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The Socially Transformative Aesthetics of Street Culture: From Walter Benjamin's *One-Way Street* to *The Arcades Project*

Jules Simon

Abstract

This paper discusses the dialectical relationship of what I call an ethical aesthetics of the city, exemplified in the relationship of the Haussmannization techniques of architectural administration and spatial domination in their forms of the functionalist imperative of modern capitalist urban planning and spontaneous, improvisational-yet-collective, innovative modes of street life. I draw significantly on Walter Benjamin's phenomenological ethics of urban aesthetics, comparing two developments in his reflections on the "everyday lived experience of the city," specifically, lived experiences of city streets, namely, the work that he published in *One-Way Street*, and his unfinished work in *The Arcades Project*.^[1]

Key Words

barricades; Walter Benjamin; Berlin; commodity; Haussmannization; phenomenological ethics; Paris; street culture; urban aesthetics

1. Introduction

Over the past century, Walter Benjamin has become an essential critic one ought to consult for how to read our experiences of the modern city philosophically, and thus aesthetically and ethically. This is primarily because of how he worked against the grain of adopting a standard philosophical approach as a lens

through which we would be forced to perceive the world through a fixed, reified comprehensive theory, such as Capitalism, Marxism, Social Contract Theory, or even Environmentalism. Instead, following Benjamin's lead, we begin phenomenologically, guided by an initial intuition with a rough ideal or desired goal, and proceed to gather a multitude of historical fragments, citations, texts, and quotes that are bound together through relations of elective affinities, correspondences, or family resemblances and assemble them into a montage-like image that, as Benjamin's efforts attest, best reflects the actuality of a "street-like" experience of the city. In doing so, our normative preconditions are interrupted, and we are re-normativized to experience the city, with new ethically informed aesthetic perceptions. In this way, we are able to be in a position to redeem the task of history-making through creating ethically informed aesthetic relations in our everyday, lived experiences of the city.

I begin with Benjamin's beginning, not as might be expected, with his *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, but with his published beginning when he took up his exploration of life in and from the streets of Berlin, with his experimental text, *One-Way Street*, a phenomenological exposition of the ethical aesthetics of his lived life in the city of Berlin.^[2] In what follows, I explore how he extends that critical, experimental city project begun in and from the streets of Berlin to its extension, deepening in his treatment of the streets of Paris with the *Arcades Project* (*Passagenwerk*). I limit my interpretation of that work to "Convolute E," from the *Arcades Project*, which presents Benjamin's constructed textual image of the phenomenon of the Haussmannization of Paris, the demolishing of the streets and street-life of "old Paris" in order to usher in new streets and street life of a new, modern Paris. That constitutes the major work of this exploration. I conclude with some remarks on how that work prepares us, his later readers, for what Benjamin envisioned as the "redemptive" work of an active and critically enlightened street culture, one that is critically engaged and thereby relies on happy and healthy city dwellers.

As Michael Jennings puts it in his "Introduction" to *One Way Street*, Benjamin's "search for new formal means to evoke the experience of the modern urban street" conjures up the modern metropolis, but in such a way that "the demands of contemporary conditions be respected through an investigation of the potentials of language as the medium for the immediate sensuous presentation of everyday things."^[3] However, it is not enough just to show or describe those conditions through mere

representations of the city; rather, “the commodity—the primary element of the modern urban capitalist environment—must be theorized.”^[4] It is this task, the theorizing of the commodity as that which primarily conditions our modern, consumerist urban life, from aesthetic experiences to ethical and political relations, that Benjamin set as his task in *One Way Street* and that he embodied in the massive undertaking that became *The Arcades Project*.

2. *One-Way Street*

Benjamin’s urban aesthetics is based on a method he developed that I describe as both phenomenological and ethical.

Phenomenologically, Benjamin gathers and then crafts images of first-person observations of lived-world experiences to create a montage-like constellation that provides, in his judgment, the best of all possible depictions of the ephemeral and enduring experiences of city life. Shot through each of the aphoristic insights, however, is an ethical or normative concept for how an experience that he aesthetically recounts influenced—or could or should influence—this or that other human experience. In this way, he builds an aesthetic experience that enables the reader to more authentically align his or her own lived-world experiences, fragmented as they are, with those Benjamin gathers together in his constellating thought structures.

As Michael Jennings points out, reading *One-Way Street* “requires a special kind of urban literacy” in how Benjamin draws on the *avant garde* of Dadaism, Constructivism, and Surrealism in constructing, through a series of “condensed moral or psychological insight[s],” a “dense cityscape of shops, cafes, and apartments” in what seems like a “random sequence of aphorisms, reminiscences, jokes, off-the-cuff observations, dreamlike fantasies, serious philosophical inquiries, apparently unserious philosophical parodies, and trenchant political commentaries.”^[5] Benjamin embraced writing in fragments as a way to challenge dominant and dominating master narratives.

