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THE CITY, THE PLAYER

WALTER BENJAMIN AND THE ORIGIN OF FIGURATIVE SOCIOLOGY

THE COLLECTIVE EXPERIENCE OF PLAY

If we attempt to unify the theoretical efforts that appreciate a specific social activity in play, we can sketch the perspective of an entire anthropology of play into cohesive parts deriving from the knowledge of collective experience. This preoccupation is, in fact, two-fold. On the one hand is the comprehensive description of the relationship between life styles and their stylizations in everyday practices and customs as well as in cultural works, and on the other are social sensitivities and representations that are relatively shared by individuals grouped in human communities. This very general framework encourages situating the presence of play as one of the concrete manifestations of an emotional core, converting primitively negative impulses into attractive forces which, because of this, becomes the seat of all human interaction and agitation, the

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energetic heart of social power.¹

No doubt this invisible center, which animates each socially constituted group, designates the pivot around which gravitate the fascination and the repulsion that people have for that which brings them together historically: the overcoming of their own foreignness made possible through multiple and complex mechanisms of socialization. In this it undeniably integrates negativity at work, death and anguish, delimitation of the sacred through which spring passions, desire and the transgression of norms and habits that feed the opening essential to life. Nevertheless, it is not possible to affirm anything essential or reasonable with regard to the nature of this obscure or subterranean center, but we can apply ourselves to inventorying its diverse and permanent manifestations classically identified as anomic or peripheral, among which: crime, poetic exaltation, religious or political fanaticism, sectarian rituals, play, etc.

This is why by defining “the disparate forms of the sacred as something ambiguously heterogeneous, for which we are responsible”,² Michel Leiris supplies us with a clue making it possible to draw a cartography of contemporaneity, in which the emergence of the sacred, individual subjective intimations and extreme experiences are no longer derived solely from the absolute order of traditions but actualize our need for loss and for spending within the very societies of economic accumulation. Imagination and the confrontation of the present time is nothing other than this great game, endlessly exhausted and ever renewed, with a duration that preserves and establishes the limits of our relation to other people and things and the already fleeting moment with its experienced intensity. How can play and its inductive nature be situated within the search for a temporality that snatches the human being from his irreversible flow toward death? For is it not true that the modern spatialization of the sacred, explored by the stroller or the most elaborate urban deviations, hardly introduces play into the city inasmuch as the city is also the metaphor for the

¹ This thesis is the origin of the first intellectual developments of the College of Sociology (1937-1939), in particular Georges Bataille, “Attraction et répulsion” (January 22, 1938 and February 5, 1938). In *Le Collège de sociologie*, Denis Hollier, Paris, Gallimard, coll. “Idées”, Nr. 413, 1979, p. 188-231.

² Cf. Jean Wahl, “Au Collège de sociologie”, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

social link faced with its ineffable extremity? For, “all games contain the idea of death” (Jim Morrison).

Considering play in the manner of a revealer of societal trends, paradoxically evident and hidden, here we should aim for a sociology derived from play, along the lines of Roger Caillois,³ rather than for a sociology of play as such. The two questions raised previously do not construe play as an object of knowledge but designate it as a particular element in the recognition of sociality, i.e. as a temporal sequence of an approach to space in which are externalized feeling and will—to inscribe the subject into the socially tragic, there where the poignancy of its personal destiny, lucidly in its consciousness, takes on the appearance of a collective game.

