

# WALTER BENJAMIN AND THE URBAN LABYRINTH

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The main purpose of my essay is to discuss the relevance and fruitfulness of the description of cityscape as labyrinth. Within his city-centred cultural theory, Walter Benjamin, gave a new understanding to this powerful image which emerged in ancient Minoan culture and ancient Greek mythology, and which found a widespread return during the seventeenth century. Today, many theoreticians, writers, artists, designers, composers and architects are still inspired by the concept of the labyrinth. I cannot give a full account of this multi-faceted, puzzling history; Gustav René Hocke (1963), Karl Kerényi (1950) and Helmut Kern (1999), among others, were better prepared for doing so than I. However, from the concept of the labyrinth, Benjamin made one of the clues for understanding genuinely modern urban experiences: to experience urban 'landscape' as labyrinth. What were his motives? I will be arguing that, within Benjamin's cultural theory, the concept of the labyrinth is closely related to a truly urban cultural figure who emerged in 19<sup>th</sup> century: the flâneur.

Although a major part of my essay focuses on Benjamin, I am speaking for our times as well. Can we give a new meaning to the two afore-mentioned crucial notions in Benjamin's thought, or do they remain within the historical text? But let me begin by reminding the reader of some central features of philosophical reflections on landscape, before shifting from landscape to cityscape.

## *I*

I take as my starting point the assumption that both landscape and cityscape have to be conceptualized not as pure givens, in the sense of natural phenomena, but rather as cultural phenomena. There is always an embodied subjectivity involved as their condition of possibility. Theorizers of landscape,

ranging from Francesco Petrarch to Alexander von Humboldt, Carl Gustav Carus and Georg Simmel, share the conviction that landscape is an eminently modern phenomenon which presupposes an individualized and fragmented subjectivity. Landscape exists only to the extent that there is a subjectivity experiencing and constituting it. A natural environment becomes a landscape only in so far as it is viewed and looked at. It is not produced by the spatially and temporally unmoving subjectivity, but by the moving body. Landscape is constituted by a culturally shaped subjectivity.

One consequence of this is that making a landscape out of a natural environment is underpinned by culturally produced imagery – by paintings, for instance. We may experience the countryside from the perspective of a Camille Corot, a Caspar David Friedrich, a William Turner, a Jan van Goyen or a Vermeer van Delft. The act of constituting landscape consists in continuous shifts of horizons and perspectives due to the changing positions of the moving body. The resulting perspective view is intrinsically linked to those views which follow. Edmund Husserl used to talk of ‘retentions’ and ‘protentions’.

For purposes of my following discourse, I would like to distinguish between two different lines in the theorizing of landscape. Drawing on Francesco Petrarch, Alexander von Humboldt, Carl Gustav Carus and Georg Simmel, the German Hegelian philosopher Joachim Ritter argued, more than one generation ago, that the experience of landscape is based upon modern society’s rule and control over nature. The aesthetic pleasure of experiencing the natural surrounding as landscape is a specific, secularized phenomenon of modern society. The contemplative view of the cosmos, the metaphysical ‘*theoria tou kosmou*’, returns under the conditions of modern society in a completely changed meaning. What, in ancient times, belonged to the privileges of Greek priests or Roman augurs, and then was secularized as a metaphysical activity of philosophers, becomes, in the context of modern society, an activity performed by everyone, during leisure time. For Ritter, the experience of landscape is, in a word, a kind of return to metaphysical totality by way of aesthetic reconciliation (Ritter 1974).

Adorno’s thoughts, my second line, are closer to Benjamin. Adorno revises Ritter’s theory on two points. First, landscape is to be conceived as natural history. We esteem in cultural landscape the utopian figuration of a reconciliation of nature and culture. We project our longing for reconciliation onto landscape. Cultural landscape is not a pure given but a utopian semblance.

