

PLACES THAT REMEMBER

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The English director and theorist of the theatre Peter Brook starts one of his books with a seemingly light-minded statement about the situation in the theatre as a case of watching. Nothing else is needed for a theatre but the situation of someone walking through an empty room and someone else watching, he claims. But it seems to me, that even the fact of someone's walking through an empty room has a meaning; the empty room is localized through it: that lonely walker (whoever he is) defines and marks his surroundings with his personality.

Peculiarities of the relations between place and its objects and subjects are observed in a number of Walter Benjamin's texts. A relationship, seemingly controversial from the outside, is formulated in these texts. Places themselves become subjects, they provide the past.

We can presume that a man, who enters a room, bases his first impression of it on one of his preceding experiences. Entering a new, formerly unknown room, one is supported by experiences and memories of rooms seen before, when formulating a personal opinion of the place. We could talk about the gaze of familiar things, that watches and constitutes our stay in the room, but this would take us too far from the chosen topic.

Post-modernism has, with its subject-centred viewpoint, questioned a number of fixed space theories, even the Euclidean one. Subjectively the space is always based on the personal experience of private memory. It is more than a mathematical abstraction and belongs mainly to the spheres of geometry and geography. But one has to look at what is behind and inside the space as well.

Let us specify: space is abstract, purely mathematical construction for thinking. Place means a room provided with events, through which it is defined in man's perception. These two types of space can be distinguished as objective and subjective space. As Gaston Bachelard puts, the rational and real space: the

first one for thinking and the second one – empirical; the latter being the realm of human experience (Bachelard 1997: 86–97).

Places in towns, topographies and interiors, play an important role in the theories of memory by Walter Benjamin. His articles on memory, remembering and recollection that include places, are the subject of this paper. Such towns as Paris in the stage of modern development (and some others like Moscow and Naples, that display the controversy of traditional-communal and modern sights) play a significant role in Benjamin's texts. He worked for years on a complex of ideas on the memory and remembering (forgetting). Benjamin's discourse is lengthy and variable, he has studied and tried different memory models.

While the Euclidean space can only be conceptual, real space is always connected with something actual: not with ideas but with memory traces. One of the models of memory that Benjamin studied, is the topographic-spatial (one of the oldest mnemonic techniques): in the process of remembering, the memories are recollected in spatial form. It is explained by the fact, that all our memories are supported by real places, they are attached to places. Places can be seen as storages of our memory. Benjamin obviously places the memory outside the subject in the texts *Paris – the Capital of the 19th Century* [*Paris, die Hauptstadt des XIX. Jahrhunderts*], *One-Way Street* [*Einbahnstrasse*], the autobiographical *Berlin Childhood* [*Berliner Kindheit um 1900*] and its preliminary work *Berlin Chronicle* [*Berliner Chronik*]; also the *Passagen-Werk*, the most famous, incomprehensible and vague of them, published for years after Benjamin's death. This book is full of quotations, it is an assemblage and configuration, almost a picture with meanings not in sentences, but in the gaps between (*inzwischen*) them. This turns the book into a peculiar catalogue of meaningful objects and their locations, because memory is a scene of action and happening for Benjamin. Memory is not an instrument (for research or work), it is a medium (Weigel 1994: 121).

One of the first models that Benjamin uses before the topographical, is the archaeological model. In the register of archaeology he emphasizes the importance of the location, its significance in deciphering traces and remnants of the past. He describes recollecting as an archaeological excavation: its results depend more on the mode of search and research, than they depend on the finds themselves and the places where they have been found (Benjamin 1991: 486–489).

Recollection becomes a figure of repetition. (It is caused by the narrative structure of recollection.) Recurrence and repetition of situations are no cause for fear. Circumstances and relations are like layers and strata. (Benjamin believes that there is a real value somewhere – a nucleus *in the bowels of the Earth*. One should not be afraid of repetition, return to the original status and situation, the eternal return.)

The *Berlin Chronicle*, a preliminary work to the *Berlin Childhood* of the 19th century, is an illustration of archaeology. It is based on the previously stated ideas; it is fiction that tests the theoretical models. Memory-traces are arranged into memory images. These traces are reconstructed by trains of associations, drawn from the connections between objects, scenes, names and images. The reader has no choice but follow these trains of associations, and accept them as meaningful, or ignore them. Occasion structures the recognition or reading of the past (or awakening, which is another perfect metaphor for remembering). Thus recognition leads us, *noch nicht bewußten Wissen vom Gewesenen* (Benjamin 1982: 1014).

This use of the word apparently associates with Freud's topographical image, which describes the unconscious as another place of occurrence (*anderes Schauplatz*). With this he tried to illustrate the reciprocally influencing processes of consciousness and the unconscious.

But Benjamin's space cannot be interpreted merely as a manner of representation. Speaking of Paris (in his essay *Paris – the Capital of the 19th Century*), Benjamin compares certain places in the real townscape with the dream: *Man zeigte im alten Griechenland Stellen, an denen es in die Unterwelt hinabging. Auch unser waches Dasein ist ein Land, an dem es an verborgenen Stellen in die Unterwelt hinabgeht, voll unscheinbarer Örter, wo die Träume münden. Am Tag gehen wir nichtsahnend an ihnen vorüber, kaum aber kommt der Schlaf, so tasten wir mit geschwinden Griffen zu ihnen zurück und verlieren uns in dunklen Gängen. Das Häuserlabyrinth gleicht am hellen Tag dem Bewußtsein; die Passagen (die in ihr vergangenes Dasein führen) münden tagsüber unbemerkt in die Straßen. Nachts unter den dunklen Häusermassen aber springt ihr kompakteres Dunkel erschreckend heraus.* (Benjamin 1982: 1046.)

