

Walter Benjamin. Short Notes on the Memory of Fragmentation

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Abstract: *Walter Benjamin's work will be analyzed from the perspective of cultural memory in the context of globalization and also from the perspective of one of the negative effects of the globalization, the loss of identity references. Benjamin's perception of the memory represents the core of his writings, and some of the most important elements of his work: collection, flâneur, experience, angel of history, stays under the sign of the memory.*

Keywords: *Walter Benjamin, memory, angel of history, experience, fragments, collection*

The globalization is not only defined as “a process of general dissemination (of merchandise, technologies, news, political influence, religious ideas) across political and cultural boundaries and of the ensuring integration of various, previously isolated zones into one system of interconnections and interdependencies, where all nations, empires, tribes and states cohere in some way or other through political, economic or cultural relations,” [1] but also as a process that affects the stability and the capacity to relate to a certain identity. When the traditional values are challenged and there are too many opportunities and there is no education regarding the methods that can be used in order to choose between different cultural approaches, the personal identity suffers from an overwhelming task, that of finding its way between different fragments of what used to be the old social and cultural context. “In smashing apart traditional national boundaries, globalization, ironically, offers people a kind of ‘absolute freedom’ to do whatever they like. The irony is that the world of ‘everything goes’ has become crippling, as the anxiety of choice floats unhinged from both practical and ethical considerations as to what is worth pursuing. (...) Instead of finding ourselves, we lose ourselves” [2]. In the context of globalization, the need for stability and the search for some limits that could offer and preserve the sense of our own identity determine the approach of memory from a very different perspective, that of the cultural memory, capable to answer to the need for finding some stable references. Jan Assmann defines the cultural memory as a form of collective memory shared by a number of people and which provides to these people a collective, cultural identity and he also proposes to frame “the realm of traditions, transmissions, and transferences” into the “cultural memory” term, without arguing for the replacement of Halbwachs’ idea of “collective memory” with “cultural memory”, but distinguishing “between both forms as two different *modi memoranda*, ways of remembering” [3] In this way the cultural memory is defined as an “externalization and objectivation of memory, which is individual and communicative, and evident in symbols such as texts, images, rituals, landmarks and other ‘*lieux de mémoire*’” [4] The cultural memory stays at the foundation of the creation and preservation of the community identity and, therefore, of the personal identity, being expressed by places and sacred texts, rituals and monuments, in a certain way through what Pierre Nora called *lieux de mémoire*, the place being also used in the Antiquity as a tool of the *ars memoriae*, which receives a quantity of information easily accessed by a person who is visiting that place in his/her mind. “For Cicero and Quintilian the *loci memoriae* were practical mental tools, free of ideology. *Loci memoriae* were not determined by social values, by historical views, or future expectations. Nora’s *lieux de mémoire* are also mnemotechnical devices, but extremely ideological, full of materialism, and far from being neutral or free of value judgments. Most *lieux de mémoire* were created, invented, or reworked to serve the nation-state” [5] Nowadays the process of reasserting the identity is sometimes materialized as a movement opposed to migration, a return to the places of memory that follows the European construction and globalization. Benjamin’s work will be regarded as a kind of place of memory, according to the definition of the European *lieux de mémoire* [6], to whom we can return in order to understand the European identity.

The analysis of Benjamin’s work is carried out precisely in this particular frame, as a *lieux de mémoire* and we will try to sketch a theory of memory developed in his writings in different forms using various concepts. The present paper will only explore two concepts used by Benjamin: the collection and the experience. Benjamin was sometimes pictured as a memory explorer who

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had worshipped the history too much, but also as one who had written too much [7], who advised the writers to never stop writing in order to preserve their ideas and not to destroy the canvas of memory because a recollection represented an open door to another image on the memories canvas. Benjamin's perception of the memory has been partially approached before, but without emphasizing the theory of memory and its role in his writings, a theory that can be discussed from a whole range of perspectives: the collection as a way of completing and recovering a shattered memory, the work of the angel of memory but also the work of the historian, the fragments of memory, the personal but also the collective memory, the experience as a way to access the collective memory, the collector but also the *flâneur* as a collector of experiences who wanders through the city using the passages as access roads to the collective memory. Although there are countless studies dedicated to Benjamin's life and work, a perspective that could reunite different concepts seems to be missing.