Second, images of cultural landscape are images of ‘a memento’ (ÄT, p. 102; AT, p. 96). Historical memory and historical mourning must be invested in order to serve the utopian figure of reconciliation between culture and

nature. Adorno stresses the discursive continuity between the aesthetic experience of nature in cultural landscape, and the aesthetic experience of modernist works of art (compare my essay Paetzold 1997, especially pp. 216-222). Both have in common the fact that they are images. Nature appearing as beautiful is not conceived as an object of action. The purposes of self-preservation are transcended in both the work of art and the aesthetic experience of landscape (ÄT, p. 103; AT, pp. 96-97).

Both the theories I have referred to, from Ritter and Adorno, locate the experience of landscape outside the precincts of the city. During the nineteenth century however, there emerged an experience of landscape within the urban space. For most cultural theoreticians, Paris was the place where this shift occurred from landscape outside the city, to cityscape (compare Seel 1991, pp. 230-33). Louis-Sébastien Mercier is supposed to be one of the first authors looking at Paris as a 'picture', as a 'scene' (Mazlish 1994, p. 46). That is to say, Mercier transposed elements of Denis Diderot's concept of the theatre stage to the urban surrounding.

## II

After these preliminary remarks, I can now enter the thematic analysis of this essay.

As my point of departure, I take a frame of notions which was introduced by Benjamin. It is the correlation between, on the one hand, the landscape of the modern metropolis, which is labelled as a kind of labyrinth, and on the other hand, the strolling activity of a specifically urban cultural figure which emerged in modernity: the *flâneur*.

In his "Arcades Project", Benjamin wrote: "The city is the realization of that ancient dream of humanity, the labyrinth. It is this reality to which the *flâneur*, without knowing it, devotes himself" (Benjamin 1999, p. 429, M6a,4. Compare p. 839, F°13, F°19).

As Kern convincingly has shown in details, the labyrinth as a culturally powerful symbol underwent two historical transformations. Its original meaning as it surfaced in ancient Minoan culture on Crete was that of a ritual group dance which made of young girls and boys grown-ups by relating them to society and the cosmos at large. According to Kern it is important to understand that the labyrinth-dance was graphically drawn as a visual token (Kern 1999, p. 19). The first shift in the meaning of this symbol occurred when it was absorbed in ancient Greek and Roman mythology alluding to Troy, as we can find in Homer's "Iliad", later in Virgil's "Aeneid", Plutarch,

Ovid, Strabo and others. Ancient Roman culture brought about the second transformation of the labyrinth's meaning. The ancient Romans related the labyrinth-dance to the act of founding a city (Kern 1999, p. 114). As we will see later in this essay, Benjamin picked up especially this meaning but gave a new twist to it in that he attributed it not to the foundation of the city, but to the modern urban everyday. At any rate Benjamin took on the city-relatedness of the symbol of the labyrinth which belongs, to repeat, to ancient Romans' legacy.

To come back to the Benjaminian flâneur-labyrinth constellation: In that the flâneur experiences the urban scene as a "cityscape", as Benjamin literally says, the "old Romantic sentiment for landscape" is replaced by a "new Romantic conception of landscape", the "cityscape" (Benjamin 1999, p. 420, M2a, 1). Whereas the old Romantic experience of landscape was spatially located outside the city, the metropolis has become "the properly sacred ground of flânerie" (Benjamin 1999, p. 421, M2a, 1). The flâneur, Benjamin argues, explores the cityscape as a dialectic between "the interior as street (luxury), and the street as interior (misery)" (Benjamin 1999, p. 909). That is to say, the flâneur is, first and foremost, interested in the "social space of the metropolis" (Frisby 1994, p. 84). The "sensational phenomenon of space", "the 'colportage phenomenon of space'", the "Kolportagephänomen des Raumes" is the flâneur's "basic experience" (Benjamin 1999, p. 418, M1a, 3).

Although Benjamin's use of the notions of the flâneur and of flânerie is often ambivalent and contradictory, I would like to suggest the following interpretation. The simplistic origins of flânerie exercised by the 'physiologists' (M. Bon-Homme's "Le Flâneur au saison" [1806], Louis Huart's "Physiologie du Flâneur" [1841] among others) were set aside by writers like Honoré de Balzac and Victor Hugo, who celebrated the "artist-flâneur", and of course by Charles Baudelaire, who became Benjamin's favorite model (Ferguson 1994, pp. 22-42; Burton 1994, pp. 2-6). They – especially Balzac and Baudelaire – revealed the reality of the modern metropolis as an endangered, contradictory totality.

