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Liu, Shu

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Walter Benjamin's Concept of Experience and His Literary Practice

By

SHU LIU
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Approved:

Stefan H. Uhlig, Chair

Chunjie Zhang

Jeff Fort

Committee in Charge

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Abstract

This thesis explores Walter Benjamin's development of the new concept of experience and selects key parts of it to develop the significant arguments of this speculative philosophy of experience and why he remains of contemporary interest. This horizon of experience is based on reflecting on the epistemology of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Benjamin sought to expand the concept of experience in Kant's legacy, challenging the limits of philosophy with experience. He tries to provide a solution to the weakening of experience (*erfahrung*). I look at the sources of his work and find that his theological and historical materialist view of time is an important element that he provides for recasting a new concept of experience. This recasting of the concept of experience is a foundational connotation throughout his research and is also reflected in his literary works.

In the first chapter, I first explore the philosophical background of the concept of experience and provide a separate introduction to the two types of experience *erfahrung* and *erlebnis* in the German tradition, which became the inspiration for Benjamin's grasp of modern experience in later years. Then, with a specific analysis of “Program of the coming philosophy” and some other texts, aligned with a review of Kant's theory, I argue that Benjamin inherited and challenged Kant's concept of experience in an epistemological sense. In this challenge, he resorts to religion, language, and the present time to enrich the totality of experience.

In chapter 2, I choose to enter the text of “On the Concept of History” to demonstrate how discontinuous time is, and particularly what his "now-time" can provide for an empirical perspective. Through the standstill, the dialectic of present and past, and the shock of these appeals, Benjamin succeeds in establishing a historical materialist experience of time.

In chapter 3, I analyze the expression of temporal experience in “Berlin Childhood around 1900” as a literary practice for a new conception of experience. Through the analysis of the imagery of rain, I argue that his experience of time is conscious, spatial and in the present. And to this end, I introduce the similarities between the artistic approach of classical Chinese poetry and Benjamin's conception of the subject and object. Mimicking Proust's methodology of involuntary memory, Benjamin's literary practice in Berlin's childhood searched for ways to recover experience as *erfahrung*.

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Table of contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iv
Introduction	1
Chapter 1 The Concept of Experience and the Speculative Philosophy of Erfahrung	7
The German Tradition of “Experience” ——Erfahrung and Erlebnis	7
“The Certainty of Experience with Temporality”- Inheritance and Critique of Kant	12
A Speculative Philosophy of Experience and Its Opposition	18
Chapter 2 Historical Materialism's Philosophy of Time and Modern Experience	25
The Present, Discontinuous Experience of Time – On the Concept of History.....	25
Dialectics at a Standstill - Anti-Progressive Historical Materialism	28
Tracing the Past in Present Time - Proust, Baudelaire and The Reconstruction of Experience as A whole.....	35
Shock and The Temporal Structure of Modern Experience	39
Chapter 3 The Literary Practice of The New Concept of Experience – “Berlin Childhood around 1900”	42
The Imagery of Rain– Consciousness and Spatialization of Time	42
From Proust's involuntary memory to a philosophy of history.....	48
Conclusion	55
Bibliography	57

Introduction

The study of Walter Benjamin has been surprisingly popular in the world to this day since his selected collections, *Illuminations* edited by Hannah Arendt entered the Western English-speaking world. After the continuing influence of modernity on the human subject, it seems that the dilemmas and hopes of the late nineteenth century still share the correspondence with the present. Theodor Adorno, Jacques Derrida, Jürgen Habermas, Hanna Arendt, and other modern philosophers have all had the representative criticism of Benjamin's thought, which in the discourse system of capitalist criticism presents itself in these directions: language and translation, Epistemology and Empiricism, philosophy of history and cultural criticism, Theology and Marxism.¹ These directions of his research continue to echo many contemporary issues, such as the boundary between language and thought, the sensory revolution's interrogation of rational traditions, the postcolonial politics of the subject, the absence of identity, and so on.

However, despite his theories being counted among the Frankfurt School traditions,

Benjamin did not adopt the same fierce critical and vigilante attitude towards the modern

¹ See also in Gaddis Rose, Marilyn. "Jacques Derrida: Des Tours de Babel." *Babel*. John Benjamins, 1986, Habermas, Jürgen, Philip Brewster, and Carl Howard Buchner. "*Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism: The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin.*" *New German Critique*, no. 17 (1979): 30–59, Wolin, Richard. *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*. University of California Press, 1994, and Arendt, Hannah. "Walter Benjamin 1892-1941." *Men in dark times*, 1968.

fracture as the rest of the school. Yet it is an attitude that confronts the range of effects caused by modernity, including those on the subject and the aesthetic, with a rather gentle attitude, in a way that actively adapts. Faced with the modern ruins, he is always like the hunchback he writes about, picking fragments on his way through the history of the place and trying to put it together somewhere else, somewhere present. Arendt likens Benjamin to the collector of history and the “pearl picker”. The spirit of the collector is to revive the old world; the way to revive the old world is to exhibit his collection in a disorderly and chaotic way. The authenticity of the collection rebels against the traditional narrative method, and the originality of the collection rebels against the authority of the traditional narrative. For Arendt, the combination of "pearl picking" as a method of dealing with history and "exhibiting the collection" as a method of narrating history defines Benjamin's identity as a thinker caught between the past and the future.²

The tiny objects collected from the dust, forming a figurative idea and memory, became Benjamin's counterweight to the alienation of humans by modernity. It is this persistent effort to 'rebuild' and accept the complexity that seems to resonate with the current generation who are still trapped in this work. In 1981, in Susan Sontag's *under the sign of the Saturn*, for example, she offers an individual, figurative reading of Benjamin,

² Arendt, Hannah. "Walter Benjamin 1892-1941." *Men in dark times*, 1968.

especially in her formulation of Benjamin's "open positions"³ - theological, surrealist, aesthetic, communist - as a heroic attitude in the face of contemporary realities. A heroic attitude to the complex organic problems of the contemporary world. In 1989, Susan Buck-Morss has also paid creative attention to Benjamin's Arcade Project, trying to uncover the significance of Benjamin's work of criticizing contemporary consumerist culture in her work, *The Dialectics of Seeing*. Working with Benjamin's vast files of citations and commentary which contain a myriad of historical details from the dawn of consumer culture, Buck-Morss tries to make visible the conceptual structure that gives these fragments philosophical coherence.

Furthermore, we could say that the storm named "progress", as proposed by Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History", continues to sweep through human society. In our increasingly empty time, "stopping to wake the dead and mend what is broken" has become difficult heroism. Is the society sustained by transnational capital, financial speculation, digital streaming, real estate mortgages, personal finance, and cyber-sociality the afterlife of capital, or the "last struggle of a class"? The new COVID-19 virus from unknowable nature has easily destroyed much of the order and changed the way human society is organized and socialized. The grand discourses- ethical, national, economical,

³ Sontag, Susan. *Under the sign of Saturn*. London: Penguin books, 2009. 133.

or political, constructed by mankind seem particularly absurd, limited, and insignificant in the face of the impact of nature, and theories based on reason seem to have undergone a desperate disenchantment as a result. At this moment, the whole of tradition, collectivity, memory, values, and language is again being ruthlessly shattered. The reconstruction of individual and collective experiences that Benjamin sought to express became important. The key to building a bridge of understanding between the time we live in and Benjamin's time, and as what many scholars have focused on to distinguish Benjamin from traditional philosophers, is, I suppose, a reworking and rethinking of his speculative philosophy of “*erfahrung*” (experience).

To clarify the origin and development of Benjamin's concept of experience, I would like to start with an emphasis on the philosophical aspect of Benjamin's thought, especially with respect to the Kantian origins of his concept of experience. Based on his youthful study of Kant's philosophy and the influence of neo-Kantianism, Benjamin critiqued and developed Kant's concept of experience. In the words of a letter to Gerhard Scholem, dated 22 October 1917, to “comprehend [Kant] with the utmost reverence, looking on the least letter as a tradendum to be transmitted (however much it is necessary to recast him afterwards)”. I argue that the development on the concept of experience continues to be the notion that has always distinguished Benjamin's thought from that of traditional philosophers. Especially in the later period, he does not define it exclusively within the

vision of the philosopher, which makes this speculative horizon where philosophy and cultural history merge, that he tries to open and clarify more unique.