The key element which will represent the starting point of this approach is offered by Walter Benjamin in his interpretation of Paul Klee's painting named *Angel of History* or *Angelus Novus*, which Benjamin bought. What is the history of this angel? As Esther Leslie (2000) asserts, in April 1921, Benjamin went to a Klee exhibition in Berlin and the next month he went to Munich and bought this watercolour named *Angelus Novus*. "The new angel, affixed above his desk wherever he lived, fluttered through his life. It provided the name for a critical journal he wishes to found. He wrote about it as example of the childlike aesthetic at the core of the modernism he prized. The picture seems to detail history's doubled capacity for progression and regression" [8]. And what is this doubled capacity if not that of a social reality that destroys itself but maintains the impression of technological progress. For Benjamin, the modern time is a time of hell [9], because the modern technological inventions, the results of the so-called "progress", take the shape of a war consuming the world and transforming its collective and cultural memory into pieces that are difficult to be catalogued as being worth or not to be collected. This angel of history represents a paradigm of Benjamin's thinking and some of the most discussed concepts of his work are permanently moving around it. But first of all what is Benjamin's interpretation of this angel of history? "His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress" [10]. It is useless to say that this interpretation became more famous than the picture itself. The angel of history looks at the fragments left behind, the recollections that will be formed under the sign of destruction but also under the sign of memory and oblivion; the angel would like to stay and reconstruct what it was destroyed, but this is not his task. "In the profane historical world over which he watches, the angel is impotent" [11]. Neither the angel of history can remain and reconstruct things, nor the collector, but the latter can pick up the fragments and, as we shall see, and reintegrate them in the circle of cultural life, because "the collector transfigures things by divesting them of their commodity character" [12].

Even though the general view is that Benjamin was a naturally unsystematic man, a hero of fragmentation in line with Novalis, Schlegel and Nietzsche as Leon Wieseltier characterizes him, the fragmentary aspect of Benjamin's work is primarily caused by the form of his writings. These writings approach a wide variety of subjects, being maybe the result of his tendency to collect, also materialized in his work, as well as the result of the fact that he needed to gain enough money to live and, in the absence of a firm source of income, he was forced to write on different subjects in order to be published [13]. On the other hand, he was surrounded by a world of destruction that began before the Second World War, and maybe that is why sometimes, without a clear meaning in this direction, he followed in his writings the notion of memory and its correlative concepts. Benjamin, just like the angel of history, witnessed the wind of destruction, surrounded by the ruined fragments crowding at his feet. The angel cannot stay and reconstruct what was destructed but it is the collector's task to keep an eye on the cultural fragments and to try to save them from the oblivion. Benjamin was a collector in his personal life, but also in his writings, as he collected books, children toys, but also quotations; let us not forget that one of his ambitions, as Hannah Arendt mentioned in her "Introduction" to *Illumination*, assumption also sustained by Theodor

