European Journal of Social Sciences Studies
ISSN: 2501-8590
ISSN-L: 2501-8590
Available on-line at: www.oapub.org/soc

DOI: 10.46827/ejsss.v7i1.1154 Volume 7 | Issue 1 | 2021

THE ANGEL OF HISTORY AND THE RUINS OF PARIS: WALTER BENJAMIN IN FRANCE OR THE PROGRESS AS CATASTROPHE

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Abstract:
If Walter Benjamin's writings have been mostly interpreted in the fields of art and literature critique, we would like here to take his philosophy of history more seriously, despite its acknowledged lack of unity (Habermas 1988: 32) and systematicity (Arendt 1960: 248). Drawing from the well-known allegory of the "Angel" developed in his theses on the concept of history written at the beginning of the Second World War and just before his death in Port-Bou, we will further analyze his genealogical critique of Parisian modernity contained in the Arcades Project, a work undertook more than a decade before, during his exile in France. In echo with the imagination of prospective ruins which florished during the modernization of the French capital after the 1850's, Benjamin's conception of progress, understood as a catastrophe submitting industrial capitalist societies to a permanent "*state of emergency*", is thus combined with the theorization of a "*Copernician revolution in the field of historical method*" (Benjamin 1999: 348). Beyond Benjamin's phenomenological enterprise of a physiognomy of material modernity, and the romantic and surrealistic sensibility of his "*anthropological materialism*", his philosophy of progress inscribes itself in a radical paradigm rendering its centrality to the idea of catastrophe (Anders 1972; Dupuy 2004; Stengers 2009), against the accidental role it holds in the principles of precaution and "*responsibility*" (Jonas 1979) and in the nowadays dominant paradigm of "*risk*" (Beck 1986); furthermore, "*our*" catastrophes would have in a Benjaminian perspective to be diagnosed in the past and the present rather than anticipated for the future.

Keywords: philosophy of history, catastrophism, Haussmannization, modernization

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1. Introduction

> «*History is like Janus; it has two faces. Whether it looks at the past or at the present, it sees the same things.*» (Maxime Du Camp, Paris, vol.6, p.315)

> *"The subject of this book is an illusion expressed by Schopenhauer in the following formula: to seize the essence of history, it suffices to compare Herodotus and the morning newspaper."* (Walter Benjamin, Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century, Exposé of 1939)

"How could they not have foreseen?" asked Isabelle Stengers to the readers of *Le Monde*[ii] after the catastrophe of Fukushima in 2011: how could *they* - the experts and decision-making elites - *not* foresee, that an earthquake of exceptional magnitude, followed by a gigantic tsunami, would certainly devastate an overpopulated seismic island and contaminate durably the neighboring Pacific ocean by causing a massive rejection of radioactive waste? This was actually more of a rhetorical question, as the philosopher of sciences seemed already to know the answer: *"The only compass which now seems to define our future is the upholding of economic growth and competitiveness (…) Tepco had been, for example, very efficient in the rationalization of the production costs and the securing of profits. The experts, on their side, had to collaborate in a constructive manner in the mobilization for innovation and progress"*. At a time when the "principle of precaution" could be suppressed from the French constitution in order to be replaced by an ambiguous principle of "responsible innovation"[iii] - which could, indeed, but does not refer to the "imperative of responsibility" developed by Hans Jonas (1979) - and despite the major nuclear risk still threatening French national territory, Jean-Pierre Dupuy called on his part not only for the advent of a "*slow science*" (Stengers 2013) but rather for the advent of an "*enlightened catastrophism*" (un "*catastrophisme éclairé*") (Dupuy 2004; 2012). Beyond the risk paradigm - or the intuition of a "*risk of risks*" - of our late modernity, which would simply be another avatar of modern rationalist thought and have proved several times its inefficiency, a catastrophist consciousness at a global "*time of catastrophes*" (Stengers 2009) - when the impossible has not just become possible but is precisely ineluctable - should recall us that we are not only, in the words of Heidegger, "*beings-towards-death*" but also, unavoidably, "*beings-towards-catastrophe*".

The intuition that modernity has created the conditions of its own disasters had already been formulated long before the institution of a "*risk society*" (Beck 1986): in the aftermath of the destruction of Lisbon in 1755, after that Voltaire had lamented himself on divine perversion and abandoned the optimism of Leibnizian theodicy (Adorno 1966: 361) in his *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne* (1756), Rousseau defended in his *Lettre à Voltaire* the idea that neither God nor Nature were to blame. If this earthquake, followed by this

[ii] Isabelle Stengers, « Comment n'avaient-ils pas prévu? », *Le Monde*, 25th of March 2011.
[iii] Nicolas Treich, « Le véritable enjeu des débats sur le principe de précaution », *Le Monde*, 7th of October 2014.

tsunami coming from the Atlantic, have had a so high faculty of destruction, it was precisely because Man and Society had concentrated human populations in huge cities, confined them in precarious constructions and created social inequalities which made the poorest of them mostly vulnerable in such disastrous contexts. Rousseau's intuition forged the motive of an upcoming social progressism that was interwoven with the idea of a perfectibility of human condition and therefore a certain linearity in the progress of human history, one of the major topics of the Enlightenment, even if Rousseauist skepticism already denounced the discrepancy between technical progress on the one hand, and "human" progress on the other hand. If the tragedy of Fukushima could in part be explained by "*capitalist sorcery*" (Stengers & Pignarre 2005), the Sovietic context which allowed the disaster of Tchernobyl in 1986, in the so-called Lenin central, also shared a belief in the infinite progress of technique: catastrophes, in this sense, are spectacular arisings blowing up - but never for a long time - the expectations of a continuum thought as the guarantee of better tomorrows.

Walter Benjamin died before the catastrophes of Tchernobyl and Fukushima, he died even before the atomic bombings of Hiroshima, in 1945; he committed suicide in the village of Port-Bou before reaching the Spanish border, in 1940, when he understood that he would certainly be sent to Auschwitz. But because he did not believe in the modern mythology of progress, he did not believe either in the *potentiality* of risks, understood as its collateral damages: "*the concept of progress has to be based on the idea of catastrophe. But the fact that things are still going on this way is precisely the catastrophe. It is not what could await us, but indeed what already happened*", as he wrote in his text *On the concept of history*[iv] a few months before his death, nineteen theses which could be considered as his philosophical testament (Berdet 2013: 3). In it, the allegorical figure of the Angel of history, inspired by the *Angelus Novus* of Paul Klee, has got caught his wings in a storm that propels him irresistibly into a future which he nevertheless refuses, this storm being the principle of progress. The accumulation of ruins (Trümmer auf Trümmer), forming the landscape in which the Angel is being forced to evolve, evokes the ineluctable obsolescence threatening all material creations of modernity: under such conditions, the "*state of emergency*" usually declared in exceptional cases of catastrophes, represents in Benjamin's catastrophism the rule, and not the exception. His theses *On the concept of history*, written in the hectic of the Second World War, were a critique of conservative historicism, positivism and evolutionism, three very modern trends of thought which he identified as being common to the pressing dangers of fascism and Stalinism, but also to social democracy. During more than a decade before dying in Port-Bou, Benjamin spent most of his time in exile in the rooms of the Bibliothèque Nationale of Paris, where he could collect materials in order to write his "*prehistory of modernity*" (Urgeschichte der Moderne), set in the context of the French nineteenth-century. The *Arcades Project*[4], through the use of "*dialectical images*" assembled in a montage at a standstill, through constellations of voices coming from the past, represents an attempt to write a counter-

[iv] Walter Benjamin, *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*. In *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1982. 4 Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*. In *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1982.

history of nineteenth-century's Parisian life. Thought as a chronicle from below, it refuses to celebrate the triumphant continuum of progress: Parisian arcades and gas lightings, Haussmanian boulevards and crinolines, railroads and locomotives, portrait paintings and photographies, panoramas and universal exhibitions, form altogether a landscape of ruins to be explored by critical posterity.

2. On the concept of history, or "*methodological apocalypse*" (Berdet: 2013)

> *"VIII- The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. (…) The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are 'still' possible in the twentieth century is not philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge - unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable."* Walter Benjamin, *On the concept of history*, These VIII, 1940

Dealing with uncertainty regarding the future is as much a collective as an individual burden: after all, "*the future of humanity comprises everything that will ever happen to any human being, including what one will have for breakfast next Thursday and all the scientific discoveries that will be made next year*" (Bostrom 2009: 1). As we have chosen to think of Benjamin's *Theses* of 1940 as a methodological introduction to his *Arcades Project*, this forces us to begin our analysis with the end, Benjamin's end, as the starting point of a genealogy of catastrophe. Could Benjamin have foreseen what awaited him in Port-Bou? After the announcement of the Hitler-Stalin Pact in August 1939, which beyond the symbolic shock of seeing communism joining the ranks of fascism, changed drastically the situation of refugees in France, he already had to endure a traumatizing internment of three months in the Nevers Camp and wrote in a letter to Horkheimer: "*the future prepares for sure even worse events for us*" (Fuld 1979: 299). With the instauration of the Vichy Regime in July 1940, Benjamin had to flee towards the South of France, like millions of other refugees[v]. He would undertake an exhausting two-days long crossing of the Pyrenees - Benjamin was a heavy smoker and had a heart condition - together with a little group of travelers guided by Lisa Fittko; after having reached the promised border, he would finally realize that the Franquist authorities would not let them pursue their path, for him towards Lisbon, and finally America. "*Refugees carried vials of poison in their vest pockets, just in case (…) and Arthur Koestler claims he was given large amounts of morphine by Benjamin in Marseille, just in case*" (Taussig 2006: 13), amounts that were surely "*enough to*

[v] We can't resist here to quote the words of Lisa Fittko: "*The apocalyptic atmosphere in Marseille in 1940 produced its daily absurd story of attempted escape : plans around fantasy boats and fable captains, visas for countries unknown to Atlas, and passports from countries that had ceased to exist. One had become accustomed to learning through the Daily Grapevine which foolproof plan had suffered today the fate of a House of Cards. We still were able to laugh - we had to laugh - at the comic side of some of these tragedies. The laughter was irresistible when Dr. Fritz Fraenkel, with frail body and gray mane, and his friend Walter Benjamin, with his sensitive scholar's head and pensive eyes behind thick glasses, were, through bribery, smuggled on a freighter, dressed up as French sailors. They didn't get very far*. " (Lisa Fittko, "The story of Old Benjamin", in *The Arcades Project*, 1999).

kill a horse" (Fuld 1979: 307). Benjamin had never been a "*débrouillard*", as Lisa Fittko wrote later, singling out "*his lack of adaptability, a euphemism with her for a variety of incompetence that, it so appears, was all too common among these refugee intellectuals, lacking what today we call survival skills or street smarts. (…) But of course the practicalities of suicide were not beyond reach - as if the lack of adaptability had a certain ethical principle behind which was, precisely, not to adapt*" (Taussig 2006: 12). During his crossing of the Pyrenees, Benjamin had refused to get rid of a heavy black suitcase which was slowing the progression of the group towards Spain: some say he was carrying an important manuscript with him, which he didn't want to leave to the nazis; this was perhaps a revised version of the *Theses on the philosophy of history* together with a final version of the *Arcades Project*. When Rolf Tiedemann tried to find it again years later, it had disappeared. (Taussig 2006: 9).

