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The City of Collective Melancholy: Revisiting Pamuk's *Istanbul*

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Author biography

Davide Deriu is Reader and Director of Architectural Research at the University of Westminster. His work focuses on representations of modern architecture and cities. After completing a PhD at University College London, he held fellowships from the AHRC, Yale University's Paul Mellon Centre, and the CCA where he curated the exhibition *Modernism in Miniature* (2011). He has published in several books and journals, including the *Architectural Theory Review*, *The Journal of Architecture*, and *Emotion, Space and Society*. Edited works of his include *Emerging Landscapes* (Ashgate 2014) as well as special issues of *The London Journal* and *Architectural Histories*, the journal of the European Architectural History Network (EAHN) which he helped to found. In 2019 he was awarded a Mid-Career Fellowship from the British Academy.

Abstract

This essay looks back upon Orhan Pamuk's non-fiction book, *Istanbul: Memories of a City* (2003), and unpacks its multi-layered representation of the city as landscape. It is here that Pamuk pursues most overtly "the quest for the melancholic soul of his native city" which won him the 2006 Nobel Prize for Literature. Weaving personal memoir and historical essay into a unique narrative tapestry, Pamuk's book explores a series of tensions that define the city's image and identity; insider/outsider and East/West polarities, in particular, are tirelessly deconstructed. The essay examines Pamuk's poetics and politics of memory in relation to works by other authors, notably Walter Benjamin. In conclusion, the new edition of *Istanbul* (2015) is discussed against the background of the social and spatial changes that have beset Turkey's cultural capital in the interim.

Keywords: Benjamin, Walter; city; Istanbul; landscape; melancholy; memory; nostalgia; Pamuk, Orhan.

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The City of Collective Melancholy: Revisiting Pamuk’s *Istanbul*

When I first visited Istanbul, in September 2001, the city was experiencing a renaissance. The former Constantinople had fallen into a prolonged decline over much of the twentieth century, following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire; its erstwhile splendor was tarnished by a process of decadence, its geopolitical role replaced by that of Ankara, capital of the new Turkish Republic founded in 1923. By the turn of the millennium Istanbul was flourishing again. However, 2001 was a turbulent year for Turkey; the country suffered a major financial crisis, which spawned a new political order. The newly founded Justice and Development Party (in Turkish, AKP) won the general election the following year and went on to assert an increasingly autocratic rule that still holds sway at the time of writing. 2001 also marked a turning point in the representation of the so-called “Muslim world” in the western media, as the events of 9/11 inaugurated a new age of fear and hostility. When I flew to Istanbul from London, a week after that tragedy, the tension was palpable.

I went back to Turkey at the end of 2004, this time to take up a job that would keep me there for two years. The country had just entered negotiations for full membership of the European Union and, at that time, the AKP government was widely regarded in the West as a beacon of moderate and democratic Islam. After overcoming financial doldrums, Turkey was on a path of rapid economic growth fueled by neoliberal economics and driven by the construction sector, amongst others. During the noughties, Istanbul expanded rapidly as its population hit the ten million mark and continued to increase. Its status as a global city was consolidated by the development of the financial and media sectors, the extension of the mass-transit network, large-scale building programs, a tourism boom, and a vibrant cultural life that made it an international hub of art and design. Cultural institutions such as Istanbul’s Museum of Modern Art, which opened in 2004 to wide international acclaim, contributed to this rising profile.

Although the process of rampant gentrification exacerbated a host of social, spatial, and environmental issues that raised doubts over the sustainability of its growth, Istanbul was increasingly regarded as an attractive destination by foreign visitors and investors alike – it had become a “cool city.”¹

It was amidst the city’s revival, in 2003, that the author Orhan Pamuk (born there in 1952) published *Istanbul: Memories of a City*.² Blending the genres of memoir and essay, the work explored the complex identity of this metropolis that stretches between Europe and Asia. Published in the wake of seven novels, a screenplay, and a collection of essays, *Istanbul* became an instant classic. It was translated into several languages and its English version (2005) was praised by critics, paving the way for the highest literary accolade: in 2006 the Swedish Academy awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature to this writer “who in the quest for the melancholic soul of his native city has discovered new symbols for the clash and interlacing of cultures.”³ The appeal of *Istanbul* reached beyond Pamuk’s core readers, as the book became a popular companion for cultured travelers and a point of reference for architects and urbanists. A former architecture student himself, at Istanbul Technical University, Pamuk was able to evoke the distinct aura of his home city through a careful admixture of genres, registers, and cultural references. Through the pages of the book, the city unfolds like a landscape that is made all the more compelling by the uncaptioned images interspersed with the text.

I have returned to Turkey time and again since, my reflections on *Istanbul* evolving along with my observations of the rapidly transforming city. In 2015, a new version of the book was issued with an introduction by the author and an expanded body of images. This revised publication, followed by an English “deluxe edition” (2017), prompts questions about the status of the book in relation to the changes that have overtaken Istanbul – and that have also affected Turkey more broadly. The city has lost some of its international appeal as a consequence of the social and political turmoil that has shaken the country over the 2010s, and Turkey’s proposed liaison with the European Union (itself torn by internal rifts) has not materialized, giving way instead to new political allegiances as well as new flows of capital and visitors, notably from Arab countries. In the meantime, Pamuk has reinforced his position as the pre-eminent Turkish author of his generation, having contributed perhaps more than any other contemporary writer to shaping the image held throughout the world of Istanbul.

Against this background, this essay revisits Pamuk's *Istanbul* by unpacking the tropes that make it such a significant and intriguing representation of the urban landscape – or, rather, of the city *as* landscape. My aim is not so much to offer an explanatory narrative as to explore a set of themes that underlie the poetics and politics of Pamuk's work. Examining the book's complex and layered portrayal of the city, I reflect also on the new edition in light of the momentous events of the 2010s, events that have arguably affected not only Istanbul's physical and social landscape but also the conditions of its representation.