In resistance to the totalizing and fascist tendencies of modernity—Nazi Germany, Mussolini’s Italy, Stalin’s Soviet communism, and the faceless consumer commodification of Western Societies—Benjamin set about locating and relativizing the fragments he found in his research, as a way to critically illuminate the larger whole and thereby valorize the particularity of individual human experience, by redeeming their alienations and isolations from the normative constrictions of modern mass mentality. Indeed, not only was he able to show, through exemplifying instances of the “dialectical standstill of the

moment," how everything was falling to pieces, so to speak, but also how, in saving this or that fragmentary piece and assembling it along with others in new collective constellations, attempts to obliterate the past could be avoided by redeeming those very fragmentary and ephemeral events, connections, relationships, places, houses, theaters, and so on.^[6]

Thus, the very experience of reading such a book, designed to challenge existing structures and the normative expectations of a structured reading, should and would lead to reading the city and one's experiences in the city with others in this new, critical way. It's not for the sake of creating a coherent argument that Benjamin writes but for exercising the pleasure of reading; not for the sake of coming to a linear conclusion with step-by-step inferentially entailed premises or empirical pieces of evidence but rather for the sake of enunciating the very pleasure of the distinct writing and reading of just this passage—of evoking and eliciting a *Jetzt-Zeit* or "Now-Time" —of passing through the moment and this particular place in the text or the city that is shot through and vibrating with distinct meaningfulness. Indeed, as Jennings notes, "Far from a loose aggregation of prose aperçus, *One-Way Street* represents Benjamin's first attempt to create a text as a highly theorized constellation of fragments."^[7]

Written together with the German drama in an aphoristic, parenthetical style—against the novel and the essay, Benjamin's new form of coherently constructed montage-of-fragments breaks up the "unbroken course of intention—one has to think constantly, and always start anew, aligning the inhaling and exhaling of breathing with the actual form of contemplation."^[8]

Benjamin's appropriation of Dadaist photomontage, consisting of images and parts of images cut out of popular print media, illustrated newspapers, and advertisements, "demanded a new kind of image reading [for Benjamin's readers] without the structures of single point perspective and perspectival recession into space, [because] the viewer is forced to form a mental image of the picture, an image that is often a free recombination of spatially dispersed elements of the photomontage."^[9] The result of this new kind of reading practice is that, as similarly constituted subjects with fragmented, historical experiences, we allow this new form of reading to influence our perspective-forming-attention. We are then better able to read our urban aesthetic experiences in a similar, pieced-together way, having had our neurotransmitters reprogrammed by Benjamin's mentoring influence. The indirect structure of the book necessitates an indirect way of reading that, per Benjamin,

accords better with our indirect way of aesthetically experiencing the city. The text-as-constellation leads to engendering a new form of mindfulness that Jennings calls “reading as constellating,” which draws us to “free flights of daydreaming” in addition to new kinds of critical awareness.^[10] These new forms of appraising subliminal connections between textual passages then facilitate new forms of appraising subliminal connections between urban experiences.

For example, as Jennings points out, a single constellation gleaned from a single “aerial perspective” provides only one, limited view of the text and the city; whereas, citing Benjamin from the section *Chinese Curios*, “Only he who walks the road on foot . . . learns of the power it commands.”^[11] The aesthetic imperative is that we need to actually walk the streets ourselves, as we walk the pages of the text, but as critically informed walkers and readers, in order to redeem our city experiences. According to Jennings, Benjamin’s central trope for the book is to elicit the experience that,

. . . the reader walking down the textual street on foot of course must submit to the law of unidirectionality enforced by the one-way street. Standing at the top of this street, the linear reader looks down into what Benjamin in a letter called “a prospect of precipitous depth.” This readerly vertigo evokes, then, a particular experience of history. Movement down this one-way street is forced, inevitable: there is not only no turning back, there is no turning aside.^[12]

This reading experience of Benjamin’s text is analogous to the inexorable experience of traveling down any one-way street in any city. But this is not just any city. This is Benjamin’s Berlin, the Berlin of his *Childhood Around 1900* and the Berlin of his *Adulthood* from the 1920s with descriptions in the form of first-person subjective accounts with tangible references to the context of a broader objective reality. The reading condition thus not only elicits the aesthetic memories of actually traveling on a one-way street but that Benjamin’s one-way street has a fatalistic content. Specifically, our aesthetic experience aesthetically carries the content of an actual subjective experience of participation in a lived life (Benjamin’s) in a form of urban capitalist modernity:

The reading experience, on this level, replicates the predominant experience of life under capitalist modernity, the sense of “impending catastrophe” in all of its inevitability that Benjamin describes in the central sociopolitical analysis of *One-Way Street*, the section “Imperial Panorama: A Tour through the German Inflation.”^[13]

The passage from “Imperial Panorama” leads the reader into and through a street of bourgeois attitudes that have become hardened by the recent history of structural-historical conditions of capitalist, urban-centric exploitation and oppression of the working classes:

The helpless fixation on notions of security and property deriving from past decades keeps the average citizen from perceiving the quite remarkable stabilities of an entirely new kind that underlie the present situation [. . .]. But stable conditions need by no means be pleasant conditions, and even before the war there were strata for whom stabilized conditions were stabilized wretchedness. To decline is no less stable, no more surprising, than to rise. Only a view that acknowledges downfall as the sole reason for the present situation can advance beyond enervating amazement at what is daily repeated and perceive the phenomena of decline as stability itself and rescue alone as extraordinary, verging on the marvelous and incomprehensible. [14]

What Benjamin is up to in aligning the “power of the ‘textual road’” with the “experience of the modern urban street” is the attempt to provide a way to critically theorize the modern urban environment.^[15] In doing this, he applies what I call an ethical aesthetics, as a variation of phenomenological ethics, that is other than standard, philosophical theorizing, such as that which was being practiced by his colleagues, Horkheimer and Adorno, in the Frankfurt School.

Instead, inspired by the aesthetic approach to interpreting Marx’s socio-economic theory by Georg Lukacs and working alongside fellow philosopher-journalist Siegfried Kracauer, with *One-Way Street* Benjamin develops a unique approach to critically assess the deleterious effects of commodity fetishism and its daily display on the urban streets of Berlin. The inter-related network of reified commodity fetishisms denatured human consciousness in such a way that our human standpoints—what should be our natural perspectives—on life in the city are distorted by the normativizing influence of commodity fetishism, leading, at first, to ambiguity, but then to ineffectual forms of understanding the very modern urban conditions of consumer commodification and the alienating effects of capitulation to capitalism-at-all-costs that causes the distortions. Thus, lacking understanding, there can be no resistance on the part of the average city dweller and urban life, on and from the streets, becomes merely the life of affirming bourgeois consumer commodification caught up in buying and selling, prostituting oneself and gambling, and marching to the tune of the next best advertisement or marketing strategy.

What we have with *One-Way Street* is not only Benjamin's experiment with writing from the streets of his lived life but, beyond descriptive narrative, a critical-normative evaluation that provides a possible prescription for actualizable revolutionary change. Benjamin's key insight with *One-Way Street* is that it is not enough merely to *journalistically report* on the social, personal, and political events of his time and place, the Weimar Republic of twentieth-century Berlin. This was already a daunting challenge since, in the 1920s, Berlin was considered to be a global city. It was the third largest municipal city in the world and produced such cultural icons as: Bauhaus architecture; Martin Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929); Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) and *M* (1931); Marlene Dietrich starring in Sternberg's *Der blaue Engel* (1930); the politically critical paintings of George Grosz, influenced at first by Expressionism and Futurism and then by Dadaism and New Objectivity; Bertolt Brecht's and Kurt Weill's *The Threepenny Opera* (1928); Carl Jung's psychology; and the ubiquitous fashion of the roaring Golden Twenties. Benjamin tried to capture it all.

But he intuited that he would need a much more comprehensive canvass than Berlin could provide to realize his intellectual and critical, revolutionary passions. He needed such a canvass to build a photomontage of and critically assess the emergence of modern, urban, global consumer commodification but on a local level. And thus began the *Passagenwerk*, or *Arcades Project*, the theme of which became "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century."

3. *The Arcades Project; the Passagenwerk; Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century*

"Swan" by Charles Baudelaire

Old Paris is gone (no human heart
changes half so fast as a city's face) ...
There used to be a poultry market here,
and one cold morning ... I saw

a swan that had broken out of its cage,
webbed feet clumsy on the cobblestones,
white feathers dragging through uneven ruts,
and obstinately pecking at the drains ...

Paris changes ... but in sadness like mine
nothing stirs—new buildings, old
neighborhoods turn to allegory,
and memories weigh more than stone.

...

But my treasured memories are heavier than the rocks.^[16]

In 1927, inspired by Louis Aragon's description of Passage de l'Opéra, in *Paris Peasant*, Benjamin and Franz Hessel began working on a jointly written article on the Paris Arcades.^[17] They never finished the project but Benjamin continued, with the initial intention to write a series of essays on the Paris Arcades that he reconceptualized over the years and became the monumental project that consumed the last several years of his life.

It is not my intent to trace the historical origins of that perplexing work or its development over time. Instead, I focus on just one Convolute— one chapter—from that unfinished project, namely, Convolute E, which has to do with Baron Haussmann's destruction and recreation of the City of Paris, in the middle of the nineteenth century. My intent in doing so is to follow up on Benjamin's project of reading the city that he began with Berlin in *One-Way Street* and the twentieth century, tracing backward to construct a genealogy of the modern city through focusing on the Haussmann-led imperial bulldozing of the central sections of Paris, in the middle of the nineteenth century, with the explicit goal to emulate the orderliness and architectural regularity that he found in a recent experience of London. He would thereby meet the mandate of Napoleon III to bring light, trees, a working sewage system, and straight and broad boulevards to the City of Paris so that, in their words, Paris could be brought into the modern age!