If we compose Benjamin's various reflections on flânerie into one concept, then it could be shown that he had a cultural history in mind leading from the soothing cityscapes of the physiologists through the urban allegories of Baudelaire, and ending in Baron de Haussmann. The dialectic of flânerie which had related the interior of the houses to the public spaces of the streets, and which had its urban site in the arcades, came to an end. It was caused by the introduction of the grand boulevards of Haussmann, on the one hand, and by the emergence of the department stores on the other. Both these shifts in the urban fabric destroyed the sources of flânerie which were, to reiterate, deriving from the entwining of the interior as house and as street.

In "Charles Baudelaire" (1938), Benjamin gave the following description of the highlight and decline of *flânerie*: "If the arcade is the classical form of the *interior*, which is how the *flâneur* sees the street, the department store is the form of the *interior's* decay. The bazaar (Warenhaus) is the last hangout of the *flâneur*. If in the beginning the street had become an interior for him, now this *interior* turned into a street, and he roamed through the labyrinth of merchandise (Labyrinth der Ware) as he had once through the labyrinth of the city" (Benjamin 1973, p. 54).

It is noticeable here that Benjamin relates the strolling activity of the *flâneur* to the labyrinthian structure of the city. According to Benjamin, the *flâneur* experiences the crowds of the modern metropolis as a kind of shield but also as an object of observation. The *flâneur* is not only drawn to the streets and their architecture, but also to the social spaces where crowds gather, like railway stations, exhibition halls and department stores. The *flâneur* explores the 'labyrinth of the populace', the 'human labyrinth' of the metropolitan masses.

As Benjamin says: The "masses" "stretch before the *flâneur* as a veil: they are the newest drug for the solitary. – Second, they efface all traces of the individual: they are the newest asylum for the reprobate and the proscrip. – Finally, within the labyrinth of the city, the masses are the newest and most inscrutable labyrinth." (Benjamin 1999, p. 446, M16,3).

I would now like to summarize my discussion of the *flâneur*, before moving on to look at the notion of the labyrinth. It is my contention, that we have to understand *flânerie* as an ambivalent cultural and political activity, which emerged in the run of the nineteenth century, but continues into our own times. The *flâneur* is related to the detective in sharing the latter's concern with observing the crowds in the streets. For this reason, a *flâneur* could become an agent of the state's secret service. The *flâneur* shares with the photographer an interest in the visual culture of city life. He produces literature and works of art, as exemplified by Baudelaire, Charles Dickens and Edgar Allen Poe, and also Edouard Manet and Edgar Degas. *Flânerie* is also the origin of modern sociology. The genre of urban ethnography, in particular, is rooted in the urban activity of strolling, as the examples of Siegfried Kracauer, Franz Hessel, Georg Simmel, Robert Ezzard Park, and Henry Mayhew can show (see Frisby 1994). For my argument here, it is important to recognize that *flânerie* is not just strolling around and gazing, but it transforms urban observation into cultural work. If we include Benjamin himself in the group of passionate *flâneurs*, then we can conclude that *flânerie* is related to a critical cultural theory of city life. As Chris Jenks wrote: "The *flâneur*, though grounded in everyday life, is an analytic form, a narrative device, an attitude towards

knowledge and its social context.” (Jenks 1996, p. 148). The moving body is involved here, strolling through the labyrinth of the modern metropolis, but the phenomenological experiences must be linked to the symbolic structure of culture.

Speaking in terms of philosophy, we may argue that the flâneur portrayed by Benjamin is a post-metaphysical subjectivity. He is to be clearly distinguished from Plato’s Socrates in that he has no guaranteed community to whom to address his reflections. Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s ‘promeneur’ was as lonely as the flâneur, but found his moral identity at the borderline between city and countryside. Nietzsche’s Zarathustra did not even enter the metropolitan city. But insofar as the flâneur depends upon walking, he is also clearly distinguished from Rorty’s postmodern ironist. At the end of my essay I shall come back to this point.

