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Svend Erik Larsen

Benjamin’s Aura

One cannot get around Walter Benjamin in the study of modern urban culture and its literature. In that context, whether he would like it or not, he has become haloed in an aura of mastery. For good reason: his analyses of the nervous dynamic of the modern city are unique, and his influence can be traced in many examples of urban analysis, even if he is neither cited nor named explicitly. His sense of the decisive role that minutiæ play in one’s experience of the city, and his ability to transform the marginal into the typical through broad associative cross-sections breaking up established intellectual categories and types of text, make his work both necessary and stimulating for any cultural analysis of the state of the modern city.

Benjamin had no desire to be a specialist within literary criticism or any other specific discipline. He was a visionary diagnostician of culture. As it happens, very large parts of his oeuvre take literature as their subject, or at least as their substance: early works on art criticism in German Romanticism, on Goethe’s Wahlverwandschaften (The Elective Affinities) and, most exciting, on Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels (The Origin of German Tragic Drama) with the important notion of allegory. There are also numerous reviews, surviving notations, short author introductions, radio speeches, and occasional references to literature side by side with more comprehensive treatments of Baudelaire, woven into broader analyses of Paris, of surrealism, and of Brecht. Not to mention his translations of Proust.

However, his interest in literature does not automatically make him an outstanding literary critic. Since the 1960s, Benjamin’s importance has been upheld, to a great degree, by a literary and aesthetic interest in the cultural history of modernity, with emphasis on the city as its locus. But his particular themes of cultural analysis led him to overwork certain texts, and certain aspects of texts, and caused him to omit others. The focal point of this essay is to examine how the analysis of culture and the analysis of literature mutually define and limit each other in Benjamin’s work.

Most of Benjamin's literary analyses have an opposite orientation to that of his analyses of the city. The latter are sensitive to fragmentation, to the network of details in a directly perceived—which is to say, aesthetic—experience of one's surroundings, with all its structures of conflict and paradoxes. Conversely, the thread running throughout Benjamin's literary studies is their concentration on the synthesizing motifs or themes of the works involved. These analyses are not greatly concerned with literature's aesthetic aspects, its transgressions and paradoxes, nor with the history of particular genres and their gradual or abrupt changes. In his book on tragedy, Benjamin stresses that an artwork should be carried by an idea,¹ and the concluding sentence of his dissertation on art criticism emphasizes, too, the idea behind a work of art.²

His most detailed presentation of the nature of ideas is found in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*. In contrast to the analytical character of a concept, bound to specific formal languages and leading to unity, if not uniformity, an *idea* is a principle that makes "the extreme reach a synthesis," that is, not a unity but a totality in which the contrasting elements, similar to Leibniz's monads, are still active. The constant reference to the dialectic character of the synthesis also adds a Hegelian touch to Benjamin's notion of idea. Like the monad, the idea has no specific manifestation of its own: it "can not be thought of as an object of observation, not even by the intellect" (*Ud* 1.1:215). It occurs in various sign complexes—"semiotics" (*Ud* 1.1:342)—that represent such a principle, for instance, the arts or any other cultural artifact down to the most trivial, as became clear in Benjamin's work on Paris. The point is that no type of sign complex in advance has priority over any other for the unfolding of the idea (see *Ud* 1.1:350).

Benjamin chooses works that are amenable to this approach, already in his analysis of Goethe's philosophical novel *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (1924–1925), but more emphatically in his later readings of Baudelaire. Despite a nuanced understanding of the fact that Baudelaire's work as a whole is shaped by urban experience, Benjamin's core texts are those, like the famous "À une passante" ("To a Passerby"), that predominantly deal with the city as a clearly marked theme—the urban environment and its life. In this way, literature comes to assume the role of an illustrative text, or of a cultural-historical source for an analytical thesis on the fragmented character of the city. All the bits and pieces that cannot be synthesized in the urban analysis turn up in literature as a thematic synthesis—a paradox that Benjamin apparently is not aware of or simply did not care about, maybe because the paradox is part and
parcel of his notion of the guiding idea of a literary work. On the one hand, the idea is “free of intentionality” (Ud 1.1:216), synthesizing actual fragments of any kind. Thus, we can pass back and forth between the literary structure and the world of actual experience without noticing any decisive boundary. On the other hand, the idea—almost always in the singular form—is compared to Leibniz’s monad which undeniably is of an intentional nature. Hence, the fragments of the city can be turned into thematic essences. This is evident when Benjamin stays inside a literary corpus, as in his readings of Brecht, for example. Here his literary analysis is reduced to merely a paraphrase, or it claims “gesture” to be the epic theater’s aesthetic hallmark, which lends it more ideological than aesthetic value, and consequently Benjamin here, too, simply lays out the Brechtian idea.³

