlooking how it might concretely be lived as a pure means in itself, and not as a means to a single end or several ends. This pure means is here envisaged as an ontological condition of Being prior to its embroilment in different concrete, ontic projects connected with a reduction to a means.

Benjamin and Nietzsche, as well as the avant-garde and political revolutionaries of the 1900-1920s were arguably such *destructive characters* in societal contexts and junctures marked by decadence (*forfall*). What of today in England and Scandinavia? Or to put it differently, how might Benjamin be read as a writer for our times, with

ⁱ This essay has been written on the basis of shared discussions and ideas developed in the Benjamin Research Group at Lillehammer College in 2000. Participants: Gunn Saunes, Tom Hammeren, Gro Børvan, Cecelie Zakarassian, Frida Österwall and Stephen Dobson. Regi Enerstvedt also suggested important revisions to this essay in January 2001.

Nietzsche and revolutionary movements such as the subterranean, largely submerged, sub-(con) text of his work? This essay looks at the case of Benjamin.

Introduction

The allegiance of Benjamin scholars changes with the fashions, often in the wake of new or revised translations of his work into different languages. Thus, the recent translations of the Arcades Project into English will with certainty lead to an interest or rebirth of interest in his work on the experience of the city. In the 70s and early 80s, the emphasis was upon his political texts and how they might serve the cause of different revolutionary movements. Take for example Eagleton's (1981) book entitled, *Walter Benjamin or towards a revolutionary criticism*. In the late 80s interest turned to Benjamin's relationship with language, interpretation and figures such as Heidegger. Just consider the Heideggerian sub-text in the word *ground* which enters the title chosen for the collection of essays by edited by Nägele (1988), *Benjamin's Ground. New Readings of Walter Benjamin*. The authors propose a textual re-interpretation rather than a political analysis based upon mass movements and political party membership.

One of the aims of this essay is to argue that despite changing scholarly receptions and interpretations of his work, it is possible to identify a connecting thread joining together his different writings on the urban (cityscapes in the 1920s, Berlin Childhood from the early 1930s, the *Arcades Project*), politics (*Critique of Violence* from the early 1920s, *Theses on the Concept of History* from the late 1930s), and language (*On Language as Such* in the 1920s, the *Mimetic Faculty* in the 1930s). And if not joining these writings together, at least bringing them into mutual proximity – a shared constellation seeking profane illumination and radical, concrete change. Not to argue that only this thread exists, he was concerned that theology among other things should be retained as one such alternative thread. In this essay however, the focus will be upon his understanding of the *destructive character*. The framework for this discussion will be his small essay from 1931 entitled, *Der Destruktive Charakter* (The Destructive Character), with the argument that with this essay he defines one of these connecting threads. (Benjamin, 1974, 1979)

A second goal of this essay is to raise for discussion how the destructive character might form a *ground* capable of informing reflections on the contemporary situation in general, and in particular, on topics such as violence, self-destruction and post-modernism. *Ground* used in the double

sense, as an actual space upon and in which events take place, and as ontological Heideggerian space supporting existential choices.

Part I: The 1931 essay

The destructive character is a short essay, not more than two pages in total length. Benjamin opens by asking what it would mean to a person looking back over his life, realising that all his obligations originated ‘in people on whose “destructive character” everyone was agreed.’ (Benjamin, 1979, p157) In other words, that a person had encountered and entered into a relationship of dependency to such figures.

Without specifying concrete examples of such people and the role of dependency they institute and support, he immediately concentrates his attention upon what might be characteristic of the destructive character as a type of person. Such a focus upon the character as a type is a strategy Benjamin had adopted in his reflections on the melancholic as a character in his book on tragedy, and he was to do the same in his reflections upon the storyteller later in the 30s. The character in the sense of standing for a psychological type but meaning more than this, because it includes immediately within itself cultural, social, economic, political and historical relations. Sociologists, supporters of Bourdieu’s concept of the habitus, would readily assert that Benjamin was therefore dealing with a social character, combining the qualities of the unique individual with their socio-economic and political backgrounds.

The destructive character is seen to make room, adopting the view that ‘destroying rejuvenates in clearing way the traces of our own age’. (p157) As a consequence the ‘world is simplified’, but the destructive character has ‘no vision...few needs, and the least of them is to know what will replace what has been destroyed.’ This might be taken as an indication of nihilism. ⁱⁱ For Benjamin and many other Europeans after the First World War, the world seemed to have lost its meaning. The treaties and decisions of politicians appeared powerless in the face of an economic recession, quickly assuming global proportions. This was the background for Heidegger’s view that the German *volk* had lost its Being. But it could be argued that leaders such as Stalin and Hitler were destructive and in

ⁱⁱ The reference here is to Nietzsche’s passive nihilism, and not its opposite, active nihilism. Both conceptions are developed in aphorism 23 of the *Will to Power* text attributed to him: ‘a passive nihilism, a sign of weakness. The strength of the spirit may be worn out, exhausted, so that previous goals and values have become incommensurate and no longer are believed.’

possessing a clear vision disproved Benjamin's thesis. Yet, perhaps Benjamin is drawing attention to the destructive character's ability to create the space or platform for such leaders, 'someone is sure to be found who needs this space without its being filled.' (p158)

The objection might be raised that Hitler and Stalin were not necessarily destructive themselves. They had henchmen to do the destructive work for them. But, as argued in the paragraph above, it might be that destructive others were preparing the ground for the emergence of Hitler and Stalin, who would then continue to lead and direct the destructive work of these industrious and dutiful others. This would suggest that these leaders were used as a kind of shorthand by writers to denote in a more general way the many doers of the deed. Not then to mean that history is reduced to the actions of a few great leaders, but that they were signifiers for the actions of many others.

The destructive character's role is therefore in the first instance to keep the possibilities open. They have 'no interest in being understood'. This would serve the interests of those wishing to maintain the status quo; the bourgeois, but also others in positions of power, who look for 'comfort' and predictability.

Is the destructive character interested in saving or conserving anything? His reply is that 'the destructive character sees nothing as permanent', and Benjamin once again directs his energies against the enemies of change, 'some pass things down to posterity, by making them untouchable and thus conserving them, others pass on situations by making them practicable and thus liquidating them.'

He thus supports the destructive character as the person willing to take up a position at the crossroads, abandoning all certainties and all that might induce a feeling of well-being and self-contentment.

Let us break off this brief exegesis and ask how different critics have interpreted his essay.

Part II: Two interpretations

In the already referred to book edited by Nägele there is an essay by Ronell. It presents one interpretation of Benjamin's essay. Ronell notes how Benjamin makes reference to the destructive character whose 'need for fresh air and open space is stronger than any hatred', who 'has no interest in being understood'. Ronell's conclusion is that Benjamin, with

these citations, is likening the destructive character to Nietzsche's Zarathustra and his prophecy of the over-man. (Ronell, 1988, p128-130) Nietzsche outlined how the over-man lived in a position beyond all hatred, or to use his terminology, beyond resentment. Nietzsche's over-man was also unconcerned with being understood, preferring to be misunderstood.

The thinly veiled implication of Ronell's interpretation is that Benjamin was welcoming the arrival of violent destructive figures who regarded themselves as supreme leaders. Such that Benjamin, whether intentionally or unintentionally, was in fact providing legitimacy for precisely leaders on the political right (for example Hitler) or political left (for example Stalin).

However, there is reason to argue, as in the opening presentation of this essay, that Benjamin was not seeking to justify and describe the destructive character as a new type of leader per se. He was more interested in showing the necessary conditions, preparing the *ground* for precisely the emergence and arrival of such leaders. When the *ground* had been cleared, then society was ready for Hitler and Stalin to arrive with their clearly stated projects or visions.

Such an interpretation is more in keeping with the one suggested by Wohlfarth (1994). He argues that Benjamin was concerned to re-capture the work and ideas of Nietzsche from the Fascists for a revolutionary cause. Such that destruction was necessary to remove capitalism, bourgeois institutions and the private concerns and life styles of its supporters.

To provide support for his interpretation Wohlfarth argues further that Benjamin was involved in a number of long discussions with Brecht when he wrote this essay. The destructive character's 'clearing away the traces' is a phrase that Benjamin acknowledges elsewhere as Brecht's:

...the destructive aspect of Brecht's character,
which puts everything in danger almost before it
has been achieved. (Benjamin, 1983, p119)

Wohlfarth's point is that Benjamin borrowed this phrase from Brecht to re-claim for the socialist revolution capitalism's continual effacing of the traces. Capitalism effaced traces in order that each new fashionable commodity would be demanded by the consumer and make its predecessor obsolete. Benjamin's attention was to clear away the traces of capitalism for the arrival of a new type of society. One that could not be defined in its final form in advance, as Marx also noted.

In other words, the Wohlfarth interpretation supports the view that Benjamin was reclaiming the destructive character both from Fascists looking to Nietzsche to support their cause and from capitalists who identified the destructive character with the entrepreneur and consumer willing to make commodities and perhaps even people obsolete, or at least replaceable.

The Wohlfarth and the Ronell interpretations of Benjamin's destructive character have differing consequences. The former opens for the view that when Benjamin talks of the destructive character he is really talking of the proletariat who must destroy both Fascism and capitalism. Ronell's view implies that the destructive character is the over-man of which Nietzsche talked. That is the stronger leader willing and brave enough to break with morality and accepted mores.

These two differing interpretations will now be left and an attempt will be made to develop an alternative interpretation of Benjamin's destructive character, asking at the same time what kinds of implication such a character might have for our contemporary situation and existence. The strategy adopted intends not in any way to deny the validity of Wohlfarth and Ronell's interpretations, but to shift attention to the very last sentence of Benjamin's essay.

Part III: Existential concerns

The last sentence of Benjamin's essay reads as follows:

Der destruktive Charakter lebt nicht aus dem Gefühl, daß das Leben lebenswert sei, sondern daß der Selbstmord die Mühe nicht lohnt.
(Benjamin, 1974, p398)

The destructive character lives from the feeling, not that life is worth living, but that suicide is not worth the trouble. (Benjamin, 1979, p159)

In his presentation, Wohlfarth selects the phrase 'not that life is worth living' to argue that Benjamin means that in the Germany or Europe of the 30s there existed no positive values to unite people and give meaning to life. That it was a time of decadence. (Wohlfarth, 1994, p161) But, Wohlfarth quotes only this phrase and not the sentence from which it is

taken. He therefore begins to draw attention to the existential concerns of Benjamin's essay and conception of the destructive character, but he doesn't develop such an existential perspective, his intention lies elsewhere, and he moves on to speculate, as noted above, about Benjamin's connections with socialism and Brecht.

The perspective to be developed in what follows will build upon an interpretation of the complete sentence and its existential implications. Benjamin seems to have constructed or crafted this sentence as a kind of enigma, or better still as a statement made by an oracle in a deliberately obtuse manner, so that the reader must puzzle over its meaning and risk getting snared in the Nietzschean trap of believing that they, as a member of the mass, have understood its meaning when they have not.

It might even be the case that Benjamin with this sentence is setting in motion the activity of the destructive character he has just described. Such that he is refusing to provide a once and for all meaning or interpretation of the destructive character. That this sentence's enigmatic quality is intentionally designed to keep options open - a *ground* cleared, permitting endless re-interpretations (and destructions) of traditionally accepted views on suicide for example.

In 1931, while traveling in the south of France he wrote in his diary (May 4th):

I feel tired. Tired above all of the struggle, the struggle for money, of which I now have enough in reserve to stay here...this fatigue combines in a strange way with the causes of my dissatisfaction with my life. This dissatisfaction involves a growing aversion to, as well as a lack of confidence in, the methods I see chosen by people of my kind and my situation to assert control over the hopeless situation of cultural politics in Germany... I need only hint at my growing willingness to take my own life.
(Benjamin, 1999, p469-470)

Benjamin is drawing attention not to the economic motive as a cause for his suicide, nor even to the apparent lack of any values to live for or realise, but to his disappointments with fellow intellectuals and the possibility of achieving anything through writing and publishing. To phrase it differently it is a lack of belief in the social bond he has with

other intellectuals, who he later in the same entry accuses of dividing ‘into factions’.

This entry and its content can be placed alongside and compared with the destructive character essay he was working on at the time. When this is done, it becomes possible to view Benjamin’s remarks on his own life as indicative of the futility of trying to be destructive and clear away obstacles. That is to be destructive won’t achieve anything, even in the sense of clearing the *ground*. Benjamin’s diary therefore confirms the phrase, ‘not that life is worth living’ as expressed in the essay. But, why doesn’t he then commit suicide? Why does he choose to go on living, as the first part of the already quoted sentence suggests (‘the destructive character lives from the feeling...’)?

At the end of this diary entry he talks of an earlier stay at Capri and his ‘decision to put up with anything as long I did not have to leave the island’. (Benjamin, 1999, p471) Perhaps, his reason for not committing suicide was a creeping sense and feeling of fatalism, and connected with this an unwillingness to precisely adopt the stance of the destructive character, where it would be necessary to change things.

The following year while in Nice he once again contemplates suicide. This time he writes his final will and drafts farewell letters. But, he doesn’t commit suicide. There are no indications as to why he didn’t realise this planned intention. Could it have been once again a certain fatalism, as summed up in the last phrase of his essay on the destructive character, ‘that suicide is not worth the trouble’?

