

**‘THE CRITICAL AESTHETICS OF MODERN URBANISM:  
EXPERIENCING ATHENS’**

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## [Contents]

<b>Illustrations</b>	4
<b>Abstract</b>	5
<b>Introduction</b>	7
<i>i: Position and Aims</i>	7
<i>ii: Development of the Research Questions</i>	8
<i>iii: Epistemological and Methodological Rationale</i>	9
<i>iv: Critical Theories of Modern Urbanism</i>	13
<i>v: Thesis Overview</i>	18
<i>vi: The ‘Case Study’</i>	20
<b>[I]</b>	24
<b>Section [1]: Epistemo-logy or Epistemo-critique?</b>	25
Chapter 1: Walter Benjamin and the Critical Potential of Art and Literature	26
1.a: Historicism and Interpretation	31
1.b: The Storyteller and the History-teller	34
Chapter 2: The Experiencing Subject as Narrator, Writer and Critic	39
<b>Section [2]: The Critical Aesthetics of Modern Urbanism</b>	45
Chapter 1: Space and Subjectivity in Early Modern German Aesthetics	46
1.a: Form and the Reflective Subject	50
Chapter 2: The Experience of the City in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction	57
2.a: The City as Montage of Images	59
2.b: Immersion and Mimicry	68
Chapter 3: Critical Subjectivities of Modern Urbanism	77

## [Contents]

<b>[II]</b>	87
<b>1. ‘One-way street is my street now’</b>	88
<i>When the flâneur is also a good diver; when planning has a story to tell; and how mapping can be totally subjective</i>	99
<i>How one can go the wrong way up one-way streets</i>	106
<i>When the street is a state of mind; how stories become tactics; and why walking means politics</i>	83
<b>2. ‘An avenue that is like me’</b>	109
<i>How can bodies resemble cities; when exploring the city is like opening an old chest; when one meets an avenue for the first time</i>	115
<i>When an avenue is like you and me</i>	127
<b>Epilogue</b>	138
<b>Bibliography</b>	142
<b>Appendix</b>	151



## [Illustrations]

<i>(1) Café in Exarheia, Athens; photographs: Betty Nigianni, 2007</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>(2) Polykatoikia (block of flats) in Exarheia Athens; photographs: Betty Nigianni, 2007</i>	<i>66</i>
<i>(3) S. Kleanthes and E. Schaubert, final plan for the New City of Athens, 1833; in Eleni Bastéa 'The Creation of Modern Athens: Planning the Myth', p. 77</i>	<i>67</i>
<i>(4) Panoramic photograph of Athens, 1910. Syngrou avenue on the left; in Kostas Biris 'Athens: From the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century', p. 260</i>	<i>88</i>

## [Abstract]

This thesis discusses how the modern city can be understood as an experiential environment of critical subjective practice. Fictive textual representations of subjective spatial cultures and practices within the modern Athenian public realm are examined in reference to Walter Benjamin's critical theory and aesthetics.

Benjamin, inspired largely by early German Romantic art criticism that was based upon ideas about the self-reflective and self-transformative experience of form, developed a concept of 'experience': as critical process and practice. Exploring the relationship between modern urban experience and critical subjectivity, this thesis examines Benjamin's concept of experience through his diverse writings on art, architecture and urbanism; the main references being drawn upon: the theses *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928) and *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism* (1920); the essays, 'The Storyteller' (1936), 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (1940), 'Little History of Photography' (1931) and 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1935); as well as the urban writings Benjamin produced between the late 1920s and early 1930s, such as *One-Way Street* (1928).

Benjamin's philosophy of experience is subsequently employed to develop an epistemological and methodological framework for the interpretation of the selected fictive narratives. The short stories 'In Pieces' (*Kommatakia*) (1979), and 'An avenue that is like me' (*Nomizo pos he leoforos Syngrou mou moiazei*) (1999), written by the Greek authors Vangelis Raptopoulos and Manos Kontoleon respectively, describe Athenian spatial practices and cultures, as experienced, from the critical viewpoint of the experiencing subject/author. Although modern Athens was initially developed and planned under Western European influences, diversionary spatial and cultural practices characterised by improvisation and subjective appropriation have emerged. Informed by Benjamin's 'literary montage', a method of textual juxtaposition; and to a lesser degree, by his idea of the 'thought-image', offering a particular approach to 'city portraiture'; the thesis adopts an experimental structure in order to provide a platform for open-ended, critical interpretation of the fictive texts.

This thesis aims to offer original contributions to key discourses in contemporary arts and design theory on spatial practices and representation, as well as to the broader scholarship in arts and design criticism and historiography. For this purpose, a discussion on modern urban aesthetics is constructed, articulating the idea that urban experience can inform critical spatial practice. Furthermore, the thesis proposes a specific interdisciplinary approach to textual representation and interpretation that fosters critical practice; thus, further demonstrating that contemporary critical writing within the arts and design disciplines can oscillate between different discourses and methods of writing (namely fictive narration, historiography and critical theory).

## [Introduction]

### *i: Position and Aims*

This thesis builds a discussion on modern urbanism from an experiential perspective. The main intention has been to develop the argument that the modern city, as experiential environment, can inspire and foster critical subjective practices and cultures. This research draws extensively upon the work of modern philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin, in particular his concept of experience, which was influenced by early German Romantic ideas of self-reflection and self-transformation through the immediate experience of form. Throughout the period of his urban writings in the late 1920s and early 30s, Benjamin explored the critical aspects of experience in the context of modern urbanism, and the greater possibilities for critical practice fostered within a modern urban experience shaped by modern technology and aesthetics.

Through reference to this framework, the thesis discusses literary representations of modern Athenian urbanism, which have described subjective spatial occupations and practices. Modern Athenian urbanism was selected as a ‘case study’, because of its particular spatial cultures, demonstrating improvisational and performative attitudes within the public realm. Although initially developed under modern Western European influences, especially in terms of city planning, modern Athens has largely deviated from the Western model. The cultural qualities identifiable within modern Athenian urbanism, and covering the period from 1970 to present day as represented in the literature, resemble those inherent within the modern urban cultures of Naples, Marseilles and Moscow, as described by Benjamin in his essays on these cities<sup>1</sup>. More specifically, proximity, immediacy, mobility, tactility, and immersion were among the most prominent characteristics of the urban experience that Benjamin identified in

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<sup>1</sup> The essays: ‘Naples’ (1925), ‘Moscow’ (1927) and ‘Marseilles’ (1929).

these cities. Benjamin further advocated those characteristics as essential for a modern urbanism that would foster critical practices.

As a consequence, the thesis simultaneously pursues a number of overlapping objectives. On the one hand, the thesis aims to develop a theoretical discussion inspired by Benjamin's concept of experience, which can make an original contribution to contemporary discourses on spatial practices within the context of critical subjectivity. Furthermore, the thesis aims to contribute to discourses on methods of interpretation, criticism and historiography within the art and design disciplines. This research adopts a methodological approach inspired by Benjamin's critical theory, in order to analyse textual representations, and to offer original interpretations of Athenian modern urbanism, which are not fixed to one authorial position, but are open to the reader's critical and creative engagement. For this purpose, the second part of the thesis follows an experimental structure via a method of non-hierarchal presentation, juxtaposing diverse material from analytical and non-analytical discourses (fictive narrative, historiographic, critical and other theoretical interpretations).

## ***ii: Development of the Research Questions***

Starting on a speculative note, the research undertaken for this thesis initially provided a means to pursue my interests in the interrelationship of subjectivity, space and the city. I have always been intrigued by concepts of space and their use in architecture and urban design. Drawing inspiration from several modern literary texts, I began to form research questions that would examine relationships between subjectivity, experience and spatial practice within the context of modern urbanism. By looking at texts of fiction I thought it would be possible to develop an alternative research inquiry, which would critique the abstract concepts of space traditionally used in architecture and other design disciplines.

It soon became clear that stories written as first-person narratives, which described urban space from the view of the 'I', foregrounding the author's subjectivity<sup>2</sup>, would be particularly useful. I selected texts with a semi-fictional, semi-autobiographical quality that emphasised how subjective experience manifests in the form of narrative. The stories selected, which narrativised experiences of modern Athens, provided an insight into the way modern urbanism is experienced through a nexus of subjectivities. The fact that the texts described activities that did not lie within prescribed spatial practices, and further described urban experience as a transformative process, was of particular interest to me. Therefore, it became clear that the texts could be examined to explore the operative role of urban subjective experience in inspiring subjective appropriations that challenge the prescribed, 'normative' spatial occupations. Following this line of inquiry, I examined a number of social and cultural theories of space that engage with subjectivity.

As a consequence of this approach and many emerging questions, the thesis soon developed on a number of overlapping levels: first, it developed as a critique of modern urban space, by the examination of the dynamic relationship between urban space and subjectivity; second, as a discussion of the social and political through an examination of the operative role of the narrativisation of space; and third, as a critical history, through the employment of literature and interdisciplinary methods for analysis and interpretation.

### ***iii: Epistemological and Methodological Rationale***

Furthermore, it became apparent that the work of Walter Benjamin, an influential writer who was interested in the critical role of art and literature, resonated with my emerging research questions. His work, intertwined with his equally interesting life, has had a continued impact upon contemporary cultural discourses. Although situated within the broad area of critical

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<sup>2</sup> Here I employ the word 'subjectivity' in a broad sense, to mean individual and multiple perspectives or experiences; and in opposition to the 'objectivity' derived from Descartes' perspective of impartial 'truth' (Hall, 2004: 3). However, it is within the scope of the thesis to discuss subjectivity as the experiential 'self', or the 'I', as influenced by Romantic ideas and Benjamin's concept of experience.

theory and connected to the social theory of the Frankfurt School<sup>3</sup>, Benjamin's work has become known for its unique approach to criticism. Benjamin was a proponent of intuitive judgment, and drew upon the areas of myth, ritual, memory and perception. Whilst studying the work of Benjamin and his contemporaries, as well as current scholars of his work<sup>4</sup>, I understood that his philosophy and critical theory developed largely around epistemological issues of knowledge and experience. Drawing upon Kantian and Romantic ideas, Benjamin proposed an epistemology that would combine "intuition and understanding" in an undivided manner<sup>5</sup>. Benjamin applied this epistemology to the examination of art and literature as mediums of communicating experience, and to their role in allowing access to the generation of knowledge. His subsequent argument for a new method of critique, which deviated from the descriptive and analytic approaches of conventional criticism, was largely derived from his skepticism of types of knowledge that were dissociated from experience. Furthermore, Benjamin critiqued the various European cultural forms of early 20th century modernity, including architecture and urbanism<sup>6</sup>.

Consequently, Benjamin's philosophy offered an appropriate epistemological context, within which I was able to develop my initial research inquiry and form an appropriate methodology for the interpretation of literature. Through further close readings of Benjamin's texts, I was able to trace some of his main influences back to early Romantic thought<sup>7</sup>. Romanticism is considered to be a broad movement in terms of its origins, characteristics and

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<sup>3</sup> The Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, founded in 1923, with leading members the Marxist thinkers Theodor Adorno, Jürgen Habermas, and Max Horkheimer (Geuss, 1981: 1).

<sup>4</sup> Such as Wolin (1994), Caygill (1998), and Gilloch (2002a).

<sup>5</sup> As cultural historian and Benjaminian critic Howard Caygill (1998: 2) argues, Benjamin questioned the basic assumptions of the Kantian concept that: a) there is a distinction between the subject and the object of experience, and b) that there can be no experience of the absolute. Caygill (1998: xiv) further notes that for this reason "Benjamin not only extended the neo-Kantian attempt to dissolve the distinction between intuition and understanding, but went further in seeking a concept of 'speculative experience'." See Section 1 for further explanation.

<sup>6</sup> In texts such as: 'One-Way Street' (1928), 'Berlin Chronicle' (1932), and *The Arcades Project* (1927-1939).

<sup>7</sup> Caygill (1998: 41) discusses Benjamin's early doctoral thesis *The Concept of Criticism in Early Romanticism* as an attempt to extend and enrich Kant's concept of experience through Romantic art criticism (mainly Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis and Johan Wolfgang von Goethe).

intentions. However, among its prominent, fundamental principles, was, a fascination with imagination and powerful feeling, and a wish to examine materiality as a manifestation of the transcendental<sup>8</sup>. Furthermore, in this context, the Romantics described processes of infinite self-configuration through the encounter with form<sup>9</sup>. Benjamin made references to the inseparability of reflection and cognition advocated by the Romantics, while he further recognised reflective thought as an infinite transformative activity that occurred on a formal level<sup>10</sup>.

Therefore, in the context of Benjamin's philosophy, the focus of my selected narratives on the subjective, experiential aspects of urban spatial practices and the transformative relationship between subject and space, enabled me to follow a 'neo-Romantic' approach<sup>11</sup>. Thus, a critical interpretation of the modern city through the narratives of self-reflective subjectivities could be made, allowing for the examination of non-normative spatial practices, inspired by emotions, perception, the imagination, and performative activities. By transgressing stylistic, functional, and sociologically oriented concerns, this approach further became a critical endeavour in itself; critiquing the established discourses in arts and design, derived from preoccupations with theories of subjectivity that encompass issues relevant to particular identity groups, such as gender and race. This thesis, whilst critical of modern capitalism, differs from other current critical analyses of space. Rather than adopting a purely

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<sup>8</sup> For more on the principles of Romanticism, see (Ruston, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Taking observation as an example, the Romantics described a mutually transformative encounter, during which the object observed is brought to self-consciousness and revealed to the observer, who, through the heightening of his own consciousness, gets nearer to the object and finally draws it into himself. See further references to Novalis's descriptions of observation in (Benjamin, 1996: 151-152)

<sup>10</sup> (Benjamin, 1996: 121-122)

<sup>11</sup> As Ruston (2007: 110) notes: "T.E. Hulme's lecture 'Romanticism and Classicism', which was delivered in 1911 or 1912, but published posthumously in 1924, argues that 'after a hundred years of romanticism, we are in for a classical revival'. Often Romanticism is defined by its difference to that which preceded it, in this case the classical, or more properly neo-classical period of the eighteenth century. It is also possible, as Hulme's essay proves, to define Romanticism in opposition to a period that postdated it, the period of the early twentieth century that we would now call Modernism." Furthermore, Gilloch (2002a: 29) describes early Romanticism as the ancestor of modern criticism.



rationalist approach<sup>12</sup>, this research turns to the literary narrative, proposing that the manifestation of subjective experience through the narrative can open-up critical perspectives.

Therefore, by engaging with literary narratives on modern urban space by different subjects/narrators/writers, a different line of inquiry has resulted, dealing with urban space as a series of 'subjective' spaces, rather than as a designed total. By adopting this approach, I believe that the thesis informs current theories and practices that are critical of the city as a planned total, and the designed building-as-object. In this way, and broadly conceived, this research resonates with contemporary theories and practices that have addressed the human subject and agency in space, in terms of "their production of meanings, subjects, relations, uses or desires"; and, further considering space in relation to social practices, have placed an emphasis on the human subject and his/her everyday life activities<sup>13</sup>. Such theories and practices favour histories that focus on space that is produced and constituted by the practices of social life, and as a terrain of subjective experience. Furthermore, these approaches to criticism and historiography draw largely upon critical social theory, including that of Benjamin, in order to argue for a liberal socio-spatial politics<sup>14</sup>.

Additionally, this thesis argues in favour of interdisciplinary methods of critical interpretation. Employing literature as interpretative and critical tool, I adopt a method of critique and interpretation that is close to Benjamin's 'immanent criticism'. Immanent criticism did not follow the established descriptive or analytic approaches that were derived

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<sup>12</sup> "The growth of capitalism brought unheard of changes within Western environments that caused profound unrest and anxiety and led to two kinds of revolutionary reaction and protest. One, the anti-capitalist reaction, was of the rationalist kind, already begun in the eighteenth century with the philosophers of the enlightenment and then passing from France to the political radicals of England and later turning into Marxist philosophy. The other reaction could be described as individualistic, anarchic, liberal, and romantic. This reaction began with such philosophers as Kant and Rousseau, passed to Schopenhauer and Byron, and finally acquired the most violent of its forms in the philosophy of Nietzsche." (Lesnikowski, 1982: 147)

<sup>13</sup> (Borden, 2001: 12). Iain Borden (2001: 6) further argues in favour of non-traditional architectural histories and theories that consider space, time and social being equally, and with particular regard to everyday life and the human subject, whilst considering architecture as not itself space, but only a way of looking at space.

<sup>14</sup> Here I refer to art and design discourses, including criticism, which occupy a range of positions from post-Marxism and post-structuralism; such as, the following publications: Iain Borden and Jane Rendell (eds) (2000) *Intersections: Architectural Histories and Critical Theories*; Iain Borden (2001) *Skateboarding, Space and the City: Architecture and the Body*; Neil Leach (2002) *The Hieroglyphics of Space: Reading and Experiencing the Modern Metropolis*.

from ‘objective’, ‘distantiating’ views of the artwork; rather, the essence of the artwork was considered to unfold from within itself at the very moment of experience<sup>15</sup>. In this sense, Benjamin and I share common aims; rather than making the choice to recover original authorial intentions, we search to uncover meanings as they are constantly reconfigured in different contexts. Thus, the thesis, by studying the selected literature, questions how modern urban architectural formations are subjectively reinterpreted. Consequently, the intentions or background of the authors are not discussed, since it is the very potential for the narratives to incite a critical reflectivity at the moment of reading that is of importance to my approach<sup>16</sup>.

#### *iv: Critical Theories of Modern Urbanism*

To develop further my proposal regarding Benjamin’s ideas on urbanism, I will now introduce three scholars that have been foundational to my subsequent discussion on Athenian urbanism. The theories on urbanism of Henri Lefebvre, Michel De Certeau and Steve Pile, like Benjamin’s own, have been preoccupied with the possibilities for critical practice that are intrinsic within modern urban experience. As Ben Highmore suggests, Benjamin, Lefebvre and De Certeau all recognised that modern everyday life is essentially urban (Highmore, 2002: 74); and went further to argue that within this everyday urban realm, there is a transgressive potential contained in a “non-conscious” dimension (Highmore, 2002: 59). Highmore (2002: 47) argues, “In epistemological terms, they reject a ‘rationalist’, traditionally ‘scientific’ approach to the modern city and the everyday, suggesting instead the possibility of a science of everyday life that would operate in the areas of myth and ritual.”

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<sup>15</sup> Benjamin was a proponent of anti-historicist critical methods that were based on immersion and immanence. He discussed such ideas in various writings. For instance, in ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, he argued that such criticism would operate through the rejection of the distance between the artwork and the public, which sustained the artwork’s value related to its ‘aura’ (its authentic uniqueness); and which further promoted the appreciation of art on a ritualistic, cult basis. For more on this, see (Benjamin, 1992: 211-235). His ideas on ‘immanent’ criticism were influenced by the Romantics, as explained in (Gilloch, 2002: 21)

<sup>16</sup> “The immanent illumination and actualisation of the artwork in the present moment of reading.” (Gilloch, 2002a: 33)

Indeed Lefebvre was highly critical of 'abstract' modern space. Considering space, ideologically and materially, as a social production, Lefebvre argued that space essentially formed part of a dialectical process: rather than existing *a priori*, space is produced by, and a product of, social being. In this context, he criticised modern space for servicing a side of human activity that is more akin to the production of objects, rather than to the production of social relations and different subjectivities. In architectural terms, Lefebvre posited that this condition of production in the modern city was characterised by the inability of city authorities to replace the unique symbolism and spaces of the traditional city with anything other than functional units and sites of circulation. He observed that the lack of symbolic meaning and qualitative difference in the city resulted in the banal monotonous experience of modern urban space; thereby, depriving inhabitants of the conditions necessary for creative occupation and appropriation.

Lefebvre's criticism that modern space did not address human activity in terms of experience, agency and meanings, calls upon the explication of the spatial dimension of subjectivity, since, for Lefebvre (1991: 18), there is "an interaction between 'subjects' and their space and surroundings". In *The Production of Space* (1974), Lefebvre discussed the relationship between the internal world of the subjective self and social space, referencing the work of the Surrealists and Bataille. He further suggested that inner space should be decoded through an illumination of the transitional process that occurs from "subjective space to the material realm of the body and the outside world"; hence, to social space (Lefebvre, 1991: 18). Lefebvre argued that human subjects, understood as psycho-corporeal 'bodies', are one of the primary sites, from which any kind of activity of redefinition and reproduction of the external world stems. His treatment of space as psycho-corporeal recognised that any activity that has an effect on the external world, simultaneously has an effect on the subjective self, and vice-versa. Therefore, for Lefebvre, space-production is the context for self-definition and for the production of the subject.

Iain Borden has commented on “Lefebvre’s rejection of the terms ‘users’ and ‘inhabitants’ for inferring marginality and underprivilege”; arguing instead, that the term ‘subjects’ suggests socially constructed entities that *do* something: in this sense, space is not an intellectual projection, but is enacted (Borden, 2002: 27). Within the context of the Lefebvrian schema, a distinction is made between two kinds of activity that operate in the modern city: the popular everyday ‘appropriation’ of space; and the more official practices of spatial ‘domination’ by the nation-state, or capitalism. For Lefebvre, the latter can only reproduce the hegemonic forces of capital, while the former can be a transformative activity that operates through the seizure and re-functioning of space.

I argue that Lefebvre advocated a neo-Romantic modern life<sup>17</sup>, “emphasising conflict, emotions, rejection of hierarchies, originality and spontaneity” (Borden, 2002: 28-29); qualities and experiences which were embedded into action: “The city is not only a language, but also a practice” (Lefebvre, 1991: 391). Lefebvre’s recognition of the inseparability of experience and practice can be understood to be essentially romantic: “On close scrutiny, then, romanticism appears not only as a contradiction but as an explosion of interconnected contradictions at varying levels of consciousness and depth [...] the common element for the romantics and the national forms taken by romanticism would be the relation between possibilities and reality, *a relation which was fictitious and dreamed of, but at the same time lived out in praxis*: in other words, the relation between possibilities and historical contradictions” (Lefebvre, 1995: 312).

De Certeau, too, was preoccupied with the relationship between subjective experience, agency and everyday practices; he was interested in the potential for ‘transgressions’ in the modern city to counter what he saw as the capitalist, homogeneous, banal, decorporealised lifestyles of the modern city. For De Certeau, as for Lefebvre, it is through the ‘body’ that one can escape “the imaginary totalisations produced by the eye” (De

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<sup>17</sup> This is apparent, I believe, in *The Production of Space*, but more explicitly so in his earlier book *Introduction to Modernity* (1962). This book closes with a chapter entitled ‘Twelfth Prelude: Towards a New Romanticism?’, in which Lefebvre makes links between modernity and early 18<sup>th</sup> century French culture, deeply influenced by German Romanticism. See (Lefebvre, 1995: 239-388).

Certeau, 1984: 93) and subsequent environments of capitalist commodification. Everyday spatial practices, which involve the ‘body’, such as walking, instead “refer to a specific form of *operations*...to ‘another spatiality’ (an ‘anthropological’, poetic and mythic experience of space), and to an *opaque* and *blind* mobility characteristic of the bustling city” (De Certeau, 1984: 93).

Following on from the above, De Certeau also described the ‘enactment’ of urban space through subjective practice. De Certeau’s view of space as enacted, or ‘practiced’ (De Certeau, 1984: 117), was informed by his interests in literature, archival research and the narrative. Highmore (2002: 169) suggests that there is a relationship between De Certeau’s own research and writing practices<sup>18</sup> – keeping archival material from heterological sources and attempting to make ‘polyphonic’ (multi-voiced) texts – and his theoretical approach to the practices of everyday life. This is especially apparent in his discussion of modern urban space as the ‘enactment’ of stories, or the ‘performance’ of narratives. For De Certeau, the enactment and performance of stories and narratives can be transformative; by transforming the ‘subject’ into an ‘agent’, or ‘actor’ in everyday urban life, thus further weaving private and public into a unitary, and ever-changing, network of meanings: “Stories [...] traverse and organise places; they select and link them together [...] Every story is a travel story – a spatial practice” (De Certeau, 1984: 115).

Contemporary psychogeography is likewise interested in the kind of urban politics that is situated in everyday practices: “The first and most prominent of these is the activity of walking [...] This act of walking is an urban affair and, in cities that are increasingly hostile to the pedestrian, it inevitably becomes an act of subversion. Walking is seen as contrary to the spirit of the modern city with its promotion of swift circulation and the street-level gaze that walking requires allows one to challenge the official representation of the city by cutting across established routes and exploring those marginal and forgotten areas often overlooked

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<sup>18</sup> De Certeau considered literature to be intertwined with historical writing. In his essay ‘The Freudian Novel’, he discusses Freud’s own ‘historical’ writing (e.g. in *Moses and Monotheism*) as a ‘conversion to literature’, a Freudian reevaluation of the relationship between literature and history, which proposes literature as “the ‘logical’ discourse of history, the fiction which allows it to be thought.” (De Certeau, 1986: 18).

by the city's inhabitants. In this way the act of walking becomes bound up with psychogeography's characteristic political opposition to authority." (Coverley, 2006: 12) It is within such a context that Steve Pile examines the inherent contradiction of political structures that attempt to encompass subjective everyday practices: "Subjectivities are about feelings – fears, desires, repulsions – which are not so easily contained within a narrowly structural analysis of politics." (Pile, 1997: 23) In his article 'Masculinism, the Use of Dualistic Epistemologies and Third Spaces', Pile argued that such contradictions are due to an underprivileging of 'space'; which occurs through the association of space with the concepts of emotion, the body, and the feminine. The underprivileging of space is dichotomist, derived from both, the Kantian separation of 'Time' and 'Space', and the antithetical separation of 'Reason' and 'Emotion' in the Enlightenment subject: "Dualistic epistemologies permit one side of the dichotomy to be valued (time, Reason, mind, male) and the other (space, Emotion, body, female) to be debased" (Pile, 1994: 259).

To counteract the dualism inherent within the context of urban politics, Pile proposes a 'psychogeographical' approach, which draws upon a "psychoanalysis of space" (1996: 244). Pile recognises the 'partial', 'virtual', 'double' and 'performed' relationships between objects, subjects and spaces; furthermore, he states that "social sanction, social power and the possibilities of radical politics" accompany these relationships (Pile, 1996: 244-245). From this perspective, an urban ideology of resistance "does not rely so much on acts, but on the meanings that social actions may take on in the practice of everyday life" (Pile, 1997: 14); and therefore, "urban planning as a spatial technology of domination" (Pile, 1997: 3) can be resisted through the creation of new meanings out of imposed meanings. In this way, the recreation of meanings enables a re-working of space (Pile, 1997: 16), which occurs at different scales (the body, locality, region, nation etc) (Pile, 1997: 13).

Although the theorists discussed above draw upon a host of different philosophies and theoretical influences (including, but not limited to: Marxist, psychoanalytic, existential and/or phenomenological discourses), I believe they share a 'common ground'. Recognisable

in this common conceptual ground, are Benjaminian and Romantic ideals of the intertwinement of experience, reflection and practice, subjects and objects; and a privileging of immediacy and contradiction. Above all, and in the spirit of their spatial theories, they could all potentially agree with Lefebvre and his following statement: “The user’s space is lived – not represented (or conceived). When compared with the abstract space of the experts (architects, urbanists, planners), the space of the everyday activities of users is a concrete one, which is to say, subjective” (Lefebvre, 1991: 362).

## ***vi: Thesis Overview***

The thesis is comprised of two parts. Part [I], drawing upon Benjamin’s philosophy, develops the scholarly discussion that forms the methodological and epistemological investigation of the research. Part [II] employs an experimental interpretative structure, applying the above methodological investigations to propose critical interpretations of four fictive narratives on modern Athens.

Drawing upon my own interpretive readings of Benjamin’s writings, via English translations, and contemporary Benjaminian scholarship within the English-speaking academy, part [I] is comprised of two sections. Section 1 traces links between the writing practices of criticism, history and literature. Opening with an introduction to Benjamin’s philosophical position on the relationship between methods of art and literary criticism and historiography, with a specific focus on Benjamin’s anti-historicism, the chapter examines Benjamin’s ideas on the communication of experience through storytelling and narration. The chapter closes with a discussion on the impact that Benjamin’s aforementioned ideas have had upon methods of modern and contemporary historiography. The main references to Benjamin’s philosophy, in this chapter, are taken from the essays ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ (1940), and ‘The Storyteller’ (1936), as well as his book *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928). Shaped by Romantic ideas of infinite self-configuration through the experience of, and reflective encounter with, form, Benjamin’s concept of experience is a

central point of discussion. I argue that such a conception of experience precludes critical reflection from a fixed subjective position (e.g. the authorial); instead, advocating a critical interpretation that is open to reconfiguration and re-evaluation.

Section 2 explores Benjamin's ideas on the modern city, in particular how his thought developed under the influence of modern technology and art, as expressed in his urban writings during the late 1920s and 1930s. Benjamin acknowledged that, deeply embedded in modernity, were potentials for a new kind of critical experience, which could provide a break from traditional views of history, politics and subjectivity. As Benjamin argued in essays such as 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1935), 'The Author as Producer' (1934) and 'Little History of Photography' (1931), this new experience would be formalised in new art, literature and philosophy, which would further embrace modern technologies. Benjamin argued that modern techniques, such as the cinematic 'montage', when incorporated into traditional forms, such as historiography, would produce critical writing and encourage creative reading through texts that are open to reconfiguration and re-evaluation.

