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WALTER BENJAMIN’S FIGURATIVE SOCIOLOGY

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ABSTRACT:

This paper attempts to demonstrate that Walter Benjamin, in his writings dedicated to the city, shaped a true “microsociology of everyday life” of the city, which is part of a sociological type often ignored as it cannot easily be ascribed to any of the dominant currents of thought of the twentieth century (Positivism, Neokantism, Dialectics, Phenomenology). It is essentially founded on an “aesthetic paradigm” both as regards the theory of knowledge and the centrality of play as a fundamental element of social reality.

From an epistemological point of view, the paper points out the limits of a theory of knowledge of society which is exclusively rationalistic, and it proposes a form of concrete, anti-systemic knowledge, made up of images, figures, constellations and fragments, capable of restituting the individuality of the phenomenon. From this style of thought comes the “mimetic” element of Benjamin’s writings on the city, which build up a dialectical exchange between the text and urban reality. Text and city become a single interchangeable reality.

An exploration of three fundamental “figures” of players in the city – the *flâneur*, the collector and the gambler – shed further light on the fundamental aspects of Benjamin’s conception of everyday life. The *flâneur* experiences the urban space of the city in what could be termed an “as if” mode: in his imagination it becomes similar to a dream landscape which turns into a sitting-room, an amusement park, or a labyrinth in which to lose himself. The collector tries to overcome the anonymity of the urban environment by attempting to leave *traces* in the private space of his home. The gambler, finally, tries to challenge the inexorability of time as destiny, through the rite of the number and the element of chance which belongs to it.

The analysis of these three metropolitan psychological types demonstrates that in Benjamin’s eyes modern everyday life is substantially a “mourning play”, “a play of sorrow” (*Trauerspiel*) which moves between utopia and melancholy. It refuses to relinquish the impossible demand for restitution of that which has disappeared (the “no longer”, *nicht mehr*), and it turns the unsatisfied energy of its desire towards that which does not presently exist (the “not yet, *noch nicht*): the utopia of a dimension which is emancipated and not instrumental of everyday reality.

1. Premise

In the writings by Walter Benjamin devoted to the city, one can discern a veritable “microsociology of everyday life” in the metropolis, which was awarded scant attention by twentieth-century social theory¹. It is present above all in the great incomplete work on the *Arcades* of Paris (1926-1940), which formed the focus of Benjamin’s efforts at several different stages over a period of no less than fourteen years. This work – or rather what remains of the incomplete composition – should be considered in relation to a series of other writings which are fundamental for the development of the concepts around which the work is structured. This is important for an understanding of its meaning, since it consists exclusively of a collection of citations, aphorisms, fragments, and partial drafts². First and foremost, any enquiry into the *Arcades Project* must take into account Benjamin’s study on *The Origins of German Tragic Drama* (1928). Although this study apparently has little to do with the metropolitan dimension, Benjamin claimed that it served as the basis for the inspiration underlying several of his important conceptions. In a 1935 letter to his friend Gershom Scholem, one of the leading scholars of Jewish mysticism, Benjamin gave the following outline of the theoretical background of his work:

It will not permit concessions from any quarter and if I know anything at all about it, then it is that no school will rush to claim it for themselves. In some respects, I am sometimes tempted to regard it as having close affinities with the early study on Baroque as far as its internal structure is concerned, whereas the external structure is likely to be remarkably different. And there’s another point I want to make: both centre around the unfolding (*Entfaltung*) of a traditional concept. Where the earlier book outlined the concept of the Trauerspiel, here it will be that of the fetish character of commodities. If the book on Baroque mobilized its own theory of knowledge, this is going to be the case to at least the same extent for the *Arcades*, where however I am unable to foresee whether they will be given an independent representation and how far I will succeed in doing so³.

¹ Not many commentators have assessed Benjamin’s late work from the point of view of its specifically sociological relevance. And yet, as argued by Mennighaus in his fundamental study, “the greatest innovative force of Benjaminian thought on myth consists in his late *physiognomic sociology*, his aesthetics of the social world-of-life. In this theory...[one finds] the foundation of a new form of social theory and of utilisation of the (mediated) immediacy of everyday life” (Menninghaus 1986, p. 113, our italics). Naturally, there are also some notable exceptions. Among these, the works by Patrick Tacussel 1986 and Paolo Jedlowski 1989 and 1994 should certainly be cited. Other attempts to appraise the contribution Benjamin made to a reading of the social world are to be found in Neubaur 1983 and da Frisby 1994.

² The value, so to speak of the *Arcades Project* has been substantially called into question. The first Italian edition (Benjamin, 1986), which came out without the long preface by the German editor Rolf Tiedemann, did little to aid an understanding of the work. Moreover, some scholars, such as Espagne and Werner (1986), went so far as to deny that the collection of notes had any independent value, arguing that in actual fact it is simply a collection of Benjamin’s materials destined to be further and radically reworked (on this polemical issue, cf. the introduction by G. Agamben to Benjamin 1986, p. XVIII).

³ Benjamin 1966, p. 654.

These revelations unveil a series of important elements. Firstly, Benjamin intended to place the concept of the fetishism of commodities at the centre of the *Arcades Project*. This conception, taken from Marx, was intended to provide the fundamental key for an interpretation of his work on the Paris *Arcades*, and Benjamin clearly felt there was an affinity between the economic world analysed in *Capital* and that staged in Baroque drama. A second major point concerns the theory of knowledge that was to underpin the *Arcades Project*. This work, like that on German Baroque drama, was probably designed to be preceded by a premise on the nature of knowledge, of which only a partial draft can be construed from the extant fragments⁴. In this investigation we will keep to the indications provided by Benjamin, developing these fundamental aspects of his conception regarding the link between *Trauerspiel* and the fetishism of commodities, and the theory of knowledge implicit in the *Arcades Project*.

It is equally important, however, to take other writings and essays by Benjamin into consideration. As can easily be imagined, if Benjamin's reflection on the metropolis finds its *Place de l'Etoile* (Adorno) in the work on the Paris *Arcades*, then since the work extended over almost fourteen years it is hardly surprising that significant traces of his conception can be discerned in a whole series of essays and fragments composed by the author throughout this entire time span⁵. Within this context, a privileged position is occupied by his studies on Baudelaire, since a specific part of the work was to be devoted precisely to the French poet. Furthermore, the essays devoted to Baudelaire are in effect the only truly complete and published chapter of the work on the *Arcades*. These are the essays *The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire* and *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*. The former of these two essays, which Benjamin considered to be no less than a "model in miniature" of the *Arcades Project*, received pungent criticism, culminating in its rejection for publication by Adorno. The latter essay, on the other hand, which was published in the journal *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* of the Frankfurt School in exile in New York, was enthusiastically accepted by his intransigent intellectual friend. Considerable importance for the development of Benjamin's conception and for the construction of his opus magnum on Paris can also be ascribed

⁴ The theory of knowledge of the *Arcades Project* is to be found above all in the fragments contained in the chapters entitled *Theory of Knowledge*, *Theory of Progress and Oneiric City and Oneiric architecture*, *Waking Dreams*, *Anthropological Nihilism*, *Jung*. It should be recalled that these are not strictly speaking chapters, but only Konvolut, collections of fragments, aphorisms and notes. Obviously, this makes the interpretation and reconstruction even more problematic.

⁵ Therefore, the *Arcades Project* should be seen as related, at the very least, to a series of important essays by Benjamin, in addition to the ones devoted to the city mentioned in this paper, including *One-Way Street* (1928); *Surrealism* (1929); *On the Mimetic Faculty* (1933); "The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility," (1935); *The Storyteller* (1936) "Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian," (1937); and finally, *On the Concept of History* (1940), a veritable spiritual testament by Benjamin (not designed for publication), written shortly before his death and containing a series of reflections that would probably have been incorporated in the introductory part devoted to the "theory of knowledge" of the *Arcades Project*.

to a series of— apparently minor — writings devoted to the city, either in the form of autobiographical memoirs or travelogues. These writings comprise the collections of reminiscences *A Berlin Childhood around 1900* and *A Berlin Chronicle* (both dating from 1932), which constitute, as Theodor Adorno stated, “the significant counterpoint of the material he was gradually gathering together for the project of the work on the Paris Arcades”⁶. Equally significant, among the writings collected under the title “City Images” (*Städtebilder*), are the depictions of *Naples* (1924), written jointly with the actress Asja Lacin, and *Moscow Diary* (1927), springing from his journey to the capital of what was at the time the young Soviet Socialist republic.