How then should the first part of the sentence be interpreted, ‘the destructive character lives from the feeling, not that life is worth living, but that suicide is not worth the trouble’? The destructive character would agree that life is not worth living under its bourgeois capitalist or Fascist authoritarian forms, and also that it is not worth committing suicide because there is a chance that things can be changed. In contradistinction with Benjamin and his own life, the destructive character therefore chooses not to adopt fatalism and acceptance of the situation. Action rather than passive acceptance is the motto.

Can the destructive character commit suicide? Benjamin commits suicide in the course of his unsuccessful flight from France to Spain in 1940. There are many obstacles at the border checkpoint, and in the night he takes an overdose of the drugs he carries with him for a medical condition. With the destructive character in mind, it might be speculated that he saw no way of clearing the *ground* of obstacles, so he could not adopt the

stance of the destructive character outlined in the essay. Instead, he turned the destructive character inwards rather than outwards, and destroyed his very own existence. Thereby, clearing away the only thing over which he believed he had any power and control.

In summary, the last sentence seems to indicate that the destructive character acts in a destructive manner so long as they feel that they can clear the *ground* and move onwards. Such that there is no point in suicide if the option to clear obstacles has not been irrevocably removed. And, even if it has been removed, then fatalism and acceptance may still remain a next best solution, if a far from satisfactory one at that, entailing a postponement and not denial of acts of destruction.

To envisage fatalism as a strategy of survival is to break with the Durkheimian view that excessive fatalism can lead to suicide. The type of fatalism found in Benjamin is more akin to the Russian fatalism identified by Nietzsche. The desire to slow one's metabolism and conserve energies for better times, 'to cease reacting altogether...a kind of will to hibernate.' (Nietzsche, 1969, 230)

It is important to note that the destructive character's conception of suicide marks a break with the general framework used by Durkheim to conceptualise suicide. Durkheim stressed how different social causes could lead to different motives for suicide: the lack of social norms (anomi), its opposite in the form of over integration, and altruistic suicide or egoistic suicide, when society encourages or allows the development of excessive individualism. But, Durkheim lacks a consideration of the existential choices made by the individual in the act of suicide. There are at least two traditions on suicide which emphasise this existential aspect. Firstly, writers such as Kierkegaard, who connected suicide with a deep sense of doubt, and more recently Baechler (1979), who argued that suicide had its origin in one of four existential choices: escapism (when life was considered hopeless), aggression (the desire to make others feel guilty or as an act of revenge), to offer oneself for a cause or as an absurd act (for example deliberately choosing a dangerous mountain route when climbing or increasing the stakes in a game of gambling such as Russian roulette).

The second existential tradition criticises Baechler's excessive emphasis on individual choice because it implies an individual somehow separated from their socio-economic environment and freely able to choose. Writers such as Hammerlin and Enerstvedt (1988) and Hammerlin and Schjelderup (1994) thus argue that the existential choice of the individual must be placed in a Human Activity Theory framework of social motives, from

within which the individual can and must choose.ⁱⁱⁱ They arrive at four types of suicide (after an examination of the history of suicide from the time of the Greeks to the present, including the international socialist movement's reaction to suicide by some of its own followers at the beginning of the 20th century), the content of which are not unlike some of the types of suicide identified by Baechler and Durkheim: suicide as a form of protection against someone, as a form of revenge, as a response to pressure from others (for example, when in prison or under torture) or in support of a cause (similar to Durkheim's altruistic suicide). (Hammerlin and Schjelderup, 1994, p130)

The conception of suicide suggested by the destructive character shares the existential understanding of the act and its connection with choice and social motives. But, it is a conception suggesting a certain character type who resists precisely suicide after having weighed up the existential *ground* and the nature of its obstacles.

This means that Benjamin's conception of the destructive character is therefore able to contemplate the escape from the 'growing willingness to take' one's own life. The last sentence of the essay ('suicide is not worth the trouble') clearly suggests some kind of connection between suicide, destruction and the existential question, as to whether life has had, or still can have, a meaning. One reading would be that Benjamin is suggesting that thoughts of suicide can be overcome and as a consequence abandoned if the opportunity – as an existential choice - to clear the *ground* still exists. Or to put it differently, the person must become – as an existential choice - a destructive character if they are to hold at bay and refuse thoughts and plans of suicide. (such a proposal is not necessarily welcomed by those desiring to treat, or help those contemplating suicide)

This does not necessarily mean an appeal to and approval of a strategy giving legitimacy to violence in the sense of 'brute force'. The destructive character can destroy their own past or present obstacles without risking physical harm to themselves or others. So that memories and ideas can be destroyed as persistent obstacles.

Putting to one side the question of suicide and its relation to the destructive character, attention will now be turned towards how the

ⁱⁱⁱ Enerstvedt, inspired by Human Activity Theorists such as Luria, Rubinstein and Vygotsky, has been for a generation one of the most prominent Scandinavian spokesmen for a re-direction and development of this school of thought.

destructive character can have relevance to understandings of contemporary post-modernism and violence.

Part IV: Post-modernism, violence and the destructive character

With the question of suicide, the destructive character contemplates self-destruction, but there is also the more urgent question of the destructive character's destruction of others. What might be broadly called the question of violence towards, on and through others. To say it is a more urgent question today than in the 1930s when Benjamin was writing his essay is to perhaps underestimate the experiences of the First World War upon a European (and global) population. Furthermore, the specter of a Second World War was fast approaching on the horizon. Nevertheless, it is correct that mass violence, either on the football terraces or in the form of ethnic confrontations, as well as private acts of violence in the home or between random others, are increasingly European experiences, which both politically and from the perspective of social policy are making ever greater demands for attention in the media and in our daily lives.

Reflections on the question of violence and destruction were not new to Benjamin in the 1930s. Already in 1920-21, he wrote an essay called *the Critique of Violence*. This will be returned to in more detail in a moment. The point here is to note how in this essay Benjamin was looking to conceptualise violence as a pure means, not as something reducible to or as the effect of some other means or ends, such as class or gender inequality. This makes his small essay on the destructive character a return to the same kind of strategy in the sense that this time he elaborates and reflects upon the essence of destruction-in-itself as a pure means. Secondly, in this later essay his recasting of violence from the perspective of destruction is to preserve his interest in violence. Or perhaps, it is the case that in the earlier essay he was even then interested in destruction but chose to call it violence.

So, there exists a possible line of connection between his early and later thought. In detail, in *the Critique of Violence* essay his intention is to argue that to view violence as a means to some political end obscures an understanding of violence as a pure means. Or, to put it differently, violence would then be defined by its ends and these could change according to the shifting interests of those concerned.

To understand violence as a pure means it is necessary to consider it as isolated from its ends, however abstract and unrealistic such a project at first sight might appear. Benjamin begins by arguing that legal

philosophy's conception of violence has become ensnared in this means to ends problematic. On the one hand, the view that violence is a natural right of the individual and thus conceived as a means irrespective of ends risks letting each and every individual act violently towards the next as a natural right. (Benjamin, 1979, p133)^{iv} It is necessary for the state to intervene and make the individual donate this right to the state, thus avoiding the possible destruction of all by all.

On the other hand, legal philosophy in adopting this solution risks a monopoly of violence ending up in the hands of the state, with the consequence that the state becomes concerned with using violence to preserve laws from those who break or wish to destroy them. So in the former case we get a situation where violence as a natural right is violence as a means irrespective of ends, and in the second case we get the polar opposite, where violence becomes a state concern, and thus an end for the legitimacy of the state irrespective of its means, such that any degree or form of violence is permissible, provided that it achieves its ends.

Benjamin then attempts to conceptualise violence as a pure means where it is removed from this mean-ends framework. His argument is that violence has throughout history been experienced as the paradox of making laws or preserving laws. To make laws has necessitated breaking previous laws, while the latter preservation of laws has worked against precisely such changes, especially if they have threatened the very nation state's existence in a revolutionary manner.

To view violence as the desire to make new laws, or its opposite to preserve existing laws, is to shift the focus towards the actual lived experience of violence and laws. It carries the implication that violence will always be experienced in this manner irrespective of whether its perpetrator is a revolutionary worker's party striking for its rights, or a military apparatus belonging to the state seeking to maintain the status quo. It is precisely these two actors which concern Benjamin in his 1920-21 essay.

The reader might feel however that Benjamin has in this essay failed to escape the reduction of violent acts to the interests and ends of different actors. Violence remains ensnared in a means-ends framework, this despite the shift of focus to the experience of being violent.

^{iv} The argument that violence is a natural right is Benjamin's coding, taken from the debate on law, that human violence can be traced to human instincts. Freud kept this option open with his concept of the aggressive death instinct.

It is possible to read the essay on the destructive character as an attempt to escape the reduction of violence, in this later essay called destruction, to specific actors. As Benjamin says in this later essay, 'no vision inspires the destructive character.' This suggests a willingness to abandon the ends of different actors, whether they are those belonging to unions, the military apparatus, or even those of the strong leader or revolutionary party.

In more pure form the essence of violence/destruction is distilled. It becomes a pure means. But there are consequences for such a perspective. Violence and destruction come to be viewed as abstracted from a concern with justice or unjust ends. To put it in Nietzschean terms, we enter a realm beyond morality, *Beyond Good and Evil*, to quote the title of one of his books.

In his 1920-21 essay, Benjamin had not abandoned the question of who had the legitimate right to be violent. He was in effect still concerned with good and evil, violence and the question of morality.

Is it possible that much of the violence and destruction witnessed and experienced in today's society can be understood as our fear of acts becoming pure means, where the question of morality - the good and the evil - has been forgotten. This would suggest that the violence at football matches, in homes, by the military or others has forgotten the question of morality and become the expression of the destructive character.

Furthermore, it would then provide confirmation of the arrival of the post-modern, defined by some as the sense in which questions of morality have been allocated a back seat; living in the intensity of the moment, without consideration of the moral consequences of actions becoming the dominant issue.

Did Benjamin in his short essay on the destructive character show an awareness of the moral implications of this character's actions? The answer must be in the negative. In the following quotation he does however emphasise the (post-modern) strategy of seizing the moment or situation, even if it appears to be in a somewhat a-moral manner:

The destructive character stands in the front line of the traditionalists. Some pass things down to posterity, by making them untouchable and thus conserving them, others pass on situations, by making them practicable and thus liquidating them. The latter are called the destructive.
(Benjamin, 1979, p158)

Of course the International Situationists in the 50s and 60s adopted such a strategy in order to live situations, rather than become passive spectators. (Sadler, 1999) And, Sinclair's work on walking around London would seem to also intensify the experience of the lived moment or situation. (Sinclair, 1997) Did the International Situationists and more recently Sinclair take up questions of morality? If not, are they guilty, like the destructive character, of dispensing with issues of morality? Are they then embracing a post-modern society lacking in morality and producing new forms of destructive character?

A further question to be debated, is if we are being over-anxious about the contemporary situation and ignoring how throughout the course of history there have always been – and always will be - destructive characters willing and managing to live beyond the confines of morality to be destructive characters. If this is the case, then the anxiety that the post-modern has arrived, with violence, destruction and an apparent lack of concern with questions of morality, is a vastly over-exaggerated and a far from new experience.

Summary and conclusion

Benjamin's conception of the destructive character has been interpreted as an invitation to contemplate the strong leader, with clear Nietzschean traits. Others have seen his destructive character as an oblique reference to the revolutionary potential of the proletariat.

The strategy adopted in this essay has instead been to emphasise the existential import of his reflections for an understanding of suicide, or what might be called self-destruction. The argument has been that destructive characters represent a way of resisting suicide and self-destruction, precisely because they, in their desire for and realization of destruction, still see a way out and a way of clearing the *ground*.

The *ground* used in the sense of an actually existing space cleared of obstacles, whether living or objects, and also *ground* in the sense of the Heideggerian ontological space of Being permitting the making or contemplation of existential choices. For Heidegger the making or contemplation of such choices was itself a creative act, analogous with the work of the artist:

...founding as bestowing, founding as grounding, and founding as beginning...what went before is refuted in its exclusive reality by the work. What art founds can therefore never be compensated and made up for by what is already present and available. Founding is an overflow, an endowing, a bestowal. (Heidegger, 1971, p75)

Furthermore, these destructive characters are those who have not become over-whelmed by fatalism and the decision not to act. It was argued that Benjamin in the early 1930s himself seemed to favour a form of fatalism, as a way of resisting suicide.

Taking this argument further it means that to escape suicide a certain level or expression of destruction, and its corollary, the presence of the destructive character must be permitted. This will ensure that people, acting individually, or in groups, have the opportunity to give up and be done with painful experiences. Or, to paraphrase Benjamin, the memory can be liquidated before it can lead to self-destruction and suicide.

The second main argument involved using Benjamin's conception of the destructive character to develop some theses not on self-destruction, but the second main violence and destruction imposed on and through others. The argument was that the destructive character can escape the use of violence and destruction as a means to an end if it is experienced as pure means. But, this entails perpetrators who are willing to abandon any obligation towards the moral consequences of their actions.

Violence and destruction cease then to be either good and permitted (for example in the state's argument that violence is necessary to preserve the existence of the state) or evil and prohibited (for example in the state's view of the acts carried out by revolutionaries or anarchists). It means that the destructive character lives in the moment of the act.

This a-morality and living in the moment might be used to conceptualise outbreaks of violence and destruction in our present society, where those responsible say that in the moment of acting violently they had no conception of morality, or of the possible moral consequences of their acts.