Although the flâneur takes the distancing position of the visual observer, he is by no means the dispassionate cognitive subjectivity of modernity, but rather the organ of modern culture. Contrary to the modern urbanist whose theorizing of the city aims at practical intervention in the design of the city – if we think of Ildefonso Cerda, Baron Georges Eugène Haussmann and Le Corbusier – the flâneur attempts images of modernity. A flâneur might be a poet, a painter, a journalist, a sociologist or a cultural theorist (see my essay Paetzold 1995).

It is true, and has often been pointed out, that the nineteenth-century flâneur was largely a male gendered cultural figure (compare Shields 1994, especially pp. 63, 66-67. Wolff 1994, especially, pp. 124-130). But if we look at the many traces in Benjamin’s writing which leave the male-centredness of culture behind, we can even find access to feminist approaches, especially if we bring to bear Julia Kristeva’s theory of culture (Weigel 1996, pp. 63-79).

### III

Now I can pick up the thread of my discourse. The flâneur experiences the modern metropolis as a labyrinth. Benjamin has called the labyrinth “that ancient dream of humanity” which has been realized in the modern city. How should we understand this? The labyrinth of the metropolis is a pregnant Gestalt the symbolic meaning of which is mythically underpinned. The image points towards daily encounters with metropolitan reality. The big city in which we live, day in and day out, appears in the image of a labyrinth. This image refers not least to the opacity and impenetrability of everyday urban life.

A look at Joseph Rykwert’s “The Idea of a Town. The Anthropology of

Urban Form in Rome, Italy and the Ancient World" (1985) may help to clarify the meaning of Benjamin's notion of the labyrinth. According to Rykwert, the foundational myths of the city comprise not only the fixing of an axial cross (*cardo*, *decumanus*), of a centre (*mundus*), of borders and gates, but also the image of a labyrinth (Rykwert 1985, pp. 148-153). The myth of the labyrinth is mostly about how to find access to the city. A riddle must be solved or a heroic action is required, before one is allowed to enter the centre, that is: the world. Usually, the mythic hero needs the aid of a woman who is later left in the lurch, or is going to be killed; Ariadne, for instance, guiding Theseus through the Cretan labyrinth. Without doing injustice to Rykwert's theory, we may take a clue from it. We can distinguish between foundational myths (Romulus and Remus or Cain, as heroic founders of cities) and those which refer to the maintenance of a city life. The myth of the labyrinth can be attributed to the latter category. It presupposes the foundation of a city to which access must be gained, or even regained.

The symbol and myth of the labyrinth, as Kern, Rykwert, and Karl Kerényi have shown, were often accompanied with dance; the maze dance, by which the victory of the hero is ritually celebrated. The dancers perform and position themselves in a spiral form. Generally speaking, we can distinguish between the spiral or double-spiral form, and the rectangular form, as abstract graphic representations of the labyrinth. The point is, however, that the moving body within a labyrinth does not 'know' of this overview, and is puzzled by the choices to be made at each new junction.

Benjamin's image of the labyrinthian city is not about the question of the foundation of the city, but on the contrary seeks to describe the everyday life of the modern metropolis. The labyrinth is a convincing *Gestalt*, by which city life can be captured. The city is not a jungle but a labyrinth. Due to the labyrinthian structure of the metropolis, the conduct and behaviour of the city-dweller is slowed down. "The labyrinth", Benjamin says, "is the home of the hesitant. The path of someone shy of arrival at a goal easily takes the form of a labyrinth." (Benjamin 1985a, pp. 30-55, here: p. 40). We should not, in the first instance, think of problems by which to orientate ourselves; rather, the experience of city life by way of aimless strolling is what is at issue here.

Although Paris with its arcades were Benjamin's original source for thinking about city life in terms of the labyrinth, he nevertheless applied this idea to his "Berlin Childhood around 1900". Here he states that to experience the city as a labyrinth requires "schooling". It is a kind of "art". He wants to make a parallel between his personal memories and an intersubjectively valid 'image' of the city of Berlin: "Not to be able to find one's way in a city doesn't mean much. To stray in a city as one strays in a forest, however, requires training.

