

# Dialectical images: media and consciousness in *The Arcades Project* of Walter Benjamin

## *As imagens dialéticas: mídia e consciência em Passagens de Walter Benjamin*

ANTONIO RAFELE<sup>a</sup>

Université Paris Descartes La Sorbonne, Centre d'Études sur l'Actuel et le Quotidien. Paris, France

### ABSTRACT

This paper aims at investigating the textual relations that link media and consciousness in *The Arcades Project* of Walter Benjamin. The paper builds-up a constellation of terms (history, nature, time, media, myth, habits), a plot of motifs that composes an organic pattern and provides a problematic image of the self and the knowledge.

**Keywords:** Media, consciousness, self, time, knowledge

<sup>a</sup> PhD in Sociology, researcher of Centre d'Études sur l'Actuel et le Quotidien (CEAQ) Université Paris Descartes La Sorbonne. Orcid: <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9273-7744>. E-mail: [antonio.rafele@gmail.com](mailto:antonio.rafele@gmail.com)

### RESUMO

Este artigo tem como objetivo investigar as relações textuais que vinculam mídia e consciência em *Passagens*, de Walter Benjamin. O artigo elabora uma constelação de termos (história, natureza, tempo, mídia, mito, hábitos), uma trama de motivos que compõe um padrão orgânico e fornece uma imagem problemática do eu e do conhecimento.

**Palavras-chave:** Mídia, consciência, *self*, tempo, conhecimento

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### MEDIA AND IMAGES

**T**HE ARCADES PROJECT draws a very detailed picture of Parisian life at the turn of the Twentieth century, captured between the establishment of the metropolis as the dominant *medium* of everyday life, and its already visible transfiguration into a media society:

Balzac was the first to speak of the ruins of the bourgeoisie. But it was Surrealism that first opened our eyes to them [...] A start is made with architecture as engineered construction. Then comes the reproduction of nature as photography. The creation of fantasy prepares to become practical as commercial art. Literature submits to montage in the feuilleton. All these products are on the point of entering the market as commodities. (Benjamin, 1999: 13)

*The Arcades Project* activates a viewpoint that rests on the discontinuity of historical and social processes: existence is neither to be taken as an absolute, nor in a line of continuity with the past, but only in that form that expresses it as up to the minute, alive and present. The past appears to be dead, submerged, and inanimate; only the present, by subverting a perspective of continuity and progress, can retrieve for its own use those fragments of that past, perceived as closest to it. Each piece of the large final mosaic pushes toward one distinct direction, but contains within itself a recurrent structural motif. Art nouveau, exhibitions, *intérieur*, photography or Baudelaire lose all their distinctive features; they converge and mirror the functioning of history: “[H]istory, [is masked] in the guise of fashion” (Benjamin, 1999: 200). History is Fashion in disguise, it follows its rhythms, becoming an endless sequence of discontinuities, an uninterrupted succession of new moments that, by crystallizing, offer nothing really new, but only actual, alive and present reconfigurations of *already existing* elements. They are simply illusory and provisional lifestyles, indispensable in diverting attention from the inexorable passing of time. History produces an achronic, aimless, and infinitely extensible movement, from its onset folded in on itself, and its self-reproduction.

In Benjamin’s study of the metropolis both the author and the reader reach a *high observation point*, from which they gain an organic and global view of the disparity of fragments, and the complexity of experience. This cohesion does not feature as a reality pre-existing analysis, but as something that can only be grasped as one reads on. Such a process allows the reader to penetrate

single details, and recognize the traces scattered in the various paragraphs. These recurrent and obsessive traces prepare the way toward the recognition of a structural motif. For both author and reader this is not a smooth and progressive, but discontinuous process. It is completed when the various different and detached routes, perfectly correspondent to the single components of the outside reality, suddenly reveal their coherence, and clear and distinct shape, even though provisional. Residues or traces of the “Convolute N [On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of progress]” resurface almost throughout *The Arcades Project*, to the point that it becomes a core perspective able to explain the metropolitan experience from the inside, and to relativize the phenomenon as a distinct historical phase with its own facets, balance, points of strength and weakness. The viewpoint develops from within the object of research, without being forced on it. In order to function, this perspective requires the active participation of the reader: firstly of the author as reader of himself, then of another self who, by making and breaking the connections between the various paragraphs, justifies their presence *in medias res*.