In this way play reminds us of the violent significances of our habitation of space and time because in every play activity the boundaries of these dimensions of living experience lose all wantonness. The player’s absorption in his passion can only be understood through the eyes of the reasoned vertigo by which he subjects himself to certain rules, a vertigo whose reason can only be measured by the mysterious yardstick of the impossible race that he undertakes with the time of expenditure and the space of the movement of his wins. In this manner the player accentuates the ordinary relation that we maintain more flexibly with space-time: the folly of the player results from this acceleration of his own history and the consciousness that he may have of it. In his remarkable work, *Homo Ludens*, J. Huizinga stresses this dimension of the phenomenon of play by defining it: “Play is a voluntary action or activity, accomplished within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to freely accepted but fully imperious rules, endowed with an end in itself, accompanied by feelings of tension and of joy and by an awareness of being otherwise than in everyday existence.”⁴

To envisage sociologically this abrupt separation from everyday existence of which the player is the modern hero, we are brought to envisage the fact that there exist affectual forms of experience

³ Roger Caillois, *Les Jeux et les Hommes*, chap. 5, for a sociology developed from play, Paris, Gallimard, coll. Idées, Nr. 125, 1958.

⁴ J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, Paris, Gallimard, 1951, p. 34-35.

based on a temporal rhythmicity rather distinct from that which the administrated organization of global society imprints on existence. Moreover, the study of these affectual forms, by composing crystallizations that signify sociality, sketch the subjective reliefs of a space combining habit and risk, a proximity with both elsewhere and with otherness. All observers who have adhered to this theoretical exigency have not failed to link it to an epistemological reflection given over to the ambitions of a figurative sociology, by assigning to metaphors, to images and to perceptions a heuristic efficacy until then overlooked. The use of analogy and literary constructs, of metaphorical transposition of aphorisms thus derives from a methodological concern the scope of which is not discourse or language itself, but the expected complicity with the social recognized as play.⁵

FROM THE PLAYER TO THE STROLLER

The discovery of a reality in which experience and existence are combined sums up the poetic adventure, from Baudelaire to Surrealism, and explains thereby the sociological interest given them by Walter Benjamin in his attempt to extract a theory of language reconciling the word and the thing, the image and the idea, and orienting itself even more generally toward a micro-sociology of everyday life and of the city. In this perspective every object is the fragment of the historic context surrounding it, each detail participates in a figuration of the universal which endows it with meaning.

In essays entitled *Charles Baudelaire, un poète lyrique à l'apogée*

⁵ This trend is today borne in the U.S.A. by romantic sociology, the theses of which are known in France from an article by Richard H. Brown, "Métaphore et méthode: de la logique et de la découverte en sociologie", published in *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, vol. LXII, Paris, 1977. With reference to the legitimacy of the use of metaphors in the human sciences, it is stated, "... all knowledge is a matter of viewpoint. We know something only as a certain thing, developed in one manner or another. And just as making a metaphor, in the broad sense, means seeing one thing from the viewpoint of another, it follows from what we have just said that all knowledge is metaphorical", p. 62. In France Michel Maffesoli illustrates this disposition in his work, *La Connaissance ordinaire*, Paris, Librairie des Méridiens, 1985.

du Capitalisme,⁶ Benjamin offers us the first presentation of the player and the stroller as urban personalities, regulating their social existence on a temporal rhythmicity and an experience of space in dissonance with the ideals that mobilized nascent industrial Europe. Borrowed from Baudelaire's "spleen", the theme of melancholy is somewhat the mental implanting of this mutilated sensitivity. In the 19th century, which witnessed the definitive establishment of the rational organization of labor with the salaried class, and its implicit rigor—the calculation of the temporal economy—the idle person and the player each refer to some sort of pre-Promethean nostalgia. W. Benjamin quotes Alain, who wrote in this regard: "... play energetically denies every acquired situation, every antecedent, every advantage recalling past services, and it is in this respect that it is distinguished from work. Play rejects ... that weighty past which is the characteristic of work."⁷ Benjamin then enlightens us on symbolic realism, of which Paris during the Second Empire furnishes an example with four ideal types: *la vie bohème*, the stroller, the player and modernity.