Benjamin therefore does not focus on literature as a specific textual strategy (to a lesser degree, however, in Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels), including how various genres function and are developed. He highlights the fragmented modern form that mirrors the fragmented experience iconically, not the narrative that, perhaps unsuccessfully, strives to establish a cohesive principle as a counterattack to the fragmented modern experience. Also ignored are the changes that narrative genres as a whole underwent in the urban literature of the 1800s. Balzac, Hugo, Dickens, and the like, are of course not unknown, but they are not among his library’s most read books. In fact, in his essay “Der Erzähler” (“The Storyteller”) Benjamin is most concerned with manifestations of the premodern oral narrative tradition in modern culture, and sees narrative as an agency creating the distance from experience that is necessary in order for the experience to be communicable (La 2.2:438ff.). But the narrator is not viewed as an element in an aesthetic structuring process with an omniscient narrator or with shifting narrators. The narrator—in the definite, singular form—is simply a stand-in for the monological author bringing his theme to the public.

Benjamin’s essay on the technical reproducibility of works of art is in a way an exception to this rule.⁴ Its main topic is the loss of the aural character of art once it can be technically reproduced in identical form. However, its subject is not literature, but the visual arts. This is odd, because of course long before the art community stopped celebrating the aura of the unique object, written literature has always assumed reproducibility as a precondition for its existence and function, precisely by virtue of its being written and printed. From the magic rune to Derrida’s generalized writing, a fundamental assumption regarding the principles of literary aesthetics is that the written word escapes the control of its author and becomes partly dependent on the whim of the reader. This is a function of the nature of written communication, and it
renders futile any attempt to limit the reproducibility of the written
word by means of a copyright, or to base its trustworthiness on an
author’s name. Literature’s validity has always been contested because of
its inherent unreliability, and it has taken this challenge as its impetus.

Although Benjamin himself chose short genres—the essay, the sketch,
the radio address, the review, the memory piece, and so on—he did not
engage in a profound reflection on the relationship between choice of
genre and the aesthetic experience of the urban world. Benjamin
moved freely between media, genres, and text types, treating them all
together as one great text. Therefore, one finds no deep-probing
dialogues with the classical genres or subgenres, such as, for example,
classical topological poetry as background for modern thematic treat-
ments of urban life. In spite of his stimulating descriptions of a place
which, like the city, is no longer a place in the classical sense of
possessing a genus loci, he has not engaged in a dialogue with those
topological genres.5

This brief skeptical look at Benjamin’s literary contributions raises the
question: why is Benjamin no great literary reader when his cultural
analysis is so striking? The answer, I believe, is that his strengths in
cultural analysis are precisely what make him so weak in literary analysis.

Literary Method

In his memorial essay on Franz Kafka (1934), Benjamin stresses that
gesture is the element in Kafka’s work that must never be overlooked:
“Every [gesture] is an event, indeed one is tempted to say a drama in
itself” (La 2.2:419). It is also the element that, in Benjamin’s view, makes
Brecht’s epic theater interesting: Brecht’s theater feeds on dissociated
gestures. And it is the motif that Benjamin pounces on in Baudelaire’s
poem “À une passante.” Here, the passing woman of the title meets, with
lifted skirt, the poet-narrator, in a hurried and concentrated instant
loaded with the excitement of physical closeness and the ineluctability
of separateness.6 Benjamin’s code word here is “shock.” She stiffens in a
split-second gesture torn from all connection, from its own internal
progression or from potential interaction with the gestures of others.
The shifting positions and confrontations of decontextualized singular
events, exemplifying this “dialectic of the frozen instant” (La 2.2:530),
constitute the core of Benjamin’s fascination with urban analysis leaving
an immediate imprint on his analysis of literature. To analyze a literary
work by analyzing its motifs is to formulate an illustration of, and not a
possible dialectic contrast to, the analysis of culture.
With such nexus forming the interpretative framework, it is clear that distance becomes a problem for method as well as for experience. Instantaneous experience must be grasped from both within and without at the same time, for if the experiencing agent and the interpreting agent are separate, the instant to be interpreted escapes. Therefore the importance of the narrator in Benjamin’s restricted sense is understandable; he is the agency that makes the mediation of experience, even instantaneous experience, possible through distancing, namely in fixing it as a theme that can be narrated. One might therefore argue that the narrator in the text finds his counterpart in the strolling flâneur in the street: he who keeps his distance, not because he dumbly knows too little, but because he hypersensitively knows too much, and therefore modulates his behavior so that, in the midst of the flurry of experience in the street, he stands out even in the experiential instant as part of but not absorbed by the turbulent street life. Furthermore, Benjamin’s perspective of Marx’s analysis of commodities is marked by the central urban experience: commodities are objects that fascinate precisely because of their form and not their function, and because their social function as trade goods is determined by their ability to circulate by virtue of their form, their invitation to direct enjoyment on the part of the possible purchaser.