2. *Melancholy play*

The French sociologist Patrick Tacussel has pointed out that Benjamin’s social theory reflects “an epistemological reflection elevated to the ambition of a *figurative sociology* [...] with a heuristic efficiency that has so far been neglected. His recourse to analogy, literary montage, metaphorical transposition and aphorism reveals a methodological concern whose fulcrum is not discourse or language itself, but the complicity established with the social aspect recognised as play”⁷. We can thus take this effective description as a starting point for our revisitation of Benjamin’s thought, exploring it in all its implications: indeed the “cipher” through which Benjamin interprets daily life in the modern metropolis is, precisely, that of play, more specifically, “mourning play, play for “those who are sad”. For example, this allows a literal translation of the German term *Trauerspiel* (although conventionally translated as “tragedy” in the terminology of drama, it is composed of the word *Trauer*, bereavement, sadness, and *Spiel*, a game, play, but also performance, representation). If one is to assume that Benjamin regarded social life in the context of the capitalist metropolis as fundamentally a “game” or a “mourning performance” – both of these being meanings of the German word *Spiel* – then it is necessary to clarify the specific object of the bereavement, that is to say, what form of lack and of loss is represented or performed. To gain insight into this fundamental constellation of fetishism, play and bereavement, which constitutes the central element of Benjamin’s metropolitan *figurative sociology*, it is worth looking at certain writings on this subject by Sigmund Freud. In the Freudian analysis one finds – naturally translated into the language of psychoanalysis – the fundamental elements characterising Baroque poetic sensitivity, and it is these elements that Benjamin had rediscovered, in a different context, in XIXth century Paris and in the poetic world of the *Fleurs du Mal*.

⁶ In the *Afterword*, appearing as an appendix to Benjamin 1950.

⁷ Tacussel 1986, pp. 52-53, our italics.

According to Freud, what links the phenomenon of fetishism with the grieving and melancholy state of mind is a mechanism of “negation” or of “denial” (*Verleugnung*) of reality⁸. In his 1917 essay devoted to *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud’s attention centred on the apparent inexplicableness of the melancholy state of mind which, upon the loss of the object of love, fails to react with a new libidic investment towards a new object in order to replace the lost one. According to Freud, the dynamic and psychological mechanisms of the melancholy state of mind could not be understood unless it were on the basis of the fundamental *ambiguity* that is founded on the mechanism of “negation”. Thus the psychology of the melancholic individual is troubled by a conflict between perception of reality, which would prompt the subject to relinquish the impossible demand for the return of the loved object, and the persistent desire directed towards that object, which, instead, drives the individual to deny this perception. The subject falls into melancholia because s/he neither conforms to the principle of reality nor ceases to obey the laws of his or her desire: or rather, the individual engages in both attitudes at the same time, culminating in one of the typical compromises that are possible only under the dominion of the laws of the unconscious.

According to this perspective, the typical state of mind of *Trauer* is represented by the paradox of a libido directed towards an ungraspable object that satisfies its need precisely by the very fact of being elusive. That is to say, this is a state of mind which is fixed on an object or an activity that is only apparently something concrete and tangible, whereas at the same time it also continually makes reference to something beyond itself, something that cannot ever be truly possessed. Hence the affinity of this state of mind with the behaviour of the *fetishist* towards material objects: “considered from this point of view, the fetish confronts us with the paradox of an ungraspable object that satisfies a human need by the very fact of being impossible to grasp. Inasmuch as it is a presence, the fetish object is indeed something concrete and even tangible, but inasmuch as it is the *presence of an absence*, it is, at one and the same time, immaterial and elusive, because it continually makes reference to something beyond itself, something that cannot truly be possessed”⁹. Thus the state of mind of *Trauer*, and, likewise, the psychological attitude of the fetishist, both of which have in common the absence of the object of desire that no longer exists (or has never existed) are, paradoxically, brought together by the common dimension of hope. The *Trauer* is faithful to the “no longer”, just as hope is faithful to the “not yet” (*noch nicht*, according to the expression used by Ernst Bloch). In fact, precisely the subject of the bereavement, if such a subject submits to the arduous psychical work of one who has lost the object of love, is particularly

⁸ Cf. Agamben 1993.

⁹ Ivi, p. 41.

disposed to investing the unfulfilled energy desire towards that which does not exist at this time (the *utopia*), thus constituting a critical and dissonant element with respect to existing reality.

3. *Space, time and objects of everyday life*

When the fragments of the *Arcades Project* are read with greater attention to detail, they are seen to be populated by a series of figures of players. The most significant ones are the *flâneur*, the collector and the gambler. These three figures express three fundamental aspects of the microsociology of everyday life in the metropolis: the relation with urban space, with the *time* dimension and with the objects of everyday life¹⁰. In effect, we are dealing here with three fundamental dimensions of *everyday life*, and their formation should be set in close relation with the ludic experience. According to Huizinga, play is “a voluntary action or activity, performed within the framework of established limits of time and space, according to a freely accepted but totally imperative rule; play is endowed with an end in its own right, and is accompanied by a feeling of tension and joy, as well as an awareness of existence that differs from consciousness of everyday life”¹¹.

It is therefore important to highlight the non-everyday nature of play, which is capable of being internal to, and constitutive of, the repetitive practices of everyday life, yet at one and the same time also capable of imposing an intensity and otherness on such practices, shattering the routines of administered society. Benjamin expressed a rather similar conception in a review of a book on the history of toys:

...the great law that, above all individual rules and rhythms, reigns over the whole world of play [is] the law of repetition. [...] In effect, every profound experience seeks insatiably, until the very end of things, a repetition and return, the revival of an original situation from which everything started out... Through this procedure he [the child] not only succeeds in overcoming the terror of certain original experiences by smoothing the edges, by light-hearted evocation and parody, but also in repeatedly enjoying triumphs and victories more intensely. The adult frees his heart from terror, enjoys to a twofold extent, through storytelling. The child creates everything for himself from a new beginning, starting everything all over again. this is perhaps the most profound root of the double meaning of the German *Spielen*: repetition of the same thing is perhaps the element shared by the two senses of the word. It is not a matter of “doing as

¹⁰ Benjamin himself suggests this division of the *Arcades* into numerous fragments. For instance, where he points out: “Parallelism between this work and the book on the Trauerspiel: both share the theme of “theology of hell”. Allegory, advertisements, types: martyr, tyrant – prostitute, speculator” (*GS V*, p. 1216). Thus these are central figures which, like all the major issues of the *Arcades Project*, have merely been sketchily drafted. On the theme of the “theology of hell” in relation to the fetishism of goods, cf. Desideri 2001.

¹¹ *Homo Ludens*, cit. in Tacussel 1986, p. 52.

if” but of “always doing everything anew”, the transformation of the most devastating experience into a habit, that which constitutes the essence of play.¹²

Thus play in a sense lies upstream of everyday practices inasmuch as it constitutes *habits*: what has “never been experienced” is tamed and repeated, until it becomes a widely consolidated and customary practice.

The peculiarity of Benjamin’s vision resides in his interpretation of these three figures of players as peculiar forms of “mourning play” (*Trauerspiel*) which express different types of bereavement and loss. As such, these activities share several common features: a) they have no end, and it is not by chance that Benjamin places them mainly in the chapter devoted to *idleness* (taken in the pregnant sense of Latin *otium*), that is to say, describing them as an activity devoid of an immediate practical purpose and, for this very reason, lacking any termination (the *flâneur*, as an idle roamer, can always take a turn at another street corner, the collector can always own one more item, the gambler can always have another go at winning the stakes); b) they are directed towards an object which in actual fact can never be possessed in its entirety (the urban space in the case of the *flâneur*, objects in the case of the collector, time in the case of the gambler); c) they are representations of an *absence*, of something that is not there and yet which, during play, one fictitiously tries to keep alive. In this sense, these are activities that can be defined as “allegorical” in the proper meaning of the term¹³: they do not assume a meaning in their own right, but through that to which they allude. Therefore they have an implicitly critical content in that they refer to something that lies beyond their own existence, towards a reality that does not yet exist unless it be in fantasy and dream.