The positivist adage, "Progress through order", evokes quite well the spirit of the fully modern contours that Baudelaire's era impressed on the city. The city dweller cannot fail to inhale the moralizing breeze that triumphantly accompanied the industrial effort. The systematic lighting of streets, the strategically planned construction of the major boulevards, the Parisian tax on wine that pushed outside the limits of the capital an entire segment of the population whose poverty did not serve to inhibit drunkenness, the dissolution of the ragpickers' association are all examples signaling the coincidence between the new policed partition of urban space and the hygienic exclusion of an entire underworld, that *Lumpenproletariat* so scorned by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels when they analyzed *Les Mystères de Paris* by Eugène Sue, the mémoires of the "Professional Conspirator", A. Chenu, or of the "stool pigeon" Lucien de la Hodde.⁸

⁶ Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire, un poète lyrique à l'apogée du capitalisme*, trans. by Jean Lacoste, Paris, Petite Bibliothèque Payot, coll. Critique de la politique, 399, 1982.

⁷ Alain, *Les idées et les âges*, Paris, "Le jeu", 1927, p. 183.

⁸ Cf. A. Chenu, *Les Conspireurs, les sociétés secrètes, les corps-francs*, Paris, 1850. L. de la Hodde, *La naissance de la république en février 1848*, Paris, 1848. On this, Alexandrian, *Le Socialisme romantique*, Paris, Seuil, 1979.

At the same time the “romantic” invention of photography and the development of the mass-circulation press began to snake up conventional relations between the image and time, the word and action. Testimony to this can be found in the polemics that opposed portrait painters and enthusiasts of the daguerreotype with regard to their relative artistic qualities: the aesthetic of the negative vs. the fetishism of a tale that can be recopied thousands of times brutally introduced the sensation of speed mediated by technology. The invocation of Satan in *Les Fleurs du mal* is nothing other than the sullen perfume exuded by this historic confrontation. W. Benjamin reminds us that Baudelaire’s Devil is both the guardian of Promethean scientific innovations and the “generous players” who has his “subterranean abode near the boulevard”; but he is also the author of perpetual intrigue designated in the poet’s litanies as the “confessor of conspirators”.

It is impossible here not to reflect on the obscure centrality of *la vie bohème*, refuge of the revolutionary clubs of Raspail and Blanqui, inflamed by a conception of politics that made of a *coup d’État* a game like “Monopoly”, where rebellious barricades could become the magic winning formulas. Trysting places, *tapis-francs*, cabarets and wine shops are the fixed points in the hazardous existence of an international conspiracy, which the bohemian life in fact maintains at a distance from the modern proletariat. In reality as in the poem (cf. “*Le vin des Chiffonniers*”), informers and raggickers share this Kingdom of the Shades where the limits of human misery can only be vaguely glimpsed through the benevolent intentions of the social observer (cf. H.A. Fréguier, *Des classes dangereuses de la population dans les grandes villes et des moyens de les rendre meilleures*, Paris, 1840). Although technical control of urban geography seems to crown the conquest of power by the bourgeoisie, nevertheless W. Benjamin notes that for this class, “political events have easily taken the form of lucky breaks at a gaming table.”⁹

Benjamin’s analysis describes perfectly this *vie bohème*, perceived as a residual art of living, derived from the encirclement by the law of commercial values of aspects until then neglected (art,

⁹ Walter Benjamin, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

poetry, etc.) by its economic dictates. However, despite development of a truly original theory of the collective experience, the author discerns but vaguely the alternative current in which the bohemian lifestyle draws and expends the energy that makes it attractive at the heart of the social power it denies. *La vie bohème* is a case of spatial non-contemporaneity in that it deliberately occupies a place (an area of precise movements, definable places, etc.) within a space organized around a weighty civilizational project, contradicting the cultural basis out of which it issues. A non-synchronicity in time is superimposed over this antagonistic co-existence (spatial proximity/social distance).