Panoramas capture the distracted gazes of passers-by; they announce, on the one hand, a subversion of the relationship between art and technology; on the other, a redefinition of the old image of nature:

Just as architecture, with the first appearance of iron construction, begins to outgrow art, so does painting, in its turn, with the first appearance of the panoramas. [...] One sought tirelessly, through technical devices, to make panoramas the scenes of a perfect imitation of nature. [...] Announcing an upheaval in the relation of art to technology, panoramas are at the same time an expression of a new attitude toward life. The city dweller, whose political supremacy over the provinces is attested many times in the course of the century, attempts to bring the countryside into town. (Benjamin, 1999: 5-6)

Insofar as their vocation is to display, panoramas anticipate photography. Moreover, they reduce painting to mere informative or imitative art; no longer a sensorial experience or a cultural stimulus, painting becomes purely a reproductive *technique*, no matter how faithfully it may depict the changing daylight, the rising of the moon, the rush of waterfalls. Nature is removed from its environment and its public, decontextualized, and transferred to the city as an image, a residue or a recollection. Nature is deprived of strength and instinct, it is re-created and

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re-lived artificially, in a perfectly controlled way. The old myth of a balance or of an undissolvable bond between nature and culture rested upon the continuous interaction between the two. The metropolis ensured the increasing prevalence of culture. Accordingly nature becomes a prosthesis or a mere metaphor: it is no longer an originating power, vivid and potentially antagonistic to social life, it becomes but a memory of an old style of life, the dull echo of a primal condition.

“What makes the first photographs so incomparable is perhaps this: that they present the earliest image of the encounter of machine and man” (Benjamin, 1999: 678). In its role as the first *medium*, photography offers scenarios, situations, beliefs and practices directly dependent upon its technical and expressive potential. Its model of fruition differs from that of the Renaissance that implied cultural distinction on one hand, and, on the other the conception of art as a sensorial experience, whose duration and existence transcend fruition. With photography the medium itself by its very power activates content and sensorial responses, and does so independently from explicit ideas and desires. The medium generates habits that the self metabolizes and repeats, while its duration coincides with its consumption. The spectator becomes integral to the medium because the latter exists and lives only insofar as it is being experienced.

A new and *ab nihilo* creation, the photo can encapsulate fragments of time, things and people in a detached and all-comprehensive view, almost from a position of superiority. By crystallizing moments in time, photography differs from classical sculpture, which aspired toward duration and a-temporality. Each snapshot automatically becomes past and *dead*; for this reason, looking at a photo of oneself involves relating to the experience of death and what has passed. Each photograph is the representation of a moment condensing a piece of world history; there is no linearity or progression between one photo and another; only intermittence and discontinuity. Life unfolds as a sequence of moments that *have just happened*. It is as if a straight line were continuously cut into small and discrete segments, each holding within an entire period of time.

These changes translate into a new perception of existence: a succession of immersions and resurfacing. Something is experienced, and once that experience is over, it is considered in retrospective. Immersion, resurfacing and retrospective thinking characterize our relationship to things, from which experience, memory and knowledge are drawn. In the light of a retrospective view, the things of the world will be perceived as illusions, clothing and habituations, only temporarily

absorbing and occupying the time of the self. Death irrupts into everyday life, not in a biological form, an unspeakable, marginal experience compared to our infinite distractions and habits, but through the experience of the ephemeral. Things simultaneously show their two sides: vitality and ruin where vitality blends with the desolation of ruins, and together they seep into the time of the self. The circularity of life and death overrides the opposition between them; this opposition implied a rigid separation of the two, with a central role given to the myth of immortality. In the circularity life-death the value of temporal duration is weakened and displaced, so that memory offers the only resistance to the corrosive and destructive action of time.