The street names must speak to the wanderer like the snapping of dry twigs, and the little streets in the heart of the city should reflect the times of day to him as clearly as does a hollow on a mountainside. I learned this art late; it fulfilled the dream of which the first traces were labyrinths scrawled on the blotting paper of my notebooks... The path into this labyrinth... led over the Bendler Bridge..." (Benjamin 1991, Vol. IV 1, p. 237. Translation according to Weigel 1996, p. 137).

Within a labyrinth we are aware of all our actual steps and moves. We are deprived, however, of an overview of the whole. We give ourselves over to the topographies of the space we are in. We become motivated to come to grips with the whole – it emerges, at any rate. But we cannot afford to meet this demand. Orientation within the city has much to do with the magic of the street names. It is this magic which gives the locations within a city a cultural inscription, and at the same time it is the magic of street names and of urban areas which prompt us to wander through the city.

In his essay on post-revolutionary Moscow, Benjamin says that he had already made an image for himself of the topography of the city before he entered it. But bodily contact with the streets and houses, during his *flânerie*, only made him experience the labyrinthian structure of the city (Benjamin 1991, Vol. IV 1, pp. 318-19). We touch, here, upon an important point. In order to reveal the city as a labyrinth, it is necessary for a meeting to take place between a layer of experience which can be described phenomenologically, and a symbolic level. Phenomenology must receive a symbolic structure in order to become historical and critical (Benjamin 1985b, p. 175; compare Gilloch 1996 pp.135-139, 149-167, 171-177. Compare Weigel 1996, pp. 48, 119).

#### IV

As far as I can see, Benjamin himself has given three explanations for the labyrinth of the modern metropolis:

First, the labyrinth is connected with the market as the prevailing model of sociality. It is the market which structures the actions and conduct of men. "The labyrinth is the correct route for those who always arrive at their goal anyway. The goal is the market." (Benjamin 1985a, pp. 30-5, here: p. 40). In this context we must think of the curiosity provoked by the passages and the luxurious commodities displayed in them; the impeded actions caused by the need to look at the prices of the goods. The rules of the market, however, are also valid for the cultural productions to which the *flâneur* is devoted. The



flâneur as producer must look to the value of the cultural commodities he offers, and how he can sell them to his advantage.

Secondly, Benjamin offers a drive-based economic explanation for the labyrinth (of the metropolis). According to Freud, before it can be satisfied a drive leads a life in episodes (Benjamin 1985a, p. 40). The drive shifts its goal; it must pass through different instances before it is satisfied. Freud's psychoanalysis, which Benjamin appropriated during the 1920's, starts from the principle that there is no substantial core to the self, it is decentred. For this reason, within the biography of a self there are always only temporary compromises to be found between the claims of the drives and the cultural instance of the 'I'. Within flânerie, which reveals the labyrinthian aspect of the metropolis, the modern subjectivity, without a substantial centre, finds its adequate expression. The flâneur experiences the contemporary as episodes of the 'Now'; as instances or moments which are unconnected.

Sigrid Weigel has pointed out that Benjamin uses the image of the labyrinth as an image for reconstructing a person's biography. A spatialization of memory is presupposed here. It replaces genealogy in terms of origin, and family in terms of scenes and locations by passages and pathways (Weigel 1996, pp. 123-124).

Thirdly, the labyrinthian of the metropolis can be interpreted as an image for a mankind which does not wish to know where things are leading (Benjamin 1985a, p. 40). Here, of course, we find Marx' idea that the capitalist mode of sociality has created a second nature, by which human beings are determined in reverse. Dreams and images brought forward by culture are necessary in order to keep open the process of social change. But Benjamin attempts to penetrate dream images with the rationality of the concept, in order to reach an awakening.