3. The Angel of history

> *"IX- A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the 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 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 in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The 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."*
> Walter Benjamin, *On the concept of history*, These IX, 1940

The first reference to the document of the nineteen theses appears in a letter to Horkheimer dated from the 22th of February 1940, originally written in French: Benjamin claims in it that he wishes to "*establish an irremediable scission between our way to look at things and the legacies of positivism*", which haunt even to the historical conceptions of the left (Löwy 2014: 29). In the words of Victor Serge (1939), it was "*Midnight in the century*" when Benjamin undertook this work; in his last letters to Gretel Adorno, who was already in New-York with her husband, he writes: "*war and the constellation which it has formed have conducted me to lay down on paper thoughts, of which I could say that I keep them on me - and even in me - since approximately twenty years*." (Löwy 2014: 30). Twenty years earlier, he had made the acquisition in Munich of Paul Klee's painting which exerted on him a deep fascination; he certainly had the time to contemplate it on the walls of his Berliner bedroom during a few years, but in exile from the beginning of the 1930's, he had decided to leave the *Angelus Novus* to Gershom Scholem, who settled later in Jerusalem, where the painting stayed since then. The symbolic interpretation made of the Angel by

Benjamin is certainly very personal and quite arbitrary, but it can be used as an entrance door to his philosophy of history[vi].

"*But a storm is blowing in from Paradise*": if the allegory of the storm was also used by Hegel in his *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte* as "*the tumult of world events blowing in the present*" (1837: 35), Benjamin pursued an implicit confrontation with the Hegelian philosophy of history (Löwy 2014: 84), a rationalist theodicy legitimating each "ruin" and each historical faux-pas as the necessary step on the necessary and triumphal progression of Reason and as the realization of the Progress of humanity towards the consciousness of liberty. This linearity and necessity in the modern conception of history has left in Benjamin's perspective its legacy in a denominator common to the most "vulgar" form of Marxism, to socialdemocratic evolutionism and of course traditional historicism (Löwy 2014: 29). Adorno and Horkheimer also made a use of the angelic allegory in their *Dialectik der Aufklärung* (1947: 162), evoking thereby the expulsion from the Garden of Eden: "*the angel which has hunted humanity from paradise towards the path of technical progress, is itself the sensible image of this progress*". But what would be this profane equivalent of a lost paradise which progress, in its irresistible progression, keeps keeping away from us? It could be read as the old topic of primitive classless societies, in continuity with Rousseau's Bon Sauvage: in an article on Bachofen's *Mutterrecht* (1861) published in 1935, Benjamin celebrated the imaginary of ancient matriarchal communities, understood as "*communist societies at the dawn of history*", thought as profoundly egalitarian and peaceful, and combining themselves with new realities in order to give birth to utopia (Löwy 2014: 82). In his *Theorien des deutschen Faschismus* (1930: 215), Benjamin had on the contrary already described his representation of Hell: years before the rise of nazism and the engagement of final solution, he announced that "*millions of human bodies would certainly be torn to bits and eaten up by gas and iron*" in a foreseeable future. In order not to emphasize too much his prophetic abilities, we have here to recall that Benjamin belonged to a generation which had made a sensible experience of the First World War; in this event, an intimate relationship was built between technical progress and exaltation of warfare, rendering hereby the discrepancy between the potentialities of technical innovation on the one hand and the state of "*moral elucidation*" that should accompany it on the other hand, more obvious (Ombrosi 2006: 267). Klee himself had suffered in his flesh from the insanities of the First War, and took in the 1920's the habit to paint caricatures of the Emperor Wilhelm II as commander in chief of the German armies, under the traits of a mounstruous "Eisenfresser". For the same reasons, Benjamin would write in his theses of 1940 that "*there is not a document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism*".

If the total administration of camp systems, followed by the industrial extermination of Jews and Gypsies in death "factories" would only be fully engaged one

[vi] Hannah Arendt, who was the first person to visit Benjamin's grave in Port-Bou just before her leaving for America - and was enchanted by the beauty of the cemetery facing the Mediterranean see (Taussig, 2006) - refused to consider Benjamin as a philosopher, mainly because his thought was not systematic enough. We can only try to demonstrate here its potential consistency and coherence, without fully agreeing with it.

year after his death, Benjamin had already sensed that nazism would perform a new perverse alliance between the love of technique and modern barbarism. The personal experience of antisemitism had of course formed in him an acute sense of danger; in August 1933, just after the beginning of the national-socialist dictature, he mentioned for the first time the *Angelus Novus* in an autobiographical text named *Angesilaus Santander*, in which he reflects on the secret non-Jewish names[vii] given to him by his parents, in case he would become a writer (Berdet 2013: 53). Seven years later, he would write in his theses: "*one reason why fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm. The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are 'still' possible in the twentieth century is not philosophical*" (These VIII). Against the social-democratic thought making of fascism an anachronical and pre-modern vestige of the past - like in the writings of Karl Kautsky, explaining in the 1920's that fascism was after all only possible in an agrarian country like Italy, but certainly not viable in a modern and industrialized nation like Germany (Löwy 2006: 78) - Benjamin wishes to recall on the contrary the intimate relationship entertained by it with industrial capitalism, and therefore its very *modern* character, criticizing hereby the illusion of those blinded by the idea that scientific and technical progress would be incompatible with political and social barbarism.

"*At a moment when the politicians in whom the opponents of fascism had placed their hopes are prostrate and confirm their defeat by betraying their own cause, these observations are intended to disentangle the political worldliness from the snares in which the traitors have entrapped them. Our consideration proceeds from the insight that the politicians' stubborn faith in progress, their confidence in their 'mass basis', and, finally, their servile integration in an uncontrollable apparatus have been three aspects of the same thing. It seeks to convey an idea of the high price our accustomed thinking will have to pay for a conception of history that avoids any complicity with the thinking to which these politicians continue to adhere*": in his tenth thesis, Benjamin wishes to settle accounts with communism in its Stalinist version, refering implicitly to the traumatizing event of the Hitler-Stalin pact, which had sounded the death knell of the hope of a consequent opposition to Hitlerian fascism. Like Adorno, Benjamin had embraced quite late Marxist theories through the reading of Lukacs' *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* (1923), but before the vast majority of the left intellectuals of the period, he had already identified the tendencies making of Stalinism a dead end, problems which were to be acknowledged decades later: the illusory promises of the left, interwoven with a blind faith in the infinity of progress, would have neutralized the real capacities of thought and action of the people, in submitting them to a bureaucratic apparatus and the fetishism of the party as an end in itself.

But social-democracy was in Benjamin's perspective only another false alternative to the deadly association of nazism and Stalinism: in his eleventh thesis, he asserts that "*the conformism which has been part and parcel of social democracy from the beginning, attaches*

[vii] Bendix Schönflies (Fuld, 1979). In Port-Bou, the Franquist authorities would also take care to bury Walter Benjamin under a catholic name : Benjamin Walter. His false name was furthermore given to the false body (Taussig, 2006).

not only to its political tactics but to its economic views as well. Nothing has corrupted the German working-class so much as the notion that it was moving with the current. It regarded technological developments as the fall of the stream with which it thought it was moving. From there it was but a step to the illusion that the factory work which was supposed to tend toward technological progress constituted a political achievement. The old protestant ethics of work was resurrected among German workers in a secularized form". Beyond the denunciation of the conformist progressism of social-democracy through fragments of the discourse of Josef Dietzgen in his *Religion der Sozialdemokratie* (1906) - "*every day, our cause becomes clearer and the people get smarter*" - Benjamin criticizes here the sanctified productivism defining, in the words of the *Gotha program* of 1875, labor "*as the source of all wealth and of all culture*". His further denunciation of the effects which this ideology and its practice have on "*Nature, which, as Dietzgen puts it, would exist gratis*" as raw material for the progress of humanity, and its identification as "*a complement to the corrupted conception of labor*" could appear avant-gardist; at a time when environmental preoccupations were far from being a priority, Benjamin made a radical critique of both capitalist exploitation of nature and its continuity in the positivist and technocratic ideology of both "vulgar" Marxism and social-democracy. In echo with Marx's *Critique of the Gotha program,* Benjamin wishes to recall the intuition of the first socialist utopias - before the failure of 1848's revolutions and the triumphal ascension of capitalism in the second half of the nineteenth century - which at the time did not oppose the exploitation of labor forces to the exploitation of nature : "*the new conception of labor amounts to the exploitation of nature, which with naive complacency is being contrasted with the exploitation of the proletariat. Compared with this positivistic conception, Fourier's fantasies, which have so often been ridiculed, prove to be surprisingly sound*". Benjamin's fascination for Fourierist utopia and the indeed nonproductivist system of Phalansteries can be viewed in parallel with his sympathy for Bachofen's fantasized Matriarchy, in the Rousseauist romantic ideal of the reconciliation of Man with a Mother Nature which had been declared as an enemy to be, in Cartesian terms, "mastered and possessed" by positivist modernity.

4. The Doll and the Automaton

> *"I- The story is told of an automaton constructed in such a way that it could play a winning game of chess, answering each move of an opponent with a countermove. A puppet in Turkish attire and with a hookah in its mouth sat before a chessboard placed on a large table. A system of mirrors created the illusion that this table was transparent from all sides. Actually, a little hunchback who was an expert chess player sat inside and guided the puppet's hand by means of strings. One can imagine a philosophical counterpart to this device. The puppet called 'historical materialism' is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is wizened and has to keep out of sight."* (Walter Benjamin, *On the concept of history*, These I, 1940)

Benjaminian philosophy of history can be considered as the fusion of three schools of thought which apparently have nothing in common: German romanticism, Jewish messianism and Marxist materialism. One of Benjamin's first articles (*Romantik*, 1913) insisted on the need to restore "*the romantic desire for beauty, the romantic desire for truth, the romantic desire for action*" (Gesammelte Schriften, p.46), understood as a global *Weltanschauung*, a "*structure of sensibility reaching from Rousseau to Schlegel and Novalis, up to the Surrealists*" and a longstanding "*cultural critique of capitalist and industrial modernity"* (Löwy 2014: 14). In his *Dialog über die Religiosität der Gegenwart* (1913), he evokes also his neo-romantic aspiration to a new religion and a new socialism, forming in his ideal a new *social religion* which would have Tolstoï, Nietzsche and Strindberg as prophets (Löwy 2014: 15). Here lies the orientation of Benjaminian romanticism, which indeed is not directed towards a pre-modern and conservative past, but rather towards revolution, only under the curious traits of a *messianic* advent. In the introduction to his doctoral thesis (*Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik*, 1919), he also mentions that a certain messianism should be at the core of a romantic conception of time and history (Löwy 2014: 17); in this text, he opposes already the *qualitative* conception of time corresponding to the thought of romantic messianism, for which the life of humanity should ideally represent a true accomplishment, against a constant and sterile run after novelty and future, to the *quantitative* emptiness of time characteristic of the modern ideology of progress (p. 65-66).

