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The Physiognomist and The Rag-Picker Walter Benjamin: Reading the City-as-Text and Writing the Text-as-City

Pınar Balat
TU Delft

Istanbul

A girl in her early twenties, wearing a bright-colored sweater and a medium length skirt, looked for a place to sit. When she finally sat down and took out her book, entitled 'Komünist Manifesto', the girl of the adjacent seat gave her and her book a short, cold glance. This other girl, too, held a book in her hands, a collection of verses of Koran and sayings of Mohamed. Soon she stands up and moves to another seat far enough from the supposedly heathen girl. In Istanbul, everyone must choose his standpoint, everyone must know next to whom he is standing, but more important than that, who he is standing up to.

There is no clearer demonstration of this than in times of voting, when crowds line up outside the elementary schools of the city to put their political choice on paper with a red stamp marking 'yes'. A 'yes', most often formulated not as an election of one political party but as a rejection of the rest. Istanbul obliges one to live alongside with the other that one so strongly rejects to be, just as she hides a brothel behind the rear wall of a mosque or raises luxury residence blocks out of an old slum. A teenage girl keeps her head low to ignore the whistles of a group of men standing on her way to school; a middle aged religious man uncomfortably sits behind a kissing couple and nods disapprovingly as he tries to keep his eyes off them; a child sells handkerchiefs while he completes his school work kneeled down on the street, outside the door of an expensive sea food restaurant. Istanbul, the capital of glorious empires, the fascination of many travelers, in reality, is almost never delightful, but always overwhelmingly alluring.

An old small ferry travels through the grimy waters of Haliç. Involuntarily, on these

boats, people of the city become objects under display, as if their faces, cloths and gestures were a historical edifice to be visited. It is for documenting one of the many similar daily scenes of Istanbul that the foreigners get onto these boats, for taking travel pictures of the six-year-old girls whose heads are covered with colorful scarves, and for considering the eighteen-year-old girl who is already a mother to three kids, as a part of their fascinating experience in the developing world.

Judging from the flowing crowd of the streets in the center, one thinks this is almost Europe. Though details give it away, the foreigner is blinded by the impudent laughs, rushing bodies and loud conversations. A stuffed-mussel seller chats with a group of students as he counts the money, an angry taxi-driver coarsely tells an old lady off for not looking where she is going, a group of teenagers comment on the legs of a young girl as she clumsily walks by on her high heels. The recently painted nineteenth century buildings with balconies of splendid ironwork remind of the area's old educated population, the long-ignored apartment blocks demonstrate today's poverty and ignorance. Music fills in the air and a continuous loud murmuring surrounds the houses and hotels, shops and mosques, schools and brothels. A girl in the crowd argues about the human rights violations in a neighboring country, as she orders a new glass of beer with a few movements of her hand.

Not everywhere, though, the city generates such blend of melodies, conversations and glasses clinking together. Other streets and other girls are much more quiet. In a neighborhood not very far from the luxury breakfasts and exclusive celebrations of Bosphorus, streets are unpaved, trees are covered with dust and electricity is stolen from an adjacent power line. A frantic ritual of cleaning and cooking goes on in the houses during the day, always accompanied by one television program or another. Pile fabric curtains conceal the interiors, as it is the most private of the family, as it is where both tender love and violent abuse must stay disguised. In one of the kitchens, a young girl cooks dinner for her husband while keeping an eye on the children who fight over a piece of chocolate.

Istanbul obliges one to choose a standpoint, to be one and not the other, gives one a label and a corresponding code of conduct. Istanbul breaks down her territory into pieces. To some, she gives a temporary neighborhood of broken roofs and crowded rooms, to others a lonely mansion and an exclusive life. She holds them together, antagonizing and at once compelling one to the other. People of Istanbul lament over a missed prayers time, a lost job opportunity; they worry about the education of a child or an unexpected assault, and they sigh, in disappointment, as they repeat to themselves an old saying: "Istanbul, the land made of gold."

A city could be perceived as a formation of layers of narratives, as a collection of images traced by spatial experiences. Walter Benjamin would define it as a "linguistic cosmos" (Gilloch 181), as an accumulation of 'mute' objects, the linguis-

tic potential of which becomes legible to the attentive philosopher, who translates this potential into the language of words and eventually brings them to speech (Buck-Morss 13). Following Benjamin's philosophy of language while developing a new perspective on the urban phenomena, we recognize that the city always proves to be more than a mere combination of its composite parts. Spatial narratives, which trace the surface of the city, form invisible connections between objects and images, incrementally constructing threads or patchworks of urban experience; in this manner, they allow the city to have a greater meaning and content than that of its composite parts alone. Literary narratives, city portraits in particular, have a similar nature of constructing urban experiences, this time on paper, by piecing together the literary depictions of urban images and the linguistic translations of mute urban objects. The urban, then, whether experienced in a spatial or in a literary narrative, exists both as the real and as the imaginary, most often simultaneously. In the city portraits of Benjamin, the literary narrative appears in the image of the spatial experience, and at once, the particular structure of the literary depiction gives shape to the spatial narrative itself, as it is experienced on paper. This paper, following the philosophy and literary style of Walter Benjamin, intends to explore the spatial and literary narratives of two cities and two texts, Istanbul and Naples, as they are reciprocally born and reproduced in each other.

