The Urban Pedagogy of Walter Benjamin: Lessons for the 21st Century

Part 2

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Preface

In Part I, the emphasis was on Benjamin's understanding of language, on how his views of translation might have relevance to our contemporary desire to communicate across generations and cultures. Taking these interests in communication as given, Part II is devoted to the question of change. Specifically, to how Benjamin experienced and recognised change, and most importantly, how he prepared for its interruption. He suggested the term dialectical image as a tool to achieve this latter goal. To the question of who experiences this change one of the dictionary entries suggests that it is necessary to understand Benjamin's concept of the self. Also that, in order to understand in what direction change is going, that it is necessary to understand Benjamin's concept of home.

The essay in this Part takes up the question of violence. It is not viewed through dialectical images, which could have been a chosen strategy. Instead, the essay examines Benjamin's personal and political understanding of violence. But, the essay does more than re-visit Benjamin, it considers how relevant his reflections, dearly paid for in an attempted suicide in the early 1930s, might be to the contemporary violence we experience in urban and other contexts and to the much voiced debate on post-modernism.

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Critical dictionary of fragments

Dialectical images Benjamin proposes dialectical images as a way of directing attention towards on the one hand, the human faculty to make images, and on the other hand the dialectical manner in which two or more opposing entities can be drawn together to bring about a shock with creative consequences. Thus, in the *Arcades Project* (1999) he suggests the following:

> The dialectical image is a lightning flash. The Then must be held fast as it flashes its lightning image in the Now of recognisability. The rescue that is thus - and only thus - effected, can only take place for that which, in the next moment, is already lost. (9,7)

> Telescoping of the past through the present. (7a, 3)

> The materialist presentation of history leads the past to place the present in a critical condition. (7a, 5)

> The shocking experience is meant to stop time and hence disrupt precisely, how the way 'things "just keep on going" is the catastrophe.' (9a,1)

But, dialectical images, acting and enervating more swiftly than the slowness of conceptual thought (in symbolism the image was able to bypass conceptual thought with its allegiance to universals and the paraphernalia of transcendentalism), are not limited only to a consciousness of time. Take for example his observations on Atget's surreal photographs of Paris:

> Atget almost always passed by the 'great sights and so-called landmarks'; what he did not pass by was… the Paris courtyards, where from night to morning the hand-carts stand in serried ranks; or the tables after people have finished eating and left, the dishes not yet cleared away – as they exist in their hundreds of thousands at the same hour…Empty the Porte d'Arceuil by the Fortifications…They are not lonely, merely without mood; the city in these pictures looks cleared out, like a lodging that has not yet found a new tenant. It is in these achievements that surrealist photography sets the scene for a salutatory estrangement between man and his surroundings. (Benjamin, 1979, p250-251)

The dialectical image here presented is between the normal hustle and bustle of the city and its utter silence as objects rather than people gain the upper hand.

Different types or persona can also be experienced as dialectical images. For Benjamin, the female prostitute is seller and commodity in one; a human subject displaying value (as well as exchange value) and an object selling herself as waged labour. Money procuring the services of the prostitute also takes on the character of a dialectical image, 'it buys pleasure and at the same time, becomes the expression of shame'. (Benjamin, 1999, p492)

The shock, the dialectical clash of opposites, the making sure that things don't keep on going – these are the shared urban, pedagogic goals of dialectical images. It is seen on silent, empty Norwegian streets after 2pm on Saturdays when according to custom shops close for the weekend. It is seen in the financial district of the City of London on Saturdays: the commuters are absent and their sandwich bars, pubs and restaurants remain closed. The experience of weekend silence clashing with the weekday bustle yields a premonition of the end of capitalism, or suggests another way of doing business for example, the home office as dream, such that financial transactions no longer take place in the City.

The dialectical image is the shock or the estrangement, which compels the viewer to take a second more detailed look at their everyday life, and in so doing gives 'free play to the politically educated eye, under whose gaze all intimacies are sacrificed to the illumination of detail'. (Benjamin, 1979, p251) This has wider implications for history, which will be made in the present, rather than viewed and regarded at a distance as some finished product, waiting to be revealed for future generations. (Cadava, 1997, p72) Telescoped into the present, the past is then in effect immersed in and part of the present; its detail illuminated for political as opposed to academic purposes.

Experience

> The art of storytelling is coming to an end. Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly…It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences.

One reason for this phenomenon is obvious: experience has fallen in value…Every glance at a newspaper demonstrates that it has reached a new low…Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent – not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? …For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, economic experience by inflation, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body. (Benjamin, 1971, p83-84)

Benjamin, writing in the aftermath of the First World War, was drawing attention to how not only had the content of experience become eroded, but also to how our ability to communicate it had been impeded. Thus, the newspaper, communicating events each day is occupied by novelty and the new, 'to convey happening per se, which is the purpose of information'. (Benjamin, 1983, p113). Little of what it reports has an after-life. Benjamin's desire is that meaningful experience should precisely have an after-life and remain memorable, to become embedded in 'the life of the storyteller in order to pass it on as experience to those listening.' (Benjamin, 1983, op. cit)

With this in mind he suggests that the experience of little value is *erlebnis*. (Benjamin, 1983) By this he means it is lived in the here and now and forgotten. It can be repetitive, but the point is that we assign little long-term value to it. Against this he suggests our often thwarted desire for *erfahrung*. That which involves the experience of something worth recollection and reminiscence, such that it breaks with the continual return of the ever same of empty experiences, *erlebnis*.

Another way of putting it is to say that he desires historically valuable experience, the founding of what Nietzsche called in a memorable phrase, *monumental history*. At the level of society, it is the desire for shared historical experiences. At the level of the individual, it is the desire that the individual reflect over their many experiences - collecting them, sifting and sorting through them. The goal is to become a person who has cleared a space and made time for what might be called in that equally memorable phrase, *the life of the mind*; in order to reflect over these experiences, which are by no means only mental and by no means merely lived as perpetual experiences of *erlebnis*.

It is also the desire to focus on the form and content of collective experiences, such that the dominant manner in which they are normally consumed and manipulated by capital and opinion makers in different bourgeois public spheres can be opposed. (Negt and Kluge, 1993) For example, so that spectators of movies are already regarded as producers, and not merely consumers, through the required labour of emotion and fantasy, which assimilates and also negates any intended manipulations. This was Benjamin's point, the masses in reception were to critically evaluate mass produced films, and in this manner to become collectively and on a personal level 'the author as producer'. (1983a)

Allegory To Benjamin allegory was a way of seeing and experiencing the world. (Benjamin, 1985; Spencer, 1985) He found it in Baroque German tragic drama, but he also regarded it as a valid way of experiencing the modern capitalist society, where people treat each other increasingly as objects of a purely monetary or instrumental value. The prostitute on street corners was an allegory for the corporeal experience of commodities trussed up with nowhere to go.

The allegoricist was opposed to symbolists who looked for signs of correspondence with ancient times and their artifacts for example, in their epic myths and religious rituals. Such symbolists sought a crisis-free, timeless, transcendental experience shielded from the new of genuine historical *erfahrung*. Shunning the symbolist's repetitive empty time, *erlebnis,* and in search of *erfahrung*, the Baroque allegoricist sought motifs of death and mortality for example, in the macabre and its inherent mortification of phenomena – to thus intensify the experience of human wretchedness in architecture, in the human body, in wars and historical events.