The alliance of these two contradictory forms of utopian eschatologies - messianism and revolution - is explicitly contained in the very first thesis *On the concept of history*, under the paradoxical association of theology and materialism. The double allegory of the Doll and the Automaton was certainly inspired by a story written by Poe in 1836 and translated in French by Baudelaire a few decades later (1871), "The chess player of Maelzel", telling the fascination exerted by an automaton dressed as a Turk and reputed to be able to play chess even better than a man, which was presented at the Viennese Court in 1769 and finally showed across the United States by an inventor responding to the name of Johann Nepomuk Maelzel (Löwy 2014: 38). The trick consisted in the presence of a hunchbacked dwarf acting as the *spiritus rector* of the Turkish doll, which was only in appearance an autonomous automaton; in a rationalized and disenchanted modern world, Benjamin identifies theology to this dwarf, which has to stay out of sight in order to let the puppet of historical materialism win: Benjaminian philosophy of history wishes to assert a dialectical complementarity existing potentially between the dwarf and the doll, messianism and revolution, theology and materialism. The second thesis *On the concept of history* goes further in the evocation of Benjaminian *profane* theological conceptions with the introduction to the messianic concept of "redemption" (Erlösung): "*the past carries a temporal index by which it is referred to as redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim*". The endowment of redemption inherited from past generations by posterity in the present can be understood as

"remomeration" (Eingedanken) of the past failures and sufferings of the successive oppressed (Löwy 2014: 47). Through the long influence of Gershom Scholem, Benjamin had been in contact with Jewish theology: the kabbalistic equivalent of christian *apocastasis* - the final salute of all souls in the return to origins, the re-establishment of Paradise - is defined in his *Encyclopaedia judaica* (1932) as the *tikkun olam,* the reparation of the world, necessitating the s*hevirat hakelim,* the breaking of the vases, and relying rather on a cyclic than a linear conception of time (Fleury 1992: 174). Without explicitly referring to it, Benjamin had also read Franz Rosenzweig's *Stern der Erlösung* (1921), which was, like his concept of revolutionary messianism, inscribed in the dissident tradition of the *dohakei haketz,* or those who wish to activate and precipitate the Apocalypse and hereby the advent of the Messiah (Löwy 2014: 133). The so-called "messianic power" inherited by each generation is in this sense the contrary of contemplative expectation, and the redemption, understood as reparation and emancipation of the oppressed, is only possible through the advent of apocalypse in a cyclic course of time, in which the dialectic of destruction and restoration never ends. Like in the words of Kraus, cited by Benjamin in his fourteenth thesis, "origin is the goal" (1916) and like in the words of Hölderlin, who was also a good read of Benjamin, "*where the danger is, grows also the saving power*".

Against what he identifies as the vulgar evolutionism of Marxist eschatology - which can of course be found in the writings of Marx and Engels themselves - Benjamin does not conceive revolution as the natural result of a mechanistic historical materialism conducting automatically to the final crisis of capitalism and the dictature of proletarian masses (Löwy 2014: 37): the automaton of Marxist historical law had after all several times lost the game and would need the help of the dwarf of theology in order to potentially obtain victory. Benjamin delivers indeed a quite heterodox version of Marxism, in denunciating its *optimism* towards the future: like the French dissident communist and surrealist Pierre Naville (*La Révolution et les intellectuels*, 1926), he asserts the need of an "organization of pessimism", a strange apology which found no echo in the communist culture of the period, still full of hopes. Like Naville, who would be excluded from the French communist party soon after the publication of his writings, Benjamin did not fit in the orthodox mould with his own reinterpretation of Marxism, which should in his perspective include *pessimism* and hereby the consciousness of a constant catastrophe in its revolutionary theory and method (Löwy 2014: 25). Benjamin did not believe in the "lendemains qui chantent"; his Marxism, nourished at the source of Lukacs' exegese, relied on the concept of class struggle, but evacuated the Hegelian linearity justifying the past victories of the oppressors over the oppressed by the upcoming advent of its achievements. In the association of material issues and spiritual motives, his revolutionary messianism claims the illusions of modern progressism: the constant state of emergency can only be broken by revolution in the present, not in the awaiting of the future.

5. Stopping the clockwork

> *"XV- The awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode is characteristic of the revolutionary classes at the moment of their action. The great revolution introduced a new calendar. The initial day of a calendar serves as a historical time-lapse camera. And, basically, it is the same day that keeps recurring in the guise of holidays, which are days of remembrance. Thus, the calendars do no measure time as clocks do; they are monuments of a historical consciousness of which not the slightest trace has been apparent in Europe in the past hundred years. In the July revolution an incident occurred which showed this consciousness still alive. On the first evening of fighting it turned out that the clocks in towers were being fired on simultaneously and independently from several places in Paris. An eye-witness, who may have owed his insight to the rhyme, wrote as follows: Qui le croirait! On dirait, qu'irrités contre l'heure, de nouveaux Josués au pied de chaque tour, tiraient sur les cadrans pour arrêter le jour!"* (Walter Benjamin, *On the concept of history,* These XV, 1940)

Against the mechanical ticking of the clockwork - as symptom of the modern *quantitative*, "homogeneous" and "empty" conception of time - Benjamin defends here the *qualititative* character of calendars, which in the rememoration and repetition of collective events, would symbolize a both heterogeneous and fully significant historical consciousness (Löwy 2014: 115). Like in the revolutionary calendar, the biblical imperative of *zakhor!* ("remember!") in the Jewish tradition brings the past into the present in the act of remembering redemptive *and* catastrophic events (Löwy 2014: 115), such as the leaving of Egypt (*Pessah*), the revolt of the Macchabees (*Hanoukka*) or the rescue of the exiled facing a massacre in Persia (*Pourim*). In his last thesis, Benjamin reasserts the qualities of the traditional Jewish discontinuous time conception and tradition of remomeration: "*we know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and the prayers instruct them in remembrance, however. This stripped the future of its magic, to which all those succumb who turn to the soothsayers for enlightenment. This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future turned into homogeneous, empty time. For every second of time was the strait gate through which Messiah might enter*" (These XVIII B). Like the Joshua (Josué) of the Old Testament - who suspends the Sun movement in order to obtain victory - the French revolutionaries attempted in 1830 to shoot at the Parisian city clocks, symbol of the march of a so-called "progress" in an inextricable historical continuum which was considered as not being in their interests, but rather in those of the ruling elites; Benjamin defends precisely a conception of history as a stopping of conventional time, as a necessary interruption of modern catastrophe, in a paradoxical perspective of "*dialectics at a standstill*" (Tiedemann, 1982: 1).

This refusal to jump on the rapid train of modernity was associated with a methodological interpretation of real historical work as a *chronicle* from below, which in its generous heterogeneity should not distinguish between macro and micro-levels: "a chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts

in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history" (Thesis III). Benjamin's revolutionary messianism claims that no one should be forgotten; the *apocastasis*, the redemption of all souls, shall restore each and every victim of past oppressors: "*only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious*" (Thesis VI). In this sense, the ideal historian has the task to feel *empathy* (Einfühlung) with the oppressed of the past, "from the repression of the slaves and the death of Spartacus, to the failure of the *Spartakusbund* and the assassination of Rosa Luxemburg, from the victims of Roman Imperium, to the ones of Hitlerian Imperium" (Löwy 2014: 66) : "*Flaubert, who was familiar with it, wrote: peu de gens devineront combien il a fallu être triste pour ressusciter Carthage. The nature of this sadness stands out more clearly if one asks with whom the adherents of historicism actually empathize. The answer is inevitable: with the victor. And all rulers are the heirs of those who conquered before them. Hence, empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers*" (These VII). Like Nietzsche, cited in his twelfth thesis, Benjamin asserts the need for another writing of history, against the conventional historians who like to swim with the stream, in the "*nude admiration of success*" and the "*idolatry of great factual events*" (*Vom Nutzung und Nachteil der Geschichte für das Leben*, 1874, 147-149): the Benjaminian historian should have the task to "*brush History against the grain*" (These VII), opposing to the continuum of the governors the discontinuum of the governed.

Against the method of conservative historicism, represented here by the French Fustel de Coulanges ("*to historians who wish to relive an era, (he) recommends that they blot out everything they know about the later course of history*") - an equivalent of Ranke - Benjamin demands furthermore to the chronicler to think *with* the past and not *over* it (Kang 2011: 80), in a co-presence of past *and* present breaking hereby once again with the usual continuity *from* past *to* present (and *towards* future). Like he writes it in his fourteenth thesis, "*history is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now. Thus, to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with the time of the now which he blasted out of the continuum of history. The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome incarnate. It evoked ancient Rome the way fashion evokes costumes of the past. Fashion has a flair for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago; it is a tiger's leap into the past*". The comparison between fashion and revolution could seem surprising; but if in both cases, the association of past and present enables a "tiger's leap" out of the temporal continuum between very remote periods of time, the temporality of fashion corresponds in Benjamin's perspective to an infernal repetition of the same, giving only the external illusion of a constant change: quite on the contrary, revolution should constitute the stopping of this "eternal return" in the advent of a profound modification (Löwy, 2014: 111) of social and temporal order.

The presence of the "now" in his conception of historiography is what Benjamin called the *Jetztzeit*: through *dialectical* images bringing the past into one's present, Benjaminian historical method aims to reach *sensibly* the elements of the past in the "*now of their recognizability*" (Jetzt der Erkennbarbeit). The re-actualization of past moments and

elements in one's present would though not only be a methodology in the strict sense of the term: it is also understood as a "*life-saving intervention*" (rettender Einfall), a solution to the mechanical oblivion and disparition of these moments and elements through the deadly march of history and progress (Löwy 2014: 58): "*The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again.(…) For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns, threatens to disappear irretrievably*." (These V).