[Insert figure 1 near here]

On Some Motifs in Pamuk

Pamuk conceived of *Istanbul* as a response to the loss of collective memory he felt had beset the city. The literary device he chose is a hybrid narrative that weaves together memoirs of his childhood and early youth with a series of essays about artists and writers who shaped the cultural imagination of the city. The biographical thread of the book spans the period from the early 1950s to the mid 1970s, when Pamuk resolved to become a writer, his tales of childhood and self-discovery including a candid account of the author's family and its vicissitudes. This is interwoven with chapters devoted, some to European writers (such as Gustave Flaubert, Théophile Gautier, and Gérard de Nerval), and others to Turkish authors (such as Yahya Kemal, Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, and the historian Reşat Ekrem Koçu), indicating the diverse range of sources from which Pamuk formed his imaginary of Istanbul. Family anecdotes and cultural references are juxtaposed so that, for instance, the chapter on “Four Lonely Melancholic Writers” – dedicated to twentieth-century Turkish authors who portrayed Istanbul before Pamuk – is immediately followed by one titled “My Grandmother,” creating a fusion of cultural and familial legacies. This echoes the postmodern synthesis of techniques and genres that characterizes Pamuk's oeuvre. As the author himself avowed: “The formula for originality is very simple – put together two things that were not together before.”⁴ In *Istanbul*, the result is a rich narrative tapestry in which memory and history complement one another.

The book first appeared at a time when the relationship between history and memory was under scrutiny. Within architectural culture, after decades in which the notion of collective memory had dominated postmodern discourse (channeled through the seminal work of Aldo Rossi), the idea that a city remembered through its monuments began to be questioned – this amidst a broader “crisis of memory” that emerged at the end of the twentieth century.⁵ With the concept of memory increasingly understood as a plurality of experiences, subjectivities, and identities, its

use became alternative – and even antithetical – to the historical narratives embedded in museums and other institutions. Academics began to embrace more fluid concepts such as “urban memory,” which is not limited to the permanent traces of the past but encompasses a multiplicity of cultural practices and processes through which cities operate as loci of collective memory. As Mark Crinson describes it,

“Urban memory can be an anthropomorphism (the city having a memory) but more commonly it indicates the city as a physical landscape and collection of objects and practices that enable recollections of the past and that embody the past through traces of the city’s sequential building and rebuilding.”⁶

The works of authors such as W. G. Sebald and Paul Auster have been held up as exemplars of a narrative form of remembrance that blurs conventional boundaries between facts and fictions, indicating ways in which contemporary literature is implicated in this memory process through “the intricate interlacing of autobiographical reflections, biographical accounts and historical anecdotes.”⁷ In *Istanbul*, Pamuk negotiates the same discursive spaces and recombines them to create his own version of the remembered city.

The spatial fulcrum of the book is the apartment building the Pamuk family built in the 1950s on the hill of Nişantaşı, a residential district on the European side of the city. The house where the author grew up constitutes at once the main location of his autobiographical narrative and the vantage point for his observations of the urban landscape – the real protagonist of the book. Istanbul becomes an object of aesthetic contemplation for a writer who found his calling only after exploring other creative pursuits. Pamuk’s first medium was painting, and he sought to depict on canvas the image of the cityscape from a balcony that allowed him to behold the view of the Bosphorus. These urban observations from one remove were enriched by his endless strolls through the city, prompted by his fascination with the dilapidated buildings of the back streets and the mansion houses that lined the waterfront. After innumerable attempts to capture the fleeting aura of the landscape, Pamuk abandoned painting and set about studying architecture, but university failed to inspire him and eventually he dropped out. The ending of *Istanbul* marks this moment, recording a conversation between the twenty-two-year-old Pamuk and his mother, who warned him of the dire life that was lying ahead should he quit his studies: “don’t give up architecture, my son. You’ll suffer terribly if you do. Look at this Le Corbusier: he wanted to be a painter but studied architecture.” “I don’t want to be an artist [...],” the young Orhan replied, “I’m going to be a writer.”⁸

This epilogue marks the start of a process the result of which, we realize, is the book before our eyes. Pamuk's way of involving the reader as a witness, by drawing attention retrospectively to the making of the text, is reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's 1927 short story, "Street Haunting," in which the drive to buy a lead pencil becomes the pretext for a walk down the desolate city streets that then provides the grist for the author's imagination: "to escape is the greatest of pleasures," she wrote; "street haunting in winter the greatest of adventures."⁹ At the end of the story, Woolf returns home and contemplates the pencil she bought, "the only spoil [...] retrieved from all the treasures of the city."¹⁰ We are led to imagine that the simple device that set the narrative in motion is also what provided the author with a tool for recording on paper the treasures encountered in her *flânerie*. In Pamuk's *Istanbul*, the conclusion marks at once the end of the author's youthful sorrows – his own "street haunting in winter" – and the starting point of his writing life.

During his formative years, Pamuk was inspired by Woolf, along with other modernist writers such as Faulkner and Proust, coming gradually to the realization that his imagination was inspired to creativity more by writing than by attempts at painting or architectural design.¹¹ Yet he consciously retained an architectural method in the way he went on to construct the stories of his novels, which are always laid out in painstaking detail, at a range of scales. In *Istanbul*, in which the main structuring device is the alternation of personal memories and other urban histories, the effect is to make all stories his own, and at the same time constitutive of a shared Istanbul. The tension that is set up, between the personal and the collective, is but one of a number of tensions that provide the secondary structures of the book, some articulated explicitly (such as the oppositions between inside and outside, or East and West), others left implicit (past/present; nature/culture). These tensions become primary configuring elements of the city's landscape.