There where the satisfaction of needs through consumption of merchandise (cf. the “Parisian passageways” as networks for the socialization of urban crowds in W. Benjamin) legitimates the punitive compensation of salaried labor and sedentarism, the person living the bohemian life—fleeing all social security—transforms his existence into a temporal errancy hardly in conformity with the values and principles for management of time that govern his era. From this spatial and temporal imbalance to the social rhythm activating the world surrounding him flows modern melancholy i.e. the mental envelope of an individual consciousness taken in a collective sensitivity, which makes of the present a receptacle of burning memories, and of these the kaleidoscope in which the moment lived is appreciated and depreciated. “The spleen is the feeling that corresponds permanently to the catastrophe”, W. Benjamin was to write.¹⁰

Re-evaluating this multiplicity of social times, and its poetic honing, leads to admitting a metanoiac dynamism,¹¹ a convergence of emotions, a poignancy of intersubjectivity in communicational activity, which radically relativize rational imperatives and determinist logic in the adventure of groups and human communities.

In this way we can understand that desire, childhood memory or shared sensations, which belong to the realm of the experience of time and space, sometimes stabilize an association of individuals

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, “Zentralpark”, *op. cit.*, p. 214.

¹¹ Cf. Patrick Tacussel, *L'attraction sociale, le dynamisme de l'imaginaire dans la société monocéphale*, Paris, Librairie des Méridiens; coll. “Sociologies au quotidien”, 1984.

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that no explicit reason or coherent project could unite. The somber heroism of the player is also derived from this psychosocial framework; it is for this reason that W. Benjamin devotes several pages to it in his *Quelques thèmes baudelairiens* of 1939.

The emotional intensity of play snatches the individual away from his memory and from the heritage of experience, of which he is the depository. The player is projected into an infernal time, that of the submission of pleasure to impatience. Of course, W. Benjamin is speaking here of the “professional” player—who would be the typical figure of the modern hero, who undertakes everything from zero, whose only partners are chance and the unflagging continuation of days and nights. This heroism is modern because it can no longer have any other setting for adventure than the large city, nor any higher ambition than that of making of chance a category of his destiny.

From this derives the confident resolution that guides the player toward the field of his hypothetical exploits: the lessons of the past barely count with regard to this perpetual round robin pursuit of the lucky break. W. Benjamin stresses, “play deprives of all orders of experience. Perhaps this is because they have that obscure feeling that players frequently recur to what is termed ‘a plebeian appeal to experience’. The player says ‘my number’ like the pleasure-seeker says ‘my type’”.¹² The valorization of objects, of numbers or events in terms of their power to harness chance along with the integration of these events into the player’s legend is both one of the vectors of the heroizing of his social existence while at the same time being the means of access to the consecration through which this mythification of his destiny will be made possible.

If the player expresses the refusal of the constraints of a salaried position, of bourgeois management of profit, like bad children of nascent capitalism, if he prefers to sacrifice all existential certainty to the dizzying *nirvana* of chance, the stroller of the nineteenth century is a gardener of the crowds to whom the immense city must open up its soul through the spectacle of its tumult and the enchanting charms of its omnipresent merchandise. The stroller plays in the city with the dimensions of space and time, whose

¹² Walter Benjamin, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

frontiers he hopes to metamorphose—like some modern alchemist. As for the player, his consciousness lucidly grasps this irreparable flight of instants. W. Benjamin perceives in this cruel lucidity one of the reasons for the wild ecstasy of consciousness which, in expectation and pain, constructs the imaginary stage set for play. “The inebriating sensation which we mean here is specified temporally, just as is the suffering that it should lighten. Time is the stuff in which are hoisted up the phantasmagoria of play.”¹³ Nevertheless, unlike the player, the consciousness of the stroller is an experiment on the memory of places and of men, a reappropriation of his own history—from childhood to adulthood—a longing open to the sensations nourished by melancholy.

W. Benjamin published an anthology of memories (*Enfance berlinoise vers mil neuf cent*) in a variety of journals between 1933 and 1935. In it he accorded to the urban setting a power to reveal authentic experiences, of which Childhood retains the privileged position. The city,—Berlin—permitted him to weave a link between the child he had been and the dialectical imagination of the adult author, who collected the images of a past ever present in the hopes and fears of the stroller. Just as memory remains a significant element of yesterday, a mental picture that memory has not evacuated, a miniature of the human trajectory, the street is also the microcosm, the monad that contains the exploding significances of the city and the world. The stroller is the one who patiently delivers himself to deciphering this latent social reality whose attributes are the interior architecture of the unconscious and the subjective relief of urban space.