Haussmann was chosen by Emperor Napoleon III to carry out a comprehensive urban renewal program of Paris, to include broad new boulevards, parks, and public works. Haussmann zealously worked on doing just that from 1853–1870, annexing large parts of the city to do so, and almost doubling its size from twelve arrondissements to its current twenty. Beginning in 1854, in the center of the city, hundreds of old buildings were condemned and demolished and replaced by buildings that were mandated to be the same height, style, and faced with the same cream-colored stone. Amazingly, Haussmann rebuilt almost the entire city in 17 years, spent 2.5 billion francs (about 29 billion euros today), displaced 350,000 people, and recreated 20% of all central Parisian streets. Remarkably, one in five Parisian workers were employed in the rebuilding of Paris at that time.

Benjamin initially named his work "The Arcades Project," in order to underscore his thesis that the advent of modern Paris,

in its current guise at the beginning of the twentieth century, as a cosmopolitan center of bourgeois consumer commodification and the vanguard of fashion, had its origins with the introduction of the iron and glass Arcades throughout the city. The initial purpose of the Arcades was to introduce luxury products from the newly burgeoning textile industry to the upper classes of Paris and to solidify the newly emerging middle class with their buying power and desires to emulate the fashion and lifestyle choices of the trend-setting upper classes. These same consumer-commodity-based patterns of urban and cosmopolitan lifestyle choices continue to dominate and influence why and how humans live in cities today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

It is to those enduring class structures of the *ancien regime* that Benjamin draws attention in his works, from the streets of the capital city of Germany to the streets of the capital city of France. Along the way, we learn how social transformation and political revolution went hand in hand with the material, aesthetic reconstruction of the city of Paris. Benjamin's thesis is well known, namely, that Paris was reconstructed to become a place where broad avenues could be safely accessible to military troops and vehicles—to be used against the masses—and where the masses could then be more easily mobilized as an army of consumers of commodities, with broad avenues lined with shops to make the aesthetic shopping experience along beautiful broad streets as easy and profitable as possible. However, even though such streets are functionally able to accommodate tanks and troops to quell any popular uprising, the so-called riotous mobs could still challenge the ruling class and the reconstruction. And they did. Understanding the originary elements of their resistance is at the core of my thesis of what constitutes the formation of a fomenting street-culture.

Inherent in that formation is the nature of immanent critique, as opposed to an evaluative one. In Benjamin's hands, an immanent criticism reveals something hidden within the work, a quality that reveals something about its time and that has potential to continue to foment positive change. Identifying such an immanent criticism controls the rest of my commentary in this paper because that is at the heart of what I refer to as redemptive forms of street culture.

3.1 Arcades analysis

Convolute E is subtitled "Haussmannization, Barricade Fighting," which alludes to the forced architectural reconstruction of Paris that took place in the name of controlling the Parisian populace. What that meant in historical practice, especially relevant for

urban aesthetics, is that the institutional practice of city planning was founded through the desires of Napoleon III when he hired “Baron” Georges-Eugène Haussmann to remodel the City of Paris, in order to usher it and the citizens of Paris into the modern age. The citizenry of the city was not consulted about the changes to the city, devised from on high by Napoleon III and Haussmann in private meetings. Indeed, *apropos* for benevolent and patriarchal monarchical rule, the interests of the public stakeholders were not at all taken into account. Instead, the aesthetics of the city were functionally, strategically, economically, and politically determined, in order to normatively change the habits and the ability for average Parisian citizens to not be able to individually express themselves and thus, in part, to limit the ability of the oppressed lower classes to resist from the street. Conjecturally, Napoleon III and Haussmann realized, at least in part, how the aesthetics of a city plays a proportional role in how the populace acts politically and economically, which creates structures to induce commodity fetishism that would, and still does, limit political uprisings.

Benjamin sets our thinking in motion, in this Convolute, with a series of three quotes, the first of which is from Franz Böhle’s *“Theatrical-Catechism, or humoristic explanations of various exquisite foreign words in the stage life”*:

The flowery realm of decorations,

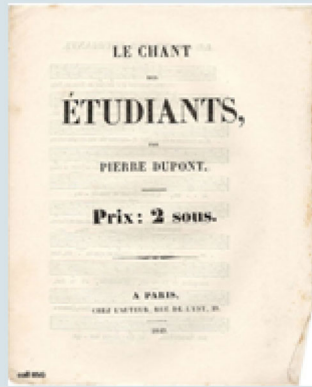
The charm of landscape, of architecture,

And the endless effect of scenery rest

Solely on the law of perspective.^[18]

With this quote, which also indicates how deeply Benjamin was engaged in attempting to convey the importance of urban aesthetics and how our reading of a text corresponds with our reading of a city—we are introduced to how the concept of perspective exemplifies the pairing of aesthetics and ethics in understanding Benjamin’s ensuing conceptual constellation of the Haussmannization of Paris. We are immediately influenced to think of architecture in the ways that a stage is set to influence our reception of whatever actions may or may not occur in the dramatic scenes that follow. Paris is the stage at hand, and Haussmannization is the drama that unfolds in the poeticizing of the street that Haussmann, as director, sets into motion to architecturally quell revolutionary forces.