The birth of a new medium corresponds, in individual consciousness, with the multiplication of ideal images, in which the individual and the collective attempt to remove imperfections from the product and any defects in the social system:

Corresponding to the form of the new means of production, which in the beginning is still ruled by the form of the old (Marx), are images in the collective consciousness in which the new is permeated with the old [...] At the same time, what emerges in these wish images is the resolute effort to distance oneself from all that is antiquated – which includes, however, the recent past. These tendencies deflect the imagination (which is given impetus by the new) back upon the primal past. In the dream in which each epoch entertains images of its successor, the latter appears wedded to elements of primary history. (Benjamin, 1999: 4-5)

Novelty at first seems to be an *angelus novus*, a circumstance soon to become daily practice, yet is still shapeless, and nascent. During this phase the new has two sides to it. It appears as a reflection and a derivation from the old: early photography recalls painting, cinema literature, the metropolis the municipality, and the web television. Paradoxically, however, the new also raises expectations and desires, a political and social potential that asks to be made manifest, and, if necessary, destroys the ties and divisions posed by the old system. At an imaginary level, a breach between *present* and *recent past* is thus created. This breach feeds the need typical of every generation to take its distance from the immediately preceding epoch; “to each generation the one immediately preceding it seems the most radical anti-aphrodisiac imaginable” (Benjamin, 1999: 64). In order to impose its difference and originality, the new elaborates a series of discourses that push individual and collective imagination

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back to a remote past, to the fantasy of an original society, without social bonds, class divisions or social actors. These discourses represent man in an idyllic condition, full of humanity, but completely immaterial and decontextualized. Such discourses temporarily suspend experience and the social equilibrium, and they correspond to the sensation or illusion that the need for a social equilibrium can be finally overcome. Utopias are only apparently detached from the present, while, in fact, they constitute an extension of it, if not a defence. They do not aim to realize their project, but to perfect novelty: *to give machines a more human face*. Utopias pertain to a dormant or subconscious phase, lasting only until the new has entirely taken over in everyday life. Novelty transforms into a *working machine*, capable of combining its original objectives – commerce, wealth and consumption – with the human needs that have developed meanwhile. The transformation of *myth* into *habitus*, of a blind and instinctual force into a clear and neat situation inseparable from action entails a simultaneous redefinition of the functions, values and powers of the various social actors.

“[W]hereas the education of earlier generations explained these dreams for them in terms of tradition, of religious doctrine, present-day education simply amounts to the distraction of children” (Benjamin, 1999: 388). The shift from myth to habit also manifests itself when we divert from the general level of social life to the particular one of individual microhistories. In both cases, the metropolis is the cause of the whole process, the space that fills the existence of individuals and the collective with infinite events that are discontinuous from each other, and disconnected from past experiences. Under these circumstances, identity coincides with the infinity of situations experienced, and is led purely by chance, far from any image of perfectibility. As a result, the individual feels deeply estranged from the structures and institutions that used to protect an identity that was both individual and collective. Growth is fragmented, and takes place in solitude as the individual progressively recognizes the traces left by experience on his current behaviour. Recognition happens at those moments when time is suspended and the *continuum* of existence is interrupted. Thus individual existence becomes populated with fragments, figures and images that layer upon layer, over the course of everyday life, have stratified and merged with the self. In an instant there is a kind of leap from a latent preconscious and distracted level to a lucid and conscious one. The potential, characteristics

and circumstances determining everyday action then appear clear and distinct, even though they remain provisional.