Naturally, such figures are highly elusive, and they are never fully defined in the *Arcades Project*: instead, they are merely sketched in.

(1) The figure of the *flâneur*, as is known, is central in Benjamin’s thought, yet it remains enigmatic and hard to grasp¹⁴. What can be said is that for Benjamin, the *flâneur* constitutes an “original phenomenon” in the sense in which Goethe used this term (as will be clarified further on) , and it is “represented” in a multiplicity of contexts through different empirical, biographical, historical and literary materials. One can therefore identify in Benjamin’s work a historical *flâneur*,

¹² GS III, p.131.

¹³ The term allegory derives from the Greek *állos*, other, and *agoréuein*, to speak; therefore it literally means “to speak of something other”. It indicates an image, a symbol, a concept which expresses a meaning that is not immediately intelligible and which differs from the literal meaning. On the relation between allegory and *Trauerspiel* cf. GS I, pp. 336-410.

¹⁴ Cf. Lidner 1983. From a historical point of view, the *flâneur* can be identified with the Parisian dandies of the second half of the nineteenth century – men of letters, artists, journalists and so forth, who spent most of their time ambling along the boulevards enjoying worldly and society pleasures and earning their living with the growing *feuilleton* industry. In French, *flâneur* means ‘someone who wanders around aimlessly’, with no particular destination in mind. For a portrait of this historical-social context, cf. Kracauer 1976.

discernible above all in nineteenth-century literature and social history (the sources being predominantly authors such as Baudelaire, Hugo, Poe, among others and, originally, the *Paris Peasant* by Louis Aragon)¹⁵. In addition to this *flâneur*, (who was also the focus of interest in the study on the *Arcades*), in Benjamin's work one also finds a biographic *flâneur*, namely the figure that expresses his conceptions in autobiographical writings (*A Berlin Childhood around 1900*, *A Berlin Chronicle*) as well as a *flâneurie* devoted to the discovery of foreign cities (*Naples*, *Moscow* and other portraits of cities). Over all these there towers a metaphysical-philosophical *flâneur*, whose breadth of speculation elevates him above the other figures: this *flâneur* is identified with the gaze of the *Angelus Novus* who is the protagonist of his *On the Concept of History*, Benjamin's philosophical testament dating from 1940.

Loss, the *Trauer* saddening the *flâneur*, is the loss of a mythic relation with urban space. Now, "although there exists nothing definable as *the* conception of myth in Benjamin"¹⁶, it is possible to identify some characteristic features of *flâneurie* as urban mythology: in particular, childhood, play and dreams are the expression of a mythic relation with the world. According to Benjamin, myth contains elements and potentialities than must be preserved and utilized within the framework of reason. In his writings on the city he frequently emphasises the positive and utopian content in experiences such as mimesis, play and inebriation. In this sense it is correct to say that Benjamin expresses a highly ambivalent vision of myth¹⁷ that allows him, contrary to the rationality that is a feature of western civilisation, to come into contact with a free and polyvalent sensuality, with fantasy and play, and thus to denounce modern rationality itself as destiny, coercion with forced repetition and fetishism.

What characterises the practice of *flânerie* is its ability to cause a breakdown of the rational, "intellectualistic" (Simmel) and conscious experience of the metropolis. In *A Berlin Childhood around 1900* Benjamin speaks of the fundamental character of *flânerie* in the following terms: the phenomenon of intentionally "losing oneself" in the urban space, which Benjamin associates with the archetypal figure of the *labyrinth*:

Not to find one's way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal. [...]. But to lose oneself in a city – as one loses oneself in a forest – that calls for quite a different schooling. Then, signboards and street names, passers-by, roofs, kiosks, or bars must speak to the straying wanderer like a cracking twig under his feet and the alleyways of the city must confidently strike the hours, as the mountains signal the

¹⁵ For example, in a note Benjamin underlines: "Three aspects of *flâneurie*; Balzac, Poe, Engels; the illusionistic, the psychological, the economic aspect" (*GS V*, p. 983).

¹⁶ Menninghaus 1986, p. 109.

¹⁷ Lidner 1986, p. 39.

ravines. I learned this art rather late; it fulfilled a dream that had shown its first traces in the labyrinths on the blotting pages of my school exercise books¹⁸.

Childhood – like one of the main peculiarities of *flâneurie* as a form of *Trauerspiel* - holds a close affinity with play as regards the position to be taken towards the creation of fictitious and invented situations. This ludic attitude towards urban space stands in opposition to its merely geometric, instrumental representation, in which it is the abstract equivalence of urban spaces that prevails. In other words, fictitious and invented situations move in an inverse direction as compared to the motion impressed on existence through the administered and abstract rhythms imposed on the city by the circulation of money and capital. In the fragments of the *Arcades Project* – echoing the surrealists – it is *inebriation* that describes an unregulated and unconventional experience of the urban space.

Whoever wanders at length along the streets without any particular destination in mind is seized by a heady sense of inebriation. At every step his gait acquires increasing strength; the seductiveness of the shops, the bistros, or the smiling ladies wanes and fades while the magnetism of the next street corner, of a distant pile of leaves, or of the name of a street becomes ever more irresistible. Then the ravages of hunger overwhelm him. He refuses to have anything to do with the thousands of ways of assuaging it. Like an ascetic animal he strays through unknown districts until, exhausted, he collapses in his bedroom, whose welcome is frosty and aloof.¹⁹

Through inebriation, the *flâneur* experiences the city “as himself”: it becomes transformed into a living room, an amusement park, or a jungle full of perils and enticements:

Isn't he accustomed, by his constant wanderings, to interpreting the image of the city differently at every turn? Doesn't he transform the arcade into a casino, a gaming den, where he stakes red, blue and yellow tokens on women's feelings, on a face that surfaces – will the face return his glance? – or on a mute mouth – will it speak?²⁰

The very rhythm of the *flâneur*'s stroll (in the *Arcades* it is said they used to take a tortoise for a walk on a leash²¹) and the manner of his “roaming” stand by definition in opposition to any instrumental utilization of the urban space. The *flâneur* uses the metropolis “as a game”. For him, the road magically turns into a furnished *interior*, the crowd is a gold-mine of faces to be discovered, the Boulevard a reservoir of electricity where one can uncover the latest novelties concerning the great department stores.

¹⁸ Benjamin 2003, p. 360.

¹⁹ Benjamin 2000, p. 466.

²⁰ Ivi, pp. 969-970.

²¹ Ivi, p. 968.

Landscape, that's what the city becomes for the flâneur. Or, more precisely, for him the city very clearly splits up into its dialectical poles: it opens up to his view like a landscape and encloses him like a room²².

What the oneiric experience shares with the ludic dimension is the creation of an imaginary, virtual situation, within which opposites can coexist (contrary to the situation observed in ordinary logic that is dominated by the principle of non-contradiction); in such a situation, the principle of pleasure is not constrained to submit to the imperatives of the principle of reality. For Benjamin, dreams become an autonomous source of experience and knowledge, a hidden key to the mysteries and secrets of conscious life. Without a doubt, dreams become the repository of utopian visions of mankind: their realisation is forbidden in conscious life and they act as a bolt-hole for the desires and aspirations that mankind is denied during material life. In this regard, Adorno pointed out that for Benjamin, "dreams become a medium of unregulated experience, a source of knowledge opposed to the trite superficiality of thought"²³. In dreams, as Adorno has aptly stated, "the absurd is presented as if it were self-evident with the aim of divesting self-evidence of its power"²⁴. Consequently, it becomes the starting point for the construction of a *new principle of reality* (a point that would subsequently be greatly exploited by Herbert Marcuse), which seems to hint at transposition of the dream images into reality²⁵.