In this context, one has to remind oneself of Benjamin's distancing from Surrealism. According to Benjamin, the cultural strength of Surrealism consisted in the rehabilitation of the dream-world. Dreams had been categorically rejected by Descartes and modern rationalism. Benjamin did not favour simply the flourishing of dreams, like the Surrealists. He took capitalism to be a kind of dreaming sleep into which humankind had fallen during modernity, and from which it should be awakened. "Capitalism was a natural phenomenon with which a new dream-filled sleep came over Europe, and through it, a reactivation of mythic forces. The first tremors of awakening serve to deepen sleep." (Benjamin 1999, p. 391, K1a,8 and K1a,9; see Buck-Morss 1997, pp. 270-274).

For Benjamin, the rise of socialist movements produced just such tremors or stimuli for an awakening. They needed to be strengthened. He wanted to

reach a “constellation of awakening”, whereas the Surrealists remained in the world of dreams. This constellation of awakening was projected by Benjamin as ‘paralleling’, as convergence between the rational notion and the sensuous image. In his “Arcades Project” he stated: “Delimitation of the tendency of this project with respect to Aragon: whereas Aragon persists within the realm of dream, here the concern is to find the constellation of awakening. While in Aragon there remains an impressionistic element, namely the ‘mythology’..., here it is a question of the dissolution of ‘mythology’ into the space of history.” (Benjamin 1999, p. 458; N1,9).

Benjamin’s theory of the collective dream has a parallel in Ernst Bloch’s thinking. According to Bloch, daydreams are characterized by the features of enrichment of subjectivity, of opening up new horizons, and of pointing to a telos of successful ‘endings’. Daydreams want to be ‘realized’. Like Benjamin, Bloch interpreted the daydream as something which is not rational in its own terms, but which is nonetheless accessible to a collective rationality.

## V

Let us return to the labyrinthian of the metropolis. As I have said, the labyrinthian is connoted with concepts such as the market, the psychic life of drives in episodes and finally the capitalist character of society. How can the labyrinthian function as a clue for an understanding of concrete urban phenomena? I would like to point to at least two aspects.

The first is related to the street. According to Benjamin, the labyrinthian of the city receives profile as a synthesis of two different ‘horrors’ or ‘dreads’. The modern street, the infinite ‘asphalt tape’ on which the flâneur tramps, is characterized by monotony and aimlessness. It never ends, but this very endlessness is attractive and fascinating. The way (Weg), on the other hand, refers to a mythical horror. We do not know where it is leading and this makes us anxious. It could be a maze. The labyrinth of the city synthesizes both of these structures, the ‘way’ and the ‘street’. Benjamin writes: “‘Street’ to be understood, has to be profiled against the older term ‘way’. With respect to their mythological natures the two words are entirely distinct. The way brings with it the terrors of wandering (German: Irrgang HP), some reverberation of which must have struck the leaders of nomadic tribes. In the incalculable turnings and resolutions of the way, there is even today, for the solitary wanderer, a detectable trace of the power of ancient directives over wandering hordes. But the person who travels a street, it would seem, has no need of any waywise guiding hand. It is not in wandering that man takes to the street, but

rather in submitting to the monotonous, fascinating, constantly unrolling band of asphalt. The synthesis of these twin terrors, however – monotonous wandering – is represented in the labyrinth.” (Benjamin 1999, p. 519; P2,1).

Here we have an excellent example of the way that Benjamin brings together the phenomenological ‘essence’ of a way, a pathway, in contrast to the street, and the symbolic inscription of this essence into cultural history and collective memory. The way is a horror because it is embedded in the process of the migration of tribes. The asphalt tape induces not just a funny walk, in the lonely stroller, the *flâneur*, but also a dread. As a modern phenomenon the urban labyrinth is nurtured by both of these aspects, it offers a paradoxical pleasure and at the time it causes a threat.

The modern metropolis has a labyrinthian structure in that it relates the ‘Inside’ and the ‘Outside’, as well as the ‘Above’ and the ‘Beneath’, of the urban geography in a new way. We need to distinguish between a gate and a triumphal arch; both signify thresholds, that is, modes of passages. The city gate mediates the entrance to the world; triumphal arches, on the other hand, transform those who pass through them in that the glory of the conquering hero is mirrored onto the passer-by. However, both gate and arch have lost their mythical strength as either initiation rite or as elevation (Benjamin 1999, pp. 86-87; C2a,3).