The second quote of the opening set is from Pierre Dupont, the purpose of which is to refer to the historical/political substructure for the aesthetic reconstruction, a reference to the



songs of rebellion and resistance being sung by the students and workers at that time:

The breathless capitals
Opened themselves to the cannons.^[19]

The opening paragraphs of the body of the *Convolute* then proceed to marshal a series of perspectives beginning with another quote from Böhle on interior decoration, indicating how the dominating mode of nineteenth-century interior decorating focused on curtains and draperies that, for Benjamin, provided an analogy to an interior perspective on windows—or views from within, from one’s commodified subjectivity to life in the streets. This reminds the reader of the position that Benjamin had previously established, namely, that the interior is reflected in the exterior and vice versa, namely, that perspectives about objective external conditions are just as much influenced by the conditions of subjectivity as the individual is influenced, or normed in their thinking, by the destruction, or the de-structuring, and rerouting of one’s direction on the street. Through textual citations, the curtains of meaning are drawn aside, like the drapes of the Biedermeier room, to reveal the loss of agency by the populace of Paris, under the destructive redirections of Haussmann, the director of this tragedy in the making.^[20]

Benjamin deepens the validity of his point with a second perspective on the fashion of wearing petticoats, up to six layers deep, in order to be able to get just the right flounce of advertised sexual attraction. Benjamin’s point here is not salacious but rather an attempt to show how psycho-sexual dynamics are interwoven into our everyday experiences of reality, thus grounding and validating the embodied interdependency of the other perspectives.

The third quote is from Karl Gutzkow, on language, satirizing the rhetoric of popular French orators who took, as the model for interpreting every kind of truth about the social conditions of their contemporary urban society, the tired, medieval trope of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*:

“There was a book in the Middle Ages a book which concentrated the spirit of the times as a mirror concentrates the rays of the sun.... a book.... a book....this book was the *Divine Comedy*.”^[21]

With that critical contextualization, questioning the mores of the level of cultured education of the reading and listening masses, who loudly applauded such orators—Benjamin turns to the real task at hand, namely, an assessment of the relative success of the project of deconstructing traditional Parisian street life, with its winding and inexplicable passageways and eccentric architectural aesthetic expressions, by the imposition of Haussmann’s formal vision of beauty, of purposeless purposiveness, as an enervating standard for what he understood as enlightened, ethical aesthetics.

However, the following quote in Benjamin’s text sets the pattern for that with which we have now become well acquainted, namely, the political critique of Parisian Haussmannization and Haussmann’s “enlightened ethical aesthetics:”

Strategic basis for the perspectival articulation of the city: A contemporary seeking to justify the construction of large thoroughfares under Napoleon III speaks of them as “unfavorable ‘to the habitual tactic of local insurrection.’” *Une vie de cité* (Paris, 1925), p. 469. “Open up this area of continual disturbances.” Baron Haussmann, in a memorandum calling for the extension of the Boulevard de Strasbourg to Châtelet. Emile de Labédollière, *le Nouveau Paris*, p. 52. But even earlier than this: “They are paving Paris with wood in order to deprive the Revolution of building materials. Out of wooden blocks there will be no more barricades constructed.” Gutzkow, *Briefe aus Paris*, vol. 1, pp. 60–61. What this means can be gathered from the fact that in 1830 there were 6,000 barricades.^[22]

Rooted in multiple confirming citations, the “ethical aesthetic” judgment is clear: the imperial governing agenda, from Napoleon III and Haussmann, does *not* originate in an unqualified attempt to bring beauty, clean air, trees, and regular waste removal to the multitude of the lower classes. Instead, as we learn from the next perspective, Benjamin, quoting Jules Claretie, from *La Vie à Paris*, sadly observes that “The Arcades are dying.” They are dying because, as Claretie noted, they suffer from “stale air,” which is akin to “stifled perspectives.”^[23] The implication is that one of the effects of Haussmann’s urban planning was to close off traditional passageways of Parisian life—traditional living patterns or passageways that engender unique and lively perspectives—through the destruction of traditional, lower-class neighborhoods. To spell out the irony: Napoleon III’s stated intention, when he hired Haussmann to radically transform Paris, was to bring light and air into the suffocating constrictions of Paris’s excruciating labyrinth of narrow alleyways and streets that were a hotbed of disease, crime, and filth—no sewage system, no parks, no trees, and old,

non-uniform rundown buildings. And he did succeed, as Benjamin notes, citing Adolf Stahr, writing in 1857, “that one had to make haste now to see the old Paris, for ‘the new ruler, it seems, has a mind to leave but little of it standing.’”^[24]

But, after a few more entries on the fascination of the age with perspectives, Benjamin cites J.J. Honegger and evinces a clear dialectical image: “Having as they do, the appearance of walling-in a massive eternity, Haussmann’s urban works are a wholly appropriate representation of the absolute governing principles of the Empire: repression of every individual formation, every organic self-development, fundamental hatred of all individuality.”^[25]

What Benjamin intends to solicit in us is the recognition that the enforced imposition of planned architectural regularity of buildings defies one form of individuality, namely, the kind of individuality that is associated with authenticity and aesthetic aura that, from a Benjaminian perspective, was displaced by the kind of individuality characteristic of the age of Kantian enlightened autonomy, rationally purified of any peculiar characteristics, of unpredictable and individually spontaneous aesthetic aura.

