Chapter 35

Walter Benjamin, Urban Studies and the Narratives of City Life

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But for me to descend into what is truly the mind's lower depths, where it is no longer a question of the night's falling and rising again (and is that the day?), means to follow the Rue Fontaine back to the Theatre des Deux Masques, which has now been replaced by a cabaret.

Breton 1960: 39

Introduction

In trying to tell the story of how people have attempted to theorize the economic and social life of cities the name of Walter Benjamin is commonly absent from what we might loosely refer to as the canon of urban studies.[1] This should not be so. In part this chapter points towards an intellectual project that might reinscribe such a history and reinstate Benjamin as a significant character in the castlist of urban social theory. But only in part. There is only limited value in the relay race metaphor of intellectual influence, the carriers of truth passing on the baton of progress in the steady accumulation of scientific knowledge. And if the value of such an Enlightenment metaphor is moot it also cuts against the very grain of Benjamin's own rather less optimistic version of the relationship between the intellectual and the social and political world.

And so there are two complementary purposes to this chapter. One is to focus upon some of the constellatory themes that Benjamin treated upon in his descriptions of the nature of city life and the other is to illustrate how some of these thematics continue to have both analytical and political value in the present. The argument of the former is to suggest that Benjamin's work conveys a sense of an individual of the past working in analytical territory that defies ready categorization but resonates in the problems and issues of a present that confronts the hyper-real excesses of today's sprawling metropolises and the polyphonous exercises that take the city as an organizing theme or a significant focus of contemporary social theory.

The second argument is that at the heart of Benjamin's conceptual framework is a simple analytical move that finesses many of the more stale debates that have plagued mainstream urban studies for several years. Because the observer and the observed are continually problematized within Benjamin's work the relationship between subject and object disrupts any simplistic invocations of theorizing the city. In short Benjamin's work is as much about the manner in which an urban sensibility structures our narratives of the real as it is about the manner in which the city itself is an object of scrutiny. The proper function of a social theory of cities never was and never could be a chimeric search for the essence of the urban. It always needed to occupy a more complex and more ambivalent relationship between the production of time and space and the realization of city form, both as represented and as a crucible of representation.

Genealogies: The Beatification of Walter B. and Alternative Histories of Urban Thought[2]

Benjamin confounds easy categorization in part because his personal failure to receive academic recognition prohibits ready disciplinary labels and in part because of the manner in which he resolutely refused to distinguish between some of the more conventional oppositions in academic debate. His writing crosses traditional genres: much of his work, including the portraits of the cities of Naples, Paris, Moscow, and Berlin, was repeatedly reworked as radio broadcast, journalistic text, and theoretical prose. Culture intertwines with economy, discursive prose alternates with analytical theory, and the anecdotal continually infests narratives of generalization, a set of tensions that are more often than not resolved through the genre of the axiomatic ambiguities that sometimes seem more characteristic of an early-day Borges than the programmatic certainties of friends and sometime colleagues of his in the Frankfurt School of critical theory.

Benjamin's work has come to the attention of Anglophone audiences principally through the translations of two collections of his writing: *Illuminations* (1973) and *One Way Street and Other Writings* (1979) and through a disciplinary focus that derives mostly from his thinking about the relationship between culture and technology that influences the thinking of late 1970s and early 1980s debates in cultural and social theory (e.g. Arendt 1972; Eagleton 1981; Buck-Morss 1989).[3] Such discussion impinged little on the ferment of debate around social theory and the city that characterized approximately the same time period and was most visible in successive Urban Change and Conflict biennial conferences and in journals such as the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*. Consequently, the more recent flush of interest in the work of Benjamin might loosely be identified with the cultural turn in mainstream writing about contemporary cities. Yet while such a link is historically plausible it would be intellectually simplistic. While it is easy to suggest that Benjamin's work offers few insights on the manner in which the debate of the 1970s and 1980s attempted to "theorize" the nature of the city as variously a crucible of economic production, social reproduction, mass consumption, or political mobilization, it is also the case that to reduce his contribution to the domain of the cultural would be equally misleading.[4] Instead it is possible both to historicize Benjamin's writing as an exploration of modernity experienced through the new urbanism that

emerged at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth-century, and also to trace the contours of his thought in the writings of individuals that succeeded him.

Such an exercise most obviously looks at those writers who followed Benjamin chronologically. But we might also consider a reassessment of some of the explorations of the problematic urban that predated Benjamin's work. Though there is no space to do so here, it is possible to look again at exercises such as those of Engels, Booth, and Mayhew that in confronting urban life were struggling to come to terms with precisely the same phenomena of capitalist modernity that Benjamin himself confronted. Such a culturally sensitive reading of what appears to be nineteenth-century reportage or economism has in recent years led to a much more nuanced understanding of matters as diverse as the use of statistical measurement of health and mortality (Hacking 1990), the metropolitan roots of a colonial sensibility (Stallybrass and White 1986), the rhetorical rendering visible of the economy in Engels (Marcus 1973), and the governmental problematics of the nineteenth-century city. Benjamin's own work is usefully read alongside such recent contributions and consequently offers as much to the cultural focus of a new economic sociology as it does to a cultural rendering of the contemporary city.

