

# Art, Critique and Memory Values and Historical Tensions in the Experience of the City

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## Introduction

This section gathers together the improved versions of the papers presented at the Benjaminian Colloquium «Art, Critique and Memory – Values and Historical Tensions in the Experience of the City», which took place at the Faculty for Social Sciences and Humanities of Universidade Nova de Lisboa on the 23rd of June 2016 as part of an ongoing research project – conducted by IFILNOVA’s group «Art, Critique and Aesthetic Experience». This project aims at investigating the experience of the city in the intersection between philosophy and art. Bringing together scholars such as Fabrizio Desideri, Jeanne Marie Gagnebin, Maria Filomena Molder, and some new voices from the field of the studies on Benjamin (Nélio Conceição, Bruno C. Duarte, Luciano Gatti), this symposium was a convenient opportunity and an enriching meeting point for possible developments of the Benjaminian heritage.

In the texts gathered here, the critical thinking of Walter Benjamin becomes a compelling means to explore the way artistic practices absorb historical tensions, as well as the transformation of values in modern societies. Therefore, the city, both from the perspective of critique and history and of art, is the pivotal point on which these contributions focus. Against this backdrop, Benjamin’s thought shows all its potential: it tackles essential questions concerning artistic practices and it also delves into the experience of the city as a privileged space where collective and individual memory are meaningfully interwoven. Indeed, this becomes apparent when we look at the relationship between writing and reminiscence in his *Berliner Childhood around 1900* book or at the fundamental role the city of Paris

plays in his understanding of the tensions, fractures and ambiguities of modernity in the unfinished project on the Parisian Arcades.

By presenting a dialectical relation between «now» and «what-has-been», Benjamin's historical thinking provides important keys to analyse the ethical, social and political issues of modernity. As Jeanne Marie Gagnebin shows, the Berlin thought-images of *Einbahnstraße* are not only akin to surrealism and other avant-garde movements, but also disclose a powerful political and intellectual background – influenced by the romantic relationship with Asja Lacis and Benjamin's considerations on the dimension of play. As in the thinking of several of his contemporaries, who wrote about major figures of literature, the avant-garde movements and the new technical means, such as photography and cinema, in Benjamin's thinking the question of aesthetic values goes hand in hand with the study of the changes in the conditions of the possibility of experience in modernity. Moreover, that study is strongly related to a critical attitude in this changing scenario. In this vein, Luciano Gatti's close reading of Benjamin's commentaries on the *Handbook for City-Dwellers* by Bertolt Brecht pertinently points out that, more than a lamentation about the decay of tradition in our urban life, they comprise ways of sharpening a critical attitude. The experience of shock, increased by urban modern life, clearly involves a perceptual dimension, often related to body-rooted reactions to technological stimuli. By delving into the analogy between the gestures of the worker in the assembly line and the gestures of the gambler in «On some Motifs in Baudelaire», Nélio Conceição's text proposes an alternative interpretation of repetition, thereby problematizing the effects of the shock experience.

The monadic and labyrinthine nature of the knowledge of the city offered in Benjamin's texts matches an imagistic concept of history, which Fabrizio Desideri thoroughly presents in his text, by highlighting the link between the project on the Parisian Arcades and the book on the *Trauerspiel*. The complementarity between the micrological analysis and the theological task of a critical reconstruction of the whole brings forth the complex and prolific concept of «dialectical image». Hence, besides the

diversity of approaches to urban phenomena and the constellation of nexuses of the notion of «city», Benjamin's texts have a physiognomic background and, implicitly, they seem to call for an exercise of decipherment of modern social and economic structures. This invites us to consider the city as a privileged space where the values of the present are discernible, where the historical tensions with the past can be measured, and where the expectations and challenges of the future can be projected.

Nowadays, the ways we live and experience urban spaces are certainly different from the nineteenth century ones, brought forth by the quotations and observations of *Das Passagen-Werk*. By contrasting Benjamin's theory of quotation with the different ways his work has been quoted, and particularly in the case of Kenneth Goldsmith's book project *Capital: New York, Capital of the 20th Century*, Bruno C. Duarte insightfully touches the heart of the artistic appropriation of the Arcades Project «method». Thus, even if we are writing today in a completely different context from the one of the Weimar Republic and the years that culminated in the Second World War, Benjamin's thinking is still critical and provocative. The richness of the developments brought about by these texts shows how their philosophical, political or artistic motifs provide us with «methods», concepts and insights that are contemporary.