Adorno, but contradicted by others, was to produce a work entirely made out of quotations, this ambition being almost accomplished in his *Arcades Project*. Benjamin's work is also a form of collection, full of various aspects that perhaps no one else could manage to assemble; for example *One-Way Street*, so well analyzed by Michael Jennings in "Walter Benjamin and the European avant-garde", contains aphorisms, jokes, dream protocols, descriptive set pieces, cityscapes, landscapes, mindscapes, pieces of writing manuals, trenchant contemporary political analyses, prescient appreciations of children's games, behavioural patterns and moods, decryptions of bourgeois fashion, living arrangements and so on, a vast collection [14]. He never stopped collecting, not even in writing. Collecting, as Benjamin asserts, is a passion of children or rich people; this is the reason why an object that is part of a collection has only an amateur value and not necessarily a pragmatic one; the collected object stops being an instrument and gains its redemption becoming part of a collection with an intrinsic value. "Benjamin could understand the collector's passion as an attitude akin to that of the revolutionary. Like the revolutionary, the collector "dreams his way not only into a remote or bygone world, but at the same time into a better one in which, to be sure, people are not provided with what they need any more than they are in the everyday world, but in which things are liberated from the drudgery of usefulness" (*Schriften* I, 4(6). Collecting is the redemption of things which is to complement the redemption of man" [15]. The work of the collector is that of selecting his precious fragments from a pile of debris; he doesn't need to destroy the context anymore in order to extract the objects that will become part of his collection because the history and the "break in tradition", as result of the "progress", has already accomplished that. "The close affinity between the break in tradition and the seemingly whimsical figure of the collector who gathers his fragments and scraps from the debris of the past is perhaps best illustrated by the fact, astonishing only at first glance, that there probably was no period before ours in which old and ancient things, many of them long forgotten by tradition, have become general educational material which is handed to schoolboys everywhere in hundreds of thousands of copies. This amazing revival, particularly of classical culture, which since the forties has been especially noticeable in relatively traditionless America, began in Europe in the twenties" [16].

As Susan Sontag mentions his collector's instinct served him well, and everything he did during his life was to collect in one form or another. "Learning was a form of collecting, as in the quotations and excerpts from daily reading which Benjamin accumulated in notebooks that he carried everywhere and from which he would read aloud to friends. Thinking was also a form of collecting, at least in its preliminary stages. He conscientiously logged stray ideas; developed mini-essays in letters to friends; rewrote plans for future projects; noted his dreams (several are recounted in *One-Way Street*); kept numbered lists of all the books he read" [17]. In cultural terms, to collect means to survive and to maintain a form of bond with the past. Wieseltier states that all the things written by Benjamin represented only a commentary, and similar to the great medieval commentators, Benjamin demonstrated that the commentary can be an instrument of originality, and in his case of redemption. The interpretation becomes a reconstruction of the memory, of the fragments seen by the angel of history. In *Unpacking My Library. A Talk about Book Collecting* Benjamin shows that "every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories." For Benjamin, quoting means to name, bring the truth into the light, and pull out the recollection from the shadow of oblivion. To cite also means to repeat something that has already been said. To quote becomes an act of resituating the tradition, a bond with the past. "What the convention brings with it, in addition to itself, is a form of continuity. The quotation marks indicate that what is cited (and recited) is not new but is the reiteration of what has already been; an intended repetition of the Same in which the singularity of the past's content is itself maintained" [18].

Hannah Arendt mentions that Benjamin knew that the break in tradition and the loss of authority which occurred during his lifetime were irreparable; for this reason Benjamin considered that he had to discover new ways of dealing with the past, and he became a master when he discovered that the "transmissibility of the past could be achieved by its citability." The quotation is a way of accessing the canvas of memory and collecting is seen as a form of practical memory (*Project Arcade*). "This discovery of the modern function of quotations, according to Benjamin, who exemplified it by Karl Kraus, was born out of despair (...) out of the despair of the present and the desire to destroy it; hence their power is "not the strength to preserve but to cleanse, to tear out of context, to destroy" (*Schriften* II, 192). Still, the discoverers and lovers of this destructive power originally were inspired by an entirely

different intention, the intention to preserve; and only because they did not let themselves be fooled by the professional “preservers” all around them did they finally discover that the destructive power of quotations was “the only one which still contains the hope that something from this period will survive – for no other reason than that it was torn out of it” [19].