In so many ways ahead of contemporary thinking about the urban condition, Benjamin resolutely tied the economic to the cultural, the theoretical to the empirical, technology to sensibility; identified the modern city as the cumulative realities of fabricated time and space. The city was a rebus through which a social totality might be read but any such totality was also a social construction of particular modes of representation. In this sense it is at times the sheer overload of information in the early twentieth-century city that distinguishes it for Benjamin. In the face of such confusion how is it possible to knit together a narrative that makes sense of the urban experience to the urban dweller? There is a hidden, rarely told genealogy of stories of the urban that would involve a reassessment of Benjamin's place in the canon of urban studies. The future of the past is invariably uncertain. But if Benjamin's comment that "even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins" has any degree of truth it is possible to summarize such influence, albeit too briefly. So although any such typology is in part arbitrary it might be worth highlighting five strands of work that remain influential and can plausibly be related to Benjamin's own thinking.

1. The culture of money and the cultural production of economic value
2. Problematizing the real and the production of space and time
3. The city as text and emblem
4. Aura, distance, and closeness and the problem of the city view
5. Authenticity and urbanism as corporeal experience

The culture of money and the cultural production of economic value

In 1912 Benjamin attended the lectures of Georg Simmel in Berlin and in all of his work subsequently rarely failed to stress the cultural dimensions of the nature of economic life.[5] Just as Marx argued metonymically from the circulation of the smallest commodity to the structure of capitalism, Benjamin stresses the culture of commodification that cannot divorce materialist economy from an estheticized sense of a changing present.

This is most easily illustrated from two of his most well-known pieces. In the *One Way Street* a montage of lists, theses, aphorisms, and observations on the nature of everyday life cluster around the "Imperial Panorama Tour of German Inflation." Likewise, Benjamin's invocation of the *flâneur* is commonly cast as a particular city character but less often seen in his final destination; seduced by the commodities of the department store, hypnotized by the culture of money.

Both the *flâneur* and *One Way Street* have received attention in mainstream cultural studies but Benjamin's influence should also be recognized in contemporary economic sociology. The affinity with Bourdieu is self-evident and his attempts to render visible the artifice of urban change and the spectacular if hallucinatory economism at the heart of grand projects of urban regeneration prefigures more recent demonstrations of the imagineering of cities (Boyer 1994; Sorkin 1992; Harvey 1990; Jacobs 1996; Kearns and Philo 1993), while the fascination with the social production of the technologies of the relations of production sits easily alongside a focus on the social aspects of economic life (Thrift 1996; Lash and Urry 1994) and the political and cultural construction of Adam Smith's hidden hand of the marketplace.

Problematizing the real and the production of space and time

There are times when Benjamin has been celebrated as reasserting or "reactivating" the value of space in relation to time (Soja 1996: 71). However, perhaps it is more useful to think of Benjamin's significance in terms of an analytical problematization of naive notions of the real, his interest lying in the manner in which temporalities and spatialities become not just media of truth but narrative constructions of modernist realities.

Benjamin does not reject a notion of the real but instead renders visible the modes of fabrication through which the real is constructed as an object of representation. The outright rejection of Whiggish ordering of historical progression is never more clearly and prophetically stated than when in *One Way Street* Benjamin comments that "the assumption that things cannot go on like this will one day find itself apprised of the fact that for the suffering of individuals as of communities there is only one limit beyond which things cannot go: annihilation" (Benjamin 1979: 55).

Benjamin's suspicion of history was most readily described in his purchase of Klee's painting "Angelus Novus":

> His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm has been blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress (Benjamin 1968: 249; also quoted by Buck-Morss 1989: 95).

His fascination with the manner in which places and spaces, histories and memories are socially constructed and technologically mediated compounds this pessimism but makes both the textual strategies of the city observer and the confusing multiple realities of the urban condition a legitimate subject matter for his

multimedia collections of prose, cuttings and artifacts. Again such concerns with the nature of the shock in the urban sensibility link directly to those of latter-day theorists such as Lefebvre and Virilio (Der Derian 1998: 3).

There is consequently in Benjamin's work a problematization of the real but not a discounting of it. More importantly, as simultaneously both real and imagined (Soja 1996; Keith and Pile 1993) the city was the outcome of a variety of technologies of representation; an accumulation of statistical constructs, panoramic views and appropriated places, objects of government and moments of both fascination and fear, all held together by a narrative that foregrounded the fairy tales of capitalism. Such a multiplicity again can be read both against the fascinating but at times naive engagements of Chicago School ethnographies and also in advance of the urban theorists of the 1990s such as Neil Smith, Rosalyn Deutsche, Sharon Zukin, and Ed Soja who have focused in the wake of Lefebvre on the production of space. Benjamin's project also demanded both theoretical sophistication and also a resolutely empirical engagement that confounds some of the more simplistic invocations of postmodern urbanism and potentially provides an exemplary case of how the dirty reality of everyday city life can be confronted with the never innocent labor of academic investigation. The refusal of history is a refusal of a particular kind of ordering that characterizes both Benjamin's work and its own afterlife. There is no compensatory celebration of the spatial. Spatiality too for Benjamin is artifactual.