(2) The figure of the collector is endowed with analogous significance²⁶. Only apparently extraneous to the urban space, he seeks refuge in the space of that which is private (the bourgeois *intérieur*) where he is engaged in the (desperate) attempt to reproduce the external world on a small scale. What he actually hopes to achieve by this undertaking is to escape from the chaos that characterises the external space of the metropolis, in particular the chaos the metropolis impose above all on objects, forced as they are to become commodities on the market. The collector's aim, according to Benjamin, is to engage in the desperate task of restoring to objects their use value, their individual and irreducible character. Here too we are dealing with a "sad", virtually infinite activity ("as far as the collector is concerned, his collection is never altogether complete; and even if he only lacked a single piece, everything he has gathered would still be but a fragment"²⁷). And yet, as Benjamin states, "the collector transfers himself, ideally, not merely into a world that is remote in space and time, but also into a better world where, admittedly, men are as poorly

²² Ivi, p. 967.

²³ Adorno 1990, p. 240.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Cf. Wolin 1986, pp. 207-208.

²⁶ On the relation between the *flâneur* and the collector, Benjamin very effectively observed "Optical *flâneur*, tactile collector" (*GS V*, p. 217), highlighting the similarity between the two forms of play.

²⁷ Ivi, p. 222.

equipped with the necessary as they are in the everyday world, but where things are free from the slavery of being useful”²⁸. Thus the collector, with his activity, represents the bereavement of a controllable, ordered and well classifiable world, which tends to disappear in the chaos of urban space.

(3) The last significant figure of the modern metropolitan *Trauerspiel*, “sketched with grandiose strokes” (Adorno) both in the fragments of the *Arcades Project* and in the essays devoted to Baudelaire, is that of the gambler. This figure likewise reflects certain historical and social traits of the era of Paris in the Second Empire²⁹. Benjamin’s most complete portrait of the gambler is offered in the essay *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*, commenting on the poem *Le Jeu*. Here Benjamin observes that “time is the stuff of which the phantasmagorias of play are made”³⁰.

Benjamin’s socio-psychology of gambling is characterised by a series of fundamental elements. One element is clearly that of a rebellion by the upper classes against metropolitan *ennui* (against “homogeneous and empty” time, as Benjamin calls it, which is the time marked by the hands on the clock: the life of the metropolis is crucially based on the reliability and exactness of this time, as insightfully pointed out by Simmel 1995). What is characteristic in this paradigm is not so much the search for money and wealth by means of fortune, bypassing the mechanism of wage labour (which is, nevertheless, an elementary and important element): indeed, the gambler’s aim is by no means that of material accumulation of wealth. For if the gambler were focused exclusively on an increase in wealth, gambling would not exhibit the traits of subverting the routine of everyday metropolitan life that Benjamin ascribes to it.

One such trait is certainly that of challenging destiny, through the ritual of the number and the randomness that is one of its intrinsic characteristics. “In the brothel and the gaming den there is the same sinful delight: capturing destiny in pleasure”³¹: that is to say, placing history - understood as Christian philosophy of history, providence, in which man finds himself included independently of his own will - at the service of pleasure. The activity of gambling does not derive simply from the nihilism of consumerism and the generalisation of the exchange value that leads to the end of any absolute value (the Nietzschean “death of God”) and also results in feeling that one is authorised to engage in libertinism. Rather, according to Benjamin, it involves a divinisation of pleasure, which

²⁸ Ivi, p. 12.

²⁹ Benjamin suggests this form of analogy between the *flâneur* and the gambler: “phantasmagoria of space (the *flâneur*), phantasmagoria of time (the gambler)” (ivi, p. 985).

³⁰ *GS* I, pp. 115-116.

³¹ *GS* V, p. 550.

acts as the fundamental element of the narcissistic personality³². The gambler – who foreshadows analyses on the contemporary “culture of narcissism” – succeeds in imagining, at least for an instant, that God himself has prepared such a fortune for him that “money and the good, relieved of any earthly gravity, come to him from destiny as if in a perfectly reciprocated embrace³³.”

Here one can also clearly perceive the intrinsically anti-utilitarian and anti-economicistic character of gambling: what counts is not money in itself, but the fact that no effort has been made to obtain it, and therefore the harsh law of wage labour and profit has exerted no role at all. Benjamin thus sees gambling as an implicit rebellion against the unalterable character of the world of mass industrial production and of the mechanism of wealth distribution. Another fundamental element is self-destructiveness, according to which what has so far been accumulated must be destroyed. It is known from the outset that gambling involves a loss, defeat, ruin (in this sense it should be compared to the activities of *squandering* analysed by Georges Bataille), yet despite this, the gambler accepts the risk because it offers an antidote, an escape route from a principle of reality that is surpassed by the principle of pleasure. In this sense the figure of the gambler sketched by Benjamin constitutes a paradigm that goes beyond the actual specific activity of gambling.

The loss, or “bereavement” that gambling, as it were, acts out on the stage is the fullness and the magic of the temporality of childhood play. It repropose – albeit in an obsessive and neurotic manner – the peculiar mechanism of novelty and repetition which – as we have seen – characterises children’s play activity: the “one more time” (*noch einmal*) addressed to every experience of profound joy. For like children’s play, “gambling offers the only occasion on which there is no need to give up the principle of pleasure and the omnipotence of thoughts and desires, since in gambling the principle of reality offers no advantage at all with respect to the principle of pleasure”³⁴. Thus both are bearers of a profound tension directed towards the search for happiness: a search that takes place by means of repetition, of the “one more time” addressed to every experience of profound joy.

Through obsessive and mechanical repetition of making his bets, the gambler seeks a chink through which the unique experience of childhood joy can appear to him *once more*. This makes him a modern hero, who even wins the respect of Baudelaire in the *Fleurs du Mal*. He stoically swims against the tide in the “homogeneous and empty” ocean of the exchange value, desperately searching for a *unique* experience, a winning *coup*. His psychological mechanism embodies a pale reflection of the original desire for repetition that a child expresses in play: he is the swordsman

³² Benjamin mentions citations of the *Psychologie des Hasardspielers* by the psychoanalyst and Bergler, where one finds the statement that “the gambler essentially pursues narcissistic and aggressive desires of omnipotence”, *ivi*, p. 571.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ As claimed by the psychoanalyst and Bergler, cited by Benjamin, *ivi*, p. 571.

who will not resign himself to unhappiness and “prefers, all things considered, pain to death and hell to nothingness”³⁵ (*Le Jeu*). The gambler’s *Trauerspiel* thus consists in creating a situation in which there may still exist fragments of the sovereign and omnipotent temporality of the blissful condition of childhood narcissism.

4. *The problem of method in Benjamin and Adorno*

The “figurative” character of Benjamin’s appraisal of the historical and social world of the metropolis, his recourse to metaphors rather than concepts and definitions is far from being an extrinsic quality of his thought: rather, it is rooted in the most important part of his epistemological reflection. Here too, in the theory of knowledge, it is not inappropriate to refer once again to the *Trauerspiel* as a cipher allowing insight into Benjamin’s thought, in the two fundamental meanings of the German term *Spiel*, i.e. “play” and “performance” or representation³⁶. The character of “play” attributable to Benjamin’s figurative epistemology is manifested through frequent recourse to analogy, literary montage, citation, as well as the ubiquitous presence of metaphor. These styles of thought and writing can be considered as modes of “playing” with reality, that is, of setting up a relation with reality that is not purely detached and objective but instead expresses a trust and familiarity with the variety and uniqueness of the phenomena that compose it. Earlier, in delving further into the Benjaminic conception of play, we saw that the “mimetic faculty” is a fundamental characteristic of the ludic experience³⁷. The analogical procedure itself is founded on a playful mode of proceeding, that of “as if”, which makes it possible, by creating a fictitious situation, to establish a parallelism between realities considered to be heterogeneous. At the same time, this mimetic attitude towards reality reveals an explicit concern with the classical philosophical problem of “representation”, namely the fact that the *way* in which the truth is told is not indifferent as regards the content of the truth itself.