Moreover, imaginatively connecting Benjamin’s allusions, the reconstruction reached deep into the metaphysical and material bases of the creative foundations of the city and the aesthetic originality of its people. Quoting from E. Levasseur’s 1904 work on the history of class and industry in France from 1789–1870, Benjamin notes how the very subsoil of Paris “has been profoundly disturbed” by the construction of the new sewage system and that, with the use of concrete and cement to build the underground system, the very substructures of tens of thousands of buildings was recast.^[26]

And yet, another perspective introduces two additional conditions driving Haussmann: (1) the population increase that was tied into (2) the advent of technology. These two interrelated developments meant that the railroad brought more and more people from other countries to the capital: “Paris, as we find it in the period following the Revolution of 1848, was about to become uninhabitable. Its population had been greatly enlarged and unsettled by the incessant activity of the railroad (whose rails extended further each day and linked up with those of neighboring countries), and now this population was suffocating in the narrow, tangled, putrid alleyways in which it was forcibly confined.”^[27] The indirect effect of this combination of the influx of foreigners into the

capital city meant that socio-economic sifting had to occur. And the sifting favored the emerging bourgeois class, namely, those who could afford the stream of commodities then being produced under the impetus of capitalism. New houses and apartments had to be constructed that would aesthetically mirror the broad boulevards being built to line up with the new businesses, hawking the new lines of consumer products.

This observation then entails another perspective from Benjamin, on how Haussmann, to enforce his plan and to implement the replacement of the troublesome lower-classes by the consumer-oriented middle-classes, led to the business of the expropriation of houses, where exorbitant amounts of money passed hands in order to buy out existing home owners and businesses to make room for the new buildings. All kinds of deceptions occurred to falsify the actual success of a business, such as filling a shop with people or fake goods when the “jury” came to set the price to be paid. This was capitalism run rampant. According to Du Camp, in Volume 6 of his work *Paris*, “It was a sort of midnight gang that rifled the till of the city government.”^[28]

Benjamin provides two additional critiques to his constellating “dialectical image at a standstill,” emanating from Engels and then Marx. The first is a judgment about street fighting through building and defending barricades as a means of resistance and then revolutionary struggle. Engels judged that “the barricade produced more of a moral than material effect” when, if the barricade was held, that unsettled the conviction of the military.^[29] The moral effect was to undermine the confidence of the imperial city forces.

However, Marx’s perspective on the nature of the class struggle in relation to the February Revolution, conveyed in the next passage of the *Convolute*, provides Marx’s qualifying and sarcastic observation that the proletariat were confused by the aristocracy of the *ancien regime* into thinking that all class distinctions were abolished in the name of *fraternité*.^[30]

With those critical perspectives in hand, Benjamin further builds his ethical aesthetic case with yet another argument circulating at that time that aligns Christian religion with economic, bourgeois, normative expectations, drawing critical attention to Lamartine’s economic manifesto that proclaimed the right to work and the “advent of the industrial Christ.”^[31] Against Lamartine, Benjamin notes that there was no religious binding of the working classes into a body of unified workers-with-a-divine-mission. What actually happened was the

disenfranchisement of the working classes and a deepening of the division of class difference. He again quotes Levasseur, "The reconstruction of the city..., by obliging the workers to find lodgings in outlying *arrondissements*, has dissolved the bonds of neighborhood that previously united them with the bourgeoisie."^[32] With this citation, we see even more clearly the extent to which Benjamin's perspective was shared by others at the time, namely, that Haussmann's efforts were fed from and led to the kind of society of his aspirational urban model, British London, where the architecture and streets were well-ordered and the class differences were deep and fixed.

