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Solibakke Ivan Karl
Syracuse University

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Squaring the Cultural Circle: Dialectical Approaches to Reading Cultural Memory

Dr. Karl Ivan Solibakke
Assistant Dean for Finance and Long-Range Planning
Associate Professor in German Literature and Culture
College of Arts and Sciences
Dean's Suite – Hall of Languages 300
Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York
United States of America

Dialectical Images and Cultural Memory

The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again. […]For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.[1]

Walter Benjamin's fifth thesis on the philosophy of history sets a congenial frame for considering the implications of memory within the field of cultural studies and linguistic endeavors. In Benjamin's final fragments, penned shortly before the cultural and medial theoretician attempted to flee from the Gestapo by crossing the Pyrenees on foot, the passing of time is resolved into individual images that continually flash by. Apparently homeless and devoid of any anchor other than the material objects they illustrate the images of the past manifest themselves in correlation to the present as a mirror, rendering the present both its immediacy and authenticity. Benjamin suggests here that the legitimacy of the now does not come about by stringing past events into a linearity of historical progression, imposing on the elapsing of temporality the kind of seamless logic we have come to recognize as teleological. Rather, present and past are posited one against the other for an instant, during which a remarkable reciprocity of recognition and revelation occurs. Much as we stand before our mirrors and are confronted with astartling recognition of our own fleeting images, past and present enter the very shortest of dialogues, in which a fragment of truth shines forth for only a fraction of a second.

However, it is within this splitter of time that Benjamin's dialectical image can be evoked. Occupying a liminal space between now and then, the image functions as a mnemonic membrane, which is as genuine as it is tenuous and as enigmatic as it is ephemeral. Revealing time and space as fragmentary manifestations of truth, Benjamin's dialectical image must be regarded as the epistemological core of his approach to cultural memory.[2] In essence, his concept involves the kind of assimilation that equates abstract configurations with empirical constellations and reassesses the mimetic relationship between what is being represented and the representing media. Translated into the objects and entities that the images are expected to embrace this assimilation presupposes the unfolding of all modes of perception, which are deposited into the vast archives of cultural design. In turn, these archives resemble semiotic webs, into which the artifacts amassed by modern societies are encoded: the varieties of visual and performing arts, fashion, political discourse, media, consumerism, mass entertainment, sexuality and the debris wrought by global commodification and rampant industrialization. Hence, seemingly incongruous levels of text and material fragments are superimposed onto the archaeology of socio-cultural transformations, which, as Benjamin argues, are replete with secret meanings for the collector of culture.

His focus is not only on the derivation of the semiotics forming the cultural web or on learning how to decipher the vast amounts of debris in the cultural archive, but also on reading the circularity or reiterations of past and present signs. He views culture and its repository as a vast text that can be likened to a virtual monad of images and signatures deriving from the collective unconscious. Above all, the temporal and spatial dimensions of the fragments in the archives correspond to the dialectics of past and present images. Thus, palimpsesting or accumulating layers of temporality within the image is central to his conception of cultural and material historicism. It is this concern with what Benjamin terms the phantasmagorical traces[3] in the European cultural archive in the nineteenth century that marks the clearest juncture between his cultural epistemology and our current approach to cultural investigation as an academic discipline. Searching for the origins and traces of modernity, for the moment when the flow of time has been ruptured and has had to adopt a new rhythm, we are also given to culling the graveyards of textual artifacts and *tempi passati*, unearthing the shards that might answer questions and fill in missing links.

In this vein Benjamin's most valiant attempt to codify the modern cultural archive is the pages and pages of textual material assembled in his *Arcades Project*.[4] Hinging on his notion of historical materialism, cultural experience in the *Arcades Project* is tantamount to perceiving both the object and its ghosts or its many recurring images, all of which have been subsumed into the archive as semiological memories. Thus, the archive is both a vast warehouse and a textual labyrinth, in which the pieces of semiotic debris embedded appear juxtaposed to one another and the heterogeneous sign systems are clearly folded into themselves. If Benjamin's *Arcades Project* is treasured today as a vast and unruly compendium of nineteenth century modernism and a phantasmagorical archaeology of the emergence of modern urban culture, then this essay aims to show that Heinrich Heine's immensely rich reflections on the French capitalin *French Conditions* and *Lutezia*contain invaluable reference points for Benjamin's urban convolute. While on the surface Heine's texts seem to invoke the particularity of the topography embodied in their titles, their underlying aim is much more ambitious and must be recognized as one of the first attempts to recast the mnemonics of modern European culture. Most clearly the works illustrate the transformation of urban geography into a matrix of modern experience, which is mapped out as an allegorical blueprint for bourgeois cultural semiotics to accompany the nascence of continental European capitalism and global interdependence in the wake of colonialist expansion.

