

Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project

Sami Khatib

“The fragments of the *Passagen-Werk* can be compared to the materials used in building a house, the outline of which has just been marked in the ground or whose foundations are just being dug” (Tiedemann in Benjamin, 1999, 931). Ever since its posthumous publication in 1982 in German and particularly after its English translation in 1999, the *Passagen-Werk* or *Arcades Project* has been characterized in architectural terms. It comes as no surprise that Rolf Tiedemann, the German editor of Benjamin’s *Gesammelte Schriften* and editor of the *Passagen-Werk*, chose this metaphor to introduce the unfinishedness of Walter Benjamin’s magnum opus. Between 1927 and 1940, Benjamin spent most of his time in Paris’ Bibliothèque Nationale studying literature, arranging and compiling a huge collection of citations, which would have become a book of a new type transcending the limits of what we call a “work.” Almost everything that Benjamin produced during this period, most notably the famous essay on “The Work of Art in its Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1935/36), his last theses “On the Concept of History” (1940) or his studies on Baudelaire (1938-40), “literally” grew out of this project. Especially the latter, the projected book on Baudelaire, is constructed out of the citations and fragments of the *Arcades Project*. In this respect, the English translation’s title, *Arcades Project*, is well chosen. It is a projected work to which Benjamin in his private notes and letters referred as “Passagenarbeit” – signaling a work in progress.

This unfinished work borrows its name from one of its major architectural objects of inquiry: the Parisian arcades of the early 19th century constructed at the rise of high capitalism – the time when Paris became *the* “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century.” Benjamin drafted two self-titled outlines or “exposés” of the *Arcades Project* which framed his interest in this architectural form in terms of a microcosmic inquiry that could allow for a stereoscopic view of the past and, ultimately, an macroscopic insight into the “primal history” or *Urgeschichte* of the 19th century and its major historical novelty: the “commodity form” (Marx) as the ruling form of all social, subjective and objective relations. Prima facie, the arcades are the predecessors of yesterday’s department stores and today’s shopping malls. Initially, they were small urban streets covered with a roof that allowed shopkeepers to display their goods in a threshold zone in between the *inside* of the shop and the *outside* on the street. As Benjamin quotes in his 1935 *Exposé* from a vintage *Illustrated Guide to Paris*: “These arcades, a recent invention of industrial luxury, are glass-roofed, marble-paneled corridors extending through whole blocks of buildings, whose owners have joined together for such enterprises. Lining both sides of these corridors, which get their light from above, are the most elegant shops, so that the is a city, a world in miniature” (Benjamin, 1999, 3). How this “world in miniature” presents the monadological “crystal of the total event” (1999, N 2,6) – the totality of the social relations of capitalism at the historical time (19th century) and geographic place (Paris) of its emergence – is the principal question and challenge of the book.

Choosing the Parisian arcades as an allegory for capitalist relations of production and circulation, Benjamin formulated his heterodox Marxist wager: “With the destabilizing of the market economy, we begin to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled” (1999, 13). Indeed, the arcades of the 19th were already in the process of decay when Paris became the capital of high capitalism by the second half of the

century. Benjamin did not spend a second to lend these outlived buildings the cachet of nostalgia; rather, he attempted to mobilize the collective imaginary of the 19th century, materialized in everyday journalism, pulp fiction, high literature and theories of all kinds, in order to get hold of dream-like anticipations of the coming unnatural “death” (1999, X 11a,3) of capitalism. Only as ruins in becoming, defunctioned and decommmodified buildings, the arcades could be rescued in the name and for the sake of classless society. Instead of fetishizing its ruins Benjamin called for the revolutionary usage of the collective memories of a past that never properly existed in the first place. It is this paradoxical temporality of recursive anachronicity that is at stake when Benjamin describes his project as *Urgeschichte*, the non-linear primal history of what conventional historiography would only present in a linear way – as a causal chain of events ordered chronologically, divided in the disciplines of cultural, intellectual, architectural, economic and political history. Yet the *Arcades Project*’s “theoretical armature” (1999, 933) aimed at something radically different.