Furthermore, despite the billions of francs spent on reconstructing the city and, listed in the very next entry, the fact that "Parks, squares, and public gardens first installed under Napoleon III [numbered] between forty and fifty..."^[33], Benjamin cites the ironic remark from Louis Veuillot, on the aesthetic result of that reconstruction: "Paris is musty close"^[34]

3.2. Mixing it up: a mélange of perspectives

To extend his surrealist *mélange* of perspectives on the city, Benjamin moves between what he perceived as the aesthetic desire to create vast panoramas, serving "the epoch's will to expression," and miniatures, from which architects worked, including Haussmann and Napoleon III.^[35] By contrast, the impoverished masses, who were limited in their means to express themselves—who did not have vast sums of federal or city tax money to create models or rebuild antiquated structures—would use whatever means available to them to express their perspectives, namely, the technologies at their disposal that enabled them to create barricades any way that they could. For example, notes Benjamin, in order to express their resistance to the coercion that was uprooting their daily lives: ". . . [They used] omnibuses to build barricades. The horses were unharnessed, the passengers were put off, the vehicle was turned over, and the flag was fastened to the axle."^[36]

Benjamin deepens his critique of Haussmann's choices in urban aesthetics by including two additional quotes from Corbusier. The first is entitled, Haussmann and the Chamber of Deputies: "One day, in an excess of terror, they accused him of having created a *desert* in the very center of Paris! That desert was the Boulevard Sebastopol."^[37] And, again from Corbusier: "The avenues [Haussmann] cut were entirely arbitrary: they were not based on strict deductions of the science of town planning. The measures he took were of a financial and military character."^[38]

These perspectives are important for how they demonstrate that the vaunted *rational* reconstruction of Paris by Haussmann was more politically motivated than based on a sound philosophical understanding of the nature of the city and its people. Instead, it was all pomp and circumstance that choked off the very life of the citizens of the city. [39]

..... This pomp has something oppressive about it, just as the restless bustle accompanying the city's transformation robs natives and foreigners alike of both breathing space and space for reflection [. . .]. Every stone bears the mark of despotic power, and all the ostentation marks the atmosphere, in the literal sense of the words, heavy and close [. . .]. One chokes and anxiously gasps for breath. [40]

But, it was not enough that the life was being choked out of the general populace of the city. The imperial power, the despot Napoleon III and his right-hand man, Haussmann, developed an aesthetic policy that prioritized preserving monuments over the "old houses" of the lower classes:

. . . . At first sight, it seems strange that the government has made it its business to preserve existing monuments [. . .]. The government, however, does not aim to pass over the people like a storm; it wants to engrave itself lastingly in their existence [. . .]. Let the old houses collapse, so long as the old monuments remain. [41]

On the preservation and new construction of monuments, we learn about the monumental in history from Nietzsche's *Use and Abuse of History*. For Nietzsche, the construction of monuments provides material recognition of the justified actions and strivings of the chain of great men in history. And, while he most likely developed this notion from his interpretation of the history of great men in the ancient world, Nietzsche also critically employed this idea of history to levy a critique of the socialist Commune and its failure in 1871 in Paris. [42] He saw that as a bourgeois counterpart to the enervating culture of Bismarckian Prussia. He may have had the monumental reconstruction of Paris in mind when he drafted that section of his slim text. In short, for Nietzsche, as for Napoleon III and Haussmann, monuments represented an enduring physical reminder of the victorious will-to-power and evidence of the inherent superiority of the aristocratic ruling classes.

As Matthew Charles points out, in "Benjamin's Angel of History as Anti-Nietzscheanism," Nietzsche celebrated the fall of the Commune, rejoicing that not everything had given in to "Franco-

Jewish leveling” and “the greedy instincts of *Jetztzeit*.”^[43] And, specifically on monumental history and the ethical aesthetics of the art of monument-making and maintaining, Nietzsche wrote in “The Greek State”:

Accordingly, we must learn to identify as a cruel-sounding truth the fact that slavery belongs to the essence of a culture: a truth, granted, that leaves open no doubt about the absolute value of existence... The misery of men living a life of toil has to be increased to make the production of the world of art possible for a small number of Olympian men. [...] Every moment devours the preceding one, every birth is the death of countless beings, procreating, living and murdering are all one. Therefore, we may compare the magnificent culture to a victor dripping with blood, who, in his triumphal procession, drags the vanquished along, chained to his carriage as slaves.^[44]

Benjamin’s judgment was dialectically and ethically much different. While not directly criticizing Nietzsche’s conception of culture, Benjamin’s Angel of History appears in his theses, “On the Concept of History,” in order to help Benjamin proclaim that:

Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist [...] cannot contemplate [them] without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.^[45]



Granted I have only visited Paris a few brief times but, in those brief visits, I did not find a single beautifully sculpted monument on those beautifully designed mean streets that did not testify to such an architecture of barbarism. Here, Francois Konye sculpted one such monument in honor of Baron Haussmann himself, erected in 1899. The artwork expresses an arrogant and proud aura, overlooking the boulevard that

bears his name, Boulevard Haussmann, Paris 75008. With a senator’s imperial cloak thrown over his shoulders, the prefect of Seine holds a folder with documents in his right hand,

presumably his plans to transform Paris—politically, ethically, and aesthetically.^[46]

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Endnotes

[1] Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott and edit. and intro. by Walter W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA and London, England: The Belknap Press, 2016); Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

[2] Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood Around 1900* (Cambridge, MA and London, England: The Belknap Press, 2016).

[3] Benjamin, *One-Way Street*, pp. 1-20.

[4] *Ibid.*, p.10.

[5] *Ibid.*, the first passage p. 3 and the second passage pp. 5-8.