A parallel conception can be found in crimes where the accused pleads insanity in the actual moment when they committed the act. But, in pleading insanity they are refusing not only a moral awareness of their act, but also a consciousness of having carried out the act. The destructive character is on the other hand, conscious of what they are doing, even if it involves acting beyond the bounds of morality.

The argument on the destructive character in this essay suggests additional points: if the modern rational society was built upon a clearly defined and adhered to sense of morality permitting and requiring a dialectic of violence and destruction to make laws and to preserve or impose laws, then the lived experience of this violence and destruction may still be found in post-modern society. But, it is a society where the boundaries of morality, in turn dictating levels of permitted and prohibited violence and destruction, are no longer clear or considered a goal worth pursuing, as was the perceived case in modern, rational society.

However, it might also be the case that the presence of the destructive, a-moral characters is an indication of, not post-modernity, but the fall back into some kind of primitive violence or pre-modernity. The image of Rousseau's wild man in his famous essay on the root of human inequalities, comes to mind. But, also the random violence and destruction experienced upon the street, as people are killed and harmed without any apparent motive or prior knowledge of the victim's identity.

The conclusion, is thus that Benjamin's destructive character can be embraced as a way of escaping existential thoughts of suicide and as a way of motivating and accounting for rebellion in the proletariat or other oppressed groups. But, it must also be taken as a warning against those destructive characters who desire to act a-morally, for example as violent and destructive leaders. Leaders who sometimes find others willing to carry out the destructive deeds, so that their own hands remain unsoiled.

Bibliography

Walter Benjamin references:

- Benjamin, W.: *Illuminationen*. Ausgewählte Schriften. Frankfurt:
- Benjamin, W.: The Destructive character (1931). In, *One-Way Street*, 1979
- Benjamin, W.: *Gesammelte Schriften*. (Edited by Schweppenhäuser and Rolf Tiedemann) Frankfurt: Frankfurt am Main, 1974-89.
- Benjamin, W.: *One-Way Street*. London: New Left Books, 1979.
- Benjamin, W.: *Charles Baudelaire. A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*. London: Verso Books, 1983.
- Benjamin, W.: *Understanding Brecht*. London: Verso, 1983a.
- Suhrkamp Verlag, 1961.
- Benjamin, W.: *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. London: Verso Books, 1985.
- Benjamin, W.: Central Park. In, *New German Critique*, Fall 1985a.
- Benjamin, W.: *Moscow Diary*. Edited by Smith, G. Massachusetts:
- Benjamin, W.: Program of the Coming Philosophy. In, *Benjamin. Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*. Edited by Smith, G. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- Benjamin, W.: *Kunstverket i Reproduksjonsalderen og andre essays*. (Art in the Age of Reproduction and Other Essays) Oslo: Pax Forlag, 1991.
- Harvard University Press, 1986.
- Benjamin, W.: *Illuminations*. Contains essays: The Task of the Translator, The Storyteller, Theses on History. London: Fontana, 1992.
- Benjamin, W.: *Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994.
- Benjamin, W.: *The Arcades Project*. Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- Benjamin, W.: *Selected Writings vol 2. 1927-1934*, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999a.

Other references:

- Baechler, J.: *Suicides*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1979.
- Cadava, E.: *Words of Light. Theses on the Photography of History*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997.

- Eagleton, T.: *Walter Benjamin. Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*. London: Verso, 1981.
- Gilroy, P.: *Between Camps. Racism, Identity and Nationalism at the End of the Colour Line*. London: Allen Lane Penguin books, 2000.
- Hammerlin, Y. and Enerstvedt, R. Th.: *Selv mord I Virksomhetsforståelsens Perspective*. (Suicide from the Perspective of Human Activity Theory) Oslo: Falken Forlag, 1988.
- Hammerlin, Y. and Schjelderup, G.: *Når Livet Blir en Byrde. Selvmordsforståelse og Problemer ved Forebygging*. (When Life Becomes a Burden. Understanding Suicide and the Problems of its Prevention) Oslo: Ad Notam, 1994.
- Heidegger, M.: *Being and Time*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1962.
- Heidegger, M.: The Origin of the Work of Art. In, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, by Heidegger, M., New York: Harper and Row, 1971.
- Joyce, J.: *Finnegans Wake*. London: Faber and Faber, (1939)1975.
- Joyce, J.: *Ulysses*. London: Penguin, 1992.
- Litz, A.: *The Art of James Joyce. Method and Design in Ulysses and Finnegans Wake*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961.
- Nägele, R. (editor) : *Benjamin's Ground. New Readings of Walter Benjamin*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988.
- Negt, O. and Kluge, A.: *Public Sphere and Experience*. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- Nietzsche, F.: *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*. New York: Vintage Books, 1969.
- Ronell, A.: Street Talk. In, Nägele, R. (editor) *Benjamin's Ground. New Readings of Walter Benjamin*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988.
- Sadler, S.: *The Situationist City*. Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1999.
- Serres, M.: *Genesis*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1995.
- Serres, M.: *The Troubadour of Knowledge*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1997.
- Sinclair, I.: *Lights Out for the Territory*. London: Granta Books, 1997.
- Spencer, L.: Allegory in the World of the Commodity. The Importance of Central Park. In, *New German Critique*. Winter, 1985.
- Wohlfarth, I.: No-man's-land: On Walter Benjamin's 'Destructive Character'. In Benjamin, A. and Osborne, P. (editors), *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy. Destruction and Experience*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Wolin, R.: *The Heidegger Controversy*. Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1993.
- Wittgenstein, L.: *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London: Routledge, 1984.
- Wittgenstein, L.: *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1994.

**The Urban Pedagogy of Walter Benjamin.
Lessons for the 21st Century**

Part III

By

Stephen Dobson

ISBN: 1 904158 17 X
Price: £2.50 (p&p free)

First published in Great Britain 2002 by Goldsmiths College, University of London, New Cross, London SE14 6NW.

Copyright: Goldsmiths College, University of London and Stephen Dobson 2002.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means without the permission of the publishers or the authors concerned.

Further copies of this publication are available from CUCR, Goldsmiths College, London SE14 6NW.

Preface

Part I of this series dealt with the topics of language and communication, Part II with the question of change, specifically its instigation and connection with dialectics and violence, this third and final Part builds upon these foundations to address most directly what the urban means in terms of the experience of moving through urban space.

Benjamin looked to the poet Baudelaire and figures such as the prostitute and the rag picker for inspiration. Benjamin is for many, most known for his reflections on the flâneur strolling through the arcades. In attention to the small details of different kinds of flâneur Benjamin anticipated the work of Goffman on demeanour and the management of identity. As to the experience of moving through urban space he explored how perception could be altered through different kinds of intoxication and alienation. These topics are never far below the surface of more recent commentators and flâneurs, such as the International Situationists devoted to psycho-geography, De Certeau as he walks and writes pedestrian narratives and Iain Sinclair in his noticeably bitter reflections on the ‘tattered’ urban fabric of London.

As with Part I and II, this Part includes a Dictionary of Critical Fragments to introduce the reader to relevant aspects of Benjamin’s work. The accompanying essays are the seeds of a new generation influenced by Benjamin, following in his footsteps and wishing to botanise the asphalt.

Contents

Critical Dictionary of Fragments:

Nature

Flâneur

Intoxication

The urban way of life

The virtue of idleness

Essays:

Exploring Accumulated, Suspended and Lost Time in London. From Typology to Topology By Stephen Dobson and Øivind Haaland

Botanising the asphalt: First reflections on a day spent walking between Wapping Hydraulic Pumping Station and the London Eye By Stephen Dobson

Some thoughts while walking around Whitechapel By Jo Hadley

Angels, Fragments and Ruins in London’s East End By Ben Gidley

Critical Dictionary of Fragments

Nature There is a danger that the use of technology and the urban dweller's increasing dependence upon it means that contact with others and with nature, both one's own and that of the surroundings, is prevented or postponed indefinitely. One step removed from consciousness, the individual no longer touches or is touched by what once was most natural. Benjamin voices such an awareness in the following aphorism from *One-Way Street* with the title *Gloves* (1979, p59):

In an aversion to animals the predominant feeling is fear of being recognized by them through contact. The horror that stirs deep in man is an obscure awareness that in him something lives so akin to the animal that it might be recognized. All disgust is originally disgust at touching.

It is not therefore unusual for the urban dweller to feel a sense of anxiety when animals, even under the control of their owners, are encountered in towns. The urban dweller prefers to hide behind a veneer of cultivation and the pride that they have become civilised. However, to once again re-establish contact with nature, both internally and externally, requires a certain strategy according to Benjamin (1979, p298):

Not to find one's way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal. It requires ignorance – nothing more. But to lose oneself in a city – as one loses oneself in a forest – that calls for quite a different schooling. Then signboards and street names, passers-by, roofs, kiosks, or bars must speak to the wanderer like a cracking twig under his feet in the forest...

It requires that the wanderer learn the 'art of straying' into unfamiliar streets, such that the shock of the new can disturb and break the insulating, silken lining of civilisation and its dependence upon technology.

The flâneur To saunter, stroll, wander, promenade, to be a flâneur – these are the terms describing the walker who has time on their hands. Not then the commuter in a rush, or the child running for their school bus. For Benjamin the flâneur planted his feet one after the other, in order to let the seed of uncharted and unexpected experiences grow in an unhurried fashion. The allegorical connection with nature and a metaphor drawn from plant life was deliberate on his part:

The style of the flâneur who goes botanizing on the asphalt...
(Benjamin, 1983, p36)

The walker is able to plant and reap experiences from an activity, which has become increasingly unnatural to many urban dwellers, addicted as they are to the intoxicating thrill of motor, train and air travel.

This most natural of activities, walking, could also have a pedagogical, political and even military goal for Benjamin. It was to recapture and re-experience space surrendered to planners, architects and the owners of capital.

Only he who walks the road on foot learns of the power it commands, and of how, from the very scenery that for the flier is only the unfurled plain, calls forth distances, belvederes, clearings, prospects at each of its turns like a commander deploying soldiers at a front. (Benjamin, 1979, p50)

Sinclair (1997) walking across London and De Certeau (1984) in his charting of everyday pedestrian space have both followed Benjamin's footprints and possessed similar pedagogical and political intentions. To give the flâneur a political rather than leisurely goal.

The flâneuse? Benjamin with his concept of the flâneur might have reproduced the male culture of the nineteenth century, where the only public role allowed for the sauntering woman was as a prostitute, or as an embellishment on the sleeve of their husband's wealth. (Wolff, 1989) To botanise the asphalt in such a masculine manner is then to consign women to the status of objects through the gaze. The walker ceases to be concerned with living plant-life; and instead of planting the seeds of political revolt they take the life of those on the street, in particular women, denying them an active role.

Intoxication In the tradition of novelists and members of the avant-garde Benjamin experimented with drugs. He has two accounts of Marseilles, one under the influence of hashish. His goal was to widen his experience of reality and he quotes Joël and Fränkel:

One of the first signs that hashish is beginning to take effect... experiences that approach inspiration, illumination... space can expand, the ground tilts steeply, atmospheric sensations occur: vapour, an opaque heaviness of the air; colours grow brighter, more luminous; objects more beautiful, or else lumpy and threatening. (quoted in Benjamin, 1979, p215)

His observations were as follows:

‘Richard was a young man with understanding for everything in the world that was of the same kind.’... Whereas Jensen’s sentence amounted, as I had understood it, to saying that things are what we know them to be, thoroughly mechanized and rationalized, the particular being confined today solely to nuances, my new insight was entirely different. For I saw only nuances. (Benjamin, 1979, p220)

The increase in his awareness of the interplay between the aura of objects and the hard materiality of objects themselves was repeated in his view of the flâneur and the consumer seduced by commodities in department stores, and also by membership of the crowd, which swirls around these commodities:

The crowd is not only the newest asylum of outlaws; someone abandoned in the crowd. In this he [the flâneur] shares the situation of the commodity. He is not aware of this special situation, but this does not diminish its effect on him and it permeates him blissfully like a narcotic that can compensate him for many humiliations. The intoxication to which the flâneur surrenders is the intoxication of the commodity around which surges the stream of customers. (Benjamin, 1988, p55)

In such a manner, Benjamin had found a way of describing and also experiencing the secular opium of the people and the concrete pedagogics of their intoxication.

The empathy with others and commodities permitted the ‘incomparable privilege of being himself and someone else as he sees fit. Like a roving soul in search of a body, he enters another person whenever he wishes.’ (Baudelaire, quoted by Benjamin, 1983, p55) Intoxication as the pursuit of *the self* and the *self of many selves* is not therefore dependent on the consumption of hashish and other types of medication. The intoxication of the crowd and the commodity might equally be substituted for the intoxication of the medicinal.

The urban way of life It would not be unfair to argue that Benjamin rarely had the cow muck of the countryside or of the cow shed upon his footwear. He was an urban flâneur, rather than a man of the woods or the fields out hunting with his dog for small game or hares. His romanticism for the storyteller was not for the workman in the village pub, or for the farmer at home with the family on a Sunday after working the fields.