The way in which the tensions, or dualities, act also as symbioses, is clear from the outset of *Istanbul*, when the author's child-self imagines his double, "another Orhan" inhabiting the city.¹² This reflexive device allows him to observe from the outside and to inhabit from inside simultaneously; boundaries between private and public tend to blur, commonalities are privileged over divisions. This is the kind of both/and that allows Pamuk to recognize the whole while acknowledging its singularities. Ultimately, Pamuk's Istanbul is regarded as a unicum in which the inhabitants are joined together by a common destiny, which is that of the city itself. Unlike writers whose imagination is fueled by displacement or exile, Pamuk's requires that he stays "in

the same city, on the same street, in the same house, gazing at the same view.”¹³ His identification with the city is not only biographical but truly existential: as he states, “Istanbul’s fate is my fate.”¹⁴

The structure of the book reflects the inherently ambivalent character of the city itself, with all its complexities and contradictions. These are most evident in the encounter between East and West, a dichotomy the author has tirelessly sought to deconstruct in his oeuvre. Various of his works explore the porous relations between these contested categories in an attempt to envisage, as he puts it, their “organic combination.”¹⁵ In *The Black Book* (1990), a mystery plot is interwoven with a web of stories about Istanbul as the identities of the protagonists are refracted through the city’s labyrinthine settings.¹⁶ Some of the novel’s themes re-emerge in *Istanbul*, whose hybrid narrative elicits an urban imaginary in which eastern and western motifs uneasily coalesce. A self-professed “westernizer,” Pamuk has constantly reflected on the complex position of Turkey vis-à-vis Europe: “For people like me, who live uncertainly on the edge of Europe with only our books to keep us company, Europe has figured always as a dream, a vision of what is to come; an apparition at times desired and at times feared; a goal to achieve or a danger. A future – but never a memory.”¹⁷ In this respect, he follows in the footsteps of Turkish writers of the early Republican period who strove to represent Istanbul’s ambiguity from insiders’ perspectives. Crucially, though, he steers away from their nationalist sentiments.¹⁸

Istanbul’s chapter “Under Western Eyes,” in particular, deals with the peculiar condition of being both an insider and outsider in the city. Pamuk epitomizes the native Istanbulite (in Turkish “Istanbulu”) who has internalized the orientalist gaze of European writers and artists. This process, far from untroubled, is described in terms of a “brutal symbiosis:” “Western observers love to identify the things that make Istanbul exotic, non-Western, whereas the Westernisers amongst us register all the same things as obstacles to be erased from the face of the city as fast as possible.”¹⁹ At the same time, though, the awareness of his composite identity offers the author an escape from provincialism and becomes a source of gratification:

To see Istanbul through the eyes of a foreigner always gives me pleasure, in no small part because the picture helps me fend off narrow nationalism and pressures to conform. [...] Westernisation has allowed me and millions of other Istanbulus the luxury of enjoying our own past as “exotic,” of relishing the picturesque.²⁰

The provocation for this passage is Walter Benjamin’s 1929 essay “The Return of the *Flâneur*,” itself a review of Franz Hessel’s book *Spazieren in Berlin* (“On Foot in Berlin”), which Benjamin

praised as an exemplar of writings on cities produced by their native inhabitants.²¹ For Benjamin, the relatively small number of urban writings that fall into this category offer unique insights into the cities they describe. Insiders are deemed to be inspired by “deeper motives” associated with their close experience of places, hence their works “always have something in common with memoirs;” by contrast, the outsider-writer is lured by superficial impressions typified by “the exotic and the picturesque.”²² Pamuk has avowed a great admiration for Benjamin and *Istanbul* teems with implicit allusions to his work – so much so that Benjamin appears almost to be another “ghostly other” within the book.²³

Eschewing any clear-cut division between insider and outsider, Pamuk proposes an attitude that is prompted by his city’s history, where modern Turkish writers are bound to confront the imaginary they have inherited from European – mostly French – travel writers. In a chapter devoted to “Flaubert in Istanbul,” Pamuk elaborates on how he identified with foreign authors in order to find his own voice: “For people like me, Istanbul with one foot in this culture and one in the other, the ‘Western traveller’ is often not a real person – he can be my own creation, my fantasy, even my own reflection. [...] So whenever I sense the absence of Western eyes, I become my own Westerner.”²⁴ The ambivalent position of seeing one’s own place, alternately, from inside and from outside characterizes the author’s ever-shifting point of view:

I will often feel that I’ve become one with that Western traveller, plunging with him into the thick of life [...] to become at once the object and subject of the Western gaze. As I waver back and forth, sometimes seeing the city from within and sometimes from without, I feel as I do when I’m wandering the streets, caught in a stream of slippery, contradictory thoughts, not quite belonging to this place, and not quite a stranger. This is how the people of Istanbul have felt for the last hundred and fifty years.²⁵

To what extent this feeling might be a reflection of individual identities and social backgrounds is a question that is not addressed in the book. Whilst the author laments that Istanbul lost much of its cultural and linguistic diversity during the “turkification” process of the 1950s and ’60s, his own all-encompassing narrative comes also at the cost of flattening out subjectivities. Yet in a country that is socially fractured along multiple fault lines, his work has the noble – if somewhat lofty – aim of bridging divides and bringing cultures together: I would suggest that it is in this spirit that an all-embracing expression like “the people of Istanbul” should be understood. Pamuk’s vision of the city as a unicum, in particular through his approach to the complex cultural intersections between East and West, has undoubtedly contributed to *Istanbul’s* appeal

amongst foreign readers, as well as progressive and secular readers at home. It works to fend off arguments that foment divisions, particularly those that propound a “clash of civilizations.” Commenting, in an interview carried out after the original publication of the book, on the widespread sense of anxiety that characterizes Turkey’s relationship with the West, Pamuk suggested that the condition of living with two *souls*, or *spirits*, driven by very different impulses, is in fact potentially enriching. As he put it, “Schizophrenia makes you intelligent.”²⁶

Soul and the City

If the structure of *Istanbul* is one of identifying tensions in order to embrace or defuse them, its pursuit, through Pamuk’s journey into memory, is an attempt to capture Istanbul’s riven soul. Pamuk remembers his childhood as a time afflicted by a “dying culture,” when the city was full of the relics of a glorious history that would never return.²⁷ The drive to modernize Turkey “amounted mostly to the erasure of the past;” being modern meant espousing everything new that came from Europe and America. The way in which the Pamuk family retreated indoors, furnishing their dwelling like an overstuffed museum, encapsulates the decadence and tedium of bourgeois life in 1950s and 1960s Istanbul. An array of unused objects, ranging from pianos to Japanese screens, as well as glass cabinets holding china and silverware, are recollected by the author as the signifiers of bourgeois taste with which his family surrounded themselves in their quest for westernization.²⁸ It was in reaction to this state of uneasy gloom that the young Orhan went about his creative pursuits.