Historical consciousness is with Benjamin comparable to the fleeting sensations of "unvolontary memory".

6. The *Passagen-Werk*, or a prehistory of Catastrophe

> *"What is expressed here is a feeling of vertigo characteristic of nineteenth century's conception of history. It corresponds to a viewpoint according to which the course of the world is an endless series of facts congealed in the form of things. The characteristic residue of this conception is what has been called the 'History of Civilization', which makes an inventory, point by point, of humanity's life forms and creations (…). Our investigation proposes to show how, as a consequence of this reifying representation of Civilization, the new forms of behavior and the new economically and technologically based creations that we owe to the nineteenth century enter the universe of a phantasmagoria. These creations undergo this 'illumination' not only in a theoretical manner, by an ideological transposition, but also in the immediacy of their perceptible presence."* (Walter Benjamin, *Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century,* Exposé of 1939)

As Michael Taussig suggested, Benjamin was certainly a Proustian Marxist (Taussig 2006: 15), who loved to collect "*madeleines*" enabling him to resuscitate the collective past in according more significance to the sensible than to the abstract. The art of catching elements of the past in the "*now of their recognizability*" and in the "*immediacy of their perceptible presence*" required consequently not only a redefinition of orthodox Marxist conception of history, but also a new understanding of both material and ideological culture. As Rolf Tiedemann wrote, Benjamin "*valued three short sentences by Proust more highly than most of what existed in the field of materialist analysis: the majority of Marxist art theorists explain culture as the mere reflection of economic development: (he) refused to join them*" (1982: 11). Benjamin wished indeed to replace the concept of "*reflection*" by the one of "*expression*" (Ausdrück), modifying thereby the traditional Marxist relationship between basis and superstructure from a simple causality link to a more complex link of "*expressive correlation*". Indeed, he was mostly interested in the "*thread of expression*" (Tiedemann 1982: 12); in the fourteenth Convolute of the *Passagen-Werk*, he wishes to make it clear: "*the expression of the economy in its culture will be presented, not the economic origins of culture*" (Benjamin 1982: 460).

Benjamin was concerned about "*palpable knowledge*" (gefühltes Wissen) and "*did not set out according to Ideologiekritik; rather, he gave way to the notion of materialist*

physiognomics (…) inferring the interior from the exterior; it decodes the whole from the detail, it represents the general in the particular" (Tiedemann 1982: 12). Here, abstract concepts are being replaced by sensible images, and these "dialectical images" are not only thought as the associations of past and present at a standstill, they are also a constant dialectical back-and-forth between infrastructure and superstructure. The *Passagen-Werk* was in Benjamin's perspective supposed to restitute a "prehistory" (Urgeschichte) of modernity set in the Paris of the nineteenth century, in studying the expressive character of earliest industrial and capitalist "*Ur-phenomena*", namely "*earliest industrial products, earliest industrial architecture, the earliest machines, but also the earliest department stores, advertizements and so on*" (Tiedemann 1982: 12). Benjaminian "*physiognomic*" thought, his "*smooth empiricism*" (zarte Empirie) borrowed to Goethe (Alac 2008: 6), the method of an "*esthetic*" Marxism understood as the focalization of critical attention to esthetic phenomena - which would deeply influence the later work of the Institut für Sozialforschung and especially the Adornian critique of industrial mass culture (Durand-Gasselin 2012: 90) - were here assigned the task of "*recognizing the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled*" (*Paris, Capitale du XIXème siècle*, Exposé of 1935, section IV).

In Adorno's words, cited by Rolf Tiedemann (1982: 15), Benjamin's philosophy "*appropriates the fetishism of commodities for itself: everything must metamorphose into a thing in order to break the catastrophic spell of things*". The Marxist concept of "*commodity fetishism*" (Warenfetischismus) was central to Benjamin's critique of the phenomenon of "*reification of civilization*" in the development of industrial capitalist society: through the veiling of social production relationships and the annihilation of the social utility of commodities under the exaggerated importance accorded to exchange-value, the nineteenth century would have created a world of "*phantasmagorias*". Benjamin revealed his intention to explicate more profoundly this concept in a letter to Gretel Adorno in March 1939: "*I have busied myself, as well as possible in the limited time, with one of the basic concepts of the Arcades, placing at its core the culture of the commodity-producing society as phantasmagoria*" (Kang 2011: 75). More concretely, phantasmagorias were popular optical spectacles of the European nineteenth century, enabled by the invention of the "phantascope", which by a game of mirrors and lightnings, would subjugate the attention of the audience in showing animated images, and could be considered as the ancestor of the cinematograph (Berdet 2007: 3); with his allegorical use of the term, Benjamin expresses the idea that "*the nineteenth century is the dream we must wake up from; it is a nightmare that will weigh on the present as long as its spell remains unbroken*" (Tiedemann 1982: 7). Through "dialectical images" assembled in a "montage", through the assembling of a "constellation" of fragments under the form of citations, understood as "monads" which would be able to "crystallize" the whole, the *Passagen-Werk* wishes to dissolve the spell and to demystify the triumph of Parisian nineteenth century, already identifying conventional historicism and the ideology of progress as its best "narcotics".

The topic of phantasmagoria and collective illusion was explicit in the fact that Benjamin originally intended to entitle his *Passagen-Werk* as "Parisian Arcades, a

dialectical *féerie*" (Kang 2011: 82). At the heart of this motive was the "*experience of his generation*" that "*capitalism would not die from a natural death*", but also the intuition that it was a phenomenon "*with which a new dream-filled sleep came over Europe, and, through it, a reactivation of mythical forces*" (Tiedemann 1982: 7) in a society which rather dreamed itself as being fully rational. The ambition of "awakening" contained in Benjamin's philosophy made his *Kulturkritik* closer to *Ideologiekritik* (Kang 2011: 82) as it was developed by the earlier members of the Frankfurt school in the denunciation of a "false consciousness", and at the same time differentiated itself from a Surrealist abolition of the demarcation between dream and reality, or life and art. If Benjamin criticized Aragon for "*persisting within the realm of dreams*" (Tiedemann 1982: 6), his work was nevertheless early inspired by the movement of Surrealist avant-garde, namely in their common fascination for the symbolic of daily objects: "*Surrealism can boast of a surprising discovery. It has for the first time identified the revolutionary energies manifesting themselves in the outdated, in the first iron constructions, the first industrial buildings, the first photographies, in the objects which are starting to disappear*" (Benjamin 1982: 119). Benjamin's quest of "*the fullness of experience*" made him use the concept of "profane illumination" (1929) as "*the experiences of the Surrealists taught him that it was a matter not of restoring theological experience but of transporting it into the profane*" (Tiedemann 1982:6): the quest for authentic experience is also contained in his concept of "*anthropological materialism*" as corrective of a mechanical dialectical materialism (Berdet 2013: 1).

7. Anthropological materialism and its figures: the flâneur, the collector and the *chiffonier*

In a letter dated from the 10th of November 1938, Adorno writes to Benjamin: "*the poetry of Baudelaire attributes precisely to phenomena this sort of spontaneity, this concrete obviousness, this thickness which they happen to have lost through capitalism. This sort of immediate materialism, deeply anthropological, hides a profoundly romantic element. To speak very drastically, we could say that your work situates itself at the crossroads of magic and positivism. It is a bewitched place*" (Berdet 2013: 1). The "bewitched" tradition evoked here could be the one of the Surrealists and their forefathers of the nineteenth century, such as Rimbaud and Baudelaire, who were already adepts of "profane illumination" without naming it in these terms: as Michael Löwy suggests it with the words of André Breton[viii], Benjamin also found himself caught in a paradoxical sensibility "*between Rimbaud and Marx*" (Löwy 2013: 2). Against the disenchantment and sterility of rationalism developed in industrial capitalist societies, only a romantic, poetic and reenchanted form of dialectical materialism would fulfill the promises of utopia, adding to scientific Marxism a bit of its profane theology and exhilaration, rendering it hereby more sensible, concrete and even

[viii] In his *Congrès des Ecrivains contre le Fascisme*, organized in June 1935, André Breton used the following formula : «To transform the world', said Marx ; 'to change the life' said Rimbaud : these two watchwords shall for us belong together », a sentence which could summarize the ambitions of the Surrealist program (Löwy 2013: 3).

more "*human*". In his *Einbahnstrasse* (1928), Benjamin already refered to "*drunkenness*" (Rausch) as being the essence of the magical relationship uniting Man to Cosmos in ancient times, a kind of "*experience*" (Erfahrung) and state-of-mind which would have disappeared with capitalist modernity and its productivist functionalism[ix].

The need of reenchantment at times of impoverished experience was already about Rimbaud and Baudelaire associated with the refusal of bourgeois progress: "*It can only be the end of the world in going forwards*" wrote Rimbaud in his *Illuminations* (1895: 170), in echo with the prophetism of Baudelaire in his *Fusées* ("*the world is going to end*", 1851: 665), who also identified the belief in "Progress" as an "*extase de gobemouches*" (Hamel 2007: 7). This deep pessimism was also to be found in the first anticipation novels of the French nineteenth century, which on the contrary to a Jules Verne's positivist optimism, predicted the final ruins of Paris in an ever darker future[x] (Hamel 2007: 8). The romantic *topos* of prospective ruins became a commonplace of literary imagination during the Haussmanization of Paris (Hamel 2007: 9), synonym of the vast modernization of the capital undertook under Napoleon III, and seen by poets and artists as a constant enterprise of destruction. As Benjamin writes in his *Passagen-Werk*, "*the rêveries over the decline of Paris translate the obscure consciousness of the fact that the infinite growth of cities is always associated with the possibility for them to be entirely destroyed*" (1982: 122), giving once again echo to a Rousseauist discourse about the disaster of Lisbon. Some commentators of the period would even imagine with irony the extension of Paris as reaching towards the ocean in a near future, "*resuscitating hereby the old legend of "Paris, port de mer*" (Fournel 1875: 232). Without mentioning the destruction of Paris through a tsunami, these apocalyptic narrations seem nevertheless to account for the inherent paradox of the modern regime of historicity as it was analyzed by Koselleck (1988: 32): the acceleration of time and the erosion of tradition in the aftermath of European Enlightenment would have created a constant need of projection towards an unforeseeable future, annihilating thereby through complexity and uncertainty every lived experience, in a present which was being condemned, at a time of constant change, to become a "*past future*".