Instead, mirroring the potential loneliness of urban life he wandered the streets, for the most part on his own. And yet, Benjamin anticipated the now common argument that the urban-rural dichotomy is fast disappearing: we are apt to talk of rural dwellers who commute on a daily basis to urban areas, and vice versa, we recognise urban dwellers who are increasingly willing to sell up and move to the countryside, in order to *appropriate* and *exploit* 'green values', for their children and of course for themselves. As Benjamin phrased it:

Just as all things, in a perpetual process of mingling and contamination, are losing their intrinsic character while ambiguity displaces authenticity, so is the city. Great cities...are seen to be breached at all points by the invading countryside. Not by the landscape, but by what in untrammelled nature is most bitter: ploughed land, highways, night sky that the veil of vibrant redness no longer conceals. (Benjamin, 1979, 59)

In this quote, Benjamin teaches that the city dweller cannot escape brute nature, 'ploughed land' and 'night sky', any more than the rural dweller can. And in drawing attention to a third element, the highway; he highlights the inter-connection of the country and the city. It is interesting to note in this connection how the tram line is being re-introduced between London and New Addington, an out of city residential area constructed after the Second World War. The tramline, ploughed land, into which the non-attentive might step, and the night sky all suggest that the experience of the rural dweller is increasingly invaded by the urban dweller and vice versa, so that perception of difference and disparity between the two becomes more difficult and demanding. There are foxes in city areas as in rural copses.

The virtue of idleness Do we work too much? Weber traced one argument to support this back to the role of the Calvinist work ethic. Benjamin also noted its influence:

The stringent work ethic and moral doctrine of Calvinism, it may be said, is most intimately related to the development of the *vita contemplativa*. It sought to build a dam to stem the melting of time into idleness, one such time was frozen in contemplation. (Benjamin, 1999, p803)

Where Weber celebrated the growth of the spirit of capitalist enterprise, Benjamin wanted to defend the *vita contemplativa* from it. Or to put it differently, the virtue of not doing anything in particular, of *Being* idle as a way of *Being*.

Benjamin drew a distinction between leisure and idleness. The former was an active filling or fulfilling of time, whereas the latter was lacking in such a clear goal, 'whoever enjoys leisure escapes Fortuna; whoever embraces idleness falls under her power.' (Benjamin, 1999, p800)

Fortuna as a deified, mystical power connected with pure fate, luck and chance, and determining the good and ill befalling a person. The man of leisure was therefore too goal-orientated. 'He to whom leisure no longer means anything in itself is happy to put his idleness on display.' (p802)

Benjamin argued further that idleness was characterised by an openness to immediate experience, rather than to the kind of experience which is the outcome of work. This immediate experience and the contemplation it involves, and rests upon, has 'no sequence and no system', it is a 'product of chance'. Empathy is possible when idle because the individual can focus on whatever they please. They have no obligations to follow a certain route to reach a specific leisure or work goal: 'on the high road of empathy, any passer by whatsoever as its substrate'. (Benjamin, 1999, p805)

But, is knowledge a concern of the idler? Benjamin, as noted, connected the idler with contemplation. He was not against study as a source of knowledge, but it was the study of an 'unfinished collection of things worth knowing, whose utility depends on chance.' (Benjamin, 1999, p802) He gave the news reporter as an example of a person who idly waits for the chance happening. They must try to be present for the unexpected – an impossible task? Not so much present, as prepared:

News service and idleness. Feuilletonist, reporter, photographer constitute a gradation in which waiting around, the "Get ready" succeeded by the "Shoot" becomes ever more important vis-à-vis other activities. (Benjamin, 1999, p802)

The point is that the kind of knowledge the reporter is waiting for and contemplating is open and unlimited. Rather than the fixed and limited character of knowledge necessary to play a game of leisure or complete a work task, it was indeterminate in its scope.

Benjamin also envisaged other sources and strategies for obtaining such knowledge through idleness: an idleness connected with study. In *One-Way Street* he describes the importance of the art of copying. The copying of the text, as opposed to its reading, was likened to the person who walked the contours of the landscape rather taking a plane to fly over it:

Only he who walks the road on foot learns of the power it commands, and of how, from the very scenery that for the flier is only the unfurled plain, it calls forth distances, belvederes, clearings, prospects at each of its turns like a commander deploying soldiers at a front. Only the copied text thus commands the soul of him who is occupied with it, whereas the mere reader never discovers the new aspects of his inner self that are opened by the text...because the reader follows the movement of his mind in the free flight of daydreaming, whereas the copier submits it to command. (Benjamin, 1979, p50)

He provides further advice on copying:

Fill in the lacunae of inspiration by tidily copying out what is already written. Intuition will awaken in the process. (Benjamin, 1979, p69)

Copying the text in both these examples is important because it lets the text lead the person. In reading by contrast, the reader is concerned to lead the text in the direction of a meaning which they seek to impose and find confirmed. Or to put it even more strongly, the reader forces a meaning upon the text, instead of idly waiting for the text to take over and create the meaning. The latter is found in the art of copying.

Benjamin is suggesting two things: Firstly, that it is important to practice the art of not doing anything in particular. It may even have revolutionary potential in the sense that it refuses the work ethic and the leisure ethic, both based upon filling time. Secondly, he is suggesting that it is possible to gain knowledge through idling, but it is knowledge of a more diffuse, inexact character. In sum, he is providing guidance on how idling can be an existential way of *Being*. Time fills itself, rather than we filling it. However, as a way of *Being*, idling can be distorted and combined with the work ethic: 'the true salaried flâneur (Henri Béraud's term) is the sandwich man' advertising commodities, as he walks in an apparently idle manner (Benjamin, 1999. p804).

Exploring Accumulated, Suspended and Lost Time in London. From topology to topology

Stephen Dobson and Øivind Haaland

Introduction

Baudelaire in 1863 suggested that urban life was characterised by the ‘transient, the fleeting, the contingent’. Similarly, some writers in postmodernism speak of the collapsing of distinctive historical styles, moments and epochs into an endless spiral of commodity fetishism, in which consumers pick, choose and quote from among lifestyles, architectural styles and historical moments. Both Baudelaire and the postmodernists offer a homogenous, flat view of time, contrasting to the diverse ways we all experience time.

Benjamin offers a less homogenous version with his distinction between ‘*erlebniss*’, the lived and forgotten time of the factory worker, and ‘*erfahrung*’, the intense non-repeatable time of revolutionary moments like the Paris Commune of 1871. But his account too quickly pigeon holes the experience of time into one or the other. In this essay, we suggest there are a number of possible experiences of time, of which we identify three: accumulated time, suspended time and lost time.

I: The City of London

De Certeau (1984) in his book on the practice of everyday life became an advocate of the stories told by pedestrians in the city. Not verbalised or written in text, but those spatial narratives as people traverse the city in an uncontrolled, irregular fashion, predominantly in their leisure time. These pedestrian stories provide a counter-foil to the panopticon, disciplined, rational use of space defined by planners and the owners of capital. De Certeau represents an anarchistic voice drawing attention to the disruptions in the regular flow of people and time. Further, pedestrian stories resist the experience of panopticon time. Panopticon practices based upon the observation and planned control of people can be self-administered and not just imposed. For instance, in the daily commute to work, the worker cannot totally disregard the transport systems directions or they may never arrive at their destination. But it is not just the imposition or self-imposition of ordered practices which is interesting. The panopticon control of movements also leads to accumulated experiences of time. Time experiences can be slightly

different over a longer period of time, but they can nevertheless accumulate.

At work, we can see examples of the accumulation of time. These can be connected with the production of future exchange-value. The logic is that commodities cannot be produced if time is not experienced in a cumulative, planned and administered manner. In the City of London in the morning and the evening, commuters rushing to and from work build up accumulated experiences of time spent travelling. When at work, they can sometimes be seen moving between different office blocks, crossing busy streets, with documents or contracts under their arms, and their images suggest that the contracts and deals on which they are working are the foundation for future exchange-value. Over time their work activity will be accompanied by a sense of time experienced as an accumulated entity.

The image of the office worker or the image of the commuter are *snap shots* which suspend or freeze an activity for us to examine or reflect upon, at our leisure. This means that the activity and its experience of time are removed from the ongoing narrative, the lived life as lived so to speak, which gives the image its character and direction. We are called on as viewers to re-construct this narrative and to thereby *flesh out* how those portrayed in the image experience time in and through their activity.

The urban commuter and office worker are an image of capitalism at a specific juncture, the start of the 21st century. To become an image of dialectical experiences of time: moments of the now, dialectically united with an accumulating repeatable experience of time. But, this image also contains a second dialectical experience of time, since it joins the accumulated image of the moment and time to the more persistent sustained image of what Sombart called the 'quintessence of capitalism'. By this he meant the modern businessman as a materialised spirit of capitalism. (Sombart, 1915) Thus, the image of the urban commuter and office worker in their experiences of time as lived moments of the now are dialectically united with, and reveal the persistent corporal expression of the spirit of the modern business man, a 'mental outlook that cares only for gain.' (Sombart, 1915, p304)

The more we observe the details of the commuter and office worker, the more we also entertain the thought that we are already viewing the remnants of soon to disappear experiences of time and its actors. With the rise of electronic communication the workers of the future may no

longer commute, working instead from home. Related to this, the carrying of paper documents which *flesh out* visible evidence of work on contracts and deals will be replaced by drafted and electronically communicated alternatives. The commuter and office worker as images of accumulated experiences of time might therefore be transitional, on the way towards new and different images of more privatised home-based experiences of accumulated time.

II: Legal London: the Inns and Temples

Returning to the journey through London, as the City's financial district is left a new area is entered: the Law Courts and those who work with matters concerning the practice of law. Barristers and judges in their work pay tribute to accumulated cases of law over time and in so doing experience accumulated time. Here, it is not so much the concrete production of use-value in a factory and images of the worker in oiled overalls. Neither is it the production of foundations of future exchange-value and images of the office worker. Instead, it is the production and maintenance of the rules and regulations, which form a parameter protecting precisely the concrete production of use-value or the foundations of future exchange-value. The images are of barristers and clerks of the court in their black robed attire.

Just like the office workers and the commuters their image is dialectical: their court robes point backwards in time, reflecting accumulated experiences and traditions of time down the centuries, at the same time as the passing moment is seen in the cut of their suits, their shoes and the hair styles. In other words, images and experiences of past time and present time are dialectically interwoven; and the business man's mental outlook desiring material gain, clearly an element in the motivation of the barrister's desire for success is here disguised, hidden or denied by a corporeal image of serving the rule of law, stability and precisely tradition. The atmosphere is one of maintaining the already established rule of law, which in turn secures the parameters of the production of exchange-value in other production-based activities, such as for the business person.

III: School

The foundations for future exchange-value is also visible as an image seen in the residential areas touching on the boundaries of the City: in the Isle of Dogs and Whitechapel areas. Children in uniforms travelling to or from school indicate that they are engaged in the formation of the educational premises for their future occupational involvement in the

production of exchange-value. With their daily repetitive movement and their regular involvement in education they experience time as an accumulated entity. But time will also be experienced dialectically, where the counterpart is the way the children live and experience time not as an accumulated phenomenon directed towards future goals, but as the opportunity to experience passing moments in different play activities outside of the classroom. The time experienced in the playing of hopscotch or rat, tap and bolt is for example lived intensively and then abandoned for another game or activity. It lacks the accumulative aspect of activity preparing for tasks in the adult world.

IV: Tourist London

A fourth example of accumulated time is supplied by the image of two tourists on the street as they study a map in deep concentration. In attempting to navigate or negotiate a route through the city towards some event or monument a number of streets will be traversed. The experience of these streets will be cumulative in the sense that its elements, the traffic lights, pedestrian subways, entrances to buildings, bus stops and similar things will be accumulated as part of a journey to and from some desired tourist sight. And, just as the streets, lights and so on accumulate, so will the experience of time take on the character of an accumulated entity as the goal is neared. Even in this case however, the experience of time will be dialectical, not only is time accumulated, but it is also lived as passing moments, the reading of the map is completed without recalling in detail the time spent consulting it again and again. In other words, the accumulated experience of time is dialectically opposed by moments of time experienced as passing moments, lived and forgotten.

To summarise, in a daily fashion, the worker, commuter, lawyer, school pupil and tourist through their respective activities can experience time as an accumulated phenomenon. In many respects these experiences are the result of imposed or self-imposed panopticon practices. Such as following a map, interpreting the word of law, being receptive to a school lesson, finalising a business contract, or producing a commodity some form of discipline is required. Furthermore, the wider goal of producing exchange-value or its premise are an important source of accumulated experiences of time. Lastly, the connection of imposed and self-imposed discipline with the production of value or its premises yields not merely experiences of time as an accumulated phenomenon; time is experienced dialectically as the joining of the lived, passing moment, *erlebniss*, with more persistent experiences of time linked with traditions or the essence of capitalism. When the production of use-value, its premise or the tourist's journey are broken or disrupted, the

experience of time as an accumulated dialectical phenomenon connected with experiences of time as passing moments is also disrupted. A second experience of time intervenes or takes over, here termed *suspended time*. It coincides in some respects, as has been noted, with Benjamin's concept of *jetztzeit*, now time. But, as is typical of Benjamin his theoretical categories were often left embedded in his descriptions of urban life and he rarely developed theoretical typologies, which is the goal of this essay.