Not only does the modern metropolis redesign the relationship between the ‘Outside’ and the ‘Inside’, it also relates the passages ‘Beneath’ – the underground tunnels, the grottoes, the arcades – with life on the ground ‘Above’. For this reason, the metaphysical dichotomies of a central core and a periphery outside, a hierarchical ‘Above’ and a seductive ‘Beneath’, disappear. Benjamin compares the correspondence between ‘Up’ and ‘Down’ with dreaming and waking: “One knew of places in ancient Greece where the way led down into the underworld – a land full of inconspicuous places from which dreams arise. All day long, suspecting nothing, we pass them by, but no sooner has sleep come than we are eagerly groping our way back to lose ourselves in the dark corridors. By day, the labyrinth of urban dwellings resembles consciousness; the arcades (which are galleries leading into the city’s past) issue unremarked onto the streets. At night, however, under the tenebrous mass of the houses, their denser darkness bursts forth like a threat, and the nocturnal pedestrian hurries past – unless, that is, we have emboldened him to turn into the narrow lane.” (Benjamin 1999, p. 875; a°,5).

The second aspect: The experience of the labyrinth implies that one’s location is well determined, although it cannot be inscribed into a co-ordinating network. This double-layered structure characterizes the passage through the labyrinth. The city-dweller experiences the differences in

atmospheric tuning between urban quarters, but they are not integrated into a unified scheme. The metaphysical significance of the quarters vanish, since the centre as the site of 'truth' is devalued.

Nevertheless, boundaries remain; thresholds which give structure to the regions. Benjamin refers, in this context, to the modes by which we experience borders within the dream. They are experienced as cuts, which cause surprise, but these cuts do not follow a rational, but rather a poetic order. The experience of the metropolis is interwoven with such dream traces. It is precisely this which constitutes the labyrinthian of the metropolis.

"The city", Benjamin says, "is only apparently homogeneous. Even its name takes on a different sound from one district to the next. Nowhere, unless in dreams, can the phenomenon of the boundary be experienced in a more originary way than in cities. To know them means to know those lines that, running alongside railroad crossings and across privately owned lots, within the park and along the riverbank, function as limits; it means to know these confines, together with the enclaves of the various districts. As threshold, the boundary stretches across streets; a new precinct begins like a step into the void – as though one had unexpectedly cleared a low step on a flight of stairs." (Benjamin 1999, p. 88; C3,3).

## VI

Now we have some essential structures of Benjaminian theory of the urban lifeworld at hand. In the concluding part of my essay I would like to outline a position which maintains some distance from Benjamin, whilst remaining faithful to his 'Critical Theory', by transforming it.

Benjamin's question as to whether we should continue the social dreams of the nineteenth century, or bid farewell to them, is only to be answered from the position of our situation today, that is, in the decline of functionalist urbanism, to which Benjamin subscribed.

In the 1960's, the Dutch architect Aldo van Eyck introduced the vision of a 'labyrinthian clarity', in order to characterize the mutual relationship between the architectural building and its site within the urban texture. He published a manifesto-like text in the "Situationist Times" (No. 4, October 1963), starting from the tradition of Dutch structuralism and opposing Le Corbusier's functionalist creeds. The programmatic core of his manifesto was: "The large house – little city statement (the one that says: a house is a tiny city a city a huge house) can get on very well... It possesses a kind of clarity that never quite relinquishes the secret it guards. It is above all... a kind neither

house nor city can do without. Let me call it labyrinthian clarity." (van Eyck 1963, p. 84).

Not only did Aldo van Eyck inspire architects in their designs, such as Herman Hertzberger, Lucien Lafour, or Theo Bosch, he was actively engaged in the urban renewal of Amsterdam's Nieuwmarkt during the 1970's and 1980's. On the other hand, in his "La Production de l'espace" (1974) which has been translated to English in 1991 Henri Lefebvre traced the symbolic meaning of the labyrinth back to a "military and political structure", designed to trap enemies inextricably in a maze, before it served as "palace", "fortification", "refuge" and "shelter". The labyrinth expresses a "natural principle" within the Greek idea of Logos/Cosmos (Lefebvre 1991, pp. 233, 240).