Against the accelerated tempo of modernity, the "flâneurs" of the Second Empire would have taken the habit to go for a walk in the already outdated arcades with a turtle kept on a leash, at a time when the reputed Café Anglais served turtle soup as must-have dish of its fastuous dinners (Berdet 2013: 438). Baudelaire was one of them and his poetry

[ix] Michael Taussig, who is also an expert in the art of critical montage and a great admirer of Surrealism, has made an interesting analysis of the link between devil worship and commodity fetishism in Latin America (2006): "*In the sugarcane plantations of the Cauca valley and in the tin mines of highland Bolivia it is clear that the devil is intrinsic to the process of the proletarianization of the peasant and to the commiditization of the peasant's world. He signifies a response to the change in the fundamental meaning of society as that meaning registers in precapitalist consciousness. (…) To them, thefore, this new socioeconomic system is neither natural nor good. Instead, it is both unnatural and evil, as the symbolism of the devil so strikingly illustrates*" (Taussig 2006: 18).

[x] *Les Ruines de Paris en 4875* by the historian Alfred Franklin, published in 1875 and certainly found by Benjamin in his exploration of the archives of the Bibliothèque Nationale, imagines for example how an expedition of archeologists coming from Noumea in 4875 finds traces of an extincted European civilization over the ruins of Paris, after that a mysterious and final catastrophe had destroyed it milleniums before.

expresses through allegories the sensible experiences made by critical artists at a time of forced acceleration, considered as the consequence of bourgeois tyrannic pragmatism. The decline of the Arcades through Haussmanization from the beginning of the 1850's and the construction of large boulevards, would have rendered the purely optical experience of the Parisian flâneur, and the appropriation of the streets in his own home through the attention of his gaze, far more difficult. The *Passagen-Werk* gives a great role to the figure of the flâneur as illustrated by Baudelaire; as Agamben suggested it (2013), the whole Arcades project could even have been a sole preparation to Benjamin's book on *Charles Baudelaire, ein lyriker im Zeitalter des Hochkapitalismus* (1982), which would then have been thought as an autonomous history of the Second Empire - as the title of the text *Das Paris des Second Empire bei Baudelaire* (1982) expresses it - if Adorno and Horkheimer, in the name of the Institut für Sozialforschung which financed the project during more than a decade, would not have protested against the emphasis put by Benjamin on such poetry.

The Benjaminian reference to Simmel and his phenomenological approach to modernity also constituted the object of Adorno's recurrent critique against Benjamin's project (Barbisan 2012: 290): just like Lukacs considered Simmelian "*impressionism*" as having solely an immediate and therefore insufficient behavior towards social phenomena without explaining their mechanisms (1923: 197), Adorno defined the sociologist of modernity as a "*nearly-thinker*" (Vielleichtdenker) lacking profoundly of critical distance in his analysis. Despite this sharp critique, Simmelian phenomenological intuition did inspire Benjamin's project of an empiricist "*physiognomy*" of modern culture through the sensible study of objects (Barbisan 2012: 291). Benjamin and Simmel were both "*collectors*" (Sammler) of material artefacts, understood as witnesses of a past, both collective and individual, who were willing to rescue these objects from oblivion in considering at the same time their uniqueness, their uselessness and their non-commercial value; the perceptive tactility of the collector is in the *Passagen-Werk* an equivalent to the both attentive and disinterested gaze of the flâneur. In his essay on Eduard Fuchs (1937), Benjamin had already celebrated the activity of the collector as being a practical expression of his conception of historiography, in saving what is condemned to disappear.

The *chiffonier* was another type of collector present in the poorest Parisian areas of the nineteenth century; if the rag-and-bone man (*Lumpsensammler*) appears a lot later as the *Flâneur* and the *Sammler* in Benjamin's writings, it seems like he intended to give him a decisive role in his final version of the *Passagen-Werk* (Berdet 2013: 426). Like Baudelaire, Benjamin felt a certain love for the outcasts of modern progress; he mentions already several times the *chiffonier* figure in the unended version of his *Arcades*: "*the ragpicker is the most provocative figure of human misery. Ragtag, Lumpenproletarier, in a double sense: clothed in rags and occupied with rags*" (1999: 349). He cites further to his own commentary a prose of Baudelaire: "*Here we have a man whose job is to pick up the day's rubbish in the capital. He collects and catalogues everything that the great city has cast off, everything it has lost, and discarded, and broken. He goes through the archives of debauchery, and the jumbled array of*

refuse. He makes a selection, an intelligent choice; like a miser hoarding treasure, he collects the garbage that will become objects of utility or pleasure when refurbished by industrial magic" (1999: 350). If the figures of the flâneur and the collector remained politically ambiguous in the fact that they could potentially yield to the temptations of commodity fetishism, the radical figure of the *Lumpensammler* would be more reliable, because it pertains to the world of the barricades (Berdet 2013: 426). As Irving Wohlfarth suggested in his article "*Der Historiker als Lumpensammler*" (1982), one could compare the historical ambitions of Benjamin to the practical work of the *chiffonier*, both systematically assembling fragments, as *mediums* of modern waste, in a constellation which could not possibly find an end.

8. Parisian Arcades and other ruins of modernity

> *"And so, it is with our own past. It is a labor in vain to attempt to recapture it: all the efforts of our intellect must prove futile. The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach, of intellect, in some material object...which we do not suspect. And as for that object, it depends on chance whether we come upon it or not before we ourselves must die".* (Marcel Proust, *Du côté de chez Swann*, vol.1, pp.67-69)

> *And finally, in Baudelaire, these reminiscences are still more frequent and obviously less incidental and therefore, in my opinion, decisive. Here it is the poet himself who, with more variety and more indolence, purposely seeks in the oador of a woman's hair or her breast, for example, inspiring resemblances which shall evoke him 'the canopy of the overarching sky' and 'a harbor filled with masts and sails'.* (Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades project* (1999), pp. 403-404)

At the origins of the *Passagen-Werk* would have been the intense reading of Aragon's *Le paysan de Paris* (1928), which Benjamin had undertook to translate for the *Literarische Welt*: in it, the itinerant figure of the flâneur and the dying landscape of the Arcades are omnipresent, in the aftermath of the destruction of the century-old *Passage de l'Opéra* in 1925 (Berdet 2013: 434); "*we must now for sure endure a turmoil in the modes of flânerie*" (Aragon, 1928: 82), wrote the Surrealist poet, still in mourning. "*Surrealism was born in an Arcade*" (1999: 82), writes Benjamin at the beginning of his Convolute over the "*demolitions and decline of Paris*": indeed, if "*the father of Surrealism was Dada, its mother was an Arcade*", "*just as the history and situation of the Paris Arcades are to become the key for the underworld of this century, into which Paris has sunk*" (Benjamin, 1999: 83). At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the *Passages,* architectures of glass, iron and gas, were still emblematic of the Parisian conversion to industrial modernity; Benjamin cites for proof the already outdated *Illustrated Guide to Paris* from the year 1852: "*these arcades, a recent invention of industrial luxury, are glass-roofed, marble-paneled corridors extending through whole blocks of buildings, whose owners have joined together for such enterprises. Lining both sides of these corridors, which get their light from above, are the most elegant shops, so that the arcade is a city, a world in miniature, in which costumers will find everything they need. During*

sudden rain showers, the arcades are a place of refuge for the unpeprared, to whom they offer a secure, if restricted, promenade - one of which the merchants also benefit" (Benjamin 1999: 31). At their beginnings and until the mid-nineteenth century, the arcades were frequented by the best Parisian society as they still enjoyed the character of their novelty: "*as soon as the Parisians had got a taste of the new galleries, they lost all desire to set foot in the streets of old - which, they often said, were fit only for dogs*" (Benjamin 1999: 53); but with the Haussmanization and consecutive electrification of the streets of Paris, the further development of department stores like the *Bon Marché*, and the increasing use of cabs as means of transport, the arcades were condemned to become forgotten places of perdition, mainly frequented by cheap prostitutes and nostalgic poets by the end of the century. Jules Clarétie tells the story of this decline in *La vie à Paris* (1896): "*they are fleeing the arcades, the arcades are dying (…). The arcade that for the Parisian was a sort of salon-walk, where you strolled and smoked and chatted, is now nothing more than a species of refuge which you think of when it rains. Some of the arcades maintain a certain attraction on account of this or that famed establishment still to be found there. But it only is the tenant's renown that prolongs the excitement, or rather the death agony of the place. The arcades have one great defect for modern Parisians: you could say that, just like certain paintings done from stifled perspectives, they're in need of air*" (Benjamin 1999: 121).

The modernization of Paris undertook under Napoleon III in the works of the Baron Haussmann was mainly justified as being an enterprise of public salubrity, as the medieval narrow streets of the capital were also "in need of air": the construction of a network of large avenues and boulevards right in the middle of the capital at the beginning of the 1850's changed the face of the city drastically, and the life of its inhabitants with it: "*Paris now ceased forever to be a conglomeration of small towns, each with its distinctive physiognomy and way of life (...). The centralization, the megalomania, created an artificial city, in which the Parisian (and this is the crucial point) no longer feels at home; and so, as soon as he can, he leaves. And thus, a new need arises: the craving for holidays in the country. On the other hand, in the city deserted by its inhabitants, the foreigner arrives on a specified date - the start of 'the season'. The Parisian, in his own town, now seems like one deracinated. (…) But above all, the Paris of the Second Empire is cruelly lacking in beauty. Not one of these great straight avenues has the charm of the magnificent curve of the rue Sainte-Antoine, and no house of this period affords anything like the tender delights of an eighteenth-century façade...*" (Lucien Debech and Pierre d'Espezel, *Histoire de Paris*, 1926, pp. 427-428 ; in Benjamin, 1999: 129). Beyond esthetics, the "*surgical experiments*" (Benjamin 1999: 133) led by Haussmann had a heavy social cost: the "*strategic embellishment*" was implicitly thought as a good prevention against the too recurrent construction of barricades, when the forced dislodgements through the systematic destruction of buildings were widespread. Anyway, "*the widening of the streets, it was said, was necessitated by the crinoline*" (Benjamin 1999: 133).

The story of the decline of the Parisian Arcades is also in Benjamin's perspective the expression of a history of "*modes of lightning*" (from the name of the twentieth

Convolute of the *Passagen-Werk*), which followed a constant modification throughout the nineteenth century, from oil to gas candelabras, and finally from gas to electricity.

> "*Arcades – they radiated through the Paris of the Empire like fairy grottoes. For someone entering the Passage des Panoramas in 1817, the sirens of gaslight would be singing to him on one side, while oillamp odalisques offered enticements from the other. With the kindling of electric lights, the irreproachable glow was extinguished in these galleries, which suddenly became more difficult to find – which wrought a black magic at entranceways, and which looked within themselves out of blind windows*" (Benjamin 1999: 564).