In this vein, Heine's *Lutezia* will be analyzed from the standpoint of revising urban perspectives within the paradigm of modern cultural experience and collective identity. Here, it becomes increasingly apparent that deciphering the archaeology of urbanity involves the dissolution of space and subsequently the revaluation of time. In a similar vein Benjamin's philosophy of history, as outlined in his *Epistemo-Critical Prologue* to the *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, will be reassessed and tied to the concept of the dialectical image that he develops in his remarks on Louis Philippe in the 1935 and 1939 exposés to the Arcades. Concluding this analysis is a brief appreciation of Benjamin's theories of language, since these approaches to language as a medium form the core of Benjamin's attempts to square the cultural circle or to read cultural memory as a dialectical process of textual imaging. The aim of the following article is to compare and contrast two evocations of Paris that on the surface do not appear commensurate with one another. In contrast to Benjamin's seemingly unending permutations of textual references, Heine's Parisian commentaries were collected and revised by the author before their respective publications in 1835 and 1854;*Lutezia*even appeared in authoritative versions both in German and French. On the surface, Heine's works contain images and cultural references that are still coherent to the reader and do not exhibit the fragmentary quality that is one of the most arresting features of Benjamin's unfinished project.

On a deeper level, though, Heine's commentaries make startling assertions about what could be compared tothe entropy of urban life in the nineteenth century, as modern cultural paradigms distance themselves from the last vestiges of Enlightenment and Romantic ideals. Both king and citizen in one Louis Philippe embodies the amorphous dialectics of modern social hierarchies, which during the *ancien regime* had been cemented in the divisions between nobility, clergy, bourgeoisie and the vast masses that the upper echelons fed on. Linking economic success with social prestige and tying the railway system into the circulation of commodities and services, modernity required a much less parochial understanding of class and social distinctions. Despite differences in method, Heine's and Benjamin's Parisian projects document this socio-economic revolution by recasting the foundations of modern European memory and localizing the constituent elements of what can now be recognized as a capitalist cultural repository. Essentially deeply pessimistic in tone the works also reveal history to be a string of catastrophes, such that the archives subsumed in urban spaces resemble vast and uncanny graveyards of human folly and frailty. For Heine und Benjamin reading urban spaces or viewing the city from the perspective of the text is an exercise in exhuming the ghosts of historic debris and plotting the gossamer threads of cultural fragmentation.

Heine and Benjamin: Reading Urban Space as a Cultural Topography

Paris has been the source of many evocations in German intellectual history, from Joachim Heinrich Campe and Ernst Moritz Arndt in the eighteenth century, Ludwig Börne, Heinrich Heine and Karl Gutzkow in the nineteenth to Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin in the twentieth.[5] Astonishingly, the most ambitious of these literary evocations, Benjamin's *Passagenwerk*, does not openly pay tribute to the rich legacy provided by Heinrich Heine's representations of French urbanity. All told Benjamin cites two stanzas from Heine's Hebraic epos *Jehuda ben Halevy* and a passage from his essay on the February Revolution; he provides excerpts from letters

Heine wrote to Prosper Enfantin and Karl Marx; and only very briefly does he mention Heine's Parisian commentaries within the context of quotes from other sources. Yet, *French Conditions* and*Lutetia*, compilations of articles Heine submitted to the *AllgemeineZeitung* in Augsburg for publication during the 1830s and 40s, form one of the most comprehensive readings of the French capital during the reign of *le roycitoyen*, Louis Philippe. On the one hand, Heine describes the transformation of cultural, political and economic thought in the wake of the Revolution of 1830 and the passing of such intellectual luminaries as Hegel and Goethe shortly thereafter. On the other hand, the works express Heine's disappointment that the French Revolution had failed to generate a stable and just bourgeois political system, while they also disparage the economic restrictions that weighed heavily on art and intellectual thought in the second third of nineteenth century. In light of mass cultural developments the retrieval of Napoleon's ashes and his posthumous entombment in *Les Invalides* takes on significance as a signature of the times.

More important for European concerns than the commercial, financial and colonial objects that are the source of debate in the governmental chambers, is the triumphant return of Napoleon's mortal remains [to Paris]. This issue concerns everyone in the city, from the highest to the most modest. While in the nether regions of the folk all cheer, shout, glow and blaze up, the higher and much cooler regions of society ponder the dangers, which day by day are slowly approaching from St. Helena and which threaten Paris with a highly questionable celebration of death.[6]Expressive of his dialectical approach to cultural memory, Heine mourns the catastrophic end of Napoleon's European heroism, as the mediocrity of bourgeois modernity begins to dominate in the capital of the nineteenth century.

What is most remarkable about Heine's Parisian commentaries is the realignment of focus that takes place in the twenty years between the publication of *French Conditions* and *Lutezia*. While the earlier work conjures up recognizable images, in which urban spaces – Parisian streets, buildings, parks and landmarks – are easily identified, the later work concerns itself almost entirely with the symbolic forms inherent to modern cultural memory and collective European identity. Heine achieves this goal by enlisting new codes and areas of discourse that have little or nothing to do with geometrical representations of urban space. *Lutezia* transforms the metropolis into a web of philosophical, political, cultural and social commentary, which is then spun into a virtual constellation that corresponds to urban space in the early 1840's. Both point of departure for his commentary and method in one, Heine's virtual configurations suggest that the textual fragments forming modern cultural topographies are no longer bound to the linear and teleological principles favored in eighteenth and early nineteenth century philosophies of history, but are random and disjunctive in scope. Modern cultural manifestations are perceived as heterotopes that are palimpsests of many layers of past and present experience. Thus, the dominance of the temporal as opposed to the spatial is essential to Heine's post-Hegelian approach to codifying cultural memory.