A physiognomist studies the outer appearance of a person in order to resolve his inner personality. Similarly, an urban physiognomist would study the physical structures of a city, in order to reveal the social and historical formations underlying them. Walter Benjamin's gaze on the city has been compared with that of an urban physiognomist (Gilloch 171). Physiognomical reading is an act of critical unmasking, an act of removing the layers of the urban objects in order to allow them reveal themselves and to show through (Gilloch 170). Following Benjamin's conception of the city as a linguistic cosmos or an unwritten text, it is possible to notice the correspondence between the urban images under a physiognomical gaze and the allegories of a literary work. Gilloch defines allegory as "a mode of representation in which each element of what is said or depicted stands for something else. In allegory, the apparent or surface meaning is a veneer, which conceals the actual, hidden sense" (Gilloch 171). Therefore, a physiognomical gaze at the city renders every object and every perceived experience as an allegory that stands for a social or historical formation: "Benjamin points out that 'any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else'" (Benjamin, German Tragic Drama 175 qtd. in Gilloch, 135). Thus, it is through allegory or similarly through physiognomical reading, that the city is transformed into a series of signs to be

deciphered, a text to be read (Gilloch 171). Benjamin, in his early essays carries out an experiment of how to interpret as a literary style, the successive images gathered by a passer-by as he walks through the city. He conceives the images not as subjective impressions but as objective expressions, so the linguistic content of the urban objects becomes legible and the phenomena of the city is 'read' as a language (Buck-Morss 13). Then, Benjamin in his writings translates this city-as-text into the language of words, therefore, brings the city to speech through the formation of its literary narrative.

A rag-picker is a person who collects rags and other urban debris from the streets for a livelihood, and it is in the image of the rag-picker that Walter Benjamin defines what it is to write a [city] text in the modern epoch: the slow piecing together of words and phrases, insights and instances, into a montage or mosaic of modernity (Gilloch 183). As Gilloch writes, Benjamin produces texts, which not only give an account of the city, but have urban experiences fundamentally embedded within them; he gives literary form to the city and to urban life (Gilloch 19). Two central formal properties of Benjamin's texts are the dominance of the visual and the imagery, and the predilection for the immediate and the fragmented. These properties also present themselves as the definitive characteristics of urban life. According to Benjamin, the fragmentary and immediate character of the modern urban experience renders as inconvenient the literary forms of representation that emphasize continuity and progress (Gilloch 173). Therefore as Susan Buck-Morss argues, he "rejects the 'pretentious, universal gesture of the book,' denouncing as sterile 'any literary activity [...that] takes place within a literary frame'" (Scholem and Adorno, Briefe 85 qtd. in Buck-Morss 17). Benjamin, instead of the conventional literary styles, praises the prompt language of leaflets, placards, brochures, and articles, because according to him, only the language of such literary forms "shows itself capable of immediate effectiveness" (Scholem and Adorno, Briefe 85 qtd. in Buck-Morss 17). In the modern epoch, "the calm, measured narrative unfolded by the story-teller is to be replaced by the frantic, immediate language of the journalist-as-rag-picker" (Gilloch 173). Benjamin, besides the methodology of fragmentation and montage, is interested in the direct imagistic representation of the urban material. In Benjamin's city writings, the objects and experiences of the city appear as a collection of highly graphical images, therefore his essays become a series of 'snapshots' of the urban life edited together without rendering the images theoretical or placing them into a totalizing critique. However, while each individual image -rag- is a close-up shot from the urban scene not necessarily placed in a wider theoretical framework, the total text -collection of rags- becomes a montage of the individual images pieced together around a persistent critique. Susan Buck-Morss states that

Benjamin's work, instead of being logical and chronological, is rather "grounded on philosophical intuitions sparked by cognitive experiences" that are translated into a series of disparate notes (Buck-Morss 7). It is through this style and methodology that in his writings, the city is transformed into the text and its linguistic content is translated into the language of words, while simultaneously the text itself takes on the structure of the city. This way, in Benjamin's work, the city-as-text transforms into the text-as-city.