It is in this light, when discussed in its spatial and architectural formalizations that, for Benjamin, the modern city fosters a critical attitude. Thus, a specific emphasis is placed on how this critical attitude manifests through the practice of urban writing; building on the discussion of the critical possibilities of experience posited by Benjamin, as covered in section 1. Furthermore, I discuss the broader context of Benjamin's philosophy of experience, and how his ideas were influenced by Romantic theory on experience and knowledge, which hinged upon concepts of observation and empathetic responses to space and the observed object. For this purpose, I examine closely Benjamin's thesis *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism* (1920).

Part [II], also comprising of two sections, discusses Athenian public space through the stories of two contemporary Greek authors: 'In Pieces' (*Kommatakia*) (1979), by Vangelis Raptopoulos, and 'An avenue that is like me' (*Nomizo pos he leoforos Syngrou mou moiazei*)



(1999), by Manos Kontoleon. Alongside the literary narratives, the sections include my own experimental interpretive analysis, which, by reference to the literature, draws upon cultural and other theoretical perspectives on modern urbanism. Utilising the methodological and epistemological discussions set out in part [I], historical and critical perspectives are explored in reference to the specific conditions that influenced the spatial cultures of modern Athenian urbanism. Thus, part [III], is structurally heterogeneous, developing an experimental and interdisciplinary method of discursive interpretation that follows the critical practice of ‘literary montage’<sup>19</sup> as propagated by Benjamin. In addition, I loosely follow Benjamin’s technique of textual city portraiture, the ‘thought-image’, which is made from the assemblage and juxtaposition of ephemeral impressions of the city street. Part [II] is comprised of diverse material that is presented in the form of juxtaposed textual fragments. Therefore, this part aims – as far as possible – to, “merely show” (Benjamin, 1999c: 460), and inspire the reader’s own critical interpretations.

### ***v: The ‘Case Study’***

Within the spirit of Benjamin’s philosophy, modern Athens was selected as an appropriate ‘case study’ for this thesis. Modern Athens was largely planned and developed under Western European influences, as they were manifested in the neoclassical and early modern architecture and planning. For this reason, and as Kenneth Frampton (1987: 14) argues, “Athens is a good example of a modern city, especially in the sense that the prototypical neoclassical nineteenth century city, since the 1950’s has gradually developed to follow an equally strictly modern typology”<sup>20</sup>. However, modern Athenian urbanism, in its physical form, largely deviated from modern Western European principles, mainly due to socio-

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<sup>19</sup> “Method of this project: literary montage. I needn’t say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse – these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them.” (Benjamin, 1999c: 460)

<sup>20</sup> The original Greek text is translated by the author of this thesis.

economic constraints of the modern Greek state, as well as the established Greek practices of small plot ownership<sup>21</sup>. Moreover, the urban remnants of the old Ottoman town and the classical antiquities added a palimpsestic quality to the cityscape. Under these conditions, a particular modern urban environment has developed, characterised by small scale urban spaces and buildings, and by diverse, incoherent spatial forms that co-exist in great proximity. As Jean Attali (2002: 121) states: “Athens imposes a regime of paroxysmal proximity between the constituents that are assumed to be the most opposed within its urban landscape: antique sites, Bavarian neoclassical buildings, modern buildings (sometimes superb), interminable construction sites, incomplete and abandoned edifices, congested arteries and signage of every kind long the roadside”.

Furthermore, this particular spatial environment has been indispensably linked with the predominant modern Athenian socio-cultural attitudes, providing an urbanism that is strikingly different to any other. Comparing Athens to prototypical modern American cities, such as New York and San Francisco, James Faubion (1993: 65) argues that Athens is in complete contrast to these “disciplinary cities”, as he calls them with reference to De Certeau, which are “formalist [...] progressivist and technocratic”. According to Faubion (1993: 65), this is largely due to specific Athenian cultural attitudes that have been resistant to modernist ideologies of ‘improving’, ‘enhancing’, or ‘cleansing’ the built and social environment; instead “in Athens, traditions are particularly tenacious; particularistic “pollutions” crop up everywhere”. However, this does not occur in the historicist manner of preservation for stylistic or paradigmatic reasons, or further striving for historical coherence, but, rather following its own “idiosyncratic” principles, and via highly improvised processes<sup>22</sup>. For these reasons, and as Faubion (1993: 70) points out: “Athens [...] may be a vast collection of protosocial or inchoately cultural little villages. It holds a plurality of places of class and of life-style [...] greater Athens had no true ghettos, whether religious, ethnic, cultural, valuational, or even gustatorial.”

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<sup>21</sup> Philippides (1984: 70)

<sup>22</sup> See (Faubion, 1993: 65-66)

These key characteristics of Athenian urbanism resonate with urban qualities, such as proximity, immediacy and anti-historicism, which Benjamin identified as inherent within modern urbanism, and recognised as informative to critical spatial attitudes. However, as it will be discussed, Benjamin observed that these qualities were more prominent in certain early twentieth century cities, such as Moscow, Marseilles and Naples. He further described how modern urban planning was employed in Western European cities, such as Berlin and Paris, to counteract certain modern urban qualities for political and ideological reasons.

In the context of this thesis, the above ideas will be discussed through an examination of literary representations of modern Athenian urban experience. Written by two contemporary Greek authors between the 1970s and 1990s, the literary stories examined describe experiences of Athenian public space. Following a Benjaminian approach, the thesis discusses these experiences as inherent within the spaces described, and as representative of spatial cultures and practices, which have emerged within the modern Athenian public realm. More specifically, the first chapter entitled «One-way street is my street now», discusses a network of streets in central Athens, which evolved from the original plans for the modern Greek capital. The pattern of streets was originally designed in the nineteenth century, according to neo-classical principles, and, although subject to later amendments at different stages in Athens's modernisation, to present day it has largely remained untouched. It is this inner-city site that is critically discussed within the context of modern urban planning, especially in relation to issues of restriction of spatial mobility. The discussion is inspired by the narratives of an Athenian street walker, who, I argue, performs an imaginative re-citation of the official, planned public space. The second chapter, entitled «An avenue that is like me», discusses one of the first modern motorways constructed in Athens in the early 1900s. The chapter critically examines modern urban planning practices, such as car-oriented road construction, and the control and distribution of uses through 'zoning'. The critique is inspired by the writer's narrative descriptions of his empathetic and embodied experiences of the complex spatial and socio-cultural environment that has developed along the avenue.

Although the chapters represent two different historical phases in the development of modern Athenian urbanism, it is not within the scope of the thesis to provide a comprehensive or linear history; or, as Benjamin would put it: a history that ‘flows’. Rather, I aim to present a history that “stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions” (Benjamin, 1992: 254). In addition, as a previous resident of Athens, my experience allows me to identify clear links between my own subjective experience and those narrated by the authors; further reinforcing Benjamin’s proposal to develop a criticism that is based on immediate experience.





[I]



## Section [1]:

### Epistemo-Logy or Epistemo-Critique?<sup>23</sup>

*Neither in knowledge nor in reflection can anything whole be put together, since in the former the internal is missing and in the latter the external; and so we must necessarily think of science as art if we expect to derive any kind of wholeness from it. Nor should we look for this in the general, the excessive, but, since art is always wholly represented in every individual work of art, so science ought to reveal itself completely in every individual object treated.*<sup>24</sup>

*Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*

*It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences.*<sup>25</sup>

*Walter Benjamin*

*The historian is a prophet turned backward.*<sup>26</sup>

*Friedrich Schlegel*

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<sup>23</sup> The title refers to Benjamin's title 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' in (Benjamin, 1998: 27)

<sup>24</sup> Goethe is quoted in (Benjamin, 1998: 27)

<sup>25</sup> (Benjamin, 1992: 83)

<sup>26</sup> Schlegel is quoted in (Heath, 1999: 172)

# Chapter 1:

## Walter Benjamin and the Critical Potential of Art and Literature

A large amount of the diverse and highly eclectic work of the philosopher, cultural and literary critic Walter Benjamin, is inspired by questions of epistemology. Although his main intellectual aspiration was to recreate criticism – and specifically, literary criticism – as a genre<sup>27</sup>, a number of questions persistently reappear as the theoretical background in his writings. Such questions concern, firstly, the relationship between knowledge and experience and, secondly, the role of art and literature in establishing access to and generation of knowledge. Benjamin's life-long search for methods of art criticism other than the descriptive-analytic art history of his day, is underpinned by his skepticism of the methods, validity and scope of knowledge: "Truth resists being projected into the realm of knowledge".<sup>28</sup>

This skepticism is apparent in his early work, such as in his first and only completed book entitled *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928)<sup>29</sup>. Famously, Benjamin's thesis on the seventeenth-century German baroque drama went well beyond its specific subject matter, ambitiously theorising on a plethora of issues, such as on art, science, philosophy and representation. Bearing in mind the strict scholarly conventions of early twentieth-century German philosophy, Benjamin opened the thesis with the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue', which includes a quote by the Romantic literary writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Goethe

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<sup>27</sup> Graeme Gilloch (2002a: 1) mentions that Benjamin was explicit about his aspirations as literary critic in his correspondence to his friend and Judaic scholar Gershom Scholem.

<sup>28</sup> Benjamin (1998: 29) argues: "Truth, bodied forth in the dance of represented ideas, resists being projected, by whatever means, into the realm of knowledge". I used a shorter version of the above quote, which can be found in (Sontag, 1979: 25).

<sup>29</sup> George Steiner (1998: 10-11) mentions that this book was initially written as Benjamin's doctorate thesis, his *Habilitationsschrift*, at the University of Frankfurt, but was rejected by the university examiners as incomprehensible. In his correspondence to a friend, Benjamin expressed his skepticism towards scholarship by claiming that the necessary research and discipline of scholarly form makes of "every completed-work the death-mask of its intention". Steiner (1998: 7) also notes that, despite being unsuccessful academically, the book was published in Berlin in 1928 under the German title *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*. Richard Wolin (1994:79) further argues that the 'Epistemo-Critical' prologue of the thesis probably represents one of the few independent statements by Benjamin solely concerned with the theory of knowledge and epistemology.

compares art, to knowledge and reflection in order to praise art as a worthy endeavour that brings on a “wholeness”; since it combines the “internal” and the “external”, whilst also reflecting something of the “general” in the “individual work”. Goethe further proposes to “think of science as art” (Benjamin, 1998: 27). Later on from the quote, Benjamin expresses his doubt, further questioning whether philosophical writing should conform to an exclusive “doctrine” of “historical codification” (Benjamin, 1998: 27). Instead, Benjamin argues, that similarly to art, philosophical writing faces “the task of representation” due to the essentially symbolic nature of language: philosophy uses words to represent ‘ideas’<sup>30</sup>. Benjamin goes on to extend this discussion to art criticism and critical writing, which he envisaged to be beyond the schematic, deductive and dissociative criticism that was oriented towards the ‘genre’ or ‘style’. Instead, as he saw it, it was a creative exchange between the critic and the unique work of art; an exchange through which the truth and meaning of the artwork is revealed and re-presented as an ‘idea’ by the critic.<sup>31</sup>

Benjamin’s preoccupation with representational issues within philosophical and critical writing was partly inspired by his studies of early Romantic thought. He recognised a certain critical potency within the ideas of Romanticism that proposed a rejection of

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<sup>30</sup> As Benjamin (1998: 27) stated: “It is characteristic of philosophical writing that it must continually confront the question of representation”. Moreover, Benjamin (1998: 32) argued that: “If it is the task of the philosopher to practice the kind of description of the world of ideas which automatically includes and absorbs the empirical world, then he occupies an elevated position between that of the scientist and the artist”.

<sup>31</sup> Criticising German physiologist Karl Friedrich Burdach, Benjamin (1998: 41) claimed: “But in the last analysis a methodology must not be presented in negative terms, as something determined by the simple fear of inadequacy on a factual level, a set of warnings. It must rather proceed from convictions of a higher order than are provided by the point of view of scientific verism.” Benjamin (1998:43) also made references to Benedetto Croce and his criticism of the deductive concept of genre in the philosophy of art; more specifically, he quoted from Croce’s *The Essence of Aesthetic* (1913): “Any conceivable theory of the division of the arts is untenable. The genre or the class is, in this case, a single one: art itself, or the intuition; the individual works of art, on the other hand, are infinite in number: all are original, and none can be translated into another...Considered philosophically, nothing is interposed between the universal and the individual, no sequence of genres or species, no *generalia*.”

As Steiner (1998: 21) notes: “What Benjamin polemicalises against is the unworried dissociation between scholarly-critical styles of analysis and the privileged, irreducibly autonomous objects of such analysis, a dissociation that is particularly damaging in respect of works of art and letters. Category will locate and classify form, but form generates category. Being itself composed of language, the poem or play must elicit from its interpreter, who is working in and with words, a co-active, formally and substantively cognate, indeed mirroring response.” Wolin (1994: 82) also makes references to Benjamin’s concept of the ‘truth content’ of the work of art, by noting that this was “an aspect which had been, since the German romantics, wholly neglected in German critical and aesthetic discourse”. Furthermore, he quotes Benjamin from the German publication *Briefe* (edited by Scholem and Adorno): “Criticism is in relation to these considerations (where it is identical with interpretation and in opposition to all current methods of understanding art) the presentation of an idea.” (Wolin, 1994: 83)



Enlightenment ideals and, by virtue, an emphasis upon the mystical;<sup>32</sup> as discussed by Graeme Gilloch (2002a: 28) below:

Breaking with the prevailing artistic orthodoxies of neoclassicism, the early Romantics explored and developed new modes of aesthetic appreciation and a conceptual vocabulary appropriate to the modern spirit of intellectual critique and revolutionary transformation [...] This forward-looking, pioneering sensibility of the Romantics was not that of Enlightenment thought, with its emphasis on the disenchantment of nature, scientific rationality and calculation. Rather – and for Benjamin this was of the utmost significance – early Romanticism retained a deeply mystical understanding of art and criticism as emanations and/or reminders of a pure, poetic original language.

It is within such an intellectual context that Benjamin proposes the method of ‘immanent critique’, which he intends to unfold meaning from within the artwork. The Romantics had first conceived of such a method, inspired by Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s idea of the subject coming to self-consciousness and self-understanding through an infinite process of self-reflection; thus, the work of art comes to “reflect upon itself” through criticism<sup>33</sup>. Through this process, the meaning of the artwork is disclosed. However, the meaning is not fixed, nor relevant to an initial authorial intention, but is continually construed anew through the practice of critique, which reveals conceptual associations between works of art. As Gilloch

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<sup>32</sup> As Gilloch (2002a: 27) mentions, between 1917 and 1919, before starting writing his thesis on German Baroque drama, Benjamin wrote his doctoral dissertation entitled *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*. Gilloch (2002a: 29) further explains that: “Early Romanticism combined an emphasis upon forms of mystical illumination and intuitive insight which were anathema to Enlightenment thought with an insistence upon critical rigour and sobriety that distinguished it from the irrationalism of more recent movements.”

<sup>33</sup> “In the Romantics’ conception of ‘immanent critique’, Fichte’s idea of the human individual coming to self-consciousness and self-understanding through a never-ending process of self-reflection is transposed to the work of art. For the Romantics, criticism provides the successive mirrors in which the artwork comes to reflect upon itself and thereby disclose its meaning and truth.” (Gilloch, 2002a: 21)

(2002a: 21) states, for the Romantics, “The self-disclosure of the truth of the work of art occurs during its ‘afterlife’, conceived as ongoing criticism and final dissolution.”<sup>34</sup> As other authors, including Gilloch (2002a: 21) himself have noted, Benjamin’s study of the German baroque play sets forth an early experimental form of immanent critique. He deviated from the then conventional study of the subject within the established historicist contexts of, say, the genre of classical tragedy or the baroque style. Instead, Benjamin looked for the conceptual grounding and purpose underlying the work, advocating a mode of ‘melancholy’ (Benjamin, 1998: 147-149) as the method of understanding the “secret bonds of association” (Benjamin, 1996: 141), crucial for the non-reductive method of critique and interpretation that he advocated.<sup>35</sup>

As has been shown so far, Benjamin lays the foundations for his critical theory as well as for modern criticism, by setting forth a number of key methodological and epistemological questions. George Steiner, in his introduction to the English translation of Benjamin’s *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, notes:

How can there be a general and generalising treatment of artistic-literary objects which are, by definition, unique? Is it possible to escape historical relativism or the vacant dogmatics of historicism while, at the

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<sup>34</sup> Gilloch (2002a: 21) further explains that: “In the Romantics’ conception of ‘immanent critique’, Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s idea of the human individual coming to self-consciousness and self-understanding through a never-ending process of self-reflection is transposed to the work of art. For the Romantics, criticism provides the successive mirrors in which the artwork comes to reflect upon itself and thereby disclose its meaning and truth. Truth does not reside in the intentions of the author, but is continually constituted anew through the work of critique until, recognising its relationship with other works of art, the artwork takes its rightful place within the pantheon of art, dissolving itself into the idea of Art.”

<sup>35</sup> This aspect of Benjamin’s philosophy was influenced by the Romantics, and in particular by Friedrich Schlegel, who was one of the leaders of the early Romantic school. In *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*, Benjamin discussed extensively Schlegel’s ideas, especially his views on epistemology and art criticism. Schlegel, an ‘artist-philosopher’ as Benjamin (1996: 137) called him, was critical of an approach to knowledge via a systematisation according to formal categories. Instead, he was a proponent of a conceptual and intuitive approach, which values ‘immediate’ knowledge that is not dissimilar to knowledge that is acquired through perception (Benjamin, 1996: 147). Schlegel found the possibility for ‘immediacy’ in language itself. As Benjamin wrote: “...words often understand themselves better than do those who use them...that there must exist among philosophical words...secret bonds of association...and that one gets the purest and most genuine incomprehensibility precisely from the science and the art that are intrinsically absorbed by the process of comprehending and of rendering comprehensible – that is from philosophy and philology.” (Benjamin, 1996: 141)

same time, being faithful to the temporal specificity, even unrecaptulability of one's documents? Can the interpreter interpret 'outside' his own self and moment? (Benjamin, 1998: 23)

Benjamin's preoccupation with the process of interpretation has often been interpreted itself as being a clear indication of his resonance with the Frankfurt School of social critical theory – although, as noted in Gilloch (2002a: 18-19) and in Highmore (2002: 60), the fit between Benjamin and the School is a far from neat one; and in fact it is highly complex. Put simply, the Frankfurt School for Social Research, which consisted of several early modern, psychoanalytically inspired, Marxist thinkers, elucidated a critical approach that endeavoured to transform society through enlightenment and by emancipation. Although both Benjamin and the school propagated a self-reflective attitude, social critical theory focused mainly upon the processes that constructed and produced cultural phenomena in modern society<sup>36</sup>. Ultimately, the School's emphasis on process, which can be traced back to Kant's philosophy<sup>37</sup>, was to remain highly significant and influential. In one sense, Benjamin's interest in self-reflective criticism certainly places him within this context. He acknowledges this at various instances by condemning, other, non self-critical approaches. For example, he claims that, "The reasons for the uncritical use of inductive methods have always been the same: on the one hand the love of variety and, on the other hand, indifference to intellectual rigour" (Benjamin, 1998: 39-40). However, as already mentioned, his ideas on immanent criticism drew also upon the metaphysical tradition of Romantic thought, distinguishing him

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<sup>36</sup> Raymond Geuss (1981: 1-2) discusses the particular approach of the 'Frankfurt School', which included German philosophers such as Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and Max Horkheimer. In his discussion, Geuss points at the 'emancipatory' and 'enlightening' intentions of the critical social theory of the 'Frankfurt School'. Furthermore, he mentions that this theory differs to scientific theories, which are 'objectifying', because it is 'reflective'.

<sup>37</sup> In particular Kant's idea that philosophy involves self-critical activity, and the focus of his philosophy on the construction and production of human experience, as they were expressed in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. See Caygill's introduction in (Kant, 2003: v-xxvi).

from the Frankfurt School's more orthodox Marxist critical theories.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, as I will discuss in the following subchapters, Benjamin's ideas offer a distinct approach to history and historiography.

### ***1.a: Historicism and Interpretation***

Benjamin saw criticism as interconnected with history. In much of his writing, he was preoccupied with methods of historiography and their dependence upon methods of epistemology. For Benjamin, there is an intrinsic engagement of the art critic with history, which he argued, should not, however, follow historicist practices:

What concerns me is the idea of how works of art are related to historical life. What is certain to me is that there is no such thing as art history [...] The attempt to situate the work of art in historical development does not open perspectives which lead to its intrinsic being... Current investigations in the history of art lead only to the history of form or content, for which works of art appear only as examples or models, as it were; a history of the works of art themselves never comes into question. There is nothing which links them both extensively and intensively... The specific historicity of works of art is in any event one which is never revealed in 'art history', but only in interpretation. In interpretation mutual relations between works of art emerge which are a-temporal, though not without importance from a historical point of view. Namely,

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<sup>38</sup> Peter Demetz in (Benjamin, 1986: vii-viii) notes Benjamin's affinity for "the traditions of Romantic metaphysics", whilst he also mentions that Gersom Scholem, Benjamin's closest friend, suggested in his memoirs that Benjamin was "a religious if not a mystical thinker who may have been tempted, against the grain of his sensibilities, to superimpose the terms of Marxist discourse upon his metaphysical vision of God, language, and a society ontologically in need of salvation". Also Gilloch (2002a: 19) describes tensions in Benjamin's relationships with Siegfried Kracauer and Theodor Adorno of the Frankfurt School, because of "Benjamin's theological vocabulary", and, mostly, his idea of immanent criticism, which, according to Adorno, could provide "highly subjective (mis)readings".

the same powers which in the world of revelation (which is history) become temporal in an explosive and extensive way, appear intensively in the world of reticence (which is the world of nature and works of art).<sup>39</sup>

In this sense, and by concentrating on the “intrinsic being” of the work, interpretation and history are intertwined: through the interpretation of the work of art, the ‘idea’ behind the work becomes apparent; thus, linking it with other works of a different historical time, which nonetheless share a similar philosophical ‘origin’<sup>40</sup>. Therefore, such a conceptual-interpretive approach to the artwork sheds light on the a-temporal relations between different works: in the sense that the works are not of a similar chronological period, or attributable to a chronological timeframe of linear succession. By tracing the philosophical links between different artworks, their ‘formal’ similarities and characteristics can be understood as autonomous from specific chronological periods. Benjamin termed this as ‘philosophical history’<sup>41</sup>; he further praised this kind of history for possessing dialectical qualities that distinguish it from descriptive histories of ‘evolutionary’ progression:

In literary-historical analysis differences and extremes are brought together in order that they might be relativised in evolutionary terms. In a conceptual treatment they acquire the status of complementary forces,

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<sup>39</sup> This excerpt from Benjamin’s ‘Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften’ is translated and quoted in Wolin (1994: 83).

<sup>40</sup> Benjamin employed the term ‘origin’ throughout the thesis. In the following excerpt included in Benjamin (1998: 47), he specifically relates this concept to history: “There takes place in every original phenomenon a determination of the form in which an idea will constantly confront the historical world, until it is revealed fulfilled, in the totality of its history. Origin is not, therefore, discovered by the examination of actual findings, but it is related to their history and their subsequent development. The principles of philosophical contemplation are recorded in the dialectic, which is inherent in origin. This dialectics shows singularity and repetition to be conditioned by one another in all essentials.”

<sup>41</sup> Benjamin (1998: 47) used the term ‘philosophical history’; he further explained that: “Philosophical history, the science of the origin, is the form which, in the remotest extremes and the apparent excesses of the process of development, reveals the configuration of the idea – the sum total of all possible meaningful juxtapositions of such opposites.”

and history is seen as no more than the coloured border to their crystalline simultaneity. (Benjamin, 1998: 38)

In one of his later essays, entitled 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (1940), Benjamin further expanded his critique of historicism. He described the traditional historiographer as "a chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones" and "acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history" (Benjamin, 1992: 246). For Benjamin, the uncritical recording of events that is considered to document the past "the way it really was" (Benjamin, 1992: 247), provides only a universal history; which usually favours the ruling classes. Although the Marxist influence is more apparent in this piece of writing, Benjamin here remains consistent with his earlier ideas on a philosophical interpretation of the past; as he further argued:

Historicism rightly culminates in universal history. Materialistic historiography differs from it as to method more clearly than from any other kind. Universal history has no theoretical armature. Its method is additive; it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time. Materialistic historiography, on the other hand, is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallises into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad.<sup>42</sup> (Benjamin, 1992: 254)

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<sup>42</sup> Wolin (1994: 96) comments that Benjamin's "theoretical reliance on the metaphysical tradition becomes especially apparent in his employment of the categories of 'origin' and 'monad' to illustrate the being of ideas." Wolin (1994: 99) further explains, quoting Benjamin, that: "The category of 'monad' serves as an additional illustration of the being and specificity of the idea. Like origin, the monad knows history not in terms of its extensive empirical being, but as something *integral* and *essential*: 'Its history is inward in character and is not to be understood as something boundless, but as something related to essential being, and it can therefore be

### ***1.b: The Storyteller and the History-teller***

In another essay from the later period of Benjamin's work, called 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov' (1936), historiography outside historicism is also discussed, but this time in relationship to storytelling. Referring to one of the first historiographers, the Greek Herodotus, Benjamin (1992: 89) argued that Herodotus's work is essentially that of a storyteller: "The first storyteller of the Greeks was Herodotus. In the fourteenth chapter of his *Histories* there is a story from which much can be learned." Benjamin went on to further argue that historiography could be the framework for all epic forms:

Any examination of a given epic form is concerned with the relationship of this form to historiography. In fact, one may go even further and raise the question whether historiography does not constitute the common ground of all forms of the epic. Then written history would be in the same relationship to the epic forms as white light is to the colours of the spectrum. (Benjamin, 1992: 95)

Here, Benjamin describes historiography as a common framework between certain literary forms, drawing upon his discussion of storytelling as a means of passing on experience. As Benjamin (1992: 96-97) explained, in the classical tradition of the Greeks, memory was the muse of the epic arts. Furthermore, memory keeps record of a happening; thus, aids the passing on of the event to future generations. If the process of recording events is essential to historiography and the epic, then it is reasonable that the writing of an epic story might

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described as the past and subsequent history of this being. The past and subsequent history of such essences is, as a sign of their redemption or collection in the preserve of the world of ideas, not pure history, but natural history'." He further comments on Benjamin's note: "The idea is a monad – that means briefly: every idea contains the image of the world. The purpose of the representation of the idea is nothing less than an abbreviated outline of this image of the world" (Benjamin, 1998: 48). Wolin (1994: 100) discusses further this extract, claiming that: "The concept of monad therefore attempts to stress the irreducible individuality of the ideas as opposed to their traditional hierarchical ordering within the philosophical system."

resemble the writing of history. Or put another way, like a historiographer, the storyteller constructs ‘stories’ from experiences:

The storyteller takes what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale. (Benjamin, 1992: 87)

In order to delve deeper into Benjamin’s meaning of experience discussed above, it is important to note that the German lexicon defines ‘experience’ in two separate ways, represented by the wording: *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*. Thus, a differentiation is formed between the experience that relates to the practical encounter with an event (*Erlebnis*), and the experience that relates to knowledge acquired over time (*Erfahrung*); as argued by Ben Highmore (2002: 66-67) in the following:

As for many German writers, for Benjamin the investigation of experience plays on the nuanced distinction between experience as that which is simply lived-through (*Erlebnis*) and experience as something that can be accumulated, reflected upon and communicated (*Erfahrung*). If *Erlebnis* is immediate it also tends towards being inchoate (it is pre-language, pre-reflection). *Erfahrung* on the other hand is what makes *Erlebnis* socially meaningful; it is the point at which experience is examined and evaluated.

It is clear when making a closer reading of Benjamin’s ‘The Storyteller’, that the distinction between ‘lived-through’ and ‘accumulated’ experience underlies his definition of storytelling. For Benjamin, storytelling in the modern world serves as a way of reconnecting with what he calls ‘communicable experience’ – a world where experience as *Erfahrung* has lost its value:



Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly. More and more often there is embarrassment all around when the wish to hear a story is expressed. It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences. (Benjamin, 1992: 83-84)

Subsequently, Benjamin explained that parallel to the continued decline of communication and exchange of experiences within modern society, there has been a decline in the value and use of narrative: “The art of storytelling is reaching its end because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out” (Benjamin, 1992: 86).