The methodological principle therefore becomes impressionistic, the empathetic insight, die Einfühlung, into the gestural instant—an attempt to capture what the instant itself “says.” This is somewhat paradoxical, since Benjamin is no fan of the empathetic psychology that stretches the experience of the instant beyond its actual existence. What I here call “empathetic insight” does not refer to a sentimental postulate about duration and plenitude in retaining the instant—verweile doch . . . In Benjamin’s approach the extent of the world is simply defined by whatever the individual in an instantaneous confrontation manages to catch in his net of perception, association, and memory, be it the narrator, the flâneur, or the consumer of goods as authoritative individual, separate and sovereign in his experience of the instant. As a descriptive principle for a cultural complex in motion, such as the city, it is unsurpassed, provided it is performed by a sovereign subject who has no need to define his methodological or experiential limits as anything other than his sensitive presence. The person is more important than the principle (which is why the memoirs in Berliner Kindheit um neunzehnhundert [Berlin Childhood in 1900] remain Benjamin’s unrivalled masterpiece).

As a methodological principle for the reading of literature, however, it is problematic because of its unrepeatability. It opens two not very
attractive possibilities for a literary analysis. First, literature is merely evaluated according to its general appearance, and thereby as an example of the dominant social object, the commodity. This is related to its general technical reproducibility. Although this view of literature is not false, it does not say much about the individual work and its particular power of fascination, which—despite literature being a commodity—continues to stand at the core of Benjamin's analysis of cultural objects. This transformation from individual work into a prototypical social object is grasped without consideration of all the textual details that distinguish the work both as literature, as an individual work, and as a commodity, and which gives the various literary forms (genres, imagery, motif, and so forth) a relatively independent historicity. Gesture, too, as a leitmotif, has a history and various manifestations: consider courtly literature, theater's codified repertory of gestures or, of more recent date, John Dos Passos's Rosinante to the Road Again (1922).

The second possible variant of literary analysis is the one most cherished by Benjamin: the empathetic and impressionistic reading focusing on the gestural instant as theme. The works are interpreted from the themes that directly present themselves on the basis of the cultural analysis. Just as the cultural analysis defines the type of object, the commodity, to which art and literature belong, so it also defines the themes that meet the reader—the urban motifs that emerge from the fragile experience of the instant. But works or literary forms that take as their theme anything other than the gestural instant on which Benjamin focuses, or that don't directly treat the city at all, although this hardly prevents them from appearing and circulating in the urban culture—these works are marginalized in Benjamin's oeuvre.10

A Central European Perspective

Also, urban cultural analysis is framed by limitations, precisely by virtue of the sovereignty with which Benjamin develops it. It is an analysis that identifies European culture, central European urban culture in particular, as modern culture as such, and looks out from the center of Paris. This is a view of modern city culture as a generalization of Paris—which is not entirely incorrect, but its limits must be specified.

In the last version of his childhood memoir, Berliner Kindheit um neunzehnhundert, Benjamin explains in his prelude to the piece on the Tiergarten park in Berlin what it means to get lost in the city (the city as such, one should note), an art that must and should be learned, he says. In the first version, Berliner Chronik (Berlin Chronicle), one finds the
hidden prerequisite for this generalized urban experience: “Paris taught me how to get lost.” The conceptual center of his radio addresses, *Pariser Köpfe*, is the sentence “But where else than in Paris . . . ,” just as his essay on surrealism repeatedly stresses Paris’s role as a universally valid microcosm unifying reality and fantasy, a place whose own self-perception elevates it unto a universally valid analogy for urban culture (*La* 2.1:300f.).