With visionary consequence, Heine even goes so far as to posit the death of space in *Lutezia*, since the railway network radiating out from the French capital facilitates both demographic mobility and economic growth in response to industrial expansion. The implication here is that Kantian notions of linear space derived by extrapolating natural laws onto an intellectual plane have become obsolete when confronted by the acceleration and circulation of images in the urban cultural matrix. Heterotopes and polyvalent traces of meaning now supersede any coherent and linear perceptions that once formed the girders of western epistemological thought. Referring to this contraction of natural space the author writes: "It is as though the mountains and forests of the world descend on Paris. I can already detect the odour of German lime trees; the waves of the North Sea lap at my door".[7] Far from being an expression of Romantic fantasy or poetic license, Heine suggests that spatial contours are now invested with a plurality of semiotic references.

Due to this plurality individuals are no longer able to command the wealth of their ambient sensations; rather, the individual is now overwhelmed or perhaps even victimized by the "consequences of […] modernity, which are expressed, in encoded form, in a thousand inadvertent, overlooked, or otherwise worthless cultural forms".[8] Moreover, the complexity of perception that ensues when spatial coordinates and distances have been transcended altogether makes itself felt in the cultural codes on local, national and also international scales. Heine is even prescient enough to consider the implications of nineteenth century colonization by showing that political events and economical activities in the Middle and Far East are factors dominating the decision-making processes in the governmental chambers and industrial lairs of Parisian power.

One of his cases in point centers on the controversy concerning the control of the Dardanelles, the outcome of which threatened to usher in a realignment of hegemony on the European continent. Thus, in many ways Heine's metropolis, which was rapidly transforming itself into an inchoate cultural topography, becomes an allegorical space for the conflation of collective identity on the national and for socio-economical interpenetration on the global level. This disintegration of space as an epistemological category that Heine sees superimposed on urban modernity has far-reaching consequences for the assessment of time and the perception of human historical experience. In *Lutezia* Heine cites not only a number of examples ofwhat must be perceived as a new concept of temporality, but he also hones in on the quintessential function of cultural archives subsequent to the advent of modern capitalist paradigms. Put simply, these can be likened to vast storage areas, in which the salient and non-salient spoils of human experience are accrued during the course of time and consolidated for future reference. The emphasis seems to be here on non-salient spoils, since Heine confirms the importance semiotic debris plays in our cultural reservoirs.

It can be argued that in *Lutezia*the realignment and affirmation of temporality as compared tospatial dimensions is organized alonghorizontal and vertical coordinates. Horizontal temporality involves the dominance of time over space, when, for example, tragic events occur simultaneously in various parts of the globe. Their very confluence seems to provide clear evidence of a temporal as opposed to a spatial determinism in the aftermath of the rise of urban modernity. In his concluding remarks on the year 1842 Heine compares three global events and gathers them onto a single temporal plane: an earthquake in Haiti, a major fire in the city of Hamburg and the derailing of a wagon transporting French tourists from Versaille to Paris.[9] The simultaneity of these tragedies, in which many losses of human life were mourned, confirms the singularity of human frailty within the scope of a temporal corridor. Moreover, Heine uses this confluence of spatially disjunctive events to consider the issue of natural as opposed to man-made tragedies, philosophizing as he does on the loss of human life in times of peace and contrasting these with similar losses in times of war. His comparison serves to criticize the promethean hubris of modern technical advancement in a world characterized by the illusion of unbounded movement and shrinking distances, especially since mankind seems to be perennially at war with nature.

The havoc wrought by the simultaneity of unfortunate events prevails over the security that distance had once provided. Hence, the shock of horizontal temporality even prompts Heine to reconsider the notion of theodicy, a concept central to his remarkable description of the great cholera epidemic of 1832 in Article VI of *French Conditions*. Heine suggests that national and transnational events are now linked to the question of whether global tragedies leading to massive deaths are representative of modern human fate and of the loss of the deity, not to speak of human delusions concerning the best of all possible worlds. These deeply pessimistic thoughts reflect the very nature of urban space as a theater for human suffering, epistemological fragmentation and cultural devolution. Heine's realignment of time and space can also be seen as a dialectical method for an anthropological philosophy of history that is not only innately temporal in its implications, but also devoid of teleological and cyclical ideals. He provides clear indication both in *Lutetia*, which came very late in his career, and in an earlier fragment entitled *VerschiedenartigeGeschichtsauffassung* ("Differing Perspective on History") that he had begun to think of historical and temporal heterogeneity in terms of the "presence of the now."