Moreover, Benjamin attempted to trace how the decline of communication of experience as accumulated knowledge has influenced the processes of writing modern history. Thus, he reflected on the condition of information in the modern world, by discussing the relationships, between, the chronicler and the modern historian. For Benjamin, the evolving role of information in modern society as a “new form of communication” is interrelated with the increased value of “prompt verifiability” – the immediate – and “plausibility” – the factual (Benjamin, 1992: 88). However, history in its epic form, even when considered in the less literary version of the classical chronicle, does not provide plausible accounts. The chronicler of the Middle Ages, as Benjamin (1992: 95) argued, creates “historical tales” that cannot be considered to demonstrate accuracy or a definite explanation (of events). Rather, he considered the chronicler’s factuality to be replaced by interpretation as it is conditioned by “the divine plan of salvation” ubiquitous within Medieval practices of scholarship:

By basing their historical tales on a divine plan of salvation – an inscrutable one – they have from the very start lifted the burden of demonstrable explanation from their own shoulders. Its place is taken by interpretation, which is not concerned with an accurate concatenation of definite events, but with the way these are embedded in the great inscrutable course of the world. (Benjamin, 1992: 95)

Although the chronicler is the precursor of the modern historian in tone and style of writing, the chronicler has, in this sense, more in common with the storyteller: he is a teller of history, a “history-teller” (Benjamin, 1992: 95).

Characteristically of Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller’ essay is written in a fragmented and aphoristic way; therefore, no explicit argument is developed.<sup>43</sup> However, I propose that, in fact, throughout the essay, Benjamin adopts an implicit critical position towards modern historiography, as the balance of his argument is against the reduction of interpretative narrative in historiography.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, I believe that Benjamin is consistent in his implication that, for modernity, historiography as historicism that communicates information has largely replaced historiography that serves as narrative. Thus, *Erfahrung* has been dominated by *Erlebnis*, and with that has come the decline of historian as history-teller; as Benjamin wrote:

Every morning brings us the news of the globe, and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories. This is because no event any longer comes to us

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<sup>43</sup> What Susan Sontag (2001: 129) calls ‘freeze-frame baroque’. Sontag (2001: 129) remarks that, in Benjamin's texts, “sentences do not seem to generate in the ordinary way; they do not entail”, therefore they do not create an obvious line of reasoning. Instead, it is as if each sentence “had to say everything, before the inward gaze of total concentration dissolved the subject before his eyes”.

<sup>44</sup> In the essay ‘The author as producer’ (1934), Benjamin argued more explicitly in favour of the political role of literature in modern life; as he stated: “You will find this confirmed: only the literalisation of all the conditions of life provides an accurate conception of the range of this melting-down process, just as the state of the class struggle determines the temperature at which – more or less perfectly – it is accomplished.” (Benjamin, 1999b: 776)

without already being shot through with explanation [...] Actually, it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it. Leskov is the master at this. The most extraordinary things, marvelous things, are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connection of the events is not forced on the reader. It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks. (Benjamin, 1992: 89)

Benjamin picks up on the tension between modern storytelling and historiography. In reaction, he proposes a historiography that is open to an interpretive critical reading that could be largely inspired by the form of literary narrative that does not put forward a particular explanation or view of events as truthful. Instead, it allows for the reader's interpretations, whilst offering something "useful":

All this points to the nature of every real story. It contains, openly or covertly, something useful. The usefulness may, in one case, consist in a moral; In another, in some practical advice; In a third, in a proverb or maxim. (Benjamin, 1992: 86)

'The Storyteller' is clearly inspired by the work of Nikolai Leskov, a Russian writer influenced by the tradition of storytelling, who produced work spanning across journalism, novel and short story writing. According to Benjamin, the authorship of Leskov, inclusive of openly subjective commentary, humour and irony, is a model example of writing, which allows for the interpretative and critical engagement of the reader.<sup>45</sup> Benjamin's advocacy of a

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<sup>45</sup> Benjamin had previously discussed journalistic writing in a similar context, in the essay 'The author as producer'. This essay focused on the work of another Russian journalist and literary writer, Sergei Tretiakov.

writing that is open to an interpretive critical reading is related to his Marxist, anti-capitalist views; as stated in his essay 'The Author as Producer' (1934): "For in Western Europe the newspaper does not constitute a serviceable instrument of production in the hands of the writer. It still belongs to capital" (Benjamin, 1999b: 772). Finally, the last part of this section will discuss Benjamin's philosophical understanding of the role of storytelling and literature for critical writing.

## **Chapter 2:**

### **The 'Experiencing Subject' as Narrator, Writer and Critic**

So far, I have discussed Walter Benjamin's ideas on criticism and historiography, with mention of the influences from his philosophical engagement with art and literature. I have begun to examine how his conception of art and literature within an epistemological framework shaped his ideas on historiography and criticism against and beyond historicism: "The critic has nothing in common with the interpreter of past cultural epochs" (Benjamin, 1996: 460). Various critics have described Benjamin as a thinker that did not strive for a coherent position.<sup>46</sup> This attitude resonates with his view of the past, which is not a historicism, nor a total construct or a 'grand narrative', but consists of historical fragments that relate to each other in a conceptual and metaphysical way through reference and interrelation.

Furthermore, I have drawn upon Benjamin's discussion of storytelling in order to demonstrate how literary writing may provide an example, or even a background, for historical writing. Upon closer examination of Benjamin's literary theory, it becomes clear

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<sup>46</sup> As Sontag (1979: 27) notes: "Passionately, but also ironically, Benjamin placed himself at the crossroads. It was important for him to keep his many 'positions' open: the theological, the Surrealist/aesthetic, the communist. One position corrects another: he needed them all. Decisions of course, tended to spoil the balance of these positions, vacillation kept everything in place."

that he dismisses the formalistic preoccupations of writing, in order that it can be reconsidered in its historical dimensions. As Benjamin claimed in ‘The Author as Producer’:

There were not always novels in the past, and there will not always have to be; there have not always been tragedies or great epics. Not always were the forms of commentary, translation, indeed even so-called plagiarism playthings in the margins of literature; they had a place not only in the philosophical but also in the literary writings of Arabia and China. (Benjamin, 1999b: 771)

From this perspective, as long as the writer is aware of the historical, and often ideological, nature of writing, he/she can be critical of formal notions; and “the conventional distinction between genres, between writer and poet, between scholar and populariser [...] between author and reader” (Benjamin, 1999b: 772). Therefore, writing that oscillates between differing stylistic conventions opens up to the reader’s interpretation.

Crucially for the argument put forward in this dissertation, I have integrated an aspect of what Benjamin describes as the blurring between different categories of writing. I am specifically interested in how the roles of historiography, criticism and storytelling can be interchangeable. Furthermore, I wish to expand upon my earlier discussion by drawing upon the Benjaminian idea of experience to explore the notion of the ‘experiencing subject’ as narrator/storyteller, historiographer, and critic.

The idea of experience is central to Benjamin’s critical theory and philosophy, which, as I have already discussed, sought to establish, among other things, an epistemological connection with Romanticism. Howard Caygill has situated Benjamin’s critique within the context of Romantic art criticism, which he sees as an extension to Kantian aesthetics: “Benjamin saw the Romantics extending a speculative side of critique that was latent but underdeveloped in Kant’s transcendental philosophy. In this he identified the beginnings of

art criticism as opposed to the judgment of art” (Caygill, 1998: 41-42). Within this process, Benjamin had to re-conceive experience beyond Kantian transcendentalism; as Caygill (1998: 2) argues:

In his critique of Kant’s concept of experience, Benjamin not only extended the neo-Kantian attempt to dissolve the distinction between intuition and understanding, but went further in seeking a concept of ‘speculative experience’. This recast the distinction between intuition/understanding and reason into an avowed metaphysics of experience in which the absolute manifests itself in spatio-temporal experience, but indirectly in complex, tortuous and even violent forms.

Furthermore, according to Caygill (1998: 3), such a re-conceptualisation of experience “put into question a further assumption of the critical philosophy, namely the distinction between the *activity* of reason and understanding and the *passivity* of intuition, as well as that between the visual (geometrical) axioms of intuition and the acroamatic (discursive/linguistic) categories of the understanding.” In the context of storytelling, experience takes the form of the story. Traditionally, this is communicated and circulated orally; as Benjamin (1992: 84) stated, “Experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn.” As mentioned above, in the Benjaminian sense, “experience is not primarily linguistic, it does not take place within the field of linguistic signification” (Caygill, 1998: xiv). Therefore, I would suggest that experience, in the Benjaminian context, is instead a lived and concrete reality, intrinsically connected with human life. Benjamin went further to compare the storyteller to a craftsman that works with “raw material”:

In fact, one can go on and ask oneself whether the relationship of the storyteller to his material, human life, is not in itself a craftsman’s

relationship, whether it is not his very task to fashion the raw material of experience, his own and that of others, in a solid, useful, and unique way. (Benjamin, 1992: 106-107)

It is perhaps paradoxical to conceive of something linguistic as a physical reality. However, I believe that this idea is revealing of the complexity of Benjamin's concept of experience, and its ambition to bridge over the intuitive and the rational. Such an understanding further justifies Benjamin's characterisation of the storyteller as 'craftsman' several times in the essay<sup>47</sup>:

The storytelling that thrives for a long time in the milieu of work – the rural, the maritime, and the urban – is itself an artisan form of communication, as it were. It does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel. Storytellers tend to begin their story with a presentation of the circumstances in which they themselves have learned what is to follow, unless they simply pass it off as their own experience. (Benjamin, 1992: 91)

It is significant to note the Romantic influence that is particularly obvious in this extract. In his thesis *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism* (1920)<sup>48</sup>, Benjamin (1996: 121)

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<sup>47</sup> In the same essay, Benjamin quoted Russian writer Nikolai Leskov, who claimed that "Writing is to me no liberal art, but a craft." (Benjamin, 1992: 91)

<sup>48</sup> This was Benjamin's doctoral dissertation at the University of Bern, which was published in 1920. According to Caygill (1998: 41), this thesis, a predecessor of *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, was initially conceived as an attempt to "extend and enrich Kant's concept of experience". However, as Caygill (1998: 41) further mentions, Benjamin soon realised that "Kant's aesthetics constitute the underlying premise of Romantic art criticism",

discussed the early Romantic view that reflection and cognition are inseparable. He further drew upon Fichte's idea of reflective thought as a transformative practice that operates on a formal level: "Thus, by 'reflection' is understood the transformative – and nothing but transformative – activity of reflecting on a form" (Benjamin, 1996: 122). This is clearly relevant to storytelling, which, as we have discussed, is for Benjamin the form by which experience is communicated. In 'The Storyteller', the story is described as something that is constantly reconfigured through the experience of communication, thus, the telling of the story; which can be considered as a reflective process. Furthermore, there is the implication that this activity of reconfiguration via storytelling can be potentially infinite<sup>49</sup> – as long as the story is being told, it is being transformed. Benjamin describes this process as almost mystical<sup>50</sup>:

Seen in this way, the storyteller joins the ranks of the teachers and sages  
[...] For it is granted to him to reach back to a whole lifetime (a life, incidentally, that comprises not only his own experience but no little of the experience of others; what the storyteller knows from hearsay is added to his own). His gift is the ability to relate his life; his distinction, to be able to tell his entire life. The storyteller: he is the man who could let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story. (Benjamin, 1992: 107)

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therefore the thesis focused on a reading of Kant through the early Romantics, mainly F. Schlegel, but also Novalis and Goethe.

<sup>49</sup> Benjamin (1996: 123-124) discussed extensively Fichte's conception of the reflective and positing 'I'. In this discussion, he mentioned that Fichte recognised "two infinite modes of action for the 'I', adding to reflection the action of positing...The active deed is a positing reflection or a reflected position: 'a self-positing as positing...but in no way a mere positing'...According to Fichte, the 'I' sees an infinite activity as its essence, which consists in positing." (Benjamin, 1996: 123)

<sup>50</sup> Commenting on Leskov, Benjamin (1992: 105) wrote: "The lower Leskov descends on the scale of created things the more obviously does his way of viewing things approach the mystical. Actually, as will be shown, there is much evidence that in this, too, a characteristic is revealed which is inherent in the nature of the storyteller".



Discussing further Benjamin's concept of experience, Caygill notes that, in the context of the Romantic view of reflection as transformative infinite process, "reflection occurs in a *medium* and is not the product of a *subject*" (Caygill, 1998: 42); therefore experience cannot be thought in terms of an 'acting I', but rather as 'subject-less': "The view of experience as infinite configuration dissolves any notion of a subject able to occupy a fixed position from which to reflect, since all reflections are already infinitely mediated by other reflections" (Caygill, 1998: 43-44). Considering this, Benjamin's account of storytelling as a 'craft', and as lived practice beyond subjective interpretation, can now be related to his discussion of critical historiography.<sup>51</sup> By this understanding of storytelling, the 'experiencing subject' operates outside of the traditional idea of subjectivity that presupposes a fixed perspective; instead the perspective of the 'experiencing subject' is constantly reconfigured through his or her encounter with the story. Therefore, the storyteller-as-narrator of past events, recounts those events through a reflective lived practice; involving, and retaining the potential to involve, multiple subjectivities: those of 'tellers' or 'listeners'. To conclude, Benjamin's conception of history; firstly, as a tracing of a-temporal relations between different historical objects; and secondly, as a critical history that is open to interpretation; sits well within his conception of experience: where reflective thinking and infinite interpretative process come together. In this context, storytelling can be conceived to be an open-ended and collective process of making history, where the 'experiencing subject' plays a fundamental role as a critical narrator of history.

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<sup>51</sup> Sontag (1979: 18) claims that: "Benjamin's propensity is to go against the usual interpretation; since 'all human knowledge takes the form of interpretation', he understood the importance of being against interpretation wherever it is obvious; his most common strategy is to drain symbolism out of some things...and pour it into others, where nobody suspects its existence".

## Section [2]:

### The Critical Aesthetics of Modern Urbanism

*The process of observation is at the same time a subjective and objective process, an ideal and real experiment.*<sup>52</sup>

*Novalis*

*Romanticism was substituting for reasoned appreciation of architecture, an attitude affective, emotional, and indirect in the extreme.*<sup>53</sup>

*Henry-Russell Hitchcock*

*Why should there be anything wrong about feeling at home in a world that appears to be the result of our own activity?*<sup>54</sup>

*Maurice Blanchot*

*Experiences are lived similarities.*<sup>55</sup>

*Walter Benjamin*

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<sup>52</sup> Novalis is quoted in (Benjamin, 1996: 148)

<sup>53</sup> (Hitchcock, 1970: 11)

<sup>54</sup> (Haase and Large, 2001: 57)

<sup>55</sup> (Benjamin, 1999b: 553)

## Chapter 1: Space and Subjectivity in Early Modern German Aesthetics

The widely held, contemporary, view of space as an integral constituent of architecture is only a relatively recent conception. It is well established, in contemporary discourses of architectural history, that, until the nineteenth century, the notion of space was understood solely as a metaphysical concept, without ever being thought of in aesthetic, physical – or real – terms. However, the appropriation of the notion of space within the plastic arts, such as architecture and sculpture, has roots in modernity; as is claimed by Adrian Forty (2000: 256):

As a term, ‘space’ simply did not exist in the architectural vocabulary until the 1890s. Its adoption is intimately connected with the developments of modernism, and whatever it means, therefore, belongs to the specific historical circumstances of modernism, just as is the case with ‘space’s’ partners, ‘form’ and ‘design’.

In addition, Cornelis Van de Ven locates the appearance of spatial notions in the plastic arts and architecture in the late 1800s:

One will not find one architectural treatise from before the last half of the nineteenth century, in which the idea of space is regarded as essential if at all. Until then it remained a thought *in abstracto*, clearly reserved for the realm of the philosopher and scientist. (Van de Ven, 1987: xi)

One of the key themes that interested Van de Ven was how the abstract and intellectual ideas of space were expressed in modern German language. Specifically, he analysed the

etymology of the German word for ‘space’; *raum*, which comes from the tectonic *ruum*, and that has informed (through the Germanic line) the English: ‘room’. Significantly, these meanings differ from the more abstract term ‘space’, which instead comes from the Latin term *spatium* (Van de Ven, 1987: xiii). Based on this analysis, Van de Ven further argued that the German interior, ‘raum’, had provided the first material formalisation of the abstract notion of space. Implicit in the formulation he identified, Van de Ven (1987: xiv) saw a re-conceptualisation of space, as “a sensory perception of reality and an intellectual idea [...] fused together”.

Furthermore, both Van de Ven and Forty advocate an architectural history, which attributes this unification, of abstract philosophical concept and architectural form, to German aesthetic theories of the late nineteenth century; arguing that this subsequently influenced modern architecture and planning.<sup>56</sup> In a seminal volume of key essays on early modern German aesthetics, translated into English, entitled *Empathy, Form and Space* (1994), Harry Mallgrave and Eleftherios Ikononou discuss the fundamental preoccupation with subjectivity that influenced the German aesthetic theory of that period. They claim: “the issues of form and space can just as well be viewed preeminently as nineteenth-century aesthetic problems” (Mallgrave and Ikononou, 1994: 1). Furthermore, they argue that although bound by Kantian enquiry<sup>57</sup>, German aesthetics demonstrate an original approach to form and space, which reflects a particular “modern sensibility” (Mallgrave and Ikononou, 1994: 2); one that considers the appreciation of form and space as occurring on a “psychological” level:

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<sup>56</sup> As particularly significant for modern architecture, they discuss the theories of Adolf Hildebrand and August Schmarsow, both published in 1893. Forty (2000: 260) discusses Hildebrand’s idea of space as a three dimensional continuum containing objects, as being very influential for 1920s architecture. Van de Ven (1987: xiv) mentions both theorists as influential for modern architecture; whilst he (1987: 104) further discusses the influence of Schmarsow’s ideas on the architect and planner Camillo Sitte.

<sup>57</sup> Mallgrave and Ikononou (1994: 5-8) refer extensively to Kant’s philosophical schema, including his ideas on ‘form’ as “pure form of intuition” and “form of thought”, as they were developed in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. They further discuss his notion of ‘purposiveness’ in aesthetic judgments, which was developed in his *Critique of Judgment*. In relation to Kant’s concepts of form, they state that: “Germane to both was the presumption that we actively constitute form and space in our schematisation of the world. They are, in effect, mental constructions of the observer, the subjective condition under which we sense perception operates.” (Mallgrave and Ikononou, 1994: 5)

The erstwhile philosophical and physiological problem of how we perceive form and space in effect gave way to the fledging psychological problem of how we come to appreciate or take delight in the characteristics of form and space. Implied in this subtle but at the same time dramatic shift was the analogous problem of how we might artistically exploit pure form and space as artistic entities in themselves.

(Mallgrave and Ikonomidou, 1994: 2)

This attempt to consider space in a less abstract, or *a priori* manner, but with a continued reference to subjective experience, is evident throughout early modern German aesthetic theories. Moreover, fundamentally, the conceptions of space that were informed by such theories assumed the existence of a psychological, and specifically empathic, response to space and form. As Mallgrave and Ikonomidou (1994: 17) note, for many of the theories developed between the 1870s and 1890s, the idea of subjective feeling was intimately connected with spatial and formal perception. Furthermore, they acknowledge the specific role of Robert Vischer's concept *Einfühlung* – or 'empathy', in its approximate English translation – in articulating these aesthetic concerns into a theory. Vischer's *Einfühlung* (literally 'in-feeling'), describes the process of perception as a combination of sensation and feeling: a physical, but, equally, mental and emotional response (Mallgrave and Ikonomidou, 1994: 22). According to Vischer, this process is similar to an emotional 'transference', or, a process of reading one's self into an object; or, more broadly speaking, into form and space:

Here it was shown how the body, in responding to certain stimuli in dreams, objectifies itself in spatial forms. Thus it unconsciously projects its own bodily form – and with this also the soul – into the form of the object. From this I derived the notion that I call 'empathy'. (in Mallgrave and Ikonomidou, 1994: 92)

Although the interpretation of spatial experience as intrinsic to intense emotional activity was not without precedent, Vischer's ideas had an especially significant impact<sup>58</sup>. Within discourses of art history and aesthetics of the time, Vischer's theory of empathy acquired a popular interpretation that drew upon the emphasis on psychological aspects of spatial experience<sup>59</sup>; as noted by Vischer's contemporary, Hermann Lotze: "For all spatial forms affect us aesthetically only insofar as they are symbols of a weal or woe personally experienced by us" (in Mallgrave and Ikonomidou, 1994: 21). However, when considered over the longer-term, the idea of empathy can be seen to have had an ambivalent reception. Later German art historians, such as Theodor Lipps and Wilhelm Worringer, proposed aesthetic theories that incorporated empathy within a central position. Nevertheless, they advocated notions of abstraction and geometry in activities of artistic creativity and aesthetic judgment<sup>60</sup>, which, furthermore, could counteract what were held to be negative aspects of empathetic experience. In particular, Worringer's "urge for abstraction" proposed that the search for abstract space was in reaction to the so-called *horror vacui*<sup>61</sup>. Significantly, Vischer's empathetic theory was associated with early psychoanalytic theories of perception<sup>62</sup>. In their

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<sup>58</sup> Mallgrave and Ikonomidou (1994: 21) claim that: "In the early 1870s, when doctoral candidate Robert Vischer selected as his dissertation topic the problem of emotional projection – for which he coined the new term *Einfühlung* – he did so with the philosophical terrain relatively well prepared." However, further on they state that Vischer's thesis "radically altered the aesthetic discussion of an era" (Mallgrave and Ikonomidou, 1994: 22).

<sup>59</sup> "Thus Vischer's early musings on the notion of 'empathy' were soon eclipsed by the wealth of psychological writings popularising this concept" (Mallgrave and Ikonomidou, 1994: 2).

<sup>60</sup> Van de Ven (1987: 81) explains that Lipps observed two kinds of space, a 'geometric' and an 'aesthetic' space: the former is what remains after the elimination of the mass, while the latter is the 'forceful', 'vital' formed space. According to Van de Ven (1987: 99-100), Worringer follows the same pattern when he talks about 'abstraction' and 'empathy', the two vital forces in the human mind. Van de Ven (1987: 100) quotes Worringer, claiming that, empathy, "man's desire for organic, naturalistic form", springs from "a happy pantheistic relationship of confidence between man and the phenomena of the external world"; whilst abstraction, the urge for anorganic, stylized geometry, is the result of "a great inner unrest, inspired in man by the phenomena of the outside world". Van de Ven (1987: 81) also quotes Lipps, who proposed the elimination of the material carrier, "so that the spatial can exist purely".

<sup>61</sup> In his book *Abstraction and Empathy* (1908) as mentioned in (Forty, 2000: 236). Van de Ven (1987: 97) claims that the idea of the 'dread of space' was employed in the theories of Hildebrand, Riegl, Wolfflin, and later Worringer. Vidler (2000: 44) also discusses Worringer's abstraction as a reaction towards the modern mental condition of 'agoraphobia'.

<sup>62</sup> Here, I refer to the psychoanalytic theories of introjection, projection, and identification. As Mallgrave and Ikonomidou (1994: 24, 28) note, in fact, Freud and Vischer both drew upon the same writings on dream interpretation,

discussion of spatial experience as emotional projection, early psychoanalysis described the destabilising affect of space upon the subject. Sigmund Freud used the term ‘un-homely’, from the *unheimlich* in German, to describe negative feelings of repulsion and distress; caused by familiar architectural settings, such as the house; also manifesting in the modern mental diseases related to the experience of modern public space (such as agoraphobia or claustrophobia).<sup>63</sup>

Understood simply, the theory of empathy considers the “subjective content” of the viewer’s aesthetic contemplation (Mallgrave and Ikonomou, 1994: 21). This view is of particular importance for the understanding of Benjamin’s ideas on criticism and experience. However, before expanding upon these links, I will first take a closer look at the Romantic influences on empathetic theory. Thus, I will trace the tensions between ‘empathy’ and ‘abstraction’, and ‘subjectivity’ and ‘objectivity’, within early German modern aesthetics back to Romantic thought.

### ***1.a: Form and the Reflective Subject***<sup>64</sup>

As described in section 1, for the Romantics, reflection through observation of the object was considered to be, both subjective and transcendental: subjective, as an immediate cognition and transcendental, as a reflective critical process. Furthermore, this process was understood to be continuously transformative for the object and the subject. Examining Vischer’s ideas in relation to experience of the object, a number of notable resonances with the early Romantics

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such as philosopher’s Karl Albert Scherner *The life of the dream* (1861) and Johannes Volkelt’s *Dream Fantasy* (1875).

<sup>63</sup> Sigmund Freud (2001: 300) stated that: “Space may be the projection of the extension of the psychical apparatus. No other derivation is probable. Instead of Kant’s *a priori* determinants of our psychical apparatus. Psyche is extended; knows nothing about it. – Note of August 22, 1938”

<sup>64</sup> I refer here to Schlegel’s idea of the reflective ‘self’, and Fichte’s idea of the reflective ‘I’, which I will be discussing further on.

are evident. Vischer's 'empathy' involved more than a purely emotional contact with the object:

In sensing and imagining the object, the activity of perception does not, however, imply a truly emotional contact with that object. Sensation has yet to advance through its partial or total implication with ideas to the stage of psychic feeling.

Before this can happen, a spiritual value or vital force has to be perceived within the phenomenon; the human being must pass through the realm of experience and education. (Mallgrave and Ikonomou, 1994: 102-103)

Vischer described a hierarchical schema where cognition and perception could be understood to occur at distinct stages of relative value. Vischer considered physical sensations to occupy the lowest stages. Subsequently, at the second stage, physical sensations are enhanced through mental images, or 'ideas'. At the third and highest level, he placed empathy for the form of the object, which he described as a 'mental-sensory ego' that was projected into the object (Mallgrave and Ikonomou, 1994: 23). His schema theorises processes that are beyond the cognitive and psychological aspects of experience; thus, resonating with early Romantic ideas on 'reflection'.

Examining the origins of the theory of empathy, Mallgrave and Ikonomou (1994: 17, 27-28) state that early Romantic thinkers, such as Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis, were key influences on Vischer. As it has been discussed, the Romantics believed in the reciprocity between reflective thinking and immediate cognition<sup>65</sup>. This was first formulated in Fichte's

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<sup>65</sup> Benjamin (1996: 121 – 122) mentioned the "reciprocal givenness of reflective thinking and immediate cognition" in Romantic thinking.



formalist conception of reflection: because reflection is always a reflection on a form<sup>66</sup>, reflection requires a cognitive/perceptual knowledge that is immediate. As Benjamin (1996: 147) explained in *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*:

It is clear that this theory of knowledge cannot lead to any distinction between perception and knowledge and that, in essence, it attributes the distinctive features of perception to knowledge as well. According to this theory, knowledge is immediate in the same high degree as only perception can be; and the readiest grounding of the immediacy of perception likewise proceeds from a medium common to the perceiver and the perceived, as the history shows in the case of Democritus, who describes perception on the basis of a partly material interpretation of subject and object. Thus, Novalis likewise proposes that ‘the star appears in the telescope and penetrates it... The star is a spontaneous luminous being, the telescope or eye a receptive luminous being’.

Here Benjamin points at the Romantic idea of the impossibility of distinguishing between cognition and reflection. Benjamin (1996: 147) further stated that ‘observation’ (bearing the often applied synonym ‘experiment’) was integral to the epistemology of early Romanticism. To highlight this, he commented on Novalis’s theory of natural science that was closely linked to the idea of observation. According to Benjamin (1996: 148), Novalis’s descriptions of the observation of a natural object demonstrate a process which is both reflective and perceptual; when one observes a natural object, it essentially means that one must “arouse it to self-recognition”, therefore nature “reveals” itself to the observer via the object. However,

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<sup>66</sup> Benjamin (1996: 122) explained that Fichte “defines ‘reflection’ as ‘reflection of a form’ and in this way proves the immediacy of the knowledge given in”.

this is only possible if “the experimenter is capable, through the heightening of his own consciousness [...] of getting nearer to the object and finally drawing it into himself” (Benjamin, 1996: 148). This process of “magical observation”, as Benjamin (1996: 148) called it, consists of an interaction between ‘subject’ and ‘object’, which involves a merging of the two, after a degree of incorporation of the object by the subject has occurred.