Pamuk’s symbiotic identification with “his” city is expressed most eloquently through the concept of *hüzün*, a Turkish word that defines a distinct form of melancholy. The term is derived from Islamic culture, and in particular from Sufi mysticism, where it denotes feelings of loss, emptiness, and grief associated with the inability to reach Allah – a painful state that can, nonetheless, be experienced with a sense of pride and even honor. Pamuk reinterprets *hüzün* in secular terms to describe the “feeling of deep spiritual loss” that was widespread in post-imperial Istanbul.²⁹ Lengthy passages are devoted to this “cultural concept conveying worldly failure, listlessness and spiritual suffering.”³⁰ Crucially, within Islamic culture *hüzün* is a sentiment shared by a community, and this is what distinguishes it from individualistic notions of melancholy that were formulated in the West, from Aristotle to Freud, via the encyclopedic disquisition on the “black pain” proffered by Robert Burton in his 1621 *Anatomy of Melancholy*.³¹ In seeking to convey the sense of dignified desolation that Istanbul had provoked in him since he was a child, Pamuk elevates the concept of *hüzün* to an existential principle that defines the soul of the city:

The *hüzün* of Istanbul is not just the mood evoked by its music and its poetry, it is a way of looking at life that implicates us all, not only a spiritual state, but a state of mind that is ultimately as life affirming as it is negating.³²

A possibility of redemption lies in this collective feeling of loss that sits “between physical pain and grief” – that is to say, “the same grief that no one can or would wish to escape, an ache that finally saves our souls and also gives them depth.”³³ For Pamuk, a sense of dignity binds together Istanbul’s people and places, a dignity that is reserved to her native inhabitants and cannot belong to the outside observer.³⁴ Yet the idea that insiders and outsiders mutually constitute each other’s views of the city permeates his work, and elsewhere the author suggests that the roots of Istanbul’s *hüzün* are, in fact, European.³⁵ Decay and desolation suffuse those places and vistas whose picturesque qualities were long admired by westerners before they were appreciated and appropriated by Istanbulites. Roaming the back streets of the old town in search of ruins is a source of consolation for its melancholics – and a trope of twentieth-century Turkish cinema as well as literature. In line with that tradition, *Istanbul* contains a number of passages in which the author, styling himself as a young *flâneur*, engages in a romanticized view of decaying places and ponders the dilemma of sharing the picturesque taste of Europeans: “I love the overwhelming melancholy when I look at the walls of old apartment buildings and the dark surfaces of neglected, unpainted, fallen-down wooden mansions: only in Istanbul have I seen this texture, this shading.”³⁶

As we have already seen, in order to share in this aesthetic sensibility one needs to be a stranger in his or her own city: “Those who take pleasure in the accidental beauty of poverty and historical decay, those of us who see the picturesque in ruins – invariably, we’re people who come from the outside.”³⁷ In a section of the book on the melancholy of ruins, Pamuk refers to John Ruskin’s *Lamp of Memory* and explains that Istanbul’s ruins are not so much a mark of glory (Ruskin’s “golden stain of time”) as a proud, albeit painful, reminder of an irretrievable past.³⁸ A great deal of ruination went on in the 1950s and 1960s, when the author witnessed the willed destruction of houses “full of memories” that were replaced with apartment blocks.³⁹ Other buildings were taken over by vegetation, nature repossessing the structures of human culture.⁴⁰ But as long as the city’s material fabric embodies the traces of memories, in its state of widespread dilapidation it exudes the city’s *hüzün*.

[Insert figure 2 near here]

The other main agent of melancholy, source at once of sadness and of consolation, is the waterway that has played a vital role in the life of Istanbul throughout its history – the Bosphorus. Its shores have always offered city dwellers solace from their sorrows, and the little Orhan was often taken there to breathe healthier air: “If the city speaks of defeat, destruction, deprivation, melancholy and poverty, the Bosphorus sings of life, pleasure and happiness. Istanbul draws its strength from the Bosphorus.”⁴¹ Memories of family outings to the waterfront are followed by reflections on its cultural representations. Pamuk dwells at length on the views painted by Antoine Ignace Melling in the early nineteenth century and mourns the “purity” of those landscapes as a “lost heaven” whose remnants he had witnessed as a child. The panoramas that illustrate Melling’s *Voyage pittoresque de Constantinople et des rives du Bosphore* (1819) provide particular consolation.⁴² The realization that the world they depict has disappeared yields moments of “rapture” at the recognition of familiar signs in the landscape:

Because Melling never places human dramas at the centre of his paintings, to see them is for me rather like driving along the Bosphorus when I was a child: one bay suddenly emerging from behind another, with every bend in the shore road bringing a view from a surprising new angle. And so it is that, as I leaf through this book, I begin to think of Istanbul as centreless and infinite and feel myself inside one of the tales I loved so much as a boy.⁴³

This passage vividly illustrates how the author’s excavation into memory is intimately connected with the aesthetic contemplation of the city as image. In Melling’s panoramas, Pamuk finds expressed a fundamental quality of Istanbul – that is, the anarchic disorder of a city that resists the structures and hierarchies of western urbanism. An artist and architect of mixed European descent who worked for many years at the court of the Ottoman sultan Selim III, Melling gained “an insider’s point of view” which allowed him to convey the “sublime beauty” of the city.⁴⁴ Pamuk argues that no Ottoman artist was capable of rivalling those views at the time, hence they became a reference point in the history of the city’s representation. He rediscovers them with delight: “Melling’s landscapes give us a sense of horizontal movement; nothing jumps at the eye; by exploiting the endless possibilities of Istanbul’s geography and architecture, he offers us a wondrous paradise and invites us to wander through it at our leisure.”⁴⁵