In this vein Heine's perspective on history can be compared to two approaches to the essence of the passage of time that have become cornerstones of Benjamin's philosophy of history: *Jetztzeit* and the notions of the phantasmagorical as a historical cipher.[10] Heine makes reference to the notion of *Jetztzeit* in Article 37 of *Lutezia*, when he asserts that the true wonder of the Renaissance rests on the resurrection of classical antiquity to grace the last vestiges of the Middle Ages gone moribund. Comparing the way the Renaissance fed on the past to the fashion of duplicating Renaissance forms in the new furnishings being sold in Parisian stores in 1841, he asks: "Does our understanding of the present sense an elective affinity to that period [i.e. the Renaissance], which, as we do, sought a fountain of youth in the past, thirsty for a fresh elixir of life?"[11] One recognizes here the commodity fetishism that Benjamin discovered in the objects of consumption, not of production as did Karl Marx, and becomes cognizant of how commodities can take on meaning as dialectical images or "ciphers of equivalence". That is, they point back to some form of "paradisiacal pre-history" and forward to a "utopian expectation"[12]. Essentially phantasmagorical they interrupt the continuum of time and are transformed into "images in the collective consciousness in which the old and the new interpenetrate".[13] The dialectics inherent in the phantasmagorical, that uniquely ephemeral reciprocity of present and past[14], can also be linked to the "presence of the now" that Benjamin describes in his 14th Thesis on the Philosophy of History.

History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*]. Thus, to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with the time of the now which he blasted out of the continuum of history. […] The French Revolution […] evoked ancient Rome the way fashion evokes costumes of the past. Fashion has a flair for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago; it is a tiger's leap into the past.[15] Arguably, Heine's and Benjamin's theory of *Jetztzeit* can be said to avail itself of the notion of what can be designated as vertical time. Vertical time implies that the phenomena of cultural semiotics are imbued with the layers of historical dimensions that the material itself encapsulates. Consequently, objects, symbols and even fields of discourse are transformed into palimpsests comprised of two or more iterations of similar or related elements. The present iteration reflects on the past and the past is mirrored in the present, and the interstitial spaces between the reciprocal configurations of the modes determine the polyvalence of modern cultural manifestations. No longer arranged in linear patterns, cultural forms now appear as circular configurations. The result is a concept of cultural history no longer based on schematic principles but on transient and dialectical constellations that transform the historical narrative into semiotic montages and epiphanies.

Benjamin was later to coin the term "telescopage" to describe this contraction of time and space, which can be linked to the idea of someone rapidly closing a concertina that had been unfolded. Moreover, the montages that Heine advances in *Lutezia* can also be compared to the theory of "historical materialism" that Benjamin sketches in the first third of his 1937 essay on "Eduard Fuchs: Collector and Historian". Historicism presents the eternal image of the past whereas historical materialism presents a given experience with the past – an experience that is unique. The replacement of the epic element by the constructive element proves to be the condition for this experience. The immense forces bound up in historicism's "once upon a time" are liberated in this experience. To put to work an experience with history – a history that is original for every present – is the task of historical materialism. The latter is directed toward a consciousness of the present which explodes the continuum of history.[16]Benjamin's ideaofexploding the continuum of historycan easily be applied to the cosmopolitan and demographic transformations that the European continent experienced between the Congress of Vienna in 1815 and the unsuccessful Bourgeois Revolution of 1848. Changing the face of the European continent within a brief space of thirty years, these historical watersheds prompted Heine to assemble a cultural archive expressive of the polyvalent discourse layers underlying modern memory.

His deliberations on Parisian culture, politics and demographics can thus be viewed as a redefinition of the goals generally attributed to cultural mnemonics[17]: the construction of a national, regional or local identity and a reflection of how collective cultural devices[18] have been called upon to transform the present into a reiteration of past traditions. In the wake of the hybridity of modernity Heine's archive assumes the form of a vast 'clearinghouse', in which the categories of space and time are subsumed into the materiality of urban semiotic experience. Concerned with political, social and aesthetic developments his repertoire of urban semiotics embraces not only the press as his primary medium for circulating discourse, but also the arts – music, painting, opera and dance –, the polyphony of objects on display in the shop windows that the flâneur perceives as a contrast to the material poverty of the masses, and finally the emotional scars that a number of essentially unsuccessful revolutions – 1798, 1814, 1830 and 1848 – had left on the collective psyche of the capital of the nineteenth century. In keeping with his critical stance on bourgeois modernity, Heine notes the rise of economic axioms by positing them as substitutes for the defunct commandments of the lost deity. Indeed, he argues in *Lutetia*that modernity has established a "cult of material interests, self indulgence [and] money"[19], the fragility of which is felt in every major crisis besetting the *Juste Milieu*.