In his metropolitan writings in general and in the *Arcades Project* in particular, Benjamin offers a fascinating method for reading the city. What we have is a “physiognomics” of the urban text,

³⁵ According to the wording of the poem *Le Jeu* by Baudelaire, cited by Benjamin, *GS I*, p. 116.

³⁶ As was perceptively argued by Georgy Lukács in his essay “*On the Current Meaning of Critical Realism*”, the object and method of Benjamin’s book on Baroque drama centred on allegory and the *Trauerspiel*. This implies that Benjamin himself, in his methodology of analysis, intended to put into practice the allegorist’s technique, which constituted the object of his research on the philosophy of literature (on this, see the Introduction by Renato Solmi to Benjamin *Angelus Novus*, Turin 1962, p. XIV).

³⁷ With regard to the faculty of mimesis, Benjamin composed several fragments that were fundamental for the elaboration of his philosophy of language: cf. *GS II*, pp. 438-449 and pp. 522-524 (the pieces entitled *Doctrine of similarity* and *On the Mimetic Faculty*).

whose principal protagonist is to be found in the *flâneur*³⁸. Just as the *flâneur*'s stroll is a meandering without any precise destination, abandoning oneself to the labyrinth of the city, following its lures and hidden attractions, so the same can be said of the construction of Benjamin's urban texts. The experience of the metropolis is not represented in a coherent and systematic manner, but rather by momentary snapshots, fleeting spontaneous images of everyday life. It is important to take note that Benjamin's "physiognomics" establishes a "mimetic" relation with urban reality. Text and metropolis blend into each other, until they become one single, exchangeable reality. As has rightly been pointed out³⁹, Benjamin's texts on the city are *city-as-text* and, simultaneously, *text-as-city*.

When one is dealing with the case of the *text-as-city*, it is the text itself that taken on an urban form. For Benjamin, the city cannot be conveyed in writing or narrated in the traditional form, precisely because it implies the crisis of representation and narration. As Benjamin remarked in his essay on Baudelaire, the experience of the metropolis is transformed from *Erfahrung* to *Erlebnis*, in other words from a transmittable and accumulatable experience to an individual, fragmentary experience that cannot be assimilated by conscience. Benjamin's texts on the city (from the essays on Naples and Moscow to his book on Berlin, to the collection of aphorisms *One-Way Street*, and also the project of the *Arcades*) represent an original attempt to "write" the city, incorporating it into the text, seeking to communicate in writing the fragmentary and discontinuous character of the metropolitan experience.

At the same time, however, the city is transformed into a text that has to be read and deciphered (*city-as-text*): murals, roads, casual and random encounters turn into episodes capable of unveiling concealed meanings of the overall social reality. Just like the *flâneur* who "wanders around aimlessly" along the city roads, meandering through his own district and among its most hidden monuments, Benjamin himself aimed, in the *Arcades Project*, to highlight "the expressive character (*Audruckscharakter*) of the earliest products and the first shapes of industrial architecture, of the first machines, but also of the first great department stores, advertising hoardings, etc." ⁴⁰. "Expression" (*Ausdruck*) is a category of mimetic theory in Benjamin's language. It refers to the mimetic faculty of perceiving and reproducing the similarities of surrounding nature. Thus in Benjamin's view, the origin of language does not spring from a casual relation between word and

³⁸ In fact, Rolf Tiedemann, a pupil of Adorno and editor of Walter Benjamin's works, has asserted that "the prolegomena to a materialistic physiognomics that can be desumed from the *Arcades Project* are among the most significant of Benjamin's concepts" (introduction to Benjamin *GS V*, p. XXVII). It would also be of interest to assess the importance of the other figures of players considered previously (the collector and the gambler) for Benjamin's figurative epistemology. For reasons of space, attention will be restricted here to the *flâneur* as an urban physiognomist.

³⁹ Gilloch 1999, p. 182.

⁴⁰ *GS V*, p. 514.

thing. Words are "names" and the human individual who denominates things may or may not grasp their essence: the denomination is a sort of translation of that which has no name into the name, the translation of the imperfect language of nature into the language of man. The culture of mankind, like language more generally, therefore originates from this immediate, "mimetic" relationship with nature, of which it tends to reproduce the elementary forms: the "expression" is systematically linked to the stimulating qualities of the environment. Benjamin believed that the primary phase of this unspoilt relationship with nature is myth (of which play represents one of the most profane manifestations), which consists in this original naming of natural phenomena carried out in order to achieve protection against the very fact of their being unknown. Myth thus exemplifies an as yet uninterrupted relation between the human organism and surrounding nature. It represents a fundamental semantic heritage present in the language of man, containing a wealth of meanings with the aid of which men interpret the world in the light of their needs. Thus meaning is not something that men add to their languages from the exterior (like "flying", to use Benjamin's words), but is rather something latent in the very speech acts they perform, something that must be reawakened by "translating" the mute language of nature into the language of man, while ensuring that it does not lose its original semantic potential of a relationship with nature⁴¹.

The fascinating – although highly complex – “social physiognomics” delineated by Benjamin thus proposed to read and interpret the city by starting out from its physical and material characters (the architectural shapes, the spaces, the advertising hoardings etc.) considered as a “mythic text” in which its dreams and latent desires become intelligible. In a totally eclectic manner, Benjamin considered this method that he had devised as standing in a relation with historical materialism:

Marx depicts the causal connection between the economy and culture. Here what we are dealing with is an expressive connection. It is not a question of depicting the economic origin of culture, but the expression of the economy in its culture⁴².

Here Benjamin – proceeding analogically, as was his custom – was trying to transpose his mimetic theory of culture into the field of the Marxian critique of ideology, with somewhat original results, especially when this approach focused no longer on urban reality but on the “materialistic” interpretation of Baudelaire’s poetic and ideological conception. The first complete study that Benjamin intended to extract from the project on the *Arcades* of Paris and publish as an independent piece centred precisely on the figure of the French poet. It was a study that required Benjamin to put his methodological reflections into practice and to utilise at least part of the immense quantity of historiographic materials he had been amassing for over a decade. The product of this effort was a

⁴¹ On these aspects of Benjamin’s thought, cf., from a critical point of view, see Habermas 1972.

⁴² *GS* V, pp. 513-514.

long essay, almost an independent book, entitled *The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire*. However, this study was destined never to be published in the journal of the Institute for Social Research⁴³ that had commissioned it, and was subjected to a barrage of particularly harsh criticism by Adorno. Nevertheless, this allows interesting insight into the methodological differences between the two approaches to the theory of culture, with the Adornian strand of thought constituting an undeniably more traditional development of Marx's method of the "critique of ideology".

On reading the text of *The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire* one is imbued with a sensation akin to what might derive from a "description of confusion"⁴⁴: a bulky mass of facts concerning social, political, literary, psychological, even statistical history, all assembled in a rather appealing manner but shunning any form of explicit theoretical links. Adorno's reaction, upon receiving this text, was one of utter dismay, as he expressed to Benjamin in a letter that was to become famous, and his profound disappointment was intensified by the great hopes the entire *Institut für Sozialforschung* had cherished for this manuscript, which constituted the first attempt to publish a work – the *Arcades* of Paris – which had been in progress for over ten years⁴⁵. Adorno's reservations with regard to Benjamin's essay were expressed in a lengthy letter written in November 1938, and can be summarised as a charge of naive sociology, arguing that Benjamin tended to derive facts belonging to the cultural "superstructure" directly from phenomena of an economic nature:

Allow me to express my thought in the simplest and most Hegelian manner possible. Unless I am very much mistaken, your dialectic lacks one thing: mediation. Throughout your text there is a tendency to relate the pragmatic contents of Baudelaire's work directly to adjacent features in the social history of his time, preferably economic features. [...]⁴⁶.

Adorno then provides further details, pointing the finger more directly at Georg Simmel⁴⁷, whom Benjamin had cited explicitly. Adorno particularly objected to the *Arcades* in which "in-

⁴³ Except in the collection entitled *Charles Baudelaire. A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, Frankfurt a. M. 1969, published many years after Benjamin's death.