What these references are arguing for is the thesis that cityscape as labyrinth is still an inspiring idea, beyond Benjamin. As I have argued, the labyrinth and the flâneur are related concepts. That is to say, only by strolling do we experience the city as a labyrinth.

Today we find different theories which can give new meaning to the notion of flânerie. I would like to single out just two new modes of understanding flânerie:

On the one hand we have Michel de Certeau's "Walking in the City" (De Certeau 1993, pp. 151-160). De Certeau develops a "rhetoric of walking" (De Certeau 1993, p. 158). His is a strategy of concentrating on everyday life and focusing on walking in order to overcome the functionalist view of the city as a view from above, in order to control: "urban life", he emphasizes, "increasingly permits the re-emergence of the element that the urbanistic project excluded, 'walking'" (De Certeau 1993, p. 155), that is to say the accent is on the "chorus of footsteps" (De Certeau 1994, p. 157). A rhetoric of walking is a "style of use", that is "a way of being" and "a way of operating". De Certeau's walker makes use of the urban spaces by bringing in his/her own body in movement. But this walking activity aims at a "poetic geography" of urban sites (De Certeau 1993, p. 159). A rediscovery of "local legends (*legenda*: what is *to be read* but also what *can be read*)" (De Certeau 1993, p. 160) emerges; that is to say, a phenomenological level. Merleau-Ponty spoke of a 'style' of bodily moves; we experience the body insofar as it is put into action: Physical motion and symbolic level are intertwined. De Certeau makes use of two Benjaminian notions in this respect, the 'labyrinth' (De Certeau 1993, p. 152) and the 'dream', as means of clarifying the "pedestrian rhetoric" (De Certeau 1993, p. 160).

What is important here is the fact that de Certeau's walker aims at a 'poetic geography'. That is to say, 'narratives' which reveal cityscapes in cultural

'works', undermining both the functionalist view of the city from above and the 'disciplinary' power structures which supervise the city-dwellers through the official, administrative politics of the state institutions. Michel de Certeau is in favour of micro-narratives linked to the moving and strolling body. He gives a new meaning to the concept of the flâneur.

Another stimulating model is involved in Jinnai Hidenobu's 'spatial anthropology'. In his book "Tokyo" Jinnai Hidenobu tells the cultural story of Tokyo. The story makes use of city walks. These walks, however, are to be related to a scholarly reading of city maps from different periods, as well as to a scholarly reading of the poetic narratives of the specific sites of the city, the water-side, the former commoners' houses, the backstreets etc. "We have become so accustomed to travelling by subway or elevated highway that we have become insensitive to the rich variety of features found in everyday life. 'Reading the city', requires us to walk in streets and experience its spaces for ourselves. Only then do we acquire a feel for the development of its neighbourhoods." (Hidenobu, 1995, p. 9).

## VII

This brings me to a concluding remark: Richard Rorty has launched an influential view of postmodern culture, which describes it as being inhibited by ironists who are in search of continuous redescriptions of their lives and of the moral state of society, and who are restlessly reading and consuming books. Philosophy is replaced by literary criticism in order to improve the morality and the political culture of the liberal community. The philosopher emerges in the guise of a 'polypragmatic' who has to link the various discourses together in order to keep the conversation of society on relevant issues going. Against this elitist and bodiless idea of a community, I would like to propose a revitalized 'Critical Theory' which is anchored in urban culture and in cultural workers (see for a step in that direction Paetzold 2000). These bear the imprints of city walks exercised by real bodies. They are curious about urban affairs, and want to make sense of city life today in that they produce at the same time city-related poetic matters.

The Benjaminian project is not at all confined to Baudelaire. It has been continued by a remarkable chain of writing city-dwellers, ranging from literary figures, such as Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Peter Handke, Konstantin Kafavis, Eric de Kuyper to Paul Auster and Thomas Pynchon (Lehan 1998). They all are inspired by city life and bring to surface what its specific culture is.

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