Drifting in the city The influence of the artistic practice in the street for the transformation of public space

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1 ABSTRACT

All sort of comprehensions and reflections about the city have been getting nourished from a diverse set of artistic practices that involve the presence of the artist in the street; one of the prime examples might be the relation between the poet Charles Baudelaire and the philosopher Walter Benjamin, in regard to Paris in the XIX century. Later on, this dynamic relation between Art, Urbanism and Architecture could be observed significantly in the contributions from diverse expressions: Dada, Surrealism, Lettrist International, Situationist International, Land Art, Minimal Art. All of them having in common the presence of the artist in the public space who acts, either as catalyzer in charge of inciting processes of transformation, or as collector in charge of documenting them. These registries, through the light of history, would multiply and reveal all sorts of meanings.

This relation between artistic practice and urban reflection might be located in what Heidegger describes as the archetypical association between the philosopher and the artist that can be tracked down in history, particularly, between poetry and philosophy. In the case of the city it is possible to wonder about this same relation in a broader sense. The XX century avant-garde and posterior alternative expressions from the artistic realm ended up influencing the theoretical awareness about the transformation of the city, but moreover, it ends up influencing the planning of urban scenarios as places in continuous processes of becoming: reshaping, disintegration, mutation, remodeling, revolution and so forth…

The relation between artistic practice and theoretical reflection about urban phenomena allows us to relate a diverse set of experiments for understanding the city: *flânerie* by Baudelaire, Dada's *visits*, Surrealism's *deambulations*, *dérives* from Lettrist International, Land Art interventions and the recent *transurbances* from the art collective Stalker. In different degrees they illustrate how Art has been integrating alternative and marginal discourses into the stream of philosophy, architecture, design, urbanism, but furthermore into urban planning and policymaking.

The aim of the paper is to analyze a series of methodological practices that involve going through the city, and its diachronic influence over the reflections about urban phenomena, commenting on the historically-recognized examples but also upon recent experiments carried out in Scandinavia.

2 INTRODUCTION

The modern metropolis represents one of the most complex and vastest manifestations of human action;[1] the transformation of the urban fact into the concept of the modern city signified a substantial acceleration in daily-life pace and in the transformation over the environment. Walking, one of the most ancestral actions, gained since then a totally different meaning and implied an entire new experience.

There is an important element to consider in regard to the time in which this shift was more noticeable, the nineteenth century can be seen as a division in history in relation to material culture. As it happens with this kind of divisions they arise from the need to classify and understand time regardless of the gradual and ordinary occurrence of these changes for those immerse in the process. The philosopher Walter Benjamin had a special fixation with the XIX century and the division it represented in terms of production, he minded specially the continuum of the changes, but at the same time he pointed out the threshold this way:

"In all areas of production, from the Middle Ages until the beginning of the nineteenth century, the development of technology proceeded at a much slower rate than the development of art, Art could take its time in variously assimilating the technological modes of operation. But the transformation of things that set in around 1800

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[1] Ernesto SABATO, *Sobre heroes y tumbas,* Editorial Suramericana, Buenos Aires, 1983. Page 283.

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dictated the tempo to art, and the more breathtaking this tempo became, the more readily the dominion of fashion overspread all fields. Finally, we arrive at the present state of things: the possibility now arises that art will no longer find time to adapt somehow to technological processes."[2]

The shift, clearly seen in the tempo of production, ended up getting manifested in the rhythm of replacement of objects in everyday use, in the speed of the cities and in the pulse of life in general. This change is attributable to the industrial revolution and the possibility it carried out of mass-production and the increased velocity of transformation over nature.

The accelerated growth and development was experienced specially in several cities across Europe; the outcome of the rapid replacement would be a continuous clash between tradition and renewal, a fundamental characteristic of modernity.

Several metropolises were the scenario where different stereotypes and roles emerged as the result of the significant changes of that time, nonetheless some specific places had special circumstances for certain conditions to get manifested; such is the case of Paris, which influence in the cultural field had a deep effect on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. At the beginning of the nineteenth century Paris was not still cosmopolitan, but in a short period of time it suffered serious transformations that changed its surface dramatically transforming it into one of the most creative scenarios. It was a place of strong contradictions but, furthermore, a reckless source of revolution, it was on its streets where one of the most inspirational ways of experiencing the city appeared: *flânerie.*

3 FLÂNERIE: WALKING IN PARIS IN THE XIX CENTURY

"[…] the city has been the paradise of all those who need to chase after no livelihood, pursue no career, reach no goal-the paradise, then, of bohemians, and not only of artists and writers but of all those who have gathered about them because they could not be integrated either politically -being homeless or stateless- or socially."[3] *Walter Benjamin, Illuminations.*

Paris underwent one of its largest transformations in two decades; between 1850 and 1870 the city went past from being a medieval town, to become "the capital of the nineteenth century" [4] and the result in its urban and architectural typology created an unparalleled setting for intellectuals, poets, homeless, refugees and all those who were at the margins of society. What specific circumstances did Paris have for these conditions to get manifested? There is certain circumstantiality involved in the configuration of a city for this phenomenon to happen, it is not accidental that alike cities became a hotbed for writers, poets, bohemians, immigrants and outsiders in general.

Under the authority of Napoleon III, the mayor Georges-Eugène Haussmann systematically torn apart and rebuilt Paris in two decades, changing its surface dramatically. The plan included a radical urban transformation through rigorous planning and implementation, both in the center of Paris and in the surrounding districts.