V: Petticoat Lane

Baudrillard once drew attention to a raid on a supermarket, where the people already in the building were encouraged to take what they wanted. (Baudrillard, 1981) The normal pursuit of value, whether in the shape of use-value or exchange value, was momentarily suspended and people were a little unsure as to what to do. Should they take these 'unpriced' commodities, with the possibility that they might have to return them at a later date when law and order was re-established? And, if they were to take commodities, which should they select, since price was no longer a viable measure of their value? In such a situation, time was no longer experienced as accumulated. It had been suspended in a permanent *Now*, what Benjamin so aptly called *jetztzeit*, Now Time. It could also be called suspended time in the sense that time was neither accumulated nor lost, a kind of limbo state. The time of opportunity, of choice, of existential truth. It could be argued that this suspended time should in fact include the time when commodities are exchanged, because in this activity the person is once again suspended between future exchange-value of the commodity and the past accumulation of exchange-value used to produce the commodity and now embodied in it. In other words, suspended time might, drawing upon and developing Baudrillard's conception, also refer to experiences of suspended time caught between moments and experiences of accumulated time.

Attending London street markets, such as Petticoat Lane, provides images of people exchanging commodities with money as the mediating term. Time is experienced as an accumulated phenomenon connected with the steady accumulation of purchases or sales, and yet it is dialectically opposed by a more insistent experience of time: the repetitive non-progressive experience of time as exchanges are made again and again with each new trader/customer. In other words, the time of exchange, as suspended time, fights to expand a position between and also within the experience of time as an accumulated phenomenon.

VI: The bus stop

Suspended time can also be seen in the image of people waiting in a queue to catch a bus or to purchase an entry ticket to some form of entertainment. In waiting, time is experienced as neither use-value or exchange value. It might be useful that time is spent in the queue, but while standing in the queue it is easy to become impatient or bored in anticipation that time can once again begin to flow and be experienced as accumulated usable time. And, as with the case of the market, a dialectical experience of time is in evidence: the experience of suspended time measured against the steady insistence that time should and will once again in due course be experienced as an accumulated phenomenon.

VII: The refugee camp

Such waiting also corresponds with the refugee's experience of time in transit camps, while they are waiting to be moved either to a country of permanent resettlement or returned to their homelands. The word *transit* sums up how the suspended time of the queuing experience is connected with a movement from one place to another, but the actual movement has been interrupted, hence the queue and the waiting.

VIII: The Tower of London

Suspended time takes on a third form in the images of tourists visiting historical monuments or galleries, such as the Tower of London or St. Paul's Cathedral. At these sites, historical events have been frozen, or rather suspended in a fixed state for the benefit of the tourist. The same is also the case at the gallery where the object or image displayed has been taken out of its normal context and frozen or suspended for the visitor. But, the fact that the monument or the gallery can be visited again and again on later occasions reveals once again the presence of a dialectical counterpart to the experience of suspended time, namely an experience of accumulated time. Visits can be experienced as suspended time and then accumulated.

In these tourist locations the experience of suspended time is not exactly the *now time* of which Benjamin talked. For Benjamin, *now time* was connected with future possibilities as the past was projected into the present with the precise goal of motivating participants to bring about revolutionary changes. Tourists are not seeking to realise revolutionary goals even if they might experience an important change in their self-identity on the basis of the visit. Neither is this form of suspended time the same as the experience of time while waiting or attending a market to

exchange commodities. Instead, it is time experienced as stopped or frozen. Not then the experience of time in transit to another location of activity (for example to use the commodity purchased at the market), where time can once again be experienced as accumulated.

IX: Les Halles/Soho

A political and aesthetic movement embracing some of these dimensions of suspended time existed in Europe in the 1950s and 60s. They were known as the International Situationists and practised psycho-geography. Psycho-geography is the collective or individual drift (*dérive*) through the city on foot in search of centres of ambience, where the rational planners' desire to direct and control people's movements are disrupted. These centres of ambience, in the context of our discussion, would be centres of suspended time. Sites and routes where the normal, goal-orientated movement of commuters and their accumulating experiences of time are momentarily disrupted.

Whether the Situationists intended making these situations of ambience through political acts and thus creating *situations of now time*, or, merely desired to discover them as 'ready mades' is a matter for further discussion, not within the bounds of this essay. (Sadler, 1999, p147-157) Irrespective, in sites such as the district of Les Halles in Paris they found ambience and time experienced as suspended and a junction between other more rational, cumulative experiences of time. As a recent commentator on the International Situationist movement put it:

(Les Halles)... evoked beautifully the way in which some unities of ambience acted as stations on the drift, junctions in the psychogeographic flow of Paris. The situationists coined a term for these junctions: *plaques tournantes*. The term punned on so many meanings that it is not possible to translate it straightforwardly. A *plaque tournante* can be the center of something; it can be a railway turntable; or it can be a place of exchange (in the same way that Marseilles is sometimes described as a *plaque tournante* for trafficking, or that Paris as a whole has been celebrated as a *plaque tournante* of culture). As a centre for markets, drinking, prostitution, and drugs, Les Halles was clearly a *plaque tournante* in all these senses. (Sadler, 1999, p88. Italics in the original)

In London, perhaps the triangle of space encompassing Soho – Leicester Square – Covent Garden functions as one of these junctions or turntables, where time is experienced as suspended between the accumulated time of London's financial district (the City of London) and

political (Parliament - Whitehall) district. But, even the Soho – Leicester Square – Covent Garden area has its traditions, several visits over a longer period of time will make it possible to experience the visits as instances of accumulated experiences of time, rather than suspended time.

If the experience of time as suspended represents a disruption and interruption of the experience of time as accumulated, there is a danger that it is assumed that time is primarily experienced as a shift between suspended and accumulated time. But, we will now argue that a third experience of time in an urban setting is also possible, the experience of time as lost.

X: Kensington Park

How often are couples hand in hand witnessed in London? As the evenings draw on their images are seen more regularly on the streets or pausing on bridges to look down at the Thames. Sometimes they are seen kissing. If it is not the first time they have embraced, this would suggest time experienced in an accumulated manner. And yet, there are instances when the image of the couple seen kissing takes on a daylight appearance. One example comes to mind, outside the church or registry office after having just got married. Often a camera is used to catch the moment and the experience of time before it is lost. Or, to put it in dialectical terms, the moment encompasses an experience of time as lived in the present, at the same time as it is in the process of being lost forever. Hence the camera does not bring back the experience of lost time, but rather documents that this lost time has once existed.

There is therefore a difference between the images of the repetitive kiss and these special kisses. The latter experience of time as not repetitive and as lived and lost this is its distinguishing mark. To digress, it might be speculated that this time lived, lost and documented is what makes sculptures of kissing couples, such as Rodin's, so enduringly fascinating. The viewer of his art, as the viewer of these images of the kissers in the park or after the wedding ceremony, are witnesses and thus also share experiences of lost time. The sense of time being non-repeatable is furthermore a characteristic which separates these photographed or sculpted kisses from the cumulative time experiences of the commuter, office worker or the consumer of commodities. Additional kisses later in time may open experiences of repetitive, accumulative time, but these kisses will never have the character of those associated with lost time. They will lack the sense of uniqueness, of the once only.

Proceeding with the argument, there are other more commonplace images and experiences of lost time where the dialectical experience of the lived time against lost time is present, but less tightly connected with the once only of the unique. For example, the image of the person arriving at the station platform as the train draws away. Stamping their feet in exasperation. Over-heated and sweat dripping from their faces if they have been running or carrying a heavy bag or briefcase. The importance of this image is firstly, the experience of lost time. It is as if it is disappearing in the departing train. Secondly, there is the dialectical aspect, as the lost time is lived in the moment. It is paradoxically an experience of time lived and lost at one and the same moment. Arriving too late can be repeated again and again, but it is still the character of time lived and lost that dominates. It is not the accumulated time of the worker producing among other things use-value, or of the commuter making their way, as usual to or from their place of work. Furthermore, it contrasts sharply with the image of the person standing in the queue, where time is experienced not so much as lost as suspended in the sense that it is within their grasp, they have just chosen to use and experience it in the activity of waiting.

There is also the image of young people out drinking or partying. They are consuming time as they consume alcohol and money. Time is experienced as a lost commodity, and since they can party or drink on other occasions in the same manner, they will experience this time as repetitive, but as with arriving late, it is not accumulated, it is used up in the course of the experience. It is not then part of an activity leading to the production of use-value for future consumption. The dialectical image of the drinkers is therefore of time lived in the moment and at the same time lost.

XI: The Embankment

A fourth image of lost time has more painful and less intoxicated, pleasurable connotations: the homeless person huddled up in a sleeping bag by a shop entrance or beside the entrance to a railway/underground station. They *flesh-out* time experienced as lost, in the sense that they could have been using it elsewhere and in an another kind of activity (assuming the opportunity existed and they desired it). Dialectically this experience of lost time is joined with the lived time of the moment. In other words, it is a case of time lost for productive purposes, but not always lived as a pleasurable moment, as in the case of the party revellers.

Time experienced by the homeless living on the street is complicated when by daylight and into the evening they beg or collect money for the sale of the Big Issue magazine. In such activities they are clearly experiencing time as an accumulated phenomenon as they are also accumulating funds, and this expels the experience of time as lost. Although waiting for donations or purchasers may simultaneously be experienced as suspended time.

It was earlier argued that the office worker's experience of time as accumulated moments of the *now* was dialectically connected with a more persistent, long-term experience of time. Namely as belonging to that tradition of modern capitalist business men with a mental outlook dominated by gain. That is a persistent experience of time in the sense that it is a desire for material gain over time which is never fulfilled once and for all. Persistent also in the sense that the office workers join the shared tradition of capitalists stretching back in time. To put it differently, they continue to experience belonging to a tradition with a shared motivation: gain. The homeless, the beggar and the seller of the Big Issue in a similar manner experience a more persistent, long-term experience of time as their activity connects them with a tradition. The tradition of not so much the capitalist motivated by gain, but of the urban pauper trying to survive in some manner. Baudelaire the poet saw the tradition of the pauper in the image of the ragpicker, and Benjamin (1983, p19) commented:

When the new industrial processes had given refuse a certain value, ragpickers appeared in the cities in larger numbers. They worked for middlemen and constituted a sort of cottage industry located in the streets. The ragpicker fascinated his epoch. The eyes of the first investigators of pauperism.

Thus, the homeless join the ranks of paupers stretching back to the ragpickers, they all share an experience of the harshness of poverty and want. An experience of time as persistent, accumulated and yet it is also joined with an experience of time as lost.

Part IV: Topologies and grammars of time

The *typology* of experiences of time presented in the foregoing parts of this essay reveal a kind of cognitive map with potentially plotable coordinates. This map is *topological* in the uneven and changing manner in which time is experienced. Time viewed as a map helps organise and provide guidance through different time experiences, as lived in the specific locations in the city and in their types of accompanying social activity. Such an approach provides an illustration of how experiencing

time in a non-homogenous manner can be realised. The move from a *typology* to a mapped *topology* of experiences is in many senses a descriptive cognitive enterprise. Jameson would like to move beyond such an enterprise, making cognitive mapping into the preparatory phase in subsequent revolutionary activity. There is no reason why this should not also be a possibility in the application of the topological project we have been suggesting. And, it is precisely the uneven aspect of the topology which provides pauses, interruptions and openings for experiences of a radical, revolutionary character.

Different types of mapping might also be envisaged, yielding not merely spatial topologies (Jameson, 1984) or time-based topologies, but also emotional topologies as time, space and social activity are changed in the movement across the city. Relevant emotional categories might be pleasure, surprise, boredom, elation or resentment. Tuan (1974, p99-110; 1980, p145-174) suggests other emotional categories in his topophilia 'affective ties with the material environment' such as familiarity and attachment, patriotism, sense of wildness and fear.

Alternatively, instead of either *time* or *space*, commentators inspired by Hägerstrand, such as Giddens (1984), have argued for a topology based upon actor's combined *time-space* trajectories as they move through an urban infrastructure and its landscape. For Giddens, what is also important is the mapping of the power contained in the allocation of resources supporting these trajectories, which not only constrains, but also engenders structures of domination. (Giddens, 1984, p117) But Giddens' arguments tend to remain at an abstract level of generality, and without material drawn from or referring to empirical reality, there are few exemplifying images. Images in the sense as they have been understood in this essay: *fleshing out* lived activity offering a greater level of visibility to what would otherwise remain abstract and concealed.

The main point shared by all these conceptions of cognitive mapping is that they stress the importance of involving individuals and groups in an active manner. Building upon the idea of a move from a passive, descriptive stance to an active, self-autonomous stance we suggest that individuals and groups develop topologies of experiences of time, not only to document their own time passages through urban space and social activities, but to construct something else: their *own grammars of time games*. This term is used here to indicate a reworking of Wittgenstein's (1994) concept of language games to mean time games, as each of the categories of time outlined in the typology above and

traced in the topologies of time represent minimal linguistic and experienced units in a person's construction of their own *grammar of time*.

In this essay a number of dialectical images of time have been presented, for example, the commuter (time lived in the moment and *time accumulated*), the person in a queue (non-accumulated, *suspended time* of the moment joined to and resisting accumulated time), the couple kissing after a wedding ceremony (time lived in the moment and *time lost*). In all cases, the dialectical aspect of the image brought together the lived time of the moment with different corporeally experienced images of time: accumulated time, suspended time and lost time.

A person learning to recognise these dialectical images (accumulated time, suspended time, lost time connected with the lived time of the moment), becoming aware of the narrative connections of these categories of time (as the movement between the past, the lived moment of the present and the future of the yet to Be) would also have the opportunity of recognising narrative chains of belonging. To say that the person should learn to recognise these narrative chains of belonging is only partly correct. The narratives would also to some extent be constructed by the those witnessing or experiencing them and not then merely pre-exist, but be embedded in the activity and awaiting for recognition. In other words, the active efforts of the person are required, whereby the person learns a two-sided activity: *constructive recognition*.

Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, based upon a collection of quotations and self-composed aphorisms (of 19th century Paris) are an example of this *constructive recognition*, where the reader in studying the text can learn to recognise and construct dialectical images of 19th century Paris (e.g. the prostitute who sold herself in the passing moment, to support in turn the more long-term temporal experience and re-production of the capitalist system). The reader can also learn a *constructive recognition* of dialectical images as images of the 19th century are dialectically connected with the reader's own contemporary lived context and activities (e.g. the manner in which a waged labourer in a factory of today sells their body's productive time just as the 19th century prostitute sold her productive time).

These resultant dialectical images feel the pulse of the moment, of time and of belonging or exclusion. Some might go as far as to say that learning to think and experience in images is different to the kind of learning connected with the thinking and experiencing of written texts.

The one image-based and spontaneous and the other conceptual and delayed by reflection. But, surely Benjamin's point was not to pose the image against the concept, even if he was well-versed in Klages' desire to do precisely this (Roberts, 1982, p106), but to use the conceptual and text-based quotations and aphorisms of the *Arcades* project as a source of images, and not as the source of something totally different from images. It was the image making and image recognising faculty which was his ultimate pedagogic goal, and in this essay we have pursued a similar goal, with an added emphasis upon precisely *typologies* and *topologies* of time.

**Botanising the asphalt:
First reflections on a day spent walking between Wapping
Hydraulic Pumping Station and the London Eye**

Stephen Dobson

I – The walk

A few introductory points - to set the compass for our reflections. Already, in his early work on German tragic drama (*trauerspiel*) Benjamin was somewhat sceptical towards those who viewed drama only from the spectator's experience of *catharsis*. Catharsis understood as Aristotle's term for physiological purification or cleansing through the act of aesthetic appreciation. Benjamin spent the late 1920s and the following decade researching Paris and its Arcades. This entailed his walking the length and breadth of Paris. A project which he alluded to as a 'botanising of the asphalt'. In walking from Wapping to the London Eye one of the day's ambitions was to re-create for our context, in time and space, Benjamin's project of walking across a city landscape.¹

While walking one of the questions we discussed was the following: In botanising the asphalt, was Benjamin attempting to purify or cleanse his experiences of life in general? In other words, was he deliberately seeking *catharsis* from his divorce, his frustrations in attempting to publish his work, his personal economic struggles and the lack of commitment from fellow intellectuals in the face of rising Fascism?

Those on our walk who supported this thesis argued that he regarded Paris as a drama in the sense of Aristotle's *Poetics*, where he could purify his feelings of guilt and disappointment. The sight and experience of the Paris streets of the 1920/30s and his imagination of how they must have been in the 19th century were the plot (*suzhet*) and substance (*fabula*) of this drama.

There were also those on the Wapping to London Eye walk who argued that Benjamin's goal was not *catharsis*. His refusal to reduce tragedy to merely a physiological phenomenon seeking physiological effects was evidence in itself that he could never regard the cityscape as an aesthetic drama. They argued that Benjamin was instead interested in appropriating the Platonic essence of the city, its signs and symbols: his

¹ The walk was part of the Critical Imagination's joint conference arranged by Goldsmiths' College (University of London) and Lillehammer College (Norway) in October 2000.

goal was to read the city allegorically, as a storehouse of signs and symbols, which when fossilised and reified could yield the traces of lost life, forgotten dreams and embedded experiences: Benjamin's 'familiar city as phantasmagoria'.

But why should one be forced to choose between one or the other view? Could not the activity of botanising the asphalt, in the Paris of the 1920/30s, or, in contemporary London, be an experience of *catharsis* and at the same time an appropriation of the signs and symbols of the city? Not then even a relegation of *catharsis* to the body and the appropriation of signs and symbols to an act of cognition. Instead, a strategy more in keeping with Nietzsche who said, in the *Twilight of the Idols*, that a thought should gain somatic form, be walked or allowed to dance. And he meant dance in the way the thought danced across the page in the concrete movement of the writer's hand, and danced as the thinker walked and tested its viability before or after its documentation in textual form. In his words, 'to dance with the feet, with concepts, with words: do I still have to say that one has to be able to dance with the pen?'

Benjamin's interest in cityscapes was undoubtedly inspired by the Surrealists, especially Aragon, and their city explorations: empty streets, the arcades and so on. This could be proof enough that he like them wanted to botanise the asphalt in search of its hidden signs and symbols, as well as wanting at the same time to experience the magical intoxication of *cathartic* enervation.

II – Technology

Benjamin walked around Paris. Fifty years later, Baudrillard, a Parisian well-versed in Benjamin's work chose the car as his favoured mode for botanising the United States. A strange paradox emerges if it is noted that while Benjamin often wrote about the advent of mechanical technology and its effects upon mass consumption, he still chose to walk and not drive or take the Metro. This could mean that Benjamin looked *backwards* into history, to the Paris of the nineteenth century when the car had yet to gain a dominant position and the Metro was still in its infancy. While Baudrillard looked *forwards* into the future. But even this cannot provide the complete answer, since Baudrillard's look into the future should surely have suggested a time when the reign of the car was transcended for some other form of motion: a hyper-real form of motion.

The starting point for our walk was Wapping's now disused hydraulic pumping station. Here, until fairly recently hydraulic power was pumped to the West End, raising and lowering stage curtains in theatre land. The

pumping station is interesting in at least three respects. Firstly, the pipes taking power to the city reveal or rather conceal an underground, dimly-lit world of which few are aware. At the time of our visit, an art installation had been inserted into the station: in a semi-full water chamber, where the hydraulic power once began its journey to the city, a number of luminous green lines have been strung from the ceiling and fall into the depths of this otherwise pitch black chamber. From the viewing platform in the chamber it felt as if we had found the hidden source of not only an aquatic journey, but also journey of the soul. This sense of the source also mingled with the sense that this place was paradoxically a kind of Hades, where life reached its point of termination and was evaluated. Secondly, the disused power station has found a new lease of life, as a women's theatre and as a place for art exhibitions. Its restaurant, scarcely a café, was expensively priced and this combined with the *avant-garde* art suggested that the intended public were not to be the working class, who in previous generations dominated the area. Thirdly, if the London Parks are commonly referred to as the lungs of London, then Wapping Hydraulic station was in all respects the source of the blood that flowed through these London veins. And without the pumping action of the station at its heart, how could a person even contemplate filling their lungs with air?

In sum, the power station represents an entry into the hidden, underground world that powered the city of London. Its survival as a building, with its machinery intact, draws attention to a forgotten technology made obsolete by the greater use of electricity and other forms of power, such as gas. But the pipes have now been used by companies laying their fibre optic cables across London. An indication that each new technology is destined to be super-ceded by a successor, in a seamless flow of unending technologies, like the flow of hydraulic power itself, always flowing – riverrun, as Joyce would say, - without noticeable break.

The walk was split into three parts, a walk to the Hydraulic Station from the nearest tube station, then a walk around Whitechapel and lastly a walk along the South Bank. The connecting link between the second and third part was on an underground tube ride to Blackfriars station, although some chose to walk this connection. This mixing of walking with underground tube travel allowed the participants to experience a second form of motion in addition to walking, in this case technologically and electrically assisted and below ground. One recalls Benjamin's aphorism in *One Way Street* about the person who emerges from the underground to be surprised that the over-ground world is still

going on as before: ‘So quickly has he forgotten the weather of the upper world. And as quickly the world in its turn will forget him.’ Is Benjamin suggesting some invisible thread joining the hidden underground world, a metaphor for the unconscious, with a visible street level world, a metaphor for the conscious part of the psyche? Irrespective of whether these metaphors are accepted or recognised, it is possible that Benjamin is an opening for a corporeal experience of the unconscious and the conscious as they are played out in the time and space of the journey from Wapping to the London Eye. In other words, a Surreal experience and awareness is deemed appropriate, as the world of the unconscious is threaded and woven together with the world of the conscious. And, technology, in the form of the tube train, becomes just one element along with the corporeal, self-propelled motion of the walker occupied with botanising the asphalt

III – Property

On the walk participants were aware of their regaining or re-conquering space, which they were either unaware it existed, or aware that it had belonged to others. At Cable Street, the wall mural depicting the inhabitants of Whitechapel battling against fascists and police in 1936 revealed how the space of the street could belong to those who lived in the area.

Nevertheless, if the act of walking provides the opportunity of re-conquering space, making it the property of those who occupy it, it is important that the feeling of intoxication accompanying these occupations are not the source of mystifications. Access to many buildings, leading onto and off the streets was and still is prohibited. High metal fences and video cameras being the most visible evidence of this today. On Princelet Street, Rodinsky’s room was not open to the public, thus preserving its hidden magical quality and also making sure that we could not occupy it and make it our own, as many tourists are keen to do on their passing journey through London and its tourist sites. (Literally, taking souvenirs in the form loose pieces of plaster from a room, or, pieces of football pitch turf, in the case of a football ground). A number of paradoxes or contradictions are therefore encountered in the attempt to occupy space in the course of the Wapping to London Eye walk. If space is occupied, the occupier can feel that they own it although property rights are not transcended. Secondly, it is not necessarily a permanent ownership supported by deeds deposited in bank vaults. It is a transient, mobile ownership and the danger is that the owner can be intoxicated by the moment, as with other forms of narcotic assisted experience. The walker can recall precisely how Benjamin took

hashish in Marseilles, perhaps to experience in revolutionary style altered states of ownership.

How real was the ownership of walkers who completed their journey with a trip on the London Eye? On the one hand it was a visual ownership normally restricted to those in helicopters or flying over the city. On the other hand, as with the walkers in the street, the ownership was only temporary and did not change the long-term property rights of the state and other landowners. Were we then really investigating forms of virtual ownership?

IV – Summary

The journey from Wapping to the London Eye and the botanising of the asphalt provided a contemporary insight into the methodology developed by Benjamin. Questions were not so much answered as raised, with respect to the role of *catharsis*, the appropriation of the city as a set of signs and symbols; the role of technology above and below street level; the role of unconscious and conscious corporal experiences; and the question of real or visual, dare one say, virtual property rights.

The recent publication in English of Benjamin's Arcades work has puzzled a number of its readers. One of the challenges has been how to read it, or more precisely, how to give it one reading in preference of another. Buck-Morss (1993) looked, in the manner of a detective, for a number of codes to unlock its treasures. The walkers from Wapping Hydraulic Station to the London Eye were presented with and also encouraged to develop a more corporeal, exploratory reading of this Arcades text. Could it be that for us, as for Benjamin, that the Arcades text was a set of deliberately uncompleted, open-ended notes based upon city walks of catharsis and symbol/sign appropriation? A guide-book, or notebook, and not then a text book or limited set of stable Platonic truths to be revealed.

Some thoughts while walking around Whitechapel

Jo Hadley

In the converted Victorian pump house in Wapping, past and present converged. As Michael Keith suggested during his talk while we were there, this 19th century subterranean network that once powered London still acted as a space and metaphor for power networking in London today - a dominant 19th century presence in the 21st century, if you will. Now a stylish restaurant and art installation space, echoes of the pump house's past function - power - surrounded us in architecture and machinery as we considered the meaning of 'violence' in Benjamin's pre-WWII work. Stephen Dobson discussed the '*destructive character*' as perhaps one associated with ruptures from painful histories, clearances of social spaces and the possibility of new beginnings. During this, I was reminded not only of the rich history and recent development of Docklands itself, but of contemporary challenges to the institutional nature of power, racism and cultural identity in Britain running alongside it.

Nineteenth century urban explorers once described the area as 'an endless grand aspect' of London, where 'the wealth of the Indies was cast upon Britain's shores' (Jerrold, [1872] 1970: 29). This itself was built upon an earlier life, where the docks played 'host' to the thousands of slave-maintained trading ships which connected transatlantic maritime cities in a lived space described by Paul Gilroy as 'the Black Atlantic' (Gilroy, 1993:16). Amid the legacy of overseas merchant shipping, trading and mainland manufacture, an early global mix of diverse migrant and urban cultures emerges. For those early explorers, the new police functioned not only as guardians, but as gatekeepers and guides for the gaze of the dominant Victorian middle classes upon less 'grand aspects' of some urban walks of life.

Described as the 'forlorn men women and children of Whitechapel and thereabouts' (Jerrold, [1872] 1970: 141), these early urban explorers were escorted by the local police through the very lodgings of those otherwise 'dangerous' urban classes. It is, of course, inconceivable that such escorted visits should be reciprocated and thereby the social power relations between the Victorian classes that allowed an empowered one to gaze upon diverse disempowered others; the loyalties of the Police within these structures made clear in the process. Perhaps echoes of these voyeuristic 19th Century power relations still exist in the lenses of film crews, as they selectively follow the police into the homes of today's

'others'. It is through layers of history that I'd like to conceptualise subterranean legacies of power.

Questions of continuing police loyalties were brought into focus as we ventured from the Docklands' pump house in Wapping towards Whitechapel (and thereabouts). Walking along Cable Street, we stopped at the commemorative mural of the famous 1936 anti-fascist battle site, fought and won by the local working class and Jewish communities. Ben Gidley recounted the story of Oswald Mosley and his British Union of Fascists, as they attempted and failed to march through the neighbourhood in their 'blackshirt' political uniforms to voice anti-Semitic demands exhorting the expulsion of Jewish people from the country. These events are inextricably linked to the forces of fascism in Europe at the time but also, in wartime, they shaped a defensive 'British character', ambiguous in its relation to the cultural diversity of today.