If contemporary urban society betrays an insatiable desire for *erlebnis*, achieved through repetitive, entertaining, cathartic spectacles, then the pedagogic goal of today's allegoricist is to deny catharsis as a strategy of socialisation into acceptance and accommodation with the present state of affairs. To thus interrupt the periodic, cathartic repetition of the entertaining ever same and create instead a space (surely, urban, social and cognitive) and a moment for the institution of the new. But, not the new of the fashionable or the novel, since these merely confirm the return of ever same cycles of capitalist production, reproduction and entertainment. Nor, to patiently wait for the tarnishing of the fashionable and novel and their encouragement of the collector's delight in the obsolete. Instead, the new,

in the sense of a radical break with what has been and the necessity of the violent embrace of mortification, the allegory of future life found in death.

The self The Kantian view of the self and its specification as a source of knowledge is based upon a transcendental experience, which places the subject before objects and commands that their sensuous and intellectual content be grasped. A similar demarcation lurks behind the view that what is required is a separation of the sovereign subject from their surroundings. Such a view is found in G. H. Mead's desire to follow the ontogenesis of the self, as the *I,* internalised *me* and internalised significant *other(s)* remain separated from, and yet dependent upon external others.

Benjamin was no supporter of those who would delimit the self to strictly demarcated subject - object experiences and a self separated from external others:

> We know of primitive peoples of the so-called pre-animistic stage who identify themselves with sacred animals and plants and name themselves after them; we know of insane people who likewise identify themselves in part with objects of their perception, which are no longer objecta, "placed before" them; we know of sick people who do not relate the sensations of their bodies to themselves, but rather to other creatures, and of clairvoyants who at least claim to be able to feel the sensations of others as their own. (Benjamin, 1989, p4)

Such statements, written when Benjamin was still in his youth, amount to a declaration of intent for his later explorations: the desire to widen the boundaries of the self, for example, to include experiences under the influence of hashish. To spatialise the self in city wanderings and to equally let the utopian energies of religion, Surrealism and Communism course through him, represented additional ways for Benjamin to dismantle the traditional boundaries of self.

Instead of a transcendental experience of the self (Kant) or a social-psychological internalised self (Mead) he professed support for the four temperaments: the phlegmatic (cold and wet), the sanguine (hot and wet), the choleric of yellow bile (hot, dry, irascible and angry) and the melancholic. He regarded himself as melancholic, interested in the ruins of experience, the ways of the collector and the aesthetics of tragedy.

However, even though he derived consolation from his belief in the four temperaments, this did not mean he was a person without character and a

unique sense of self. Acting as a channel or turntable for many different forms or schools of thought and interests (Communism, Surrealism, theology and so on), merely meant that at times his own, more egotistical concerns retreated into the background. Thus, in *The Berlin Chronicle* he noted the importance in writing of having rarely used 'the word "I" except in letter [ensuring] endless interpolations into what has been, but also, at the same time, the precaution of the subject represented by the "I", which is entitled not to be sold cheaply.' (Benjamin, 1979, p 304-305) Not then, as many post-modernists presume, that it is important to abandon the belief in an authentic self and its self-directed, egoistic concerns. Rather, the more personal self and its private reveries must accept that other interests (Communism, Surrealism, religion and so on) can exist alongside and at times touch the unique character and life of the individual. In other words, without the one refusing the existence of the other for a single moment: the skin of the I made porous and sensitive to the non-I.

Time For Benjamin the catastrophe of history was that things just kept on going in a repetitive manner, in a continuum lacking for the most part important events, which could act as a source of non-repetitive experiences and landmarks. This repetitive time was forced to march to the beat of the capitalist production cycle.

It was the time of the *ever same*, dominating the everyday life of people. Capitalism and the everyday work ethic left their mark upon individuals, both bourgeois and proletarian. Another way of saying this, is that the circle of repetitive routines into which people are socialised, shares an emphasis upon production and the accumulation of experience through time. So, even if these experiences are repetitive and result in nothing new, they represent an accumulation and time as accumulation.

In Benjamin's call to halt time in moments of crisis, he sort to institute revolutionary change, such that the direction of the *ever same* could be changed, or disrupted on a more permanent basis. In effect, accumulated time was to be halted, and the experience instead, was to be that of suspended time.

Benjamin operated with a dichotomy: a reversible movement between the accumulated and yet ever same time of capitalist and repetitive experiences, what he termed *erlebniss*, and the halted or disrupted time when the new could be instituted and the participant could live historically meaningful and non-repetitive experiences, what he termed *erfahrung*. That is, a move between accumulated time and suspended time. However, it could be asked if his dichotomy should be extended beyond the merely

dyad to become a triad, where the inclusion of a third kind of time could yield both repetitive and revolutionary experiences. This third kind of time might include consumed, lost, disappearing time.

By this it is meant the individual's experience of time spent consuming not just the necessary food and drink to survive, but the repetitive time used to purchase and consume commodities. This experience would include the use-value and also the exchange value of commodities, but the point of focus would be upon how the experience of time as a commodity is consumed in a repetitive manner in the course of everyday life. However, the consumption of time could also take on the form of a suspension of daily commodity purchase and use. For example, while standing in bus queues, squinting at the departure times of trains or waiting for the lover (late again), the person as an individual and as a member of a collective irrevocably lose time. It is experienced as disappearing, and they might feel compelled to instigate a different, potentially revolutionary use and experience of their time. That is, as time is lost or disappears, it can be done with, forgotten, and something new can take its place.

In other words, to Benjamin's time of production (*erlebniss*) repetitive and empty of historically non-repetitive meaning, and time of revolution, in moments of *erfahrung*, a third distillation and mixture of these experiences of time could be added, time consumed and lost, and yet providing the opportunity for changing the course of time and activity in a revolutionary manner. As time is lost or disappears, it is done with, and a moment is created for the *new*.

Home As noted, Benjamin prided himself on rarely having used the term 'I' in his texts. (Benjamin, 1979) Post-modernists might celebrate this as an inclination to deny narcissistic tendencies. That is to embrace the loss of the 'I' and personal attributes. Jewish commentators might argue that he was trying to eliminate and refuse his Jewish heritage and its obligations.

Yet, Benjamin preserved a stubborn desire to work on his *Arcades Project* when Hitler and fascism invaded France. In the 20s, he had been invited to emigrate to Palestine and Adorno now clearly wanted him to go into exile and escape this invasion of French territory. He had projects which belonged to him and he to them, and he was far from intent on becoming a post-modern self, lacking any vestiges of a unique 'I'. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that Benjamin remained a figure who transcended national territories and any accompanying sense of belonging. He shared Nietzsche's view, choosing to quote him:

This seeking for my home… was my affliction… Where is – my home? I ask and have sought for it; I have not found it. (Nietzsche from Also Spoke Zarathustra, quoted in Benjamin, 1999)

Some retreated to the domestic sphere and sought their home in the interior, 'the house becomes the plastic expression of the personality', but Benjamin argued that such decorative trophies were a fictional framework and 'the true framework for the life of the private citizen must be sought increasingly in offices and commercial centres'. (Benjamin, 1999, p20) In other words, the self and the 'I' were, or should be, dragged into public view, for the office bureaucrat and the capitalist, and made thereby into a spectacle. A person's sense of 'I' would then have to be based upon non-domestic foundations.