Reading Aragon’s *Paysan de Paris*, published in 1926, confirmed for Benjamin this quest for “corresponding agreements”, for the elective affinity of phenomena; for the poet just as for the child, the meaning of things remains in suspense, the inflation of signs remains to be interpreted. “The Paris of the surrealists is also a *small world*”, noted Benjamin. “That is, in the great, in the cosmos, everything is presented in the same manner. There too, through the flow of traffic, phantomatic signals light up the intersection. There

¹³ Walter Benjamin, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

too unimaginable analogies and interlaced events are written into the daily agenda" (*Myth and Violence*).¹⁴

Just as the unconscious is the recording chamber for the traumas and fantasms that are strewn through the biography of a man or of a woman, giving the past a power over the present, the urban stroll can become a journey into the social ambience of an age, a journey where the present and the everyday conceal the premises for the future and make it readable in the anachronisms in which they are cast. The surrealist technique of *montage*, which indeed bears a degree of resemblance to certain Expressionist works in Germany in the Twenties (cf. Ernst Bloch, *Héritage de ce temps*¹⁵), perfectly demonstrates this requirement, for which literature is but a pretext.

W. Benjamin means to join the experience of the stroller to the totality of meanings for which he was constantly searching, his figurative writing so distant from all demonstrative rigor is part of this desire to introduce us to the mystery of "correspondence agreements" between individuals, places and things. On the cover of the first edition of *Sens unique*, published in January 1928 by Ernst Rowohlt in Berlin, an arrangement of titles in capital letters, like an advertising billboard, announced to the reader how this bouquet of thoughts and reflexes was to organize our mental panorama. There, in newspaper headline size type, can be read, "Come back! Everything is forgiven!" and, somewhat more soberly, "Mexican Embassy"; in an aggressive tone, "Luxurious apartments"; a note of wonder, "Products from China". The attention to detail, reading by an association of the words and images of urban fixtures (advertisements, billboards, graffiti, signs and panels) make the stroller penetrate into the material grammar of his knowledge of the city, but it is also the imperious sovereignty of sensations that here is raised to the rank of full-fledged knowledge.

In his preface to *Sens unique*, the translator Jean Lacoste described the scope of this poetic and cognitive project. "The oneway street will then become like a diagram in the Kantian sense, a guarantee of objectivity, a manner of shifting from the

¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Mythe et violence*, trans. by Maurice de Gandillac, Paris. Denoël Gonthier, "Le surréalisme", 1971, p. 304.

¹⁵ Cf. Ernst Bloch, *Héritage de ce temps*, trans. by J. Lacoste, Paris, Payot, coll. "Critique de la politique", 1978.

subjectivity of impressions to the construction of an object in space. The productive imagination that is at work in the construction of this street, full of letters and objects, makes possible the affinity of phenomena”, according to the expression from the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The word affinity here finds its full value. “It is a property of things, outside of us, but a magic property, obscure, which is beyond comprehension.”¹⁶ With the theory of the stroller, Benjamin introduces a cognitive aesthetic aiming at linking the image and the thing seen to the emotion that they create in order to bring together in the space where experience takes place a duration made up of an eternal succession of instants. The past would cease to be irreparable if it could preserve from the attacks of forgetfulness and death all this plethora of feelings that attach us each day pall-mall to our intimate measure of time.

In his fugitive “illuminations”, the stroller senses the violence of the modern tragedy: the planned-wear merchandise and the by now explicit artificiality of labor are the daily manifestations of the exile of nature, the loss of a cultural exchange with what is original in our relationship to the world. Nevertheless, at the center of this decline, in this geometrical place where alienation is everywhere at home, W. Benjamin discerns a passage, a difficult one certainly, through which the sacred, which leads beings and their products toward a respect for time, can recall its presence at the very heart of its historical negation (the reification of space combined with objectivizing manipulations of duration).