Adorno says in “A portrait of Walter Benjamin” that “Philosophy condenses into experience so that it may have hope.”⁴ From this article, Adorno agrees with Benjamin in developing this horizon of experience as “a philosophy directed against philosophy”. Adorno also distills in this article some motifs in Benjamin's writing, with philosophical perspectives. He shows that Benjamin's essay on Proust and his study of German mourning plays both reflect a revision of Kant's emphasis on the “thing-in-itself” vision into a “thing-itself” vision, focusing on the “thing- itself” rather than on the conceptual form of the thing. In the late Nietzschean conception, truth is not an eternal and immutable universal but only historically united with an absolute figure, then Benjamin precisely practiced this view, a philosophy directed against philosophy. Adorno's interpretive strategy for Benjamin is to analyze Benjamin within his own framework, just as one would do with Nietzsche. This paper likewise tends follow this tradition of reading Benjamin, trying to trace the style of “immanent critique” that he himself proposed to develop the main argument of this thesis: Benjamin sought to expand the concept of experience in Kant's legacy, challenging the limits of philosophy with experience. This recasting of the concept of experience is a

⁴ Adorno, Theodor W., Samuel Weber, and Shierry Weber Nicholzen. *Prisms*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press. 1981. 240.

foundational connotation throughout his research and is also reflected in his literary works.

Howard Caygill's *The Colour of Experience*, 1986, is representative hermeneutics of Benjamin's work, using the concept of experience as the main point of entry. He suggests a continuity between two major phases of Benjamin's work: the study of German mourning plays, and the genealogy of modernity in the Arcades Project. "The continuity between them may be described in terms of the development of a Kantian concept of experience through an extension of a Nietzschean method of active nihilism."⁵ The discovery of this concept of experience became the key to his criticism throughout his life.

Benjamin's works are vast, and the space of this thesis does not allow me to do a comprehensive compilation and analysis, but I still try to analyze his key theories through his representative articles, respecting his original text. These texts mainly include, but are not limited to, "Experience" (1913), "Program of the Coming Philosophy" (1918), "Experience and Poverty" (1933), "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" (1939), and "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940). And, assisting from the close reading of his late literary work *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, we can further understand the writing practice of the concept of experience, especially, how the experience of time stands out in his work. The analysis of his *Berlin Childhood* is a literary exploration of how Benjamin expresses

⁵ Caygill, Howard. 1998. *Walter Benjamin: the colour of experience.*, Introduction, London: Routledge, 1998. 3.

the concept of experience as a philosophy directed against philosophy in a non-philosophical way.

Chapter 1 The Concept of Experience and the Speculative Philosophy of *Erfahrung*

The German Tradition of “Experience” — *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*

In 1913, Walter Benjamin, full of youthful rebellious enthusiasm, wrote an essay "Experience". This essay, as an infantile product of the Berlin youth movement, planted a seed for his subsequent journey of philosophical exploration.

In 1915, when Walter Benjamin was 23 years old, we can see in Gerhard Scholem's recollections the beginning of the swinging nature of his intellectual journey. In Scholem's recollection, Benjamin "abandoned his line with the disintegration of the youth movement that had been so important to him and had not yet found a new one."⁶ Later, in 1917-1918, Benjamin completed this “Program of the Coming Philosophy”. after studying Kant's philosophy. From this essay onwards, Benjamin no longer insists on describing the Nietzschean-like spiritual transformation of youth but begins to polish a new concept - the concept of experience. This concept, or to say a speculative philosophy, permeates all of Benjamin's philosophy up to his last work before the end of his life, “Theses on the Philosophy of history”.

Among his early works, “Program of the Coming Philosophy” is one of the few papers he

⁶ Scholem, Gershom. *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*. New York Review, 2003. 34.

completed within the framework of philosophy. This essay, in the form of a reflection on Kant's philosophy, provides the source of Benjamin's philosophical thought. In this paper, Kantian philosophy and neo-Kantianism were Benjamin's primary argumentative opponent. It is also the theoretical starting point for the construction of his future philosophy. The main task of it is to rejuvenate the experience (*erfahrung*) that has been reduced heavily. We can see in it the correlation of the early style with the later content. As Michael Rosen stated, there is no more important connection between Benjamin's early and mature thought than his particular form of fidelity to Kant's philosophy.⁷

Before delving into the details of Benjamin's text, I would like to distinguish two German words he mentioned a lot in the analysis of Baudelaire's works: "*erfahrung*" and "*erlebnis*", the English counterparts of which are both "experience". According to the German construction, both words have the "-er" prefix that means the process of getting closer to something, showing the subject's continuous efforts. Comparatively, "*erlebnis*" is closer to experiencing intermittent, tangible life event. The English equivalent of its verb stem "leben" is life, which emphasizes the individual experience of living. While "*erfahrung*" intends to express perceptions acquired through experience. The prototypical verb of it is "fahren", that makes it more narrative and continuous.

⁷ Rosen, Michael. *On Voluntary Servitude: False Consciousness and the Theory of Ideology*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996.

For Benjamin, the concept of *erfahrung* is associated with tradition. It must exist in a specific context, and is transmitted through historical activity-storytelling, transferring skills, family, or community language atmosphere. It is a mode of experience, not at the subjective or psychological level, but intersubjective, embedded in a local context and reproduced through the activity of telling and concretizing.

In contrast, *erlebnis* is difficult to transmit and is an intense experience that bursts into the individual psyche. It is closer to the modern, psychological concept of experience. For example, "when I climbed the snowy mountain, the sunlight and clouds that I saw near the top were the most shocking experience of my life." In the reflection on the crisis of modernity, the difficulty of communicating individual feelings, the alienation of the way experience is conveyed, and the distortion of true reality in mass communication, all these problems, if understood with Benjamin's thinking, stem from the weakening and even disappearance of *erfahrung*, and relatively, *erlebnis* overfilling the subjective world of the human. If the creation of an immediate shocking experience no longer requires the accumulation of long-term *erfahrung* and subtle artistic language to achieve the outburst, with historical details and cultural padding full of continuity, but can be achieved easily in fragmented advertising and product design, then this experience can be produced in a capitalist way, as a commodified, alienated, and shrunken experience. Based on this produced experience, the effective conduction of communication, the establishment of consensus, the expression of the true and complete reality is compromised, both in the

epistemological and ethical sense. The transformation of experience by commodities obscures its historicity. “Just as in the seventeenth century it is allegory that becomes the canon of dialectical images, in the nineteenth century it is novelty”: “The commodity has taken the place of the allegorical mode of apprehension.”⁸

Additionally, S. Brent Plate interprets both concepts in the context of the German philosophical tradition. As he states, *erfahrung* is experience in the traditional sense, unfolding in time, and it is inseparable from the appearance of continuity. *Erlebnis*, on the other hand, is specific to the individual and is a direct, independent experience. Neo-Kantian philosophy favors the former because it emphasizes external sensory stimuli as well as the conceptual reflection of objective experience, and so creates a coherent narrative out of experience. The latter was understood as more intuitive, emphasizing the inner, subjective experience, and was honored by the Romantic thought of Goethe, Dilthey, and others.⁹ We can consider these two forms of experience as one experienced by the external senses and the other one received by the internal intuition. Benjamin began to search for a dialectical relationship between the two from his infantile "Experience" in 1913 but did not give a definitive answer at that time. It was not until his analysis of Kant's concept of experience in his *On the Program of the Coming Philosophy* that he searched

⁸ Benjamin, Walter, Howard Eiland, and Michael William Jennings. *Walter Benjamin: selected writings. Volume 4*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006, 188.

⁹ S. Brent Plate. *Walter Benjamin, Religion and Aesthetics - Rethinking Religion through the Arts*. New York: Routledge, 2006. 4.

for a way to express the concept of experience with a balance of metaphysics and historicity he emphasized from the missing parts of Kant's concept of experience.