Wide streets and boulevards were built; the typology of facades, parks, buildings and city monuments was regulated, wide avenues, in a geometrically designed arrangement, replaced the medieval structure of narrow, intricate streets and its congested distribution. For implementing his plan, Haussmann had to develop a program of expropriation and clearances that represented the demolition of the old medieval slums[5]. These boulevards and wide avenues, with the course of time, became a symbol of the Parisian life and part of the popular worldwide imagery of the French capital:

"The boulevards were only one part of a comprehensive system of urban planning that included central markets, bridges, sewers, water supply, the Opera and other cultural palaces, a great network of parks"[6]

During this massive transformation the poet Charles Baudelaire wrote one of his most influential works: *Paris Spleen,* a collection of 51 poems, published after his death in1869, that might be seen as short fragments from

[2] Walter BENJAMIN, The arcades project, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1999. Page 171
[3] Walter BENJAMIN, Illuminations: essays and reflections, Schocken books, New York, 1983. Page 21.
[4] *Ibid.*
[5] Marshall BERMAN, All that is solid melts into air, Penguin Books, New York, 1988. Page 153.
[6] *Ibid.* Page 150

urban experiences, taken during Paris modernization; the result is a stream of thought from "a botanist of the sidewalk"[7].

In this collection of poems Baudelaire depicts the *flâneur*, one of the main figures in his work: a purposeless walker, a detached observer who wanders the city being simultaneously part and apart from the crowd, a stroller.[8] The expression comes from the French verb *flâner,* which means literally: *to stroll, to loaf, to wander...* a connotation that is related not just to the act of walking aimlessly, but also in relation to the use of time, it embodied not just a form of observation and movement but also a lifestyle, as it happened with the figures of the *dandy* and the *snob,* both products of that time likewise.

The poet wandered around the hectic heart of Paris during the time of its modernistic renovation, documenting fragmentarily its transformation:

"It is not given to every man to take a bath of multitude; enjoying a crowd is an art [...] the solitary and thoughtful stroller finds a singular intoxication in this universal communion. The man who loves to lose himself in a crowd enjoys feverish delights that the egoist locked up in himself as in a box"[9]

For Baudelaire the artist should be fully exposed to the influences of his time, even the most destructive ones. Walking as a form of art, through his prose, elevated daily life of *the city of light* to the category of a Muse for modern poetry, but this Muse was no longer a beautiful and pristine woman, but a sordid, dirty and dishonorable one. The poet T. S. Eliot would summarize later Baudelaire's contribution:

"[...] it is not merely in his set of imagery of common life, not merely in the imagery of the sordid life of a great metropolis, but in the elevation of such imagery to first intensity–presenting it as it is, and yet making it represent something beyond itself–that Baudelaire has created a mode of release and expression for other men"[10]

Walking aimlessly was a way of trying the boundaries and insides of this feverish courtesan, of getting intermingled in "this ineffable orgy, this divine prostitution of the soul".[11] One of the characteristic of modern poetry, and by extension of modern art, is the desacralization of its contents, the artist was no longer dedicated to pursue blindly the beauty, abstracted from reality, instead he was immerse in the middle of the chaos and the riot, describing the anguish and the despair from the same sidewalk of the common pedestrian. Baudelaire sets up this argument in the middle of a brothel in Paris in his poem 'Loss of a Halo', an allegoric meeting between the 'common man' and the poet. The first inquires the latter:

"You here, my dear? You in a place of ill-repute! You, the drinker of quintessences! You the eater of ambrosia!"[12]

Read the complete poem: *www.bit.ly/ycVYzL*

The poet replies:

"[...] you know my terror of horses and of carriages. Just a little while ago, as I was crossing the boulevard very hastily [...] I moved abruptly and my halo slipped from my head into the mire on the pavement."[13]

But what is a halo in this context? What does it symbolize? A disk of light above the head of a saint: an aureole? Through its presence Baudelaire satirizes one of the big believes deposited on premodern art: its sacredness and holiness. A condition that is attributed not just by the institution of Art but by the common man who sees the artist as a character above his own sphere, above his ordinary reality[14]: *You, the drinker of quintessences! You the eater of ambrosia!*

The loss of the artist's aureole takes place in the middle of the boulevard, while trying to cross the street: "I was crossing the boulevard very hastily and jumping about in the mud, through that moving chaos in which death comes galloping toward you from all sides at once"[15] Here we have another symbolism in Baudelaire's poem:

[7] Jerry SALTZ, New York Magazine, Published: 9 of may, 2011. http://nymag.com/news/intelligencer/49958/
[8] *Ibid.*
[9] Charles BAUDELAIRE, Paris Spleen, Translated by Martin Sorell, ONEWORLD CLASSICS LTD, London, 2010. Page 22
[10] Thomas Stearns ELIOT, Selected prose of T. S. Eliot, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1975. Prologue
[11] BAUDELAIRE. *Op. cit.* Page 22
[12] *Ibid.* Page 90
[13] *Ibid.*
[14] BERMAN, *Op. cit.* Page 156
[15] BAUDELAIRE, *Op. cit.* Page 22

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that which strips off the holiness of the artist is the chaos of modern traffic, the speed of modernity in some way, presented in the urban insignia of Paris' urbanism.

The *mud* Baudelaire is referring to is the *madacam,* the predecessor of the pavement is used today, it was a pasty material that provided perfect traction and hardness for carriages pulled by horses, but that behaved exactly as mud in the presence of rain.