Within the mural's mix of blackshirted fascists, red-shirted communists and local residents, the Police are clearly visible. Dominating the lower left foreground, is the contorted face of a constable receiving a fisted blow to the jaw. The Police were seen as siding with Mosley's fascists in that they were there to secure the march. Indeed, even in the face of imminent violence, the Police Commissioner was under direct telephone instructions from the Home Secretary 'to see it through' (BBC 1969). Experiencing their path blocked, marchers spilt over into Cable Street, where fighting ensued. It was here a first hand story is told of a group of residents spontaneously taking a police officer hostage. Having dragged him into their home, they wondered what to do with him because no-one had ever 'arrested' a police officer before. In the end, they took his helmet and truncheon and sent him back to his colleagues to suffer the indignation of explaining the loss (BBC 1969).

This image challenges post-war notions of the 'British Bobby' as guardian of a romanticised vision of past British cultural identity. Of note also, is that since being put up in 1986, the mural has been daubed with white paint, echoing racist sentiments of 'keep England white'. Yet in recent times, the perception of the police as siding with representatives of a conservative and racist Britain has been strong. Moreover, it has marked a troubled history of a failed police commitment to community race relations, resulting in murderous inner-city riots (Holdaway, 1996). To be blunt, the captors of PC Blakelock during the 1985 Tottenham riots, could be considered less forgiving than the residents of Cable Street when they chose to decapitate rather than return him.

In the wake of the 1998 Macpherson report into the failed Police investigation into the murder of black London teenager, Stephen Lawrence, and its charges of institutional police racism, Chief Officers are working hard to re-present the Police as ‘champions of multiculturalism’. I wondered, as we walked on, if Benjamin’s *destructive character* could usefully emerge during these troubled times of police reform and need for re-invention. A character that can help cast away the pain and guilt of past identities and use its energies to clear a space for new beginnings, without giving up on itself and retreating to a more intensely fierce defender of a disguised, but narrower ideological nationalism.

Running alongside this, are vexed responses to notions of a multicultural Britain, found amongst the dominant voices of a conservative middle England. The Telegraph’s fiercely patriotic rejection of the Runnymede Trust’s report on ‘*The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain*’ bore witness to this. The report argued that Britain has to understand itself more widely than from the standpoint of a singular national identity. To achieve this, the UK needs to broaden the educational curriculum to embrace a teaching of the nature and history of racism and the value of cultural diversity accordingly (Parekh, 2000: 148, 291, 302). Yet Tory leader, William Hague’s response, backed by editorial comment and many reader articles, was to politically denounce the report as positively *anti-British*, whilst simultaneously extolling the virtues of a multicultural heritage as the very stuff of past British greatness. (Hague in the Telegraph 13th October, 2000). It is clear that ideas of multiculturalism are far from clear.

‘Botanising the asphalt’, I found myself mindful of the difficult relationships between the urban and the rural over visions of a multicultural Britain. ‘London is not England’, I have heard some suburban and village folk say. To what extent, then, can the produce of urban horticulture find itself re-potted in the contemporary English country garden? The invoked image of the ‘British Bobby’ in the Cable Street mural, is one whose relationship to the community alters when applied to a rural setting. A future ‘champion of multiculturalism’ perhaps, but in a possible rural/urban ideological divide can urban solutions be applied to rural problems when it is a question of race relations?

In discussing the rural dimensions of racism, delegates at a recent conference, *Implementing the Lawrence Inquiry Report*, suggested that

the politics of minority community representation were not the same as in the city. To illustrate a tendency to keep out of rural race politics as a survival strategy, the speaker gave the example of 'Darky Day', still celebrated in a Cornish fishing village. During the period of slave trading, slave boats would moor in the harbour and once a year the black slaves were allowed to go ashore to entertain and dance for the locals. Today the local community still celebrates this by 'blacking up' and re-enacting it. In concern over race relations, the organisers consulted with the only black resident (upon his moving to the village) to ask if he found the event problematic, which – not wanting to make himself unpopular - he said he did not and the day of commemoration continues.

Though I don't know to what extent the village school capitalises upon this for the purpose of racism and diversity awareness, it seems that through this Cornish celebration some cultural aspects of the Black Atlantic are still played out in a rural setting. A potentially useful conduit back to the Victorian Pump House in Wapping, where we started our day. Perhaps, like many things, it is what something is *used* for, rather than what it is made of which counts. So when powerful institutions like the police, political parties or anyone else with a troubled race relations record, wish to re-invent themselves as 'champions' of multiculturalism, perhaps it is right to seek clarity on what that might mean when the simple alternative not to is couched in terms of termination.

In conclusion to my reflections on the day, I would say that the political interpretations and related deployment of ideas around multiculturalism(s) in contemporary Britain is crucial in the development of a positive imagination of the self in the future. Benjamin's *destructive character* has been in some way useful in contemplating the contemporary condition of traditional British cultural identity and an institutional desire for survival through a radical rupture with the past.

Angels, Fragments and Ruins in London's East End

Ben Gidley

I: Sabbath Eve in Stepney

Being now tired of the West End, I thought a little ugliness would be refreshing; and striking east... walked down Fenchurch Street and so into the Whitechapel High Street... Ugliness! I never saw so much beauty in two hours before that Saturday Night! (Wilfrid Owen, in his diary 12 June 1915, on the eve of enlisting)

Bethnal Green and Hackney, Shoreditch and Whitechapel, Shadwell and Limehouse, the grim streets of Dockland... It was worse than my reading and what I had been told had led me to expect. I came back from our excursions physically and spiritually exhausted. It was an abyss of human suffering, an inferno of misery... I saw with my own eyes thousands of human beings who could hardly be considered such. (Rudolf Rucker in his memoirs)

“*Botanising the Asphalt*” was my third walking tour in East London in five months. The first of these was an anarchist guided tour of the East End, part of the Reclaim the Streets Mayday 2000 weekend (which culminated in riots in Trafalgar Square). About a hundred of us – hooded German autonomen, bearded Tolstoyans, dreadlocked crusties – were accompanied by about the same number of policemen as we walked through the grey drizzle of Stepney and Bow.

We saw the site of the Siege of Sidney Street: where in 1911 Latvian revolutionaries fought an armed battle with the police (the latter under the command of Winston Churchill). One of the participants, Peter the Painter, got away, becoming a minor East End folk hero.

We saw Jubilee Street, where the Yiddish anarchists' Workers' Friend Club was opened in 1906. Among the people who frequented the Club were Tsarist secret agents, terrorists (including the Sidney Street gang) and future Soviet ministers. Lenin, too, was frequently seen sipping hot tea there. Speakers there included Emma Goldman, the American Jewish anarchist, Prince Peter Kropotkin, the Russian ethnographer and libertarian philosopher, and the Yiddishists and Jewish cultural

nationalists Chaim Zhitlovsky and Ber Borochov. Many of the great Yiddish poets read there.

We saw Dunstan Villas, where the moving forces behind the Workers' Friend movement lived: the unmarried couple Rudolf Rocker and Milly Witcop, and their sons Fermin and Rudolf Jr. (A few years ago I heard Fermin, now in his nineties, recount about with his years at Dunstan Villas, including a memory of urinating over the balcony onto a policeman.²)

We then went East to Bow. We saw some of the places where the feminist, libertarian communist and Pan-Africanist Sylvia Pankhurst was active in the years around World War I. Finally, we saw the Bryant and May match factory, where the matchgirls' strike of 1888 sparked off the "new unionism" (the militancy of the low-paid casualized workers, including many Irish, Jewish and female workers). The building is now home to a gated and exclusive yuppie housing complex, and its residents didn't seem too happy to see us standing outside.

II: Avenging Angels

It may be that the continuity of tradition is mere semblance. But then precisely the persistence of this semblance of persistence provides it with continuity. (Walter Benjamin³)

Most of the people on that walk – as the sun went down on that wet but peaceful East End Friday night – would find themselves in a riotous West End at the close of the weekend. (The statue of Winston Churchill on Whitehall – the man who led the police charge at Sidney Street – was daubed with Turkish revolutionary slogans; McDonalds was smashed up; Trafalgar Square was a scene of carnage.) Many must have felt a sense of contrast between the two events. But there were more resonances, perhaps, than were immediately obvious.

Mayday as a workers' holiday goes back to the Haymarket Tragedy. On Mayday in 1886 there was a one-day general strike in the USA to campaign for an eight-hour working day. In Chicago, 400,000 stopped work and 80,000 – including a large anarchist presence – marched through the streets. The following Monday, the police fired on strikers and six workers were killed. The next day, a protest meeting at Haymarket Square was broken up by the police. In the ensuing

² See Fermin Rocker *The East End Years: A Stepney Childhood*, 1998, London: Freedom Books (the front cover is a drawing of Dunstan Villas by Fermin).

³ *The Arcades Project* (1999, Cambridge: Harvard University Press) N19,1, p.486

confusion, a bomb was thrown at the police, killing one outright and fatally wounding seven others. Evidence came to light later that the bomb had been thrown by a police agent. However, some anarchist activists were put on trial. The jury was made up of businessmen, their clerks, and a relative of a dead policeman. Four anarchists were hanged (Albert Parsons, August Spies, George Engel and Adolph Fischer), some of whom hadn't even been at the protest meeting. Another anarchist (Louis Lingg) escaped the hangman by taking his own life the day before execution. At the funeral, half a million people lined the route and another 25,000 were at the burial. Seven years after the execution, an inquiry found those executed innocent of all charges. Workers' organisations from then on made May 1st a commemoration of the Haymarket Martyrs.

London was one of the places where Haymarket commemorations were frequently held in those years. The impact of Haymarket was felt in the "new unionism" of the late 1890s; there were commemorative meetings at the Jubilee Street Club; the martyrs were celebrated in the pages of Pankhurst's paper, *The Workers' Dreadnought*. Lucy Parsons, the widow of one of the hanged men and an important anarchist leader in her own right, made frequent trips to England after 1888. As a working class black woman (part African-American, part Native American and part Mexican), she symbolized the heterogeneity of the workers movement that was emerging in the East End at that time.⁴

This East End movement, like *Reclaim the Streets* a century on, would frequently invade the West End's spaces of privilege. In London in 1886, the year of the Haymarket events, a warm summer and an economic recession led to many unemployed "roughs" sleeping out in Trafalgar Square and St. James' Park. "Agitation" among them by members of the Marxist Social Democratic Federation (SDF) gained much support and a winter of confrontations between the police and militants ensued. In August and again in October of 1887, the SDF called mass demonstrations in the Square. The October rally, with speeches from SDFers and the raising of a black flag, led to police hostility; when a second procession entered the Square behind a red flag, they were charged by the police with many arrests. As a result, the police banned meetings in the Square. A protest demonstration against this, on November 13 1887, came to be known as Bloody Sunday. Mounted police and soldiers charged the marchers. The following Sunday, there

⁴ Lucy Parsons - who once said "Now is the time for every dirty lousy tramp to arm himself with a revolver or a knife and lie in wait outside the palaces of the rich and shoot or stab them to death as they come out" and who led a parade through a rich part of Chicago with a banner reading "Behold your future executioners" - was a big influence on Class War in the 1980s.

was a disorganized attempt to retake the Square; the police hospitalized many and killed one man. The casualty, a bystander named Alfred Linnel, became a working class martyr; his funeral attracted 200,000 marchers, a sea of red flags, and some green banners of Irish freedom and yellow pennants of the radical clubs.⁵ Two weeks later, there was a second death from injuries sustained on Bloody Sunday, that of William Cunner, an unemployed Deptford painter.⁶

The Poll Tax riots of 1991, the anti-Criminal Justice Act riots in Hyde Park and Trafalgar Square during the summer of 1994, the 1997 Reclaim the Streets/Liverpool dockers occupation of Trafalgar Square and the bloody police assaults on it, and now Mayday 2000: these can be seen as continuations of the traditions of Haymarket and Bloody Sunday.

III: Angel Alley

At any given time, the living see themselves in the midday of history. They are obliged to prepare a banquet for the past. The historian is the herald who invites the dead to the table.
(Walter Benjamin⁷)

A few months after the anarchist walk in the East End, I went on a walking tour led by Bill Fishman, octogenarian, East Ender and historian, author of the classics *East End Jewish Radicals*⁸, *The Streets of East London*⁹ and *East End 1888*¹⁰. The walk was organized as part of an International Post-graduate Jewish Studies Conference held at University College, London. The small tour party was diverse; participants in the resurgence of Jewish studies in the various fragments of the former Soviet empire alongside middle-aged North Londoners, now experiencing the second generation nostalgia of the children of absentee East Enders.

We started in Angel Alley behind Aldgate East tube, the home of Freedom, an anarchist collective whose story stretches back to the 1880s

⁵ Mark Wallinger's sculpture in Trafalgar Square, *Ecce Homo*, serves, according to Wallinger, partly to commemorate Alfred Linnel, a man who has never had a statue built for him. The humility of the piece sharply contrasts with the authoritarian monumentality of Nelson's Column and the other statues of military "heroes" and kings. Incidentally, one of these kings (James II) is by plebeian Deptford carver Grinling Gibbons.