Benjamin for example, was one who seriously contemplated becoming a travel writer – not to collect trophies for the cultivation of an interior `I'. But to widen the horizon of his experiences. As a melancholic he refused to accept any one place as his homeland:

In a love affair most seek an eternal homeland. Others, but very few, eternal voyaging. These latter are melancholics, for whom contact with mother earth is to be shunned. They seek the person who will keep them far from the homeland's sadness. (Benjamin, 1979, p75)

He would have wholeheartedly agreed with Novalis's desire that man should be at home everywhere, and thus nowhere in particular.

Naming Wittgenstein argued for and then abandoned a correspondence theory of truth, where the speaker had a name for and named each object. (Wittgenstein, 1984) He later developed the view that each shared form of life developed its own way of naming objects, and this was based upon the basis of the form of life's culturally determined and delimited set of activities That is, what might be called a consensus theory of truth, more accepted and practiced than actually debated - by those involved at least. (Wittgenstein, 1994)

Benjamin too espoused a view of truth based upon naming. Early in his career he envisaged a primordial state where the naming and truth giving of individual objects was an act carried out by God, but after the Fall language and naming became the province of man; a naming concerned with sets of signs referring to each other, rather than to the uniqueness of the object, as had been God's creative intention. In the middle of his career he developed the view that truth was based upon what he called a *mimetic*

faculty, capable of naming and founding sensuous (such as through onomatopeia) or non-sensuous correspondences (such as in the act of writing) between words and objects. (Benjamin, 1979, p160-162)

Later in his career, he continued to view truth as a naming activity, but this was from within the dialectical image used to halt and disturb, if only for a moment, the accumulated culture and mores of naming, and institute new names for new experiences, as the shock of *the what-has-been* flashed into a constellation with the *now*. (Benjamin, 1999, p463)

This 'dialectics at a standstill' was never to be carried out once and for all. As Benjamin phrased it, 'each "now" is the now of a particular recognizability', and there will always be new moments to recognise. (Benjamin, 1999, p463) This open-ended stream of possibility perhaps accounts for his insistence that the destructive character ceaselessly desire to disturb the status quo of accumulated phrases, truths and life-styles.

The truth of the object had to be revealed, as the 'representation of truth', rather than as a neo-Kantian project based upon 'the acquisition of knowledge'. (Benjamin, 1985, p28) The latter as a propertied class, all too willing to build a walled garden around their most recent acquisitions – for fellow academics, closest family and friends. As he graphically put it, through a dialectical image bringing together love and the child/woman:

> And truth refuses (like a child or a woman who does not love us), facing the lens of writing while we crouch under the black cloth, to keep still and look amiable. Truth wants to be startled abruptly, at one stroke, from her self-immersion, whether by uproar, music or cries for help. (Benjamin, 1979, p95)

The aura of Heidegger Benjamin once noted in correspondence (1931), 'we are planning to annihilate Heidegger.' (Benjamin, 1994, p 365) But, he never lived to carry out this plan. He did however provide some indication of how this might be done:

> What distinguishes images from the "essences" of phenomenology is their historical index. (Heidegger seeks in vain to rescue history for phenomenology abstractly through "historicity.") These images are to be thought of entirely apart from the categories of the "human sciences," from so-called habitus, from style, and the like. For the historical index of the images not only says that they belong to a particular time; it says, above all, that they attain to legibility only at

a particular time …Every present day is determined by the images that are synchronic with it: each "now" is the now of a particular recognizability. In it, truth is charged to the bursting point with time. (This point of explosion, and nothing else, is the death of the *intentio*, which thus coincides with the birth of authentic historical time, the time of truth.) It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present casts its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural *bildlich*. Only dialectical images are genuinely historical…(Benjamin, 1999, N3, 1 p362-3)

The accusation of historicity is directed towards Heidegger who voiced too abstract a view of history, without mention of concrete dates, classes or events. Like Jung and Klages, and many Fascist ideologues, he cultivated a mythical view of history. Evidence to confirm this can be found in Heidegger's speeches as university Rector, where he stated the view that it was necessary for the German *volk*, under the guidance of a leader to reclaim their sense of purpose and Being. (Wolin, 1993, p40-61) In his writings he talked of the need to approach history ontologically, as a certain attitude to historical events, such as the need and willingness to pursue the concretely historical of events, the ontic, as a question of collective fate and destiny. (Heidegger, 1962, p436) ; Wolin, 1993) After he retired as Rector of the University in 1934, he increasingly developed an abstract, ontological view of history, preferring to wait for change, rather than actively *willing* it (by military, authoritarian or other means). This would be to impose technology and man upon nature, society and the environment, and risk the destruction of all parties through the *will to power*.

Benjamin's alternative proposal involved experiences of dialectical images located in the legibility of the moment. These would stop history remaining an abstraction and would permit people to intervene and change its course. In searching for dialectical images, where the past is fused with the present in critical moments, Benjamin's intention might also have been to break the *aura* of history as some monumental, ever distant entity governed by elites. Benjamin defined the aura in the following manner:

> To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return…the unique manifestation of a distance. (Benjamin 1983, p148)

So Benjamin was refusing the view that history should be the province of an elite set of leaders, destined to lead at a distance from their subordinates. Another way of putting this, is to say that the aura of the leader and of Heidegger was to be denied. History was to be concrete, without abstraction and the *aura* of distance; it was to be the province of the masses in their local struggles.

The aura of Benjamin If Serres (1995; 1997, p5-7) will be remembered as the pedagogue of the *aquatic* medium, where the pupil is always to swim between the two riverbanks of science and art in search of experience and knowledge, then Benjamin will be remembered as the pedagogue of the *auratic* medium, where the pupil is always looking to rescue experience and knowledge from its *auratic* decay and permanent loss, beyond the realm of the memorable.

Benjamin's name is swiftly recalled when the discussion is about the conceptualisation of media such as film, television and the inter-net. His concept of the decline of the *aura* and its connection with reproduction highlights the different experiences entailed in consuming the unique or mass produced work of art, and the role of the different media in this consumption. However, Benjamin had greater, or rather different ambitions for the experience of the *aura*.

He derived his understanding of the *aura* from Klages the symbolist, who insisted that the power of images, an *auratic* power, bypassed in a more direct manner the source of knowledge acquired slowly and methodically through concepts, universals and the stance of transcendental subjects.

Benjamin declared an interest in the question of meaningful experience, what he called *erfahrung*, and how it could be made memorable for future generations. He noted, in the spirit of Baudelaire, how people mixing in urban crowds or employed on repetitive factory lines no longer had access to meaningful experience. Their experiences were lived and forgotten, what he termed *erlebnis*. Benjamin argued that they required not merely regular annual, monthly or weekly rituals, where they could come together and celebrate a shared sociability, but historically revolutionary experiences when participants could determine their own history in a collective manner. This is what he meant by meaningful experience, *erfahrung*.

Benjamin did not however stop there. He then asked how the historically meaningful experience could be communicated to future generations. Or to

put it differently, how might this experience be remembered, by what activity? Voluntary memory was considered too inexact and unreliable a means, and he supported Proust's view that involuntary memory was the issue. Shifting the concern to involuntary memory meant locating the memorable not in the desired voluntary memory of the individual subject, but in the objects, people and situations in which they were immeshed. And, this is where Benjamin found a use for the experience of the *aura*.