"[…] the word is derived from John McAdam of Glasgow, the eighteenth-century inventor of modern paving surface."[16]

It is possible to imagine the boulevard's wide streets that allowed horsemen to go full speed, which, in addition to the muddiness of the surface, should have represented a harsh experience for the walkers in the early Parisian avenues. Crossing from one sidewalk to the other at that time was literally and odyssey through a *moving chaos*:

"We should note that Baudelaire's experience of "moving chaos" antedates the traffic light, an innovation developed in America around 1905, and a wonderful symbol of early state attempts to regulate and rationalize the chaos of capitalism."[17]

The artist in his attempt to cross the moving turmoil of modernity looses his holiness and "[…] finds to his amazement that the aura of artistic purity and sanctity is only incidental, not essential to art, and that poetry can thrive just as well, and maybe even better, on the other side of the boulevard"[18]: on the brothel, on the tavern, on the underground…

The artist becomes an ordinary man and even an antihero; the desacralization that began symbolically with crossing that threshold, and loosing the aureole, is followed by the anonymity it carried, there is no longer an emblem for the artist as in ancient times. The poet explains to the 'common man':

"And surely, I told myself, bad luck is always good for something. Now I can walk about incognito, commit base actions, and give myself over to filthy debauchery, like simple mortals. And here I am, just like you, as you can see!"[19]

The figurative prostitution of poetry implies that when crossing that modern threshold everyone becomes a wageworker, without distinction:

"Walter Benjamin seems to have been the first to suggest the deep affinities between Baudelaire and Marx. Although Benjamin does not make this particular connection […] "The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every activity […] it has transformed the doctor, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage-laborers."

The city imposed a new living pace; therefore a new artistic language was required to fit its needs. In the preface to *Paris Spleen* Baudelaire claims that modern life -*la vie modern*- requires a new poetic expression, the modern traffic appears again as an image:
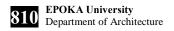
"Who has not […] dreamt a poetic prose, musical without rhythm and without rhyme, supple enough and rugged enough to adapt itself to the soul's lyrical impulses, the undulations of reverie, the laps and jolts of consciousness? It was above all from the exploration of enormous cities and from the convergence of their innumerable connections that this obsessive ideal was born."[20]

Speed, fluidity –perhaps elasticity also- and interconnectedness seem to be the leitmotifs of his intended new language in response to the modern life, all of them abstracted from the commotion of Paris and from walking through it as a way to experience the agitation.

A definition of fluidity as the quality of liquid and gases, in contrast with the solids, of changing continuously in shape when subjected to stress, deploys the term as a leading metaphor for the shift introduced in the modern era.[21] Again the unintended similarities between Baudelaire and Marx arise. In a speech given in London Marx stated:

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[16] BERMAN, *Op. cit.* Page 161
[17] *Ibid.* Page 159
[18]*Ibid.* Page 160
[19] BAUDELAIRE, *Op. cit.* Page 22
[20] BAUDELAIRE, *Op. cit.* Page 3
[21] Zygmunt BAUMAN, Liquid Modernity, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2000. Page 2

"All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions are swept away, all new formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holly is profaned, and men at last are forced to face…the real conditions of their lives and their relations with their fellow men"[22]

The maelstrom of continuous change that represented the impact of technology in the XIX century required "melting the solids and profaning the sacreds"[23] in order to pass from the old order –*ancien regime*- to the new system of relations.

If fluids do not keep any shape but they are rather constantly ready and prone to change it, for them is time what counts the most, in clear contrast with the nature of solid matter. "The extraordinary mobility [and adaptability] of fluids is what associate them with the idea of 'lightness' […] We associate 'lightness' and 'weightlessness' with mobility and inconstancy: we know from practice that the lighter we travel the easier and faster we move."[24] The image of fluidity when attributed to time is again a matter of speed in relation to change: speed, fluidity and interconnectedness.

"These are reasons to consider 'fluidity' or 'liquidity' as fitting metaphors when we wish to grasp the nature of the present, in many ways novel, phase in the history of modernity."[25]

In Baudelaire the idea of fluidity and gaseousness speaks of the constant and fast flux of modernity. Later on this characteristics became primary qualities of painting, architecture, design, music and literature in the nineteenth and twentieth century.

The imagery of common life as a way of *flowing* with his time gave Baudelaire his particular semantic strength, instead of clinging to the traditional symbols and classic referents of poetry he created his own symbols and allegories, in accordance to the fracture that his epoch represented.

Another shot from *Paris Spleen* that strikes because of Baudelaire's originality and ability to depict his everyday Paris during its renovation is the poem entitled 'The eyes of the poor': a couple of lovers visit a recently open boulevard's café to be interrupted by a family in rags who observes fascinated the splendor of the place: the shimmer of the gaslights, the abundance of food and drinks, the elegance… their observation is passive, without hostile undertones, amused and sorrowfully resigned at the same time, maybe because of it the narrator feels conflicted:[26] "a little ashamed of our glasses and decanters, to big for our thirst."[27]

Read the complete poem: *www.bit.ly/z902He*

The scenery of the poem is again a boulevard, this time still in construction process: "the corner of a new boulevard, still strewn with debris and already gloriously displaying its unfinished splendors."[28] Haussmann's intervention of Paris created a setup without precedents for new economic arrangements, new business of all kinds spread over the city center rapidly: boutiques, restaurants, theaters, sidewalk cafés; soon this type of terraced cafés where the poem takes place "came to be seen all over the world as symbols of *la vie parisienne",[29]* clearly one of the most spectacular urban innovations of the nineteenth century.