Benjamin’s daring and unprecedented endeavor went against the grain of all historical, historicist or historical-philosophical methods of its time. Following its editor Tiedemann’s architectural imagery and taking aside the different “floor plans” (932) that Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* acquired throughout the time of its construction, let us concentrate on its general outline and building material: “Benjamin’s intention was,” as Tiedemann summarizes its key idea, “to bring together theory and materials, quotations and interpretation, in a new constellation compared to any conventional form of presentation [*Darstellungsform*]. The quotations and the materials would bear the full weight of the project; theory and interpretation would have to withdraw in an ascetic manner” (931, trans. changed). In other words, Benjamin attempted to write the “primal history” of 19th century solely by virtue of an arrangement, a constellation of textual fragments, citations, literary *objet trouvé*, and – to a minor degree – theoretical aphorisms, which would function as a kind of guiding structure to navigate the immense amount of material. Deeply invested in surrealism and contemporary avant-garde art techniques such as montage, Benjamin stated in the 1930s: “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” (1999, N 1a,8). But how to choose all these textual fragments and how to organize them? How to not museumize these literary “rags”? How to make them speak and arrange them in a way that “everything factual is already theory,” as Benjamin quoted Goethe in the late 1920s.

Sitting in the Paris Bibliothèque Nationale, reading and copying, arranging and editing, Benjamin developed an intricate (and only recently fully deciphered) system of color signs, sigla and symbols to arrange thousands of citations in a thematic corpus of “Konvolutes” out of which his later editor Rolf Tiedemann compiled the book that now goes by the name of the *Arcades Project*. As is well known, Benjamin died in late September 1940 before he could finish it. Given the immense amount of material, Benjamin’s impoverished life conditions in his Parisian exile and the stretched period of time he was working on it while changing its plans, some readers of the *Arcades Project* call into question whether he still intended to finish it in the late 1930s or could have ever finished it even with better research conditions. However, for Benjamin the historico-political work on the *Arcades Project* also became an existential task that made him stay within close range of the indispensable collection of the Bibliothèque Nationale without which he would not have had access to the literature he needed. In a way, we could even speak of a symbiosis between the *Arcades* as a textual building in becoming and the actually existing building of the Bibliothèque Nationale. This material dependence made him stay in Paris as long as possible until the German army invaded France and conquered Paris. In these dramatic months of May and June 1940,

Benjamin, like many others, German leftists, German-Jewish refugees, French civilians, fled to the south of France to reach the non-occupied zone that after the armistice became “Vichy France” – the collaborating entity of the French controlled France after the defeat of 1940. Having left most of his few belongings behind and having entrusted his friend and librarian Georges Bataille with many of the notes and sketches of his Parisian studies on the *Arcades*, he put his most invaluable manuscripts in one heavy suitcase and left Paris. As we know today, he left too late or at least at the wrong time to join the exiled members of Max Horkheimer’s *Institute of Social Research* in New York – the later core members of the so-called “Frankfurt School.” Benjamin’s escape route through Marseille ended at the French-Spanish border town of Port Bou where committed suicide in late September 1940 after his group of refugees was denied entry into Spain. After some negotiations, the members of his small group could eventually resume their journey to America – with one day of delay and without Benjamin and his famous suitcase (which was never found).