The aura was 'the sensation which an object arouses in us.' (Benjamin. 1983, p112) Proust had talked of a pastry, the Madeleine, which when he ate it, transported him back to memories which he hadn't previously been able to recall. In other words, the sensation of the object, its *aura*, opened the person to the recall of meaningful experience – not necessarily of a revolutionary character for Proust, a spokesman for the bourgeoisie and the maintenance of its status quo. Nevertheless, Benjamin's point was that access to memorable experience required looking to the world around the person; an intellectual desire and practice of voluntary memory wasn't enough.

Benjamin developed this view of the sensation which an object arouses in us to include not only the tasted, as in the pastry, but also the visual. This is how most readers have become acquainted with the *aura* of Benjamin. Specifically:

> To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return…the unique manifestation of a distance. (Benjamin 1983, p148)

Here, Benjamin was developing his use of the *aura* to encompass the active role of the viewer, who no longer merely waited for the chance encounter with the object, as was implied in Proust's conception. But, note the role of distance. In order to be seen and have something or someone look back at us in return, a distance is required between the viewer and object. If the distance disappears then the object can emit no *aura* (whether actual or perceived).

He also envisaged a different scenario for experience of the *aura*: the object, in this case the person encountered, who no longer looked back, would make an unbridgeable distance or barrier. A barrier and distance which additionally refused to share and found communication and a sense of the social. And, where might a person experience such? In the city on buses and trams where people could, as Simmel noted, 'stare at one another for minutes or even hours on end without exchanging a word.' (quoted in Benjamin, 1983, p151) Another example is supplied by Joyce in

his novel *Ulysses*, as he describes a young women under the gaze of Bloom, a male character:

> The eyes that were fastened upon her set her pulses tingling. She looked at him a moment, meeting his glance, and light broke in upon her. (Joyce, 1992, p475)

The young women in question had to decide if she would continue to return the gaze, or turn away and thus brake the power of the aura and its invitation to communication and the social.

The *aura* for Benjamin and also the *aura* of Benjamin are thus basically about communication and the preconditions of the social, and these shouldn't be narrowed to merely an encounter with the work of art and the question of its reception in a unique or reproduced form. And yet, it was such a narrowing that worried Benjamin: Fascist politicians cultivated their *aura* in front of the camera - in order to manipulate the viewer into passive contemplation as they presented and turned themselves into living *auratic* works of art.

The visual and the textual With the rise of computer mediated communication and different types of viewing screen (such as the television) the fear has been voiced by some pedagogues that the young will increasingly neglect the reading of texts and books. They will instead live in an image based culture, with video games and different forms of pictorial surfing on the internet. A veritable privileging of the 'imaginary over the symbolic' and a shrinking of the public sphere based upon dialogical interaction (Gilroy, 2000, p191). But, it is by no means clear that such developments will result in cultural impoverishment, or that children will cease to read texts.

It is more the case that those highlighting the rise of the visual and the neglect of the textual draw the lines of battle too sharply. It is to simplify the issue by positing an either/or choice: either the textual work to be read, or the visual to be seen. Surely, even looking at images and the pictorial requires a development of the ability to read the image? It is surely not the case, that looking at the image gives simultaneous knowledge of its whole content. As Litz has noted in her book on Joyce:

> Even in the visual arts our apprehension of an 'Image' is the result of an accumulative process. Simultaneity can only be obtained after we are familiar with all the components and their relationships with each other. (Litz, 1961, p55-54)

This is not unlike saying that the image has to be *read* in a cumulative manner, just as a text has to be *read* in a cumulative manner, along its line. To read is thus to accumulate from either text or image, to gain a familiarity with the components of the image, just as a familiarity is gained with the meaning of the words in a sentence.

There are of course Chinese characters, ideo-grams, where the signs written in texts contain traces of the image they are meant to represent. The televised image often contains written signs or so-called sub-texts, the song can contain talk of images, the touched surface can be shaped in a series of letters for the blind person. The implied opposition between the different media, textual, visual, heard, touched with the intention of fueling an opposition is therefore a mistake.

When Joyce writes, 'television kills telephony in brother's broil' (Joyce, 1975, p52) it could be taken to mean that television and telephony are two brothers fighting in clear opposition with each other. But, Joyce continues the passage, 'our eyes demand their turn', meaning not necessarily the act of turn taking, instead sentences are to be written in the presence of an accused presenting his case *viva voca* (by the living voice and for the ear) and visually to the court. It is thus a simultaneous doubling or layering of the media, in this case the visual and the aural, and thereby reinforcing their combined impact. Similarly, the rise of the visual on the computer screen can be a new layer imposed upon the textual or the touched.

However, it is perhaps Benjamin who makes the strongest case for discounting the fears of those who envisage the end of textual reading and of reading in general. In his unpublished reflections on the doctrine of the similar and the mimetic faculty he speculates on the correspondences made long before poets such as Baudelaire. Early man imitated the movement of the stars in dance and on other cultic occasions. Man was using a mimetic faculty, creating a sensuous similarity. Today this mimetic faculty has been transformed, it is now evident in the way we create a non-sensuous similarity connecting a word to a meaning, or an event:

> For if words meaning the same thing in different languages are
> arranged about that signified as their centre, we have to inquire how
> they all – while often possessing not the slightest similarity to one
> another – are similar to the signified at their centre. (Benjamin ,
> 1999, p696)

The answer to the inquiry rests upon the necessity of revealing similarity, what Benjamin terms non-sensuous similarity, or the transformed mimetic faculty of earlier times.

Could it be the case that the rise of the visual image, layered upon and intermixing with other media, such as the text to be read, the song to be heard, or the touched to be deciphered, requires the same effort in each case. That is a mimetic action connecting the sign (image, textual, sound, touched) with a meaning? Thus, the stars seen in the sky, on the computer or television screen require an act identifying a meaning based upon similarity or correspondence. A non-sensuous similarity has to be established between 'what is said and what is meant…between what is written and what is meant', between what is touched and what is meant. (Benjamin, 1999, p697) The act of creating a similarity opens for endless permutations for example, a non-sensuous similarity of meaning is required to tie the spoken to the written.

The rise of the image, upon and intermixed with the textual is not therefore something to be feared. Children will learn to read the image as they have previously learnt to read the text. And as Benjamin speculated, in all cases where there are different signs (visual, heard, written, touched) the same mimetic faculty, even if continually transformed from the sensuous to the non-sensuous and back again, will be required to create and identify the connections between the signs and their purported meanings.

One further speculation is possible, one only partly anticipated in Benjamin's view that graphology conceals the unconscious of the writer. Or, to put it differently, the view that graphology conceals the mimetic act connecting the writer of the text to their own personal unconscious experiences. And the connecting link is through images, since this is what handwriting entails – either in the way a letter's shape or curve mimes the shape and movement of an animal for instance (the body of handwriting – the Mendelssohn theory of handwriting), or the way a letter mimes the writer's spiritual vision of warmth, plentitude and so on (the expressive, vitalist aspect of handwriting – the Klages theory of handwriting).

To read the graphology of a person will then reveal their unconscious experiences deposited as image traces in their handwriting, and as a consequence reveal truths about their normally hidden or repressed existential state. (Benjamin, 1999, p722) Reading the unconscious, existential state of a person will today have to include the way they express themselves in images, when speaking, touching or being touched. Heidegger began the investigation of this when he asked that one should be attentive to the tone of a person as they replied to the question, 'how

one is faring?' (Heidegger, 1962, p173) In an age of mechanical and electronic reproduction this may become difficult, as the signature or voice confirmation increasingly rests upon computer mediated communication and looses the corporeal mark of the unique author.