⁶ On the events of the late 1880s in Trafalgar Square and the East End, see Gareth Stedman Jones *Outcast London* (1984, London: Penguin), William J Fishman *East End 1888* (1988, London: Duckworth), and Stephen Coleman *Stilled Tongues: From Soapbox to Soundbite* (1997, London: Porcupine).

⁷ *The Arcades Project* (1999, Cambridge: Harvard University Press) N15,2, p.481

⁸ 1975, London: Duckworth

⁹ 1979, London: Duckworth

¹⁰ 1988, London: Duckworth

and the era of Haymarket. Standing in Angel Alley, Bill told us about his memories of the Battle of Cable Street, when local people, Jews, Irish, Communists and socialists defended the streets of the East End from Oswald Mosley and his fascist Blackshirts. He told us of how he spoke at a Cable Street anniversary meeting along with Phil Piratin, one of the Communist leaders in the East End at the time of Cable Street, and later the Communist MP for Mile End. He told us that he had never liked Piratin in the 1930s (Fishman had been in the Labour League for Youth and they had disliked the Communists, who had “no sense of humour”), but that it was moving to share a platform with him. They embraced, and Piratin told him “I am the oldest living veteran of Cable Street, and you’re the youngest”. A few weeks later, Bill said, Phil Piratin died.¹¹

We saw Toynbee Hall, the Victorian centre for adult education that has played a crucial role both in the development of social science, social policy and social work and in working-class life in the East End. We saw the place where Lenin stayed when he was in England for the congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, now, ironically, a Burger King. We saw the streets that inspired Jack London and Charles Dickens and others.

Finally, we stood outside 19 Princelet Street, where David Rodinsky used to live. Bill told us movingly of watching Rodinsky walking out of his house onto Brick Lane. On Brick Lane, a homeless black man sitting on a doorstep looked up and saw Rodinsky, his eyes lighting up as he held out his hands. “Thank you for asking me”, Bill heard Rodinsky say as he gave the man a handful of coins. Rodinsky, for Fishman, was a true *tsadik*, a righteous man, or perhaps even a *lamed vavnik*. Here is how Borges defines the *lamed vavnik*:

There are on earth, and always were, thirty-six righteous men whose mission is to justify the world before God. They are the Lamed Vavniks. They do not know each other and are very poor. If a man comes to the knowledge that he is a Lamed Vavniks, he immediately dies and somebody else, perhaps in another part of the world, takes his place. Lamed Vavniks are, without knowing it, the secret pillars of the universe. Were it not for them, God would annihilate the

¹¹ See Phil Piratin *Our Flag Stays Red* (1978, London: Lawrence & Wishart). Ironically, the CP, who have a central place in the popular memory of Cable Street, only decided to participate in the action at the last minute after pressure from East End militants. See Joe Jacobs *Out of the Ghetto* (1978, London: Janet Simon) for a very different perspective. While Piratin advocated a policy of mass mobilization in public places and getting respectable figures on board the campaign, Jacobs advocated more of a direct action approach, coupled with vigorous class struggle in local communities. Jacobs would shortly be expelled from the Party.

whole of mankind. Unawares, they are our saviours. (Jorge Luis Borges *The Book of Imaginary Beings*)

After the walk, we took some of the foreign visitors to a pub on Commercial Street where the walls were covered with Sherlock Holmes and Jack the Ripper memorabilia – deerstalker hats and briar pipes, sepia Victorian photographs and yellowing newspaper pages. The pub would rapidly fill and as rapidly empty as tour groups came in, hastily drank their pints and warmed up, before going out again into the night to be shown the sites of Jack the Ripper's grizzly murders.¹² Our Russian visitors seemed to appreciate the "authentically English" atmosphere in the pub. But, for those of us more familiar with the East End, there seemed to be something disturbing about the juxtaposition between this Baudrillardian hyperreality and the emotional power of listening to Bill Fishman's memories. The ethical urgency of his memories disrupts the homogenous time of the official Jack the Ripper Walk East End.

IV: Botanising the Asphalt

Post-colonial sensibilities necessitate fresh ways to acknowledge the histories of migration and the waves of migrants that have given so much energy to the life of this city and those who, like Stephen Lawrence have given their lives to it too, while changing --incrementally, glacially -- what it means to be English in the process. Kelso Cochrane, Altab Ali and Blair Peach, Gurdip Singh Chaggar, Asseta Sims and Joy Gardner are only a few of the best-known names to commemorate in this special category. Their life stories prompt a further moment of reflection in our local politics of remembrance. – Paul Gilroy¹³

¹² Since writing this, that pub has become a trendy winebar, yet another East End jostling with the existing ones.

¹³ "A London Sumptin Dis " (1999). Kelso Cochrane was an Antiguan carpenter killed by racists in the streets of Notting Hill on 16 May 1959, aged 33. Blair Peach was a teacher from New Zealand, killed at age 33 on 23 April 1979 by blows from a police baton at a demonstration in Southall against fascism. Peach was an active member of the Anti-Nazi League in East London, where he taught. Gurdip Singh Chaggar was stabbed to death at the age of 18 by a gang of racists in Southall in the late 1970s. Joy Gardner was a forty year old Jamaican woman killed by police in 1993. She had spent much of her life in the UK; her son Graeme was born in the UK; and her mother was a British citizen. However, her request for residency was turned down and the police Aliens Deportation Group raided her home at dawn to deport her. They forced her face down on the floor, sat on her body, bound her hands with a leather belt and manacles, strapped her legs together, wound thirteen foot of surgical tape around her head - while her five year old son watched. There has been no public inquiry and no punishment for her killers.

It may be considered one of the methodological objectives of this work to demonstrate a historical materialism which has annihilated within itself the idea of progress. Just here, historical materialism has every reason to distinguish itself from bourgeois habits of thought. Its founding concept is not progress but actualization.(Walter Benjamin ¹⁴)

A month or so after Bill's walk came the "Botanising the Asphalt" day. While some of the participants took the tube from Wapping to Whitechapel, our group decided, through some gritty commitment to an ethics of walking, to make our way on foot. This meant that we were able to see the mural painted to celebrate the Battle of Cable Street. We saw too the striking contrasts between the gentrified warehouse conversions in riverside Wapping and the dilapidated social housing of Shadwell. Where we were walking, the tidal line of gentrification seemed to be the Highway, which before World War Two marked the border between the Catholic and Jewish East End. The Jewish East End exists now only in traces, fragments, ghosts, ruins and fading memories. One such ruin that we passed was the building on the Cannon Street Road where Rogg's delicatessen used to be until March 2000. The last time I went in there before he closed shop – to buy supplies of creamed herring, dill pickles, chopped liver, kosher salami, heymishe cheese-cake and potato latkes – I asked Barry Rogg what we would become of our culinary lives when he left. "You'll all eat curry," he said.

Getting to Whitechapel Road, we saw the Pavilion Theatre (Whitechapel's main Yiddish theatre until 1935), Vallance Road (where Reggie and Ronnie Kray, the gangsters, lived) and the big Salvation Army building. A little to the West, we came to Altab Ali Park, named after the Bengali tailor murdered by racists there on May 4th 1978. The Park, formerly St. Mary's Gardens, was traditionally known as the Itchy Park, after the vermin that fed on the tramps who hung out there, and was immortalized in the Small Faces song (more recently covered by M People) "Itchycoo Park". In the late 1970s, the area – and especially Brick Lane market – was the battleground between Mosley's heirs, the fascist National Front, and both the local community and white working-class anti-fascists. It was against this backdrop of fascist organization that Altab Ali was murdered, and it was against the backdrop of mass mobilization against fascism that the park was renamed Altab Ali Park in 1979. More recently, the Park became the site for a Bengali Martyrs Monument (commemorating the deaths in Bangladesh's struggle against Pakistan) and has been the site of Islamicist political activities, anti-

¹⁴ *The Arcades Project* (1999, Cambridge: Harvard University Press) N2,2, p.460

fascist rallies, and open air press conferences for family campaigns around Asian victims of racist violence such as Shah Alam.¹⁵

On Brick Lane we passed the mosque that is famous for having been a synagogue and before that a Huguenot church, symbolizing the successive waves of immigration to the area. What is less known is that when it was a Jewish synagogue it was an important site of resistance to assimilation. It made a complete break with the West End-based assimilationist rabbinical authorities in this country, forbidding the use of English and of garments that resembled those of Christian priests, and imposing stricter dietary laws than the official rabbinical authorities did. As a site of the immigrant Jews' refusal of assimilation, it symbolizes the East End's subaltern relationship with the West End.

After Brick Lane, we went to Spitalfields Market, currently the site of very different struggles over space: the site is contested by various groups who variously use discourses of “community” and “gentrification” to lobby support for their competing development plans.

V: The Ethics of Walking

Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past, who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious (Walter Benjamin, VIth Thesis on the Philosophy of History)

Huge numbers of tourists come to London every year – whether from Norway, Russia or Florida, or from England’s Home Counties – and are sold a particular narrative of London’s heritage. This narrative (or panorama?) is fixed into the stones of London: in its blue plaques and in its statues and sculptures and monuments. The episodes (or explosive fragments?) I have invoked in this text are not, for the most part, commemorated so publicly or officially in London’s physical space. We have to walk with our noses closer to the ground, our ears more sharply tuned, to attend to their traces. A few tourists wind up in the East End, but usually it is Jack the Ripper and Sherlock Holmes who they hear about, not Rudolf Rocker or Sylvia Pankhurst, let alone Lucy Parsons or Milly Witcop.

The episodes invoked here have frequently had as their theme the struggle over space: struggle over the control and occupation of space,

¹⁵ see Back, Keith and Solomos “Reading the Writing on the Wall” in Slayden and Whillock’s *Soundbite Culture* (1999 Sage).

whether resistance to gentrification in the shadows of the walls of the City of London, or resistance to fascist presence on the pavements of Brick Lane or Cable Street, or resistance to the police in the battles for Trafalgar Square and Sidney Street.

But as well as the struggle over the control of space, there is also the struggle over the *meaning* of space and the *marking and naming* of space. The naming of Altab Ali Park and the mural on Cable Street are important in the attempt to try and keep the dead safe from “the enemy who has not ceased to be victorious”. But so many more of these dead – William Cunner, Alfred Linnel, the nameless matchgirls, the anonymous mass of Jewish refugees who passed through Stepney – are not recalled in any monuments. It is our task, as we walk again the streets that they walked, to remember them.

Bibliography

Benjamin References

- Benjamin, A. and Osborne, P. (editors): *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy. Destruction and Experience*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Benjamin, W.: *Illuminationen*. Ausgewählte Schriften. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1961.
- Benjamin, W.: The Destructive character (1931). In, *One-Way Street*, 1979
- Benjamin, W.: *Gesammelte Schriften*. (Edited by Schweppenhäuser and Rolf Tiedemann) Frankfurt: Frankfurt am Main, 1974-89.
- Benjamin, W.: *One-Way Street*. London: New Left Books, 1979.
- Benjamin, W.: *Charles Baudelaire. A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*. London: Verso Books, 1983.
- Benjamin, W.: *Understanding Brecht*. London: Verso, 1983a.
- Benjamin, W.: *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. London: Verso Books, 1985.
- Benjamin, W.: Central Park. In, *New German Critique*, Fall 1985a.
- Benjamin, W.: *Moscow Diary*. Edited by Smith, G. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1986.
- Benjamin, W.: Program of the Coming Philosophy. In, *Benjamin. Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*. Edited by Smith, G. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- Benjamin, W.: *Kunstverket i Reproduskjonsalderen og andre essays*. (Art in the Age of Reproduction and Other Essays) Oslo: Pax Forlag, 1991.
- Benjamin, W.: *Illuminations*. Contains essays: The Task of the Translator, The Storyteller, Theses on History. London: Fontana, 1992.
- Benjamin, W.: *Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994.
- Benjamin, W.: *The Arcades Project*. Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- Benjamin, W.: *Selected Writings vol 2. 1927-1934*, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999a

Other references

- Baudrillard, J.: *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. St. Louis: Telos Press Ltd., 1981.
- BBC: *The Battle Of Cable Street. Yesterday's Witness*. Produced by Stephen Peet, 1969.

- Buck-Morss, S.: Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered. In, *New Formations*, no. 20, Summer 1993.
- De Certeau, M: *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California, 1984.
- Giddens, A.: *The Constitution of Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984.
- Gilroy, P.: *The Black Atlantic*. London: Verso Books, 1993.
- Hague, W.: Why I am Sick of the Anti-British Disease. *The Telegraph*, 13th October, 2000.
- Jameson, F.: Post-modernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. In, *New Left Review*, no 146, July-August 1984.
- Jerrold, B.: *London, A Pilgrimage*. New York: Dover Publications, (1872), 1970.
- Parekh, B.: *The Future Of Multi-Ethnic Britain*. London: Profile Books, 2000.
- Roberts, J.: *Walter Benjamin*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1982.
- Sadler, S.: *The Situationist City*. Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1999.
- Sinclair, I.: *Lights Out for the Territory*. London: Granta Books, 1997.
- Sombart, W.: *The Quintessence of Capitalism. A Study of the History and Psychology of the Modern Business Man*. London: Fisher Unwin, 1915.
- Tuan, Y-F.: *Topophilia. A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values*. New Jersey: Princeton-Hall, 1974.
- Tuan, Y-F.: *Landscapes of Fear*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980.
- Wolff, J.: The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity. In, *The Problems of Modernity*. Edited by Benjamin, A.: London: Routledge, 1989.
- Wittgenstein, L.: *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1994.