The city as text and emblem

Although his appropriation of landscape was explicitly textual Benjamin did not merely read the landscapes of the modern city, he confronted the urban with all of his senses and in the texts of both the city portraits and *One Way Street* the visual is only one of many forms of production of knowledge.[6]

In reading the city Benjamin's fascination with the minute and the mundane served "to build up the major constructions out of the smallest clearly and precisely manufactured building blocks. Indeed to discover in the analysis of the smallest individual elements of the crystal the totality of what exists" (Benjamin, quoted by Frisby 1985: 190). Benjamin's work will seize on the marginal detail of everyday life and read it through metonymy and metaphor to render the ephemeral emblematic of urban culture as a whole. Particular historical moments and characters are likewise rendered visible in order to describe through allegory the political present.[7]

This manner in which his exercises in city semiotics were both nuanced and multifaceted has been sensitively and beautifully explored in the work of Gilloch (1996) and Buck-Morss (1989). Confronted by the "abortions of urban architectonics" "Benjamin regards the marginalia of the city as the most important clues for its decipherment" (Gilloch 1996: 30).[8] The relationship between meaning, reader, and environment creates a precedent that works through the process of the dialectical image: "Dialectical images are a modern form of emblematics. . . . The crumbling of the monuments that were built to signify the immortality of civilisation becomes proof rather of its transiency" (Buck-Morss 1989: 170).

Benjamin was clearly both influenced by surrealism and also influential in bringing its insights to bear on the modern city. In his own words "no face is as surrealistic in the same degree as the true face of the city" (Benjamin [1929] 1985: 230). There is a legacy here that is self-evident. Through his interest in allegory, metaphor, and

metonymy there is no Barthes without Benjamin, Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (1977) could have been written by Benjamin on opium playing de Quincey in Marseilles, and the miniature emblematic portrayals of contemporary urbanity seen in the narratives of Iain Chambers, Elizabeth Wilson, Patrick Wright, Iain Sinclair, and Jonathan Raban in London or Mike Davis in Los Angeles all draw their inspiration, even if occasionally unknowingly, from a genre of writing that bears a close relation to Benjamin's pioneering confrontation with the cities of his autobiography.

In a related manner Benjamin's city portraits are fascinated by the relationship between empirical experience, theoretical knowledges, authority, and the spatial practices of knowing a city. In "Berlin Chronicle" (Benjamin 1932) the city of Benjamin's childhood is introduced through the five guides to the city that figure as alternative modes of authority, each betraying the juxtaposition between the prosaic, the mundane, and the mythological that creates a caste of mind that places the body in the city, that makes psychogeographies plausible, psychoanalysis defensible, and the symbolic centrality of what is socially marginal comprehensible (Pile 1996; Stallybrass and White 1986).

Aura, distance, and closeness and the problem of the city view

> The unclouded, innocent eye has become a lie, perhaps the whole naive mode of expression sheer incompetence. Today the most real, the mercantile gaze into the heart of things is the advertisement. It abolishes the space where contemplation moved.
>
> *One Way Street*, p. 89

It is the notion of the collection and the questioning of the self-evidence of both history and/or geography as particular forms of storytelling that led Benjamin to think seriously about the problematics of the view, exemplified in his discussions around the panorama and the kaleidoscope as organizing technologies of the eye: "The aeroplane passenger sees only how the road pushes through the landscape, how it unfolds according to the same laws as the terrain surrounding 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" (*One Way Street*, p. 50).

Benjamin was expert in deciphering the manner in which the smallest changes in ways of being produced such major ruptures in ways of knowing and such changes were overwhelmingly flowing through and from the cities of twentieth-century modernity. From whether or not people looked at each other on new forms of public transport to the visual ordering of newspaper print perhaps Benjamin's most influential work focused on the relationship between technology and cultural reproduction.

It was after all Benjamin who in the "Photography" essay problematized the nature of the view from on high as opposed to the view from the street. But it was de Certeau, Lefebvre, and others who drew on this problematic erroneously to privilege the everyday and the mundane in a form of romanticism that unnecessarily renders the view from high stigmatized. Analysts should not forget that Benjamin

was fascinated by the beguiling totalities of the panorama as well as, rather than in preference to, the sensorium of the street.

Hence it was not a valorization of a particular perspective that Benjamin sought as much as an understanding of the optical unconscious that perspective invoked and the consequent need for "a salutory estrangement between man and his surroundings" and "a politically educated eye under whose gaze all intimacies are sacrificed to the illumination of detail" (Benjamin [1931] 1985: 251).

The implications of such work have perhaps been most perceptively explored in the work of Christine Boyer, particularly in the groundbreaking "City of Collective Memory" (1994), but the implications of the meditations on closeness and distance have, with some honorable exceptions (Savage and Warde 1993), been largely ignored in any urban studies attempt to reconcile economic spaces with the culture of cities.

Authenticity and urbanism as corporeal experience

Benjamin's esthetic sensibility, anecdotal prose, and the foregrounding of the individual within the matrix of knowledge production may appear to offer one account for his absence in the canon of urban studies. His work has been at times characterized as exceptional to a tradition of social investigation and thus can be divorced from both orthodox Marxist histories of the capitalist city (Katznelson 1992) and a more culturalist genealogy that links nineteenth-century explorers of the city to Chicago School ethnography through community studies literature to Birmingham School Cultural Studies.