For Benjamin, the aforementioned process resonates with the concept of Romantic reflection, as “the transformative activity of reflecting on a form” that was first developed by Fichte (Benjamin, 1996: 122). Nevertheless, as Benjamin further explained in *The Concept of Criticism*, the concept was appropriated by Novalis, as well as by the later Romantic Friedrich Schlegel; the latter clearly differentiated himself from Fichte, by stating his interest in reflection as mere thought, “as a phenomenon”, rather than as the thought of the ‘I’ (Benjamin, 1996: 128). In this sense, according to Benjamin, the infinity embedded within reflection “for Schlegel and Novalis is not an infinity of continuous advance” of an ‘I’, as in Fichte, but an “infinity of connectedness” between ‘selves’ (Benjamin, 1996: 126); taking as ‘self’ everything (Benjamin, 1996: 128), even natural objects as in Novalis’s schema<sup>67</sup>. Knowledge is then possible only through this interconnectedness<sup>68</sup> of ‘selves’; all bearing their own ‘self-knowledge’, which is further enriched via the connection to others:

How is knowledge outside of self-knowledge possible – that is, how is knowledge of objects possible? In fact, on the principles of Romantic thinking, it is *not* possible. Where there is no self-knowledge, there is no

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<sup>67</sup> Benjamin (1996: 145) argued: “All knowledge is self-knowledge of a thinking being, which does not need to be an ‘I’. Moreover, the Fichtean ‘I’, which is set in opposition to the ‘not-I’, to nature, signifies for Schlegel and Novalis only an inferior form among an infinite number of forms of the self...” He further quoted Novalis: “In all predicates in which we see the fossil, it sees us” (in Benjamin, 1996: 145) and explained that “It is not only persons who can expand their knowledge through intensified self-knowledge in reflection; So- called natural things can do so as well, the concept.” (Benjamin, 1996: 146)

<sup>68</sup> In *The Concept of Criticism*, Benjamin (1996: 126) noted: “To begin with, the infinity of reflection, for Schlegel and Novalis, is not an infinity of continuous advance but an infinity of connectedness...they understood the infinitude of reflection as a full infinitude of interconnection: everything in it is to hang together in an infinitely manifold way”. These theories served as a background for Benjamin’s philosophy of ‘constellation’; see Gilloch (2002a).

knowing at all; where there *is* self-knowledge, there the subject-object correlation is abrogated – there is a subject, if you will, without a correlative object. In spite of this, reality does not form an aggregate of monads locked up in themselves and unable to enter into any real relations with one another. On the contrary... They are so far from being shut up in themselves and free of relations that through the intensification of their reflection... they can incorporate other beings, other centres of reflection, more and more into their own self-knowledge. (Benjamin, 1996: 145-146)

The distinction between ‘subjects’ and ‘objects’ fades within this philosophical schema, and one is forced to reconsider the role of reflection in terms of the thinking ‘subject’, or ‘I’; and, as Gilloch (2002a: 31) sums up:

The self is a product of reflection, rather than reflection being a consequence of self [...] Secondly, in reflection the distinction between the subject and object of knowledge is dissolved. The ‘I’ is both subject and object of knowledge. It is the subject/object of knowledge. Finally, this reflection is ‘an infinite process’, an endless becoming of the self.<sup>69</sup>

In the same context, we can also reconsider the process of reflection of a form, understanding this to occur through the ‘opening up’ of the reflective subject to the world; thus, a transcending of the self. Vischer acknowledged this transcendental aspect of aesthetic experience was, arguing that empathetic feelings towards a form were derived from a human impulse to connect with nature; thus, to essentially transcend oneself. Commenting on

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<sup>69</sup> Gilloch (2002a: 34-35) also notes that: “A central feature of the Romantic concept of criticism, for Benjamin, was its rejection of the subject-object relation”.

Vischer's remark: "He can tolerate no obstacle; He wants to roam the whole world and feel himself as one with it"; Mallgrave and Ikonomou (1994: 26) argue that, for Vischer, the conception of empathy lies less on a purely psychological level, and, hence, is less of a subjective emotional response to form. Instead, they argue, empathy occurs more on a philosophical level, and, thus, is a transcendental process that aims at a radical rethinking of the subject and its separability from the object of empathy; or, in terms of its finite 'singularity'.

Vischer, whilst making explicit such ideas, discusses "the spatial understanding of forms", which he describes in detail as operating through processes of "seeing" and "scanning", occurring at varying degrees of consciousness and attributable value (Vischer, 1994: 93-94). At the highest level, "seeing", an emotional response is involved, which Vischer (1994: 94) sees as a transcendental process; where 'Being' is 'Becoming', resulting in a new unity:

And now, once I have accomplished the process of scanning, the impression of seeing is repeated on a higher level. What I have seemingly separated I have reassembled into an ordered and restful unity. Again I have an enclosed, complete image, but one developed and filled with emotion. The chaotic 'Being' I called 'Become!' – and my Summons brought Light and behold, it was Good.

Mallgrave and Ikonomou characterise Vischer's view of the experience of architectural form, as a phenomenological attitude, since, it concentrates on the phenomenal aspects of architecture. However, they make clear that Vischer's approach is intensified and transformed through the empathetic process. This they describe as an "energetic reading" that involves a physio-mental transference, from the perceiver onto architectural space and form, transcending and altering the perceiver-self (Mallgrave and Ikonomou, 1994: 27). They also

make explicit reference to the Romantic influences upon this aspect of Vischer's theory, further, emphasising the transcendental operation of the empathetic process (Mallgrave and Ikonomou, 1994: 26-27). As they conclude:

Although the notion of empathy in English can suggest a simple projection of emotions or the emotional response we may feel toward an object, it denotes for Vischer a more radical and thoroughgoing transference of our personal ego, one in which our whole personality (consciously or unconsciously) merges with the object. In essence, we fill out the appearance with the content of our soul. And whereas in aesthetic contemplation this merger of the self with the object may take place consciously, it more generally takes place unconsciously in our day-to-day activities. It is a pervasive attitude, an openness that we maintain with the world. (Mallgrave and Ikonomou, 1994: 25)

In architectural terms, such ideas bear many interesting implications. After all, architecture is experienced on an everyday level; therefore, empathetic/reflective experience can acquire greater significance for architecture, than, say, for an artwork. Subsequently, in the following chapter 2, I will explore these ideas through Walter Benjamin's writings on modern urbanism, further drawing upon his ideas of immanent criticism and experience that were discussed in section 1.

## Chapter 2: The Experience of the City in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

Experiences are lived similarities.

There is no greater error than the attempt to construe experience – in the sense of life experience – according to the model on which the exact natural sciences are based. What is decisive here is not the causal connections established over the course of time, but the similarities that have lived.

That experience and observation are identical has to be shown. See the concept of ‘romantic observation’ in my dissertation. – Observation is based on self-immersion. (Benjamin, 1999b: 553)

Evident in the above fragment, entitled ‘Experience’, are many of the themes that underpin Benjamin’s philosophy. The themes previously discussed in section 1, are: anti-historicism, conceptual rather than formal connections, experience as observation. It is significant to note that Benjamin wrote the above fragment in the early 1930s, which was during an important period for the development of his writings on cities.<sup>70</sup> His fascination with cityscapes, first demonstrated in his 1925 essay on Naples, had consistently grown into an interest in urban experience; especially in relation to the new, dynamic setting of the modern European city. During the same year as ‘Experience’, Benjamin wrote ‘Berlin Chronicle’, a fragmentary but extensive piece on his native Berlin, as well as a number of shorter essays, mainly on South European cities<sup>71</sup>. Similarly to his previous urban works, the texts bear motifs of memory,

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<sup>70</sup> Benjamin wrote this essay – which remained unpublished in his lifetime – in 1931 or 1932 (Benjamin, 1999b: 553).

<sup>71</sup> Benjamin started drafting and completed ‘Berlin Chronicle’ in 1932, recounting his memories of his childhood and youth. After Benjamin’s death, Scholem published those memoirs under the current title. The essays ‘Ibizan Sequence’, ‘Spain’, and ‘Hashish in Marseilles’ date from the same period and were inspired by Benjamin’s travels. See (Benjamin, 1999b: 843-846).

observation, dream, and word-play (Gilloch, 2002a: 90), interlaced into fragmented narratives. These later texts, however, show more obvious signs of ‘juxtaposition’: dreams of Berlin interpenetrate descriptions of Ibiza interiors; memories of Paris illuminate scenes from the Berlin streets; Marseilles, experienced under the influence of hashish, is described as a mosaic of contradictory images.

Benjamin’s explorations of diverse urban experiences, until then, had occurred in a comparative way; or, as he claimed in his essay on Moscow, ‘through’ each other: “More quickly than Moscow itself, one gets to know Berlin through Moscow” (Benjamin, 1999a: 22). As Caygill (1998: 118) mentions, Benjamin selected other cities that were oriented geographically around his home city of Berlin, with the aim to critique Northern European urbanism; with particular interest in the changes occurring under the forces of modernisation. Benjamin’s urban writings formed a critique of the modernisation of the urban environment, and more broadly, a critique of bourgeois Western European culture. For instance, this can be seen in his writings such as: *One-Way Street* (1928), which contains references to Paris’s radical change under the modern urban planning of Baron Haussmann during the Second Empire<sup>72</sup>; and ‘Berlin Chronicle’ (1932), with its descriptions of industrial architecture and ‘left-over’ spaces of modern urbanism<sup>73</sup>. The use of ‘juxtaposition’ as an epistemo-methodological strategy reflected Benjamin’s critical intention, which became intensified in the 1930s, when he began exploring the impact of modern technologies on art and perception; which can be seen in his essays ‘Little History of Photography’ (1931) and ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ (1935). He was fascinated with the new techniques of montage, close-up and printing reproduction, which came with film and photography.

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<sup>72</sup> The dedication at the beginning of the book constitutes the most explicit reference; it reads: “This street is named Asja Lacis Street after her who as an engineer cut it through the author” (Benjamin, 1996: 444). Gilloch (2002a: 92) argues that this was also a reference to the “more contemporary ‘urban surgery’ advocated by Le Corbusier”.

<sup>73</sup> Such as railway stations and avenues; see (Benjamin, 1999b: 606, 609).

These inspired Benjamin to review his concept of experience and to further relate it to the experience of modern urban space<sup>74</sup>.

## ***2.a: The City as Montage of Images***

*One-Way Street*, written in parallel to the latter stages of *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, represents the starting point for Benjamin's turn away from scholarly discourse. Benjamin focused instead on applying his philosophical ideas to modern urban life<sup>75</sup> and on experimenting with new writing methods, more akin to the spirit of modernity. *One-Way Street* is well known for its documentary-like qualities, following a structure that appropriates the technique of cinematic 'montage': it is a selection of textual fragments that describe observations and thoughts inspired by Berlin and other cities. In this way Benjamin aimed to introduce a new kind of criticism favouring immediate experience – even the kind of immersive experience evoked when watching a film. As he stated in the fragment of *One-Way Street* called 'This Space for Rent':

Criticism is a matter of correct distancing. It was at home in a world where perspectives and prospects counted and where it was possible to adopt a standpoint. Now things press too urgently on human society. The «unclouded», «innocent» eye has become a lie, perhaps the whole naive mode of expression sheer incompetence. Today the most real, mercantile gaze into the heart of things is the advertisement. It tears down the stage upon which contemplation moved, and all but hits us between the

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<sup>74</sup> According to Caygill (1998: 118), the city writings "should not be read as a discrete and identifiably separate part of Benjamin's authorship but as a development and intensification of the speculative concept of experience informing his philosophical, critical and aesthetic writings".

<sup>75</sup> *One-Way Street* was written between 1923 and 1926, and was published in 1928. Benjamin completed his, unsuccessful, doctorate thesis, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, in 1925, and eventually published it in 1928; the same year as *One-Way Street*. See (Benjamin, 1996: 487, 512).



eyes with things as a car, growing to gigantic proportions, careens at us out of a film screen. And just as the film does not present furniture and facades in completed forms for critical inspection, their insistent, jerky nearness alone being sensational, the genuine advertisement hurls things at us with the tempo of a good film. Thereby 'matter-of-factness' is finally dispatched, and in the face of the huge images spread across the walls of houses, where toothpaste and cosmetics lie handy for giants, sentimentality is restored to health and liberated in American style, just as people whom nothing moves or touches any longer are taught to cry again by films. (Benjamin, 1996: 476)

Benjamin argued for an emergent criticism generated by the experience of the artwork at the very moment it is experienced. As seen in *The Origin Of German Tragic Drama*, he was less favourable towards the dissociative criticism that was based upon accepted stylistic or other formal classifications. In *One-Way Street*, Benjamin's approach to criticism is situated within the differing context of the modern urban environment, which he sees as developing and being transformed through modern technologies. In the above quote, Benjamin claims that proximity, immersion and immediacy are inherent within the experience of the modern city. In a cinematic manner, the city offers fragmented, distorted, out-of-scale views; therefore, it makes reflection upon a 'thing' by distant, or, overall perception, impossible. This immersive, immediate experience of the city encourages a new kind of criticism. Commenting on *One-Way Street*, Gilloch (2002: 90) states:

Here one encounters an unequivocal demand for a new, vital critical practice informed by the techniques of modern media – film, journalism and advertising – and by the experience of the contemporary

metropolitan environment. Velocity, tactility, proximity – these were to be the principles of a radical new criticism.

In the subsequent essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, Benjamin criticised the traditional forms of art, stating that the value of the artwork lies in its ‘aura’, its authentic uniqueness<sup>76</sup>; thus, appreciation of art is promoted on a ritualistic, cult basis (Benjamin, 1992: 217). Furthermore, Benjamin declared the imminent breakdown of such forms of art in modernity, celebrating the appearance of art in a newer form produced by the modern techniques of reproduction, which he argued stood to promote politics instead of ritual:

[...] for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility [....] But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice – politics. (Benjamin, 1992: 218)

Benjamin argued that the political potential of the new, ‘unauratic’ art came about when the distancing of the artwork from the masses, created and sustained for the sake of its ritualistic value, began to break down. As Caygill claims quoting Benjamin:

Tradition worked by distancing its objects as past in order to bring them to presence in the present; Technology however destroys this distance. Benjamin sees this phenomenon as based in two social circumstances,

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<sup>76</sup> In ‘Little History of Photography’, Benjamin (1999b: 518) claimed: “What is aura, actually? A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be.”

‘both of which are related to the increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life. Namely, the desire of contemporary masses to bring things ‘closer’ spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent towards overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction’.<sup>77</sup>

The fact that modern technologies enabled the social desire to bring art ‘closer’ to the masses, for Benjamin, led to a radical political reconfiguration of art. Benjamin started exploring such ideas in the essay ‘Little History of Photography’, in which he discussed the new technological medium of photography and its potential to alter traditional conceptions of art. In this essay Benjamin advocated that greater attention be paid to ‘art-as-photography’, rather, than to ‘photography-as-art’:

It is indeed significant that the debate has raged most fiercely around the aesthetics of photography-as-art, whereas the far less questionable social fact of art-as-photography was given scarcely a glance. And yet the impact of the photographic reproduction of artworks is of very much greater importance for the function of art than the greater or lesser artistry of a photography that regards all experience as fair game for the camera. (Benjamin, 1999b: 520)

The article discusses how new photographic techniques, such as enlargement, slow motion and the close-up, can alter one’s perceptual awareness and understanding of the world; whilst at the same time opening up possibilities for art to transcend its traditionally representational function. Furthermore, Benjamin comments on how reproduction, through print, annihilates

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<sup>77</sup> In the essay ‘Benjamin, Heidegger and Tradition’, Caygill (2000a: 24) quotes Benjamin from ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’.

the auratic status of the artwork; thus, bringing it closer to the masses. ‘Little History of Photography’ introduced ideas that would eventually be further explored in ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, which, however, would be focused on the technologies of film. Benjamin regarded film as bearing an even greater potential for the reconfiguration of art and its sociopolitical role beyond auratic ends<sup>78</sup>. Benjamin argued that film “comprises certain factors of movement which are in reality those of the camera, not to mention special camera angles, close-ups, etc.”, subjecting its ‘object’ – often the performance of the actor – to “a series of optical tests” (Benjamin, 1992: 222); therefore, destroying any ‘wholeness’ or ‘continuity’ in the perception of the ‘object’, along with its ‘aura’<sup>79</sup>. Benjamin further stated that, in this way, the audience is prevented from becoming passive participants in a ritual, but instead, are forced “to take the position of a critic” (Benjamin, 1992: 222). A crucial trigger for the critical processes developed via film is ‘montage’: the editing together of different images. This specifically cinematic technique creates the juxtaposition of images, or views, of one single ‘object’, in a continuous streaming mode. According to Benjamin, this brings the spectator to a state of ‘shock’, which reinforces a reflective, critical attitude:

I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images.’ The spectator’s process of association in

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<sup>78</sup> Benjamin (1992: 215) argued: “By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproductions to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind. Both processes are intimately connected with the contemporary mass movements. Their most significant agent is the film. Its social significance, particularly in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage.” However, Benjamin (1992: 221) further recognised that film can be used for auratic ends: “The film responds to the shriveling of the aura with an artificial build-up of the ‘personality’ [of the actor] outside the studio. The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the ‘spell of the personality’, the phony spell of a commodity.” (Benjamin, 1992: 224); and: “It is instructive to note how their desire to class the film among the ‘arts’ forces these theoreticians to read ritual elements into it...Yet when these speculations were published, films like *L’Opinion Publique* and *The Gold Rush* had already appeared. This did not keep...Severin-Mars from speaking of the film as one might speak of paintings by Fra Angelico. Characteristically, even today ultra reactionary authors give the film a similar contextual significance – if not an outright sacred one, then at least a supernatural one.”

<sup>79</sup> “The aura that envelops the actor vanishes, and with it the aura of the figure he portrays” (Benjamin, 1992: 223).

view of these images is indeed interrupted by their constant, sudden change. This constitutes the shock effect of the film, which, like all shocks, should be cushioned by heightened presence of mind. (Benjamin, 1992: 231-232)

On further examination of his city writings, it becomes clear that Benjamin's view of the experience of the modern city was informed by his discussion of new artistic technologies and processes. 'This Space for Rent' finishes with the following aphorism:

What, in the end, makes advertisements so superior to criticism? Not what the moving red neon sign says – but the fiery pool reflecting in the asphalt. (Benjamin, 1996: 476)

Such a juxtaposition of images has become a common part of the contemporary or modern experience of the city. For instance, by reference to the above quote, the reflection of a neon advertisement sign on the tarmac of the city streets requires a radically new perceptual understanding of modern urban space; which, in turn, opens up possibilities for a radically new kind of criticism. It is within this framework that Benjamin conceived of his 'thought-images' as a critical way of describing the modern city. As Gilloch argues, the 'thought-images' – or *Denkbilder* in German (Gilloch, 2002b: 164) – are textual city portraits, which are made from the assemblage and juxtaposition of ephemeral impressions of the city street: "its architecture, objects, and spaces; its milling crowds and deafening traffic; its teeming markets and bazaars; the various theatrical performances of street vendors, swindlers, beggars and other eccentric characters; its encounters, contingencies and seductions." (Gilloch, 2002b: 94) Benjamin believed that, through this process, the true character of the modern city could be revealed<sup>80</sup>. Philosophically speaking, here Benjamin is in accordance with his concept of

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<sup>80</sup> Gilloch (2002b: 94) describes the 'thought-images' as "monadological fragments".

art criticism as developed in *The Origin Of German Tragic Drama*: similarly to the immanent critique of an artwork, the ‘thought-images’, as immediate responses to the fleeting impressions of the modern city, can disclose the nature of modern urbanism<sup>81</sup>. Whilst writing his ‘thought-images’, Benjamin was determined to resist the abstraction of theorisation. Writing on his 1927 essay ‘Moscow’, he stated:

My presentation will be devoid of all theory. In this fashion I hope to allow the ‘creatural’ to speak for itself...I want to write a description of Moscow at the present moment in which ‘all factuality is already theory’ and which thereby refrain from any deductive abstraction, from any prognostication, and even within certain limits, from any judgment. (in Gilloch, 2002b: 93)

I argue that, from a broader perspective, Benjamin’s approach to art criticism, which focused on the ‘object’ of criticism itself, be it artwork, architecture or urbanism, bears resonances with early modern German aesthetics. As Mallgrave and Ikonomou (1994: 4) explain, a shift from Hegelian inspired historicism, which viewed history “in terms of great relationships of race, culture, and spirit” occurred within German aesthetics, which instead placed emphasis on the work of art itself. Although he was skeptical towards their tendency to pure formalism<sup>82</sup>, Benjamin showed interest in German aesthetics, especially in his writings on art. In the essay ‘The Rigorous Study of Art’ (1932), Benjamin paid tribute to Alois Riegl’s ‘materialist’ approach to art history and criticism<sup>83</sup>. The focus on materiality in Riegl’s work was for Benjamin the only way to overcome the dualism between “a flat, universalising history

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<sup>81</sup> In the same way that the ‘idea’ of the artwork is disclosed through immanent criticism; a criticism that is focused on the artwork itself, and on the critic’s immediate experience of the artwork.

<sup>82</sup> In particular towards Heinrich Wofflin’s formalism; see (Benjamin, 1999b: 666, 668).

<sup>83</sup> Alois Riegl was an Austrian art historian, whose book *The Late Roman Art Industry* exerted an enormous influence on Benjamin; see (Benjamin, 1999b: 637).

of the art of ‘all cultures and times’, on the one hand, and an academic aesthetic, on the other” (Benjamin, 1999b: 666). Fundamental to Riegl’s theory was the idea that art (including architecture) should be understood historically in relation to changes in human perception of the material world at successive stages of history (Forty, 2000: 264). Based on this, he described a historical transition from tactile to optical modes of perception, which occurred between early antiquity and the late Roman period (Mallgrave and Ikonomou, 1994: 63).

The “physiological basis” of Riegl’s aesthetics (Mallgrave and Ikonomou, 1994: 65) can be easily discerned in Benjamin’s criticism of the modern city, with its focus on the sensational and the imagistic. In ‘Berlin Chronicle’, written the same year as ‘The Rigorous Study of Art’, Benjamin mentioned his then recent reading of Riegl’s book *The Late Roman Art Industry*. He further described and defined the ‘image’ as a determinant of his memories of his home city:

The limitation of my own feeling for the Berlin that is not circumscribed by a few facts about the Stratau Fair and King Frederick in 1848 – that is, for the topographic tradition representing the connection with the dead of this ground – results entirely from the fact that neither of my parents families was native to Berlin. This sets a limit to the child’s memory – and it is this limit, rather than childhood experience itself, that is manifest in what follows. Wherever this boundary may have been drawn, however, the second half of the nineteenth century certainly lies within it, and to it belong the following images, not in the manner of general representations, but of images that, according to the teachings of Epicurus, constantly detach themselves from things and determine our perception of them. (Benjamin, 1999b: 613)

Benjamin's city writings attempted to select and arrange urban 'images' that served as perceptual and affective responses to the complex material manifestations of the modern city. In this sense, I argue that his 'thought-images' were intrinsically anti-historicist. In these writings, Benjamin rejects an experience of the modern city that draws on the distancing perspective of the 'banal tourist' (Benjamin, 1996: 415): the city 'viewed' as a site of historical significance within the schema of tradition. Instead, Benjamin advocates an immediate, almost intimate, immersion within the cityscape; an experience that draws more upon inhabitation, rather than detached observation. To represent immediate experience, Benjamin would adopt a methodological strategy inspired by the new art of cinema; as described in his later *Arcades Project*:

Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't *say* anything. Merely show. (Benjamin, 1999c: 460)

With the 'thought-images', Benjamin created and established a new kind of urban criticism of "contingency", of "the here and now" (Benjamin, 1999b: 510). This criticism was based on immediate experience and immanence, whilst it was formalised through methods introduced by modern artistic technologies. As Gilloch (2002a: 93) sums up:

Interpretation and analysis, commentary and critique – these are to be eschewed in favour of an approach which can 'grasp the concrete' and enable it to speak for itself. The task of the writer is, through selection and arrangement, to show, to demonstrate without comment. Composed of a plethora of carefully gathered, juxtaposed particulars, the 'thought-images' are not so much single snapshots as kaleidoscopic representations, miniature mosaics, or, in the language of the 'Arcades' production cycle, cinematic 'montages' [...] methodological innovations



and textual strategies: tactile intimacy, concreteness, immediacy, and imagistic and fragmentary construction.

The ‘thought-images’ can further be situated within the broader context of Benjamin’s philosophy of experience. As discussed in section 1, Benjamin’s ideas on historiography and criticism were expressed in his concept of experience as concrete, lived reality; further extending beyond the subjective in its particularity, therefore forming conceptual links between different subjectivities, as well as historical objects. For instance, in the case of storytelling, experience is formalised in the story, through which it subsequently passes on from generation to generation; being at the same time a lived, as well as an a-temporal and non-subjective, practice. As further discussed, Benjamin’s concept of experience bears influences characteristic of early Romantic ideas about experience as reflection and cognition, a rational and an intuitive process, combined together; further having a transformative effect on the experiencing subject. Similarly, in the Benjaminian ‘thought-images’, modern urban experience is addressed in a ‘concrete’ manner: it is sensational and immediate, enabling an anti-historicist approach to the city based on immanence. But at the same time, it is conceived as a transcendental process, since it can provide insight into the ‘true’ character of modernity, revealing connections with other historical periods in a conceptual, rather than historicist, manner. I will now make a closer examination of two attributes that were fundamental to Benjaminian modern urban experience.

### ***2.b: Immersion and Mimicry***

In the ‘thought-images’, Benjamin proposes a way of perceiving the modern cityscape that involves immersion within its physical spaces and other everyday ‘concrete’ particulars: noises, colours, smells, tastes. In the essay ‘Naples’ he juxtaposes an overall, distant view of the city with the experience of walking in the city streets:

Fantastic reports by travelers have touched up the city. In reality it is gray: a gray-red or ocher, a gray-white. And entirely gray against sky and sea. It is this, not least, that disheartens the tourist. For anyone who is blind to form sees little here. The city is craggy. Seen from a height not reached by the cries from below, from the Castell San Martino, it lies deserted in the dusk, grown into the rock [...] Nevertheless, no city can fade, in the few hours of Sunday rest, more rapidly than Naples. It is crammed full of festal motifs nestling in the most inconspicuous places. When the blinds are taken down before a window, the effect is similar to that of flags being raised elsewhere. Brightly dressed boys fish in deep-blue streams and look up at rouged church steeples. High above the streets, wash lines run, with garments suspended on them like rows of pennants. Faint suns shine from glass vats of iced drinks. Day and night the pavilions glow with the pale, aromatic juices that teach even the tongue what porosity can be. (Benjamin, 1996: 415-416, 417-418)

Here Benjamin makes evident the difference between a distancing, ‘touristic’ experience of the city, drawing on the formal aesthetics of a visual panoramic overview, and the experience of the city derived from close observation whilst one is immersed in its physical quotidian reality. ‘Naples’ was the first ‘thought-image’ and an exemplary city portrait and manifestation of Benjamin’s particular approach to urban criticism. It is not by accident that the subject of the essay was the city of Naples, which itself was at the time an exemplary city for the kind of urban experience that Benjamin advocated. Quoting from Benjamin’s essay, Gilloch (2002a: 94) claims: “It is in Naples, above all, that urban orientation and navigation are a sensuous, tactile experience, where one must ‘feel’ one’s way through ‘the tightly packed multiplicity’ and the ‘anarchical, embroiled, village-like’ centre, into which ‘large networks of streets were hacked only forty years ago’.” The tactile proximity that this kind of

urban environment imposes on one's experience calls for immersion. A few years later, Benjamin would discover that, similarly to Naples, the urban cityscape of Moscow possessed some characteristics that could only be accessed through immersive experience. Although Moscow and Naples were different modern cities in terms of their socio-cultural and political context, as well as their other physical aspects such as urban fabric and climate, for Benjamin, they both possessed qualities that encouraged immersion. To be immersed, one needs to become receptive to and appreciative of public urban experiences: to share "a familiarity and reciprocity with [the city's] jostling crowds, a proximity to its profusion of objects, an expectancy and excitement in its encounters" (Gilloch, 2002a: 96). Both cities enabled and fostered such intimate engagement with public space; perhaps more so in comparison to Benjamin's home city of Berlin:

But what fullness this street has, which overflows with more than just people, and how deserted and empty Berlin is! In Moscow, goods burst everywhere from the houses; they hang on fences, lean against railings, lie on pavements. Every fifty steps stand women with cigarettes, women with fruit, women with sweets. They have their wares in a laundry basket next to them, sometimes a little sleigh as well. A brightly coloured wooden cloth protects apples or oranges from the cold, with two prize examples lying on top. Next to them as sugar figures, nuts, candy. One thinks: before leaving her house a grandmother must have looked around to see what she could take to surprise her grandchildren. Now she has stopped on the way to have a brief rest in the street. Berlin streets know no such places with sleighs, sacks, little carts and baskets. Compared to those of Moscow, they are like a freshly swept, empty racecourse on which a field of six-day cyclists hastens comfortlessly on. (Benjamin, 1999a: 23)

As Benjamin explained, Berlin's apparent 'emptiness' is associated with the bourgeois attitude of maintaining distance from the masses in the streets, whilst instead, occupying, either exclusive cultural spaces, or private interiors (Gilloch, 2002a: 96). This attitude turns the city into a setting of "princely solitude, princely desolation", despite it being adorned with "unspeakable luxury" (Benjamin, 1999a: 23). In Naples, however, the lack of strict boundaries between private and public space results in one's constant mingling with others, and things; a condition Benjamin called 'porosity':

Similarly dispersed, porous, and commingled is private life [...]

So the house is far less the refuge into which people retreat than the inexhaustible reservoir from which they flood out. Life bursts not only from doors, not only into front yards, where people on chairs do their work [...] From the balconies, housekeeping utensils hang like potted plants. From the windows of the top floors come baskets on ropes, to fetch mail, fruit and cabbage.