Here we find a clear echo of a notion that gained international credence with the French revolution and lasted far into the 1800s. In August 1789, the German publisher Johann Heinrich Campe celebrated Paris (with the Palais Royal as its center) as a place that comprised, in concentrated form, a variety of experiences equivalent to a gathering of all the “natural and human knowledge from the four corners of the world.” Of course, French writers are equally unrestrained. “Paris expresses the world. For Paris is a totality. It is the roof over the family of man. . . . Everything one finds elsewhere, is in Paris. . . . Paris is a synonym for Cosmos. . . . Are there limits to Paris? Never!” run a few of Victor Hugo’s eruptions in *Les Misérables* in 1862. With lightly disguised irony, Balzac states in his 1843 novel *Honorine* that in contrast to the English, who have all possible reason to leave London and the islands, one has no incentive to leave Paris. But one might do it, nevertheless, in order to heighten the pleasure of returning: “To find Paris again! Do you know what that means, O Parisians?” Paris is not only the epitome of all that is worth having and doing, but it involves, as here, the world outside Paris in a mythologizing self-affirmation. Earnest or ironic, these remarks belong in the same discursive and unambiguous celebration of Paris. It is this movement that resounds in Benjamin’s urban analysis: the European city, with Paris as a locality that has become a universal type.

But the modern city in Benjamin’s own century should rather be seen as an amalgamation of the tendencies which Paris, among other cities, represents, and the lines and conditions of development followed by the large American cities. When it comes to economy, the physical shape of cities, social structure, mobility, the ideologization of the relationship between city and noncity, and so on, the decentralized American metropolis contributes to the global urbanization of space and everyday life so significantly that the development on the European and North American continents (as well as in other places) is patterned after a Euro-American city model. This urban configuration confronts and transforms—and to a lesser degree is itself transformed by—the local urban forms of the world. Seen in this truly universal or global perspective, which belongs to the twentieth century as Benjamin himself.
did, the Modern City derives more from a conglomeration of urban models than from central European prototypes alone. This fact is not taken into account by Benjamin.

Benjamin’s stress on individual insight, along with his central European perspective, limits the range of his analysis of urban culture as a global phenomenon. The qualities of his cultural analysis—the generalization of the gestural instant—are not destroyed by the fact that, on the one hand, they are hemmed in by methodological problems in the analysis of literature and, on the other, by a central European viewpoint. But their range is limited. This literary method—empathy with the experiential instant as manifested in motifs—and the cultural focus cannot themselves define their limitations: the unmediated obviousness of sensual experience and the Eurocentric position have always awarded themselves a general validity, even if their fractured character is unnecessarily suppressed, and they have had difficulty recognizing the independent legitimacy of alternatives. Therefore, they cannot challenge, but only illustrate each other.

In the Street with Balzac

Alternative approaches to reading that lay the groundwork for a more complex relationship between city and literature can be launched in two ways. One can read texts and types of texts that Benjamin does not consider and which have fundamental traits other than those he focuses on. Or one can reinterpret the same or similar texts, but try other methodological and analytical approaches. I will briefly attempt the latter with Balzac. His texts on Paris are direct in their references to, and reflections of, urban life and urban space, and they repeatedly take for their theme the street and its observers, “who know the art of walking the streets of Paris, and reap a harvest of delights borne in on the tides of life that ebb and flow within her walls with every hour... an astounding assemblage of brains and machinery in motion.” The reference to the gestural instant, as in Benjamin, is obvious. But in Balzac it is always embedded in a constant dialogue with the traditional cornerstones of narrative discourse giving cohesiveness to a narrated universe: the place as a scene of intentional human action which can be localized and described as a specific place with its own genius loci. Balzac’s texts are not from the outset at a distance from such a conception of place, as Benjamin in his fragmentation of the spatial urban experience, but he is developing a distance through his narrative strategy. His strategy is a multiple one which is neither based entirely on a monological narrator, as in Benjamin’s essay “Der Erzähler,” nor
completely absorbed by an impressionistic approach. Urban experience
does not have the delocalized instant as its pivotal point, but only as an
ingredient. The constant dialectic between localization and delocaliza-
tion is a permanent driving force in Balzac, reenacted over and over
again. In this process he shows how the placeness of the city—the
characters acting in the city and the representability of urban space—
gradually undermines the traditional platform on which it unfolds and
continues to unfold. One example, concerned with representability will
have to show my point.