Although the *Arcades Project* remained unfinished, we cannot fail to grasp the systematic rigor, ambition and patience that was ‘at work’ while putting this material together. In recent Benjamin scholarship there is a tendency to celebrate – if not fetishize – the fragmentariness of this project – to depoliticize Benjamin as the postmodern writer *avant la lettre* arguing that this unworkable work was already conceptualized as a torso, an aestheticized ruin that would immediately signify what it wanted to show: the non-totalizable space of the (post)modern cityscape, allegorized by a tableaux of paradigmatic figures such as Edgar Allan Poe’s “Man of the Crowd” or Charles Baudelaire’s “flaneur,” the sandwich-man, the whore, the collector, the forger, or the gambler (just to name a few). However, Benjamin actually wanted to show how these figures, citations, places, architectural forms and buildings lay bare the historiographic skeleton of the 19th century and its central social relation: the capitalist commodity form. Even if we want to stick to the image-space of architecture, the material body of the *Arcades Project* presents a *fragmentary* constellation of minute mosaics the *total* image of which can be grasped monadically – in terms of singular “dialectical images” that flash up at a certain time, discernable only for a certain subject or reader who recognizes herself or himself as intended in these images. In other words, the projected literary edifice of the *Arcades Project* – despite all its spatial thresholds, historical ephemerality, and theoretical crossroads – aimed at a densely build structure that would present its own image of Paris, the capital of 19th century. Such an image is not monopolizable, representable in an objective manner. However, as a dialectical image it forges a constellation of the “total event” (the entire building so to speak) seized from the microscopic perspective of the smallest detail (its bricks so to speak). Benjamin even provided the theoretical “clay” to hold such an instant edifice together.

In “Konvolute N [On the Theory of Cognition, Theory of Progress]” Benjamin put his methodological cards on the table to provide a theoretical guiding structure capable of erecting the future building of his *Arcades*. This Konvolute might hold the key to complete it or, at least, to keep on building on the *Arcades*’ formation even after the death of its author. Overlooking the maze-like landscape of found, copied and assembled material, the un-timely reader of the *Arcades* always anew faces the challenge to make sense of the intriguing image that Benjamin left us with: “All historical knowledge can be represented in the image of balanced scales, one tray of which is weighted with what has been and the other with knowledge of what is present. Whereas on the first the facts assembled can never be too humble or too numerous, on the second there can be only a few heavy, massive weights” (N 6,5). However, what are these few heavy, massive weights today and who has the power to produce them and put them ‘at work’?

With regard to the architectural quality, its unfinished building structure and competing floor plans the *Arcades Project* presents an inverse image of the decomposed state of one of its major objects of inquiry, the ruined arcades of the 19th century. For a historical moment the process of architectural decay crossed the path of the ruins of an unfinished literary work. Today, the terrain of such a momentary encounter is to be found in our own time and space: in the (not only architectural) ruins of neoliberal capitalism, which are in the process of decomposition already before completion (one might be reminded of the gigantic ruin currently erected in the south of Berlin, which is still meant to be the German capital's future airport). Despite – or maybe precisely because of – its unfinishedness, Benjamin's *Arcades* and its methodological structure can function as the untimely medium to grasp the tendencies of our current present of neoliberal capitalism and commodification.

While our old fashioned libraries and public buildings are falling apart and gain the patina of the outdated – and become the “arcades” of the 21st century so to speak –, the useless monuments of neoliberalism do not even pretend to last longer than they present a use-value for future circles of capital accumulation. In the age of the digital reproducibility of books and artworks, Benjamin's library is rendered dysfunctional in the best non-capitalist sense. The same holds true for the architecture of the *Arcades* as a literary ruin and historical medium of perception: the maze of its Konvolutes and copied materials are not accessible for today's modes of knowledge production. The positivity of the *Arcades*' philological materiality does not say anything to those who do not have the “theoretical armature” to make *use* of its literary rags. This non-capitalist concept of usage – the crux of Benjamin's method of cognizing through showing – relies on the differentiating capacity of its belated readers. As Karl Kraus commented in 1913 on his Viennese friend, the modernist architect Adolf Loos: “Adolf Loos and I – he, literally and I, grammatically – have done nothing more than show that there is a distinction between an urn and a chamber pot, and that it is this distinction above all that provides culture with elbow room. The others, those who fail to make this distinction, are divided into those who use the urn as a chamber pot and those who use the chamber pot as an urn” (Kraus in *Die Fackel* 389/390, Dec. 1913). With Benjamin's *Arcades*, whose author was an avid defender of both Loos' architectural and Kraus' literary work, we are to rethink this distinction. How to use a library in the age of “cognitive capitalism” – what is an urn and what is a chamber pot?

Literature:

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