Just as the living room reappears on the street, with chairs hearth, and altar, so – only much more loudly – the street migrates into the living room. Even the poorest one is as full of wax candles, biscuit saints, sheaves of photos on the wall, and iron bedsteads as the street is of carts, people and lights. Poverty has brought about a stretching of frontiers that mirrors the most radiant freedom of thought. There is no hour, often no place, for sleeping and eating. (Benjamin, 1996: 419-420)

While in Moscow, traveling around the city offers a similar experience – on the streetcar:

Travel by streetcar in Moscow is more than anything else a tactile experience. Here the newcomer learns perhaps most quickly of all to adapt himself to the curious tempo of this city and to the rhythm of its peasant population [...] A tenacious shoving and barging during the boarding of a vehicle usually overloaded to the point of bursting takes place without a sound and with great cordiality [...] Once everyone is inside, the migration begins in earnest. Through the ice-covered windows, you can never make out where the vehicle has just stopped. If you do find out, it is of little avail. The way to the exit is blocked by a human wedge. (Benjamin, 1999a: 32)

Or the sleigh:

The passenger is not enthroned high up; he looks out on the same level as everyone else and brushes the passers-by with his sleeve. Even this is an incomparable experience for the sense of touch. Whereas Europeans, on their rapid journeys, enjoy superiority, dominance over the masses, the Muscovite in the little sleigh is closely mingled with people and things. If he has a box, a child, or a basket to take with him – for all such things the sleigh is the cheapest means of transport – he is truly wedged into the street bustle. No condescending gaze: a tender, swift brushing along stones, people, and horses. You feel like a child gliding through the house on his little chair. (Benjamin, 1999a: 33)

This Benjaminian idea of urban experience as tactile proximity with spaces, people, and physical particulars, is clearly influenced by Riegl's theory of the tactile appreciation of architectural space. Riegl distinguished between a 'tactile-close' vision and an 'optical-

distant' vision in the experience of architectural space. Although he favoured tactility and proximity, he identified the 'tactile-close' vision with a spiritual dread of space (Van de Ven, 1987: 93): the same *horror vacui* that other early modern German historians, like Worringer, identified within the empathetic experience of space. Benjamin did not use the word 'empathy' in his city writings; nevertheless, his idea of immersion comes as close as it could to an empathetic spatial experience. I see further resonances with Riegl's work within Benjamin's association of such experiences with childhood: "The instant you arrive, the childhood stage begins" (Benjamin, 1999a: 23). Considering childhood as a time when one is "closely mingled with people and things" (Benjamin, 1999a: 33), Benjamin suggested that the child may be more aware of the close, tactile appreciation of the urban environment. Benjamin further discussed mimicry as a characteristic of children's ability to identify with, and assimilate to the environment. For example, as read in the fragment 'Enlargements' that is included in *One-Way Street*, Benjamin described how children employ mimicry in their play of hide-and-seek:

Here he is enclosed in the material world. It becomes immensely distinct, speechlessly obtrusive [...] Standing behind the doorway curtain, the child becomes aware of the reality of rope and wood. Standing behind the doorway curtain, the child himself becomes something floating and white, a ghost. The dining table under which he is crouching turns him into the wooden idol in a temple whose four pillars are the carved legs. And behind a door, he himself *is* the door – wears it as his heavy mask, and like a shaman will bewitch all those who unsuspectingly enter. (Benjamin, 1996: 465)

In 1933, Benjamin wrote two short essays on the theme of mimicry, one called 'Doctrine of the Similar', as well as another shorter version, entitled 'On the Mimetic Faculty'. In these

two texts he discussed mimicry as an intrinsic human faculty and an important learning process, first appearing in childhood:

Children's play is everywhere permeated by mimetic modes of behaviour, and its realm is by no means limited to what one person can imitate in another. The child plays at being not only a shopkeeper or teacher but also a windmill and a train. Of what use to him is this schooling of his mimetic faculty? (Benjamin, 1999b: 720)

There are obvious similarities between the empathy with inanimate objects that Benjamin saw in children's play and the immersive urban experience described in his city writings. In the essay 'Walter Benjamin, mimesis and the dream world of photography', Neil Leach employs the photographic metaphor, referring to Benjamin's descriptions of Berlin's architecture as "snapshots of the physical fabric of Berlin, on to which has been etched, as though through some photosensitive process, a deeply personal sense of meaning" (Leach, 2000: 28). In the context of this empathetic architectural experience, Leach further defines Benjamin's idea of mimicry as the involvement of a creative engagement with an object; thus, being in contrast to the original Platonic notion of *mimesis*:

Benjamin reverses the hierarchy between object and its representation. He challenges the earlier Platonic notion of mimesis as an essentially compromised form of imitation that necessarily loses something of the original. For Benjamin mimesis alludes to a constructive reinterpretation of an original, which becomes a creative act in itself. Furthermore, it potentially becomes a way of empathising with the world, and it is through empathy that we can – if not fully understand the other – at least assimilate to the other. (Leach, 2000: 32)

In summary, Leach argues that the mimetic attitude constitutes a creative process, which can be particularly useful for architectural representation – especially through the medium of photography. However, on a more philosophical level, Caygill has recognised the relationship between the experience of colour and immersive urban experience in Benjamin’s work. Caygill argues that colour within Benjamin’s philosophy of experience has an immanent character, because it does not bear any fixed values, since it gains meaning from the surrounding colours. Therefore, in contrast with form, colour can be infinitely configured. Furthermore, Caygill describes how Benjamin discussed the importance of colour during childhood. In the short essay ‘A Child’s View of Colour’ (1914/15), Benjamin argued, how for children colour is not “a deceptive cloak for individual objects existing in time and space”, “a lifeless thing and a rigid individuality”, but rather a “winged creature that flits from one form to the next” (Benjamin, 1996: 50). In addition, in this context he suggested that colour can be thought as a medium of intuition, prior to the forms of space and time, which is related to feeling: “For the fact is that the imagination never engages with form, which is the concern of the law, but can only contemplate the living world from a human point of view creatively in feeling; this takes place through colour” (Benjamin, 1996: 51). So, “for the person who sees with a child’s eyes” (Benjamin, 1996: 50), the city could be perceived, in ‘feeling’, through the medium of colour, rather than through spatial form:

All the colours of Moscow converge prismatically here, at the centre of Russian power. Beams of excessive brilliance from the car headlights race through the darkness. The horses of the cavalry, which has a large drill ground in the Kremlin, shy in their light. Pedestrians force their way between cars and unruly horses. Long rows of sleighs haul snow away. Single horsemen. Silent swarms of ravens have settled in the snow. The eye is infinitely busier than the ear. The colours do their



utmost against the white. The smallest coloured rag glows out of doors.

(Benjamin, 1999a: 24)

According to Caygill (1998: 11), in Benjamin's experience of colour "the two components of Kant's account of experience – sensibility and the understanding – collapse into each other, and the experiencing subject which would contain them dissolves into its experience". For this definition, Caygill refers to an early essay-fragment by Benjamin, yet unpublished in English, describing a dialogue between a painter and his friend about the immersive experience of colour<sup>84</sup>; as well as citing a footnote in the essay 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire' (1939), which describes Impressionist painting as performing a reorganisation of urban experience through colour<sup>85</sup> (Caygill, 1998: 152).

What is most interesting in the immersive urban experience described by Benjamin – whether involving mimicry or colour perception – is the potential for creative appropriation of the cityscape; as Benjamin (1996: 450) points out: "Colour is fluid, the medium of all changes" (Benjamin, 1996: 50); and "Children thus produce their own small world of things within the greater one".

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<sup>84</sup> The fragment is entitled *Der Regenbogen: Gespräch über die Phantasie* (in English: 'The Rainbow: A Dialogue on Phantasie') and was written in 1915; Caygill (1998) makes references in pages 10-12, and 82-83. Moreover, Caygill (1998: 11) quotes Benjamin: "Margarete describes herself, in Kantian vocabulary, as losing her identity and finding herself transformed into a colour in the landscape: «I too was not, nor my understanding, that resolves things out of the images of the senses. I was not the one who saw, but only seeing. And what I saw were not things...but only colours. And I too was coloured into this landscape»."; and, in Caygill (1998: 82), another quote reads as follows: "On hearing her nocturnal experience of colour, he replies 'I know these images of phantasy. I believe that they are in me when I paint. I mix the colours and I see nothing but colour, I can almost say, I am colour.'"

<sup>85</sup> In the essay 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', Benjamin (1992: 193) notes: "...the technique of Impressionist painting, whereby the picture is garnered in a riot of dabs of colour, would be a reflection of experiences with which the eyes of a big-city dweller have become familiar. A picture like Monet's 'Cathedral of Chartres', which is like an ant-heap of stone, would be an illustration of this hypothesis."

### Chapter 3:

## Critical Subjectivities of Modern Urbanism

This chapter aims to develop a discussion that examines the critical potential of modern urban experience, with a focus upon the experience of physical and spatial forms, such as architecture. The discussion, so far, has considered modern urbanism within the early modern context of art theory and criticism, referring to ideas of spatial empathy from the late nineteenth century German aesthetics, and drawing upon Walter Benjamin's early twentieth century criticism. In particular, I have focused upon Benjamin's theory of modern urban experience as sensational and immediate, tracing links between this aspect of Benjamin's theory, and early modern German aesthetics and early Romantic epistemology. Drawing upon the above, I will now discuss the critical potential of modern urban experience to inform subjectivity.

In chapter 2 of this section, I discussed how the modern technologies of art media, such as photography and film, have informed Benjamin's criticism, inspiring him to examine the modern city in a manner that privileged proximity, observation and immanence. This is in direct contrast to the distancing, abstract theorisation, and stylistic classification of the historicist tradition. According to Benjamin, proximity, for example, comes as a lesson from photography:

Now, to bring things *closer* to us, or rather to the masses, is just as passionate an inclination in our day as the overcoming of whatever is unique in every situation by means of its reproduction. Everyday the need to possess the object in close-up in the form of a picture, or rather a copy, becomes more imperative. (Benjamin, 1999b: 519)

Furthermore, Benjamin's view of photography was of a new media that offered a new strategy for historicisation: "Yet at the same time, photography reveals in this material physiognomic

aspects, image worlds, which dwell in the smallest things – meaningful yet covert enough to find a hiding place in waking dreams, but which, enlarged and capable of formulation, make the difference between technology and magic visible as a thoroughly historical variable” (Benjamin, 1999b: 512). Especially in the way certain photographers approached their subjects, he saw an anti-historicism, which recalled a resonance with Romantic influences:

The photographer did not approach this enormous undertaking as a scholar, or with the advice of ethnographers and sociologists, but, as the publisher says, ‘from direct observation.’ It was assuredly a very impartial, indeed bold sort of observation, but delicate too, very much in the spirit of Goethe’s remark: ‘There is a delicate empiricism which so intimately involves itself with the object that it becomes true theory.’<sup>86</sup> (Benjamin, 1999b: 520)

As I discussed in subchapter 1.a, a strong belief for the access to knowledge through empirical observation was a key characteristic of Romanticism. Additionally, early Romantic thought recognised a critical process within the practice of reflection that occurred through the observation of an object. This critical process essentially operates through a reconfiguration of the subject and the object through their interaction with each other. As further discussed in subchapter 2.a, Benjamin’s early work shows a preoccupation with the concept of criticism in Romanticism and its applicability to his own emergent critical theory<sup>87</sup>. He was particularly interested in the idea of ‘critical reflection’ as a foundational aspect of Romantic criticism:

For the Romantics and for speculative philosophy, the term ‘critical’ meant objectively productive, creative out of thoughtful deliberation. To

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<sup>86</sup> Benjamin wrote this commenting on the work of German photographer August Sander.

<sup>87</sup> “Of all the technical terms of philosophy and aesthetics in the writings of the early Romantics, the words ‘criticism’ and ‘critical’ are easily the most often encountered” (Benjamin, 1996: 142).

be critical meant to elevate thinking so far beyond all restrictive conditions that the knowledge of truth sprang forth magically, as it were, from insight into the falsehood of these restrictions. In this positive sense, the critical procedure attains the closest conceivable affinity with the reflective procedure and, in utterances like the following, the two merge. (Benjamin, 1996: 142)

This aspect of Romantic criticism is evident in Benjamin's ideas on immersion as a part of art appreciation:

A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it. He enters into this work of art the way that legend tells of the Chinese painter when he viewed his finished painting. (Benjamin, 1992: 232)

As described above, whilst an individual is critically reflecting upon an artwork, a certain transference from subject to object takes place. I argue that one can call this 'immersion', 'absorption' or 'empathy'. As discussed previously in subchapter 2.b, these concepts are interconnected. According to Benjamin, the experience of the urban environment also involves such a critical and transformative process, which further, under the specific conditions of modernity, encourages a new kind of criticism based on subjective intimate engagement. Gilloch appropriates Benjamin's reference to the 'critic-as-engineer' (Benjamin, 1996: 444), to describe the emerging modern critic, who: as "an exponent of a new technology, constructs a new relationship between human beings and nature, one based upon neither the ecstatic excesses of irrationalism nor the calculating instrumentalism of Enlightenment science", but instead on "the erotic, the mimetic and the lucid, experiences and activities which point to an intimacy between human beings and their environment based upon reconciliation, reciprocity and harmonious intercourse" (Gilloch, 2002a: 104). When conceived

in this way, the philosophy of the modern critic is imbued with Romantic principles of subjective intimate engagement; experiencing the world through a combination of heightened cognition and reflection. As has been discussed, the Romantics saw in this process of critical subjective reflection, a transcending of the subjective 'self' as a separate singularity, leading to connections with other 'selves', which include inanimate objects and architectural form. Not unlike a modern Romantic, Benjamin undergoes such a process: through close observation – 'close-ups' – on the physical urban fabric. During his city wanderings, he reads critically the 'traces' of social life 'imprinted' on materiality:

*Walls.* Admirable, the discipline to which they are subject in this city. The better ones, in the centre, wear livery and are in the pay of the ruling class. They are covered with gaudy patterns and have sold their whole length many hundreds of times to the latest brand of aperitif, to department stores, to 'Chocolat Menier', or to Dolores del Rio. In the poorer neighbourhoods they are politically mobilised, and post their spacious red letters as the forerunners of red guards in front of dockyards and arsenals.<sup>88</sup> (Benjamin, 1999a: 235)

As has been previously discussed, Benjamin clearly stated that such an approach to the urban environment would be encouraged by modernity. Caygill (2000: 25) notes that, for Benjamin, because of the impact of modern technology upon our experience of space and time, new modes of receptivity and representation of urbanism would be required. Especially important were the changes in experience that came along with the new medium of film, as Benjamin notes in his essay on 'Moscow':

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<sup>88</sup> This is an extract from the essay 'Marseilles'.

Now the city turns into a labyrinth for the newcomer. Streets that he had located far apart are yoked together by a corner, like a pair of horses reined in a coachman's fist. The whole exciting sequence of topographical deceptions to which he falls prey could be shown only by a film: the city is on its guard against him, masks itself, flees, intrigues, lures him to wander its circles to the point of exhaustion. (Benjamin, 1999a: 24)

In the essay 'Cosmos in Film: On the concept of space in Walter Benjamin's 'Work of Art' essay', Gertrud Koch (2000: 213) argues that Benjamin's view of cinematic technology considers a reconfiguration of time as "immobilisation of time in the *spatial image*": "The fact that cinematic technology does not actually present but rather represents it illusionistically through a series of photographically fixed moments, turns it, in the wake of photography, into a medium in which time is immobilised in space" (Koch, 2000: 210). Koch further states that through this 'spatialisation' of time, a transformation of subjectivity takes place that re-conceives the subject as *corpus* instead of *body*; thus, as related to the universe – the *cosmos* – rather than the anthropocentric humanity<sup>89</sup>. In this context, 'tactility' and 'proximity' as modes of experience, which Benjamin was a proponent, acquire a special importance, enabling the emergence of a transformed, liberating relation between subjectivity and urban space:

By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring commonplace milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand,

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<sup>89</sup> As Gertrud Koch (2000: 210) states: "Only in this immobilisation does the *corpus* emerge out of the anthropologically untenably constructed *body*, explosively liberated into the image of the 'heavenly' from the space of the 'optical-unconscious'." Furthermore, Koch (2000: 206) quotes from Benjamin's essay 'Schemas of the psycho-physical question': "With body and corpus, man is bound to universal connections. But differently in each case: in body, he is related to humanity, in corpus, to God"; she further explains that Benjamin refers here to the Gnostic dualism in theology and cosmology, where the body is seen as separate from the corpus.

it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action. Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling. (Benjamin, 1992: 229)

In his article ‘Benjamin, Heidegger and the Destruction of Tradition’, Caygill further explores the impact of such a re-conceptualisation of subjectivity to history. According to Caygill, Benjamin considered that with the appearance of modern technologies, which would destroy “the ritual confirmation of tradition” (2000: 24), “a new political configuration of the site of tradition” (2000: 23) would become possible. This kind of reconfigured tradition would correspond to a ‘topological’, or, I would argue, ‘spatialised’, subject, instead of the traditional ‘historico-political’ subject<sup>90</sup> (Caygill, 2000: 24). Caygill (2000: 209) observes that Benjamin, enthused by the possibilities of film, envisaged “the construction of history as a kinetically activated space in which the camera moves through different levels”. This conception is against the historicist linear succession of past, present and future, furthermore subverting traditional notions of time. Instead, past, present and future, gather together in ‘moments’ to form ‘constellations’, which fundamentally link with ‘prehistory’, a “primeval moment’ [...] which spreads its roots into the present” (Caygill, 2000: 209). In this sense, new notions of subjectivity, intimately entangled with space, challenge historicist configurations as they transcend traditional conceptions of time.

In addition, I argue that, within Benjamin’s broader critical schema, this ‘topological’ subjectivity relates to the idea of the critical ‘experiencing subject’, as discussed in chapter 2

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<sup>90</sup> Here Caygill refers to Heideggerian ontology, whilst he distinguishes Benjamin’s philosophy as being contrary to the preoccupation of ‘authenticity’ and ‘inauthenticity’.

of section 1, and in further reference to Caygill (1998: 44)<sup>91</sup>. Benjamin's view of experience as an infinite configuration precludes the notion of the subject as 'acting I', who experiences and reflects from a fixed position, replacing it with the notion of the subject as constantly reconfigured through their reflective/perceptual encounter with form. If this is 'spatial form', critical subjectivities can emerge from the experience of space. Koch and Caygill similarly interpret Benjaminian modern subjectivity as shaped by technology, both arguing for the critical potential of this subjectivity to inform humanistic discourses and historiography. Furthermore, I argue that the immersive, tactile experience of modern urban space; firstly, encourages a critical subjectivity; and secondly, fosters multiple critical subjectivities that are open to reconfiguration. I believe this is evidenced by Benjamin's 'thought images'; but, like in much of Benjamin's work, the development of the ideas is only on a speculative level. In fact, Caygill (2000:29) acknowledges this inconclusive aspect in Benjamin's philosophy:

When the question is asked what the new configurations of tradition might be, what shape the new gathering of past, present and future might take, Benjamin is almost silent. He does make some comments about the emergence of a new mode of perception emphasizing tactile as opposed to visual experience, but these remain sketchy [...] He saw the reconfiguration of tradition through technology as a momentous revolution, one fraught with danger, but also with the potential for establishing new terrains of politics and subjectivity. Yet these remained unexplored.

Benjamin is more conclusive in terms of how modern critical subjectivity could manifest in new critical writing. As Gilloch (2002a: 101) observes, "what *One-Way Street* articulates first

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<sup>91</sup> "The view of experience as infinite configuration dissolves any notion of a subject able to occupy a fixed position from which to reflect, since all reflections are already infinitely mediated by other reflections. In this quasi-Leibnizian configuration of monads, each reflection contains the infinity of reflections, including its own reflection upon this infinity" (Caygill, 1998: 44).



and foremost is an ‘urbanisation’ of the text’, since it “mimics urban forms and experiences”. This new kind of writing favours “immediacy, brevity, proximity, tactility, strategy” – which are all modern urban imperatives (Gilloch, 2002a: 101). Introducing the writing method of ‘literary montage’, *One-Way Street* provides an application of Benjamin’s theory of criticism, which favours interdisciplinarity and openness to interpretation. Furthermore, *One-Way Street* is demonstrable of the idea that modern writing is a practice that is fundamentally and exclusively linked with social life and experience:

The construction of life is at present in the power far more of facts than of convictions, and of such facts as have scarcely ever become the basis of convictions. Under these circumstances, true literary activity cannot aspire to take place within a literary framework; this is rather the habitual expression of its sterility. Significant literary effectiveness can come into being only in a strict alternation between action and writing; it must nurture the inconspicuous forms that fit its influence in active communities better than does the pretentious, universal gesture of the book – in leaflets, brochures, articles, and placards. (Benjamin, 1996: 444)

The political tone of the above extract reflects Benjamin’s early conviction that modern urban experience can inspire critical – and social – engagement that, against the elitism of tradition, would bring forth a new politics of modern subjectivity. However, the enthusiasm that was indicative in his early work was succeeded by skepticism. This was especially so in regards to how technology was employed within capitalism. In his last work, *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin explored the potential of new technology to reconfigure politics, but was by no means naively optimistic. In this characteristically unfinished volume of ‘literary montage’, Benjamin questions whether the technological reconfiguration of tradition would lead to the

renewal, or the destruction of humanity. As Caygill (2000: 28) observes, by then Benjamin had recognised that “through the power of technology it is possible to create giant auratic works of art – cities and entire peoples – who are simultaneously present and absent to themselves”. This realisation was reflected in Benjamin’s critical stance towards the then contemporary fascist regimes, which, through the politicisation of art and use of modern technology, deliberately created auratic effects at large scale<sup>92</sup>. As also discussed in section 1, in the late essay ‘The Storyteller’<sup>93</sup>, Benjamin expressed nostalgia for the pre-modern ‘lived experience’ (*Erfahrung*), which was lost to modernity. However, hints of skepticism towards modern technological achievements are already detectable in his earlier works, such as *One-Way Street*:

Just as all things, in an irreversible process of mingling and contamination, are losing their intrinsic character while ambiguity displaces authenticity, so is the city [...] The insecurity of even the busy areas puts the city dweller in the opaque and truly dreadful situation in which he must assimilate, along with isolated monstrosities from the open country, the abortions of urban architectonics. (Benjamin, 1996: 454)

However great the disillusionment that Benjamin had experienced towards the end of his life<sup>94</sup>, his view of a critical modern urban experience has been highly influential for modern and contemporary culture; shaping, for instance, theories and discourses that address the

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<sup>92</sup> See ‘The Work of Art in Mechanical Reproduction’, in (Benjamin, 1992: 211-244).

<sup>93</sup> Published in 1936, the same year as ‘The Work of Art in Mechanical Reproduction’.

<sup>94</sup> Benjamin committed suicide in 1940, after being captured by Nazi soldiers at the French/Spanish border, during his attempt to take refuge to the US.

impact of technology on perception, and the political potential of art and architecture<sup>95</sup>. Furthermore, the Romantic influences of Benjamin's aesthetics are recognisable in modern aesthetic theories, particularly those that discuss the idea of 'experience' in art, and the relation between 'feeling' and 'form'<sup>96</sup>.

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<sup>95</sup> Contemporary discourses in art theory are preoccupied with ideas about the politics of aesthetics and the role of art in enabling and creating 'relations'. Relevant recent publications include *Relational Aesthetics* (1998) by Nicolas Bourriaud, and *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (2000) by Jacques Rancière.

<sup>96</sup> Modern publications on aesthetics that deal with relevant ideas are: *Art as Experience* by John Dewey (1934), and *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* by Suzanne Langer (1953).





[II]

Fig. (3)





Fig. 23. Stamatis Kleanthes and Eduard Schaubert. Final plan for the New City of Athens. 1833.

Fig. (3)

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‘One-way street is my street now’



We decided to go for a walk without talking through it first. The others had been silent for quite a while and the record wasn't playing any more. I got into that old mood again for a night walk in underwater Athens. A strong feeling, to get away with you, to swim again in the night, to cross the city with you beside me. That's why when we were wearing the diving suits we didn't exchange a single word. The tanks we were carrying were heavy and made our bodies lean forward a bit. We found ourselves quite unexpectedly in the darkness at the bottom of the sea, alone and frightened, as the house stood behind us, like something very strange and unfamiliar. The streets were dimly lit and from the rooftops of the buildings little bubbles were rising in flocks. I nodded at you to follow me as I was maneuvering through the obstacles. **Just after Omonia square, at the beginning of Athenas street, we met that blind man, sitting in the same old corner, with a black mask on, diving suit, flippers, oxygen and a little tin box for our charity.** That incident must have seemed funny to you, because I think you laughed. You were anyway right, because how could we give him any money trapped in our suits? I felt bad though about all that. The blind man was stuck in an eternally pointless waiting and as if that wasn't enough, he didn't even hold an accordion, he didn't have the possibility to play music for us, to trumpet his wish in our ears. He seemed to me unbearably lonely and for the first time I hated our underwater condition. We were already arriving at Kotzia square and were reaching the Town Hall. Then I noticed that on its roof two seaweeds had grown, big and silent. Water was moving them rhythmically and from time to time their ends were touching. Sea-horses, eels, starfish, became entangled with our flippers and then flew away. At that moment I realised that you were afraid and I felt a strong urge to fly away myself. Your fear would have seemed strange though if I didn't know you, but then I didn't need language, words, voices – with or without the transparent oxygen bubbles that were encircling us, spectacular bubbles, I could spot your teeth shaking behind the glass of your mask. I saw fear in the lowering of your eyes, that moment when your nostrils start trembling. I then felt like grabbing you violently, holding you tight next to me and go on kissing you for hours. How could I shelter my passion though in the waters and all this wetness....How could I channel my kisses to you anyway in this fucking underwater city? **Near the end of Athenas street, a big oyster broke into pieces beneath my foot. I started**

feeling cold, as I looked at the shining of a thousand pieces on the floor, the moment before the water swept them away towards another part of the city. So when you rested your hand on my hair, when you kept close to me there near Metropoli, I wasn't cold then, I got warm. When the glass in our masks touched and I looked at you, I felt safe in the pools of your eyes – even if I couldn't touch them, kiss them like I used to – I felt safe. And out there, in the large courtyard of the church, while seahorses were playing with your hair, I remembered you again, just like in old times, in my arms, “faster, faster...” – that trumpeting to speed up. I remembered then your words, your demand to stay where I was, after I came, to keep you perforated, mine, wide open. And as the bubbles were multiplying around us, as the seahorses were rattling, galloping over our heads, “faster, faster...” – I remembered your wish to keep you mastered, defenseless, conquered there on your back in the seat, with a hoarse voice, beloved, pleading, voice of my lust even if it was raining out there, even if it was raining outside, heavily, wildly. Until I held you again by the hand and led you ahead. In Syntagma square, you waved me over to make your usual phone call home. We squeezed inside the phone booth, besieged by advertisements, chairs, small tables. You took your mask off, slowly you dialed the number. The booth was waterproof and you spoke without bubbles, outside the moon was sinking little by little behind the big buildings, squelching in the waters, bleeding, scratched. You smiled as you hang up the phone and I kissed you guiltily, in a restrained, telephonic way. Your lips had a bitter taste, a saltiness and as we were now walking towards the Royal Garden, behind the mask I was licking that saltiness, with delight. The Garden, my god, that night looked like a marooned, silent, sea forest. I was watching with awe the tall soaked trees, palpitating uneasily. Surprisingly the door to the Garden was open and we climbed over. The Garden seemed to me like a huge and extraordinary aquarium. Yes, the Garden was miraculously magical that night, swaying back and forth in the heart of the city, breathing like a young child's lung. The rapid movement reminded me suddenly of your 'curly double door', that place where you keep exclusively for me, the lost valleys at the hidden corners of your body. I shuddered, touching that part of your body. Two molded lips of wet cotton that keep behind them all the chaos, that's how the wet lips of your entrance seemed to me that night. That's why I stopped

you as we were walking and I pulled you to sit back on the bench, to watch the purple moon that was coming down damp among the wet trees of the Garden. Eels and flocks of wide headed and slick fish were crashing into our masks smearing, revealing a blurred and unfamiliar aspect of the dark Garden. We had an unpleasant feeling as we left the garden, because it was as attractive as no other place.

We headed towards the columns of Olympian Zeus, intending to turn towards Plaka and go back home. We saw up in the sky some dark stains that must have been dolphins, as we reached the columns. The melancholic colours of the depths of the sea were making the pillars look sublime. You thought that they were a thousand miles high, growing above the surface of the water, connecting the mysterious waters and the sky. Leaving the columns behind us, turning right into the narrow streets of Plaka and while your breast – always unmistakable – was pointing straight ahead, we kept going in the water, passing obstacles, bubbles, fish and shells, going back home, which was waiting for us shipwrecked, at the other end of the city.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> This extract is a short story entitled '*Sto Vytho*' ('At the Bottom of the Sea') by Greek author Vangelis Raptopoulos. It is published as part of a collection of stories by the same author entitled *Kommatakia (In Pieces)*; see (Raptopoulos, 1995: 73-77). The text was translated from the original Greek text (attached in Appendix) by the author of this thesis.