George Steiner has even hardened this distinction between an esthetic domain and the scrutiny of the world of the social, using it almost to explain Benjamin's academic failure and lamenting his posthumous (mis)appropriation by the "new left." He has suggested that this fascination with the nature of allegory and emblem meant that "It is the Aby Warburg group, first in Germany and later in the Warburg Institute in London which would have afforded Benjamin a genuine intellectual, psychological home, not the Horkheimer-Adorno Institute for Social Research in the Social Sciences with which his relations were to prove so ambivalent and, during his life time, sterile" (Steiner 1985: 19). Such a categorization both traduces the work of Adorno in particular and more importantly undervalues the true nature of Benjamin's approach. For it is precisely his refusal to separate esthetics from politics and from political economy that makes his writing so insightful, even if the price of such insight makes the work so difficult to categorize. It is also such categorical bleeding that evokes a set of thematics that resonate in the contemporary city.

Thematics: The Social Rendered Visible through Stories of the City

Benjamin was fascinated by *The Entry of Christ into Brussels* painted by the Belgian/English artist James Ensor in 1889. Emblematically, the picture is now hung in the exact replica of a Pompeii villa in Malibu, California, that serves as the Getty Museum. Allegorically there is a sense in which it is possible to use this image as a frame through which we can identify thematics within Benjamin's work that speak to the present and exemplify the continuing significance of his work.

Figure 35.1 *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889* (oil on canvas, 1888, 252×430.5 cm. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles)

In Benjamin's writing in and about city life the immediacy of the new was confronted in the relics of the old; modernity for Benjamin is at least in part about the writhing transformations of social form that occupy the built fabric of the preindustrial polis: the crowd in the city, the transmogrified urban scenery, the shocking impact of new technologies, the piling up of catastrophic changes in the name of history that was fossilized in the relics of everyday city life. But what is equally significant for Benjamin is the manner in which these realities are made comprehensible; through technologies of representation, methodologies of apprehension, and narratives that both organize time and space and use temporality and spatiality to organize their rationality. This focus on the relation between the plural and contradictory realities of city life and the plural and sometimes incommensurable ways of knowing the city emerges at the end of the nineteenth-century in a variety of representative genres but speaks to the sensory overload of the urban that makes the link between Simmel and Benjamin already discussed explicit, and between Benjamin and Ensor revealing.

Ensor described himself as fascinated by the phantasmagoria of the city and in this image the loaded metaphor of the mask, the self-conscious deployment of the carnivalesque in a "visual equivalent to Bakhtin's text" (Hyman 1997: 78), and the Palm Sunday celebration that precedes by five days the humiliation of the crucifixion are paralleled in Benjamin's fascination with authenticity, identity, allegory, and the baroque; his historical pessimism and his deployment of iconic figures to carry the weight of representation.

Benjamin likened Ensor's esthetic to that of Edgar Allen Poe and used the work in his exploration of the nature of the *flâneur*: "Fear, revulsion and horror were the emotions which the big city crowd aroused in those who first observed it. For Poe it

has something barbaric; discipline just manages to tame it. Later James Ensor tirelessly confronted its discipline with its wildness; he liked to put military groups in his carnival mobs, and both got along splendidly – as the prototype of totalitarian states, in which the police make common cause with the looters" ([1939] 1973: 170).

Benjamin goes on to castigate Poe for saddling the faces in the crowd with an "absurd" kind of uniformity. The politics of the imagery is moot.[9] However, the placard that reads "Fanfares Doctrinaires: Toujours reussi" invokes a fear of ideology but more significantly the image as a whole exemplifies the problematic sociological act of observation. Benjamin draws on Baudelaire's notion of the man shocked by immersion in the city crowd as "a kaleidoscope equipped with consciousness" attempting to know the city through technologies of representation that privilege the visual (Benjamin 1973: 187). But while the technologies of seeing and the perspectival exercises in observation qualify our ability to know the city, "the social" is made visible by a crowd of exemplary characters. Under the banner "Vive La Sociale" that acts as legend or caption at the top of the painting the crowd and the street become realizations of Brussels society; as a theater of the grotesque the whole can only be known through its carnivalesque parts.

In a precisely similar vein Benjamin's work is littered with a series of iconic characters who simultaneously are figures through which the urban is rendered comprehensible and also display the limits of such totalized tales of the city.

Pierre Missac has characterized Benjamin's methodology as "moving like a knight in chess" (1995: 61) and for him Benjamin's city is known via the senses through which it is experienced, the guides through which it is mapped and the technologies of representation through which it is exhibited. Consequently, the urban world is inhabited by a "gallery of types" (Missac 1995: 76) who personify the modalities through which the city is apprehended, experienced, explored, narrated, and rendered visible in alternative versions of reality and truth. In this way Benjamin opens his narrative of "Berlin Chronicle" with explicit reference to the five guides which allowed him to know the city, including "Paris itself [as] the fourth in the series of voluntary or involuntary guides that began with my nursemaids." Elsewhere, at various times the storyteller, the collector, the archeologist, the *flâneur*, the child, the ragpicker, the stamp collector, the statistician, the detective, the sandwich board man and the gambler are among the many characters who exemplify metaphorically different ways of knowing the city and who invoke metonymically different cities that can be known.[10]

Such "types" are not unproblematic. Indeed the continual play between observer and the observed makes the weaknesses in Benjamin's work all too visible. The notion of the opening up of feminized space brings with it a particular resonance of the urban explorer (Boyer 1996; Heron 1993), commonly identified in other forms of phallocentric city narrative: traced in Blake's and Dickens's London of the past, Chandler's Los Angeles of past and present, and in Iain Sinclair's psychogeographies of London. In the figure of the whore as well as in the extended debates about the gendering of the *flâneuse* (Tester 1994; Wilson 1992; Wolff 1985) the sexualization of the street is clearly problematic: "There is no doubt, at any rate, that a feeling of crossing the threshold of one's class for the first time had a part in the almost unequalled fascination of publicly accosting a whore in the street. At the beginning, however, this was a crossing of frontiers not only social but topographical, in the

sense that whole networks of streets were opened up under the auspices of prostitution" (Missac 1995: 106).