“The Certainty of Experience with Temporality”- Inheritance and Critique of Kant

The first step of understanding Benjamin's critique of Kant's philosophy and Neo-Kantianism is to clarify is that Benjamin's respect for Kant's philosophy is a prerequisite for his absorption and development of Kant's concept of experience. In *On the Program of the Coming Philosophy*, Benjamin acknowledges Kantian philosophical system at first. As I quote that,

“The central task of the coming philosophy will be to take the deepest intimations it draws from our times and our expectation of a great future and turn them into knowledge by relating them to the Kantian system. The historical continuity that is ensured by following the Kantian system is also the only such continuity of decisive and systematic consequence.”¹⁰

For Benjamin, the first and most important point of Kant's philosophy is that it does not lie in the search for the depth and breadth of human knowledge, but in the systematic

¹⁰ Benjamin, Walter W., Marcus Bullock, and Michael W. Jennings. *Walter Benjamin: selected writings. Vol. 1.* Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2004. 100.

justification of its system. This is the trend of reference for the development of the coming philosophy: the coming philosophy also must struggle for certainty and continuity, to build up a systematic theoretical unity. It is important to note, and will be developed later, that this is in view of the principles on which its philosophical system is built and does not refer to the horizon of the new concept of experience.

However, Benjamin does not share exactly the same epistemological point of view as Kant. He points out the mechanical nature of Kant's view of experience. "Kant wanted to take the principles of experience from the sciences-in particular, mathematical physics; yet from the very beginning, and even in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, experience itself and unto itself was never identical with the object realm of that science."¹¹ Thus, science is not identical with the acquisition of knowledge.

As Benjamin states, the decisive error of Kant's concept of knowledge, under the prevalent influence of natural science, especially Newtonian physics, was to base experience on the "reality of the lowest order". Thus, Kant's new concept of experience and the philosophy-based worldview merge into one. I quote him that,

"The most important obstacle to linking a truly time and eternity conscious philosophy to

¹¹ Benjamin, Walter W., Marcus Bullock, and Michael W. Jennings. *Walter Benjamin: selected writings. Vol. 1.* Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2004. 101.

Kant is the following: The reality with which, and with the knowledge of which, Kant wanted to base knowledge on certainty and truth is a reality of a low, perhaps the lowest, order.”¹² In contrast, the metaphysical orientation, of which Benjamin resorted to religion as a specific field, interconnected with knowledge and science, is the higher experience with integrity but not hollowness.

More importantly from this part, the dimension of time, as we can see, is a significant component of the ideal concept of experience conceived by Benjamin. According to Benjamin, epistemology is confronted with two major problems. First, the certainty of knowledge without time. Second, the certainty of experience with temporality. “First of all, there was the question of the certainty of knowledge that is lasting, and, second, there was the question of the integrity of an experience that is ephemeral.”¹³

Kant solved the first problem: he established an all-embracing epistemological system, thus providing the ultimate law of universal necessity for mankind to know the stars in the sky and the human mind. But Kant, according to Benjamin, does not address the second problem, namely, how to determine the object of knowledge, that is, living experience. Kant's neglect of the problem of "the certainty of experience with temporality", results in

¹² Benjamin, Walter W., Marcus Bullock, and Michael W. Jennings. *Walter Benjamin: selected writings. Vol. 1.* Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2004. 103.

¹³ Benjamin, Walter W., Marcus Bullock, and Michael W. Jennings. *Walter Benjamin: selected writings. Vol. 1.* Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2004. 101.

the lack of integrity of his concept of experience due to the lack of the temporal dimension. At the same time, this means that the basis of Kant's research work, the object of knowledge: experience, is also inexorably dependent on the certainty that is given to it. Benjamin called this issue "the religiöse und historische Blindheit" (the religious and historical blindness)¹⁴, and it is not recognized that this blind spot is a feature of the Enlightenment, which is largely associated with the entire modern era.

It is necessary to return to Kant's text. Kant's articulation of experience is a reconciliation of empiricism and rationalism that "although all our cognition commences with experience, yet it does not on that account all arise from experience."¹⁵ Kant defines experience as "a kind of cognition that requires understanding". Knowledge is in the position of being independent of experience, independent of all sense impressions.¹⁶

Kant argues that experience itself needs to be unified by some pre-experiential, conceptual rules of cognition in order to be formed. Our ability to perform cognition with concepts does not come from experience itself, but rather from some a priori cognitive rules.

¹⁴ Benjamin, Walter W., Marcus Bullock, and Michael W. Jennings. *Walter Benjamin: selected writings. Vol. 1.* Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2004, 103.

¹⁵ Kant, Immanuel, and Norman Kemp Smith. *Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason.* Boston: Bedford, 1929, Introduction.

¹⁶ Kant, Immanuel, and Norman Kemp Smith. *Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason.* Boston: Bedford, 1929, Introduction.

On the one hand, experience must have sensory impressions as its material (the manifold). For example, we cannot obtain any information about an apple as an object if we do not first obtain information about the vision of the apple, etc. At the same time, experience itself requires understanding, that is, it must be describable by us in terms of concepts. When we have acquired information about the apple through our senses and have the ability to conceptually depict this information, the image of the apple in front of us is our experience of the apple as an object. It is the sensory impressions combined with the use of concepts that allow us to acquire cognition of objects; in this sense, our cognition is "from experience".

On the other hand, however, Kant argues that knowledge does not entirely "rise from" experience. On the surface, experience itself can be just a collection of impressions of the senses, but such a collection does not contain any of the concepts we use to know the object. For example, the image of an apple in front of us (the experience of an apple) is on the surface a bright red shadow in our visual system but does not contain the concept of "apple"; we cannot acquire any conceptual knowledge of an apple by virtue of this bright red shadow alone. In this sense, there is a deeper source of cognition behind these superficially experienced images, which is why Kant said that cognition does not all arise from experience.

In this way, Benjamin's emphasis on the hollowness and inferiority of Kant's concept of experience does not mean that he considers Kant's epistemological system to be wrong. Rather, he prefers to give the concept a larger and deeper theoretical scope than Kant's specification of experience, encompassing at least "the deeper source of cognition behind these superficially experienced images". What Kant wants to argue is precisely that there are a priori cognitive faculties beyond sensory impressions that are necessary for the formation of experience itself (including concepts such as time and space as a priori forms of intuition and cause and effect as a priori categories of knowing). The objects in our experience must be adapted to these a priori cognitive rules. Immediately following the passage quoted above, Kant states that:

“It is therefore at least a question requiring closer investigation, and one not to be dismissed at first glance, whether there is any such cognition independent of all experience and even of all impressions of the senses. One calls such cognitions a priori, and distinguishes them from empirical ones, which have their sources a posteriori, namely in experience.”¹⁷

This does not actually conflict with Benjamin's direction for his establishment of a speculative philosophy of experience, which confirms Benjamin's fidelity to the

¹⁷ Kant, Immanuel, and Norman Kemp Smith. *Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*. Boston: Bedford, 1928, Introduction.

foundational principles of Kant's philosophy. Still, Benjamin points out the weaknesses of Kant's philosophical conception of knowledge in this regard: the tendency to subjectivism and the lack of teaching (Lehre). Kant rejected the universal conception of experience of his contemporaries, treating a priori experience as a property of human faculties and thus ensuring their universal validity. However, he does not inject metaphysics into the experience. In Benjamin's view, it is precisely because a priori philosophy has not completely eliminated traces of the philosophy of the subject that it is not yet able to infuse the content of truth into the concept of experience and therefore lacks a teaching function. As he says, Kant's "radicalism" leads to the subjectivization of knowledge, and once truth takes a radical and subjective stance, it loses its objectivity and divine component.