*When the flâneur is also a good diver; when planning has a story to tell; and how mapping can be totally subjective*

In 1833, two German trained architects, Stamatios Kleanthes and Gustav Schaubert, submitted their third consecutive proposal for the planning of modern Athens: the capital-to-be of the newly formed Greek state. It was in 1832 that the two young architects were first commissioned by the provisional Greek government to prepare plans for the new city. As historian Eleni Bastéa (2000: 74) mentions, their first two designs largely evolved out of an archaeological map of Athens by the British surveyor William Martin Leake. These masterplans proposed that the new city be planned around the classical antiquities and superimposed onto the existing Ottoman town. However, their ‘triangular’ neoclassical design of 1833 was to be the most influential. Turning all perspectives toward the Acropolis, and proposing a brand new avenue, *Ermou* street, across the old Turkish town – “yet refraining from encircling its girth” (Boyer, 1994: 163) – the design proposed a radical alteration to ‘erase’ all formal traces of the Ottoman past. As Kleanthes later recounted, there was never a detailed program for the new city; the architects were simply tasked to provide a design that would be “equal with the ancient fame and glory of the city and worthy of the century in which we live” (Bastéa, 2000: 18).

M. Christine Boyer interprets the success of the proposal as being due to the colonalising tendencies of affluent Western Europe: the intention to appropriate the history of classical Athens into the Western representational order and impose it on a colonised and dominated East. According to Boyer (1994: 163), “modern Athens was a disgraceful sight” for the West, since it carried too many traces of the Turkish culture; thus, it had to be reconstructed “with its Eurocentric focal point drawn on the enlightened times of antiquity”. Several similar ideas have been argued by Bastéa, who has also described the regular, orthogonal design by Kleanthes and Schaubert, as a reflection of the newly founded regency’s intentions to modernise the Greek nation: “by introducing the machinery of a Western state” (Bastéa, 2000: 20). For Bastéa, Western planning interventions in Africa, Asia and South

America expressed the same colonising attitudes; caring less about the urban realities of the colonising nations, and more about testing contemporary Western urban theories on the new sites. Western European planners ordered cities in a regular, rational grid, and separated the functions and the residents of the cities into distinct zones (Bastéa, 2000: 83).

Walter Benjamin expressed a similar critical stance towards neoclassicism. In *One-Way Street*, he was deeply critical and aphoristic in his descriptions of the nineteenth century bourgeois interior as a dark, colonial phantasy: “Behind the heavy, gathered Khilim tapestries, the master of the house has orgies with his share certificates, feels himself the eastern merchant, the indolent pasha in the caravanserai of otiose enchantment, until that dagger in its silver sling above the divan puts an end, one fine afternoon, to his siesta and himself” (Benjamin, 1996: 447). In *The Arcades Project*, he referred to Haussmann’s boulevards as “the apotheosis of the bourgeoisie’s worldly and spiritual dominance”, “draped across with canvas and unveiled like monuments” of Napoleonic imperialism (Benjamin, 1999c: 12). As Susan Buck-Morss observed in her book on *The Arcades Project*, for Benjamin neoclassicism was another “ideological attempt to represent the unbroken pedigree of bourgeois civilisation and the eternal verity of Western imperial domination” (Buck-Morss, 1999: 26).

Looking at the 1877 modified plan of Athens, traces of the Kleanthes and Schaubert plan are still quite distinct, for instance, the neoclassical ‘triangle’ is kept in place; and subsequent modern developments of the city centre would be largely shaped around it.

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The narrator/walker of the first story begins his ‘underwater’ journey inside the ‘triangle’ of the city. He sets off from *Omonia* square, the site of the king’s palace in the original Kleanthes and Schaubert plans. It was for this reason that the square was initially named ‘Otto square’, after king Otto, the first king of Greece. The name of the square changed to *Omonia* (‘Concord’) square, after the king’s dethronement. It is there that the narrator/walker meets a

blind beggar, who wears a diving suit. Shortly after this encounter, the narrator continues down *Athenas* street. This street was designed as one of the three major boulevards, connecting the palace, as originally located in *Omonia* square, with the foot of the Acropolis Hill (Bastéa, 2000: 78). On *Athenas* street, the narrator/walker passes the Town Hall, a neoclassical building built in 1872. The underwater Town Hall of the story has seaweed on the roof. Continuing on his journey, the narrator/walker passes by *Metropoli*, the Athenian cathedral, which was also designed by European architects in 1862<sup>98</sup>. Outside the cathedral, he shares an intimate moment with his girlfriend; and again at *Syntagma* ('Constitution') Square. It was there that the royal palace was finally constructed, a neoclassical building that was later to become the parliament of the republic. The narrator/walker finally ends his drift in the Royal Garden, originally the garden of the palace; it is nowadays a public park.

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Michel de Certeau's idea of the transformative operation of stories is rooted in his theory that significant places can be continuously redefined through cultural signification, spatial occupation, and representation; the latter including storytelling and narrativisation.<sup>99</sup> In the story, the narrator/walker appropriates the 'official' public space of the city, by inscribing his personal narrative, through an emotional and physical journey. Following De Certeau's idea of spatial appropriation through narrative, it could be argued that in this way, the narrator/walker performs a transgressive activity: he/she "turns the street into a living room",

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<sup>98</sup> Initially commissioned to Theophil Hansen, the design was later modified by Greek architect Demetres Zazos, and, after his death, by F.L.F. Boulanger, until its completion in 1862 (Bastéa, 2000: 161-163).

<sup>99</sup> In the chapter 'Spatial Stories' in the book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel De Certeau discusses this theory extensively. To develop his argument for the operative role of narratives in spatial reconfiguration, he makes a distinction between the concept of 'place' (*lieu*) and the concept of 'space' (*espace*). According to De Certeau (1984: 117), "a place is the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of co-existence. It thus excludes the possibility of two things being in the same location (place). The law of the 'proper' rules in the place...It implies an indication of stability"; furthermore: "A space exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it...In contradistinction to the place, it has thus none of the univocity or stability of a 'proper'".

or, in the traditional *flâneur*'s manner, he/she "reverses an established distinction between public and private spaces" (Burgin, 1996: 145), between official history and personal memory; thus, further destabilising and reconfiguring hierarchical significations.

In fact the *flâneur* and the story's narrator/walker occupy not dissimilar environments. The major redevelopment of Paris during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century under prefect Baron Haussmann, had been influential for the planning proposals of modern Athens. As Bastéa (2000: 144) mentions, Otto, the first king of Greece, consulted Haussmann's publications about the project<sup>100</sup>. As Simon Sadler (1998: 99) notes, Haussmann's approach of *tabula rasa* (meaning 'blank slate') was later criticised by French critical thinkers, such as Bataille and Foucault, for suppressing incidents and places that contradict narratives of authority: Haussmann turned "*Ile de la Cite* into an administrative desert" (Sadler, 1998: 99). Similarly, Kleanthes and Schaubert eradicated all traces of Athens's Ottoman past.

Sadler has further criticised such practices for possessing an underlying intention to turn the city into a *mnemonic* (a 'memory aid'), by creating 'chains' of monuments or sites as a kind of 'text' that would profess 'official' history and knowledge. In this context, Sadler describes the Situationist practice of *dérive*, the aimless walking in the city, as a way to inspire the subversive activity of 're-inscribing' monuments to 'official' history with subjective meaning (Sadler, 1998: 99). I believe that this critical interpretation falls within De Certeau's theory of subjective appropriation through occupation of public urban space. De Certeau went further to discuss the practice of walking as an act of 're-inscription' – and so a transgressive activity and a political intervention – through rendering space visible through the creation of new 'paths', of alternative 'routes' through space; however enduringly reversible or flexible. As mentioned by Steve Pile (1996: 117), for De Certeau, the walker's anarchical spatial mobility subverts the institution of spatial practices as 'citation' of the

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<sup>100</sup> According to Eleni Bastéa (2000: 144), France was the country most frequently mentioned in the daily press regarding cultural and architectural issues. In 1869 'Aion' reported that Prefect Haussmann of Paris was replaced by Cevreau, "the famous prefect of Paris under Napoleon III, Haussmann, published two volumes...he sent a copy of these volumes to King Otto via the then-consul of Greece in Paris" (Bastéa, 2000: 144).

already there; and so allows for *space* to be a lived reality – or in his own words, “practiced place” (De Certeau, 1984: 117).

Basically I thought that running was allowed in the centre of Athens. That's why as I was running up Academias street, I was struck by surprise, as they say, when that guy with the bowler hat and the sack spat on me. This was strange, it wasn't as if we had collided, sending his hat and sack crashing to the ground; and so what was the misunderstanding about, and why did he spit on me and shouted: "Don't you know that it's forbidden to run in the centre of Athens?" I was taken by surprise, that's all! I wasn't looking for a fight because I was hungry, I wanted a cheese pie and I didn't have enough money - I was fifty pennies short - and where was I supposed to find you in that crowd, how could I spot you within those noisy crowds, moving like a herd of ants on the beloved body of Athens? Anyway you know well how to hide - I've told you so many times - and (coincidence?) you always seem to do so in the most inappropriate circumstances, always at times when I want you and need you immensely, when I am expecting you all lit up and beautiful, to fill in my void and eliminate my tyrants. And perhaps now I didn't need you so much for the fifty pennies - the change of a whole life - but just like that, just to be on my side, to run with me on the street, so that I don't wander around alone amongst so many people, so that I don't get spat on by whoever.

I slowed from a run, I walked slowly up Academias street, the torturing one-way street. The people around me seemed to be acquiring a heaviness, stronger facial features in their slow movement. Advertising labels were flickering all around me like spots on the night's face, I was developing small prickly thorns. Far away, very far behind me, the guy with the bowler hat and the sack, frozen, in the middle of the pavement, misplaced, and me, unaccustomed with his spit on my cheek, my forehead and my jumper, stigmatised, stained. I am sick of the traffic, I am bored with repetition. I keep his medals on me, I don't wash myself, I don't rinse myself, like at the times when my hands smell of your aroma and I don't wash them so that they always smell like that, to preserve you.

Finally, after lots of twisting and turning, I find the bookshop. I go inside with the saliva on me and I ask for the book with my name on (it is *my* book) and I get a negative answer. - "Is it out of stock?" - "We don't have it" - "What do you mean you don't have it?"

– “We don’t have it”. There is no such question, there is no such book and I start running faster and faster. Everything runs around me at a great speed, the book shelves turn upside down, they fall down, so many books and mine is nowhere to be seen. Everything turns upside down, money from the till hits the ground with metallic sounds. – “What do you mean you don’t have it?” and the salesman looks at me embarrassed, unarmed, mainly so, unarmed and I load my gun, I open my mouth, I lift up the cock, ready. I see him folding in two and falling dead on the floor.

**On the way back I keep misbehaving. Academias street is a one-way street and I go the wrong way up, I go faster than the speed limit, my book gets published before I even write it, I keep misbehaving. Near the Opera I meet the man with the bowler hat and the sack still immobile. I stop to wipe the saliva on him, to repay my old debts, to get rid of what I owe.** Then I leave again. Now I am rather calm. I find you near Kaniggos square. You wear your tight skirt, the pretty gold pin on your hair. You shine through the night. I hold your hand. I don’t run, I am not hungry, I am not scared. You shine through the night and I recognise that superiority of yours. I have no need for misbehaving now, for debts and credit. One-way street is my street, now that I want and don’t want to publish the book, that I want and don’t want to be hungry, or in debt in public!<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> See Raptopoulos (1995: 51-54). This extract is the short story ‘*Monodromos*’ (‘One-Way Street’), also included in the collection *Kommatakia (In Pieces)*. It was translated from the original Greek text (included in Appendix) by the author of this thesis.

### *How one can go the wrong way up one-way streets*

In this story, the narrator/walker runs up *Academias* ('Academy') street, a one-way avenue that runs parallel to the other main central Athenian avenue, *Panepistimiou* ('University') street. Both street names refer to two major civic buildings, which lie in between them: the Academy of Athens and the University building, both designed and constructed in the nineteenth century. Along with the National Library, located next to them, these buildings were designed to form a neoclassical 'architectural trilogy', which would represent the official history and cultural power of the modern Greek state<sup>102</sup>. Nevertheless, the actions of the narrator/walker do not fit within the Situationist description of modern urban experience: in Michel Colle's words, "the state of total and passive submission of the man in the street placed before the architectural phenomenon" (in Sadler, 1998: 7). He rather 'misbehaves', as he states, by running, instead of walking; and going 'the wrong way up'.

De Certeau (1984: 117) argued that the walker transforms the street, as geometrically defined and treated through modern urban planning. He called this practice the 'rhetorics of walking', a practice of 'inscription' that is not abstract, but indispensably linked with the walker's physical mobility: through his/her movement on the streets, the walker "condemns certain places to inertia or disappearance and composes with others spatial 'turns of phrase' that are 'rare', 'accidental' or 'illegitimate'" (De Certeau, 1984: 99). From this perspective, the narrator/walker of the story disturbs the 'stability' of the 'proper' that *Academias* street is according to official discourses; and through "the ensemble of his movements", he actuates 'space' within it (De Certeau, 1984: 117). In this way, De Certeau would argue that he transgresses the 'already there', the 'place' of the street that is constructed by power discourses<sup>103</sup>, in order to reveal the street as a terrain for critical subjectivity.

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<sup>102</sup> As Bastéa (2000: 156-161) calls them, in the chapter 'The Athenian Trilogy: University, Academy, Library'. The three buildings were designed by the Danish architects Hans Christian and Theophil Hansen.

<sup>103</sup> Throughout the twentieth century, the street has been associated with movement and circulation, and it has been discussed as "the great modern dream of mobility" (Berman, 1988: 326), and as a 'flexible' terrain: "Contrary to the buildings, which almost always belong to someone, the streets in principle belong to no one" (Perec, 1999: 47).



Contrary to the proclamation of the planning officials in nineteenth century Athens that the street was “an artistic...and an administrative question”<sup>104</sup>, the narrator/walker acts in recognition of the critical potential of the experience of the modern street. In later writings, the writer of the story will describe uncanny, nightmarish street environments that often lead his protagonists to act out of character or the ordinary; unusual things always happen “out there in a street, somewhere in the centre of Athens”<sup>105</sup>.

## §

“Any human movement, whether it springs from an intellectual or even a natural impulse, is impeded in its unfolding by the boundless resistance of the outside world. A shortage of houses and the rising cost of travel are in the process of annihilating the elementary symbol of European freedom, which existed in certain forms even in the Middle Ages: freedom of domicile. And if medieval coercion bound men to natural associations, they are now chained together in unnatural community. Few things will further the ominous spread of the cult of rambling as much as the strangulation of the freedom of residence, and never has freedom of movement stood in greater disproportion to the abundance of means of travel.” (Benjamin, 1991: 454)

Benjamin’s *One-Way Street* can be considered, among other things, to be an investigation of the experience of resistance to movement in modern urbanism. In the above quote, which forms part of his critique of German modernism, in the fragment ‘Imperial

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<sup>104</sup> The quote is from a letter by the Minister of the Interior, Ioannis Kolettis: “The question of street alignments is a complex one; it is an artistic question and an administrative question” (Bastéa, 2000: 110). However, as Bastéa (2000: 109-110) notes, reasons of “beautification, cleanliness, or facilitation of transportation” (Bastéa, 2000: 115) were given only to disguise economic and political motives behind the proposed street layouts. In this sense, Bastéa, (2000: 110) further notes similarities between the case of Athens and Prefect Haussmann’s monumental redesign of Paris under Napoleon III (1853-70), which was carried out by private developers, pointing at tendencies of favoritism and profiteering in regards to both projects.

<sup>105</sup> In Raptopoulos’s novel *O Ergenis (The Bachelor)* (1993), as well as in his short story ‘Aquaforce’, the protagonists commit suicide after undergoing self-reflective ‘journeys’, whilst walking or driving in the city of Athens. The quotation by Raptopoulos (1993: 22) was translated from the Greek by the author of this thesis.

Panorama: A tour through the German inflation', he described a shift in the experience of movement: from the pre-modern experience that unfolded in opposition to a substantial entity, 'the outside world', to the modern urban experience of movement, the resistance of which cannot be identifiably caused by a substantial entity. In which case, as Caygill (1998: 130) argues, "The experience of resistance does not rest on there being something – a substance – which resists us, but is a symptom of an intangible obstacle to our movement." Caygill (1998: 130) further relates the modern urban experience of resistance to Benjamin's concept of 'porosity'<sup>106</sup>: which refers to the seemingly transparent and fluid modern urban environment. In a passage from 'Imperial Panorama', Benjamin (1996: 454) describes "the perpetual process of mingling and contamination" that takes place in modernity, where, like "all things", cities "are losing their intrinsic character and ambiguity displaces authenticity". This 'porous', ambiguous urban condition, in which fixed 'authenticities' are undistinguishable from what is transitory, may be experienced by the city dweller as a source of threat and insecurity: "There is no longer a substantial entity which resists our movement, but an ambiguous and inauthentic experience of blockage which resists our comprehension"<sup>107</sup> (Caygill, 1998: 130-131).

Nevertheless, Benjamin suggests that this sensation of resistance can also be experienced as an opportunity for a creative response and improvisation. To support this argument he discusses the city of Naples, where porosity results "from the passion for improvisation, which demands that space and opportunity be preserved at any price" (Benjamin, 1996: 416-417). Benjamin observes that in Naples, the porosity of the city provides the conditions for the unexpected; encouraging inventive and flexible responses of spatial occupation and use: "As porous as stone is the architecture. Building and action interpenetrate in the courtyards, arcades and stairways. In everything they preserve the scope

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<sup>106</sup> This concept first appears in the 'Naples' essay, but it pertains other 'city portraits' by Benjamin, as well as *One-Way Street*.

<sup>107</sup> Caygill (1998: 121) also notes in reference to the 'Naples' essay: "In the description of the city there is no distinction between what is fixed and permanent and (its feared opposite) what is transitory – rather everything is in a continual process of discontinuous transformation".

to become a theatre of new, unforeseen constellations. The stamp of the definitive is avoided” (Benjamin, 1996: 416). In the above conditions, Caygill (1998: 122) identifies a ‘speculative’ spatial experience, in which “every position is in a process of negotiating its relations with other positions”. Furthermore, by comparing the Neapolitan environments of porosity to Haussmann’s Parisian boulevards, he observes that Naples offers “no fixed spatial form which governs the location of participants” (Caygill, 1998: 122); whilst “transitions between different parts of urban space are not smooth and continuous, but multifarious, sudden and abrupt” (Caygill, 1998: 122-123). Caygill (1998: 123) argues that this is the “experience of shock”, in which Benjamin recognised a distinctly critical potential. Inspired by the effect of modern art techniques (i.e. montage), Benjamin advocated the ‘shock’ that, as an experience, encouraged creative and critical agency, rather than passive responses to a phenomenon.

In explicit political terms, Benjamin further argued that it was precisely this ‘experience of shock’ that modern urban planning was meant to abolish. In Convolute E of *The Arcades Project*, he made multiple references to published materials on Haussmann’s project: “Strategic basis for the perspectival articulation of the city. A contemporary seeking to justify the construction of large thoroughfares under Napoleon III speaks of them as “unfavourable ‘to the habitual tactic of local insurrection.’” Marcel Poëte, *Une vie de cité* (Paris, 1925), p. 469. “Open up this area of continual disturbances.” Baron Haussmann, in the memorandum calling for the extension of the Boulevard de Strasbourg to Châtelet. Emile de Labédollière, *Le Nouveau Paris*, p. 52. But even earlier than this: “They are paving Paris with wood in order to deprive the Revolution of building materials. Out of wooden blocks there will be no more barricades constructed.” Gutzkow, *Briefe aus paris*, vol. 1, pp. 60-61. What this means can be gathered from the fact that in 1830 there were 6,000 barricades.” (Benjamin, 1999b: 121). Benjamin points out that the boulevards were not constructed solely for technical, or aesthetic reasons, but in order to facilitate certain political purposes: namely preventing the inevitable insurrection of the proletariat population of the inner city quarters.

Therefore, it seems that the regulation and resistance of movement in modern urbanism operates and occurs on differing levels; which, rather than presenting obvious, substantial entities of opposition, employ ambiguity. In this framework, subjectivity in the pre-modern sense, of the 'fixed', 'authentic' viewpoint, is challenged. For Benjamin, there are two possible responses: the first to insist upon fixed identities; whilst the other is to embrace ambiguity as an opportunity for inventiveness – or, in Caygill's words, "The first option defends a given identity to the point of psychosis, while the second risks identity for the sake of its transformation" (Caygill, 1998: 130-131).

It's raining tonight. It rains really heavily, I am not kidding. It rains cats and dogs! Through the glazing of the telephone booth, among thousands of long distance talks on the phone with you, I watch the raindrops all around, looking for you. I call you from here, from Areos Square, you don't answer. Your phone rings and nobody answers. I get out and wander in the park. Rain soaks me thoroughly. My clothes are soaking up the heavy raindrops. I wander, my feet taking me here and there for no reason. I miss you. I go back again. I dial the twelve numbers: the code for the foreign country and then your number. Tens of beats resonating in my ears, dull booms and bangs. Then you answer and the reception is automatically lost. Just a "Hello?" of yours impregnates the cables reaches deep inside me. Then nothing. I call again, and again; and always as soon as you answer the reception is lost. That, you know, is terrible in an orange phone booth. Unbearable. Because tonight the rain grates my skin and I desire you. I miss you terribly tonight and I can't stand the distance anymore, your going away, the separation. That's why I run away. At Mouseio there isn't a single soul. The small tables and the chairs are soaking wet. The telephone booth sobs with emptiness. The red light is on but I can't get through. I am looking for you, as you dissolve in the darkness. At Kaniggos square the machine is broken down, crumbling. It keeps my twenty in, I beat and kick it. It gives me back the money and I go. I hate Athens when I wander around on my own in the rain. I hate it. It becomes an empty silence that multiplies your absence. It becomes a conduit of the void, of my loneliness. I feel the dirty grime of the road sticking to me. The passersby chase after me hurriedly, holding up their umbrellas. I stumble on their warm breaths.

I come out at Omonia square. Rain falls heavier now and I am soaked to the bone. I go down the stairs. They sell newspapers, bagels and salepi. People, voices are all around me, I hear the Metro coming. I find a telephone for long distance calls. I put a twenty in, I dial the number, you answer the phone. Rain inside me. Water making small pools. Underground holes that flood with muddy waters. Do you hear me? I can no longer stand this disjoining situation. I can't bear it anymore, you being there and me here, at the other end of the world. Do you hear that? What about your studies and all that bullshit that you're telling me? Give it all up and come back. Can you hear me, eh? You can hear me.

Talk to me. I can't bear it anymore, I'm telling you. I can't stand it. Don't deny me that, no. Twenties over. The red light is on. Your voice descends into the bottomless abyss between us. The phone call is over and the receiver needs to be put back in its place. The rain falls heavier. It rains cats and dogs.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> See Raptopoulos (1995: 51-54). This extract is the short story '*Yperastiko*' ('Long Distance Call'), also included in the collection *Kommatakia (In Pieces)*. It was translated from the original Greek text (included in Appendix) by the author of this thesis.

*When the street is a state of mind; how stories can become tactics; and why walking is political*

“In modern Athens, the vehicles of mass transportation are called *metaphorai*. To go to work or come home, one takes a ‘metaphor’ – a bus or a train. Stories could also take this noble name: every day, they traverse and organise places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories [...] Every story is a travel story – a spatial practice” (De Certeau, 1984: 115). Here, De Certeau describes an intrinsic link between narrativisation – or storytelling – and mobility in modern urban space.

The cities that inspired Benjamin’s ‘thought-images’ offered a sensuous, tactile navigational experience: in order to orient oneself, one must ‘feel’ one’s way through Naples or Moscow. Benjamin recognised that these cities were in constant flux, which, although differently caused and manifested, encouraged spatial mobility and improvisation<sup>109</sup>. From Benjamin’s perspective, these cities encompassed processes of perpetual re-inscription and re-configuration via spatial occupation. In this sense, it can be argued that these urban environments are ‘anti-historicist’, since they allow for continual configuration through immediate spatial experience: they do not provide sites onto which a monumental historicism can be permanently inscribed; but are in a process of constant transformation, “not according to a plan but according to improvisations, whose motivation remains inscrutable and whose consequences are unforeseeable” (Caygill, 1998: 124). Similarly to stories, which are reconfigured as they are told, these cities are reconfigured as they are experienced, practiced, and lived.

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<sup>109</sup> Caygill (1998: 124-128) compares the experience of mobility in Moscow and Naples.

In his inner city journey, the narrator/walker of the stories, appropriates the official, historicist construction of the city: in De Certeau's terms, as a 'proper' place, by creating alternative, subjective routes that incorporate 'accidents', 'ruptures'; or 'turns of phrase'<sup>110</sup>. Pile has discussed such activities as a kind of 'politics of resistance'. Furthermore, he suggests that resistance can be considered as the recognition of how power relations can be "incomplete, fluid, and liable to rupture"; thus, resistance is defined through the meanings taken on by social actions in everyday life, rather than the actions themselves (Pile, 1997: 14). From this perspective, Pile thinks that urban planning as "a spatial technology of domination" (Pile, 1997: 3) can be resisted through various 'tactics' of appropriation: through practices that "create new meanings out of imposed meanings" via spatial appropriation that "re-work[s] and divert[s] space to other ends" (Pile, 1997: 16). For Pile, subjectivity plays an important role in such urban practices and processes. Since 'resistance' is not merely conceived to be changes in external physical space, Pile (1996: 255) argues that resistance must engage with "the spaces of the subject, but also the ways in which people move through spaces which are constitutive of subjectivity". He further argues that, for this reason, "identification, desire and fantasy in psychic life" (Pile, 1996: 255) should be acknowledged as significant constituents of urban spatial practices.

Following similar lines of argument, postmodern criticism can be said to have stressed the need for subjectivity to inform politics. In a postcolonial context, Frantz Fanon has pointed out that the intrinsic potential for resistance can lie within the psychical manifestations of practices of 'colonisation' by hegemonic norms and values (Fanon, 1986). Furthermore, in the context of globalisation, Fredric Jameson has proposed 'an aesthetics of cognitive mapping', which enables the subject to actively intervene in the globalised environment of alienating 'postmodern hyperspace' (Jameson, 1991). It is most interesting to note that, within these discourses, antithetical distinctions between the 'local' and the

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<sup>110</sup> De Certeau (1984: 117-118) distinguished between 'place', as constructed by official discourses, and 'practiced place', as practiced through lived experience and everyday practice. He also mentioned actualising 'space' and 'spatialisation' through movement, as going against the construction of the city as a 'proper'.



‘global’, the ‘body’ and the ‘city’, become ambivalent. As Pile comments, these entities do not appear on natural scales anymore, but are rather formed out of the tensions that they contain. Echoing Lefebvre, he argues that, “all scales ‘speak’ of the ‘production of space’, not only as an echo of domination, but also as a possibility of resistance” (Pile, 1997: 13).

## §

The city has been given many descriptions in modern and postmodern urban discourses. It has been said that: “The urban terrain is an emotional concrete condition”, and that “The city is a state of mind”<sup>111</sup>. Therefore it has been discussed, not as “merely a physical mechanism or an artificial construction” (Pile, 1996: 245), but also as a complex set of relationships that come together through diverse networks; namely economic and administrative, but also symbolic and representational (Donald: 1999). Thus, the city is discussed in terms of subjective experience, which acknowledges the significance of the relationship between the urban subject and the specific geography of the modern city<sup>112</sup>. As Marx stated: “Men can see nothing around them that is not their own image; everything speaks to them of themselves. Their very landscape is alive” (in Sadler, 1998: 77). Such an approach to the city makes an active and creative urban existence possible, transforming the places of power into terrains of subjectivity; or, into places that one wouldn’t want to leave, as, in the writer’s own words, they are ‘as attractive as no other’.

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<sup>111</sup> The first quote by architect Adam Caruso is included in his article *‘La ville émotionnelle’* (‘The emotional city’). It was translated into English from the French by the author of this thesis. The second quote by geographer R. E. Park of the Chicago School is included in his 1925 essay “The city: suggestions for investigation of human behaviour in the urban environment”; quotation is included in (Pile, 1996: 245).

<sup>112</sup> “To be an urban subject means something – and the geography of the city means something: whether it is in Freud’s uncanny story of dreadful delight or in the freedom it gives for people to lose themselves and look anew. The streets become a map of visible and invisible relations of meaning, identity and power into which the subject is placed and has to find their way around – and possibly, one day, to escape” (Pile, 1996: 245).





*Fig. (4)*

## 2

‘An avenue that is like me’<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Parts of this chapter were published in (Nigianni, 2006); the article is attached in Appendix.



Cities are like people,” my father used to say and I knew he was telling the truth – he seemed like a whole city himself.

He had big palms, wide forehead, long and thin lips, boldly curved eyebrows, eyelids that added a sense of mystery to his look and his voice could be heard as far as the most distanced neighborhood, which I, quite often, dared to reach.

“That’s the way it is!” my grandfather would agree with him, and go on saying: “Each city has its own story, just like people do!”

Grandfather had deep lines around his eyes, his neck stuck out from his buttoned-up shirt all wrinkled, his fingers had taken that yellow colour of the tobacco and marks of an old illness scarred his nostrils.