The opening of *Ferragus* (1833) is one of Balzac's most-quoted urban
descriptions (F 9–13; Fe 13–15). In trying to come to terms with the
specific placeness of the city he employs a funnel-shaped composition,
here in three stages: we open with the narrator's general description of
the streets of Paris, after which the perspective shrinks to a consider-
ation of where and how one can meet women in the street, and finally it
is individualized in an unnamed young man who one evening acciden-
tally meets the married woman he secretly loves. I will examine, for the
most part, the first stage of the description. This composition assumes
two things. First, that the gradually shrinking perspective lends greater
precision. This is a perceptual theory of long standing, with origins in
Aristotle's inductive reasoning, and with applications beyond literature:
ideally, perception works beyond common *genus* and *species* characteris-
tics toward the object's *differentia specifica* that grasps the thing in its
individual actuality. Second, the composition assumes that it is possible
to describe space as an empty stage, on which the human actors are
positioned, later to engage in mutual interaction. Space and people,
subject and object, are separate and are brought together as external
elements. This is a post-Cartesian way of linking people and their
environment. These two assumptions—increasing preciseness of experi-
ence and the stability of space—determine the panoramic description of
space. Here, too, then, Balzac uses well-known forms in an analysis of the
gradual destabilization of space.

The action takes place in the Rue Pagevin, near the later Halles, a
place one absolutely should not wander around in alone, particularly at
night. Night or not, the description is carried by sight—and touch—
impressions that for various reasons are imprecise:

The streets of Paris . . . possess human qualities, so that you cannot help forming
certain ideas of them on a first impression. . . . These observations may be dark
sayings for those who live beyond the bounds of Paris; but they will be
apprehended at once by those students, thinkers, poets, and men of pleasure,
who know the art of walking the streets of Paris, and reap a harvest of delights
borne in on the tides of life that ebb and flow within her walls with every hour.
For these, Paris is the most fascinating of monsters; here she is a pretty woman, there a decrepit pauper; some quarters are spick and span as the coins of a new reign, and a nook here and there is elegant as a woman of fashion.

A monster, indeed, is the great city, in every sense of the word. In the garrets you find, as it were, its brain full of knowledge and genius; the first floor is a digestive apparatus, and the shops below are unmistakable feet, whence all the busy foot-traffic issues.

Oh! what a life of incessant activity the monster leads! The last vibration of the last carriage returning from the ball has scarcely died away before its arms begin to stir a little at the barriers, and the City gives itself a gradual shake. All the gates begin to yawn, turning on their hinges like the membranes of some gigantic lobster invisibly controlled by some thirty thousand men and women. Each one of these thirty thousand must live in the allotted six square feet of space which serves as kitchen, workshop, nursery, bedroom, and garden; each one is bound to see everything, while there is scarce light enough to see anything. Imperceptibly the monster's joints creak, the stir of life spreads, the street finds a tongue. . . . Others may think of Paris as the monstrous marvel, as an astounding assemblage of brains and machinery in motion, as the City of a Hundred Thousand Romances, the head of the world. (F9–11; Fc 13)

Here we encounter neither an empty space, ready for human actors, nor a development in precision. This is because, for one thing, objects that move as "delights borne in on the tides of life" are observed by people who are themselves moving, the flâneuring strollers. Everything is "an astounding assemblage of . . . motion." Even Balzac's sovereign narrator cannot suppress a guarded "without doubt." For another thing, the borders of the space are fluid: even if Paris is "the head of the world," and even if the city limits are clearly marked by "her walls," and even if we can well give up managing "beyond the bounds of Paris," these borders cannot be so conceived by the pedestrian who makes observations while he walks around: "Who has not left home in the morning for the uttermost ends of Paris, and recognized by dinner-time the futility of his efforts to get away from the centre?" (F12; Fc 14). Such a borderless area stops being a specific place with a clear geography and clear categories of things and space, because of its endlessness and looseness. Therefore, things impose themselves "by a glowing magnetism" (F14; Fc 14), and the street and its contents live their own lives: "the stir of life spreads, the street finds a tongue." The observer disappears as an independent personality: "you cannot help forming certain ideas." Things therefore have no stability, even while they are being perceived—nursery, bedroom, kitchen, workshop, and garden are spatial locations alternating arbitrarily in the description. They are isolated fragments, registered by a body in movement, a reflection of the moving observer's own moods. It is his fleeting desire for money and
women that rubs off, mixes with his fear of disappearing in the torrent of sense impressions that leave him defenseless: the city is a monster.