A Speculative Philosophy of Experience and Its Opposition

If we place *On the Program of the Coming Philosophy* in that era, we can see that Benjamin's attention to Kant's concept of experience and the development of the inheritance of it as the beginning of the discussion is inevitable. In the post-Kantian nineteenth century, existentialism, Marxism, utilitarianism, pragmatism, and neo-Kantianism emerged. In Germany, neo-Kantianism became the dominant philosophy interpreting Kant's philosophy. Neo-Kantian philosophy reconciles the different applications of Hegel and Schopenhauer to Kant's theory of thing-in-itself. Their way was to apply the theoretical vision of the thing-in-itself to the study of social history (the

philosophy of history of the Freiburg school, represented by Wendelban), also paying much attention to the a priori subject (Freiburg school) and the a priori logic (Marburg school). The "blind spot of religion and history", to some extent, comes from the dominant discourse of the methodology of the natural sciences in the modern period (schools such as Neo-Kantianism received its influence). Engaging in a discursive reflection on Kant's philosophy became a must for Benjamin who wanted to reinvent a new concept of experience from an epistemological discussion based on a reflection on the modernity of the society of that era. The "blind spot of religion and history", to some extent, comes from the dominant discourse of the methodology of the natural sciences in the modern period (schools such as Neo-Kantianism received its influence)

Further, it is necessary to look for the most crucial position of Benjamin regarding epistemology. I quote him that

“The task of future epistemology is to find for knowledge the sphere of total neutrality in regard to the concepts of both subject and object; in other words, it is to discover the autonomous, innate sphere of knowledge in which this concept in no way continues to designate the relation between two metaphysical entities.”¹⁸

¹⁸ Benjamin, Walter W., Marcus Bullock, and Michael W. Jennings. *Walter Benjamin: selected writings. Vol. 1.* Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2004. 104.

In this sense, Benjamin's concept of experience built on the epistemological field is somehow anti-certainty. "Indeed, one can say that the very greatness of his work, his unique radicalism, presupposed an experience which had almost no intrinsic value and which could have attained its (we may say) sad significance only through its certainty."¹⁹ Although he mentioned the struggle for continuity and systematicity in the system of future philosophy, as for the specific concept of experience, he opposed the natural-scientific certainty declared by the proponents of neo-Kantianism. Benjamin argued that neo-Kantianism failed in advancing Kant's philosophy; rather, they formalized its application within the larger context of modern science, which would lead to an empirical concept that would become empty and superficial. On the one hand, they shifted their attention from the natural sciences to the spiritual and human sciences, and on the other hand, they used the analytical methods of the study of the natural sciences to analyze the spiritual sciences in a compartmentalized manner. And herein lies the paradox. This approach represents seeing natural science as the authority, using it as a yardstick to measure the field of humanities, and reducing the humanities to natural science-like formulas and prescriptions. The cult of scientific instrumental rationality embodied therein is precisely what Kantian philosophy seeks to avoid in its motives. Thus, to find a different path from neo-Kantianism to inherit Kant's philosophy, the task of future philosophy is no longer to discuss scientificity but to focus on the ideology and existence of human beings. This kind of

¹⁹ Benjamin, Walter W., Marcus Bullock, and Michael W. Jennings. *Walter Benjamin: selected writings. Vol. 1.* Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2004. 102.

thinking is also responding to the modern obsession, the uncertainty that the rapid changes in technology and social structure have left on the way of life of every modern person.

Based on the relationship between knowledge and experience uncovered by Kant, Benjamin wanted to establish a new concept of experience based on this relationship. To keep experience and knowledge from being bound up in empirical consciousness, “this new concept of experience, which would be established on the basis of the new conditions of knowledge, would itself be the logical place and the logical possibility of metaphysics.” He introduced an important philosophical concept of "concrete totality of experience". In this concept, Benjamin incorporates historical, religious, and linguistic dimensions into "experience," establishing a link between the philosophical horizon and history and religion. This incorporation is achieved through teaching where religion can be presented to philosophy in the first stance. From there we can provide a basis for existence on which thinking can work. “Yet the source of existence lies in the totality of experience, and only in teaching does philosophy encounter something absolute, as existence, and in so doing encounter that continuity in experience. “²⁰

The concept of a new experience is built since such integration and dialectical thinking. Respecting Kant's legacy, Benjamin integrates cultural, historical, philosophical, and

²⁰ Benjamin, Walter W., Marcus Bullock, and Michael W. Jennings. *Walter Benjamin: selected writings. Vol. 1.* Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2004. 107

religious horizons as much as possible, making every effort to return the lived to the lived, rather than reducing it to a single rational construct. In fact, in his 1933 *Experience* he further clarified the antithesis of the new experience concept he wanted to establish: that of the precise constructs of the natural sciences. “There is no greater error than the attempt to construe experience-in the sense of life experience-according to the model on which the exact natural sciences are based.”²¹

The new concept of experience that Benjamin wanted to establish corresponds to an expression that is not a formulaic, definitional concept to a logical deduction inherent in the concept. He also does not promote the framing and structuring of human knowledge. The use of rigorous logical forms to confirm the endless capacity for mastery and control of knowledge possessed by human beings is a product of the development of Enlightenment philosophy into the modern era. Many philosophers, while carrying on the legacy of the Enlightenment to develop the architecture of reason, were skeptical of this tendency to magnify our infinite cognitive capacity, and Benjamin was among this group.

In response, the more radical Nietzschean philosophy proposes to be removing the influence of rationality on modernity.²² Differently, Benjamin continued to maintain

²¹ Benjamin, Walter, Michael William Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith. *Walter Benjamin: selected writings. Vol. 2, part 2*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005. 553.

²² See in Habermas, Jürgen, Philip Brewster, and Carl Howard Buchner. “*Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism: The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin*.” *New German Critique*, no. 17 (1979): Pp. 30–59.

respect to rationality to, as stated in the program of the coming philosophy, “within the Kantian framework.”

At one point in his early career, he expected to intervene in academic circles by tinkering with traditional philosophy. In his later years, he did not abandon his earlier philosophical beliefs, and he sought the value of experience in the philosophy of language, religion, and history mentioned in *On the Program of the Coming Philosophy*. For Benjamin, the new experience should appeal to language and religious indoctrination (Lehre). Language is the communication of content, which allows for the popularization of truth and knowledge. And the addition of religious knowledge to philosophy makes philosophical knowledge communicable. But we have to admit the great influence of Nietzsche's theory of historical cycles on Benjamin. Nietzsche's historical cycle differs from the traditional linear and eternal view of time in that he breaks time into "past," "present," and "future" points in time, destroying the continuum of religious time. This directly provides an important argument for Benjamin's unique inheritance of historical materialism in “On the Concept of History”. In Chapter 2, we will analyze how fractured, discontinuous time functions in Benjamin's philosophy of experience.

Back to the discussion here, Benjamin does not attempt to carry theology forward, but draws on the concept of lehre/teaching in religion in order to meet the need for salvation from impoverished experience and to make the concept of experience less hollow. The last

sentence of Benjamin's "Programme for the coming Philosophy" states his reason for valuing religion as a need for a philosophical system that can be added to philosophy:

“The basic tendency of this definition of the relationship between religion and philosophy, however, is to meet the demands for, first, the virtual unity of religion and philosophy; second, the incorporation of the knowledge of religion into philosophy; third, the integrity of the tripartite division of the system.”²³

Beyond the philosophy of the 19th and 20th centuries, we can understand that the theological and metaphysical areas can serve more as a complement to the existing logos-centered philosophical system.

In the period of Benjamin's capitalist critique, he combined this theology with Marxism to reach the possibility of salvation by correlating revelation with mysticism through the now-time (*jetztzeit*) rupture in structural history. In his later Arcades Project stage, and especially in “On the Concept of History”, he further developed the enrichment and refinement of the speculative philosophy of experience by examining the temporal dimension with a historical materialistic perspective.

²³ Benjamin, Walter W., Marcus Bullock, and Michael W. Jennings. *Walter Benjamin: selected writings. Vol. 1.* Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2004. 110.

Chapter 2 Historical Materialism's Philosophy of Time and Modern Experience

The Present, Discontinuous Experience of Time – On the Concept of History

An important context for talking about Benjamin's view of time is that at the turn of the century, what Heidegger called the end of metaphysics and the opening of new problematic domains for thinking about the fate of man and history from an existential perspective were important expressions of the disillusionment and reflection of early twentieth-century thinkers on the ideas and world picture since the modern era. The rationalist consolation represented by Hegel and the metaphysical consolation represented by Nietzsche, which equates life with art, represent two different concepts of modernity. These two conceptions are reflected in the view of time, one is linear, with purpose and direction, pointing to the realization of some utopia or the return of the absolute spirit to realize itself, and the other is a circular sense of time in which the will to power is eternally reincarnated. However, these two different concepts of time do not lead to a breakthrough understanding of human thinking, but rather to greater anxiety and nihilism. Or rather, the World Wars, the increasing alienation of man by the capitalist mode of production, and the decline of the traditional value system represented by religion, a series of etiologies of modernity that make it impossible to break through these two understandings of temporality. Benjamin confronts this problem of modernity with his unique conception of time, about the present

and standstill.