However these types are quite deliberately unfinished and imperfect narrative devices. In an insightful passage in the essay on Kafka Benjamin evokes a parallel: "In Indian mythology there are the gandharvas, celestial creatures, beings in an unfinished state. Kafka's assistants are of that kind: neither members of nor strangers to, any of the other groups of figures, but, rather, messengers from one to the other. . . . They have not yet been completely released from the womb of nature" (Benjamin 1973: 113).

His way of moving like a knight in chess through narrative figures that are consciously "unfinished" points to a different sort of interdisciplinarity in the study of the city than that most conventionally understood. Benjamin's thinking escapes disciplinary categorization precisely because disciplinary categorization is the object of its study. City types become the organizing tropes which mediate knowledges of the city but they imply a diverse range of forms of presentation. Hence there is a complementary fascination in Benjamin with the ethical, esthetic, and technological mechanisms through which such knowledges are collected, organized, narrated, exhibited, and displayed.

Ways of studying the city imply cognate technologies through which meaning is rendered comprehensible: the story and the novel, the newspaper and the photograph, the museum and the exhibition – all render visible particular forms of the truth marked by their conditions of production and characterized by ethical as well as epistemological traces. It is the artifice of the rendition that seems to fascinate Benjamin, an artifice that in concealing itself displaces narrative and subsumes the psychoanalytic moment; that through the shocks of the surreal is rendered visible as the hidden machinations of the powerful and the seductive logics of the commodity. When Benjamin opts for literary montage and suggests that he has "nothing to say, only to show" it is precisely because of his preference for such "profane illuminations" of the world in which we live."[11] In part the city's totality is confounded by this kaleidoscopic dimension of what he describes as a constellatory epistemology. In this way we should not look to Benjamin for a handbook for social investigation but as a form of stage lighting for particular forms of intellectual inquiry in the city. But what is surely more interesting is to turn Benjamin's investigations back on themselves; to expose the connections between *flâneurie*, journalism, and the sociological gaze; to expose the construction of temporalities and spatialities within particular narrative forms and to use his continual bleeding of one context into another to help to provide an ethical compass for social research in the cities of difference that are diminished by conventional genres of urban studies.

At present the cities of social policy, sociology, geography, anthropology, and history seem to bear little resemblance to each other and at a subdisciplinary level the similarities may be even weaker, divided by methodological, paradigmatic, and ideological competition. The argument here is that a kaleidoscopic framing of such competition might be helpful. Consequently, Benjamin's work points towards a contextualization rather than a relativization of knowledges of the urban, a move that on one level may appear mundane yet at another level is more complex. Such a notion explicitly does not echo a return to the empirical or equate with the urban studies variant of E. P. Thompson's Poverty of Theory diatribe that emerges in the

introductory chapters of Peter Hall's (1998) curiously Eurocentric recent volume *Cities in Civilization*. Such a notion of contextualization has been explored elsewhere (Keith and Pile 1993) but commonly involves a reconsidering of the relationship between the empirical and the theoretical through the blurring of conventional boundaries between the esthetic, the ethical, and the epistemological and is particularly germane to contemporary cities characterized by the production of multiple temporalities and spatialities, estheticized commodities, and an ethical vacuum that is endangered by humanistic excess.

Time and Space and Technology in the City of Many Perspectives

The plurality of the urban confounds attempts to define the essence of the city. Any attempt to turn knowledges into a visible form reveals the artifice of cartography. Benjamin plays with this polysemy; he muses on the idea of plotting his life on a map (Benjamin [1932] 1985: 295), is fascinated by the prospect that "The map is almost as close to becoming the centre of the new Russian iconic cult as Lenin's portrait" (Benjamin [1928] 1985: 196), and variously considers the city as labyrinth, statistical artifact, exhibition, collage, panorama, and sensorium.

Consequently, the interplay between closeness and distance which is at the heart of Benjamin's "Work of Art" essay and informs the representational variations in most of the city writing is clearly not about the valorization of a particular perspective. Time is mediated through the production of histories and autobiographies, exemplified through iconic figures such as the child who sees the city with a strange gaze. Space, through different framings of the visible, different kinds of view and different technologies of representation mediates the multiplicity of spatialities that are realized through iconic figures such as the stranger and the *flâneur*. As Gilloch puts it: "Benjamin offers a subtle, intricate interplay of perspectives in which closeness is paradoxically achieved through distance. The city is rendered strange not so much through a simple effect of distance but rather through the continual movement or fluctuation of vantage points. There is flux between the minutely detailed close-up and the distant observation. Benjamin's images of the city are not static but dialectical in character" (1996: 62).