For all this luxurious scenery to come to life entire neighborhoods that had existed for centuries were demolished. By tearing down the old medieval slums the, once sealed, world of urban poverty was exposed and vice versa: for the first time the poor were looking with their own eyes the world of material excess and sophistication, consequently this would carry along social confrontations later on:

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[22] Speech at the anniversary of the *People's Paper,"* in Robert C. Tucker, editor, *The Marx-Engels Reader,* 2nd edition Norton, 1978. Page 475.

[23] BAUMAN, *Op. cit.* Page 142

[24] *Ibid.* Page 2

[25] *Ibid.*

[26] BERMAN, *Op. cit.* Page 149

[27] BAUDELAIRE, *Op. cit.* Page 52

[28] *Ibid.*

[29] BERMAN, *Op. cit.* Page 151

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"The method called Haussmann […] of making breaches in working-class quarters of your big cities, especially in those that are centrally situated […] but they appear at once somewhere else, and often in the immediate neighborhood."[30]

Class privileges became more evident in these well-illuminated corridors of commerce, since then poverty came to be part of the scenery of big urban centers, any attempt to hide them would be just a matter of superficial suppression, the problem would spring up in any other form. The boulevards simply opened up and exhibited the social wounds of the *new era.*

When considering the up and downsides of the modernization of Paris, it is impossible to ignore the social and environmental tragedy of development, but despite the obvious downsides, the new construction clearly opened up the city, for the first time in history[31], to all its population and was a place without comparison for the nourishment of art, fashion, and festive existence:[32]

"Five generations of modern painters, writers and photographers (and, a little later, film makers) starting with the impressionists in the 1860s, would nourish themselves on the life and energy that flowed along the boulevards." **[33]**

The broad corridors crowded with cafés, theaters and cinemas, surrounded by public space with no precedent would be the setting for some of the most influential avant-garde expressions during the XIX and XX centuries. Accordingly the city *flânerie* would inspire countless generations of philosophers, writers, artists, poets, musicians, street performers, buskers, and so forth.

Benjamin got fascinated with Paris after his first visit in 1913, still being a very young man; this fascination would lead him later to consider Baudelaire's work and the figure of the *flâneur* as key elements for understanding the social and cultural history of the city in the nineteenth century. Once more Paris as the *flâneur'*s Muse:
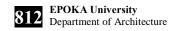
"What all other cities seem to permit only reluctantly to the dregs of society -strolling, idling, *flânerie*- Paris streets actually invite every one to do"[34]

Apart from fostering the sluggish walkers, the streets of Paris would provide the kind of place that would become an icon and fundamental element of the intellectual life of the city: the *café.* Mentioned before in Baudelaire's poem 'The eyes of the poor', the Parisian café turned out to be the place, for excellence, of encounter for lovers, poets, "all those who need to chase after no livelihood, pursue no career, reach no goal-the paradise, then, of bohemians, and not only of artists and writers but of all those who have gathered about them because they could not be integrated either politically -being homeless or stateless- or socially." By conviction or misfortune, the place of the wanderers:

"[…]one inhabits a city by strolling through it without aim or purpose, with one´s stay secured by the countless cafés with line the streets and past which the life of the city, the flow of pedestrians, moves along."[35]

But the cafés were just the dots in a vast network of commerce that flourished after Haussmann's urban-planning intervention. An important part of the walker's comfort, in regards to the architectural arrangement, was described by Benjamin as the sensation of protection from the medieval walled configuration without its tightness:

"This city, around which one still can travel in a circle past the old gates, has remained what the cities of the Middle Ages, severely walled off and protected against the outside, once were: an interior, but without the narrowness of medieval streets, a generously built and planned open-air *intérieur* with the arch of the sky like a majestic ceiling above it. ¨The finest thing here about all art and all activity is the fact that they leave the few remainders of the original and the natural splendor"[36]

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[30] Karl MARX *and* Frederick ENGELS, Selected Works, 2 volumes, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1955. Volume I, Page 559.

[31] BERMAN, *Op. cit.* Page 150

[32] Susan BUCK-MORSS, The dialectics of seeing, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1991, Page 66

[33] BERMAN, *Op. cit.* Page 151

[34] BENJAMIN, The arcades project.

[35] BENJAMIN, Illuminations. Page 21.

[36] *Ibid.* Page 20.

The width, openness and transparence of the boulevards was intended to gave air and light to the streets, to improve hygiene and to deal with the busy traffic, also, but not less significantly, to frustrate and control any revolutionary blockade militarily.[37] The city had undergone three revolutions in less than 60 years: 1789, 1830 and 1848; the strategy was clear: "long and broad corridors in which troops and artillery could move effectively against future barricades and popular insurrections."[38]

Conforming to Napoleon III's commands, the main motivation of Haussmann's renovation was to favor commerce and to impede any future revolutionary attempt, it results really paradoxical that his intervention ended setting up the spetial conditions for all sort of intellectual outsiders, artists, immigrants, refugees and so forth; the coexistence of art and repression turned out to be a hotbed of revolt, just a year after the boulevards were finished they were the scenario of the revolution of 1871, incited significantly by those outsiders: the Paris Commune, an uprising with Marxist and Anarchist spur that would be followed almost a century later by the outburst of May 1968.