When I looked at my grandfather, it was as if I was reading a book full of adventures and unexpected incidents.

They used to talk about their home country. It was a city, a city whose name reminded me of one of the three Magi who worshiped Jesus Christ. A city spread along a coast, decorated with polygonal balconies and satiated with sherbets and sweets with strange names and thick tastes.

*“The houses I used to have were taken away from me”* – I think my grandfather used to mutter. So I realised they were talking about a city that I would never meet.

My mother would open – especially at nights with a full moon – an old wooden chest decorated with thin iron bars.

“Look, look!” she’d invite me and I’d stick my whole face into a wooden tip filled with foxed books, colourful flowers made of starched fabric, hats in strange shapes, dresses in bright colours and then I’d stretch out my hands trying to reach the bottom, probing it carefully in case a splinter prickled my hand, and mother would always advise me:

“Gently, gently now! Gently we touch the things that carry inside them our dreams, our hopes and our passions!”

Gently, softly my hands were fumbling and trying out touches and shapes, till they’d reach that circular object, the one wrapped up in a cotton cloth...And I would feel it, my palm was so small I almost couldn’t grasp it, but I’d finally manage to grab hold of it, to hold it firmly, to drag it out in the pale light which reigned the room – the light of a full moon and an acetylene lamp.

The cloth had small red and white squares and its edges were tied in a loose knot. A cloth taken from a kitchen’s hook. That’s how it must have been! But was it ever possible?

My mother, shaking her head, would say:

“You know, houses are quick to spite you, if you strip them!”

But I was just as headstrong! Whatever I touched, I wanted to know the use of. Under the piece of cloth, I could guess the shape of the object and its kind.

“Come on, open it!” my mother’s order sounded dipped in sorrow. “Open it!”

I’d obey. I’d undo the knot, letting the edges of the cloth fall downwards and in my palms I’d see a piece of rock. A rock from a road. It must have been a dirt road. A road that’d raise dust in the summer and’d be filled with small pools of water during the days of rain. The road of a city that no longer existed.

**“This is my country now...** What’s left of it!” my mother’d choose words that’d cut into my heart and stay there, etched forever.

So my mother’s country was a city too – always the same city.

**Well – I used to wonder –, can a city be sometimes the eyelids that hide a mystery, sometimes the scars an old illness leaves on the nostrils and sometimes a stone taken from a quiet little street?**

“Everything was burnt down! ...” *“Wherever you touch it, memory hurts, there is only a little sky...”* my grandfather used to sigh, deeply he sighed, as if that very moment he had in front of him the images of panic, of fire, of terror!

“Memories never leave us!” my father would add and then he’d remember an old tune and would start singing it. And mother would smile: “They become tales and legends!” I’d hear her whispering. All these things were a city. A city that vanished in flames, that saw its wealth being raided and watched those who loved it abandon it piled up in caiques, ships, barges and boats, swimming next to dead bodies and barrels that once – two days ago – were carrying in their circular bellies oil, olives and wine...

The city was dying and its swan-song was one of flame and ash.  
A city – the city of the ones I loved. A city I will never know...

*“This wood that would refresh my forehead*

*the hours of noon that used to burn my veins*

*It would burst into foreign hands. Take it, I’m offering you a present,*

*Look, it’s the wood of a lemon tree ...”* – I don’t remember who it was that passed on to me this piece of advice, this legacy. A heavy burden. Heavy food. But I had a sturdy stomach. I could digest anything. I can still digest everything, even now.

“Well, I have to find a city of my own then!” I’d say to myself all determined, some nights when everything was really quiet, so quiet in fact that dreams wouldn’t come near me out of fear that even their light step would stir the calm of the half-closed shutters and the peaceful sound of the sleeping birds .

**A city, then, that would be my own. A city made for me. A city that would be like me. A city... Perhaps the city I was born in...But of**

course, that's the one. The city I was born in and growing up in... The city I intended to spend the rest of my life in.

The city that lay at the bottom of the hill where I lived.

A beautiful city. A lively city. Big...God, how big!

So big itself and I so small!...

But how could it be possible for a boy to resemble to a city, a boy who, when darkness fell, would contemplate the shadows of the dead and shiver, who would remember the screams of the displaced and panic?

The city *I* wanted to be like, would have – I imagined – all the small corners where we stash away our toys, all the small terraces from where we can gaze far off towards our dreams, all these hidden alleys that carry the smell of our loved ones.

“But cities aren't children that injure their knees on the first fall! Cities are more like creatures that look towards the future planning victories! And you discover them... *“once you let your heart and your thought become one”* – I think it was my dearest aunt that once explained to me how she herself had chosen the place she believed was more like her.

Therefore, a city not to play “hide and seek” in, neither to jump up and down to the rhythm of a nursery rhyme. A city that would match the shape of my maturity.

“But you have to plan ahead!” my father would make sure he passed on the rules of a certain social propaganda.

To decide upon – that's what I *had* to do – the boundaries of my own future. Out of a whole city I'd have to pick one single place.

**Squares signal freedom.**

**Avenues aim at success.**

**Commercial streets offer comfort.**

**Some neighbourhoods cover the need for love. Others lead you to the heights of social success.**

I'd ask my mother to take me with her on her weekly days out.

On the main streets, I got to know the clamour of the big stores, the bureaucracy of the public-service buildings, the luxury of the luminous cafés.

All these were situations that either scared me or left me indifferent.

“*Well*”, as if a voice was explaining to me,

“*We always set out to return*

*To solitude, a fistful of earth, to the empty hands.*”

Our house waited, steaming with the smell of pastries and the suffocation of old furniture.

So I persuaded my father to take Sunday walks with me in other people's neighbourhoods.

Buses gasped on uphill roads; matches that fascinated those who'd accepted the identity of the fan, were played in stadiums; cinemas offered their enchantment only as long as they had their lights switched off.

All these things bore elements of what I desired or repressed, but they weren't me. I couldn't possibly be anything like any of those things.

*"...People strangers*

*In rooms in streets under the pepper trees*

*While the headlights of cars massacre*

*Thousands of pale masks*" who would whisper those words in my ear – and when?

Was the city hiding from me or was it I that refused my standardization?

*"Yet, once I loved Syngrou Avenue*

*The big road's double swaying*

*That left us magically by the sea*" – the prophecy had been written and it was only a matter of time until I discovered it. The same cannot be said of the impulsion towards that which would become my destiny.

The day would come then, when I'd discover and love Syngrou Avenue, this long and straight road which headed to the sea. I would believe...

When was it that I first thought I had the desire – and the ability – to be like it?

It must have been in those years when I would quiver at the sight of a naked female arm and my whole body was convinced that it was carrying inside it a victorious army commander. The boy was becoming a man, and sitting at a table out on the street, surrounded by flowerbeds, little ponds and ducks, the elegant lady was sipping her ice cream soda, leaving on the white straw the mark of her red lips.

*"...This rose it's yours, it's yours*

*You can take it*

*Now or later, whenever you want to*" – that same woman led me to the big hall, through huge automobiles, full of shining nickel and perfectly round lights and bumpers.

Cars possess the magic of an everyday adventure, if you can learn how to tame them and then take them and let them roll you down roads that don't reveal their end.

I asked to know the name of that road in front of the big hall, the

one full of cars. A straight wide road it was, and no matter how much I stretched and stretched, I couldn't see its end. A road that only a car such as those in that big hall deserved to tame and so I asked again, I pulled on my mother's hand.

"Tell me, how's this road called?"

"Syngrou avenue," the lady with the red lips smiled and bent over me. "Do you know where it leads to?"

My eyes started their journey at the dimple of her neck, jumped over the shiny obstacle of a little cross and tried to follow the line which seemed to separate her two breasts.

"To the sea!" and her arm stretched out over the beautiful bright blue of a car and pointed to one direction...Under her short sleeve, the colour of her armpit peeked through, a timid pink.

*"Break Ariadne's thread and look!*

*The blue body of the mermaid"*

I shivered.

Syngrou Avenue – just like my gaze – started mere steps from where I was standing and disappeared towards some unknown beach.

And so I thought – no, I decided – that *this* was the road I should be like.

I stepped outside onto the pavement. My father followed me.

"One of these days I'll take you for a walk down the very end of this road...Down to the sea," that large palm of his was playing with my short-cut hair.

"I think I am like Syngrou Avenue", I whispered; so softly did I whisper, that no one heard me but myself, or did I?... Maybe I never heard those words, maybe I never spoke them. Maybe I only ever thought about them... Yes, that's right: I only ever thought about them!

So, out of a whole city, I chose one road. The straightest, the longest, the dullest, least remarkable one. But one nonetheless favoured by the stunning cars; one bold enough to fall into the sea's embrace! Into the blue body of a mermaid! I chose a man's road...<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> In (Kontoleon, 1999: 37-43). The short story was translated from the original Greek text, included in Appendix, by literary translators Iraklis Padopoulos and Katerina Sykioti.

*How can bodies resemble cities; when exploring the city is like opening an old chest; when one meets an avenue for the first time*

From the title, the narrator of the story already expresses the idea that there is a fundamental and essential, empathetic relationship between urban space and its inhabitants. He begins his narration by describing his family's physical features; his father's 'boldly curved eyebrows' and 'eyelids that added a sense of mystery to his look', as well as his grandfather's fingers, which 'had taken that yellow colour of the tobacco' and the 'marks of an old illness' that 'scarred his nostrils'. The writer then goes on to intermingle these physical features with the city: 'Well – I used to wonder – can a city be sometimes the eyelids that hide a mystery, sometimes the scars an old illness leaves on the nostrils...?'

The ideas of an intertwinement and mirroring between body-scape and city-scape have been discussed by philosopher Elizabeth Grosz (1995: 104), who describes "constitutive and mutually defining" relations between the body and the city. In the essay 'Bodies-Cities', Grosz (1995: 105) argues that such relations escape all 'causal' or 'representational' models: meaning that there is neither, a purely external relation between the body and the city, nor a simple mirroring of the body in the built environment. Instead, she suggests that space is correlated to the subject; rather than being an empty receptacle, space is closely dependent on its 'contents', while the ways in which it is perceived and represented depend on the subject's relation to those contents.

As the story develops, it becomes clear that the interconnection between spatiality and the embodied subject makes possible a dynamic and transformative spatial inhabitation. As Grosz (1995: 92) argues, "space makes possible different kinds of relations, but in turn it is transformed according to the subject's affective and instrumental relations with it"; thus, the body is marked by the city, but the body in turn shapes the city.



The narrator describes how he was introduced to the vital connection between his body and space when he was still a young child, by listening to the stories of his family about their long lost home city. A memorable object, a stone from one of the city's roads, helps bring the memories back and acts as a catalyst for storytelling. The narrator gives a detailed description of his efforts to retrieve the stone from the depths of a wooden chest, filled with other family belongings that were salvaged during the war<sup>115</sup>. In his search, he has to engage in a blind, tactile hunt through the space of the timber box, until he finds his way to the special object: an object that his mother called 'her country'. Therefore, this early embodied subjective spatial experience operates in a twofold way: as a bodily practice that privileges senses other than vision; and, an imaginative practice, as the chest and the stone refer symbolically to a lost home city.

The conception of space as experienced, dreamed, imagined and remembered, rather than as architectural and geometrical, has been discussed by philosopher Gaston Bachelard. For Bachelard, this is the only way to approach the 'intimate dimension' of space. In his book *The Poetics of Space* (1958), he demonstrated how the feeling of 'intimacy' is related to certain domestic spaces that also function as places to 'hide' and 'shelter' memory: the drawer, the chest or the wardrobe<sup>116</sup>. He also describes those spaces as experienced through an embodied imagination: "I alone, in my memories of another century, can open the deep cupboard that still retains for me alone that unique odor, the odor of raisins drying on a wicker tray" (Bachelard, 1994: 13).

It is such an intimacy with the city that the narrator aims to explore: 'The city I wanted to be like, would have - I imagined - all the small corners where we stash away our toys, all the small terraces from where we can gaze far off towards our dreams, all these hidden alleys that carry the smell of our

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<sup>115</sup> Here I refer to the Greek-Turkish war in Minor Asia in 1912. After the defeat of the Greek army, the Greek population was forced to abandon the area and to seek refuge in Greece.

<sup>116</sup> In the chapter 'Drawers, chests and wardrobes', Gaston Bachelard (1994: 86) wrote: "'We shall never reach the bottom of the casket'. The infinite quality of the intimate dimension could not be better expressed."

loved ones.’ And he is about to discover that navigating through the space of the city is to be a surprisingly similar experience to his tactile and embodied search through the old wooden chest.

## §

“For children are particularly fond of haunting any site where things are being visibly worked on. They are irresistibly drawn by the detritus generated by building, gardening, housework, tailoring, or carpentry. In waste products they recognise the face that the world of things turns directly and solely to them. In using these things, they do not so much imitate the works of adults as bring together in the artifact produced in play, materials of widely different kinds of new, intuitive relationship. Children thus produce their own small world of things within the greater one” (Benjamin, 1996: 449-450). Benjamin was fascinated with the great creativity and inventiveness children show in their use of objects and the spatial environment. In *One-Way Street*, Benjamin makes multiple references to children’s spatial experience through play. These experiences, usually in interior settings, are described as tactile, immersive, and empathetic. In the fragment ‘Child hiding’, a game of hide-and-seek in a modern apartment evokes experiences of de-materialisation and absorption: “Here he is enclosed in the material world. It becomes immensely distinct, speechlessly obtrusive [...] Standing behind the doorway curtain, the child himself becomes something floating and white, a ghost [...] And behind a door, he himself *is* the door – wears it like his heavy mask, and like a shaman will bewitch all those who unsuspectingly enter” (Benjamin, 1996: 465). On the other hand, the dresser drawers of the ‘Untidy child’ “must become arsenal and zoo, crime museum and crypt. ‘To tidy up’ would be to demolish an edifice full of prickly chestnuts that are spiky clubs, tinfoil that is hoarded silver, bricks that are coffins, cacti that are totem poles, and copper pennies that are shields” (Benjamin, 1996: 465). These experiences of identification and mingling with the inanimate world resemble the modern urban experiences of being

“closely mingled with people and things” that Benjamin (1999a: 33) described in ‘Moscow’, as well as in *One-Way Street*: “Just as all things, in an irreversible process of mingling and contamination, are losing their intrinsic character while ambiguity displaces authenticity, so is the city” (Benjamin, 1996: 454).

There is an obvious critical aspect in such experiences and practices. Leach (2000: 30-31) described the empathetic, *mimetic* appropriation of interior spaces and objects in Benjamin’s descriptions of children’s play as ‘creative’. Gilloch (2002: 103) sharing a similar view, notes that, for Benjamin, “On his or her various ‘hunts’, the child transforms not only the object world, but also the moribund spaces of the city – not least the nightmarish bourgeois interior, a setting where ‘luxury’ ensures impoverishment.” Furthermore, this ‘creative’ and ‘appropriative’ engagement questions and subverts prescribed spatial practices associated with certain socio-cultural attitudes. For the ‘Untidy child’, ‘untidiness’ is a form of rebellion towards bourgeois cleanliness: “The child has long since helped at his mother’s linen cupboard and his father’s bookshelves, while in his own domain he is still a sporadic, warlike visitor” (Benjamin, 1996: 465). Or, for the ‘Pilfering child’, ‘stealing’ candy becomes a sensual, almost sexual, act, which is subversive of propriety: “Through the chink of the scarcely open larder door, his hand advances like a lover through the night. Once at home in the darkness, it gropes toward sugar or almonds, raisins or preserves. And just as the lover embraces his girl before kissing her, the child’s hand enjoys a tactile tryst with the comestibles before his mouth savours their sweetness” (Benjamin, 1996: 464).

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The narrator’s early intimate spatial experiences in his home surroundings are followed by the exciting city explorations of his early youth. Further on in the story, he recalls the eventful discovery of his favourite avenue during one of his journeys out in the city: “The day would come then that I’d discover and love Syngrou avenue... When was it that I first thought I had the desire – and the ability – to be like it?

It must have been in those years when I would quiver at the sight of a naked female arm and my whole body was convinced that it was carrying inside it a victorious army commander.’ Spatial apprehension is described, once more, primarily as a bodily and imaginary experience; the writer’s sexual awakening coincides with his discovery of the ‘long and straight road which headed to the sea.’ A particular incident charged with eroticism will further trigger off feelings of empathy and identification with the place: ‘My eyes started their journey at the dimple of her neck, jumped over the shiny obstacle of a little cross and tried to follow the line which seemed to separate her two breasts... Syngrou Avenue – just like my gaze – started mere steps from where I was standing and disappeared towards some unknown beach. And so I thought – no, I decided – that *this* was the road I should be like.’

## §

In her essay ‘Into the Labyrinth’, Elizabeth Wilson (2000: 150) describes the “sophisticated urban consciousness, which reached a high point in central Europe in the early twentieth century” as “essentially male”. According to Wilson, it was accompanied by “sexual unease” and preoccupied with “the pursuit of sexuality outside the constraints of the family” (Wilson, 2000: 150). Wilson (2000: 150) also notes the problematic representation of the presence of women in the modern city: “Woman is present in cities as temptress, as whore, as fallen woman, as lesbian, but also as virtuous womanhood in danger, as heroic womanhood who triumphs over temptation and tribulation”. Paradoxically, in Benjamin’s case, as well as hers, it was a woman who initiated the children to the city’s “fateful pleasures to be enjoyed” and “enormous anxieties to be overcome” (Wilson, 2000: 146): “Now let me call back those who introduced me to the city. For although the child, in his solitary games, grows up in closest proximity to the city, he needs and seeks guides to its wider expanses, and the first of these – for a son of wealthy middle-class parents like me – are sure to have been nursemaids”

(Benjamin, 1999b: 595). In the *flâneries* of Benjamin's adulthood, the female urban presence acquires a clearer socio-political significance, which, at the same time, manifests in a spatial and performative manner: "There is no doubt, at any rate, that the feeling of crossing for the first time the threshold of one's class had a part in the almost unequaled fascination of publicly accosting a whore on the street. At the beginning, however, this was a crossing of frontiers not only social but topographic, in the sense that whole networks of streets were opened up under the auspices of prostitution. But what is really a crossing? Is it not, rather, an obstinate and voluptuous hovering on the brink, a hesitation that has its most cogent motive in the fact that beyond this frontier lies nothingness? But in great cities, there are countless places where one stands on the edge of the void; and the whores in the doorways of tenement blocks and on the less sonorous asphalt of railway platforms are like the household goddesses of this cult of nothingness" (Benjamin, 1999b: 600). For Benjamin, the female becomes an embodiment of the two main sources of contradiction within modern urbanism: sexuality and democracy. For this reason, Wilson (2000: 153) proposes that women, "a symptom of disorder, and a problem" in the city, are placed at the centre of any future, radical approaches to city planning.

## §

The literature characteristic of the modern Greek period has demonstrated a specific sensibility towards the relation between urban space and subjectivity<sup>117</sup>. It often offers depictions of the modern city as 'body', and Athens, especially, has been repeatedly described as "a living organism, an erotic body", which interacts experientially with the writer (Papageorgiou, 2000: 525). The references to the poet George Seferis in the story about

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<sup>117</sup> As mentioned by Vitti (1978: 387-389), after the early works influenced by romanticism and neo-realism, the Greek literary production since the 1920s has demonstrated a great interest in the phenomenon of urbanism, which has been represented through subjective narratives following the technique of the 'stream of consciousness' – as employed by James Joyce and Virginia Woolf.

Syngrou avenue further evoke influences by symbolism, surrealism and psychoanalysis<sup>118</sup>. Seferis described Syngrou avenue in a couple of his poems as an indifferent modern space; however, bearing a latent eroticism<sup>119</sup>. He describes Syngrou as an escape from the urban ‘labyrinth’ of the city centre that leads to the sea, an element symbolically associated with sexual pleasure (Koliva, 1985: 198).

These depictions of the road by Seferis become more significant when contextualised within the early Athenian modernisation that took place between the 1930s and the 1950s. This was a period of intense urbanisation in Greece; succeeding a number of major historical events, such as the Balkan, Asia Minor, and First World Wars. Among other things, these periods of unrest and violence caused, both, a big influx of refugees, whilst at the same time an increase in the volume of internal immigration to the capital city of Athens. During this period, it became obvious that Athens would never be the city-symbol that the nineteenth century neo-classicists dreamt about; instead, it was rapidly transforming into a modern fragmented city, and expanding chaotically in all directions (Papageorgiou, 2000: 517-519). This situation was, however, welcomed in the modern Greek literary production. Young writers, eager to embrace modernism, acknowledged a poetic quality to the newly emerging modern urban spaces, such as the motorway, which were acquiring an integral function within the city. As Vasiliki Koliva comments, “The avenues appeared frequently in novels of this period”, and “they indicated passage, transition, wanderings related to a psychological trial”, as well as “a wish to escape” (Koliva, 1985: 198). Related symbolically to the modern urban experience of mobility through their obvious connection with the car, avenues provided powerful poetic images of freedom of movement.

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<sup>118</sup> As Vitti (1978: 393-411) notes, George Seferis, as well as poets Andreas Empeirikos and Odysseus Elytis, were part of the so-called ‘generation of the 30s’, a literary movement which was influenced by French literature and surrealism.

<sup>119</sup> In the poem ‘A word for summer’: “And yet I used to love Syngrou avenue/ the double rise and fall of the great road/bringing us out miraculously to the sea/the eternal sea, to cleanse us of our sins.” (Seferis 1995, 89); similarly in the poem ‘Syngrou Avenue, 1930’: “when you let your heart and your thought become/one/with the blackish river that stretches, stiffens and/goes away:/Break Ariadne’s thread and look!/The blue body of the mermaid” (Seferis 1995: 41) Both these poems are quoted by Kontoleon in the story.

Syngrou avenue was one of the first fast motorways to be constructed in Athens. Originally conceived and designed in the late nineteenth century, it was fully constructed by 1904 to connect the city centre with the coastal suburb of Phalero<sup>120</sup>. The ‘straight road, direct and unswerving’ that is Syngrou avenue becomes celebrated in Greek literature as another embodiment of modernity: a symbol of the modern pleasures of the car and speed, heading towards the sea, and, for many users, reinforcing associations with masculinity and sexuality. Novelist George Theotokas, celebrating the “concept of the modern element of culture”, wrote of Syngrou avenue: “Day and night Syngrou Avenue flows toward the coast of Phalero carrying along the newborn and as yet unexpressed rhythms of a strong lyricism looking for strong poets” (in Papageorgiou, 2000: 519). Seferis later subtitled his own poem, called ‘Syngrou Avenue, 1930’, “To George Theotokas, who discovered it” (in Papageorgiou, 2000: 519-521).

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<sup>120</sup> Biris (1999: 188) mentions that the avenue was designed between 1876-1878 by Ioannis Genisarlis, surveyor and professor in the Athens Polytechnic. Biris (1999: 252) further notes that the cost of the project was covered mainly by the donations of the wife of Greek banker and philanthropist Andreas Syngros.

The decision had been made and the exploration would soon follow. Besides, the time had come for me to open my wings.

*“The house*

*Full of grilles and distrust when you examine it closely*

*In its dark corners*

*‘For years I used to go to bed early,’ it whispers”*

So, I would conquer the whole world, yes I would – my teenage decisions were determined by my body’s transformations.

**As I was changing, the Avenue was changing. We were both discovering the seductions of the night.**

But before revealing to me the secret sins of love, it rewarded me with the sight of a church built of brown stone and three or four little houses snugly perched amid those cliffs that had been – as if by mistake – planted in the middle of the valley, instead of on a beach and left to keep company, not to sea-gulls and fishing boats, but to sparrows and green buses.

The unexpected fascinated me and danger attracted me, like the small magnet used by my mother’s dressmaker did the pins.

One time I dared to take the last late-night bus and from behind the window panes I was trying to make out the shapes of those who could offer anyone – even me? – the kind of love called “paid”.

I’d learnt to regard paying for love as a sign of toughness and masculinity.

“But if I don’t pay, what woman will sleep with me?” a soldier had confessed to me one night in the army, while he was keeping guard, three to five a.m.

The cigarette in his mouth was about to burn his lips and traces of a careless midwife had flattened the curves of his face.

Along with a packet of cigarettes, I offered him some money and promised him the hospitality of the road I thought was like me.

*“And all this is an old story that no longer interests anyone;*

*We’ve hardened our hearts and grown up.”*

Poor soldiers, unloved teenagers and romantic dreamers...

**As I was growing up, my face was changing.**

Besides, Syngrou Avenue too knows how to change faces. It taught me to do the same.



During the day, the road dons the suit of an entirely respectable business and locks itself up in air-conditioned offices or shines behind squeaky clean shop-windows.

It exchanges money, sells tickets – the smell of lager but a distant memory for now –, it advertises cars and, as the trees shed a useless shadow, faceless tourists cannot decide on whether or not they should use their cameras. Syngrou Avenue has nothing worth seeing to offer them. Only there, near the end, only there where the end is near, there is a change of scenery: a beach; one however that is remote, dirty and finally useless, any trace of beauty it does have, serving no purpose whatsoever..

The blue mermaid has been forsaken...perhaps it is elsewhere that those who are truly keen should look for her.

Ah, how right I was – I say to myself – on the choice of the road that is like me. Everything this road does, I do too...And I do it eagerly and with conviction.

But alas, the night always returns. And with it, so do my guilts.

*«We looked for metamorphosis in our youth  
with desires that played like big fish  
In seas suddenly shrinking...»*

To this day, I haven't managed – and I doubt if there's anyone who has – to successfully record all the details that have been engraved on the two sides of the avenue. After all, it's not as if the people you meet on it are ever really just the walking type, there to enjoy a quiet stroll. All of them – men more often than not – have an ulterior motive. Some of them are there to sell, others to litter; some of them look to get aroused, others to offer arousal.

The Avenue is not fond of bright lights. A couple of distant neon lamps along with the headlights of the cars whizzing by are all it needs. Nevertheless, every now and then, the passer-by will come across the big bright billboards of the famous *bouzoukia*, the live-music venues that are the heart of Greek night-life; also known as those places that commercialise joy. If you are lucky – this *is* after all one of the few attractions the Avenue has to offer – you could run into one of the stars of this kind of entertainment: women or men whose eyes have lost the gift of modesty, whose ears have lost the ability to process sounds of lower volume than that of a microphone. Still, these are the deities of our age, complete with a 'best-before' label, and those who meet

them have every right to feel blessed, like the old pilgrims to the Holly Land who were graced with the rare chance to catch a fleeting glimpse of an angel. Such deities owe their immense popularity to the type of songs they somehow manage to pull off. Songs that chain you down rather than lift you up, like, for instance, those my father used to sing on Sunday mornings during the 50's. Those kind of songs light fireworks and promote face powder and make-up cream.

Syngrou Avenue is a place that never relaxes – another thing we have in common. It never sleeps. Its bustling activity in the morning creates the conditions that will, come the night, create the need to live it up and revel till dawn.

In other words – at night the road gives back all the dirt, the day has thrown at it.

And I'm just not sure whether the bodies hanging about like cheap merchandise should be mocked and scoffed at or whether they are the ones who mock and scoff, a daily reminder of the pathetic lives of those who need to buy.

In any case, at nights, I can hardly distinguish which type of walker (or maybe user?) of the road I was like. I belong – I like to think – to the buyers, if only the potential ones. But the smell of exhaust fumes and a couple of saliva stains on my jacket suggest otherwise, making me shudder at the ever more plausible thought that slowly but steadily I am drifting towards the ranks of those that sell themselves.

*“And the bodies like broken branches  
like roots uprooted.”*

But if I think twice about it, I start laughing. I start laughing and clapping my hands. I sing one of those songs with the empty words that don't make any sense, they're there just to give you something to follow the rhythm with. I'm glad. Relieved. Relaxed. I did very well – I congratulate myself – to decide to identify with Syngrou Avenue. An avenue digests everything and can be blamed for nothing. An avenue like that doesn't need to prove its identity. It is what it is: self-sufficient and alone – a road with very few side-streets. Those who decide to walk on it, have neither the desire, nor the means to escape. They have no choice – once they enter – but to reach its end. Unless they're willing to risk the humiliation or the danger of a subway. Syngrou is a road that accepts things as they are. And it contains all sorts of things.

As for me...Yes, believe me. I'm telling the truth when I claim I think I am like Syngrou Avenue.

But, allow me one question...Which road are *you* like?

No need to *get* all tense now! I'm only joking.

*"All this was fine, all this, a casual stroll."*

From the days of the city that is no more and of the people who had identified with it, to our days, the days of those who choose to go down – all grown-up now – a straight road, direct and unswerving. A road that disappears into the sea... With no desire to go on, nor regard for what comes after. A road that has forsaken the mermaid.

*"And at the bottom, almost hidden, the sleepless worm."*

So you see, at the risk of becoming disagreeable, I have to insist: Syngrou Avenue *is* like me. And it is like you too. Trust me, I'm somewhat of an expert on the matter...I think this much I have managed to prove to you.