⁴⁴ "The description of confusion is something different from a confused description" (*GS I*, p. 134). The expression is by Benjamin himself, taken from the fragments of *Central Park*, testifying to his conscious use of his method.

⁴⁵ Adorno was deeply in agreement with the project of a materialistically oriented "refunctionalisation" of the philosophical method inaugurated in the *Epistemo-Critical Prologue* of the book on Baroque, which Benjamin had announced to him during a meeting defined as "memorable", held in Königstein in Switzerland in 1929 (cf. the introduction by Rolf Tiedeman 1983).

⁴⁶ Benjamin 1966, p. 363.

⁴⁷ "In very close connection with these materialistic digressions, faced with which one can never shake off the fear instilled in one's mind by the sight of a swimmer with terrible gooseflesh plunging into freezing water, there is the appeal to concrete modes of behaviour such as is the case, here, with the *flâneur*, or subsequently the passage on the

depth theoretical arguments” were replaced by “metaphor”, based on simple analogical associations among phenomena: in other words, the most harshly criticised elements were precisely those that Benjamin shared with Simmel’s style of thought and research and which he had promptly espoused. In fact, the phrase Adorno frowned upon was indeed a citation from Simmel’s *The Sociology of the Senses*⁴⁸ (one of the most brilliant *excursus* of the whole of the *Sociology*), where Simmel dwells on the issue of seeing and hearing in the city. What is of significance here is not so much Simmel’s brilliant and innovative flashes of intuition, as rather the fact that Adorno – unlike Benjamin – did not appreciate what can be considered as the innovative aspect of Simmelian *sociological aesthetics*, which resided in laying the groundwork for a general theory on society by starting out from elementary aspects of everyday life, often elements of an aesthetic and sensory nature⁴⁹. Adorno expressed in the following terms his deep-seated concern with regard to this mode of proceeding:

[...] I see it as methodologically unfortunate to give conspicuous individual features from the realm of the superstructure a “materialistic” turn by relating them immediately and perhaps even causally to corresponding features of the infrastructure. The materialistic determination of cultural traits is only possible if mediated by the *total process*⁵⁰.

The “accusation” of vulgar Marxism could hardly have been formulated more explicitly. In Adorno’s vision the interpretation of cultural phenomena (and thus also the attempt at a “materialistic” formulation of the metropolitan lyricism of a poet) can be undertaken only through the mediation of the global historical-social process. Any “immediate inference” as regards a link between economic and spiritual phenomena endows phenomena with precisely the type of spontaneity, concreteness and compactness they have lost in the capitalist context⁵¹. Adorno also

relation between seeing and hearing in the city, which, not quite by chance, resorts to a citation of Simmel” (ivi, p. 364). What Adorno criticises as deriving from Simmel is precisely “the appeal to concrete modes of behaviour” for global theoretical explanations, which in his view characterise Simmel.

⁴⁸ It should be noted that Benjamin was to maintain this citation even in the subsequent version of the essay on Baudelaire (*On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*, in Benjamin 1969).

⁴⁹ In this regard, Dal Lago has aptly remarked: “ It is in this philosophical space [of the description, at once metaphorical and empirical, of the modern experience, ed. note] that Benjamin met Simmel. Just as is the case in the *Philosophy of Money*, in Benjamin the shift from one sphere of experience to another occurs by metaphorical leaps, which shed a constantly new light on reality. And it is for this reason that while Adorno’s sociological work becomes trite if it is shorn of its dialectical pathos, the works by Simmel and Benjamin are still full of life” (Dal Lago 1994, p. 150).

⁵⁰ Benjamin 1966, p. 364, our italics.

⁵¹ Adorno was to remain faithful to this opinion until the time of the celebrated dispute on Dialectics and Positivism in Sociology, held in the 1960s in Germany. Here, defending his dialectical vision of society vis-à-vis positivism - which demands greater “micrological” attention to individual concrete elements – Adorno asserts: “the old controversy with Benjamin on the dialectical interpretation of social phenomena centred around the same problem: Benjamin’s social physiognomics was criticised as too immediate, lacking reflection on the mediation of society in general” (Adorno *et alii* 1969, p. 52).

furnishes a synthesis of his criticisms with a definition of Benjamin's method, which, notwithstanding its stinging criticism, is undoubtedly insightful:

Things can also be expressed as follows: the theological motif of calling things by their name tends to spill over into wide-eyed presentation of mere facts. If one were to describe this state of affairs in drastic terms, one could say that labour is positioned on the crossroads between magic and positivism. This spot is bewitched. Only theory could break the spell...⁵².

What Adorno neglected to consider is that Benjamin was not so much focusing on Hegelian dialectics as, rather, on the idea of re-actualising his mimetic theory of language in the light of the new avant-garde cinema⁵³. Indeed, Benjamin's intention was to take "materialism" so seriously as to endeavour to lead phenomena to language. Corsets, old tattered photos of the Venus of Milo, prostheses and paper holders: these and other debris of industrial culture that appeared in the "dim, almost abyssal light" of the *Arcades* as "a universe of mysterious affinities"⁵⁴ were philosophical ideas in their own right, constructed like constellations of concrete empirical phenomena, material and historical. The method – or better, the "style" – of the figurative sociology Benjamin sought to achieve in the *Paris Arcades* and in the first essay on Baudelaire (which represented a "model in miniature" of the entire work) was therefore substantially different from the "dialectic mediation" that forged Adorno's line of reasoning. Only by referring to the technique of cinematographic montage could Benjamin's approach be put into effect⁵⁵. In this perspective, Benjamin's work was to be read as a *city-as-text*, which seeks to transfer into words the fragmentary and discontinuous character of the metropolitan experience, composed of *chocs*, collision, sudden changes of direction.

Curiously, one writer who did comprehend the "concrete" aspect of Benjamin's critical style, with its close links to experience, was a thinker who had very little connection with this tradition of thought: H. Arendt⁵⁶. In her portrait of Walter Benjamin, certainly one of the most penetrating

⁵² Benjamin 1966, p. 365.

⁵³ In his *profile* of Benjamin, Adorno had observed: "fragmentary philosophy remained but a fragment, perhaps the victim of a method, concerning which one can by no means be certain that it will allow itself to be carried out in the framework of thought" (Adorno 1990, p. 245).

⁵⁴ As emerges from the fragments of the first attempts at drafting the *Arcades* Project, *GS V*, p. 959.

⁵⁵ On the link between cinema and metropolitan reality, Benjamin had pointed out: "cinema responds to certain profound modifications of the perceptual complex – modifications which, in the framework of private existence, form part of the experience of every passer-by immersed in city traffic, and in the historical framework, part of the experience of every citizen" (*GS I*, pp. 55-56). Furthermore, on the role of cinema, including an epistemological role, Benjamin stated: "cinema: explicitation (result?) of all forms of visualisation, of the times and the rhythms foreshadowed by modern machines, in such a manner that only in cinema do all the problems of contemporary art achieve their definitive formulation" (*GS V*, p. 440).

⁵⁶ This is the depiction by Hannah Arendt, *The Pearl Fisher. Walter Benjamin 1892-1940*, Milan 1993. this essay forms part of a series devoted to some significant intellectual figures of the period between the two world wars, entitled

appraisals of this author, she dwells with particularly sharp insight on the characteristics of his “materialism”. Arendt notes that when Benjamin eagerly seeks to uncover concrete facts, events and happenings whose meaning was designed to stand out in an exemplary and evident manner, he by no means inclines towards binding or generically valid statements, but instead shapes his wording in such a manner that statements of this kind are replaced by metaphoric observations. The well-known Marxian “architectural metaphor” of structure/superstructure does not fall within a relational framework that can in some sense be traced back to the “dialectic mediation” to which Adorno was referring; rather, in Arendt’s view it acquires a *metaphoric* character, for metaphor sets up a connection that is perceived by the senses in its immediacy and does not require an interpretation, so that its utilisation tends to fix *correspondences* between objects that may be physically quite remote from one another. This concept⁵⁷, highly familiar to Benjamin, can be recognised in a famous poem by Baudelaire (in *Les fleurs du Mal*), where it designates precisely the system of reciprocal analogies that pervade the universe, “the intimate and secret relations of things”. The metropolis was pervaded with just such a web of secret analogies that reveal themselves only to the eye of the *flâneur*. As noted earlier, the eye of the *flâneur* coincides with that of the urban photographer: “The *flâneur* is not attracted by the official aspect of the city but by its sordid dark street-corners, its neglected population: an unofficial aspect that lies behind the façade of the bourgeois life-style and is ‘captured’ by the photographer in the same way that a policeman captures a criminal”⁵⁸.