On the one hand he paints a picture of the city as an allegory for the nation-state that avails itself of the economies of scale and only rarely invokes intellectual prowess or artistic excellence to underscore its cultural values. On the other hand, his panorama of urban experience is so comprehensive and brilliantly intertwined that any sense of physical contours, in which the discourses take place, evaporates. What remains is a floating bubble of mnemonic discourse that nimbly fleets from one semiotic region to the next, collecting data, dust and debris as well as projecting the dialectical image as the confluence of the new with the old. After having read Heine with Benjamin's spectacles it would be appropriate to turn once again to Benjamin and elucidate some of the precepts in his philosophy of history that are relevant to the concept of the dialectical image as a device for reading cultural memory. The history of philosophy viewed as the science of origins is the process which, from opposing extremes, and from the apparent excesses of development, permits the emergence of the configuration of an idea as a totality characterized by the possibility of a meaningful juxtaposition of such antitheses inherent in these opposing extremes.[20]

Benjamin's approach to the philosophy of history, which he delineates in the fiendishly difficult introduction to his *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, must be recognized as a historical reinterpretation of the theories underlying Platonic ideas. Comprised of a form of being that is not commensurate with any of the material objects subject to scientific investigation ideas can only be grasped by philosophical reflection, whereas empirical terms arise from sensory modes of perception. If, as Benjamin indicates, the totality of being inherent in ideas is only fathomable within the dialectics of their extremes, then the ideas themselves can only be fathomed as configurations in a constellation of elements. Because language as a medium embodies what the ideas symbolize, the terms gleaned from contemplating the constellations then become a medium of representation that is capable of bridging the epistemological gap between ideas and phenomena as well as between the notion of origin and the unfolding of historical experience.

Origin, although an entirely historical category, has, nevertheless, nothing to do with genesis. The term origin is not intended to describe the process by which the existent came into being, but rather to describe that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance. […] Origin needs to be recognized as a process of restoration and reestablishment, but, on the other hand, and precisely because of this, as something incomplete. There takes place in every original phenomenon a determination of form in which an idea will constantly confront the historical world, until it is revealed fulfilled, in the totality of its history. […] The principles of philosophical contemplation are recorded in the dialectic which is inherent in origin. This dialectic shows singularity and repetition to be conditioned by one another in all essentials. The category of origin is not therefore […] a purely logical one, but a historical one.[21]

As Benjamin argues, the symbolic or eidetic character of language as a cultural medium can only mirror the truth of ideas, when the essence of the term re-establishessome form of mnemonic origin. Although this capacity to restore originsbears close resemblance to Plato's anamnesis, there are singular differences between Plato's ideas and Benjamin's epistemological configurations. The most prominent difference is that Benjamin's mnemonic medium rests on ever changing symbolic constellations and not on single, eternal and immutable ideas, even thoughBenjamin's constellations, like Platonic ideas, are also only accessible through contemplation. Philosophical contemplation, as he envisions it, concerns itself with decipheringsemiotic complexes, which cannotbe considered to be commensurate with Platonic ideas as a result of their non-cognitive essence as well as their being based on historical experience. Benjamin holds that the representation of thisexperience takes place as images within the larger scheme of the constellation. He thus adopts the concept of the constellation as a configuration of signs, which transform his dialectical terminologies into historical models that revealthe temporality of the clusters of phenomena in their respective states of being.

In order to achieve this goal, philosophy as an epistemological discipline has to accept the viability of historical codification. The premise amounts to Benjamin's historical turn, in which the dialectics of time and space are subsumed into a virtual entity that resemblesa monad of cultural design. In correlation to Leibniz' concept of the monad, in which a totality of world harmony manifests itself, each idea grasps the full representation of the phenomena as both ideal and objective entities. Not only does the monad mirror all of the temporal codes pertinent to a model of the universe, but all of the dimensions of cosmic space as well. Containing data on origin, telos, material and form, the monad is the point of origin for the semiotic systems comprising the complexity of world representation. Arguably, the concept of the monad serves as the most comprehensive model for Benjamin's theory of the dialectical image, since the transition from ideal constellations into the configurations of empirical elements occurs as a continual process of virtual representation and textual assimilation. Texts, then, constitute the heterotopes of modern cultures, since as constellations of language they conflate the empirical and the ideal. Thus, the richness of Benjamin's dialectical image can best be admired in his *Arcades Project*, which transforms the rampant commodification and spatiotemporal topographies of the Parisian arcades in the nineteenth century into a virtual cultural landscape.[22]

More specifically, Benjamin's concept of the monad becomes a factor in his delineation of the modern individual and his apparent dependency both upon the sanctuary his interior provides and the many objects he has gathered there. Hence, the reign of Louis Philippe between 1830 and 1848 is recognized as the moment in history, in which the individual as collector begins to assemble his own mnemonic archive within the confines of his four walls. Transforming his private surroundings into a theater of illusions, he gathers objects that are divested of their commodity character and invested instead with the exceptional value attributed to cultural treasures.