Contemporary Violence and Walter Benjamin's Conception of the *Destructive Character* [i]

Is the *destructive character* typical of periods of perceived and experienced decadence, or *forfall* to use the Norwegian word? Periods such as ours? Do we then seek to escape its consequences – viewed by some to be mediocrity, egalitarianism, feminism, mass society, abandoned projects of revolutionary socialism and solidarity – through the exertion, promotion and imposition of a logic of elitism, the superman (*overmennesket*) and the individual right, or group demand to be destructive?

Destructive characters represent not a submission and admission of melancholy in the face of such decadence. On the contrary, their destruction knowing no boundaries is a resistance to such melancholy and to an accompanying sense of resignation and fatalism. In other words, to fight precisely decadence with destruction of the old, and to make in the process a clearing or *ground* (Heidegger) for the new. Heidegger's (1971, p76) phrase was a bestowal of the *ground-laying grounding*.

To understand the *destructive character* in such a manner requires understanding it as a pure means – this being Benjamin's project – without reducing it in a reductive manner, to the status of a means supporting the production of commodity or gender relations and their associated institutions. To reduce and hence define the destructive character in terms of such ends, would be to risk overlooking how it might concretely be lived as a pure means in itself, and not as a means to a single end or several ends. This pure means is here envisaged as an ontological condition of Being prior to its embroilment in different concrete, ontic projects connected with a reduction to a means.

Benjamin and Nietzsche, as well as the avant-garde and political revolutionaries of the 1900-1920s were arguably such *destructive characters* in societal contexts and junctures marked by decadence (*forfall*). What of today in England and Scandinavia? Or to put it differently, how might Benjamin be read as a writer for our times, with

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Nietzsche and revolutionary movements such as the subterranean, largely submerged, sub-(con) text of his work? This essay looks at the case of Benjamin.

Introduction

The allegiance of Benjamin scholars changes with the fashions, often in the wake of new or revised translations of his work into different languages. Thus, the recent translations of the Arcades Project into English will with certainty lead to an interest or rebirth of interest in his work on the experience of the city. In the 70s and early 80s, the emphasis was upon his political texts and how they might serve the cause of different revolutionary movements. Take for example Eagleton's (1981) book entitled, *Walter Benjamin or towards a revolutionary criticism*. In the late 80s interest turned to Benjamin's relationship with language, interpretation and figures such as Heidegger. Just consider the Heideggerian sub-text in the word *ground* which enters the title chosen for the collection of essays by edited by Nägele (1988), *Benjamin's Ground. New Readings of Walter Benjamin*. The authors propose a textual re-interpretation rather than a political analysis based upon mass movements and political party membership.

One of the aims of this essay is to argue that despite changing scholarly receptions and interpretations of his work, it is possible to identify a connecting thread joining together his different writings on the urban (cityscapes in the 1920s, Berlin Childhood from the early 1930s, the *Arcades Project*), politics (Critique of Violence from the early 1920s, *Theses on the Concept of History* from the late 1930s), and language (*On Language as Such* in the 1920s, the *Mimetic Faculty* in the 1930s). And if not joining these writings together, at least bringing them into mutual proximity – a shared constellation seeking profane illumination and radical, concrete change. Not to argue that only this thread exists, he was concerned that theology among other things should be retained as one such alternative thread. In this essay however, the focus will be upon his understanding of the *destructive character*. The framework for this discussion will be his small essay from 1931 entitled, *Der Destruktive Charakter* (The Destructive Character), with the argument that with this essay he defines one of these connecting threads. (Benjamin, 1974, 1979)

A second goal of this essay is to raise for discussion how the destructive character might form a *ground* capable of informing reflections on the contemporary situation in general, and in particular, on topics such as violence, self-destruction and post-modernism. *Ground* used in the double

sense, as an actual space upon and in which events take place, and as ontological Heideggerian space supporting existential choices.

Part I: The 1931 essay

The destructive character is a short essay, not more than two pages in total length. Benjamin opens by asking what it would mean to a person looking back over his life, realising that all his obligations originated 'in people on whose "destructive character" everyone was agreed.' (Benjamin, 1979, p157) In other words, that a person had encountered and entered into a relationship of dependency to such figures.

Without specifying concrete examples of such people and the role of dependency they institute and support, he immediately concentrates his attention upon what might be characteristic of the destructive character as a type of person. Such a focus upon the character as a type is a strategy Benjamin had adopted in his reflections on the melancholic as a character in his book on tragedy, and he was to do the same in his reflections upon the storyteller later in the 30s. The character in the sense of standing for a psychological type but meaning more than this, because it includes immediately within itself cultural, social, economic, political and historical relations. Sociologists, supporters of Bourdieu's concept of the habitus, would readily assert that Benjamin was therefore dealing with a social character, combining the qualities of the unique individual with their socio-economic and political backgrounds.

The destructive character is seen to make room, adopting the view that 'destroying rejuvenates in clearing way the traces of our own age'. (p157) As a consequence the 'world is simplified', but the destructive character has 'no vision…few needs, and the least of them is to know what will replace what has been destroyed.' This might be taken as an indication of nihilism. [ii] For Benjamin and many other Europeans after the First World War, the world seemed to have lost its meaning. The treaties and decisions of politicians appeared powerless in the face of an economic recession, quickly assuming global proportions. This was the background for Heidegger's view that the German *volk* had lost its Being. But it could be argued that leaders such as Stalin and Hitler were destructive and in

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[ii] The reference here is to Nietzsche's passive nihilism, and not its opposite, active nihilism. Both conceptions are developed in aphorism 23 of the *Will to Power* text attributed to him: 'a passive nihilism, a sign of weakness. The strength of the spirit may be worn out, exhausted, so that previous goals and values have become incommensurate and no longer are believed.'

possessing a clear vision disproved Benjamin's thesis. Yet, perhaps Benjamin is drawing attention to the destructive character's ability to create the space or platform for such leaders, 'someone is sure to be found who needs this space without its being filled.' (p158)

The objection might be raised that Hitler and Stalin were not necessarily destructive themselves. They had henchmen to do the destructive work for them. But, as argued in the paragraph above, it might be that destructive others were preparing the ground for the emergence of Hitler and Stalin, who would then continue to lead and direct the destructive work of these industrious and dutiful others. This would suggest that these leaders were used as a kind of shorthand by writers to denote in a more general way the many doers of the deed. Not then to mean that history is reduced to the actions of a few great leaders, but that they were signifiers for the actions of many others.

The destructive character's role is therefore in the first instance to keep the possibilities open. They have 'no interest in being understood'. This would serve the interests of those wishing to maintain the status quo; the bourgeois, but also others in positions of power, who look for 'comfort' and predictability.

Is the destructive character interested in saving or conserving anything? His reply is that 'the destructive character sees nothing as permanent', and Benjamin once again directs his energies against the enemies of change, 'some pass things down to posterity, by making them untouchable and thus conserving them, others pass on situations by making them practicable and thus liquidating them.'

He thus supports the destructive character as the person willing to take up a position at the crossroads, abandoning all certainties and all that might induce a feeling of well-being and self-contentment.

Let us break off this brief exegesis and ask how different critics have interpreted his essay.