Benjamin’s thought was thus fairly remote from dialectical materialism, which claims to chart a route from the concrete fact of experience to the abstract element of thought by means of the complex mediation of thought processes. On the contrary, it was precisely the much scorned concrete aspects of life that interested Benjamin. The doctrine of the superstructure, Arendt continues, was in his interpretation of the concept something describable as the last “doctrine of metaphorical thought” and, eschewing all mediation, it brought the structure into direct relation

Men in Dark Times. It also includes portraits of Kafka and other thinkers. Arendt was a friend and correspondent of Benjamin, and had in-depth knowledge of his work. Among the Benjamin commentators, she was the first to emphasise the importance (also from the point of view of the theory of knowledge) of the influence of Goethe on Benjamin (as acknowledged by Rolf Tiedeman 2002, pp.78-85).

⁵⁷ The theory of correspondences was formulated systematically for the first time in the mystical doctrine of Swedenborg, a scientist and mystic of Swedish origin who - ironically criticised by Kant - postulated the existence of a biunique correspondence between heaven and earth and between spiritual and natural things. Baudelaire refers to Swedenborg as the one who had taught him “that everything, form, movement, name, colour, fragrance, in the spiritual as in the natural realm, is significant, reciprocal, converse, corresponding”. But Baudelaire’s concept loses its original mystical connotation, designating instead the system of reciprocal analogies that pervade the universe, “the intimate and secret relations of things” (cf. Löwy 1992, p.19).

⁵⁸ Sontag 1992, p. 49.

with the so-called material structure, which took on a sensorial, perceptive character, like the “totality of the data experienced by the senses”.

If, for example and this would have been perfectly in tune with the spirit of Benjamin’s thought – the abstract concept of *Vernunft* (reason) were to be traced back to an origin deriving from the verb *vernehmen* (to perceive, hear), then one might think that a term belonging to the sphere of the superstructure had had its sensorial structure restored or, on the contrary, that a concept had been transformed into a metaphor...⁵⁹.

In this sense the meeting with what his “dialectical” friends Horkheimer and Adorno called “vulgar Marxism” – that is to say, with Bertolt Brecht, who was certainly not any more dialectical than Benjamin himself, but whose intelligence was amazingly close to reality – could actually be described as beneficial. Therefore it is reductive to assert, as Adorno does, that Benjamin’s materialistic categories fail to coincide in any way with the Marxist categories because he had set up a correlation, in his essay on Baudelaire, linking “certain predominant elements of the superstructure [...] directly, and perhaps *even casually*, with the corresponding elements of the real base structure⁶⁰. There was nothing casual at all in these correlations. Instead, there was a conception of the *logos* that was different from the dialectical approach, but this does not imply that it was merely poetic, i.e. devoid of objective claims. In fact, the *flâneur*’s gaze can be likened to the scrutinising eye of the photographer, or better still, of the cinematographic operator, who chooses the succession of his shots based on a specific montage criterion, the specific aim of which is, precisely, to *say* something about the external world, in a way that is definitely different from the rational *logos* of dialectics. Benjamin’s quest is thus the search for a *different logos*, seeking to give voice even to that which refuses to belong to the world of words. He therefore sets structure and superstructure in relation with each other but – as it were - in a cinematographic manner. The *flâneur*’s gaze is that of the photographer and the cinematographic operator, which succeeds in keeping together, in a paradoxical fashion, *logos* and *poetry*, the poetry-making word and the

⁵⁹ Arendt 1993, p. 24.

⁶⁰ Ivi, p. 19, our italics. However, it should be pointed out that Adorno himself always held the physiognomical approach in high esteem, including its social theory. As pointed out by Müller-Doohm 2000, p. 59, in Adorno’s view unregulated experience is the first condition of the possibility of sociological knowledge. Indeed, Adorno argued that “Only an experience that does not protect itself in advance with theorems that are already available [...] succeeds in perceiving the changes in the physiognomics (*Physiognomie*) of society, and can help as regards the claim of its deficient theory” (Adorno, *ivi*, p. 194). Adorno resumed the dispute with Benjamin many years later, and this clearly demonstrates the importance he ascribed to it within the theoretical debate. Critically, within the context of the celebrated dispute on *Positivism and Dialectics in Sociology*, he states that “Benjamin’s social physiognomics was criticised as too immediate, devoid of reflection on the mediation of society in general” (Adorno 1969, p. 52).

cognizant word. Physiognomics moves in the realm of hidden details, of the “cracks” that open in the façade of social order, of the real situation neglected by the great theoretical constructs⁶¹.

That the uncovering of correspondences between the "structure"⁶² and the "superstructure" - which would undoubtedly have been far more extensive in the *Arcades Project*, had it been completed⁶³ - was no vaguely poetic and romantic flight of fancy but could indeed fulfil a philosophical and explanatory function is made clear by an episode from the later essay on Baudelaire published in 1939, this time with Adorno's unreserved approval⁶⁴. For here not only is the celebrated theory of the “atrophy of experience” (*Verkümmerung der Erfahrung*) expounded in greater detail, but there also appears a sequence of figures that are quite unusual for a literary essay, and which instead call to mind the rapid alternation of cinematographic sequences typical of 1920s Russian films (a classic case is Eisenstein's *October*, where the figures of the Bolsheviks shooting with machine-guns are superimposed on the images of the tumultuous crowd fleeing from the winter palace, all at the same breakneck speed.) In a brief but striking succession of paragraphs in Benjamin's essay, (§ 6, 7, 8, and 9) the fast-paced scenario swings from a description of crowds thronging in the city to segments taken from Marx's *Capital* to the assembly line to intimations of the “art of the eccentric” that the idle soul indulges in while roaming through the *luna park*. What these images, these urban scenes, have in common is the experience of the *choc*, of the impact and collision, which to Benjamin's eyes is the quintessence of the metropolitan experience. But this idea

⁶¹ Literally, physiognomics is the parascientific discipline that aims to identify people's psychological and moral characters from their physical appearance, above all their facial features and expression. At the end of the following century, the Swiss thinker J. K. Lavater sought to transform physiognomics into a rigorous science, with the collaboration, among others, of Goethe. The main criticism that has always been levelled against physiognomics is that it remains in the field of common sense or of pseudoscience. However, important thinkers such as Dilthey, Simmel, Cassirer (cf. Moynahn 1996) have developed a number of new approaches to the problem of physiognomics, in which they see it as a possible key for an understanding of the complexity of many cultural phenomena. In its immediatistic *naïveté* – i.e. in the belief that an immediate access to the truth of a phenomenon can be gained by starting out from the pure sensory data, excluding any form of historical-cultural interpretation – physiognomics offers an original proposal as compared to the tradition of western thought. As has been stated with precision by Rolf Tiedemann, “physiognomics deduces the internal from the external, from the corporeal this-here, it operates inductively by starting out from the sphere of visibility (*Anschaulichkeit*)» (Tiedemann 1983, pp. 27-28).

⁶² For Benjamin, “Structure” was always more than the “productive forces”, as has been rightly underlined by Witte 1986, inasmuch as it extended so far as to embrace the whole of the human and object-related “new nature” produced by *techné*.