They are in and of themselves dialectical images evoking the memory of a genuine and pristine world that is spatially and temporally removed from the drudgery of modern reality. Above all they are expressive of the extremes – minute interiority versus cosmic exteriority – that Benjamin requires for the totality of his historic constellations. In his 1939 expose he explains: Under the reign of Louis Philippe, the private individual makes his entry into history. […] In the arrangement of his private surroundings, he suppresses both a clear perception of his social function and his business interests. From this derive the phantasmagorias of the interior – which, for the private individual, represents the universe. In the interior, he brings together remote locales and memories of the past. His living room is a box in the theatre of the world.[23]Most clearly, the objects articulate the hidden traces of extensive expanses of history within a space that has been reduced to a box. Life in the city, a metaphor for the encroachments of bourgeois capitalism, banishes individuals into interiors that are filled with props: slippers, watches, blankets, umbrellas, coverlets, cases and etuis. With their protective coverlets and cases these objects encapsulate the chronology of human remembrance and as phantasmagorias they are transformed into the dialectical images and receptacles of modernity. Heine, long before Benjamin, was cognizant of this development and in two stanzas of his epic poem *Jehuda ben Halevy* he makes an ironic but apt reference to the boxes and etuis of the *Juste Milieu*, setting the stage for some of the imagery of the interior that Benjamin later invoked in his Arcades fragment.

And Jehuda ben Halevy,
In [my wife's] view, would have been honoured
Quite enough by being kept in
Any pretty box of cardboard

With some very swanky Chinese
Arabesques to decorate it,
Like a bonbon box from Marquis
In the Passage Panorama[24]

Concluding this portion of the investigation it is necessary to emphasize that Heinrich Heine and Walter Benjamin contribute to a transcultural projection of local or regional signatures of memory and mnemonic signs. Due to the free flow of cultural semiotics over European borders, which can be linked to Heine's and Benjamin's French exiles as well as to their activities for newspapers and international publishers, both similarities and differences in the configurations of modern European memory can be ascertained. Capitalizing on the circulation of products, wealth and services in the first three decades of the nineteenth century mnemonic symbols and archives of memory are integrated into the transfer processes tying continental bourgeois cultures together. Hence, both thinkers not only consider cultural codes from a national or regional historical perspective, but are also instrumental in establishing a larger network of symbolic forms, which are no longer dependent upon the classical or religious traditions that had monopolized European memory prior to the rise of a set of secular maxims in the latter decades of the eighteenth century. The secular semiotics that feeds modern cultural design need not be homogeneous, since it is no longer anchored into an all pervading religious canon. Notwithstanding, both Heine and Benjamin are quite explicit that there is a distinct ideology at the core of their cultural semiotics, and that is the law of economic scale and value.[25]Modern urban experience after 1830 acquiesces to the laws of commodification, selecting the mnemonic tokens that are readily exchangeable to feed the incessant circulation of symbolic forms and excluding the extraneous ones that are then relegated to the mountain of debris that forms our cultural archives today.[26]

Reading the Theory of Language as a Medium of Cultural Memory

In the *Origin of German Tragic Drama* objects and their respective images are projected as the medium of an aesthetic form of expression that successfully conflates religious semiotic emblems with the intention of the artistic genius. For Benjamin German tragic drama marks the point at which a profanation of religious signs takes place, since they initiate a historical relationship between image and semiosis. Although the development is clearly connected to the weakening of religious conviction in intellectual circles during the Baroque era, the historicity that realigns the relationship between images and signs is a characteristic of Benjamin's epistemological approach to language in general and a cornerstone of his semiotic understanding of the dialectical image. This convergence of epistemology and historicity can also be seen in the early essays on language theories that delineate Benjamin's semiotic messianism and his translation of philosophical premises into teleological notions of cultural design.

Here the argumentation hinges on the function of language as a medium for communicating intellectual and spiritual excellence. Since in his early works Benjamininvoked and criticized the Kantian and Hegelian spirit as the central axis of any configuration of the world, he also considered language and linguistic systems to be the primary medium for capturing the paradigm of historical experience that underlies cultural mnemonics. Inherent to establishing language as a supplemental code for the principle of being is a deep reflection of the homological structures involved in the communication process. These, in turn, override all other epistemological essentials. Spirit is language itself and does not therefore have to avail itself of language as a medium, so that language and spirit and forms of being take on a unity of identity and interact with one another as one medial substance.[27]

When Benjamin determines that the world spirit is a linguistic essence and that language is the medium of all worldly substance, then by analogy the wealth of world spirit is embodied in mankind's talent for evoking language. Mankind is accorded the privilege and task of transforming the language of nature into epistemological systems by giving the objects their names. In compliance with adamistic theories for the origin of language, mankind ties into the operative semiotic mode that is the characteristic of language as a primary ontological medium.[28]Nevertheless, names and terms are located on a semiotic level secondary to that of the world spirit, even if its effectiveness and purpose are drawn from the purity of the primary medial code the spirit represents. By analogy, the language of animals and even inanimate objects is also a derivative of the medium and therefore the entire semiotic web consists in a series of hierarchical rings that are more or less dense in correlation to their proximity to the purest manifestation of the medium. The differing densities of the semiotic media and not their intrinsic distinction form the secret to comprehending Benjamin's theories of language. Moreover, the media are without content and apparently meaningless of and among themselves. Much as Saussure's language theories adopt a revolving row of signifiers that are mutually exclusive, so that signifier and signified are markers for what every other sign in the row is not, Benjamin's sign systems are interconnected with one another and take on meaning only in their respective interdependence. Thus, his semiosis rests on the reflexivity of signs, images and objects, which in turn work on opened and closed categories of similarity and difference.