[6] See Jules Simon, "Rosenzweig's Messianic Aesthetics" in *Franz Rosenzweigs Neues Denken*, edited by Wolfdietrich Schmied-Kowarzik (Freiburg: Verlag Karl Alber GmbH, 2006), pp. 407-417.

[7] Benjamin, *One-Way Street*, p. 5.

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 6.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 7.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 27; quoted at p. 8.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 9.

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 33.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 9.

[16] See Charles Baudelaire, "Swan," in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, p. 89-90. Baudelaire dedicated the poem to Victor Hugo, who was exiled because of his opposition to Napoleon III and what he considered to be the destructive urban policies of Hausmann. One can feel the rhythm of the changing aesthetics of Paris, the semantic alterations expressing architectural stability and instability and a sense of loss and nostalgia.

[17] Cf., "Paris Peasant" (Le Paysan de Paris) by Louis Aragon, 1926 / Rolf Venner, 14 Oct 2010.

<https://orangemanor.wordpress.com/2010/10/14/paris-peasant-le-paysan-de-paris-poem-by-louis-aragon-1926-rolf-venner/>. Accessed May 11, 2019). The poem criticizes a style of life based on rational mental habits as a quotidian form of the academic pursuit of truth, while lauding the apprehension of a sense of the marvelous that infuses everydayness in the modern Parisian street-life.

[18] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA and London, England: The Belknap Press, 1999). The title in German reads: "*Theater-Catechismus, oder humoristische Erklärung verscluedenervorziiglich im Biihnenleben üblicher Freudwörter.*"

[19] Pierre Dupont (1821-1870), *Le Chant des Étudiants* ("The Song of Students" 1849) *Chant des Ouvriers* ("The Song of Workers" 1846), which praises the union between students and workers, the two wings of socialism. The image is from the International Institute of Social History and is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 license, <http://www.iisg.nl/collections/chansons/chanson-02.php>. Accessed February 23, 2020.

- [20] Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 120.
- [21] *Ibid.* pp. 120-121.
- [22] *Ibid.*, p. 121.
- [23] *Ibid.* See also Jules Claretie, *La Vie à Paris, 1895*, edited by Charpentier and Fasquelle (Paris, Bibliothèque-Charpentier, 1896), pp. 47 ff.
- [24] Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 121.
- [25] *Ibid.*, p. 122.
- [26] *Ibid.*
- [27] *Ibid.*
- [28] *Ibid.*, p. 123.
- [29] *Ibid.*
- [30] *Ibid.*
- [31] *Ibid.* see also *Journal des Économistes: Revue Mensuelle de la Science Économique et de la Statistique*. V. 10 1845 Dec-Mar (University of Michigan Library, 2009), p. 212.
- [32] Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 123.
- [33] *Ibid.*
- [34] *Ibid.* see also *Les Odeurs de Paris* (Paris: George Crès, 1914), p. 14.
- [35] Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 124.
- [36] *Ibid.*
- [37] *Ibid.* p. 125. see also Le Corbusier, *Urbanisme* (Paris: George Crès, 1925), p. 149. The boulevard de Sébastopol is one of the most important roads opened up by Hausmann in his rebuilding of Paris. It ran on a north–south axis across Paris, leading to the Gare de l’Est.
- [38] *Ibid.* see also Le Corbusier, *Urbanisme*, p. 250.
- [39] Sir Edward Elgar composed “Pomp and Circumstance” — the title comes from a line in Shakespeare’s *Othello* (“Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!”) — in 1901. But, it wasn’t originally intended for graduations. Elgar’s march was used for the coronation of King Edward VII.

[40] Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p.125. see also *Die Grenzboten, Journal of politics and literature*, edited by Gustav Freytag (Leipzig, 1861). These remarks are aimed at Haussmann.

[41] Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 126. see also *Die Grenzboten*, semester 2, vol. 3, pp. 139-141.

[42] Scott Jenkins, *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* Vol. 45, No. 2, Summer 2014 (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press), pp. 169-181.

[43] See Matthew Charles, "Benjamin's Angel of History as Anti-Nietzscheanism." In a letter dated June 21, 1871, for example, Nietzsche declares himself in good spirits because not everything had capitulated to what he calls "Franco-Jewish leveling" and "the greedy instincts of *Jetztzeit* [now-time]." This post from January 8, 2013 can be found at *Pedagogy and the Humanities*:

<https://benjaminpedagogy.wordpress.com/2014/01/08/benjamin-s-angel-of-history-as-anti-nietzscheanism/>. Accessed May 25, 2020).

[44] See Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Greek State," translated by Carol Diethe in *Nietzsche. Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1988) pp. 764-78. The original text was written in 1871-72.

[45] Benjamin does not object to or criticize this conception of culture in his theses, "On the Concept of History," in which the Angel of History appears, but draws the opposite political conclusion from its recognition to that of Nietzsche's. See Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938-1940*, edited by Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA and London, England: Belknap Press, 2003), pp. 389-400.

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