I quote Benjamin from *Theses on the Philosophy of History* that:

“A historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop. For this notion defines the present in which he himself is writing history. Historicism gives the ‘eternal’ image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past. The historical materialist leaves it to others to be drained by the whore called ‘Once upon a time’ in historicism’s bordello. He remains in control of his powers, man enough to blast open the continuum of history.”²⁴

The "present" here is both a stopping point in time and an open field of the horizon, that is, the reality in which history is written. He emphasizes the disruption of continuity, thus highlighting the significance of the temporality of standstill and instant. Benjamin's idea of "presentness" opens a new understanding of modernity. In answering the question of the possibility of salvation and emancipation of human beings, especially individual subjects, Benjamin does not think in a linear, progressive time horizon, nor does he search for it in the eternal cycle of forceful will. Rather, he believes that the hope and possibility of

²⁴ Benjamin, Walter, Howard Eiland, and Michael William Jennings. 2006. *Walter Benjamin: selected writings*. Volume 4. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006. 396.

emancipation are contained in the present moment of history. In the explosion of the continuity of the materialized history, the homogeneity of an era is also blown apart, and the ruins - the present - are intervened in. The present is the intersection of the past and the future, and the past is constantly reinterpreted in countless present moments so that the present is open. By the same token, the future has acquired retrospective meaning and countless possibilities because of the countless present moments. The meaning of both the past and the future is realized through the present.

In a small poem about the July Revolution, chosen by Benjamin himself, the normative, continuous nature of time is taken as the object of criticism in his view of experience:

“Qui le croirait! on dit, qu'irrites contre l'heure,
De nouveaux Josues, au pied de chaque tour,
Tiraient sur les cadrans pour arreter le jour.
(Who would believe it! It is said that, incensed at the hour,
Latter-day Joshuas, at the foot of every clocktower,
Were firing on clock faces to make the day stand still.)”²⁵

²⁵ Benjamin, Walter, Howard Eiland, and Michael William Jennings. *Walter Benjamin: selected writings. Volume 4*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006. 395.

Perhaps Sartre's unique treatment of time in *nausea* helps to understand how this reviewing of time can awaken experience. Regarding Roquentin's complaint about biographical writing, I noticed Sartre's reflection on the sense of time and the significance of time to distinguish existence and essence. Man's experience of time is defined by creating concepts such as the past, present, beginning, and end. In this kind of regulation, people think that they can express and appreciate the essence of time. But this essence of time is just broken and vain, due to the infiniteness of time.

Like a small glare of this powerlessness of time, in the diary of Roquentin, it says,

*"The last minute I am spending - in Berlin, in London - in the arms of this woman whom I met two days ago - a minute I love passionately, a woman I am close to loving - it is going to come to an end, I know that. In a little while I shall leave for another country. I shall never find this woman again or this night."*²⁶

Time, here in his perception, is full of haphazard and uncertainty. A beginning or end can't deliver the true existence of time. Like Roquentin's, or Sartre's attitude towards narrative and story and how they abandon the true experience of time. People like to tell the story to be true, with a beginning and ending, with a cut of the time period, but this is actually like

²⁶ Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Nausea*, translated by Robert Baldick. Penguin books, 1965. 35.

a kind of repetition of the essence, but not a touch of existence. However, Roquentin feels that a better way to experience and express time is through music. Time is wrapped by an experience brought by music but not cut into pieces. The music symbols are concrete and firm, but men are not trying to abstract the time in it. In music, there will not be too many signifiers to cover the signified. It doesn't make Roquentin feel unfamiliar. In this experience it isn't packed with man's regulations on things so that the infinite time can be delivered a tiny percent by man's experience, the infinite existence might give us a glimpse from nothingness. As Benjamin says,

“Although chronological reckoning subordinates duration to regularity, it cannot prevent heterogeneous, conspicuous fragments from remaining within it ...The man who loses his capacity for experiencing feels as though he has been dropped from the calendar.”²⁷ Time becomes the most important area of the twining between existence and essence. And in art, scattered fragments of genuine historical experience can be grasped again by man.”

Dialectics at a Standstill - Anti-Progressive Historical Materialism

In “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, history is a discontinuous process, and it is in this continuous process that now-time comes to the fore and achieves the effect of abrupt

²⁷ Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Vol. 241. No. 2. Random House Digital, Inc., 1969. 335.

standstill. Now-time takes a leap out of the time continuum. “History is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time (Jetztzeit).”²⁸ In other words, the unique experience of the past (Vergangenheit) stays in the course of history. The development of history and the progress of people are synchronized.

“The concept of mankind's historical progress cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such a progression must underlie any criticism of the concept of progress itself.”²⁹

Individual experience and historical experience deposits (erfahrung) are in constant pursuit of synchronization in development. The ideal form of indoctrination and development is that every age's attempts to reclaim tradition from the dominant conformity to the present. This recalls a similar argument in the works of Benjamin's youth movement, that youth is valuable in itself, no matter what ideas are instilled in young people by their fathers or predecessors. Young people are not without a sense of autonomy but are too accustomed to the spirit (Geist). The growth process of an individual does not take place in a homogeneous time, nor is it a quantitative increase in years, but a continuum of values at

²⁸ Benjamin, Walter, Howard Eiland, and Michael William Jennings. Walter Benjamin: selected writings. Volume 4. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006. 395.

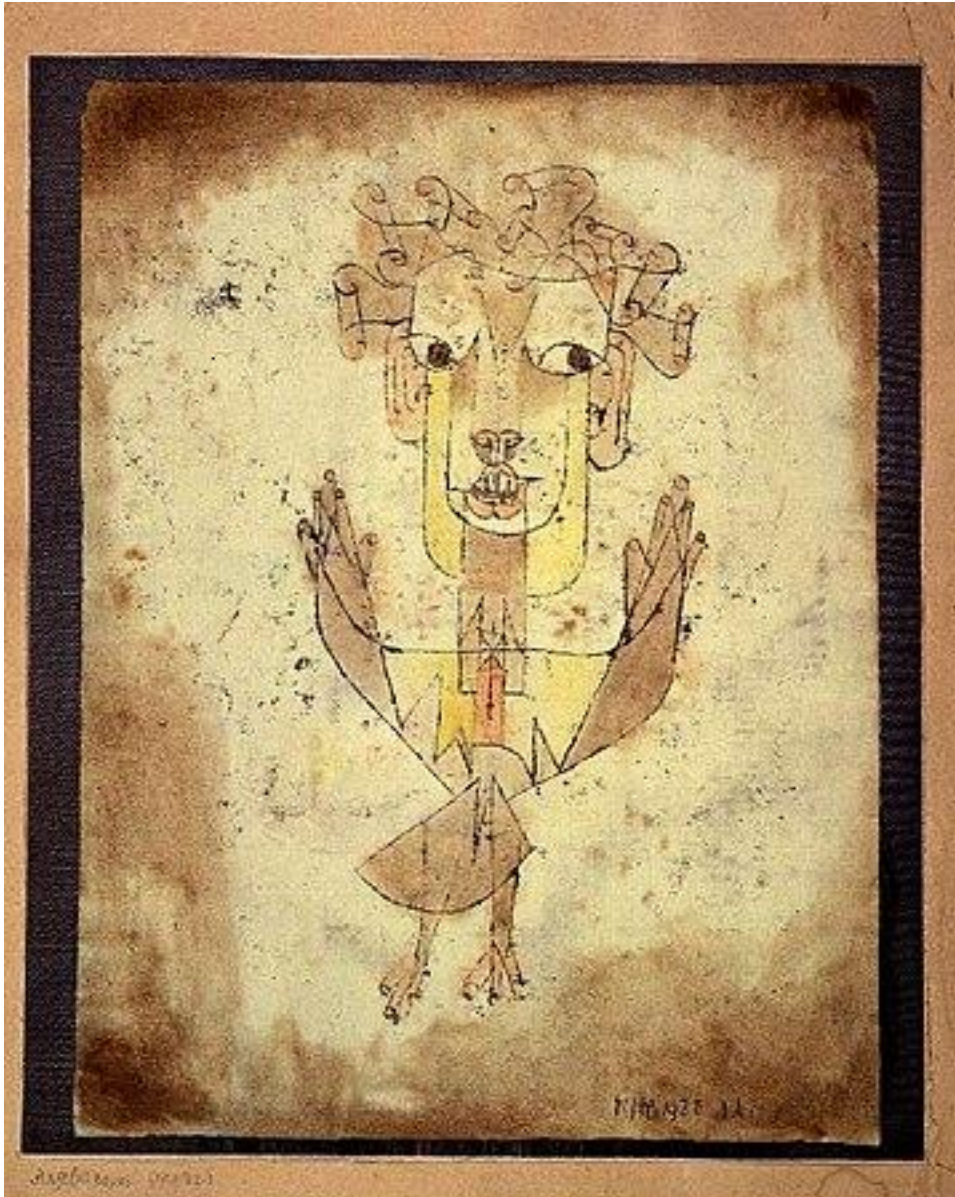
²⁹ Benjamin, Walter, Howard Eiland, and Michael William Jennings. Walter Benjamin: selected writings. Volume 4. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006. 393.

each stage.