Part II: Two interpretations

In the already referred to book edited by Nägele there is an essay by Ronell. It presents one interpretation of Benjamin's essay. Ronell notes how Benjamin makes reference to the destructive character whose 'need for fresh air and open space is stronger than any hatred', who 'has no interest in being understood'. Ronell's conclusion is that Benjamin, with

these citations, is likening the destructive character to Nietzsche's Zarathustra and his prophecy of the over-man. (Ronell, 1988, p128-130) Nietzsche outlined how the over-man lived in a position beyond all hatred, or to use his terminology, beyond ressentiment. Nietzsche's over-man was also unconcerned with being understood, preferring to be misunderstood.

The thinly veiled implication of Ronell's interpretation is that Benjamin was welcoming the arrival of violent destructive figures who regarded themselves as supreme leaders. Such that Benjamin, whether intentionally or unintentionally, was in fact providing legitimacy for precisely leaders on the political right (for example Hitler) or political left (for example Stalin).

However, there is reason to argue, as in the opening presentation of this essay, that Benjamin was not seeking to justify and describe the destructive character as a new type of leader per se. He was more interested in showing the necessary conditions, preparing the *ground* for precisely the emergence and arrival of such leaders. When the *ground* had been cleared, then society was ready for Hitler and Stalin to arrive with their clearly stated projects or visions.

Such an interpretation is more in keeping with the one suggested by Wohlfarth (1994). He argues that Benjamin was concerned to re-capture the work and ideas of Nietzsche from the Fascists for a revolutionary cause. Such that destruction was necessary to remove capitalism, bourgeois institutions and the private concerns and life styles of its supporters.

To provide support for his interpretation Wohlfarth argues further that Benjamin was involved in a number of long discussions with Brecht when he wrote this essay. The destructive character's 'clearing away the traces' is a phrase that Benjamin acknowledges elsewhere as Brecht's:

> …the destructive aspect of Brecht's character,
> which puts everything in danger almost before it
> has been achieved. (Benjamin, 1983, p119)

Wohlfarth's point is that Benjamin borrowed this phrase from Brecht to re-claim for the socialist revolution capitalism's continual effacing of the traces. Capitalism effaced traces in order that each new fashionable commodity would be demanded by the consumer and make its predecessor obsolete. Benjamin's attention was to clear away the traces of capitalism for the arrival of a new type of society. One that could not be defined in its final form in advance, as Marx also noted.

In other words, the Wohlfarth interpretation supports the view that Benjamin was reclaiming the destructive character both from Fascists looking to Nietzsche to support their cause and from capitalists who identified the destructive character with the entrepreneur and consumer willing to make commodities and perhaps even people obsolete, or at least replaceable.

The Wohlfarth and the Ronell interpretations of Benjamin's destructive character have differing consequences. The former opens for the view that when Benjamin talks of the destructive character he is really talking of the proletariat who must destroy both Fascism and capitalism. Ronell's view implies that the destructive character is the over-man of which Nietzsche talked. That is the stronger leader willing and brave enough to break with morality and accepted mores.

These two differing interpretations will now be left and an attempt will be made to develop an alternative interpretation of Benjamin's destructive character, asking at the same time what kinds of implication such a character might have for our contemporary situation and existence. The strategy adopted intends not in any way to deny the validity of Wolhfarth and Ronell's interpretations, but to shift attention to the very last sentence of Benjamin's essay.

Part III: Existential concerns

The last sentence of Benjamin's essay reads as follows:

> Der destruktive Charakter lebt nicht aus dem Gefühl, daB das Leben lebenswert sei, sondern daB der Selbstmord die Mühe nicht lohnt. (Benjamin, 1974, p398)

> The destructive character lives from the feeling, not that life is worth living, but that suicide is not worth the trouble. (Benjamin, 1979, p159)

In his presentation, Wolhfarth selects the phrase 'not that life is worth living' to argue that Benjamin means that in the Germany or Europe of the 30s there existed no positive values to unite people and give meaning to life. That it was a time of decadence. (Wohlfarth, 1994, p161) But, Wohlfarth quotes only this phrase and not the sentence from which it is

taken. He therefore begins to draw attention to the existential concerns of Benjamin's essay and conception of the destructive character, but he doesn't develop such an existential perspective, his intention lies elsewhere, and he moves on to speculate, as noted above, about Benjamin's connections with socialism and Brecht.

The perspective to be developed in what follows will build upon an interpretation of the complete sentence and its existential implications. Benjamin seems to have constructed or crafted this sentence as a kind of enigma, or better still as a statement made by an oracle in a deliberately obtuse manner, so that the reader must puzzle over its meaning and risk getting snared in the Nietzschian trap of believing that they, as a member of the mass, have understood its meaning when they have not.

It might even be the case that Benjamin with this sentence is setting in motion the activity of the destructive character he has just described. Such that he is refusing to provide a once and for all meaning or interpretation of the destructive character. That this sentence's enigmatic quality is intentionally designed to keep options open - a *ground* cleared, permitting endless re-interpretations (and destructions) of traditionally accepted views on suicide for example.

In 1931, while traveling in the south of France he wrote in his diary (May 4th):

> I feel tired. Tired above all of the struggle, the
> struggle for money, of which I now have
> enough in reserve to stay here…this fatigue
> combines in a strange way with the causes of
> my dissatisfaction with my life. This
> dissatisfaction involves a growing aversion to, as
> well as a lack of confidence in, the methods I see
> chosen by people of my kind and my situation
> to assert control over the hopeless situation of
> cultural politics in Germany… I need only hint at
> my growing willingness to take my own life.
> (Benjamin, 1999, p469-470)

Benjamin is drawing attention not to the economic motive as a cause for his suicide, nor even to the apparent lack of any values to live for or realise, but to his disappointments with fellow intellectuals and the possibility of achieving anything through writing and publishing. To phrase it differently it is a lack of belief in the social bond he has with

other intellectuals, who he later in the same entry accuses of dividing 'into factions'.

This entry and its content can be placed alongside and compared with the destructive character essay he was working on at the time. When this is done, it becomes possible to view Benjamin's remarks on his own life as indicative of the futility of trying to be destructive and clear away obstacles. That is to be destructive won't achieve anything, even in the sense of clearing the *ground*. Benjamin's diary therefore confirms the phrase, 'not that life is worth living' as expressed in the essay. But, why doesn't he then commit suicide? Why does he choose to go on living, as the first part of the already quoted sentence suggests ('the destructive character lives from the feeling…')?

At the end of this diary entry he talks of an earlier stay at Capri and his 'decision to put up with anything as long I did not have to leave the island'. (Benjamin, 1999, p471) Perhaps, his reason for not committing suicide was a creeping sense and feeling of fatalism, and connected with this an unwillingness to precisely adopt the stance of the destructive character, where it would be necessary to change things.

The following year while in Nice he once again contemplates suicide. This time he writes his final will and drafts farewell letters. But, he doesn't commit suicide. There are no indications as to why he didn't realise this planned intention. Could it have been once again a certain fatalism, as summed up in the last phrase of his essay on the destructive character, 'that suicide is not worth the trouble'?

How then should the first part of the sentence be interpreted, 'the destructive character lives from the feeling, not that life is worth living, but that suicide is not worth the trouble'? The destructive character would agree that life is not worth living under its bourgeois capitalist or Fascist authoritarian forms, and also that it is not worth committing suicide because there is a chance that things can be changed. In contradistinction with Benjamin and his own life, the destructive character therefore chooses not to adopt fatalism and acceptance of the situation. Action rather than passive acceptance is the motto.