It is as though the author, by linking childhood memories to well-known visual and literary images of the city, were seeking to capture an Istanbul that had all but disappeared – or, perhaps, to paraphrase Benjamin, in the fleeting moment of its disappearance. Pamuk portrays the *hüzün*

of the city, as it were, in chiaroscuro. For him, the soul of Istanbul is in black and white, and is best apprehended in winter, not surprisingly his favorite season: that is, when mist, rain, and snow give the city a special texture all of its own. The images Pamuk selects to set up a dialogue with the text – pictures from his family’s albums sitting alongside city views, in keeping with the book’s two-fold narrative – are intentionally reproduced in shades of grey. Melling’s panoramas are accompanied by photographs taken by local news photographers,⁴⁶ many of them by Ara Güler, the Armenian-Turkish photojournalist whose images of Istanbul from the 1950s onward had already become the standardly-accepted twentieth-century views of the city by the time Pamuk searched through Güler’s archive.⁴⁷ If Melling was regarded as the superlative painter of the Bosphorus, Güler’s reputation as the unrivalled chronicler of contemporary city life is encapsulated in his epithet, “the eye of Istanbul.” The monochrome tone of his photographs is integral to what Ipek Türeli has called their “nostalgia mode,” feeding a public discourse that is critical of the city’s expansive growth.⁴⁸ Pamuk initially conceived of *Istanbul* without images, but Güler’s work inspired him to introduce them, for he saw in it the ideal visual counterpoint to his urban “dreamscape.”⁴⁹ This term might help us to appraise the author’s melancholic representation of the city in black and white, for although Güler also took color photographs (and Melling too painted a number of watercolors), in Pamuk’s reverie there is no place for chromatic variation.

[Insert figure 3 near here]

This achromatic depiction of Istanbul has attracted a good deal of commentary. Maureen Freely, Pamuk’s English translator, recalls the experience of going through the last chapters of the book:

I stopped to consider the stark beauty of his black-and-white tableaux. I thought about the colors he had carved away. For when was the Bosphorus ever monochrome? Yes, there were days when the melancholy mist descended, but when the sun broke through again, it was so blue it hurt your eyes. For every image of 1960s Istanbul that this book brought back to me, there were a hundred missing. ⁵⁰

Similarly, the architectural historian Esra Akcan, who helped Pamuk edit *Istanbul*, has highlighted the dynamism of the city that was emerging around the turn of the twenty-first century:

“Istanbul is no longer a black-and-white city, as it appeared to Pamuk as a child, but a multicolored booming metropolis, developing and expanding.”⁵¹ Although the author’s intent was largely to reflect on the city’s recent past rather than to document its contemporary condition, it was to do so in the present. His musings on *hiçzın* are narrated in the present tense, as if to insist on its continuing relevance. Akcan acknowledges that “[t]he accomplishment of

Pamuk's *Istanbul* [...] resides in its ability to speak to the readers who can still look through this booming global city and see its melancholy in the background."⁵² But what about those readers who cannot see this background? While the work has met with mixed responses at home, its fortune has been greater abroad. Besides multiple translations of the book in several languages, the chapter devoted to *hüzün* was republished in 2007 as a standalone essay in a photobook by Magnum photographer Alex Webb, who accompanied it with his own pictures, scenes of street life in Istanbul in highly saturated colors.⁵³ This attests to the popularity of Pamuk's vision of the city to foreign readers who, from a distance, may be able to reconcile the black-and-white atmospheres described in *Istanbul* with vibrant images of the twenty-first-century metropolis.

The outsider's view brings up yet again the inescapable issue of orientalism that recurs in critiques of Pamuk's work.⁵⁴ Indeed, his interpretation of East and West as temporal categories, aligned respectively with past and present, echoes a typical trope of orientalist discourse. For Engin Işın, *Istanbul* conveys the nostalgia for an idealized place that is conjured as an object of desire, of longing,⁵⁵ which means inevitably that in Pamuk's text "*hüzün* is caught up with the Orientalist gaze."⁵⁶ Işın adds that any claim to define the soul of a city should treat it as a discursive formation capable of supporting the strategies of different social groups, while Pamuk's is limited to his own bourgeois view. While this critique allows us to see that the concept of *hüzün* is not as pervasive as Pamuk would have us believe, it should be emphasized that throughout the book the author is acutely aware of the orientalism inherent in his own gaze, and constantly subjects it to reflexive scrutiny. It is through recognizing the role of European art and literature in the historical representation of Istanbul that he is able, not only to trace his cultural influences, but also to reclaim the image of the city from a twenty-first century Istanbulite's perspective.⁵⁷

Utopian Impulses

We have already seen how Pamuk made reference to Benjamin's essay on the return of the *flâneur* in order to transcend the dichotomy between insider and outsider. Pamuk's "child's vision" of the city in *Istanbul* calls to mind other works of Benjamin's, in particular his memoirs *A Berlin Chronicle* and *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, written between 1932 and 1933 from a self-imposed exile.⁵⁸ In *A Berlin Chronicle*, the German writer bent the conventions of the memoir to advance the critique of modern urban society he had put forward in previous texts, notably *One-Way Street* (1928), in which he exposed the destructive effects of industrial capitalism on nature.⁵⁹ Esther Leslie has observed that, in spite of its title, the *Berlin Chronicle* is anything but a chronicle:

“[Benjamin] pretends to be remembering the sense he made of the world when he was a child, when in reality he is a critic highlighting the trajectory he has witnessed.”⁶⁰ The reminiscences of turn-of-the-century Berlin allow him to reveal, through a montage of fragments, “the first traces of the historical decline of the bourgeoisie.”⁶¹ Departing from the autobiographic genre, Benjamin mobilizes memories of childhood and early youth to capture the deeper forces underlying the modern city through a series of fleeting moments. This move shifts the emphasis from time to space:

Reminiscences, even extensive ones, do not always amount to an autobiography. And these quite certainly do not, even for the Berlin years that I am exclusively concerned with here. For autobiography has to do with time, with sequence and what makes up the continuous flow of life. Here, I am talking of a space, of moments and discontinuities. For even if months and years appear here, it is in the form they have at the moment of recollection. This strange form – it may be called fleeting or eternal – is in neither case the stuff that life is made of.⁶²