A very simple and straightforward metaphor at the beginning of the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” indicates Benjamin's expectation of a combination of theology and historical materialism. Benjamin has a mechanical device on stage, with a chess player sitting on one side of the device and a marionette on the other. The marionette is dressed in Turkish attire, with a water pipe in his mouth. In fact, in the belly of the chess table there is a small hunchbacked man hiding inside the table. The hunchbacked dwarf was operating the "puppet show" from a hidden box, using a thin wire to remotely control the puppet's. He manipulates the game by controlling every move the puppet makes. This puppet is called "historical materialism", and in this remote-control situation by others, the puppet can win all the time. And this hunchbacked dwarf is the small and ugly “theology” that everyone leaves behind and does not see.

Benjamin uses standstill at present as a linking point between historical materialism and messianic salvation. A short treatise on Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* and the ruins brings together the themes of Benjamin's theological, political coherence.³⁰

³⁰ See Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. This argument for progress as crisis emerged early.



The lines of this Cubist work by Paul Klee are very simple. In the painting, the angel's lips are slightly parted, the wings are open and closed, the eyes are staring at something, and the hair strands are fluttering in the wind. In Benjamin's description, this angel of history faces into the past, with ruins piled higher and higher in front of him, reaching up to the sky. He wanted to stop and make a difference, but he was in a headwind position, blown

relentlessly into the future by a windstorm. Benjamin called this storm “progress” (Fortschritt). And the angel is no longer able to redeem the status quo in the course of history. He is blown into the future by a strong wind, which also reflects his nihilistic attitude towards historical progress, in terms of salvation.

The idea of bourgeois criticism does not appear explicitly in “On the Concept of History”, but the section on the painting of the *Angelus Novus* best exemplifies Benjamin's expectation of linking salvation and revolution. The ultimate goal of Benjamin's late tendency toward a Marxist materialist conception of history was to express dissatisfaction with the age of mechanical technology through capitalist criticism. From modern to contemporary times, human's desire to control the natural world has become more and more inflated.

History under the influence of the progressive view of history develops blindly and piles into ruins, not only at the experience level, but also at the concrete material level. This dissatisfaction coincides with the empirical conception of the lack of religious spirituality in his theological phase, as discussed earlier in this paper. For Benjamin, capitalist criticism and messianic spirituality, both of which can serve to redeem the status quo. A true historical materialist should be wary of such progress and should not advocate progress that would further weaken and destroy the experience of history.

Arguably a confrontation with the nature-science construe and reductionism, Benjamin

sought to practice his theological and historical materialist tendencies in the conceptual construction of the new experience. His way is to describe a visual, intuitive and present experience, through the combination of image and time.

Benjamin proposes that the dialectic at a standstill is in *The Arcades Project*, talking about the image in a historical materialist attitude.

"... an 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. Only dialectical images are genuinely historical ..."³¹

As stated before, the present, the stopping, the break of continuity that Benjamin's view of time emphasizes constitutes the connotation of dialectics at a standstill. In the dialectical relationship between the present and the past, the actualized image can enter history in an instant. At the moment at a standstill, time acquires its content and meaning.

³¹ Benjamin, Walter, and Rolf Tiedemann. *The arcades project*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1999. 462.

Tracing the Past in Present Time - Proust, Baudelaire and the Reconstruction of Experience as a Whole

In the previous exposition it can be concluded that the historical materialist concept of history is distinguished from the historicist concept of history and is reflected in two different experiences of time. In the historicist concept of history, history is simply a chronicle-like narrative, with linear time strung together like a rosary. There is no difference between past, present and future, time is homogeneous and immutable. Historical materialism, on the other hand, treats every historical object as a monad, anti-linearly in the shock from the stop.

“Where thinking suddenly comes to a stop in a constellation saturated with tensions, it gives that constellation a shock, by which thinking is crystallized as a monad. The historical materialist approaches a historical object only where it confronts him as a monad.”³²

Shock causes a stop in continuity. The stop does not mean the end of the behavior; rather, the interruption is an opportunity. Its significance lies in giving individuals the possibility to connect with existence and to enter history. The course of history is discontinuous, and every point in historical time is meaningful. Like Foucault's focus on heterogeneity, Benjamin tends to value the marginal things that have been overlooked in the long history.

³² Benjamin, Walter, Howard Eiland, and Michael William Jennings. *Walter Benjamin: selected writings*. Volume 4. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006. 397.

His concern with the secondary, the marginal, the heterogeneous (in summary, the concrete expression of historical discontinuity) runs through his entire life journey: the importance given to secondary writers in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, the wanderer (*flâneur*) in the streets of Paris, the small and insignificant objects in the accounts of Berlin's childhood. In each specific historical point, or rather in each stop of historical time, we can feel the accumulation of *erfahrung* in the artistic eruption of *erlebnis* and grasp the modern experience from it.

Benjamin's approach to the grasp of experience in stopping time is to be in present-time and to look back into the past. People always recall the good times of the past in a fleeting moment. This moment causes a break in the overall and continuous order of time. It is in this process of pointing toward the past that one encounters the joy of recollection and a certain transcendence, which is salvation in the sense of Benjamin

The method of being in the present tracing the past, is most evident in the literature of Proust, which has received much attention from Benjamin. In his analysis of Proust's work, Benjamin offers his own understanding of the "involuntary memory" proposed by Proust, based on this dialectic at a standstill. He argues that Proust did not write as life was supposed to be because what matters to a writer is not what he has experienced, but the way he weaves his memories. The text woven through this involuntary memory has infinite possibilities in the moment that time stands still. In this complex interlacing of temporal

patterns, Proust spatializes and visualized time:

“Proust has brought off the tremendous feat of letting the whole world age by a lifetime in an instant. But this very concentration in which things that normally just fade, and slumber consume themselves in a flash is called rejuvenation.”³³

Proust's literary capture of involuntary memory gives a concreteness to Benjamin's concept of experience. Without the need for a real visual image of the object, the alliance of involuntary memory in perceptual impressions can anesthetize the sense of time and exchange the *erfahrung* of the past in the intuition of the evoked senses. Alternatively, the effect sought by Proust can be explained by Baudelaire's style. Baudelaire extensively and calmly captures the flux of inner intuitive correlations: as in the scent of a woman, in the fragrance of her hair, in the fire (sky) of the port.

In Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*, a lyric poem “Le Goût du néant” (The Taste of Nothingness) says,

“Le Printemps abordable a perdu son odeur!”

(Spring, the beloved, has lost its scent!)

³³ Benjamin, Walter, Michael William Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith. *Walter Benjamin: selected writings*. Vol. 2, part 1. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005. 243.

Benjamin expresses the loss of scent as a collapse of experience, “If the recognition of a scent can provide greater consolation than any other memory, this may be because it deeply anesthetizes the sense of time.”³⁴ This sense of time, however, is an orderly sense of time. A kind of disturbance of order brought by spleen makes time out of order and becomes reified. As Baudelaire writes,

Et le Temps m’engloutit minute par minute,
Comme la neige immense un corps pris de roideur.
(And minute by minute, Time engulfs me,
The way an immense snowfall engulfs a body grow stiff)

Here time is not historical, but in a melancholic and sensual space-spleen, the perception of time is supernaturally keen. “Every second finds consciousness ready to intercept its shock.” As Proust understands, the words “one day” and “one night” in Baudelaire’s poem are days when time is completed, days of recollection. They are not related to other days. They do not have continuity but are independent of time.