Can the destructive character commit suicide? Benjamin commits suicide in the course of his unsuccessful flight from France to Spain in 1940. There are many obstacles at the border checkpoint, and in the night he takes an overdose of the drugs he carries with him for a medical condition. With the destructive character in mind, it might be speculated that he saw no way of clearing the *ground* of obstacles, so he could not adopt the

stance of the destructive character outlined in the essay. Instead, he turned the destructive character inwards rather than outwards, and destroyed his very own existence. Thereby, clearing away the only thing over which he believed he had any power and control.

In summary, the last sentence seems to indicate that the destructive character acts in a destructive manner so long as they feel that they can clear the *ground* and move onwards. Such that there is no point in suicide if the option to clear obstacles has not been irrevocably removed. And, even if it has been removed, then fatalism and acceptance may still remain a next best solution, if a far from satisfactory one at that, entailing a postponement and not denial of acts of destruction.

To envisage fatalism as a strategy of survival is to break with the Durkheimian view that excessive fatalism can lead to suicide. The type of fatalism found in Benjamin is more akin to the Russian fatalism identified by Nietzsche. The desire to slow one's metabolism and conserve energies for better times, 'to cease reacting altogether…a kind of will to hibernate.' (Nietzsche, 1969, 230)

It is important to note that the destructive character's conception of suicide marks a break with the general framework used by Durkheim to conceptualise suicide. Durkheim stressed how different social causes could lead to different motives for suicide: the lack of social norms (anomi), its opposite in the form of over integration, and altruistic suicide or egoistic suicide, when society encourages or allows the development of excessive individualism. But, Durkheim lacks a consideration of the existential choices made by the individual in the act of suicide. There are at least two traditions on suicide which emphasise this existential aspect. Firstly, writers such as Kierkegaard, who connected suicide with a deep sense of doubt, and more recently Baechler (1979), who argued that suicide had its origin in one of four existential choices: escapism (when life was considered hopeless), aggression (the desire to make others feel guilty or as an act of revenge), to offer oneself for a cause or as an absurd act (for example deliberately choosing a dangerous mountain route when climbing or increasing the stakes in a game of gambling such as Russian roulette).

The second existential tradition criticises Baechler's excessive emphasis on individual choice because it implies an individual somehow separated from their socio-economic environment and freely able to choose. Writer's such as Hammerlin and Enerstvedt (1988) and Hammerlin and Schjelderup (1994) thus argue that the existential choice of the individual must be placed in a Human Activity Theory framework of social motives, from

within which the individual can and must choose.[iii] They arrive at four types of suicide (after an examination of the history of suicide from the time of the Greeks to the present, including the international socialist movement's reaction to suicide by some of its own followers at the beginning of the 20th century), the content of which are not unlike some of the types of suicide identified by Baechler and Durkheim: suicide as a form of protection against someone, as a from of revenge, as a response to pressure from others (for example, when in prison or under torture) or in support of a cause (similar to Durkheim's altruistic suicide). (Hammerlin and Schjelderup, 1994, p130)

The conception of suicide suggested by the destructive character shares the existential understanding of the act and its connection with choice and social motives. But, it is a conception suggesting a certain character type who resists precisely suicide after having weighed up the existential *ground* and the nature of its obstacles.

This means that Benjamin's conception of the destructive character is therefore able to contemplate the escape from the 'growing willingness to take' one's own life. The last sentence of the essay ('suicide is not worth the trouble') clearly suggests some kind of connection between suicide, destruction and the existential question, as to whether life has had, or still can have, a meaning. One reading would be that Benjamin is suggesting that thoughts of suicide can be overcome and as a consequence abandoned if the opportunity – as an existential choice - to clear the *ground* still exists. Or to put it differently, the person must become – as an existential choice - a destructive character if they are to hold at bay and refuse thoughts and plans of suicide. (such a proposal is not necessarily welcomed by those desiring to treat, or help those contemplating suicide)

This does not necessary mean an appeal to and approval of a strategy giving legitimacy to violence in the sense of 'brute force'. The destructive character can destroy their own past or present obstacles without risking physical harm to themselves or others. So that memories and ideas can be destroyed as persistent obstacles.

Putting to one side the question of suicide and its relation to the destructive character, attention will now be turned towards how the

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[iii] Enerstvedt, inspired by Human Activity Theorists such as Luria, Rubinstein and Vygotsky , has been for a generation one of the most prominent Scandinavian spokesmen for a re-direction and development of this school of thought.

destructive character can have relevance to understandings of
contemporary post-modernism and violence.

Part IV: Post-modernism, violence and the destructive character

With the question of suicide, the destructive character contemplates self-
destruction, but there is also the more urgent question of the destructive
character's destruction of others. What might be broadly called the
question of violence towards, on and through others. To say it is a more
urgent question today than in the 1930s when Benjamin was writing his
essay is to perhaps underestimate the experiences of the First World War
upon a European (and global) population. Furthermore, the specter of a
Second World War was fast approaching on the horizon. Nevertheless, it is
correct that mass violence, either on the football terraces or in the form of
ethnic confrontations, as well as private acts of violence in the home or
between random others, are increasingly European experiences, which
both politically and from the perspective of social policy are making ever
greater demands for attention in the media and in our daily lives.

Reflections on the question of violence and destruction were not new to
Benjamin in the 1930s. Already in 1920-21, he wrote an essay called *the
Critique of Violence*. This will be returned to in more detail in a moment.
The point here is to note how in this essay Benjamin was looking to
conceptualise violence as a pure means, not as something reducible to or
as the effect of some other means or ends, such as class or gender
inequality. This makes his small essay on the destructive character a return
to the same kind of strategy in the sense that this time he elaborates and
reflects upon the essence of destruction-in-itself as a pure means.
Secondly, in this later essay his recasting of violence from the perspective
of destruction is to preserve his interest in violence. Or perhaps, it is the
case that in the earlier essay he was even then interested in destruction but
chose to call it violence.

So, there exists a possible line of connection between his early and later
thought. In detail, in *the Critique of Violence* essay his intention is to argue
that to view violence as a means to some political end obscures an
understanding of violence as a pure means. Or, to put it differently,
violence would then be defined by its ends and these could change
according to the shifting interests of those concerned.

To understand violence as a pure means it is necessary to consider it as
isolated from its ends, however abstract and unrealistic such a project at
first sight might appear. Benjamin begins by arguing that legal

philosophy's conception of violence has become ensnared in this means to ends problematic. On the one hand, the view that violence is a natural right of the individual and thus conceived as a means irrespective of ends risks letting each and every individual act violently towards the next as a natural right. (Benjamin, 1979, p133)[iv] It is necessary for the state to intervene and make the individual donate this right to the state, thus avoiding the possible destruction of all by all.

On the other hand, legal philosophy in adopting this solution risks a monopoly of violence ending up in the hands of the state, with the consequence that the state becomes concerned with using violence to preserve laws from those who break or wish to destroy them. So in the former case we get a situation where violence as a natural right is violence as a means irrespective of ends, and in the second case we get the polar opposite, where violence becomes a state concern, and thus an end for the legitimacy of the state irrespective of its means, such that any degree or form of violence is permissible, provided that it achieves its ends.

Benjamin then attempts to conceptualise violence as a pure means where it is removed from this mean-ends framework. His argument is that violence has throughout history been experienced as the paradox of making laws or preserving laws. To make laws has necessitated breaking previous laws, while the latter preservation of laws has worked against precisely such changes, especially if they have threatened the very nation state's existence in a revolutionary manner.