Growth coincides on one hand with, the events experienced by the self, and, on the other, the way in which the self elaborates these events. Previously separate, growth and knowledge now merge: every single piece of new knowledge will add a further peg – vital to one's personal growth, yet replaceable. This means that self-knowledge is indissolubly linked to the experiences that produced it, and to the self. It also means that self-knowledge is left to chance, because nothing ensures that the self will ever gain self-knowledge. The *collective self* now redefines itself only partially through a self that elaborates experience and relates it to others. Knowledge and memory can no longer be considered as chronological systems of objective experiences, but become ephemeral and discontinued processes, dependent on the self and the experiences that made them possible. Should new media, capable of stimulating different reflections and memories, replace the historical experiences of the metropolis and the media in the organization of everyday life, their whole body of critical materials would inevitably be destroyed or decay. Knowledge and the medium form a system at once close and chaotic: *close*, because only a specific medium originates and seals in a distinct organisation of knowledge, *chaotic*, because a medium can bring infinite variations and possibilities of knowledge even to a single individual.

The isolation of the self and the consequent loss of any sense of the finality of time bring everyday life centre stage. The *everyday* becomes the matrix of all experiences but also a system of modes and practices whereby the self reassesses the value, function and sense of ongoing events. Before becoming a habit, every single event presents itself to the individual as a potential narrative. In this phase it is experienced as a myth or a daydream, as a blind and instinctive force that demands to manifest itself. Daily use, repetition, and self-observation transform that potential into a familiar *habitus*, circumscribed and perfectly recognisable. A repeated experience becomes absorbed and integrated into behaviour, one more fragment of the history of one's psyche. The sense and meaning of the various experiences come together in the self only *a posteriori*: things do not have an intrinsic or autonomous value. Their meaning only surfaces when the self makes an image of them, when it recognizes and relativizes them as prosthesis of everyday happenings.

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Acknowledging that pleasure is the key motive, the driving force behind individual will and action, implies the following: external objects are perceived as prosthesis or stimuli, boxes to fill and empty, *circumstances* that can simulate desires and emotions, illusion and disillusion. When objects are produced it is with the expected uses the consumer will make of them in mind. The pivot of a sophisticated game revolving around the dynamics of attention and seduction is the consumer. This applies to exhibitions:

World exhibitions are places of pilgrimage to the commodity fetish. [...] It [the first national exhibition of industry] arises from the wish “to entertain the working classes, and it becomes for them a festival of emancipation.” The worker occupies the foreground, as customer. [...] They open a phantasmagoria which a person enters in order to be distracted. (Benjamin, 1999: 7)

The mass “comes centre stage in the role of customer”: it lets itself become entrapped in a complex labyrinth of mirrors and windows where it participates in a roaring world of illusions. This manipulates individuals by taking their attention away from the alienation of factory work. Objects are miniatures of the exhibition as a whole and they correspond perfectly with the nature of metropolitan stimuli; mere prompts, distractions, and *shocks*. The exhibition has an essentially ludic character, and is conceived for the visiting public. Maps, glass buildings and retrieval of past aesthetic experiences such as the museum and the basilica all contribute to seducing, attracting and entertaining the passer-by and the potential customer. The consumer exploring the various sections of the exhibition, experiences them as an opportunity for leisure, entertainment and distraction. The instrumental or communicative side of the experience is therefore allowed to prevail over the historical and aesthetic.

Jugendstil is the second attempt on the part of art to come to terms with technology. The first attempt was realism. There the problem was more or less present in the consciousness of the artists, who were uneasy about the new processes of technological reproduction. [...] Jugendstil no longer saw itself threatened by the competing technology. And so the confrontation with technology that lies hidden within it was all the more aggressive. Its recourse to technological motifs arises from the effort to sterilize them ornamentally. (Ibid.: 557)

Before the advent of the historical avant-garde and of advertising, *art nouveau* succeeds in bringing together aesthetics, technology and the market. Individual creativity and the memory of artistic tradition become part of the laws of production; *art nouveau* makes of art an ornament and an instrument at the service of everyday consumption. Its objective is not to create a final work, but to participate in the fluxes of everyday life, to confer style and taste to objects. It no longer addresses an artistic niche, but the public in general, consumers of any kind of goods. Objects are produced and consumed *distractedly*: what matters is not the profound value of the experience, but the ever changing desire for objects, their allure and magnetism, and, of course, their enjoyment.