Allegory is central to this critical method, and the child is its primary agent. As Graeme Gilloch has pointed out, in Benjamin’s memoirs, “the child is the urban archaeologist *par excellence*, an image of redemption, an allegory of the allegorist.”⁶³ Digging the ground of the modern metropolis for ever-new finds is an operation that carries inherent political value. By reminiscing about the past, the storyteller brings out the revelatory power of the child’s discoveries:

“Through collecting, the remembered child liberates everyday things from the fate of the commodity, just as the remembering adult redeems apparently insignificant moments from the oblivion of amnesia.”⁶⁴ According to Gilloch, this possibility of redemption depends on the child’s ability to relate to nature in a way that is not dominant or exploitative but rather ludic and pleasurable. Only the storyteller retains this organic attitude towards the city *as* nature: while the child collects, the adult re-collects through the labor of memory and re-combines images into new constellations.⁶⁵ Both child and storyteller embrace a form of utopian dreaming that restores a poetic sense of balance to the metropolis, providing an antidote to the reckless pace of modern urbanization: “The recollection of childhood is a fundamental imperative for Benjamin, because it recalls those forgotten dreams, those buried utopian impulses which must be recovered and realized in the present. The Berlin texts constitute an archaeology of hope.”⁶⁶

Echoes of this utopian impulse resonate throughout Pamuk’s memoir, which is also animated by a quest to restore balance to the metropolis. Istanbul is a playground of adventures that allow

the narrator to unveil multiple layers of memory by conflating experiential and historical times. Pamuk's book contains a number of motifs that can be found in Benjamin's Berlin texts as well: the experience of growing up in an affluent district where the family home is the point of departure for *flânerie*; the excursions into an exotic world of abject poverty; the memories that evoke magical aspects of places and people; the representation of the city as a mythical nature governed by archaic forces that lie beyond human control; and, above all, a pervasive feeling of solitude. There are, however, important ways in which Pamuk's memoir differs from Benjamin's. Whilst the latter made use of literary montage as a means to achieve a shock effect through the collision of fragments, the former strives to deconstruct binary oppositions in order to explore new organic combinations. This is not only a stylistic difference, one that might be reduced to lessons from the literary canons of modernism and postmodernism, but arguably reflects a deeper intellectual chasm.

According to Max Pensky, Benjamin's melancholy had a paradoxical nature, for the Jewish philosopher sought to mediate his sense of impending catastrophe with the revolutionary hope invested in a redemptive, messianic force. In a short text titled "Leftist Melancholia," Benjamin criticized progressive German writers (notably Erich Kästner) who had given up the ideological struggle in order to indulge in an aesthetic contemplation of the world.⁶⁷ Their hopeless melancholy came under attack for betraying the revolutionary cause in the name of an inward-looking form of resignation. For Benjamin, this reactionary attitude was far removed from the melancholy that had animated the baroque *Tranerspiel* (tragic drama), or Baudelaire's modern use of allegory, in that it showed, writes Pensky, a "*taedium vitae* without allegorical destruction."⁶⁸ Conversely, Benjamin sought to revive allegory as a meaningful political weapon in the service of materialist dialectics by severing objects and images from their context and presenting them as fragments – first collected by the child then recollected by the writer through a labor of memory.

While Benjamin's melancholic gaze aimed at using allegory and montage to blast through the deeply embedded structures of German bourgeois life, to reveal their intrinsic contradictions, Pamuk's memoir seems to have been driven by an almost opposite impulse, to recompose the fractious landscape of Turkish culture and society into an organic synthesis. Pamuk's utopianism, in other words, is of a nostalgic variety. Initially, the city's collective melancholy offered a refuge from the bourgeois tedium of his childhood; then, as a young man, he turned the urban environment into an object of aesthetic contemplation. It should be added here that Pamuk never claimed to be interested in literature as a means of social commentary.⁶⁹ Even though he

honed his craft in the 1970s and 1980s, at a time when being a writer in Turkey was invariably associated with politics, his own artistic ambition was to transcend the social context of his country, and his primary interest was in reading European modernist literature. This literary path did not exempt him, once he had gained a public profile, from undergoing a political court trial for alleged “public denigration of Turkish identity” following an interview he gave to a Swiss newspaper in 2005.⁷⁰ Such tribulations are all too common for Turkish writers. Yet in Pamuk’s case, the trial may have contributed to projecting an image he never courted, that of the politically engaged author.

This is not to say, however, that the complex and layered edifice that constitutes *Istanbul* is devoid of critical, or indeed political, significance. Pamuk’s representation of the city as an ambivalent place, ever oscillating between opposite poles and eschewing any attempts at ordering, might in fact be regarded as a provocative attempt to reclaim *from inside* a narrative of the city that had long been owned by outsiders. In redressing that balance, Pamuk took a distance from the earlier generation of Turkish authors who had written about Istanbul mostly through the nationalist discourse of the young Republic. There is a systematic intent in Pamuk’s deconstruction of binaries and their received value systems. If the main poetic gesture of his memoir consists in embracing ambivalence, as I have contended, this gesture hints towards a gendered re-vision of Istanbul as well: from the central role of the mother in his family portrait to the little Orhan’s imagination of God as woman, the author rejects hegemonic power structures and describes the city as a non-hierarchical microcosm. Two centuries after Melling’s *voyage pittoresque*, the urban landscape is still centerless, and Pamuk redeems this condition as a distinctive trait of the city: “Istanbul is so unmanageably varied, so anarchic, so very much stranger than Western cities: its disorder resists classification.”⁷¹