The reflexivity or mirroring of images that the density of the interdependent sign systems engenders has a number of important implications. First, Benjamin discards the notion of arbitrariness, which is one of the key principles behind Saussure's understanding of the sign systems. Because Benjamin's signs are ultimately derivatives of the pure language inherent to the world spirit, they are not solely dependent upon cultural and communicative norms and are open to ceaseless permutations and transformation.[29]Indeed, in his estimation the muteness of the inanimate objects is directly translatable into the articulation and phonation of human language, and vice versa. Translation attains its full meaning in the realization that every evolved language (with the exception of the word God) can be considered a translation of all the others. By the fact that, as mentioned earlier, languages relate to one another as do media of varying densities, the translatability of languages into another is established. Translation is removal from one language into another through a continuum of transformations. Translation passes through continua of transformation, not abstract areas of identity and similarity.[30]

One may admire just how consistent Benjamin's intellectual development from 1916 to the late 1930s is when we consider that there is both an unfolding of his theoretical positions as well as a direct correlation between his theory of translation, which posits that any translation of a text will provide new perspectives on the original's meaning, and his concept of similarity, which superseded the messianic language theories of the early years. *TheTask of the Translator*, which originally introduced Benjamin's renderings of Baudelaire's *Tableaux parisiens* into German andhas since become one of his most admired theoretical works, serves as an example here. Like Wittgenstein's *Tractatusphilosophicus*, Benjamin envisages a logical space occupied by what he deems to be a virtual, absolute and universal language, the various facets of which resonate on different levels in the language of original text and the language of its translation. Even a poor translation canserve as an edification of the original by tying into the universality of the logic behind all language. In turn, his concept of similarity rests on noticeable changes to the corpus of a language in the wake of the corruptive forces of history and cultural decline.[31] The emphasis here is on noticeable, since the changes can only be cognizant to the memory of an origin that has long since been buried under the layers of deficient language usage. Thus, there is the necessity to seek out the archive and, as an archaeologist would, unearth the origin of language as a great cultural treasure.[32]The leading archival medium is written language, which, as Benjamin conjectures, represents the canon of a historically coded mimesis of nature. Mimesis must be understood hereas the talent of mankind to locate and define real and ideal similarities in the plurality of signs found in the micro and macro cosmos.

This talent is the basis for the genesis of a communicative culture design that can pinpoint the various similarities embedded in the circulation of signs. Clearly, the sign systems retain their integrity as medial paradigms only when they are mimetically anchored to the origin of all articulated language. Hence, it is the "ideal similarity", which forms the deductive maxims of mankind's mimetic faculty. Correspondingly, Benjamin speaks of false mirrors, in which the semiotic vestiges of the discrepancies between the real and the ideal manifest themselves. Mankind's greatest achievements are encoded in the artifacts of written and spoken language, which in their remarkable breadth have figured since time immemorial as our most treasured archive of cultural memory. Part of forming this archive involves selecting the information that should be saved for immediate use, sifting through less tangible but nevertheless valuable material for future recall, as well as culling out the surplus data that has to be discarded. Only then can recognizable cultural paradigms be engendered and normative modes of memory constituted. Foucault paid tribute to this concept of the archive as a cultural space in his 1966 radio lecture *Les Hétérotopies* when he posited:

> The idea behind collecting and at the same time trying to stop the flow of time or rather to deposit it in a room for time immemorial; the idea to create the general archive of a given culture; the wish to enclose all frames of time, all epochs, all forms and vagaries of taste in one venue; the idea to create a room suffused with all time, as though this room could eventually exist outside of time, this idea is undoubtedly a modern notion.[33]

While the concept of folding the semiotic spoils of temporal experience layer by layer into a fixed spatial dimension is very intriguing to mnemonic theoreticians, it has continued to remain elusive. More often than not it is assumed that receptacles of active and passive memory are either lined up next to one another or somehow juxtaposed, in order to neatly store away historical data and counteract the losses inherent in human forgetfulness. Chambers and spatial representations of memory form the core of many mnemonic schemes, from Augustine's theory of memory rooms to Petrarca's or Sigmund Freud's archaeology of urban traces and Jan and AleidaAssmann's widely debated theory of the confluence of communicative and social archives within the broad band they term cultural memory. Present and future generations reflect on the past almost inevitably as it is has been handed down within prescribed codes, and it is only with intellectual effort and scholarly discipline that our prevailing archives become subject to scrutiny and written anew. Even then, it must be said that the re-selection process entails supplementing and substituting, so that the revised archive becomes yet another example of remembering and forgetting according to what has to berecognized as newly prescribed metonomies.However, we must seek out the possibility ofreducingmnemonic data to a manageable quantity, so that we can go aboutsquaring the cultural circle and reading dialectical images as agents of cultural memory at the outset of what has already proven to bea deeply troubled and fragile twenty-first century.