Man’s profane sacrifice through commercial universalization and the laws of generalized equivalency, the increasing integration of dead time into his creations, all those aspects generating boredom and the social and economic channeling of his desires collapse at the threshold of leisurely strolling. Such strolling begins, in fact, with the slow apprenticeship of deregulating applicable traffic laws and conventions and the programmed speed which defines it spatially. As Benjamin notes, “Boredom appears in the production process when this process is accelerated (by machines). The stroller, with his ostentatious nonchalance, protests against the production process.”¹⁷ It can be seen that this concept of urban

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, *Sens unique*, preceded by *Enfance berlinoise*, translated and with preface by J. Lacoste, Paris, Les Lettres Nouvelles, 1972, p. 16.

¹⁷ Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, p. 238.

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strolling leads to a theory of modernity, the two parts of which are constituted by the description of the historic form of the tragic and of the sacred in industrial capitalism and by the philosophy of experience underlying these forms.

TOWARDS AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF MODERNITY

The classic dichotomy between the concept and perception contributes to the reinforcement of the traditional opposition between metaphorical and poetic evolution and scientific thinking. According to Benjamin, this alienation of perspectives in the field of knowledge can be explained essentially by a denaturation of human experience. And this must be taken in the strict sense: the loss of a natural relation with the tangible environment and the mutilation of a tangible relationship with nature. According to him, we should be aware of a mental separation between two modes of experience: *Erlebnisse*, or atomized experience, provoked by the emotional shocks of the inflation of images, and *Erfahrung*, which weaves a supple thread in consciousness, made of hopes and desires, of a past still living in the promises of the present. Metaphorical and aesthetic accentuation are the means of survival of this type of sensitivity, made residual by the increasing development of rationalizing trends. *Erlebnisse* refers to sensation separated from meaning, lost in repetitive intemporality, with no possibility of establishing a link between the fragments of meaning furnished by immediately-lived experiences. To explore our subjective appropriation of space-time means deciphering the objective forms of sensitivity, or renewing contact with authentic experience—*Erfahrung*.

With Benjamin this possibility remains possible in a cultic perspective. The poignancy of cult is irrevocable when our use of things and places liberates them from their utilitarian role. In these moments our familiarity with the life of objects, our urban paths are enveloped in a mysterious complicity. The example of a collector or of a flea market (W. Benjamin, the son of a rich Berlin antique dealer, was himself a collector of rare books and autographs; he often refers to this) indicates this abandon to singularity when individual memory assumes the diversity which

the standard consumer circuit can no longer recycle. That difficult natural proximity to human creations, the aura, could not be perceptible to the person left indifferent by the accumulation of suffering and dreams inscribed in every human construction. There where atrophied experience seizes only the exaltation of the merchandise and magnifies the cannibal need to satisfy oneself with it, cultural experience metamorphoses the subject into an initiate, or rather into a "medium" listening to all the threads connecting his present experience to other dimensions of time: the unfinished still awaiting, the utopian negation, the signs announcing the future.

Personal experience in contemporary mass societies becomes hypothetical if the individual evacuates the intuition of unicity upon which rests the communicational relationship between men, mediatized by the objects they have created and the structures in which they live, at last given over to their memory. The stroller is the one who remains open to this possibility, which is in no way the refuge of nostalgia. "It was a prophetic corner. For like those plants said to have the power to make the future visible, there are places that have this gift of prophecy... In such places, it seems that everything that in reality still awaits you is already a thing of the past."¹⁸

When in doubt the poet is better prepared for this revelation than anyone. André Breton, in *L'Amour fou*, recounts a striking anecdote in this respect. During an amorous promenade, he noted upon several occasions that he or his companion found a subject for argument whenever they came near a recently-abandoned building. The dispute was calmed just as it had been ignited, with the facility of a magically forgotten wrong, as soon as they moved away from the building. After making inquiries among people of this village where he was vacationing, Breton learned that the house had once been the scene of a passionate drama that had taken the lives of two lovers, under circumstances which were still unexplained. This event, and many others of the same kind, confirmed for the poet the frequently evoked certitude.