The *flâneur* is also a collector, and he gathers what we can call a form of collective experience; whether he/she makes his/her way through culture or city by accessing the cultural memory and using the experience. The *flâneur*’s task is also to interpret the world and his/her work is relies on the remembrance because, when facing the fast changes of the city, as Howard Caygill shows in *Walter Benjamin. The Colour of Experience*, “the *flâneur* remembers, and folds this memory into the experience of the present”, changing the experience of the city, transforming “the lived moment into a citable experience” [20]. Another side of the quotation collection appears in the *Arcades Project* that started in 1927 and ended in 1940 with Benjamin’s death. The *Project* offers a complex perspective over the places of memory as marks to which memory always returns when identity loses its stability. The work represents a collection of quotations and reflections and follows different themes: fashion, boredom, mirrors, *flâneur*, Baudelaire – generally named places of memory. This writing offers concepts, themes and shapes used by the author to solve problems like phantasmagoria, fetishism, dialectical image. The analysis proposed by Benjamin is one that integrates different perspectives of memory; for example the fetishism can be interpreted as a sign of memory, referring to objects and their signification, accumulations of correlative memory. And what were the arcades that occupied Benjamin’s mind in the last years of his life, if not another piece of his collection, but also key elements that can be used to find the direction in a labyrinth of memory? These passages do not have a fixed meaning and do not define a place [21], but Benjamin describes them as a residue of a dream world in which natural and social constraints were all suspended. The experience and the way it was understood by Benjamin is a direct referral to his view of the memory and its connection to the oblivion. In *The Storyteller. Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov* the memory becomes the core theme that brings the story and the novel face to face, all on the background of the experience, which decreased in value starting with the First World War due to the diminishment of the oral transmission “from mouth to mouth” [22]. The shock of losing stability was fierce and thus the need for using the memory resources to increase the stability of the identity appeared. Nothing remained unchanged, said Benjamin, just the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of destructive torrents and explosions, “the tiny, fragile human body”. This is the context in which Benjamin sensed the need for collecting, recreating a shattered identity by using pieces of memory. The loss of the storyteller and of the story is the loss of the way of accessing the collective memory, the primary source of each individual memory and the source of what we call cultural memory. Benjamin’s writing mentioned above represents an indispensable source for understanding the memory, described as an epic faculty *par excellence*, and its value. “Memory creates the chain of tradition which passes a happening on from generation to generation. It is the Muse-derived element of the epic art in a broader sense and encompasses its varieties. In the first place among these is the one practiced by the storyteller. It starts the web which all stories together form in the end. (...) What announces itself in these passages is the perpetuating remembrance of the novelist as contrasted with the short-lived reminiscences of the storyteller. The first is dedicated to *one* hero, *one* odyssey, *one* battle; the second, to *many* diffuse occurrences” [23]. The eternal memory of the novelist is opposed to the short memory of the storyteller, because a story means to the listeners an access to the collective memory. Benjamin underlines that the reader of a novel is more isolated than any other. Memory creates the chain of traditions passing from one generation to another, and here the connection with the experience, especially the collective experience, becomes obvious, as it appears in *The Storyteller*. As Beatrice Hansen (2004) mentions, according to the Harvard edition of “The Return of the Flâneur”, *Erlebnis* means a single, noteworthy period, while *Erfahrung* denotes a life experience acquired during an extended period. So *Erlebnis*, emphasizes the sense of wisdom detached and communicated out of experience, an experience developed beyond history and time. Hansen considers that the most helpful distinction between the two concepts emerges in *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*, where “both were securely linked to Benjamin’s theory of memory and where authentic *Erfahrung* was tantamount to the ability to countenance the auratic. *Erfahrung* in this context meant the conjunction between the individual past and the collective past” [24].