One example of this uncertainty is the narrator's reference to the city walls as a clear demarcation line which, however, it will prove futile for anyone to try to reach. Another example is found in the narrator's representation of the unreliability of even the senses: "Some times the creature whom you follow by accident or design seems graceful and slender. . . . There are moments when she is a woman no longer, she is an evil spirit, a will-of-the-wisp" (F 14; Fc 14). Paris's "bizarre, broad contrasts" (F 12; Fc 13) are too broad—one "is bound to see everything, while there is scarce light enough to see anything," as the passage says. Finally, the shortage of words can be seen in the absence of synthesizing images that reach beyond singular observations of the city and detached paragraphs of the text. There are loose, rambling lists of human, especially female, and animal characteristics, that are linked only to fragmented details: feet, head, stomach, motion, vibration, and so on. There are characteristics that link themselves to local and completely spontaneous aesthetic and emotional reactions (fascinating, happy, beautiful, and so forth). Or, as at the end: Paris is at one and the same time movement, thought, machine, romance, head.

When the city gets its coloration from bodily sensations, it becomes difficult to characterize in a general way; it is just as variable and unstable as the sensations that become signs. The nearest we get is that it is "the most fascinating of monsters," but then later it becomes "the monstrous marvel" (F 11; Fc 14). Noun becomes adjective (monster/monstrous) and vice versa (fascinating/marvel [merveilleux/merveille]). What is the object and what is the attribute can freely be turned around. Also, bodily experience and pictures of the body can be both manipulated and reversed. Therefore, when the street is represented as a body, or fragments of a body, and thus takes on human qualities, it can just as well mean that it is familiar and human as the opposite: as a voracious monster, it can take the place of a person, make him disappear. Whether a person is present or absent, whether he can be present or should be absent in the general panoramic opening is uncertain. And the powerful, although traditional, image of the urban monster indicates that it is not at all possible for the person to choose between these possibilities. The more anthropomorphically space is depicted, the less it is open to human presence.

Street life thereby takes on the character of fate, beyond man's will or action. In Paul Auster's novel City of Glass, the protagonist Quinn speculates about the connection between fate and the word "it": "It was something like the word 'it' in the sentence 'it rains' or 'it's night.' Quinn had never known what the 'it' referred to. Perhaps a generalized
prerequisite for things as they were; the idea that something simply is, the foundation on which the events of the world took place. Balzac represents the extent and human character of the streets of Paris in just the same way: "There are [il est] streets in Paris, . . . there are [il y a] likewise noble streets, . . . Then there are [il y a] deadly streets," and so on (F9; Fc 13). What stands out here is the fortuitousness that is created when one moves around. Contacts occur accidentally and are fleeting—the young man’s meeting with the woman at the end of the funnel-shaped opening is “one of those chances that do not come twice in a lifetime,” and the woman, “Presto! She had disappeared” (F 13; Fc 15). He is in the cage, possessed by and bewildered by the disappearing sight.

Balzac is not only carrying on a dialogue with the city—which, like a quasi nature, represents the destiny of modern man—but also directly and explicitly with the forms in which our experiences already have been shaped aesthetically. The forms of representation used by Balzac are integrated in a broadly structured and systematic disassembling of the established forms for narrative representation of places, of human subjects, and of perceptual processes. As opposed to Benjamin, Balzac is not taking for granted the fragmentation of urban space, and therefore he does not represent fragmentation as a cultural or environmental fact occurring in his texts as a simple motif. Instead, he takes the need for cohesiveness through narration for granted and turns this need into a complex narrative strategy that shows both the necessity of this strategy and its cultural conditions of which fragmentation is but one aspect. Thereby he offers a more comprehensive literary representation of urban modernity than does Benjamin. The urban tension between place and placelessness is articulated in a dialogue between traditional forms and actual experience. The gestural instant, cherished in isolation by Benjamin, is historically contextualized in Balzac through his narrative strategy without losing its actual perspective.

Although one of the central effects of the urban space is to reduce history to the individual associations of memory, in Balzac history reenters the aesthetic dialogue though the experiential models that have been told over the centuries and that, through Balzac, continue to be told and changed by their being told.