In “On the Image of Proust”, Walter Benjamin explains the significance of this way of “capturing the correspondence” for reconstructing the whole of experience:

³⁴ Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Vol. 241. No. 2. Random House Digital, Inc., 1969. 335.

“For an experienced event is finite-at any rate, confined to one sphere of experience; a remembered event is infinite, because it is merely a key to everything that happened before it and after it. There is yet another sense in which memory issues strict regulations for weaving.”³⁵

Thus, everything evoked by the sensory perception represented by the “scents” is shown to be an experience that escapes from the mind under the guise of “passing away”. This experience is not only an individual experience, but also a collective experience, because memory "dismantles the confines of experience not only in the temporal dimension, but also in the spatial dimension". In this sense, Benjamin compares the "day of memory" to a festival, which is not a historical material, but a pre-historical one. And what makes the festival great and important is the encounter with the past life. As he states in 1933's article “Experience”, “Experience are lived similarities.” Correspondence gives the artistic means to represent the similarities. The real experience exists in the past life-*erfahrung*. Baudelaire's lyric poetry allows him to document the dissolution of subjectivity by the temporality of modernity, conveying the experience of modernity through the tension between lyrical devices. It is also here in Baudelaire that Benjamin identifies how to grasp the temporal structure of modern experience, meaning the retrieval of the *erfahrung* of prior life by artistic means in a highly condensed *erlebnis*.

³⁵ Benjamin, Walter, Michael William Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith. Walter Benjamin: selected writings. Vol. 2, part 1. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005. 245.

Shock and the Temporal Structure of Modern Experience

In addition to the method of looking back to the past, another important way of grasping the temporal structure of the experience of modernity is the invention of "shock". The modern human experience is replete with technological tools. The natural time of people alienated by the capitalist mode of production is filled with labor, and the time that should be reserved for feelings, dreams, and memories is filled with the experience of commodities. Humanity is over-saturated with modern experience and lacks an outlet. Just as the bursting point of historical continuity appears in "On the Concept of History", so modern man needs a bursting point in his experience to confirm his own existence. Benjamin portrayed an experience of shock in a series of essays about Paris.

At the beginning of the 19th century, the prosperity of the Parisian economy made it necessary for Parisians to take in as much information as possible from a panoramic view. So the streets of Paris emerged as arcade. Such semi-open shopping plazas provide visitors with the need for shelter from the wind and rain as well as the opportunity to display a wide range of goods, and such streets are perfect for visitors to wander around, so many loiterers emerge.

Borrowing from Baudelaire's description, the shocking experience of wanderers in a crowd is generated by "love at first sight". The sudden emotional connection of young men and

women loitering in the contrast with the excess of information brought by the commodity economy presented by the arcade street is a state of ripping off the connection with reality. A kind of standstill in time, generated in the urban experience of the capitalist era, draws on the emotional connection of the modern, fragmented subject.

The standstill, in the view of literary expression, can perhaps be described as the pursuit of a disturbance of the inherent notion of time, which is linear, continuous, regulated (specifically like the labor time determined by the capitalist mode of production). One way to achieve this kind of interference in literature is to shape or portray “shock”. Whether it is the shock of walking down the street and facing the unbearable information of the world of commodities, or the shock of working with machines in a factory, or the shock of revealing the unstable surface of the world through the rhetoric of language, it is through the shock that our perception can refocus on the horizon of experience to face the world of objectification and abstraction.

Chapter 3 The Literary Practice of The New Concept of Experience – “*Berlin Childhood around 1900*”

The Imagery of Rain - Consciousness and Spatialization of Time

In chapters 1 and 2, the thesis points out that Benjamin tried to solve the problem of the concept of time for the new empirical philosophy by incorporating the vision of time into the discussion of the concept of experience to solve the problems of inadequacy and emptiness in Kant's concept of experience. To some extent, his late literary writings has moved away from the philosophical structure of the early theological sense but remains faithful to the long-established conception of experience. In the third chapter, to analyze the possibilities of Benjamin's new theory of experience, the paper will be concerned with how his specific literary practices react to his conception of time and his theory of experience, majorly in *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*.

First, the description of the imagery of rain in *Berlin Childhood* helps us to continue our previous focus on the present moment in Benjamin's view of time as embodying the consciousness, spatiality, and presentness of time. Among his works, the most time-conscious one is *Berlin Childhood*, because it is the author's childhood memories. These reminiscent essays interpret time in different ways: time can be days, it can be waiting, or it can be fleeting.

The literacy box holds the memories of childhood, the ditty in the inner balcony contains the future of the child, and the ancient, secluded room makes time pale. One of the most time-sensitive and frequent scenes in his writing is rain.

Benjamin's creation is itself an empirical way of reading. The subject and object of watching and seeing are blurred in his writing and are delineated into the landscape being watched.

In Berlin's childhood, the narrator's viewing of the rain scene follows such a principle. In "The Otter", it says that:

"But whether it was formed in this runoff of the rains, or only fed from arriving streams and rivulets, is something I could not have decided. Always it was occupied to the utmost, as if its presence in the deep were indispensable. But I could easily have passed long, sweet days there, my forehead pressed up against the iron bars of its cage, without ever getting enough of the sight of the creature. And here, too, its close affinity with the rain is manifest. For, to me, the long, sweet day was never longer, never sweeter, than when a fine- or thick-toothed drizzle slowly combed the animal for hours and minutes."³⁶

³⁶ Benjamin, Walter, Michael William Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith. *Walter Benjamin: selected writings*. Vol. 3. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005. 366.

With the narrator as the viewer, the rain becomes the object as a natural scene, and the author is correspondingly the subject. But rain in its form is here expressing the perceptual experience of the viewer. Benjamin's description of the rain is clearly not a realistic visualization of rain as an objective object. The rain makes the days seem extended and elongated, which is not an external reaction of the scenery itself, but a representation of the author's perception. Throughout the description of the rain scene, we can see the author's "I" figure everywhere, using "my" perspective to feel the external things: the rain runoff, the otter's hair, the cage, etc. The intuitive representation of the duration of the rain constitutes an experience of time being extended. Along with the rain comes the author's inner feeling of time. With the use of words expressing time, the rain presents a continuous state, bringing the impression that the ever-extending time fits each other in the sense.

Interestingly, this may also explain the widespread popularity of Benjamin's aesthetic thinking in oriental world. This artistic technique of blurring the relationship between subject and object is very similar to the "unity of heaven and man" (天人合一), which is very important in the Chinese philosophical tradition, and "expressing emotions through objects" (借物抒情) in the Chinese poetic tradition. This methodology and artistic tendency are common in almost all ancient Chinese poetry from the Wei-Jin period to the Qing Dynasty. For example, a poem by Li Shangyin from Tang Dynasty China:

夜雨寄北

To Friend Up North on Rainy Night

君问归期未有期，

I know not when I'll go home on what you ask.

巴山夜雨涨秋池。

Night rain at Mount Ba has flooded fall's pond.

何当共剪西窗烛，

When can we meet and talk through the night?

却话巴山夜雨时。

And recall this night as rain falls on Mount Ba.

In the classical forms of the Chinese poetic tradition, most subjects and objects do not have a clear-cut antagonistic relationship. Many descriptions of natural scenes send the author's associations with the experience, specifically *erfahrung*, of the past. In this poem, for example, the rain beside a specific mountain binds a specific memory spanning two separate time periods. The rain serves as the medium in which the concentrated *erfahrung* is extracted from the span of time.

Duration, as defined by Bergson, then is a unity and a multiplicity, but being mobile, it cannot be grasped through immobile concepts. The imagery of rain, whether written about

by Li Shangyin or Benjamin, clearly fits the requirements of being mobile. Duration also suggests a sense of becoming. As a dynamically flowing object, it is renewed with each flush with new rain. Just like the flow of consciousness, time in intention grows with the flow of consciousness.

Time, as Benjamin understood it, is not a measured time in the sense that we can usually express it on a scale. He presents time to the reader in the form of rain. The form of rain forms the "duration" of Bergson, in a way that the water droplets are the number of lines, and the raindrops are the extension of time in space.