To view violence as the desire to make new laws, or its opposite to preserve existing laws, is to shift the focus towards the actual lived experience of violence and laws. It carries the implication that violence will always be experienced in this manner irrespective of whether its perpetrator is a revolutionary worker's party striking for its rights, or a military apparatus belonging to the state seeking to maintain the status quo. It is precisely these two actors which concern Benjamin in his 1920-21 essay.

The reader might feel however that Benjamin has in this essay failed to escape the reduction of violent acts to the interests and ends of different actors. Violence remains ensnared in a means-ends framework, this despite the shift of focus to the experience of being violent.

[iv] The argument that violence is a natural right is Benjamin's coding, taken from the debate on law, that human violence can be traced to human instincts. Freud kept this option open with his concept of the aggressive death instinct.

It is possible to read the essay on the destructive character as an attempt to escape the reduction of violence, in this later essay called destruction, to specific actors. As Benjamin says in this later essay, 'no vision inspires the destructive character.' This suggests a willingness to abandon the ends of different actors, whether they are those belonging to unions, the military apparatus, or even those of the strong leader or revolutionary party.

In more pure form the essence of violence/destruction is distilled. It becomes a pure means. But there are consequences for such a perspective. Violence and destruction come to be viewed as abstracted from a concern with justice or unjust ends. To put it in Nietzschian terms, we enter a realm beyond morality, *Beyond Good and Evil*, to quote the title of one of his books.

In his 1920-21 essay, Benjamin had not abandoned the question of who had the legitimate right to be violent. He was in effect still concerned with good and evil, violence and the question of morality.

Is it possible that much of the violence and destruction witnessed and experienced in today's society can be understood as our fear of acts becoming pure means, where the question of morality - the good and the evil - has been forgotten. This would suggest that the violence at football matches, in homes, by the military or others has forgotten the question of morality and become the expression of the destructive character.

Furthermore, it would then provide confirmation of the arrival of the post-modern, defined by some as the sense in which questions of morality have been allocated a back seat; living in the intensity of the moment, without consideration of the moral consequences of actions becoming the dominant issue.

Did Benjamin in his short essay on the destructive character show an awareness of the moral implications of this character's actions? The answer must be in the negative. In the following quotation he does however emphasise the (post-modern) strategy of seizing the moment or situation, even if it appears to be in a somewhat a-moral manner:

> The destructive character stands in the front line
> of the traditionalists. Some pass things down to
> posterity, by making them untouchable and thus
> conserving them, others pass on situations, by
> making them practicable and thus liquidating
> them. The latter are called the destructive.
> (Benjamin, 1979, p158)

Of course the International Situationalists in the 50s and 60s adopted such a strategy in order to live situations, rather than become passive spectators. (Sadler, 1999) And, Sinclair's work on walking around London would seem to also intensify the experience of the lived moment or situation. (Sinclair, 1997) Did the International Situationalists and more recently Sinclair take up questions of morality? If not, are they guilty, like the destructive character, of dispensing with issues of morality? Are they then embracing a post-modern society lacking in morality and producing new forms of destructive character?

A further question to be debated, is if we are being over-anxious about the contemporary situation and ignoring how throughout the course of history there have always been – and always will be - destructive characters willing and managing to live beyond the confines of morality to be destructive characters. If this is the case, then the anxiety that the post-modern has arrived, with violence, destruction and an apparent lack of concern with questions of morality, is a vastly over-exaggerated and a far from new experience.

Summary and conclusion

Benjamin's conception of the destructive character has been interpreted as an invitation to contemplate the strong leader, with clear Nietzschian traits. Others have seen his destructive character as an oblique reference to the revolutionary potential of the proletariat.

The strategy adopted in this essay has instead been to emphasise the existential import of his reflections for an understanding of suicide, or what might be called self-destruction. The argument has been that destructive characters represent a way of resisting suicide and self-destruction, precisely because they, in their desire for and realization of destruction, still see a way out and a way of clearing the *ground*.

The *ground* used in the sense of an actually existing space cleared of obstacles, whether living or objects, and also *ground* in the sense of the Heideggerian ontological space of Being permitting the making or contemplation of existential choices. For Heidegger the making or contemplation of such choices was itself a creative act, analogous with the work of the artist:

> …founding as bestowing, founding as grounding, and founding as beginning…what went before is refuted in its exclusive reality by the work. What art founds can therefore never be compensated and made up for by what is already present and available. Founding is an overflow, an endowing, a bestowal. (Heidegger, 1971, p75)

Furthermore, these destructive characters are those who have not become over-whelmed by fatalism and the decision not to act. It was argued that Benjamin in the early 1930s himself seemed to favour a form of fatalism, as a way of resisting suicide.

Taking this argument further it means that to escape suicide a certain level or expression of destruction, and its corollary, the presence of the destructive character must be permitted. This will ensure that people, acting individually, or in groups, have the opportunity to give up and be done with painful experiences. Or, to paraphrase Benjamin, the memory can be liquidated before it can lead to self-destruction and suicide.

The second main argument involved using Benjamin's conception of the destructive character to develop some theses not on self-destruction, but the second main violence and destruction imposed on and through others. The argument was that the destructive character can escape the use of violence and destruction as a means to an end if it is experienced as pure means. But, this entails perpetrators who are willing to abandon any obligation towards the moral consequences of their actions.

Violence and destruction cease then to be either good and permitted (for example in the state's argument that violence is necessary to preserve the existence of the state) or evil and prohibited (for example in the state's view of the acts carried out by revolutionaries or anarchists). It means that the destructive character lives in the moment of the act.

This a-morality and living in the moment might be used to conceptualise outbreaks of violence and destruction in our present society, where those responsible say that in the moment of acting violently they had no conception of morality, or of the possible moral consequences of their acts.

A parallel conception can be found in crimes where the accused pleads insanity in the actual moment when they committed the act. But, in pleading insanity they are refusing not only a moral awareness of their act, but also a consciousness of having carried out the act. The destructive character is on the other hand, conscious of what they are doing, even if it involves acting beyond the bounds of morality.

The argument on the destructive character in this essay suggests additional points: if the modern rational society was built upon a clearly defined and adhered to sense of morality permitting and requiring a dialectic of violence and destruction to make laws and to preserve or impose laws, then the lived experience of this violence and destruction may still be found in post-modern society. But, it is a society where the boundaries of morality, in turn dictating levels of permitted and prohibited violence and destruction, are no longer clear or considered a goal worth pursuing, as was the perceived case in modern, rational society.

However, it might also be the case that the presence of the destructive, a-moral characters is an indication of, not post-modernity, but the fall back into some kind of primitive violence or pre-modernity. The image of Rousseau's wild man in his famous essay on the root of human inequalities, comes to mind. But, also the random violence and destruction experienced upon the street, as people are killed and harmed without any apparent motive or prior knowledge of the victim's identity.

The conclusion, is thus that Benjamin's destructive character can be embraced as a way of escaping existential thoughts of suicide and as a way of motivating and accounting for rebellion in the proletariat or other oppressed groups. But, it must also be taken as a warning against those destructive characters who desire to act a-morally, for example as violent and destructive leaders. Leaders who sometimes find others willing to carry out the destructive deeds, so that their own hands remain unsoiled.

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