Hence the plastic construction of the relations between time and space (Bullock and Jennings 1996: 499) draw an analytical focus towards the construction of both temporality and spatiality as structures of sensibility that can only be disrupted and revealed through juxtaposition, sudden (surreal) ruptures of the narrative imperatives of geographies and histories of the subject. Any disciplinary celebration of the collapse of the tyrannies of privileged time and the end of history is consequently mistaken (Soja 1996). If Benjamin teaches us anything it is that the artifice subsumed in such narratives caution against such ordering – whether it is through privileging either temporal or spatial. The order of things disguises as much as it reveals, can be disrupted through juxtaposition but this does not render analysis ethically rudderless by their composition.

"The commodity as poetic object"[12]

If Marx and Engels display the material conditions of production through which the very fabric of social life becomes commodified then Benjamin exposes the manner in

which this process of commodification not only permeates all cultural forms but is also mediated through practices of cultural representation. He is effectively a pioneering cartographer of the nexus between culture and capital. Studies of the new industrial sectors, cultural industries, and cultural quarters in contemporary cities, and designer economies that are as much about signs as spaces all need to draw on a substantive understanding of the estheticization of the commodity. In this sense for contemporary urban studies Benjamin is invaluable and timely for his pioneering understanding of what he described as the commodity as poetic object, an analytical path that points towards a bringing together of cultural studies approaches to the city with political economies of the urban.

Conventional political economies of the city have focused on an analysis of the changing forces of production that generate the specifics of the contingent relations of production at particular times and places. In contrast Benjamin foregrounds the narrative forms through which the process of commodification is rendered visible, the commodity fetish, and the emergence of specifically capitalist forms of time and space.

Commodification and the nature of the fetishism of consumption can only be understood through the manner in which "commodities . . . store the fantasy energy social transformation in reified form" (Buck-Morss 1989: 29). Although Benjamin abandoned plans to title the Arcades Project as "A dialectical Fairy Scene" because it was too poetic (Buck-Morss 1989: 49) the process of estheticization remains central throughout all of his writing on cities: "Methodologically, one should begin by investigating the links between myth and money throughout the course of history, to the point where money had drawn so many elements from Christianity that it could establish its own myth" (Benjamin 1921: 290).

In Terry Eagleton's terms "In this kind of microanalysis, the individual phenomenon is grasped in all of its overdetermined complexity as a kind of cryptic code or riddling rebus to be deciphered, a drastically abbreviated image of social processes which the discerning eye will persuade it to yield up. . . . What this method then delivers is a kind of poetic or novelistic sociology in which the whole seems to consist of nothing but a dense tessellation of graphic images; and to this extent it represents an estheticized model of social inquiry" (1990: 329–30).

Benjamin develops a "constellatory epistemology" where "Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars. This means, in the first place, that they are neither their concepts nor their laws" (Benjamin, quoted by Eagleton 1990: 328). Esthetics, epistemology, and ethics are thus simultaneously realized through such constellatory themes, for "Just as philosophy makes use of symbolic concepts to draw ethics and language into the realm of theory, in the same way it is possible for theory (logic) to be incorporated into ethics and language in symbolic form. We then see the emergence of ethical and aesthetic critique" (Benjamin 1919: 219).

Yet this inquiry, in taking the esthetic dimension seriously does not lose sight of the practice of signification of the ever more obscure relationships between use value and exchange value that lie at the heart of increasingly estheticized forms of commodification. Again for Eagleton "It is a matter, rather, of constructing a stringent economy of the object which nevertheless refuses the allure of identity, allowing its constituents to light each other up in all their contradictoriness" (1990: 330).

Antihumanism and narrative

One Way Street and Other Writings was one of only two books both completed and published in Benjamin's lifetime. It is a meditation on the nature of the contemporary condition, one of Benjamin's most experimental and self-consciously avant gardeist investigations of modernity. Throughout this and other work the city works as the organizing theme through which Benjamin's thoughts are expressed.

Perhaps *One Way Street* is most readily rendered accessible if read alongside the essay on Surrealism. The apparently random and frequently winsome nature of the prose should not disguise the attempt to develop a very specific political program within the rhetoric of the shock, that follows on from the significance of constellation and juxtaposition. As Buck-Morss has cataloged, the engagement with Surrealism was a productive one but not one exclusively celebratory. The exposure of the fabricated nature of normal history and natural geography was supposed to awaken alternative ways of thinking about time and space.[13]

In this sense the instrumental political fabrication of alternative ways of thinking about the political was precisely the target of some of Benjamin's methodological tropes. As Buck-Morss has commented: "Fascism reversed the avant-garde practice of putting reality onto the stage, staging not only political spectacles but historical events, and thereby making 'reality' itself theatre" (Buck-Morss 1989: 36). The attention that is paid to narrative shape, the construction and artifice of the story, the mediating role of an iconography of landscape all points to an interweaving of esthetics, epistemic, and ethics within a specific notion of freedom: "Since Bakunin, Europe has lacked a radical concept of freedom. The Surrealists have one. They are the first to liquidate the sclerotic-liberal-moral-humanistic ideal of freedom because they are convinced that 'freedom which on this earth can only be bought with a thousand of the hardest sacrifices, must be enjoyed unrestrictedly in its fullness without any kind of pragmatic calculation as long as it lasts'" (Benjamin 1929: 136).