With the industrial revolution cities around the world followed the example of Paris and became impressive spectacles, luxury was not new in history but secular access to it was[39]. The splendor of the modern Paris and the creation of the industrial platform around it attracted a massive flow of immigration. Many were drawn by the image of spectacularity the city had gained but many more came, more pragmatically, pulled by the opportunities of employment created around the formation of an increasingly more sophisticated commerce. It was the first metropolitan-massive multiculturalism, the extension of suburbs in the margins of the city spread rapidly.

Since then, one of the phenomena that follows usually the appearing of urban areas is prostitution, obviously the appellative of being the *oldest profession* is not in vain, but definitely its institutionalization, almost open and common practice and the need for creating areas specialized for it were new elements to it, not much later it was possible to talk about the *sex industry*. The closeness of the boulevard and the brothel portrayed by Baudelaire turned out to be, later on, another big attraction and symbol of the city: the *burlesque*. Considerable mendacity, organized crime, smuggling, drug's traffic and, therefore, mafias were also some of the consequences that came along inevitably with the development of urban and industrial areas.

The role of postproduction in photography can be attributed to history: it gives focus and deepens. When looked through the perspective of time Paris engendered the conditions for a unique mosh pit of creative transformation: the urban scenario that put together, for the first time, the rich and the poor; that attracted a vast flow of immigration through its modernization, industrialization and imagery of 'progress', so one of the first massive multicultural metropolis with all the consequences it would carry: a exceptional bohemia and intense underground scene; and its inviting architecture, attractive for getting lost in the extensive network of cafés and passages.

As it happened to Benjamin, perhaps the most exceptional revelation about all this is to notice how Baudelaire's work is touching the most, if not all, the sensitive points of these conflicted processes, his poetic virtuosity is bound up with his material reality in a way in which "even his visions of transcendence are rooted in a concrete time and place".[40] The imagery of common daily life becoming a crystalized element that allows to understand history dynamically.

4 PHILOSOPHY AND POETRY; ARCHITECTURE AND ART: A PLACE BETWEEN

The traditional role of philosophy according to its etymology, as the love to wisdom –*philosophia*– expressed in the quest for truth, consists in making the absent and occluded present by means of the 'literal' word,[41] role that is played out within an open-ended interweaving of text. Following the etymology likewise, the term 'poetry'

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[37] Evgeny MOROZOV, The New York Times, Published: February 4, 2012 http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/05/opinion/sunday/the-death-of-the-cyberflaneur.html?emc=eta1

[38] BERMAN, *Op. cit.* Page 150

[39] BUCK-MORSS, *Op. cit.* Page 81

[40] BERMAN, *Op. cit.* Page 141

[41] Massimo VERDICCHIO, Robert BURCH (editors), Between Philosophy and Poetry: Writing, Rhythm, History, Continuum International Publishing Group, New York 2002. Page 3

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encompasses the entire domain of *pöiesis* as that of the creative production of meaning.[42] Here, in a wide etymological sense, the *poetic thinking* might include the whole of the arts as the creative expression of content. In the same broadest terms, and by means of characterization, the relation between philosophy and poetry might be understood as the interplay of truth and meaning[43].

By outdoing the direct etymological characterization, the respective identities of philosophy and poetry show themselves more complexly, not 'disciplinary', 'textual' or enclosed by a relational opposition; thinking of such kind of *relation* implies that the two terms can be brought together, compared and ordered in a formalist classification.

The philosophy of deconstruction developed by Jacques Derrida allows criticizing *binary thinking* and understanding how the categorized relationship of hierarchies and paired antithetic oppositions can change and get multiplied according to how we are positioned. A *binary model* is exclusive: all that *one* is the *other* cannot be, Derrida aims to replace this categorization with new inclusive formulations that correlate differences and divisions suggesting the '*undecidability*' of an oscillating system of terms: thinking of '*both/and*' rather than '*either/or*'.[44] To render the interplay of poetic and philosophical discourses is ultimately *undecidable,*[45] Heidegger called this relation before as 'the matter of thinking' (*die Sache des Denkens*):[46] a wide and circumstantial variety of perspectives and concerns both within and upon the topic.

The relation between philosophy and poetry reveals itself complex, while the openness of the *poetic* finds a shelter in the historical certainties of the *philosophical;* this refuge, according to Heidegger, contains an awareness of the rhetorical and nonliteral character of the reading.[47]
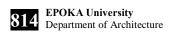
Despite the opacity of the relationship, looking at the way in which philosophy has been getting informed from poetry –and by extension from art– allows noticing strong associations between particular philosophers and poets. Heidegger and Hölderlin, Nietzsche and Rilke, Benjamin and Baudelaire, Barker and Becket, among some others, exemplify also this kind of association. Association that is not exclusive, rather it leaves all sorts of places in between for *poetic-philosophical* ways of thinking.