⁶³ Benjamin acts constructively, alternating citations from Marx with others from Baudelaire and reproducing the “phantasmagorias” that acted upon the consciousness of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie. In Benjamin's eyes, these included the motifs of the bohemien, the *flâneur*, the dandy, the *feuilletoniste*, the *interieur*, the arcade. As has been pointed out (Schiavoni 1980, p. 276), Benjamin seeks to read the entire social history of the nineteenth century “as if in a physiognomics”: thus he causes the reader to pass – and it is no coincidence that there is a reference to the title of the entire project, denominated, in German, *Passagen*, i.e. ‘Passages’, namely ‘Arcades’ – through the interior spaces of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie that were not yet extinct, enticing the reader by the force with which he shatters the appearance of such spaces.

⁶⁴ Adorno wrote after *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire* (letter of 29 Feb. 1940, in Benjamin 1966, p. 844): this is analogously true for Max [Horkheimer]. I believe it would hardly be an exaggeration to define it as the most notable work you have published since the book on Baroque and the study on Kraus”.

is not presented exclusively through abstract theorisation: it is instead “represented” by incorporating actual aspects of the situation that embody the idea – performing a sort of “citation” of the real situation within the text itself, similarly to the procedure adopted in the study on Baroque, which incorporated parts of the various dramas so that these would “represent” the Platonic idea of the *Trauerspiel*⁶⁵.

Special insight into this manner of writing is the section where Benjamin refers to the gambling motif in Baudelaire. In the *Fleurs du Mal* more than one poem is dedicated to this "process" where, according to Benjamin, "the reflected mechanism that the machine sets in motion in the worker can be studied in the idle person as if in a mirror". Hardly could an association seem more paradoxical and bizarre than that between the sumptuous gambling dens where the bourgeoisie of the Second Empire sought to dispel *ennui* by frittering away the sums gained on stock market investments, and the assembly line factories peopled by unskilled workers. And yet, a correspondence between the "superstructural" idleness of gambling and the harsh material nature of wage labour can indeed be detected (and it does not escape the perceptive gaze of the urban physiognomist):

The wage-earning worker, admittedly, lacks the adventurous element, the *fata morgana* that seduces the gambler. But he by no means lacks futility, emptiness, the fact of not being able to finish, which in fact is inherent in wage labour. Even the type of gesture, determined by the automatic process of the workplace, can be observed in gambling, which does not take place without the rapid motion of whoever makes the bet or takes the card. The swift action prompted by the movement of the machine can be seen as *corresponding* to the *coup* in gambling. The manipulation by the worker at the machine has no connection with the preceding operation for the very reason that it is its exact repetition. Since each operation at the machine is just as screened off from the preceding operation as a *coup* in a game of chance is from the one that preceded it, the drudgery of the labourer is, in its own way, a counterpart to the drudgery of the gambler. The work of both is equally devoid of substance⁶⁶.

What comes to the fore in these phrases is precisely the *immediate* association between structure and superstructure, in such a manner that the “spirit” and its “material manifestation” are mutually illuminating, without the need for any further interpretive or explanatory comment. This occurs in

⁶⁵ The epistemological roots of Benjamin’s “physiognomics” are to be found in the dense and esoteric *Epistemo-Critical Premise* (“Erkenntniskritische Vorrede”) that is the foreword to the study on *German Baroque Drama*. As Benjamin reveals at the beginning of the chapter, what is fundamental for any philosophy that does not wish to be merely “propedeutic to knowledge” is precisely the problem of the “representation” (*Darstellung*) of truth (*GS I*, p. 212). Hence the choice of the philosophical form of the “treatise”, typical of medieval philosophy. From this it follows that the form of the *Trauerspiel* is not a mere concept of a genre but an idea that has to be represented by means of a “configuration” of concepts and empirical materials. What must be underlined here is that Benjamin thereby inaugurated his conception of truth as a “constellation”, which reveals an evident affinity with the technique of the montage of heterogeneous materials, developed above all by the surrealists. This conception also lends itself in a highly congenial manner to a “representation” of metropolitan truth, which is by its very nature fragmentary and discontinuous.

⁶⁶ *GS I*, p. 113.

such a way as to induce a *choc* and sudden critical awareness in the reader, to whom the concept – in this case the reification of the experience which assigns a common fate to the idle bourgeois and the worker within the capitalist metropolis – appears immediately evident. A similar critical parallel is described by Benjamin in a 1927 article *On the Situation of Cinematographic Art in Russia* (which formed part of a series on Moscow he had been commissioned by his friend Martin Buber to write for the journal *Die Kreatur*). Here the film director Vertov, in the film *Sixth Continent*, aimed to illustrate to the Russian masses the transformation achieved by the new social order as compared to bourgeois Europe:

At split-second speed one is faced with alternating images that represent workplaces (pistons driven up and down, farm labourers harvesting, haulage operations) and images of places of pleasure in the capital (bars, ballrooms, clubs). We have drawn on society films of the last few years, taking a few small elements (often only minute details: a tenderly stroking hand, dancing feet, a hair-do, a bejeweled neckline), which have been assembled by montage in such a way as to intersperse them continuously with images of proletarians working for their bosses⁶⁷.

It thus seems clear that the *montage* performed by Benjamin as well as by the surrealists derived from cinema. This new art, as Benjamin points out in the essay on *The Work of Art*, written shortly before the article on Baudelaire, is the metropolitan art *par excellence*. The fragmentation of the metropolitan experience communicated by this art allows no scope for the “dialectical mediation” demanded by Adorno. Photography, and above all cinema, provide the most appropriate *logos* for the representation of the metropolis as the new social form of modernity.

Concluding remarks

Through an analysis of the writings by Benjamin dedicated to the metropolis it becomes possible to chart the general outline of a special form of “figurative sociology” of everyday life, grounded fundamentally on the centrality of play as a constitutive element of social living and on an “aesthetic semantics” of city life. According to Benjamin, modern everyday life is essentially a “sad game” (*Trauerspiel*), which, having refused to relinquish the impossible demand for restoration of integral happiness (whether this truly existed or is totally imaginary), directs the unrequited energy of its desire towards that which at present does not exist: the hope of an emancipated and non instrumental dimension of everyday life.

⁶⁷ *GS* III, pp. 157-158.

This particular style of analysis undertaken by Benjamin presents some affinity with the “sociological aesthetics” theorised earlier by Simmel⁶⁸, and it forms a thread, almost a karstic current in twentieth-century social thought, one that is normally neglected inasmuch as it cannot easily be codified or ascribed to a consolidated tradition of thought (positivism, neokantism, dialectics, phenomenology)⁶⁹. This sociological genre is based on an “aesthetic paradigm” which explores the limits of an exclusively rationalistic knowledge of society and history, and proposes a form of concrete, anti-systematic knowledge, composed of images, figures, constellations and fragments, capable of restituting the *individuality* of the historical-social phenomenon.

Among the critical appraisals of Benjamin’s work, some have sought to point out the internal contradictions or ineffectiveness of Benjamin’s “social physiognomics”, regarding it as too “immediate” and far removed from a form of reflective criticism on society in general (Adorno, and subsequently Habermas). Although these criticisms are not completely unfounded, in our view this does not cast doubt on the originality and interest of Benjamin’s figurative method as an approach to social reality. His method, despite its lack of conceptualisation, offers a splendid and inimitable example of how social reality can be interpreted and described using the very materials of experience itself.

⁶⁸ In the important and programmatic essay by the same name dating from 1896, recently republished in De Simone 2004, pp. 175-191. Indeed one can argue that the greatest affinity between Simmel and Benjamin consists precisely in their common contribution to the foundation of an “aesthetic paradigm” of historical-social knowledge, notwithstanding their quite sharply contrasting judgments and diagnoses on modernity in general (a relativistic judgment, devoid of utopian illusions, in the case of Simmel, as opposed to Benjamin’s apocalyptic and messianic vision) or on the different solutions to be adopted in the field of the theory of knowledge in order to bypass the “aridity” of a rigorously neokantian theory of experience: the “vitalism” of the late Simmel and the mimetic theory of language in Benjamin.

⁶⁹ In an interesting comment on the theme, Maffesoli (1993) has pointed out that philosophies generally considered to be “irrationalist” or aesthetically inspired (like vitalism and naturalism) constitute a preferred foundation for the sociology of everyday life.

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