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The sense and historical meaning of innumerable experiences can only be made *a posteriori* in the researcher's mind. This builds a *high point of observation* from which to obtain a clear and distinct image of our *now-being*, and to place that image, alongside others history has already made readable or visible.

Its founding concept is not progress but actualization [...] It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present 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 a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. – Only dialectical images are genuine images (that is, not archaic). (Ibid.: 460-462)

On the basis of experiences lived and observed, the researcher offers an image of our *now-being* related to those fragments of the past that seem to have desired, anticipated and prompted the present. The image the present builds of the past, of remnants of the past that survive as a present and living memory, is their current interpretation and actualization. The past does not merge linearly with the present, but this breaks down the past and only the fragments perceived as closest to it, are retrieved and transfigured. The historian only pays attention to the relationship the present establishes with residues of the past; a line of continuity *internal* rather than *external* to historical processes is thus created.

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History is legitimized by its own creations, and justified by its own mechanisms. The relationship between present and past confirms the operational mode of the present in its distinct way of connecting to the past; it also unravels the constants, needs and sense (or insignificance) of human action in general.

History and conscience mirror each other: they appear as a series of infinite discontinuities that in crystallizing, offer a reconfiguration of parts of a pre-existing system or the recuperation of elements long cast aside or denied:

Each time, what sets the tone is [...] the newest, but only where it emerges in the medium of the oldest, the longest past, the most ingrained. This spectacle, the unique self-construction of the newest in the medium of what has been, makes for the true dialectical theatre of fashion. (Ibid.: 64)

The present is a new turn of history retrieving for its own use and consumption pieces of the past that it finds useful, necessary or close. Closeness is not only chronological, but, consistent with Fashion, also stylistic. Television, for example, combines some of its own typical features with elements drawn from contemporary life: live broadcasting and family unit. Television does not combine these elements linearly, but rather breaks them down and reassembles them according to its own needs. Television series differ from films at the cinema; news broadcasts are a distant echo of the press; political and scientific programmes adopt a show-like format to the point of taking on the semblance of advertising, *live* sport changes the very way sport is conceived of and played.

The forms of history are not independent from one another but always prone to sudden reconfigurations. A new event may bear a deep impact on the whole system, or on parts of it. With the advent of television, cinema found itself at a crossroads: to explore alternative modes of expression, or to adhere to a production exclusively geared for television audiences. A similar process can be traced in the strenuous attempts of television (and cinema) to follow the narration of videogames, and the models of communication of the web, as the diversification of infinite satellite channels shows. When novelty appears it resembles a phantasmagoria able to fuel desires, expectations, and new and distinct possibilities of expression that existing forms may no longer satisfy. The unstoppable advance of the new, with its everyday life and its diffusion, automatically turns the old forms into ruins, forcing them to compete in a way

that will either marginalize them or exhaust their expressive potential. At a social level, the individual and the community experience novelty as both desire and fear; desire reflects the wish to dive into the new in search for new feelings of pleasure, while fear reflects anxiety about the changes the medium will bring to the existing equilibrium. Fear and desire characterize the initial phase of interiorization; they are like figures the self creates to give a name to the outside world. The following phase is day-by-day habituation: the social body enters the medium and becomes numb following its rhythms and features, constructive or destructive as they may be, until it accepts and exhausts it.