Walter Benjamin's philosophy and methodology as a writer also determines the definition of the reader of his texts, and this definition is as well prefigured in the image of the physiognomist and the rag-picker. Benjamin gives to the reader the role of being the physiognomist of his text-as-city, as he is the physiognomist of the city-as-text. The reader will decode his representations, critically unmask his allegories, and finally reveal the critique and philosophy underlying them. With the physiognomical reading of the text, the reader will bring to light, the true character of it. Moreover, Benjamin expects his readers to meander through his texts as a rag-picker instead of a flâneur in search of amusement (Gilloch 183). Pierre Missac writes: "Readers who are tempted by such a role will not sit down at their desks, pen in hand, but rather saunter through the texts which Benjamin has written for them and gradually assemble them..., not in contemplation but 'while walking' " (Missac 193 qtd. in Gilloch, 183). The reader, rather than going through the text in a state of *dérive*, will piece together the fragmented series of representations, incrementally constructing the urban experience as it is narrated. Finally, through the text of Benjamin, the reader will reveal the spatial narratives and comprehend the social and historical formations of the city, the city that was brought to speech by Benjamin.

Walter Benjamin, in his letter to Scholem in 1924, "mentions a visit to Naples and notes: 'I have collected a lot of material on Naples, noteworthy and important observations that I may be able to develop into something.'" (Scholem, Correspondence 250 qtd. in Gilloch, 22). Benjamin's essay on Naples, written together with Asja Lacin, is the genesis of vital methodological and thematic considerations that become central to his subsequent city portraits (Gilloch 21-23). This is also why, Benjamin's methodology and literary style in transforming the city-as-text into the text-as-city is most explicit in this particular essay. 'Naples', immediately from the start, bombards the reader with fragmented urban scenes, images and experiences, causing him to enter a state of flâneur wandering through the text without sense of time or direction. If the task that Benjamin defines for his reader is undertaken to decipher and re-assemble the text, the persistent social and historical critique that

Benjamin constructs about the city of Naples, is exposed. This critique appears scattered through the text, concealed below fragmented imagistic representations, however is the central element according to which this fragmented images are pieced together. In ‘Naples’, Benjamin’s critique of the transitional society, evolving from a pre-capitalist order into a capitalist one, however disguised, is the central element of the text. This critique recurrently demonstrates itself with the theme of ‘porosity’, which Benjamin uses to define various aspects of the city and its urban life. He firstly points out to the architecture: “As porous as this stone is the architecture. Building and action interpenetrate in the courtyards, arcades, and stairways” (Benjamin “Naples”, 165), later reflecting on the boundaries between public and private life: “Similarly porous is private life. [...] Just as the living room reappears on the street, with chairs, hearth, and altar, so, only much more loudly, the street migrates into the living room” (Benjamin “Naples”, 171). Benjamin repeatedly uses the ‘porosity’ concept when he represents the organization of daily life and the temporality of the city: “Irresistibly the festival penetrates each and every working day. Porosity is the inexhaustible law of the life of this city, reappearing everywhere. A grain of Sunday is hidden in each weekday, and how much weekday in this Sunday!” (Benjamin “Naples”, 168) As Susan Buck-Morss states, the theme of ‘porosity’ “captures the fact that the structuring boundaries of modern capitalism –between public and private, labor and leisure, personal and communal- have not yet been established” (Buck-Morss 26) in Naples. The modern economic and social relations of capitalism are shakily erected, the culture is dominantly improvisatory, spatial and temporal definitions are indeterminate. Benjamin writes that in Naples “[t]he stamp of the definitive is avoided. No situation is intended forever, no figure asserts its ‘thus and not otherwise’ ” (Benjamin “Naples”, 166). In ‘Naples’, Benjamin gives his critique on what Marxist theory conceptualizes as a transitional society, through images of spatial anarchy, social intermingling and impermanence (Buck-Morss 26), pieced together using the representative theme of ‘porosity’.

The literary narrative of Istanbul, which appeared in the start of this paper, took ‘Naples’ as a model for the philosophy and technique that Benjamin uses in his city texts. In ‘Istanbul’, the role of the rag-picker and the physiognomist was adapted as a methodology in reading the city and as a literary style in writing its text. While writing the text of ‘Istanbul’, the place of the author was taken, which required being the rag-picker inside the city and being the physiognomist of the city-as-text. On the other hand, with the text of ‘Naples’, the role of the reader was undertaken, which demanded the reading, decoding and re-assembling of Benjamin’s city portrait by being the rag-picker and physiognomist inside the text. The technique of-

fered to the reader for the decipherment of Benjamin’s city texts, is at the same time an invitation for the reader to decode and re-assemble the text of ‘Istanbul’ with a similar attitude. Due to its content and structure, the paper allows the reader into the text, but determines his definition as Benjamin does for his reader. Learning from ‘Naples’ and applying it to ‘Istanbul’, continually shifting roles between the author and the reader, the rag-picker and the physiognomist, this paper thus exposed the potential of literary forms as a tool to obtain fresh perspectives on the urban and thus to form a critique of it.

NOTE

¹ This literary experiment, first carried out in his essays on Naples and Moscow, later becomes a central methodology to his more expansive essays on Paris and Berlin.

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