As the "yellowish flickering" and "butterflies" of argand and gas lamps ("*the old gas torches that burned in the open air often had a flame in the shape of a butterfly, and were known as papillons") had to be replaced by "the lunar frigidity of electric light*" (Benjamin 1999: 563), the Parisian flâneurs had furthermore to endure "*the covering over of the sky in the big city as a consequence of artificial illumination*" (Benjamin 1999: 570). Under such circumstances, how could have one possibly enjoyed true experiences (Erfahrungen) in a place of the earth where the stars are not to be seen anymore? "*On Baudelaire's Crépuscule du soir: the big city knows no true evening twilight. In any case, the artificial lighting does away with all transition to night. The same state of affairs is responsible for the fact that the stars disappear from the sky over the metropolis. Who ever notices when they come out?*" (Benjamin 1999: 343). The decline of the Arcades is also an opportunity for Benjamin to evoke another emblematic material of the industrial nineteenth-century: "*the two great advances in technology – gas and cast iron – go together; aside from the great quantity of lights maintained by the merchants, these galleries are illuminated in the evening by thirty-four jets of hydrogen gas mounted on cast-iron volutes on the pilasters*" (Dulaure, *Histoire de Paris*, 1835, p.29; Benjamin 1999: 151). Railroad networks, train stations, universal exhibitions, the Eiffel tower, the Palais de l'Industrie, and even the Crystal Palace of London; all these monuments of the century were made of iron, and Benjamin dedicates his sixth Convolute to the cold and grey element ("Iron construction").

The Paris Arcades were also the witnesses of "the vogue for Panoramas", these visual spectacles, also commonly named "phantasmagorias", who knew a constant progression throughout the nineteenth century, from "*the panoramas, dioramas, cosmoramas, diaphanoramas, pleoramas, fantascopes and phantasmagorical experiences, to (…) cinéoramas (…)*" (Benjamin 1999: 527). Panoramas can be considered as the ancestors of cinema, and raised already at the beginning of the nineteenth century the issue of the reproducibility of art and its relationship to technique as it had been problematized by Benjamin in his article *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (1936): "*the fact that film today articulates all problems of modern form-giving - understood as questions of its own technical existence - is important for the following comparison of panoramas with this medium. The vogue for panoramas corresponds to the vogue for cinematrographs today. The covered Arcades, of the type of the Passage des Panoramas, were also beginning their Parisian*

fortunes then" (Benjamin 1999: 530). Despite their first triumphant novelty, the Panoramas were also condemned to be forgotten at the end of the century; Max Brod would ask with nostalgy from Leipzig in 1913: "*Does anyone still want to go with me into a Panorama?*" (Benjamin, 1999: 527).

The law of destruction followed by technical progress had reached the domain of arts by the mid-nineteenth century, and "*in the same year in which Daguerre invented photography, his diorama burned down...1839*" (Benjamin 1999: 531). The development from the first Daguerreotypes up to modern photography signed the end of the humble art of portrait paintings; "*symptom, it would seem, of a profound displacement: painting must submit to being measured by the standard of photography (…). The old Dutch masters looked upon themselves less as artists than as photographers, so to speak; it is only today that the photographer is absolutely determined to pass for an artist*" (Benjamin 1999: 685-688). Beyond the problematic loss of the "Aura" and the uniqueness of the piece of Art as a consequence of limitless reproduction, Benjamin cites further the words of Brecht in order to illustrate the idea of "regression in progression": "*so let us take an example of technical progress, which actually is regress, the perfection of photographic devices. They are much more sensitive to light than the old boxes with which daguerreotypes were produced. One hardly need concern oneself about lighting when operating them now (…). But the portraits which one makes with them are doubtless much poorer than before*" (*Versuche*, 1931, p. 280; Benjamin 1999: 687). Baudelaire holds further his own plaidoyer against the fascination for the developments of photography: "*since photography provides us with every desirable guarantee of exactitude (they believe that, these poor madmen!), 'art is photography' (…). I am convinced that the badly applied advances of photography - like all purely material progress - have greatly contributed to the impoverishment of artistic genius, already so rare... Poetry and Progress are two ambitious men who hate each other with an instinctive hatred, and when they meet along the same road, one of them must give away*" (*Oeuvres*, 1932, pp. 222-224; Benjamin 1999: 691).

The Parisian Arcades, symbol of "dialectical féérie", were in Benjamin's perspective the first matrix of commodity fetishism[xi], which was then fully developed in department stores, industrial exhibitions and the new modes of advertising. "*Le Tintamarre now remarked, after recommending "La Chaussée d'Antin" to its female readers as the 'foremost house of fashion in the world': 'the entire French railway system comprises barely ten thousand kilometers of tracks. This one store, with its stock of textiles, could virtually stretch a tent over all the railroad tracks of France' (…). But we cannot help asking: how are stores supposed to find room to stock this gigantic quantity of goods? The answer is very simple and, what is more, very logical: each firm is always larger than the others*" (Benjamin 1999: 174). Industrial exhibitions had become a tradition of the century since its start: "*beginning in*

[xi] In his seventh Convolute, Benjamin mediates an evocative definition of the Marxist concept : "The commodity has become an abstraction. Once escaped from the hand of the producer and divested of its real particularity, it ceases to be a product and to be ruled over by human beings. It has acquired a 'ghostly objectivity' and leads a life of its own (…). In the language of the commodities exchange, cotton 'soars', copper 'slumps', corn is 'active', coal is 'sluggish', wheat 'is on the road to recovery', and petroleum 'displays a healthy trend'. Things have gained autonomy, and they

1801, the products of newly emerging industries were exhibited in the courtyard of the Louvre (…). Then, following the example of England, which had organized an international exhibition in 1851, Imperial France held world exhibitions on the Champ de Mars in 1855 and 1867. The first saw the birth of the Palais de l'Industrie, demolished during the Republic; the second was a delirious festival marking the high point of the Second Empire (…). It is characteristic of these enormous fairs to be ephemeral, yet each has left its trace in Paris. The exhibition of 1878 was responsible for the Trocadéro, that eccentric palace (…), the exhibition of 1889 left behind the Galerie des Machines, which was eventually torn down, although the Eiffel tower still stands..." (Benjamin 1999: 179-180). Finally, "*the great goal so long sought had finally been achieved: that of making of Paris an object of luxury and curiosity, rather than of use – a ville d'exposition, a display city under glass... an object of admiration and envy to foreigners, unbearable for its inhabitants (Victor Fournel, Ce qu'on voit dans les rues de Paris, 1867, p. 235; Benjamin 1999: 401). In the same context, the futuristic posters of the illustrator Grandville were "the sybilline books of publicité", which announced the new tempo of life, at a time when "one could wake up some morning to find one's window placarded*" (Benjamin 1999: 65); and "*within frames of the pictures that hung on dining room walls, the advent of whiskey advertisements, of Van Houten cocoa, of Amieux canned food was being heralded*" (Benjamin 1999: 171-172). The fetishism of brands was entering daily life.

9. The eternal return of the same, or the temporality of Hell

> *"Fashion: Madam death! Madam death!*
> *-Giacomo Leopardi, "Dialogue between Fashion and Death"*
> *(…) For fashion was never anything other than the parody of the motley cadaver, provocation of death through the woman, and bitter colloquy with decay whispered between shrill bursts of mechanical laughter. That is fashion. And that is why she changes so quickly; she titillates death and is already something different, something new, as he casts about to crash her.* (Walter Benjamin, Arcades Project, 1999, p.62-63)

The phenomenology of a world submitted to phantasmagorias, understood as seductive images hiding the reality of social relationships of production, would not be complete without including the topic of fashion; Benjamin, who had for sure read Simmel's *Philosophie der Mode* (1905), dedicates his second Convolute to the subject, with explicit references to the german philosopher[xii]: "*Simmel calls attention to the fact that 'the take on human features...The commodity has been transformed into an idol that, although the*

[xii] Benjamin had attended to the lectures of Simmel in Berlin and had certainly read his Philosophie des Geldes (1907); he was also significantly influenced by the Simmelian exploration of modern metropolitan culture and sociability, whose quintessential attribute was characterized as "shock experience" (Chockerlebnis). The reference to Simmel is omnipresent in Benjamin's writings, even if the central Benjaminian motive of "awakening" was absent from the Simmelian phenomenology of modernity. Furthermore, the two german thinkers would endure the same ostracism in the universitary fields of their generations, in never obtaining a permanent position, even if they both had a non-negligible posthumous influence on posterity: the first one in Chicago, the second in Frankfurt.

product of human hand, disposes over the human." (Otto Rühle, *Karl Marx*, 1928, pp. 384; Benjamin 1999: 182). Simmel calls attention to the fact that the inventions of fashion at the present time are increasingly incorporated into the objective situation of labor in the economy... Nowhere does an article first appear and then become a fashion; rather, articles are introduced for the express purpose of becoming fashions'. (...) Simmel explains 'why women in general are the staunchest adherents of fashion... Specifically: from the weakness of the social position to which women have been condemned for the greater part of history derives their intimate relation with all that is etiquette[xiii]'. (…) Simmel asserts that 'fashions differ for different classes – the fashions of the upper stratum of society are never identical with those of the lower; in fact, they are abandoned by the former as soon as the latter prepares to appropriate them'" (Benjamin 1999: 71). The fascination for novelty would have the characteristic feature to move from top to bottom; Paul Valéry's voice is also to be heard on the topic: "*Our ideals are good for ten years! The ancient and excellent reliance on the judgment of posterity has been stupidly replaced by the ridiculous superstition of 'novelty', which assigns the most illusory ends to our enterprises, condemning them to the creation of what is most perishable, of what must be perishable by its nature: the sensation of newness...*" (Valéry, *Préambule*, 1935, p. IV; Benjamin 1999: 73). Beyond the social motive of fashion, understood as "*the effort to distinguish the higher classes of society from the lower*" (…), Benjamin mobilizes the words of Brecht in order to define once again fashion as the antithesis to revolution: "*Rulers have a great aversion to violent changes. They want everything to stay the same – if possible for a thousand years*." (Brecht, *Fünf Schwierigkeiten beim Schreiben der Wahrheit*, 1935, p.32; Benjamin 1999: 72). Indeed, fashion would only be a disguised "eternal return" (if the words are from Nietzsche, the signification is here far from being existential) of the same, exactly like modernity itself, a *false* change permitted by a collective dream and amnesia[xiv], an illusory and sterile *perpetuum mobile*: "*Definition of the 'Modern' as the new in the context of what has always already been there.(...) This constitutes the eternity of Hell. To determine the totality of traits by which the 'Modern' is defined would be to represent Hell. (…) On the motif of the heaths scapes in Kafka's Der Prozess: in the time of Hell, the new is always the eternally selfsame*." (Benjamin 1999: 544). In fact, "*the eternally up-to-date (das Ewig-Heutige) escapes historical consideration; it is truly overcome only through a consideration that is political (theological)*"

[xiii] The *Passagen-Werk* evokes frequently the demeaning role devoted to women in the commodity-producing society, and especially the reification of the prostitute, a feminine figure which was so praised by Baudelaire and tenderly evoked in his poetry: "In the form taken by prostitution in the big cities, the woman appears not only as commodity but, in a precise sense, as mass-produced article (…). As a matter of fact, prostitution in the Middle ages does not, for example, display the crudeness that in the nineteenth century was the rule." (Benjamin 1999: 346-348).