"We are dealing here with something which may not be unique but is certainly extremely rare: the gift of thinking poetically",[48] an unusual instance that Hannah Arendt attributes to Benjamin's thinking and that, according to Heidegger, is not exclusive to poetry, neither of philosophy, rather, it can be extended broadly: "any art is, in its essence, Poetry (*Dichtung*), and, also Language, and further, Thinking, are in their essence Poetry."[49]

It results paradoxical that this kind of thinking was the reason for Benjamin to be rejected repeatedly by the academy of his time and to be regarded by his friend and peer Theodor W. Adorno as "undialectic," moved in "materialistic categories, which by no means coincide with Marxist ones," and "lacking in mediation" as he related "conspicuous elements" on his work.[50] Through the perspective of time Hannah Arendt acknowledged that what was "so hard to understand about Benjamin is that without being a poet he thought poetically and therefore was bound to regard the metaphor as the greatest gift of language," the mean "by which the oneness of the world is poetically brought about"[51]

According to the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, the significant metaphorical uniqueness of poetry can also be found extensively in Nietzsche, who conveyed his philosophical ideas through narrative prose in *Zarathustra* and through numerous poems, but further more, who was one of the parents of the *poematic* genre in

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[42] *Ibid.*

[43] *Ibid.*

[44] Jacques DERRIDA, Of Grammatology, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1976. Page 26

[45] VERDICCHIO, BURCH, *Op. cit.* Page 2

[46] *Ibid.*

[47] *Ibid.* Page 123

[48] BENJAMIN, Illuminations. Page 50.

[49] Paul BALAHUR, *Philosophy and Poetry* in Nicolae Râmbu (editor), Cultura: International Journal of Philosophy of Culture and Axiology, Versita Ed, Iasi, Romania, 2011. Page 122

[50] BENJAMIN, *Op. cit.* Page 10

[51] *Ibid.* Page 14

philosophy. Deleuze, who regarded philosophy also as a poem, intended to continue with Nietzsche's purpose of elevating the fragment as a new form of philosophy.[52]

If the boundaries between philosophical and poetic thinking show themselves blurry and *undecidable,* it is possible to talk instead about the relation of the 'philosopher' and the 'poet', as might be expected, making the clarification of the unconventional but multifaceted presence of *poetic thinking* beyond any limit of designation or correspondence. Heidegger was convinced of this natural connection between 'thinker' and 'poet', on his work, he would be in charge of extracting 'essential sayings' brightening for Philosophy from the verse of Sophocles, Hölderlin, Stefan George or Reiner Maria Rilke.[53]

In "The Origin of the Art Work" Heidegger relates art to the Greek sense of *Aletheia,* as 'taking out from the unhidden', meaning an experience of revealing, of *un-concealing* what is 'hiding' in order to be brought to light[54]; the role of the philosopher, through the light of history, is to bring back and expose metaphorical bonds to the world from the realm of art. Given the continuous transformation and *transiency* of language this philosophical role is one of actualization, mainly as a matter of form rather than content.

The historical character of the relation in question renders all sort of particularities and shades; a variety that goes from the presentation of something fully sensual and ordinary –as it happens to Baudelaire's imagery of Paris– to something totally unusual, *not sensorial* and even outside of Western art or metaphysics –as it corresponds to Heidegger's appreciation of Hölderlin's poetry–[55].

The place in between philosophy and poetry that gets extended to architecture and art, is concerned mainly with the way in which language develops a connection with specific sites and historical processes. Within contemporary art, terms such as *site-specific, contextual art* and *critical spatial practice* have been used in the last two decades to describe the kind of practices that go beyond the boundaries of galleries,[56] comprising public space, urban facts, the concept of the journey and so forth.

As a mean to understand the phenomenon of the modern city, it is crucial to begin with, perhaps, the most influential and significant relationship concerning a thinker and a poet in this historical shift: the one between Baudelaire and Benjamin. From all the turbulence of the beginning of the twentieth century, the philosopher recalled Paris of the second empire, almost half a century later, while going through the verses of the poet and their intense description of the common life of the city.

For Benjamin, the relation to the past is not straight: as if the past would be casting lights to the present, or the present would be getting illuminated from the visit to the past; rather, they come altogether in an image that forms a constellation, and since the relation of this or any other present to the past is with no doubt temporary, this image is dialectical, it involves a continuous stream that anyhow is not a progression;[57] the role of the philosopher is to make suddenly emergent this image by sewing a constellation. Despite their recognized antagonism, Benjamin relation to the historical has a resemblance to Heidegger's concept of *Aletheia.*

Sunk in this continuous stream, the XIX century represented a fracture in the adaption from art to technological processes[58] and also a threshold in the institution of the modern metropolis. For understanding the *opacity* of Parisian history during that time in relation to the present, Benjamin became a *flâneur*, during long walks through the city he made social and aesthetic observations in small notebooks systematically.

Baudelaire's portrayal of Paris was decisive on Benjamin's ideas; the poet's account of the sordid and daily life of the early passages of urban commerce influenced deeply the fascination of the philosopher with the way in which the city was interconnected.

No one revealed better the social-historical relations of life in the boulevards than Baudelaire, according to Benjamin his language virtuosity, his description of common life imagery and his break with tradition in terms of referents and form, located Baudelaire's allegory as a major form of modern art, a expression that Benjamin considered a social object instead of just a literary one.[59] The boulevards were the first material manifestation of

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[52] Gilles Deleuze: "Nietzsche et la Philosophie", PUF, Paris, 1962. Prologue
[53] BALAHUR, *Op. cit.* Page 116
[54] Martin HEIDEGGER, Poetry, Language, Thought, New York: Harper and Row, 1975. Page 50
[55] VERDICCHIO, BURCH, *Op. cit.* Page 102
[56] Jane RENDELL, Art and Architecture, I.B. Tauris, London, 2006. Page 5
[57] BENJAMIN, The arcades Project. Page 462
[58] BENJAMIN, The arcades Project. Page 171
[59] BUCK-MORSS, *Op. cit.* Page 57

massive urban renewal planned by the state to favor commerce, these open-air corridors were complemented soon by the arcades, described by the philosopher as roofed-interior boulevards,[60] designed for the walker to avoid the disturbances of the exterior traffic. Both, boulevards and arcades got crystalized with the course of time as symbols or Paris and consequently Benjamin's later work *Passagen-Werk (The Arcades Project)* was derived from his fascination with them.