Epilogue: Time and History

Of course, Benjamin has been heavily criticized both by his contemporaries such as Bertolt Brecht and Theodor W. Adorno, and later by, for example, Jürgen Habermas, Peter Bürger, and Hans-Robert Jauss or, with more sympathetic understanding, by Rolf Tiedemann, Susan Buck-
Morss, and Richard Wolin. All of these critics focus especially on the relation between Benjamin's conception of history and his interpretations of literary and other cultural artifacts. They point to various explicit and implicit deficiencies in his work, either with the aim of pushing Benjamin aside as hopelessly ahistorical in his thought, or in a noble attempt to rehistoricize his project by downsizing its undeniable eschatological and messianistic components in a broad historiomaterialistic framework.20

But Benjamin's attraction has prevailed after the attacks, and his survival does not seem to rely entirely upon the benevolent repair work done by his more congenial interpreters. Why then, one might ask, has Benjamin's approach to cultural and literary analysis continued to have such a strong appeal over the last thirty years? Could it be that Benjamin's influence, at least in the literary and aesthetic field, emerges out of his deficiencies, not in spite of them? I will suggest that it is so, and for two reasons, one that is based on Benjamin's own work, another that belongs to the cultural context of his actual use.

The first and most important reason is the argumentative structure of Benjamin's own oeuvre. His late Über den Begriff der Geschichte (On the Concept of History) repeats certain notions from the earlier work on the Trauerspiel. The pivotal point in the theses is the “jetzt” or the “instant” as opposed to the “homogeneous and empty time.”21 The “instant” occurs, as we have seen, over and over again as a literary motif. It is the here-and-now of the historical subject, discontinuously detached from a linear causal or any other relation of continuity to the past. For this reason, the experience of the past is like a danger that takes the subject by shocking surprise (GS 1.2:695). Therefore, all the elements of the past become part of the instant as fragments with no other interrelationship than that of emphasizing the momentous reality of the present instant.

There is no other access to the past than this simultaneous copresence in the instant of the heterogeneous ruins of history. There is no grand temporal or sequential explanatory scheme at hand to understand the instant as part of history, only the temporal and spatial collision of fragments.22 History does not evolve, it happens eruptively and disruptively. As the instant itself is a fragment, it can constitute no platform for a reflection on or an analysis of history. Like Leibniz’s monad (GS 1.2:703) it simply exemplifies the fragmentary world it is part of. In the terminology of Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels, explained in the beginning of this paper, the “jetzt” ought to be a concept. However, it defies its own role as a concept: it is not an analytical tool in the way a concept is supposed to be. The instant is more in the nature of an idea (which Benjamin, as we saw earlier, also calls a monad) that does not find its proper place as part of a logical argument but as a literary motif,
for example, in Baudelaire’s “À une passante.” There is, however, no doubt that Benjamin sees an emancipatory dimension in this vision of a detemporalized historicity. The historical subject is not influenced by any overarching determination from the past; the fragments are kinds of ready-mades for playful combinations. On the other hand, as the instant cannot play the role of a determinate past for a subsequent future, a future change cannot be but a radical break away from the instant—an eschatological vision is close to Benjamin.

The instant is perfectly matched by a literary form: the allegory, introduced in the Trauerspiel book as the primary literary form with the potential of being a cultural form, which Benjamin later in the papers on Paris and on Baudelaire specifies as the commodity. As the literary form of the “actual ‘instant’” the allegory is opposed to the symbol, intimately related to the “mystical ‘now’” which is identical with the “homogenous time” mentioned in the theses (Ud 1.1:358). The components of the allegorical fabric are decontextualized and deintentionalized fragments, bricolaged together as contrasting extremes in the allegory. The allegory embraces the “Einmalig-Extreme,” that is, the “instantaneous-extreme” (Ud 1.1:215), “À une passante” being one such allegorical text. The fragments do not become part of the allegorical structure because of any historical or logical determination. They simply do so de facto. Through the allegorical filter, history appears as a quasinatural, frozen, archaic landscape (Ud 1.1:343)—unzeitig, that is, always in the wrong place at the wrong time. Not even revolution or eschatology is of much relevance here. So, like the concept of history, the historically sensitive literary form annihilates any possibility of understanding history as a process.