Exemplifications: Debates in Need of Walter

In thinking through the interplay between the city as a whole and the parts of the city it is possible to suggest, albeit too briefly, the sorts of urban studies problematics that Benjamin might speak to today. Most obviously, this implies a rejection of both an epistemology and a politics that privilege the everyday and valorize the street as the residue of a particular kind of humanistic city. More specifically, there is a generic take on de Certeau's (1984) spatial practices that ignores the Photography essay meditations of Benjamin and instead valorizes the poets of the streets and decries the phallocentric will to power implicit in the representations of the panorama city. At times this has emerged as a lucid and powerful critique of a particular kind of masculinist urban studies (Boyer 1996; Deutsche 1996). But the critique of boys' stories that render the city visible in particular kinds of ways should not obscure an engagement with the manner in which the urban becomes the subject of discourse and the object of technological control in other representations of the whole city.

As Barth has put it: "The Practice of Everyday Life, it seems to me, misjudges the scale, temporality and technology by which visibility can be attached to power in the

dominating way it describes. In thinking that visibility operates over the space of the city, de Certeau is imagining that a city is more disciplined than governed, and this confuses the space and the technology of disciplinary visibility with the fact that domination is, unfortunately, very much consistent with the liberal government of cities and states" (1996: 474).

Benjamin reveals the impossibility of the viewer moving outside the scopic regime without denigrating the process of empirical scrutiny and observation.[14] This circumscribes the politics of the gaze but does not decry a speculative analysis of the urban: "From within this space there is no place from which to gain an inclusive experience of the city, or to represent it, since every box is also a stage, every viewer a viewed. In this understanding of spatial experience (which may be described as 'speculative') every position is in a process of negotiating its relations with other positions; there is no fixed or spatial form which governs the location of participants in the way of Hausmann's boulevards in Paris" (Caygill 1998: 122).

In a sense George Steiner captures this in his suggestion that "It is not only that Benjamin is trapped in the hermeneutic cycle – the use of the part to define the whole whose own definition governs the status of the part – but, like Heidegger, he welcomes this circularity, perceiving in it the characteristic intimacy which binds object to interpretation and interpretation to object in the humanities" (Steiner 1985: 21).

There is consequently a plurality of contemporary debates where the tension between the part and the whole are rendered visible in the cities of urban studies and where Benjamin's contribution remains germane. To reveal the city as an object of government, a modality through which the conduct of conduct will be mediated (Foucault 1991), suggests a line of investigation of the technologies through which the temporalities and the spatialities of the whole city are represented. The signs of the city from graffiti tag (Hebdige 1993; Back, Keith, and Solomos 1999) to virtual realities of the inscriptions of Sim City (Soja 1999) demand a reflection on the interplay of technology, representation, and the urban.

The auratic artifice of tales of contemporary urban regeneration draw on the exhibitionism that was at the heart of Benjamin's Arcades Project. The analogous city, "not quite a real city nor entirely a fictitious one" (Boyer 1994: 175), that emerges in the United Kingdom in 1999 through an Urban Task Force headed by the architect Richard Rogers that works through a highly estheticized urbanism invokes an intertextual bleeding that would be taken for granted by Benjamin.

A fascination with psychoanalytic readings of the city are similarly indebted (Pile 1996). Notions of landscape as the outcome of visual organization point towards a study of the relationship between perspectivalism and urban life (Jay 1992, 1994). By questioning the philosophy of experience Benjamin directs us towards a sensorium of knowledges of the urban that play off the aural, oral, felt, and always real and imagined realities: "It forces philosophy to recognise that the experience of the city perpetually challenges and undermines the categories that are applied to it – even those of porosity and transitivity" (Caygill 1998: 124)

The democratic whole that is represented in debates on London government needs to be scrutinized for the polis that it narrates and the objects of representative democracy that emerge and range from the reinvented king as putative mayor down to the newly accountable definitions of police.

Reading the tragic history of the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence through the mapping of white supremacist suburbs of London echoes a transatlantic dialog on the iconography of the burbs and the hood, that speaks to a sophisticated rendition of the interplay between myth and metropolis and demands a response to Richard Wright's suggestion that Black and White writers are always struggling over the capture of reality in prose.

The new industrial sectors that emerge in in Seoul and Lagos as much as the new cultural industries and the cultural quarters of Chicago and Los Angeles demand a political economy of globalization that builds on a sophisticated notion of culture (Robins and Webster 1999). The city of bits, the city of flows, the informational city, and the divided city all cry out for a specific contextualization of the urban through the narratives of time and space that they organize (Castells 1996, 1997, 1998).

Conclusion

In this chapter Benjamin is not offered up as the source of some alternative paradigm of urban studies.[15] His work is helpful in avoiding both the mirage of a defining theoretical essence of the city and a Luddism that can render the city invisible in contemporary social theory. Chimeric searches for the identity of the city plagued the urban studies literature of the Anglophone world throughout the 1970s and the early 1980s. Yet at the heart of this chapter is a suggestion that both the empirical utility of the urban and the theoretical value of the city are in no way jeopardized by the failure of this longing for the pure definition of the urban condition. Benjamin is one social theorist who makes it possible for us to invert the conventional problematic; to ask instead about the stories through which cities are rendered visible as comprehensible elements of different modes of thoughts, genres of writing, regimes of the visual, modalities of government, and rationalizations of the economic.