Beyond any stylistic consideration about Baudelaire, Benjamin minded that what was exposed in his writing was a poetic account of the origin of urban capitalism. If the boulevards were the first broad and open hallway for commercial and social exhibition parallel to the first instance of fast traffic; on the other hand the arcades were ""the original temple of commodity capitalism" […] Constructed like a church in the shape of a cross (in order, pragmatically, to connect with all four surrounding streets), these privately owned, publicly traversed passages displayed commodities in window showcase like icons in niches."[61]

The *Passagen-Werk* meant to be a social and cultural history of Paris in the nineteenth century and, by these means, a demonstration of a 'materialist philosophy of history'; Benjamin intended to provide a political education for his own generation, [62] unfortunately a work never finished due to the author's decision of taking his own life while trying to scape to the US from the Nazi regime's persecution.

The reason these covered shopping corridors of the nineteenth century became Benjamin's fundamental image was exactly because of their allegorical possibilities: "the precise material replica of the internal consciousness, or rather, the *un*conscious of the dreaming collective"[63]

The correlation between the *dreaming collective* and the, relatively new and extremely powerful, apparatus of industry and technology created and materialized the *wish images* of grandeur. The fetishism of commodities noticeable in the arcades was one the first signs; the infrastructure changed rapidly in response to this fetishistic appreciation of industrial products.

Capital cities in Europe, and eventually around the world, changed their appearances rapidly and dramatically to become "glittering showcases, displaying the promise of the new industry and technology for a heaven-on-earth and no city glittered more brilliantly than Paris"[64], the image of abundance and luxury of the big metropolis obscured the tragedy of development: a destruction without precedents. Benjamin would name this illusory and distractive imagery that began in the arcades *Phantasmagoria:*

"[…] commodity displays achieved ever grander, ever more pretentious forms. The passages "are the precursors of the department stores." The phantasmagoria of display reached its apogee […]"[65]

The wide spans of windows that Baudelaire described in the Parisian café, promptly took the form of the commercial *galleria*, the activity of the *flâneur* in the XX century would involve also window-shopping. The *fetishistic* relation to commodities would be signed since then in a progression that follows the dictate of exhibition: the passages were the origins of the modern commercial arcade, this one the precursor of the department stores, soon to be followed by the shopping malls and this ones by the internet…
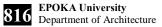
From the reflections about the arcades and its *phantasmagoria* Benjamin relates how the aesthetics of modernity would get manifested in cosmic proportions, monumentality and solidity: "rendered in stone and intended to endure in quasi-perpetuity"[66]

The modern *phantasmagoria* constituted a distraction and entangled a series of myths, especially those that located technology as a promise for social progress and harmony. The splendor of the myth of progress found its fundament in the machinery of merchandise, particularly in the World Exhibitions of the XIX century that were in charge of displaying magnificently the last scientific innovations applied to industry. For Benjamin it is possible to talk about technological progress but not about a historical one; Modernism and Capitalism concealed this contradiction:

"[…] wherein industry and technology were presented as mythic powers capable of producing out of themselves a future world of peace, class harmony, and abundance. The message of the World Exhibitions as fairylands was

[60] *Ibid.* Page 3
[61] *Ibid.* Page 83
[62] BERMAN, *Op. cit.* Page 47
[63] *Ibid.* Page 39
[64] *Ibid.* Page 81
[65] *Ibid.* Page 83
[66] BENJAMIN, Illuminations. Page 20

the promise of social progress for the masses without revolution. Indeed, the fairs denied the very existence of class antagonisms."[67]

The ideal of progress became an axiom of modernity that turned out to be unquestionable, Benjamin referred to the inadequacy of this economic progress as the storm that blows history away from paradise and through the ruins of past. Is this storm he saw in the *Angelus novus* from Paul Klee, the angel of history blown terrified into the future by the tempest of progress behind him. [68]

The notion of progress in relation to the Marxist division of *Means* and *Relations of Production,* allowed Benjamin to state that while the advances in the domain of industry and technology are undeniable as real progress at the level of the means of production, "at the level of relations of production, class exploitation remains unchanged".[69] Technological progress is remarkably obvious but talking about social or historical progress is unreasonable.

While drifting in the modern public space of Paris, just a few decades after Baudelaire, Benjamin observed how the once-admired arcades had become like caves containing fossil commodities of the consumers of the pre-imperial epoch of capitalism[70], the dinosaurs of consumerism. The arcades remained erect but they looked gloomy and were avoided by the regular passerby, who scaped scared in search for more impressive and spectacular manifestations. If the arcades appeared prehistoric and frightening just some decades after, it was because the extremely rapid changes that industrial technology has produced on the urban landscape; rapid changes that have the power to fossilize everything.

The new experience of time that this rapid change brought was precisely the opposite: hellish repetition. The expression of luxury in the phenomenon of *fashion* was the best symbol of this repetitive impermanence: ephemeral reconfiguration responding to seasons, a description that applies impressively also to the essence of *transiency* of empires, styles, ideologies, revolutions… essence that the monumentality and *phantasmagoria* of modernity and its neurotic obsession with the new intended to hide, unsuccessfully in any case.