Neither the fragments of the historical instant nor the fragments of the allegory are therefore relevant in their particularity. They are all elements in “a world where details do not count very much” (Ud 1.1:350). Hence, even if we want to focus on a particular text or object to challenge the all-absorbing merging of everything with everything else as fragments, we would fall victims to the same fragmentation ourselves. Allegory as form reduplicates history as instant, making any distance impossible, as we have discussed in Benjamin’s literary analyses. Between allegory and history there is no “abyss between imaginative being and meaning” (Ud 1.1:342), but a one-to-one relationship. Our analyses only add a new layer of fragments, thus confirming the fragmentary character of the world, even if the content of our efforts brings forth a cohesive structure. In Benjamin the general character of culture reduces the particularity of its objects—literary texts among others—and thereby also the relevance of analyses of such objects. Literary structure, history,
value, and so forth, have no specific interest, only the cultural effect of the general literary form—the allegory—and the general cultural form—the commodity. If you look from literature to history, you see nothing different; if you reach out from history to literature, you grasp nothing but repetitions of the historical instant. No wonder melancholy is a tenor of Benjamin’s mind-set.

Finally, a remark on the second reason for Benjamin’s impact. Some might think that to see Benjamin cornered in a dead end in both literary and cultural analysis hampers the use of his work. But this situation is precisely the reason for his irresistible power. At a certain cultural juncture all the negative statements that can be derived from his position can be turned upside down. Negatively you may state that you cannot analyze any specific and historically situated object, that you cannot come to grips with history as process, and that you cannot analyze a particular literary text. But you can also feel invited to enjoy a complete freedom in relation to the fragments of the world and its fragmentary representation and burst out in jubilation: you do not need to care about process or specificity, or about any differences between past and present, literary and actual experience, and so forth—“details do not count very much.” Culture and literature open up a vast field for a tempting self-projection, for the demonstration of a general textual mechanism showing the almost identical fragmentary character of every text, or for a reduction of the diversity of modern culture to the central-European urban prototype. The cultural context ready to accept this message has been that of postmodernism and deconstructionism climbing toward its peak in literary and cultural studies over the last thirty years and taking Benjamin with them. Many sophisticated philosophical arguments have been offered for the “anything goes” of postmodernism, at times hard to grasp for literary scholars. Benjamin’s force is that he legitimized the reduction of history on the very basis of a notion of history. On the part of the interpreting subject, the vicious circle in Benjamin’s argument becomes a beneficial circle offering ample space for his own imagination. Through Benjamin it is possible to epitomize historical reductionism as historical consciousness in insisting on the instant as the most advanced concept of history, without any methodological constraints on the literary interpretations following from it.

At this point it is important not to indulge in mere Benjamin bashing, but to maintain that the value of Benjamin’s contribution to literary and cultural studies of the twentieth century, in contrast to his own words, is that “details do count very much.” The unparalleled richness of the material he compiled, his keen eye for surprising parallels or associative links, as well as his individual and therefore highly particular memoirs,
will remain a lasting inspiration for a specific diagnosis of modern culture long after his theoretical or conceptual, let alone methodological, attempts have been forgotten. He forces you to take a stand—different from his.

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NOTES

1 Walter Benjamin, Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels (1928), in Gesammelte Schriften (Collected Works), ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhaeuser, 7 vols. (Frankfurt am Main, 1974-1989), 1.1:238; hereafter cited in text as Ud. Citations from Gesammelte Schriften (GS) cited by volume, subvolume, and page. All translations, including translations of titles, are mine unless otherwise indicated.

2 Benjamin, Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik (1920), in GS 1.1:119.


4 Benjamin, Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit, in GS 1.2.


7 See the analyses of Paris in Benjamin, Charles Baudelaire, in GS 1.2, and Exposés, in GS 5.1.

8 See Benjamin, Anmerkungen der Herausgeber, in GS 1.3:1178.


11 Benjamin, Berliner Chronik, in GS 6:469.

12 Benjamin, Nachträge, in GS 7.1:280.


16 See Spiro Kostof, The City Shaped (Boston, 1991). Especially the dissolution of time and space is of relevance; see, for example, Anne Cauquelin, Essai de philosophie urbaine (Paris, 1986); Hartmut Haßsman and Walter Siebel, Neue Urbanität (Frankfurt a.M., 1987); and Edward Relph, Place and Placelessness (London, 1974).

17 See Larsen, "Representation and Intersemiosis."


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