Passing from the individual experience to the collective one is what Benjamin aims in two of his autobiographical writings regarding his childhood: *A Berlin Childhood around the Turn of the Century* and *Berlin Chronicle*, and this process involves some sort of art of memory, because Benjamin uses a spatial map. As Susan Sontag mentions in her beautiful essay *Under the Sign of Saturn*, the street, the passage, the arcade, the labyrinth, are recurrent themes in his work and the reminiscences of self are the reminiscences of a place, and how he positions himself in it. In all his writings Benjamin is loyal to his passion as a collector, passion that is not strange from the family inheritance, among whose members were archaeologists and antiques traders. Therefore he assumed the task of excavating not in the earth, but in the ground of memory. For Sontag, Benjamin is not trying to recover his past, but to understand it and to condense it into its spatial forms, its premonitory structures. The *flâneur* and the experience of the city are also correlated with this spatiality. “The city activates the memory of the *Flâneur*, which then fuses with the present *Erlebnis* of the city into a narratable experience or *Erfahrung*. The footsteps of the walker provoke an ‘astounding resonance’ which is fed by memory but also evokes it” [25]. The selection criterion of Benjamin is that of the *flâneur*; from the personal memory to the collective one, because the memory is a space where the fragments become parts of a whole. His goal, according to Sontag, was to be a competent street-map reader who knows how to stray, and to locate himself with imaginary maps. Benjamin collected fragments but also created maps that can be used in order to find the way through the European legacy. His goal was the experience as *Erfahrung*. The disappearance of the story and of the storyteller is for Benjamin a sign of the collective memory disposal and the embracement of the individual memory, and for this reason Benjamin chose to collect fragments of collective memory (quotations) in order to recreate a collective experience. “If it is language that has signified unmistakably that memory is the arena for exploration of the past, rather than an instrument means to the past as a graspable end, this is because language and remembrance, while not identical, often tend to share the same turf. (...) Benjamin’s buried past is like the interred ruins of a dead city, and if his faculty of remembrance is less an excavating spade than one that buries, it is also in the power of individual memories, it would seem, to disinter” [26].

In *On some motifs in Baudelaire*, he specifies that when information substitutes the old narration and when the information is replaced by the sensation, this double process reflects the ongoing degradation of the experience; and the story, as one of the oldest ways of communication, does not simply report an event, but incorporates it in the life of the storyteller in order to communicate it to the listeners as its own experience. As I already mentioned, the experience is an essential concept for understanding his vision of memory, as it appears in the writing *On the program of the coming philosophy* (1918). For Benjamin the experience is the direct object, if not the only object of knowledge. In *The Image of Proust* Benjamin clearly states that not what the author experiences is important – the individual experience is necessary but not enough for the remembrance – but “the Penelope work of recollection” [27], the work of a collector who puts one piece behind another and manages to design a tapestry of collective memories. “When we awake each morning, we hold in our hands, usually weakly and loosely, but a few fringes of the tapestry of lived life, as loomed for us by forgetting. However, with our purposeful activity and, even more, our purposive remembering each day unravels the web and the ornaments of forgetting. This is why Proust finally turned his days into nights, devoting all his hours to undisturbed work in his darkened room with artificial illumination, so that none of those intricate arabesques might escape him” [28]. In his attempt to collect fragments of the collective memory Benjamin uses the space in order to find his way, he designs a map of his memories putting each information in a certain place, just as the art of memory was practiced in Antiquity, and his memory map contains, like any spatial map, arcades, passages and cross-roads, because as he shows in *One-Way Street*, “not to find one’s way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal and it requires only ignorance, but to lose oneself in a city, that calls for quite different schooling”. What we learn from Benjamin? Firstly, Benjamin teaches us to collect, to learn the art of collection, and to be capable to recover the fragments of our identity. Secondly, to draw our identity map, and to use the cultural fragments to find our way through the identity references, because “to lose oneself in a city” can be construed as a way to wander between different cultural references, knowing very well the way back.

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Notes

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- [17] Sontag, S., *Under the Sign of Saturn*, Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, London, 1983, p. 127)
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