History appears to be a potentially infinite sequence of moments, which are *present* but also *have just happened*. Single events do not stand in linear progression but jump about, and this lack of continuity is directly proportional to the technical difference separating them. Novelty marks the advent of a new fragment of history, but also of a new and irreparable rift in it:

In the same way a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel. (Benjamin, 1996: 259)

Fragments are essentially isolated, they follow each other discontinuously and will never become a whole: the original vessel does not exist, rather we have no awareness or knowledge of it, nor access to it. The original creative moment does not coincide with a hypothetical original fragment or matrix holding all the others together, but with the sudden flash and leap of a new event. When novelty appears, it generates history and action immediately; it thus moves toward the experience of the sacred, not in a dogmatic religious sense, but in the sense of an event capable of breaking the course of time, and of inaugurating new possibilities of life.

A view of history based on the idea of it as a sequence of events and habits excludes any sense of finality and end; in fact, it recognizes that pleasure or the will to live is its sole and essential drive. Events offer a lifestyle; pleasure holds and justifies their infinite proliferation. As a mirror image of *Fashion*, history enacts a circular time, infinitely extensible:

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Where they impinge on the present moment, birth and death [...] considerably restrict the field of play for fashion. This state of affairs is properly elucidated through two parallel circumstances. The first concerns birth, and shows the natural engendering of life “overcome” <*aufgehoben*> by novelty in the realm of fashion. The second circumstance concerns death: it appears in fashion as no less “overcome,” and precisely through the sex appeal of the inorganic, which is something generated by fashion. (Ibid.: 79)

The self experiences, preserves and overcomes birth and death only through *illusion* and *disillusion*, projections that recall, transfigure and simulate their rhythms. A bifurcation separates biological from historical time. History appears as a creation of the self, a dimension existing in parallel with nature, simulating its mode of functioning, but essentially artificial and illusory. History evolves by creating, via past and present media, many different *virtual worlds*; it is a kind of *second nature* that attracts and distracts the self from the otherwise empty and homogeneous flux of natural time. As an infinite and intermittent succession of events, *history* becomes an uncontrollable system, with no single viewpoint because each historical moment corresponds to irreducible configurations and mental states.

Viewed from above, history coincides with the countless *histories* of the self, of its habits and habitations. Since internal elements of the self and external techniques are factors that operate within the self as habitations and potential means of expression, an equivalence between them is created. The crucial issue occurring again and again is the individual's need, and search, for self-expression. Depending on the existing balance, individual potential will emerge from this process with varying intensity. All creations make sense solely and exclusively within the relationships the self establishes with the other; they are re-read not as ideology or an absolute truth, but simply as prosthesis, organized and provisional systems. This *communicative* perspective corresponds to the profound historical consciousness, to a feeling of emptiness and despair coming from the infinite through insignificant possibilities it offers:

Whoever has learned to be anxious in the right way has learned the ultimate. [...] [T]he more profoundly he is in anxiety, the greater is the man – yet non in the sense usually understood, in which anxiety is about something external, about something outside a person, but in the sense that he himself produces the anxiety.

[...] Anxiety is freedom's possibility, and only such anxiety is through faith absolutely educative, because it consumes all finite ends and discovers all their deceptiveness. [...] Whoever is educated by anxiety is educated by possibility, and only he who is educated by possibility is educated according to his infinitude. Therefore possibility is the weightiest of all categories. [...] [W]hoever has truly been brought up by possibility has grasped the terrible as well as the joyful. [...] [O]ne certainly should not be in anxiety about men and about finitudes, but only he who passes through the anxiety of the possible is educated to have no anxiety, not because he can escape the terrible things of life but because these always become weak by comparison with those of possibility. (Kierkegaard, 1980: 155-157)

Anxiety is at once a product of, and a detachment from, history: the sense of possibility that comes from the incredible accumulation and acceleration of historical habits, merges with their vanity and illusiveness. The distracted gaze of everyday life adds to another vision, one that frustrates and overcomes things while recognizing that they are indispensable for the existence and affirmation of the self. ■

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