Remembering is a state of mind, between being awake and being asleep, when conscience is in flow, divided between the individual and collective memories. It turns out that the relation between the present state and the past is not

temporal, but topographical. Town's topography represents relations between the worlds of day and night.

In the *Berlin Childhood* Benjamin is, on the one hand, mainly interested in individual memories that correspond with the town's topography. On the other hand, while writing about Paris and its arcades, he sees them as the past materialized into space (*raumgewordene Vergangenheit*), a storage for the collective memory. Sigmund Freud has used the comparison of the states of mind of dreaming and being awake to illustrate the reciprocal dependence of the two psychological systems. According to him, consciousness stands in for, or in the place of memory-traces (*an Stelle* – which can be understood as: *anstatt* or *am Ort*), covering them this way. Freud constitutes his theory of memory and the corresponding conscience upon this witty pun. The remains of memories, unattainable to conscience (*Erinnerungsreste*), can be stronger and more persistent than the real memories; especially so, if the event that had once caused them has never reached the conscience. Benjamin puts this in Proustian terms: "only what has not been experienced explicitly and consciously, what has not happened to the subject as an experience, can become a component of the *memoire involontaire*" (Benjamin 1977: 190–191). Such memory-traces (imprinted on the unconscious) only appear as symptoms. Psychoanalyst's task is to decipher, or read them. A key or code for them lies in the past, so one has to study the past. In Freud's comprehension appropriation of the past holds a promise of sufficient interpretation. In Benjamin's view reading or recognition depends on chance. The wayward reminders of *memoire involontaire* are limited to what is retained in the memory, appealed to attention. Information, distributed by *memoire involontaire*, is not (stored) in it. Benjamin sums up Proust, saying that the past is "somewhere beyond the reach of the intellect, and unmistakably present in some material object." But we have no idea which one it is: "As for that object, it depends entirely on chance whether we come upon it before we die or whether we never encounter it." These objects that function as reservoirs of the memory, can be circumvented: "we can pass them, without noticing and learning anything about our own past." Benjamin asks, whether man can finally control what he has experienced through this. (He immediately gives the fatal answer to this question.) (Benjamin 1977: 188).

Real places in the town are compared with dream-images. Benjamin (re)discovers relations between dreamed places and those in the topography of

the real town. He deals with the architecture of Paris as with a space of collective memory and of materialized past. We get a mixture of the topography of Paris, of its places in its real environment and of the "topographic" representations of psychoanalytic memory/remembrance; a whole materialized memory-topography. Traces of the past are visible in the townscape, where the present and past events relate to each other. Benjamin uses the notion of historical index, giving it a slightly different explanation. Historical index marks the legibility and recognizability of these sights for the present moment. It Differing from the phenomenological index, the historical index does not only place them into a certain moment of time, but, foremost, it suggests that the sights would become legible at a certain moment of time.

Jede Gegenwart ist durch diejenigen Bilder bestimmt, die mit ihr synchronistisch sind: jedes Jetzt ist das Jetzt einer bestimmten Erkennbarkeit (Benjamin 1982: 576–577). Reading of these sights is structured by the dialectic of conscience and the subconscious; observation of similarities has to do with a flash of intuition (*einblitzen*), it has to direct us towards a certain moment, the moment where memory-traces become legible. One could almost say that these similarities, which do not have a certain or concrete shape, are occasional. Benjamin, of course, would call them fatal or eschatological. This attitude, or undertone, characterizes the whole of his philosophical literature. The goal of his dialectic is the restoration of a whole. It characterizes his contemporary time: fragmentation of the world was perceived tragically.

Thus revelation and historiography reciprocally shape recognition. Historiographical treatment characterizes Benjamin's thinking ruled by pictures from the past. Between the present and the past he sees a pictorial, not a temporal connection. The past meets the present in a picture that becomes visible through a concurrence (of circumstances). Those have nothing to do with the collective unconscious and archaic images of Jung, they form a peculiar pictograph. The picture enfolds backward as well as forward.

Benjamin emphasizes that the real space, the (town) environment, the objects, not the spirits can and have to be studied. And so he does. He re-materializes the representation, taking into account the language of collective unconscious.

At the same time, Benjamin's treatment of space is characterized by a two-way or double attitude. One should not forget that the space he represents is

both a topographic-geographical and imaginary signifier. On the one hand, these are the projections of a mental picture to the real world, and on the other hand, the material world is turned into a signifier of psychological space. The "outer" and "inner" switch their places and it is hard to understand, where the town, his own body, or the text start, and where they end. They intertwine and interpenetrate. Victor Burgin has (psycho)analyzed this in his interesting essay "The City in Pieces" (Burgin 1996: 139–144).

For example, the Paris arcades described by Benjamin. The covered streets form a peculiar interspace in the town: their inside is turned out, and their outside is turned in. The dialectic of outside and inside characterizes modernistic space. Structures of steel and glass are typical of the architecture of the time, of which the Paris arcades can be called prototypes.

It becomes clearer, when this treatment of space is projected to the background of the historical situation with all the changes that took place at the beginning of the 20th century. Modernism changed the idea of the representation of space and that of the representation in the space. Burgin, who refers to Henri Lefebvre, admits the fractured space and the reduction of the classical perspective and Euclidean geometry, but not their vanishing, as he immediately adds. An idea of this hinders our imagination since its "invention" (Burgin 1996: 144).

Finally we can see that even the virtual reality, as a possibility of completely new environment, is so far hindered by our idea of a rational space.

A character connected with the arcades, through whose eyes Benjamin sees the phantasmagorias characteristic of the contemporary space and modernistic town, is the *flâneur*. He is a product of the fragmented, kaleidoscopic modern town, being part of it, but not dissolving in the mass, remaining an observer instead; being an ambiguous figure typical of his time.

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