The Weight of Memory

In this review of *Istanbul* I have argued that Pamuk’s identification with his native city can be seen as a poetic attempt to salvage the collective memory that is inscribed in the landscape from the pervasive effects of urban transformation. In effect, by embracing the ambivalent character of the city-as-landscape, the author sought to seize hold of Istanbul’s aura before it disappeared.⁷² In Svetlana Boym’s terms, the book expresses a form of “reflective nostalgia” in response to the perceived loss of a collective framework of memory.⁷³ The kind of nostalgia that pervades *Istanbul* is markedly different from the rather more “restorative” variety that has dominated public discourse on Turkey’s Ottoman past since the early noughties. Whilst the

appeal of Old Istanbul has driven both preservation and tourism at least since the 1980s, with Turkey's adoption of neoliberalism, the early twenty-first century has seen the consolidation of a "market-oriented Islamization of the city."⁷⁴ The zealous return to the former imperial glories of the sultanate has marked a neo-Ottomanist approach in Turkish culture, as demonstrated by a plethora of books, exhibitions, films, TV series, etc.⁷⁵ Architecture too is implicated in this process, a case in point being the construction of new monumental mosques in classic Ottoman style, such as the Taksim Mosque, which has radically transformed the central square that once represented the modern and secular ethos of the Republic. Istanbul has become a battleground for radically different politics of memory, nurtured by diverging nostalgic sentiments as well as distinct conceptions of history, culture, and society. How does Pamuk's *Istanbul*, then, relate to the present context? And how do recent changes, both in the city and in the book itself, in turn affect its significance?

[Insert figure 4 near here]

As mentioned at the outset, *Istanbul* originally appeared at a time of growth and widespread optimism in Turkey. The emergence of Istanbul as a global city culminated in the events to celebrate its designation as European Capital of Culture in 2010. As Turkish urban scholars noted at the time, however, this resurgence was not without contradictions: "The present is heavily burdened with a pervasive feeling of loss in response to Istanbul's unplanned growth and Turkey's inchoate position *vis-à-vis* Europe."⁷⁶ The mounting concern at the uncontrolled expansion of the city was registered in the documentary *Ekümenopolis* (2012), which exposed the alarming ecological impact of unbridled construction along with its social and spatial inequalities.⁷⁷ These issues were exacerbated throughout the 2010s as the city's population continued its steep increase beyond fifteen million. Istanbul became an epicenter of social unrest that erupted in 2013 with the Gezi Park protest and its violent repression. Subsequently, the city witnessed a string of terrorist attacks and, in 2016, a foiled military coup. The ensuing state of emergency curtailed already limited freedom of expression by targeting in particular politicians, journalists and academics. Dozens of publishing houses were closed down and thousands of books destroyed as part of the government's campaign to purge the country of dissident people and ideas. By the end of a decade marked by strife, the "pervasive feeling of loss" detected by critics at its beginning was a chronic condition.⁷⁸

Against this turbulent background, Pamuk's book survived, but the landscape it evokes appears to have faded into an ever more remote distance. If *Istanbul* could, in 2005, be read as a passionate paean to the city at a moment of transformation, and even as the expression of a

modern worldview that was fast being eclipsed by a new political order, over the years the book has come to seem weighed down by its nostalgia – and, perhaps, too, by its success. This impression is reinforced by the newly illustrated version published in Turkish in 2015, in English in 2017. This hardback “deluxe edition” comprises over two hundred new images selected by the author, which more than double the initial number of illustrations.⁷⁹ They include more pictures of Pamuk’s family along with documentary photographs of Istanbul gathered over the years, dating back to the period when he was roaming the back streets without a camera. The images have been selected in order to evoke particular “feelings” and “atmospheres,” and enlarged with a view to heightening their “emotional impact.”⁸⁰ Yet while some of them gain clarity from the expanded format, others have lost impact – among them, Melling’s panoramic views, now split across double-page spreads.

A new introduction by the author offers a series of wide-ranging reflections on photography, from memories of the first camera he received at the age of ten to the account of how he became an obsessive collector of pictures online. What most intrigues Pamuk about photographs is the possibility of charging them with meaning that transcends their original purpose: “I have used photographs originally intended as souvenirs or documentary records,” he writes, “to reveal a sense of melancholy the photographers never meant to convey.”⁸¹ Pamuk quite explicitly appropriates these photographs for his own narrative, not because he interrogates them, but because he uses them to support his particular claims. What in the first edition was a creative yet subdued use of images informing the narrative has given way to a more extensive, yet conventional, process of illustration upon which the writer has stamped his authority. Pamuk goes as far as to assert that the images have taken over from the writing itself: “In the first version, the photographs came appended to the text. In this, the text expands on the emotions evoked by the photographs. As a consequence, this is a book that can be enjoyed even by turning its pages at random.”⁸² This outcome is surprisingly close to the definition of a coffee-table book, and indeed, at nearly 1.2kg, the new edition is best consulted on a table (unlike the original, with its intimate pocket format) – a remarkable development for such a sophisticated literary experiment.

Explaining why he added so many historical photographs, Pamuk tells us that the early 2000s (when he began collecting pictures specifically for the book) were a period which saw rising interest in the former image of the city. This yearning for the past was largely confined to those social strata that benefited from Istanbul’s economic growth and physical change: “Perhaps the

nostalgia was born of the dizzying pace at which the city was being transformed by its new affluence, erasing so many features by which we recalled our past.”⁸³ Yet again, the author uses the plural “we” to claim a collective memory which is supposedly shared by “the people of Istanbul.” The book’s visual apparatus is thus aligned with a “general cultural trend” towards collecting photographs that is particularly popular amongst the urban middle and upper classes.⁸⁴ The bulk of the new edition seems to intimate that the weight of memory has increased, over a dozen years, to the point of becoming unwieldy. Along the way, the agency of writing has surrendered to a sweeping stream of images. Has the writer’s role, then, regressed from the act of recollecting to that of collecting that was the child’s province? And what are the implications of this new pursuit?