Both images, fashion and the arcades, criticized a modern mythical assumption about the nature of history: the statement that rapid change is equivalent to historical progress. The modern and accelerated urban renewal if compared to fashion means just a denial of decay and therefore just a temporary rearrangement of the given, which symbolizes historical change but doesn't favor it. From this perspective the modern might be seen as *no* progress.[71]

Aesthetically, the new experience of time and drifting in the city represented speed, but also juxtaposition and montage. "Already visible in the early arcades, in the kaleidoscopic, fortuitous juxtaposition of shop signs and window displays, [the montage] was raised by technology during the course of the century to the level of a conscious principle of construction".[72] A principle from the realm of photography became a new language of composition evident also later in cinema, music, advertisement, fashion, literature and, specially, in the engineering techniques that lead to the mechanical solution of positioning continuously a huge amount of mobile parts, industrially mass-produced, for the design of the Eiffel Tower, with the entire spectacle it meant in the XIX century.

The German philosopher was not the only one occupied with the Parisian poet, his influence spread to other thinkers and artists including Debussy, Proust, T. S. Elliot, Nietzsche and Foucault among many others. In his essay 'What is enlightenment?'[73] Foucault compares the concept to the modern in the works of the austere Prussian philosopher Immanuel Kant and the decadent French poet. Foucault states that the relationship between them can be followed in the value each one gives to the present in contrast to the past and future. In different ways both claim that the individual must engender his existence meaningful by cultivating what Foucault calls a *philosophical ethos.* In both Kant and Baudelaire the term modernity implies an ethical duty of self-articulation to time and not just a simple temporal or historical designation. It is the project of self-positioning rather than an particular period in history what essentially characterizes modernity.

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[67] BUCK-MORSS, *Op. cit.* Page 86
[68] BENJAMIN, *Op. cit.* Page 13.
[69] BUCK-MORSS, *Op. cit.* Page 80
[70] BENJAMIN, The arcades Project. Page 540
[71] BUCK-MORSS, *Op. cit.* Page 108
[72] *Ibid.* Page 74
[73] Michel FOUCAULT, The Essential Writings, Volume 1: Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth, Ed. Paul Rabinow, New Press, New York, 1994.

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The modern condition of Baudelaire can be understood from the respond to his specific temporal terms and aesthetics, marked by his relation to the material situation of his time. From the turmoil of Paris, Baudelaire abstracted the need to liberate poetry from the constrains of rhythm and rhyme, to create a new language that required to adapt itself to sudden impulses, undulations and leaps of consciousness. Speed, fluidity and interconnectedness were the characteristics of the modern language in response to the new experience of time.

Baudelaire elevated the common and sordid life of a city to an intense poetic presentation of ordinary reality, still bringing in something beyond, a desacralized concept of beauty, one that goes side by side with the common passerby. This appreciation was passed on Benjamin who adopted the practice of drifting purposelessly in the city, as the bohemian *flâneur,* documenting the sidewalks of Paris, picking up and collecting remains and objects of all sort; the fragments gathered were interpreted against the solemnity credited to academy and the status attributed to commodities and certain historical styles. The anatomies of the crowd, the city and, ultimately, of modernity that Baudelaire started, were followed by one of the discarded objects of industrialization, meant to be a criticism to the modern cultural fetishism of merchandises. Strongly influenced by surrealism, Benjamin attempted "to capture the portrait of history in the most insignificant representations of reality, its scraps, as it were"[74]

"Where the megalomania of monumental proportions, of "bigger is better," equated both capitalist and imperialist expansion with the progressive course of history, Benjamin sought out the small discarded objects, the outdated buildings and fashions which, precisely as the "trash" of history, were evidence of its unprecedented material destruction"[75]

Benjamin can be counted among those who were most aware of the irreparability of the break in tradition that occurred during his lifetime, again, an awareness shared inadvertently with "Heidegger's remarkable sense for living eyes and living bones that had sea-changed into pearls and coral, and as such could be saved and lifted into the present only by doing violence to their context in interpreting them with "the deadly impact" of new thoughts"[76]

The effect the historical continuum has on material production is like the transformation of bones, debris, and rubble, through the passage of time, into coral and pearls, formed in the bottom of the sea despite the uninterrupted stream of the water. The role of the critic and, therefore, of the philosopher is that of a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea to pick the rich and the strange in order to take them to the surface; bringing them back to light[77] by the act of naming them, a modern-ritual invocation that saves valuable remains from oblivion. A way of thinking that is especially aware that the process of decay represents a process of crystallization also.

The silence of an object lying down in the street, or a bleached sign hanging on a wall, has an expressive potential that becomes legible to the attentive philosopher, for Benjamin this potential can reach the form of a socio-cultural philosophy of history; his poetical thinking, along with his practice of drifting in the city collecting fragments, located the significance of material production aside its size or its *phantasmagoria.* Leftovers, outmoded buildings and even trash took fossilized forms as the forgotten remains of industrialization, where the traces of living history could be read as dots in the constellation of a dialectical image that allows *de*mythifying and revealing the present in relation to history.

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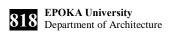BERMAN, Marshall: All that is solid melts into air, Penguin Books, New York, 1988.
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[74] BENJAMIN, Illuminations, Page 11
[75] BUCK-MORSS, *Op. cit.* Page 92
[76] BENJAMIN, *Op. cit.* Page 46
[77] *Ibid.* Page 50

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