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[1] Benjamin, Walter: "Theses on the Philosophy of History". In *Illuminations*. Translated by Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books 1969, p. 255.

[2] See Hillach, Ansgar: „DialektischesBild". In Opitz, Martin and Wizisla, Erdmut (Ed.): *BenjaminsBegriffe*. Frankfurt/Main 2000. 1. Bd., S. 186-229.

[3] See Cohen, Margaret: „Benjamin's phantasmagoria". In: *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*. Edited by David Ferris. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2004, S. 199-220.

[4] See Brüggemann, Heinz: "Passagen". In Opitz, Martin and Wizisla, Erdmut: *Benjamins Begriffe*. Frankfurt/Main 2000. 2. Bd., S. 573-618.

[5] See Brüggemann, Heinz. *„Aber schickt keinen Poeten nach London!" – Großstadt und literarische Wahrnehmung im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert. Texte und Interpretation*. Reinbek 1985.

[6] Heine, Heinrich: *Lutezia*. In *Schriften über Deutschland*. Insel Verlag: Frankfurt 1968, p. 345.

[7] *Lutezia*, p. 510.

[8] See Pensky, Max: „Method and time: Benjamin's dialectical image". In *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*. Edited by David Ferris. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2004, p. 183.

[9] See *Lutezia*, p. 489f.

[10] *Illuminations*, p. 261.

[11] *Lutezia*, p. 442

[12] Pensky, p. 184f.

[13] Walter Benjamin: *The Arcades Project*. Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLauglin. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 1999, S. 4f.

[14] See Hamacher Werner: „'Jetzt'. Benjamin zurhistorischenZeit" in *Perception and Experience in Modernity. Benjamin Studies 1*. Edited by H. Geyer-Ryan, Paul Koopman and Klaus Yntema. Amsterdam/New York: Radopi 2002, p. 146-183 (here p. 154ff.).

[15] *Illuminations*, p. 261.

[16] Benjamin, Walter: "Eduard Fuchs. Collector and Historian in *Selected Writings: 1935-38*.Edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press 2004. Volume 3, p. 262.

[17] See Böhme, Matussek und Müller (Hrsg.): *Orientierung Kulturwissenschaft*. Hamburg 2000, S. 147-164; auch Welzer, Harald: "Gedächtnis und Erinnerung" in Jaeger, Friedrich und Rüsen, Jörn (Hrsg.): *Handbuch der Kulturwissenschaften*. Stuttgart/Weimar 2004. Bd. 3, S. 155-174.
[18] See Hobsbawm, Eric: *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge 1984.
[19] *Lutezia*, p. 451.
[20] Adorno, TheodorWiesengrund: Philosophy of Modern Music. Translated by Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley Blomster. New York/London: Continuum 2003, p. 3.
[21] Benjamin, Walter: *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Translated by John Osbourne. Londen: Verso 1985, p. 45f.
[22] See Gilloch, Graeme: *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations*. Cambridge: Polity 2002.
[23] Benjamin, Walter: "1939 Exposé: Paris, Capital of the nineteenth Century" in *The Arcades Project*. Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Prepared on the basis of the German volume edited by Rold Tiedemann. Cambridge/London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2003, p. 19.
[24] *Arcades*, p. 51.
[25] See McCole, John: *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*. Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press 1993, p. 280-303.
[26] See Gilloch, Graeme: *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City*. Cambridge: Polity Press 1996.
[27] See Bröcker, Michael: „Sprache". In Opitz, Martin and Wizisla, Erdmut (Ed.): *Benjamins Begriffe*. Suhrkamp: Frankfurt/Main 2000. 2. Bd., S. 740-773.
[28] See Fenves, Peter: "The Genesis of Judgment; Spatiality, Analogy, and Metaphor in Benjamin's 'On Language as Such and on Human Language" in Walter Benjamin: Theoretical Questions. Edited by David Ferris. Stanford: Stanford University Press 1996, p. 75-93.
[29] See Benjamin, Andrew: „The Absolute as Translatability: Working through Walter Benjamin on Language". In *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism*. Ed. By Beatrice Hanssen and Andrew Benjamin. New York: Continuum 2002, p. 109-122.
[30] Benjamin, Walter: „On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" in *Selected Writings: 1913-1926*.Edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press 2004. Volume 1, p. 69f.
[31] See Steiner, Uwe: *Walter Benjamin.* Stuttgart: Metzler 2004, p. 42-50.
[32] See Lane, Richard J.: *Reading Walter Benjamin: Writing through the catastrophe*. Manchester/New York: Manchester University Press 2005.
[33] Foucault, Michel: *Die Heterotopien. Der utopische Körper. ZweiRadiovorträge*. [Translated from the German by Karl Solibakke]. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp 2005, p. 16.

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