The main character of Pamuk’s novel, *The Museum of Innocence* (2008) is a melancholic man who compulsively gathers and stores objects related to his lost love. In 2012 the author transformed the book’s contents into a real museum.⁸⁵ The lavishly illustrated version of *Istanbul* takes a different form but shares a similar intent, of re-mediating the initial work through a process of collection in which the author performs the role of curator.⁸⁶ It was also around 2012 that Pamuk became an enthusiastic, somewhat obsessive, photographer himself, taking thousands of pictures from his balcony in the space of a few months. A selection of them, depicting the view of the Bosphorus at different times and through varying focal lengths, were published in the photobook *Balkon* (2018).⁸⁷ Here we see the former would-be painter who became a writer experiment with a means of representation that enables him not only to illustrate but also consciously to frame the cityscape through his own gaze – always from the same, partial and privileged, point of view. By an irony of history, Pamuk’s photobook appeared in the same year that Ara Güler passed away, shortly after the inauguration of a museum dedicated to his work. While the photobook indicates a further shift of Pamuk’s attention from word to image, the gaze behind it shows an undiminished desire to capture the Istanbul that he sees and can make tractable. In the meantime the city that goes under this name continues to sprawl out of all proportion.

I returned to Istanbul in the summer of 2019 and caught a revealing glimpse of the ever-growing megalopolis from the airplane. The seemingly endless expanse of construction – residential districts, shopping malls, office towers, and so on – has reshaped the landscape to such a degree that it is hard to imagine a single collective identity holding the city together, if there ever was one. Is searching for the soul of Istanbul, then, anything more than a nostalgic

attempt to *make sense* of a place that has mutated beyond anyone's comprehension? Does the very title of the book, *Istanbul*, indicate a last-ditch effort to encapsulate an urban agglomeration that can no longer be subsumed under a single name? Interestingly, the new edition opens with a series of aerial views from the early twentieth century. ““Had I seen before this old photograph of the city from an airplane,”” muses Pamuk, ““I would have written a book called *Istanbul from Above!*””⁸⁸ Perhaps he had already done so, inasmuch as his melancholic account of the city – observed, imagined, and narrated from the vantage point of his family home – represents Istanbul and its people as a unified whole. By identifying with *his* city from an elevated position, the author casts himself as its ultimate decipherer.

Looking back on *Istanbul* at the dawn of the 2020s, it is impossible to escape the impression that the imaginative power of literature has gradually been surrendered to the mainstream industry of nostalgia – the book's narrative buried under a bulimic flow of images that invite random browsing. Still, the act of reclaiming the aura of the city by weaving together different threads that form its cultural identity remains a significant literary operation, one that continues to evolve in parallel with the city itself. As Pamuk notes, the book's import goes beyond the boundaries of its subject matter: “What I am describing may not, in the end, be special to Istanbul, and perhaps, with the Westernisation of the entire world, it is inevitable.”⁸⁹

END

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- 10 *Ibid.*, 36.
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- 46 For a comparative analysis of photographs in Pamuk’s *Istanbul*, see Gabriel Koureas, “Nicosia/Istanbul: Ruins, Memory and Photography,” *Kunapipi*, vol. 33, no. 1 (2011): 171-87.
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- 66 Ibid., 92.
- 67 Walter Benjamin, “Leftist Melancholia,” cited in: Max Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 9-12. (Page numbers refer to the passages where Pensky discusses Benjamin’s essay).
- 68 Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics*, 11. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* [1928], translated by John Osborne (London: Verso, 2009). Walter Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” [1940], in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, 4: 1938–1940*, ed. Howard Eiland (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 313-55.
- 69 Pamuk, “Paris Review,” 367.
- 70 The interview was published in *Das Magazin*, the weekend supplement of *Tages-Anzeiger* (Zürich) on February 6, 2005. With reference to Turkey, Pamuk was quoted as saying that “thirty thousand Kurds and a million Armenians were killed in these lands and nobody but me dares to talk about it.” The passage quoted here appears, among other places, in Pamuk, “The Paris Review Interview,” 356.

- 71 Pamuk, *Istanbul*, 153.
- 72 See also Belgin Turan Özkaya (ed.), “Transpositions on the Edge of Europe: Difference and Ambivalence in Architecture”, themed issue of *The Journal of Architecture*, vol. 16, no. 6 (2011).
- 73 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York NY: Basic Books, 2001), 55.
- 74 On the “market-oriented Islamization of the city”, which began in the late 1990s and accelerated in the 2000s, see Cihan Tuğal, “The Greening of Istanbul,” *New Left Review* 51 (2008): 65-80.
- 75 Ipek Türeli, *Istanbul, Open City: Exhibiting Anxieties of Urban Modernity* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2017).
- 76 Deniz Göktürk, Levent Soysal, Ipek Türeli (eds), *Oriental Istanbul: Cultural Capital of Europe?* (London: Routledge 2010), 10.
- 77 Imre Azem, dir., *Ekümenopolis: City without Limits* (Turkey, Germany, 2011).
- 78 A pervasive state of anxiety has been associated not only with the effects of urban development but also with recent visual representations of Istanbul. See Türeli, *Istanbul*.
- 79 A total of 233 new photographs and illustrations were added to the original 206. The emphasis on the visual is reflected in the title of the new Turkish edition, which means “Istanbul with picture(s)” or “illustrated Istanbul”. Orhan Pamuk, *Resimli İstanbul Hatıralar ve Şehir* (Istanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2015).
- 80 Orhan Pamuk, “Introduction: Taking and Collecting Family Photos,” in *Istanbul: Memories and the City* (New York: Knopf, 2017).
- 81 *Ibid.*, xiv.
- 82 *Ibid.*, xvi.
- 83 *Ibid.*, xxii.
- 84 *Ibid.*, xxii.
- 85 Orhan Pamuk, *The Museum of Innocence*, translated by Maureen Freely (London, Faber & Faber, 2009). The museum itself was installed by Pamuk in an old building of Çukurcuma (a neighbourhood in the European district of Beyoğlu) which was restored with the aid of the 2010 European Capital of Culture Agency and opened to the public in 2012. As a metanarrative based on the eponymous novel, the museum displays a range of objects that were collected by the protagonist, Kemal, in order to soothe his troubled love for a woman called Füsün.
- 86 I wish to thank Josh Carney for his insights into this topic.
- 87 Orhan Pamuk, *Balkon* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2018).
- 88 Pamuk, “Introduction”, xxiii.
- 89 Pamuk, *Istanbul*, 2017 version, 216.