[xiv] About the phenomenon of collective amnesia, or what he names "bad contemporariness", Benjamin cites an anecdote found in Julien Benda's *La trahison des clercs* (1927): " A German reports his amazement when, sitting at a *table d'hôte* in Paris fourteen days after the storming of the Bastille, he heard no one speak of politics... It is no different when Anatole France has the aged Pilate chatting in Rome of the days of his governorship and saying, as he touches on the revolt of the kings of the Jews: *now, what was he called?* " (Benjamin 1999: 544).

(Benjamin 1999: 543). Fashion, like *sole* technical progress, would be the symptom of a "regression in progression".

Quite emblematic of the fashion of the Second Empire was the puffed-up and frequently ridiculed crinoline: "*the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie works a change in women's wear. Clothing and hairstyles take on added dimensions...(...) Women, thus accoutered, appeared destined for a sedentary life - family life - since their manner of dress had about it nothing that could ever suggest or seem to further the idea of movement*." (Charles Blanc, *Considérations sur le vêtement des femmes*, 1872, pp. 12-13; Benjamin 1999: 74). The Monarchie de Juillet had already from the beginning of the 1830's marked a clear orientation of the bourgeois order towards the domestic shell of the Interior, understood as the dialectical pendant to the public and collective realm of the streets and arcades explored by the idle, contemplative flâneur[xv]: "*under the reign of Louis Philippe, the private individual makes his entry into history. For the private individual, places of dwelling are for the first time opposed to places of work. The former comes to constitute the interior, and its complement is the office.*" (Benjamin, Exposé of 1935, "Louis Philippe, or the Interior"). Characteristic of the nineteenth century's societal development, the art of "dwelling" would have found its best expression at the end of the century in the "invention" of Jugendstil, whose most characteristic work was "*the house. More precisely, the single-family dwelling (…), while the occupant himself loses the power of moving freely and becomes attached to ground and property*" (Dolf Sternberger, "Jugendstil", *Die neue Rundschau*, 1934, pp. 264; Benjamin 1999: 550). Benjamin mediates furthermore the Surrealist critique of the trend: "*What is Jugendstil, I am tempted to ask, but an attempt to generalize and to adapt design, painting, and sculpture to dwellings and furniture?*" (André Breton, *Point du jour*, 1934, pp. 234-236; Benjamin 1999: 549). Just like women's wear, which in the aftermath of Restoration and the loss of revolutionary ideals, is being increasingly directed towards family life, furniture wishes to "take root" in the ground of the fetishized Interior, at a time when the sirens of domestic comfort would tend to bury the horizon of collective utopia.

In Benjamin's perspective, the only remedy to the "eternal return of the same" would be the breaking of the "temporality of Hell" through the institution of a new social and temporal order. In his Convolute about fashion, he mentions the fantasies of Etienne Cabet in his utopian novel *Voyage en Icarie* (1840): "*Cabet had in fact tried to prove in the novel, which contains his system, that the communist state of the future could admit no product of the imagination and could suffer no change in its institutions. He had therefore banned from Icaria all fashion (…) and had demanded that dresses, ustensils, and the like, should never be altered*." (Benjamin 1999: 71). We already mentioned the fascination of Benjamin for the first socialist utopias, which after the defeats of 1848, tended to be forgotten. At a time

[xv] One could say, in reading Benjamin, that Haussmann shared already "Taylor's obsession and that of his collaborators and successors: 'the war on flânerie' " (Georges Friedmann, *La crise du progrès*, 1936; Benjamin 1999: 436). Further to be found in the *Passagen-Werk*: "In bourgeois society, indolence - to take up Marx's word - has ceased to be 'heroic' (Marx speaks of 'the victory of industry over a heroic indolence')". (*Gesammelte Schriften von Karl Marx und Friedrich Engels*, 1902, p.211; Benjamin 1999: 801). And finally, one could say that in late industrial capitalism, "the true 'salaried flâneur' is the sandwich man" (Benjamin 1999: 804).

when, out of alienation and despair, "*suicide was familiar in the mental world of the workers*" (Benjamin 1999: 721), the imagination of Fourier was still full of this "anthropological materialism" which would have been lost with the later rigidification of Marxist orthodoxy: "*only in the summery middle of the nineteenth century, only under its sun, can one conceive of Fourier's fantasy materialized. (…) One readily grasps the importance of the culinary in Fourier: happiness has its recipes like any pudding. It is realized on the basis of a precise measuring out of different ingredients*." (Benjamin 1999: 638). Fourier's recipe was that of the Phalanstery, compared by Benjamin to the covered architectures of the Arcades, and its ingredients were participation in a harmonious collective, equality, prodigality, leisure, the suppression of patriarchal authority, plus a reconciled relationship with nature. Indeed, Fourier reproached "*Descartes with having, in his doubt, spared 'that tree of lies one calls civilization*'" as enemy of natural elements (Benjamin 1999: 642): "*one of the most remarkable features of the Fourierist utopia is that it never advocated the exploitation of nature by man, an idea that became widespread in the following period*" (Benjamin, Exposé of 1939, "Fourier, or the Arcades"). But above all, Fourier's system relied on an efficient "functioning of society, whose motive forces are the human *passions*", and a "colossal conception of Man" defended by Marx himself [xvi] (ibid). Furthermore and more surprisingly, "the secret cue for the Fourierist utopia was the advent of machines" in an ideal context where "the integration of the technological into social life" would not fail through the double exploitation of Nature by Man, and of Man by Man himself[xvii]; but in too soon ridiculing Fourier's fantasies and letting itself being dominated instead by its own phantasmagorias, the century would have been "*incapable of responding to the new technological possibilities with a new social order*." (Benjamin, Exposé of 1939, "Conclusion").

But despite Haussmann's efforts to avoid further uprisings after 1848, "*the barricade is resurrected during the Commune. It is actually stronger and better designed than ever. It stretches across the great boulevards, often reaching a height of two stores, and shields the trenches behind it. Just as the Communist Manifesto ends the age of professional conspirators, so the Commune puts an end to the phantasmagoria that dominates the earliest aspirations of the proletariat. It dispels the illusion that the task of the proletarian revolution is to complete the work of 1789 in close collaboration with the bourgeoisie. But the bourgeoisie never shared in this error. Its battle against the social rights of the proletariat dates back to the great Revolution, and converges with the philanthropic movement that gives it cover and that was in its heyday under Napoleon III (…) The burning of Paris is the worthy conclusion to Baron Haussmann's work of*

[xvi] Benjamin, in his corrective of orthodox Marxism, wishes to recall as much as he can the original romantic sensibility of Marx, which was, in his perspective, lost in the posthumous dogmatic – what he names 'vulgar' interpretation of Marxism. In his Convolute about the figure of the Collector, he cites passages of Marx's writings which would perfectly fit in the mould of an "anthropological materialism": "*All the physical and intellectual senses have been replaced by the simple alienation of all the senses, the sense of having... (…) I can, in practice, relate myself humanly to an object only if the object relates itself humanly to man*." (Marx, *Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844*, p. 300 ; Benjamin 1999 : 209).

[xvii] In his Convolute about Fourier, Benjamin attests in a note that "Fourier does not know the concept of exploitation": "*The phalanstery is organized like a land of milk and honey. Even amusements (hunting, fishing, making music, growing flowers, performing in theatricals) are remunerated*." (Benjamin 1999: 645).

destruction." (Benjamin, Exposé of 1939, "Haussmann, or the Barricades"). In his theses *On the concept of history*, Benjamin also mentions the revolutionary figure of Auguste Blanqui[xviii], imprisoned in the Fort du Taureau during the Commune just before being executed[xix], a fortress from where he wrote his own philosophical testament called *L'éternité par les astres* (1872), which in its "*resignation without hope*", would have "*completed the century's constellation with one last cosmic phantasmagoria which implicitly comprehends the severest critique of all the others*[xx]" (ibid). Just like Benjamin in his last text, on the threshold of the grave, Blanqui must recognize that "*there is no progress. (…) Always and everywhere in the terrestrial arena, the same drama, the same setting, on the same narrow stage – a noisy humanity infatuated with its own grandeur, believing itself to be the universe and living in its own prison (…). The same monotony, the same immobility, on other heavenly bodies. The universe repeats itself endlessly and paws the ground in place. In infinity, eternity performs - impertubably - the same routines*." (Blanqui, 1872, p.75). In his fourth Convolute named "Boredom, eternal return", Benjamin would then note: "*Counterpart to Blanqui's view of the world: the universe is a site of lingering catastrophe*". (Benjamin 1999: 111).

10. Conclusion

If one could say that "*each epoch dreams the one to follow*" (Michelet, "Avenir, avenir!", 1873; Benjamin 1999: 150), Baudelaire would respond, surely with the approbation of Blanqui, that one must not forget that "all these old things also have a moral value" (Benjamin, 1999: 203). "*To interrupt the course of the world - that was Baudelaire's deepest intention, the intention of Joshua*." (Benjamin 1999: 318); "*what makes itself felt through the evocation of Paris in Baudelaire's verse is the infirmity and decrepitude of a great city*" (Benjamin 1999: 332); "Baudelaire's opposition to progress was the indispensable condition for his success at capturing Paris in his poetry (…): *Spleen* is the feeling that corresponds to catastrophe in permanence." (Benjamin 1999: 346). If the writer of *Les fleurs du mal* - which Benjamin

[xviii] "*Not man or men but the struggling oppressed class itself is the depository of historical knowledge. (...)This conviction, which had only a brief resurgence in the Spartakist group, has always been objectionable to Social Democrats. Within three decades they managed virtually to erase the name of Blanqui, though it had been the rallying sound that had reverberated through the preceding century*." (Benjamin, 1940, These IV).

[xix] Benjamin reports in his Convolute about "Social Movement" a tragical-comical anecdote about Blanqui's process: "*Blanqui, in the proceedings, under the presiding judge: 'What is your profession?' Blanqui: 'Proletarian'. Judge: 'That is no profession'. Blanqui: 'What! Not a profession? It is the profession of thirty million Frenchmen who live by their labor and who are deprived of political rights!'. Judge: 'Well, so be it. Let the clerk record that the accused is a Proletarian...'*." (Benjamin 1999: 735).