*"Talking does no good*

*...Each dreams separately without hearing*

*anyone else's nightmare."*

That wise poet had said all this. Do not doubt him. All I did was give a very subjective opinion, with nothing to back it up. Just an opinion... I may be wrong. May be.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> (Kontoleon, 1999: 43-47)

*When an avenue is like you and me*

As the story unfolds, the narrator appears to describe a process of identification with Syngrou avenue. In its most contemporary condition, the avenue is represented as a living organism that has been growing along with its occupants: ‘As I was changing, the avenue was changing’. In the narrator’s account, the avenue has ended up incorporating and reflecting elements of his and others subjectivity, and often, their own ‘double’ existence. While predominantly an office area in the morning, Syngrou avenue becomes an entertainment centre in the evening, attracting crowds to the various leisure venues, such as, multiplex cinemas, music halls and clubs, that line the sides of the avenue. It is also known for lap-dancing bars and prostitution that proliferate the side streets. As the narrator recounts, during the day the avenue is a commercial, banal modern space, where nothing is worth seeing and photographed; whereas, at night, it reveals another, ‘hidden’ condition related to bodily pleasures. This can be understood as a repressed spatial ‘other’; the ‘unconscious’ condition, not quite visible during the day, which is, nevertheless, inseparable from, and a dependent of, the morning routine.

§

The idea that a ‘fusing’ of body and built environment takes place in the city is well established. From as early as the period of Julius Caesar’s Roman Empire and his master architect Vitruvius, the body was not perceived as simply something to be contained by architectural space, but rather it was understood as the model according to which architecture should be created<sup>122</sup>. During the Italian Renaissance, architects and theorists went further by applying this idea to the city. Leon Battista Alberti, for example, wrote that “the city is like a

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<sup>122</sup> Both the Roman architect and, later, Leonardo da Vinci – with his famous drawing of the outstretched body of a man contained by the circle and the square – suggested that there should be a ‘harmonious’ analogy between buildings and the human body. As Burgin (1996: 141) notes, in his third book Vitruvius described, “how the outstretched limbs of a ‘well-formed man’ subtend the circle and the square”.

large house and the house like a small city”, but ultimately “every edifice is a body” (in Burgin, 1996: 142). As Victor Burgin (1996: 143) has pointed out, anthropomorphic illustrations of cities from the Renaissance period express this concept visually through the corporeal city; as well as the ideology of a time: “man [...] is literally ‘the measure of all things’”. Philosopher Henri Lefebvre, however, argued that this pre-modern embodied perception of the city soon gave way to a visual-geometric one; the body gave its place to the eye<sup>123</sup>. This shift, which he describes as largely resulting from Enlightenment thought, postulating that tactile or other corporeal experience should be suppressed in order to rely on visual orientation<sup>124</sup>, has since given way to an optical-geometric spatial perception. Subsequently, Lefebvre argued that the resultant spatial production is the origin of what he calls ‘abstract space’, and the de-corporealised and de-corporealising space of modernity.

Psychoanalysis has provided an exception among the dominant discourses on modern space dependent upon the body-mind binary<sup>125</sup>, since, early on, it has acknowledged the body as a spatio-temporal entity<sup>126</sup>. Sigmund Freud’s first investigations into the formation of the ‘ego’ in relation to the body, especially the erotogenic zones and the sexual drives<sup>127</sup>, as well as his conception of the spatial dimension of the ‘psyche’<sup>128</sup>, were highly influential in

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<sup>123</sup> Largely due to the fact that the city was until then almost undifferentiated from the countryside, therefore also from ‘nature’, which was fundamentally connected to the ‘body’. Lefebvre discussed this in chapter 4 of *The Production of Space*; see Lefebvre (1995: 229-291).

<sup>124</sup> Lefebvre (1991: 289) wrote: “Was there a precise threshold crossed ... Was there an exact moment when phallic-visual-geometric space vanquished earlier perceptions and forms of perception?” As Kathleen Kirby (1996: 52) argues, he further places this shift around the French Revolution.

<sup>125</sup> In the essay ‘The Body and Geography’ (1995), Robyn Longhurst notes that social sciences were developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century according to the dominant conception of the separation of the mind from the body. About the science of geography in particular, Kristin Ross (1993: 360) has further argued: “Its object of study is ‘landscape’, which is constituted under ‘natural’, non-historical conditions that bear nothing of the social and economic contradictions that contribute to the formation of space.”

<sup>126</sup> As Grosz (1995: 85) mentions, by considering the sexual drives and erotogenic zones of the body as “instrumental in the formation of the ego and the positioning of the subject in the structure of society and the family as a whole”, psychoanalysis recognised the body as a spatio-temporal being.

<sup>127</sup> Freud argued in 1923 that “The ego is first and foremost a bodily ego”, then four years later he added: “the ego is ultimately derived from bodily sensations, chiefly those springing from the surface of the body. It may thus be regarded as a mental projection of the surface of the body” (in Grosz, 1995: 85).

<sup>128</sup> In 1938, Freud (2001: 300) wrote as a note: “Space may be the projection of the extension of the psychical apparatus. No other derivation is probable. Instead of Kant’s *a priori* determinants of our psychical apparatus.

informing ideas on spatio-temporal corporeality. Subsequent work by Jacques Lacan, in particular his theory of the ‘mirror stage’, addressed further issues of corporeality and spatiality in relation to the formation of identity.

Working in response to such an intellectual context, Bachelard proposed a ‘topoanalysis’, in reference to ‘psychoanalysis’. Bachelard’s theory was based upon a conception of place as ‘psychic’: as not only – or necessarily – physical, but as a ‘surface’ onto which mental ‘images’ referring to a locality appear<sup>129</sup>. ‘Topoanalysis’, therefore, searches for the “placial properties” of certain images (Casey, 1997: 288), such as those of the ‘home’ or ‘house’, challenging the role these images play in our experience of the world, by extending spatialities of ‘intimacy’<sup>130</sup>.

## §

In the essay *Berlin Chronicle*, Benjamin describes purposely getting lost in the streets as a child to avoid attending a service at the synagogue. Although at first he was not fully conscious of his motives, the young Benjamin soon began to enjoy his ‘misbehaviour’: “While I was wandering thus, I was suddenly and simultaneously overcome, on the one hand by the thought, ‘Too late, time was up long ago, you’ll never get there’ – and, on the other, by a sense of the insignificance of all this, of the benefits of letting things take what course they would. And these two streams of consciousness converged irresistibly in an immense pleasure that filled me with blasphemous indifference toward the service, but exalted the street in which I stood, as if it had already intimated to me the services of procurement it was later to

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Psyche is extended; knows nothing about it.” In the posthumously published *An outline of psychoanalysis*, Freud further adopted “the hypothesis...of a psychical apparatus extended in space, expediently put together, developed by the exigencies of life” (Freud, 2001: 196).

<sup>129</sup> Although located in a philosophical tradition that draws upon Aristotle’s concept of place as ‘surface’, Bachelard’s definition moves away from the Aristotelian sense-bound notion of place (as a container and as sensible). Bachelard draws instead upon Freud and Jung to propose the soul as ‘place’ or ‘set of places’, in this way also opposing Descartes, who recognised no psychic spatiality; see Casey (1997: 287-288).

<sup>130</sup> Bachelard (1994: 8) described ‘topoanalysis’ as “the systematic psychological study of the localities of our intimate lives.”

render to my awakened drive” (Benjamin, 1999: 630). This experience of the street, endowed with an intimate, and almost spiritual, quality, further reveals an underlying sexuality. In the same work, Benjamin makes repeated reference to the sexual ‘adventures’ of his adulthood in the streets of Berlin and Paris<sup>131</sup>.

## §

Lefebvre’s critique of modern space as ‘abstract’ is in parts psychoanalytically inspired. In the essay ‘Lacan and Geography: The Production of Space Revisited’, Derek Gregory (1997: 220) argues that Lefebvre’s theorisation of the formation of modern space through processes of ‘visualisation’ and ‘de-corporealisation’, as discussed by Lefebvre, is directly inspired from Lacan’s ‘mirror stage’ theory. Although Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space* does not contain many explicit references to psychoanalysis<sup>132</sup>, the vocabulary and metaphorical structure bear obvious influences. For instance, and according to Gregory, Lefebvre discusses modern space as a collective Lacanian mirror. Thus, modern space is described in a similar way to Lewis Carroll’s “looking-glass”, through which the subject, deprived from its traditional conjunction with the body, “passes...and becomes a lived abstraction” (Lefebvre, 1991: 314); a mere ‘sign’, thus its mirror reflection<sup>133</sup>. Furthermore, Lefebvre’s overall argument is underpinned by the idea that the ‘abstract’ space of modernity is formed as a homogeneous, controlling entity, operating through the relegation of the body; but, most importantly, the sexual body. In its place, modern space celebrates the ‘Phallus’, as conceived

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<sup>131</sup> Mainly references to street prostitution; see (Benjamin, 1999: 598, 600-601)

<sup>132</sup> In one occasion Lefebvre (1991: 99) actually uses the term “psychoanalysis of space”, while he refers to Lacan only in footnotes; see (Lefebvre, 1991: 5, 36, 185)

<sup>133</sup> Lefebvre (1991: 313-314) writes: “So what escape can there be from a space thus shattered into images, into signs, into connected-yet-disconnected data directed at a ‘subject’ itself doomed to abstraction? For space offers itself like a mirror to the thinking ‘subject’, but, after the manner of Lewis Carroll, the ‘subject’ passes through the looking glass and becomes a lived abstraction.”

within the Lacanian schema<sup>134</sup>, the abstract symbol of power and masculinity<sup>135</sup>. Lefebvre names this condition ‘Phallocentrism’, and he observes its manifestation in various aspects of modern space; for example, in the dominant vertical spatialisation (i.e. high-rise buildings), or in the constant expansion of the scale of the built environment, which reinforces visual spatial comprehension.

In particular, Lefebvre is interested in the assertion of control through ‘Phallocentrism’, by the use of “walls, enclosures, and façades” to “define both a ‘scene’ (where something takes place) and an ‘obscene’ area, to which everything that cannot or may not happen on the scene is relegated” (Lefebvre, 1991: 39). Back to the story, the narrator, in his own words, claims: ‘Besides, Syngrou Avenue too knows how to change faces. It taught me to do the same.’ This ‘duplicity’, as Lefebvre calls it, becomes a fundamental characteristic of modern urban space, which, by selectively embracing and excluding things, an ‘underground life’ in the city is created. This can be understood to constitute a kind of inseparable ‘unconscious’ that comes back to haunt the city<sup>136</sup>; as described in the story: ‘Its bustling activity in the morning creates the conditions that will, come the night, create the need to live it up and revel till dawn. In other words – at night the road gives back all the dirt, the day has thrown at it.’

In addition, Lefebvre argues that the city’s spatial ‘double’ is, however, highly controlled via the modern urban planning practice of ‘zoning’. ‘Zoning’ involves the drawing of absolute boundaries between apparently contrasting uses; for example, work-related activities are distinguished and isolated from residential activities, and so are cultural from

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<sup>134</sup> See Lacan (1989: 320)

<sup>135</sup> Lefebvre (1991: 97) argued that, although abstract space presents desire “with a ‘transparency’ which encourages it to surge forth”, in the homogenising space of abstraction “desire encounters no object, nothing desirable, and no work results from its action”. Furthermore, Lefebvre (1991: 288) argued that the void is filled by the ‘Phallus’ and its heavy load of myth, rendering abstract space apart from a “representation of space (geometric homogeneity)”, a ‘representational space (the Phallic)’, as well, apart from “an arena of practical action”, also “an ensemble of images, signs and symbols”.

<sup>136</sup> Lefebvre (1991: 36) wrote: “Every society and particularly the city, has an underground and repressed life, and hence an ‘unconscious’ of its own.”



commercial. Therefore, ‘stratified’ places are produced; among which, are places especially designated for pleasure and sexuality, often associated with ‘leisure’, such as holiday resorts<sup>137</sup>. Hence, as Lefebvre (1991: 310) states, the ‘Phallus’ in ‘abstract’ space is isolated, being projected “into a realm outside the body”, then it is fixed in space and brought “under the surveillance of the eye”; or, as recounted in the story: ‘Squares signal freedom. Avenues aim at success. Commercial streets offer comfort. Some neighborhoods cover the need for love. Others lead you to the heights of social success.’

## §

However, in the story, the avenue is represented as if it transcends all the rules of ‘abstraction’. According to the narrator, the official environment of the day of high-rise office buildings and high-speed traffic, coexisted harmoniously with the environment of erotic pleasures of the night, forming an ‘organic’ entity. Moreover, in the periphery of these contrasting spatial practices, other micro-practices and cultures thrive: ‘But before revealing to me the secret sins of love, it rewarded me with the sight of a church built of brown stone and three or four little houses snugly perched amid those cliffs that had been – as if by mistake – planted in the middle of the valley, instead of on a beach and left to keep company, not to sea-gulls and fishing boats, but to sparrows and green buses.’ By allowing for the interpenetration of different uses, this multi-layered, complex environment annuls ‘zoning’. Thus Syngrou avenue does not remain a functional, ‘Phallogentric’ space, as the “straight and with great width” road that was designed to carry traffic from the inner city (Biris, 1999: 189), ‘a road for a man’, nor the ‘readable’ object that was open to the survey of the eye as in the young narrator’s (masculine) gaze. Instead, it becomes a truly

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<sup>137</sup> “Typically, the identification of sex and sexuality, of pleasure and physical gratification, with ‘leisure’ occurs in places specially designated for the purpose – in holiday resorts or villages, on ski slopes or sun-drenched beaches. Such leisure spaces become eroticised, as in the case of city neighbourhoods given over to nightlife, to the illusion of festivity” (Lefebvre: 1991, 310).

permeable environment, which allows for “juxtapositions”, “proximities” and “emotional distances and limits” to show through (Lefebvre, 1991: 288). As the narrator admits at the end of the story, it is ‘an avenue that digests everything’, ‘accepts things as they are’, and ‘contains all sorts of things’.

The concept of the permeable condition of the modern city has been widely discussed. Benjamin’s observations of the ‘porous’ environment of Naples, that he described as a place where “building and action interpenetrate [...] to become a theatre of new, unforeseen constellations” (Benjamin, 1996: 416), enabled him to formulate the argument that ‘porosity’ conditioned the critical occupations of urban space, derived from improvisation and shock. On a similar note, contemporary theoretical discourses<sup>138</sup> have described modern urban space as ‘permeable’, ‘porous’, and ‘palimpsestic’. For instance, De Certeau (1984: 201-202) described the history of the city as a ‘palimpsest’<sup>139</sup>: “This place, on its surface, seems to be a collage. In reality, in its depth it is ubiquitous. A piling up of heterogeneous places. Each one, like a deteriorating page of a book, refers to a different mode of territorial unity, of socioeconomic distribution, of political conflicts and of identifying symbolism”. Pile (1996: 241), making an obvious reference to Freudian psychoanalysis<sup>140</sup>, has also recognised a ‘permeability’ in modern urban space, showing mechanisms of the ever-competing “conscious, preconscious, unconscious; with shifting, positioning and fighting between them in a struggle for control and expression” (Pile, 1996: 243). Victor Burgin (1996: 151) has also compared modern urban space to a structure of a living organism “punctured by pores and

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<sup>138</sup> Such as social theory, urban geography, and visual theory.

<sup>139</sup> A member of the Freudian school of Paris, De Certeau (1984: 202) wrote in regards to place: “The village, the neighbourhood, the block are moreover not the only things that make the fragments of heterogeneous strata function together...It would be more appropriate to appeal to the oneiric (but theoretical because it articulates practice) model evoked by Freud in discussing the city of Rome, whose epochs all survive in the same place, intact and mutually interacting”.

<sup>140</sup> Who compared the layered structure of the psyche with the structure of the modern city. Using Rome as an example, Freud argued that, as beneath the ground of the modern city lie traces of the ancient Rome, which are also to be found on the surface of the city, in like matter childhood experiences are never eradicated, instead they quite often erupt in the present; see (Pile, 1996: 241).

orifices”. This ‘porous’ spatiality<sup>141</sup> allows for past spatial formations that have been concealed under modern space to be revealed into the present, calling into question the homogeneity and effectiveness of the “panoptical-instrumental space of colonialist capitalist modernity” (in Gregory, 1997: 228). Burgin further considers modern space to have an impact on subjectivity; modern space is “a space in which the subject itself is soluble”, a space that is at once “the source of bliss and of terror” (Burgin, 1996: 155). In the context of the above theories, it seems that the political potential created by the ‘porosity’ of modern urban space is due to a relationship with ‘interruptions’ and ‘dislocations’ that display layers of past spatial formations; and so reveal and reconstitute modern urban space as a discursive production that further has a transformative impact on the subject.

It is important to note that the latter appears in the story about Syngrou avenue: ‘porosity’ is described as if extending from the macro-level of the built environment to the micro-level of the body, which is reconfigured by the process of transcending the narrator’s subjective ‘I’. However, in reference to Lefebvre’s theories discussed in this chapter, the narrator, going through the ‘looking-glass’, does not find the mere ‘sign’ of himself, but an intertwinement between a palpable, sensual/sexual space and his own body. In reality, Syngrou avenue is most widely known for the transvestite prostitution that has gradually dominated its side streets and the part of the avenue nearest the coast<sup>142</sup>. This paradoxical, but real, transgression of the ‘Phallus’, which occurs simultaneously on the intimate level of the body and on the wider socio-political level of the city, is rather revealing. Firstly, it demonstrates a certain fluid, mutually constitutive interaction between cities and bodies; as Grosz (1992: 242) describes: “neither the body nor its environment can be assumed to form

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<sup>141</sup> A term borrowed from Benjamin, who used it in the essay ‘Naples’. Burgin discusses Benjamin’s ‘porosity’ in the context of Lefebvre’s conception of space as an extension of the body; he quotes Lefebvre: “space is ‘first of all my body, and then it is my body counterpart or ‘other’, its mirror-image or shadow: it is the shifting intersection between that which touches, penetrates, threatens or benefits my body on the one hand, and all other bodies on the other’.” (in Burgin 1996, 151)

<sup>142</sup> For more on transvestitism and Syngrou avenue, see the autobiography of Kostas Taktis (1989) *To Fovero Vema (The Terrible Step)*.

an organically unified ecosystem”, but “rather produce each other as forms of the hyper-real”. Secondly, this transgression identifies a subversive spatial inhabitation: Syngrou avenue interacts with the erotic body, as depicted in the story, not only to produce desire, but also to generate bodies; which, as Iain Borden (2001: 12) suggests, “have a dynamic operation in the city” in terms of the “production of meanings, subjects, relations, uses and desires”. Then, a ‘lived’ body-space relation is restored through transgressions of the non-sensual modern space of abstraction, only to become a site for further social and political transgressions.

Lefebvre (1991: 363) had envisaged a future “diversification of space”. In this future spatial condition, there would be “fixed, semi-fixed, movable or vacant” appropriated places, which would not obey the functional distinctions of abstraction, and where the façade, which produces the ‘obscene’, would be abolished (Lefebvre, 1991: 363); thus, the body and its sexual pleasures would be restored making a “mobilisation of ‘private’ life” possible (Lefebvre, 1991: 363). In some respects, the spatial cultures of Syngrou avenue are close to the Lefebvrian dream; the narrator/writer represents these cultures by developing his narrative around the body-city relationship, whilst further placing emphasis on the sexual body through his narration of “an erotic event in which the categorical distinctions that separate body [...] and city dissolve” (Burgin, 1996: 141). In this way, the narrator/writer represents the ‘repressed’, ‘hidden’ spatial cultures of sexuality. Therefore, the central role that sexuality plays in subjectivity, therefore in the ways one experiences space is revealed to the reader.

## §

“Cities become truly ‘habitable’ when they are ‘marked by a memory or a story, signed by something or someone” (De Certeau, 1984: 106). In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, De Certeau condemned the “logic of techno-structures”, which, he argues, deprive urban spaces from the stories and legends that “haunt” them (De Certeau, 1984: 106). Had De Certeau read the story about Syngrou avenue, one can imagine that he would have appreciated the author’s

rejection of technocratic references and favour of subjective experience. I argue that the narrator/writer describes urban space as discursively produced, which derives from the intimate intertwinement between subject and space. This intertwinement reveals physical and cultural 'layers', 'contradictions', and 'juxtapositions', which further are imbued with a socio-political significance. For De Certeau (1984: 129-130), narrativity is 'delinquent', since stories can re-organise and reconfigure spaces, and 'mobilise' places. De Certeau (1984: 130) further (fore)saw the critical social implications of spatial narrativity: "Social delinquency consists in taking the story literally, in making it the principle of physical existence where a society no longer offers to subjects or groups symbolic outlets and expectations of spaces". And although he was not clear as to what kind of actual changes would be necessary to produce 'delinquent' narrativity on the general social level, De Certeau (1984: 130) was sure that the subjective body would play an important role on the spatial level; as he stated: "one can already say that in matters concerning space, this delinquency begins with the inscription of the body in the order's text. The opacity of the body in movement, gesticulating, walking, talking its pleasure, is what indefinitely organises a *here* in relation to an *abroad*, a 'familiarity' in relation to a 'foreignness'."

*Tirelessly the process of thinking makes new beginnings, returning in a roundabout way to its original object. This continual pausing for breath is the mode most proper to the process of contemplation. For by pursuing different levels of meaning in its examination of one single object it receives both the incentive to begin again and the justification for its irregular rhythm.*

*- Walter Benjamin (1998: 28)*

## [Epilogue]

In this thesis, I have attempted to reveal connections on a conceptual level between diverse, and perhaps disparate, material. Comprised of texts written at different periods, the composite, and in parts fragmented, nature of the thesis is reflective of a – Benjaminian – desire to trace ‘constellations’<sup>143</sup>: in other words to link, rather than to separate and classify. With this desire, I have attempted to follow Benjamin’s favourite method of criticism by (re-) employing ‘textual montage’. Consequently, by taking a conceptual approach to my subject, my discussion has tended towards criticism, rather than a strictly historical analysis. In this respect, I rejected the Kantian idea of ‘disinterested’ judgment, which presupposes “a learned interpreter who veils his investments in the service of objectivity” (Jones, 1999: 39), since it provides for fixed, ‘truthful’ interpretations. Instead, I have aimed to foster an open-ended, interpretive engagement, which is demonstrative of my own working processes – identifying with shifting authorial positions. The purposely ‘performative’ nature of the thesis, a text of an ‘open-ended’, and heterogeneous character<sup>144</sup>, has produced, in this way, many diverse meanings that have been and are yet to be created and recreated; thus, the growth of the ‘constellation’, through the added meanings, is potentially infinite.

Hence, there were no references to theorists of the Frankfurt School, which Benjamin has traditionally been associated with, nor any contextualisation of Benjamin’s ideas within the scholarly framework of these thinkers. Instead, the ‘constellation’ grew, indicating and unearthing unexpected (and often unsuspected) conceptual connections amongst the work of Benjamin, the Romantics, and the more recent critical theorists of urbanism: Lefebvre, De Certeau, and Pile. Furthermore, references to the rationale of phenomenologist Bachelard,

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<sup>143</sup> I here use the term in reference to Benjamin’s notion of ‘constellation’, mentioned in writings such as *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* and *The Arcades Project*. Gilloch (2002a: 20) describes the Benjaminian ‘constellation’ as: “a figure constituted by a plethora of points which together compose an intelligible, legible, though contingent and transient, pattern”. In this thesis, it is also mentioned in an excerpt by ‘Naples’ on p. 79.

<sup>144</sup> In his introduction to (Kant, 2003: x), Caygill describes Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* as a ‘performative’ text, of an ‘open-ended’ and ‘heterogeneous’ character; and by quoting the translator of the text Kemp Smith, he claims that it is “not the exposition of a single unified system, but the record of Kant’s manifold attempts to formulate and solve his many-sided problems”.

psychoanalysts Freud and Lacan, the psychoanalytically inspired Burgin, as well as the feminists Grosz and Wilson, have contributed to the creation of a unique conceptual framework. By adopting such an approach, that follows Benjaminian ideas of immanence, montage and interrelation, I believe I have been able to pursue an interpretive methodology that supports the main arguments that this thesis has set out to develop, whilst remaining appropriate in scope to my subject of study.

Thus, I have been able to trace links between the experience of the city as a critical subjective practice and a collection of divergent spatial practices and cultures - as set out, initially, to be the main research objective. Furthermore, and perhaps most interestingly, the exploration of these links has revealed possible 'scenarios'/propositions that could inform a new approach to urbanism. I would like to highlight the following as the most significant:

a) As mentioned in the introduction (pp. xi, xv), and discussed largely in section 2, a 'neo-Romantic' approach to urban cultures and practices can be pursued by taking experience as the focus of the urban condition. In this context, following Benjamin and Lefebvre, experience is conceived as a lived reality and a practice; essentially drawing upon Romantic ideals that recognised the interdependency between empiricism and rationality, cognition and reflection, as well as the self-transformative potential contained within experience that is conceived in these terms. In an arts and design context, such an approach could open up new possibilities for the contemporary practices of spatial production and interpretation.

b) As discussed in section 2, especially in chapter 3 (pp. 54, 58, 60), tactility, proximity, immersion and immanence are, within the Romantically-inspired, Benjaminian concept of experience, indispensable modes of modern urban experience. It was further discussed that such modes encourage improvisational and participatory attitudes towards architecture and public space; which, if fostered in the contemporary urban environment, could provide alternative, non-prescribed ways of spatial occupation.

c) The idea of the 'thought-image' was also discussed in section 2 (pp. 44, 60) as a way of representing the experience of the city that is essentially anti-historicist, deriving from



immediate experience, deploying juxtaposition and dependency upon contingency. This kind of representation could be adopted by spatial practices and critical/theoretical discourses that follow emergent, neo-Romantic approaches.

d) As mentioned in the introduction (p. xxiii), and discussed in section 1, the author/critic/researcher, as an experiencing subject, can provide significant critical insight – by drawing upon their own immediate experience. As further argued in section 1, particularly in chapter 2, adopting an experiential approach, the historian and critic can play an important role in the production of open-ended and collective processes of historiography.

Furthermore, drawing upon the above conceptual framework, I have pursued the other main objective of the thesis, which had originally been set out to be a critical discussion of modern Athenian urbanism. In this context, I have examined, and demonstrated, certain aspects of Athenian urbanism that cannot be understood via a historicist trajectory, or a social scientific methodology. Therefore, I have discussed: proximity, juxtaposition, and fragmentation as significant, characteristic qualities of the modern Athenian urban fabric; and performative and improvisational spatial practices as emergent from, and interdependent with, this particular built environment; as well as the general anti-historicist attitude evident within Athenian spatial cultures of production and occupation.

As discussed and described in detail in the introduction, the inquiries and propositions developed in this thesis came out of a step-by-step process, which did not follow a prescribed or preconceived methodology: but rather a methodology that was invented and constructed along the way. Retrospectively ‘mapping’ this process once again, I see three distinct stages of development, which can be outlined as follows: a) the initial stage of tracing the research questions through researching, selecting the fictive texts, and studying cultural and visual theories addressing issues of subjectivity and space; b) the subsequent stage of deploying these theories to create interpretations of the selected literary narratives, and to develop the propositions; c) the final, and most significant, stage of contextualising, epistemologically and

methodologically, the research questions and refining the aforementioned propositions by drawing upon Benjamin's philosophy of experience and Romantic aesthetics.

It is important to note that, as mentioned at the beginning of this epilogue, the methodology of this thesis was purposely conceived and applied, at the last stage, as an ongoing and open-ended process. Inspired by Benjamin's advocacy of critical interpretation via methods of writing in an experimental, fragmented manner, and via the creation of textual 'montage', I aimed: firstly, to create a text that allows for a 'performative', critical/interpretative reading – especially so, in the second part of the thesis; and secondly, to follow a critical methodology of writing, by demonstrating my own working processes, as well as shifting – at times even seemingly to the contradictory – authorial positions. I believe that, in this way, I have also contributed a new methodological perspective to the established discourses of contemporary arts and design criticism, which tend to draw upon either a historicist, or social scientific framework, as mentioned in the introduction (p. xi).

Despite the apparently heterogeneous character of the thesis, I can now recognise the pursuit of a certain unity in my text. In my discussion of modern urbanism through literary narrative, and by deploying philosophical, as well as cultural and visual theory discourses, I have attempted to explore relationships between subjects as 'bodies', and urbanism in its physical particulars (such as urban formations, architecture, materiality), but also in its more abstract aspects (such as space and movement). It is within this context that I wish to envisage the future possibilities of the research. The advocacy of an aesthetics of urban experience based on immediacy, subjective participation and improvisation, could be a desirable critical alternative to the passive spatial practices of designed environments, as well as to the prescribed ways of making meaning of these environments.

Nevertheless, if, approaching the end, I am allowed to be self-critical and self-reflective, I will ask myself whether the desire to find unity in 'conclusion' may foster a certain nostalgia: "As Novalis claimed, 'all philosophy is homesickness'" (Lang, 1999: 22). But then again it may not be. It is up to the reader to decide!

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## **[Appendix]**

For Appendix attachments, please refer to the hard copy that is available in the Library.