The history of individuals and of groups, when raised to a paroxysmal and irremediable degree, is embedded in the memory

¹⁸ Walter Benjamin, *Enfance berlinoise*, p. 64.

of the stones, and its indelible stain remains accessible to the “seer”, that is to the person capable of picking up the psychic energy deposited in the area of these developments. In this case the near and the far lose all idea of distance and become categories of the “conscious dream”, of anticipating consciousness, for which the linearity of time, the flow of duration, no longer corresponds to an immutable order. This consciousness is thus dissimultaneous in its present experience in that it apprehends the scattered elements of a still active yesterday, or that it possesses the presentiment of what will come.

By examining these cultural phenomena, Benjamin hoped to show that aesthetic figuration (a work of art, a poem, photography) imitates the poetic stylization whose clandestine presence is detected in daily life by the stroller or the collector. This sensitivity finds its image-embellished expression in allegory, whose function is to “recollect” the complicity of man with creation, to metamorphose merchandise into a collector’s object, to transfigure the stroller’s street or neighborhood. The “recollection” comes from melancholy and turns against it, paradoxically it opens consciousness to the perception of the aura of things and places and invites considering these not as relics issued from a defunct experience but rather as fragments or components of actual experience. Says Benjamin, “If fantasy offers memory corresponding agreements, thought dedicates allegories to it. Memory causes the two to meet.”¹⁹ Likewise the modern imaginary world is a collection of symbols and images in which the archaic can be renewed in a unique practice, while the “new” often takes on the aspect of the still-the-same, of “*déjà-vu*”, and the eternal return to the same thing. Allegory is that essential experience of the coexistence of archetypal and original significations that prohibit the technical encircling of nature from seizing control of time. In it feeling is deposited like a precipitate in social modes of communication. Thus some traces of an individual’s past can enter into resonance with the semantic and cultural contents of a collective past and *vice versa*.

That modernity is the framework of a lyric aesthetization of its

¹⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, p. 225.

negative here explains how the poet, the stroller or the collector²⁰ perceive in these works of human labor this potential antiquity inevitably present in their everyday presence. The aesthetic experience remains the opening to a figurative knowledge which exceeds the truth of the facts, describing the contours of words, of things and of gestures in their virtual spatial and temporal extension. As Konrad Weisbrod says, “The constellation of phenomena in an image is a temporary closing which makes it possible to save the phenomena.”²¹ Individual and collective memory constructs mental barriers telescoping history and the present: modernity becomes the object of archaeology as soon as “under the shock of newness, where the continuity of the identical reigns ... can be detected the imaginary representations of an original past”,²² which bear utopia through their interpretation with the new.

W. Benjamin inaugurated a test of social physiognomy respectful of the ephemeral that our impressions encounter, the latter giving to the former a moving character in the jumble of souvenirs, while it grants them—through its very transience—this uniqueness without which our subjectivity could never know the chance and the risk of its immersion in the social game.

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²⁰ Cf. Walter Benjamin, “Je déballe ma bibliothèque” (a lecture on the activity of a collector), 1 and 2, translated by M. Raspati, *Le Promeneur II*, Paris, Nov. 1981; III, mid-December, 1981.

²¹ Konrad Weisbrod, “La mémoire des choses, notes sur l’*Enfance berlinoise* de Walter Benjamin”, in *Urbi*, III, Paris, March MCMLXXX, p. XLIX.

²² Jürgen Habermas, “L’actualité de Walter Benjamin. La critique: prise de conscience ou préservation”, Toulouse, Privat, *Revue d’esthétique*, nouvelle série Nr. 1, *Walter Benjamin*, 1981, p. 122.