He points towards a more modest theoretical ambition, the notion of thought and explanation that is focused on the close scrutiny of individual objects in their broader sociological context; the inspection from up close and from a distance, simultaneously and in turn. If this at times intimates further small-scale victories and large-scale defeats, then it might also point to a reconsideration of the manner in which theoretical and empirical labors are respectively valorized and credentialized in the cities of everyday life.

NOTES

1. It is interesting to note that the name of Walter Benjamin remains resolutely absent from both the bibliography and the index of first and second editions of Peter Saunders' influential volume on *Social Theory and the Urban Question* (1981, 1986).
2. With apologies to J. P. Dunleavy.
3. There is however a vast and rapidly growing secondary literature on the work of Benjamin. The two volumes of most direct relevance for an understanding of Benjamin's work on the city are those of Buck-Morss 1989, and Gilloch 1996; but other useful sources include A. Benjamin 1989; Caygill 1998; Eagleton 1981; Frisby 1985; Missac 1995; Smith 1983; Smith 1995; Steinberg 1996; Weigel 1996.

4. Indeed Peter Hall's recent dismissal of the "Marxist highway and the Postmodernist byway," for which he oddly appears to hold Benjamin almost principally responsible, caricatures Benjamin's contribution in precisely this way (Hall 1998: 12–13).
5. See a fuller description in Momme Broderson's biography (1996: 46) which describes the manner in which Benjamin was "fascinated by Simmel's absolute precision in speech and writings, the diversity of topics in his lectures, his eye for detail, his reference to marginal cultural and historical phenomena, his inquiring scepticism: in short his ability to promote independent thought and a growing awareness rather than induce numb astonishment at the monuments of history and philosophy."
6. In his explorations of the urban Benjamin suggests that "the city became a book in my hands" (Benjamin [1935–73]: 1985: 91).
7. For an extremely rich analysis of the typology of such a method divided into the thematics of fossil, ruin, wish-image, and the fetish of mythic history see Buck-Morss (1989); and for a description of the resonance of this typology for an understanding of contemporary culture see McRobbie (1994).
8. Benjamin comments in *One Way Street* "Great cities – whose incompatibly sustaining and reassuring power encloses those at work within them in the peace of a fortress and lifts from them, with a view of the horizon, awareness of the ever vigilant elemental forces – are seen to be breached at all points by the invading countryside .... The insecurity of even the busy areas puts the city dweller in the opaque and truly dreadful situation in which he must assimilate, along with the isolated monstrosities from the open country, the abortions of urban architectonics" (Benjamin [1935–73] 1985: 59).
9. It is interesting to compare Robert Hughes' suggestion that "In 1888 the Belgian artist James Ensor had depicted the crowd greeting the Entry of Christ into Brussels as a mass of bobbing, grinning and stupefied heads, using it to convey the idea that society – or, to be exact, the proletariat which Ensor hated with a paranoid passion – was not merely unreal but a sort of daemonic carnival, a collective of threatening masks (Hughes 1980: 283) with Ensor's role as a founding member of the socialist society Les XX, his critique of the conservative establishment in Belgium, and Susan Canning's suggestion that a thematic that runs through his work is one of "social critique" which commonly emerges as "the victory of marginalised individuals ... over the ruling class" (Canning 1997: 58–9).
10. "Note that the figures of the collector, the ragpicker, and the detective wander trough the fields of the fossil and the ruin, while the fields of action of the prostitute, the gambler and the flâneur are those of wish-images, and of the fetish as their phantasmagoric form" (Buck-Morss 1991: 212).
11. See the Surealism essay, p. 227.
12. Buck-Morss points out that the third section of the planned essay on Baudelaire commissioned by the Institute of Social Research was to be called "The Commodity as Poetic Object" (Buck-Morss 1991: 209).
13. In Buck-Morss's terms "Benjamin's essay [on Surrealism] also criticizes the nihilistic anarchism of Surrealism, the lack of a constructive, dictatorial, and disciplined side to its thinking that could 'bind revolt to the revolution'. The Surrealists recognized reality as a dream; the Passagen-Werk was to evoke history in order to awaken its readers from it. Hence the title for the Arcades Project in this early stage: 'a dialectical Fairy Scene'. Benjamin was intending to tell the story of Sleeping Beauty once again" (Buck-Morss 1989: 34).
14. The organization of the gaze is significant but this does not negate the value of observation – only contextualizes it: "One technical feature is significant here, especially with regard to newsreels, the propagandist element of which can hardly be overestimated. Mass reproduction is aided especially by the reproduction of masses. In big

parades and monster rallies, in sports events and in war, all of which nowadays are captured by camera and sound recording, the masses are brought face to face with themselves. This process whose significance need not be stressed, is intimately connected with the development of the techniques of reproduction and photography. Mass movements are usually discerned more clearly by a camera than by a naked eye. A bird's eye view best captures gatherings of hundreds of thousands. And even though such a view may be as accessible to the human eye as to the camera, the image received by the eye cannot be enlarged the way that a negative is enlarged. This means that mass movements, including war, constitute a form of human behaviour which particularly favours mechanical equipment" (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, Benjamin 1973).

15. Again Buck-Morss is useful in her suggestion that "His legacy to readers that come after him is a nonauthoritarian system of inheritance, which compares less to the bourgeois mode of passing down cultural teasures as the spoils of conquering forces, than to the utopian tradition of fairy tales, which instruct without dominating, and so many of which 'are the traditional stories about victory over those forces'" (Buck-Morss 1991: 337).

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