[xx] Blanqui also made a sharp critique of Haussmanization, cited by Benjamin: "*The Haussmanization of Paris and the provinces is one of the great plagues of the Second Empire. No one will ever know how many thousands of infortunates have lost their lives as a consequence of deprivations occasioned by these senseless constructions. (…) 'When building goes well, everything goes well', runs a popular adage, which has attained the status of economic axiom. By this standard, a hundred pyramids of Cheops, rising together into the clouds, would attest to overflowing prosperity. (…) In proportion as Rome collapsed in agony, its monuments grew more numerous and more colossal. It was building its own sepulcher and making ready to die gloriously. But as for the modern world – it has no wish to die, and human stupidity is nearing its end.*" (Blanqui, *Critique sociale*, 1885, p. 109; Benjamin 1999: 144).

translated, like Proust's *Du côté de chez Swann*, from french to german - plays a central role in the *Passagen-Werk*, his experience of Parisian modernity was present in many other contemporary discourses, which also had the intuition of a catastrophe threatening permanently the megalomaniac *Ville-Lumière*[xxi]. Benjamin, who had with patience *collected* these complaints during more than a decade in the archives of the Bibliothèque Nationale, wishes to make their voices well heard by posterity, in the moral act of *remembering* required by the "*Copernician revolution in historical perception" he theorized: "the new, dialectical method of doing history presents itself as the art of experiencing the present as waking world, a world to which that dream we name the past refers in truth*[xxii]*. To pass through and carry out what has been in remembering the dream!- Therefore: remembering and awakening are most intimately related. Awakening is namely the dialectical, Copernician turn of remembrance.*" (Benjamin 1999: 389). Benjamin's "revolution" consists in the replacement of an "homogeneous", "empty" continuum (from past to present, towards future) by an empathic and dialectical correspondence between past and present, in a double effort to re-actualize the past and to re-historicize the present, attempting to make its constant projection forwards in the creation of a "past future", obsolete.

If on the contrary to Ernst Bloch, Benjamin accords in his "melancholic" Marxism more significance to "*the organization of pessimism*" than to "*the principle of hope*" (Bloch 1959), it is certainly because dystopia was to him more sensibly palpable than utopia. Indeed, Benjamin refers to a Paradise which, like Bachofen's matriarchal harmony, certainly never existed, while the Hell he describes had already traumatized a whole generation; referring to the same damnation, Paul Valéry would write after the experiences of the First World War: "*we, later civilizations...we too, now, know that we are mortal*" (Valéry 1919: 1). In his *Einbahnstrasse* (1926: 25), Benjamin had warned of the fires that were still to come without an active conversion of consciousness: "we have to cut the rope before the spark attains the dynamite". The spark had already reached the dynamite when Benjamin undertook to write his theses *On the concept of history* and the pessimism of his philosophy of history found a solid ground in the events threathening the European continent; in his text on *Surrealism* (1929: 91), he would write an ironic premonition: "Pessimism all along the line. Absolutely...but above all, mistrust, mistrust and again mistrust in all mutual understanding reached between classes, nations, individuals. And

[xxi] One of them, Léon Daudet, poet and author of *Lettres de mon moulin*, describes his feelings in looking at Paris from the panoramic viewpoint of the Sacré-Coeur: "*From high up you can see this population of palaces, monuments, houses, and hovels, which seem to have gathered in expectation of some cataclysm, or of several cataclyms (…). And yes, at a certain moment I heard in myself something like a tocsin, a strange admonition, and I saw this magnificent city... threathened with collapse, with devastation by fire and blood, with carnage, with rapid erosion, like forests leveled en bloc*." (Benjamin 1999: 100). Once again, the Rousseauist critique of Society is not far.

[xxii] Of course, the motive of "awakening" from a "false consciousness" is also present in Marx's writings and cited by Benjamin: "*The reform of consciouness consists solely in... the awakening of the world from its dream about itself*" (Marx, *Der historische Materialismus: Die Früschriften*, 1932, p.226; Benjamin 1999: 456). Benjamin's innovation is here to adapt this ambition to historiography in trying to break with the temporal continuum: the consciousness of the present can awaken from a dream about itself and its own future in remembering the lost dreams of the past.

unlimited trust only in *IG Farben* and the peaceful perfection of the *Luftwaffe*". Of course, Benjamin could not have predicted what kind of disasters the Luftwaffe would inflict to European cities and civilians during the next war, nor that the IG Farben would illustrate itself twelve years later in the fabrication of the Zyklon B gas which would help rationalize the Holocaust; but his "organized pessimism" let him already envisage all documents of culture as potential instruments of barbarism, rendering hereby the continuity drawn by him between the materials of the Parisian Arcades and the materials of mass destruction and genocide used during the two World Wars, less arbitrary.

To the image of a locomotive marching irresistibly towards its destination, Benjamin opposes, in a prophecy rather turned backwards, the paradox of a catastrophe which constantly threatens to be imminent because it has already happened and is durably established. In its denunciation of the progressist optimism common to industrial capitalism, orthodox Marxism and social democracy, Benjamin's philosophy of history has to draw from the doll of historical materialism (a tradition mostly valued by the later interpretations of Brecht) and the dwarf of theology (especially defended by Scholem in his exegeses of Benjamin's work), making his position somehow lack of unity; together with Habermas, we can ask ourselves if any attempt to *systematize* this poetical thought would, after all, not be vain[xxiii]. Furthermore, the drastic Benjaminian preference for the realm of "past experience" (Erfahrungsraum) to the detriment of an "awaited horizon" (Erwartungshorizont) - from the name of the two principles of time consciousness defined by Koselleck (1988) - could lead some commentators to consider less the revolutionary character of his "redemptive criticism" than the "eminent conservatism" of his thought (Habermas 1979: 38; 1988: 22): a conservatism namely contained in the constant reference to tradition required by each present generation, endowed with messianic power, and responsible to fulfill all disappointed expectancies imputed to past generations in an act of "remembrance". The "principle of responsibility" defended decades later by Hans Jonas (1979) towards the generations to come is here being inverted: the present is with Benjamin morally *responsible* for the past, not for the future.

The key to all this might be, as Hannah Arendt suggested it, that Benjamin was indeed more of a melancholic *homme de lettres* than a rigorous philosopher. Like Baudelaire in his own time, "*he had to lay claim to the dignity of the poet in a society that had no more dignity of any kind to offer*" (Benjamin 1999: 399): Benjamin, like in the allegory of the Baudelairian poem, was an *Albatross* used to the lightness of the airs, condemned to manifest his impracticality and inadaptability in a very down-to-earth modern world, which he refused. The testimony of Hans Sahl, who was interned with Benjamin, gives

[xxiii] "Benjamin combined diverging motifs, yet without actually unifying them. And if they were unified, then it would have to be in as many individual unities as there are elements in which the interested gaze of succeeding generations of interpreters attempts to pierce the crust and penetrate to regions where there are veins of live ore. Benjamin belongs to those authors who cannot be summarized and whose work is disposed to a history of disparate effects. We encounter these authors only with the sudden flash of contemporary immediacy in which a thought takes power and holds sway for an historical instant. (Habermas 1979: 32).

echo to the words of Lisa Fittko: "*as he tried to orient himself to reality using his intelligence and his historical-political understanding, he distanced himself ever further from it*" (Eiland & Jennings 2014: 647). Early in the year 1940 and "like many other residents of Paris, he purchased a gas mask"; but "*unlike many other residents, he could see in its material presence, in his little world, an ironic allegory, one superimposing the medieval on the modern and the spiritual on the technological: 'a disturbing double of those skulls with which studious monks decorated their cells*" (Eiland & Jennings 2014: 657). At that time, Benjamin had already "*the aim of finding a safe haven in the United States*" (Eiland & Jennings 2014: 664) and started to learn English together with Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher; but unlike them, he would not "make it"[xxiv]: even if the Institute in New-York had duly required for him an entry visa to America, he would never achieve to obtain an exit authorization of the French territory. It is said that, during his agony in Port-Bou, he never stopped looking at the clock[xxv].

After the catastrophe of Fukushima, Jean-Pierre Dupuy held a conference in Tokyo in which he recalled the reflexions which Günther Anders held in his journal during his visits to Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1958: "*From the catastrophe, they speak of as if it was an earthquake, an asteroïd, or a tsunami (…) At the instant when the world becomes apocalyptic, and thus of our own fault, if offers the image...of a paradise inhabited by murderers without evil intentions and victims without hatred. Nowhere is any trace of malignity to be seen, there are only ruins*" (Dupuy 2012: 1). The philosopher of catastrophe had like his former wife come to identify a certain "*banality of evil*" (Arendt 1963) summarized in the idea of a "Promethean discrepancy" between human innovation and foresight; Jean-Pierre Dupuy sustains that the autonomization of mischief from the *real* intentions of social actors would render the principles of precaution and responsibility before risks fully sterile. The paradigm of a "risk society" which would have - finally - gained its reflexivity in adopting the incertitude proper to late modernity would, in this perspective, still inscribe itself in the modern project of mastery and in its teleology of progress. The catastrophe of Fukushima took place, after all, in a society very different from the Sovietic Union where Tchernobyl had happened: have we really become more reflexive? Jean-Pierre Dupuy's theoretical answer is to replace an *incertitude* before risks by a *certitude* towards catastrophes, and his "enlightened catastrophism" could recall Benjamin's claim to an "organized pessimism", set this time in the context of a post-modern society which dreams itself as being both

[xxiv] Following the fantasy of David Kishik, we could ask ourselves: "*what if Walter Benjamin actually made it to NewYork as he was escaping the Nazis, settling there for the rest of his long life? What if he was working on a sequel to his Arcades Project, translating his ideas about Paris, capital of the nineteenth century, to his new city and own epoch?*" (Kishik 2013: 1). Would he have undertaken a phenomenology of the metropole in the triumphal fifties, engaging himself with the uncommon verticality of Manhattan buildings and the gigantism of the Brooklyn bridge?

[xxv] Carina Birman, who was with him when he died, reports: "*He told me that by no means was he willing to return to the border, or to move out of this hotel. When I remarked that there was no alternative other than to leave, he declared that there was one for him. He hinted that he had some very effective poisonous pills with him. He was lying half naked in his bed and had his very beautiful big golden grandfather watch with open cover on a little board near him, observing the time constantly*." (Eiland & Jennings 2014: 657).

reflexive in its present praxis and responsible towards its future. The methodology of apocalypse is common to other contemporary discourses; after all, since the "*end of history*" (Fukuyama 1992) has been declared, "*it has become easier to envisage the end of the world, than the end of capitalism itself*." (Zizek 2014: 30).

Conflict of Interest Statement
The author declares no conflicts of interests.

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