The flow of consciousness represents the renewal and change of time, and thus, one can grow in the flow of time like rain. The rain in "Berlin Childhood" is no longer an objectively existing object, but a temporal existence that has been conscious, a flow of time that is similar in meaning, not just in metaphor, to the flowing rain.

If the passages quoted above are intended to express Benjamin's experience of the duration of time. In the next paragraphs, then, we can revisit his non-linear view of history and the dialectic at a standstill:

“And I looked on insatiably then. I waited. Not until it stopped raining, but until it came down in sheets, ever more abundantly. I heard it drumming on the windowpanes, streaming

out of gutters, and rushing in a steady gurgle down the drainpipes. In a good rain, I was securely hidden away. And it would whisper to me of my future, as one sings a lullaby beside the cradle. How well I understood that it nurtures growth.”³⁷

If the previous rain was in a continuous form, the rain at this time has taken on the leap in time sense. Benjamin sets up two time periods in the present experience: the "present" and the "future". Thus, in this depiction we see no longer a linear, vectorial, lateral time, but rather a displacement of place, as in the poems of Li Shangyin. In itself, this childhood memory belongs to Benjamin's "past tense", a memory of the past. Benjamin draws on Bergson's idea of the introduction of space into time. In inner time, consciousness gives the author the greatest degree of freedom, and the author can "do whatever he wants" in any place in memory and imagination. "Immersion" means that the rest of the description is a narrative of Benjamin's imagination, in which he is in the present but thinks of the future, and time moves back and forth in the picture he has conceived.

With the imagination of the observer, his consciousness shifts from the past to the past-future tense. The order of present, past and future is broken in his memories. On the one hand, the author sees time as a continuous state of feeling, and on the other hand, he sees time as different stages that are broken off. In the memory the perceiver can move between

³⁷ Benjamin, Walter, Michael William Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith. *Walter Benjamin: selected writings*. Vol. 3. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005. 366.

these different times and spaces. In the flow of rain, the author feels the future approaching even while immersing himself in the beautiful poetry of the past. The difference with the linear view of time is that Benjamin wanted to save the present, rather than just seeing time as a constant continuation of the always present. Benjamin breaks the continuity of history, dividing it within consciousness into the past, the present and the future.

What is ultimately presented together in his experience theory and literary practice is a vision of standing in the present, calling on the *erfahrung* of the past tradition, thus solving the present and redeeming the future.

From Proust's Involuntary Memory to a Philosophy of History

The consciousness of rain does not imply the intentionality that memories always have.

The greatest similarity between Benjamin and Proust lies in the pursuit of the little things in life. Memories thus become the greatest resonance between them, both in terms of text creation and philosophy. In Benjamin's analysis, the remembrance of lost time becomes a constant motif in Proust's philosophy of life, his approach to writing, and his conception of time.

Benjamin drew on Proust's style of writing, not to portray life as it was, but to portray it as

the memories of those who lived through it. In Proust's writing, there are both fond memories of his childhood and the capitalist life he experienced, both of the past and of the conscious activity of traveling through Combray to the Swan house and the Guermantes residence out of real space. Proust plays with the unique fluidity of consciousness, fusing the Swan family's childhood memories and the landscapes and characters on the road in a concrete literary text that likewise spatializes time.

As he emerges from his memories of the little Madeleine treats, his thoughts follow the familiar taste extending further into the past. The original here-and-now nature of things in the world of consciousness disappears and is replaced by the fluidity of the scene in memory. Thus, in Proust's writing, we encounter the present, recall the past, and experience “the past of the past” as well.

Benjamin once referred to the wealth of experience of the dying man when discussing experience and poverty. We may say that, sadly but greatly, Proust, lying on his deathbed, dragged the web of memory out of his body with a vengeance, when he was at his most painful but when he was at his most experienced. In Proust's spiritual world, consciousness frees him from his narrow ward and saves him from the reality from which he is suffering.

“He says: ‘Imagine, dear reader: yesterday I was dunking a bit of cake in my tea when it occurred to me that as a child, I had spent some time in the country.’ For this he takes

eighty pages, and it is so fascinating that you think you are no longer the listener but the daydreamer himself.”³⁸

Bergson mentioned two different types of recollection, one is active recollection with intentionality, and the other is unconscious recollection with diminished consciousness, which is called "involuntary memory". We often use as an example this tasteful recollection of Marcel's memory of little Madeleine snacks in *À la recherche du temps perdu*.

In his description, this involuntary recall occurs in contingent situations rather than as an active operation of human consciousness. A sudden vibration in the body occurs when "a mouthful of tea with cake crumbs touches the palate". Immediately following this moment is a pleasure of unspeakable beauty but unknown cause.

Marcel's familiarity with the taste of cake is not intentional, but simply due to the mobilizing effect of taste before consciousness, as if there is a tacit understanding between these senses. It has always been affirmed that the conscious mind has the prerogative to call the shots, but the unconscious has never been more dominant in "involuntary memory". Those intentional components in the whole memory lose their effect, or even play the opposite role.

³⁸ Benjamin, Walter, Michael William Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith. Walter Benjamin: selected writings. Vol. 2, part 1. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005. 247.

Benjamin mentioned in his evaluation of Proust's image that this non-volitional recollection is a spontaneous continuity of recollection, which all purposeful planning would scatter. As in the next description, Marcel attempts to recreate a conscious controlled recollection with the same action, but with a completely different effect. He actively pushes his consciousness "in order to get the feeling of fading again", but it ends in failure. However, on the next day, he encountered this unconscious chance situation again and remembered his aunt's cupcakes.

In involuntary memory, it is only at certain special moments when we are touched by some chance opportunity to enter involuntarily into a similar situation, to encounter something from the old time, that the past-time experience can be recreated in its entirety.

Experience and feeling become the opportunity for non-volitional memory to emerge. Because the will needs the writer to play its active role, and the recollector after removing the will from the unified position turns into the initiator of sensory experience. Yet the experiencer does not feel unhappy for being passive in the memory, rather the memory brought by this sensory fit is more beautiful and poetic.

Benjamin's collection of essays, "Berlin Childhood," also moves the reader's mind in the form of involuntary memory. In "Departure and Return", it says that:

“But usually, in the morning, the goal was something nearer, namely the Anhalter terminus—the mother cavern of railroad stations, as its name suggested—where locomotives had their abode and trains were to stop [anhaltten]. No distance was more distant than the one in which its rails converged in the mist. Yet even the sense of nearness which a little earlier had still enveloped me took its departure. Our house was transformed in my memory. With its carpets rolled up, its chandeliers encased in sacking, and its armchairs covered, and with the half-light filtering through its blinds, it gave way—as we began to mount the lowered stairs of our car on the express train—to the expectation that strange soles, stealthy footsteps, might soon be gliding over the floorboards and leaving thieves' tracks in the dust which had been slowly settling over the place.”³⁹

Proust emphasizes that unconscious recollection is a "recreation of the present and the past," while Benjamin's intention in this passage is to show that recollection has been reworked, but the scene remains familiar.

Through many visual descriptions, including several actions of the characters interacting with objects and the dimness of the light, this familiar action and carriage provide a breeding ground for the author's memories. His memories are not forced but touched at any

³⁹ Benjamin, Walter, Michael William Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith. *Walter Benjamin: selected writings*. Vol. 3. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005. 387

time following the change of objects. These depictions of objects are intuitive, but not objective. These things that mobilize the author's memories are an inducement for formed by involuntary memory. This inducement involves the general senses of smell, taste, sight, and touch, etc. Through various sensory feelings, Benjamin creates a transcendental state in which the past is applied to the present under the action of the senses, with the respect to Proust.

In the commentary and imitation of Proust, we find Benjamin's "nostalgia". Yet this nostalgia is realized precisely through each specific point in time and each specific situation. Influenced by Nietzsche, he analyzes history in three time periods: the past, the present, and the future. In the past the redeemer can gain empirical awareness of the signs, because, as Nietzsche argues, history is a cycle that repeats itself repeatedly. Judaism does not allow people to study the future, but to gain enlightenment from memories and the present. Because they believe that every moment now could be the moment of the coming of the Savior. Benjamin, who was deeply influenced by Jewish theology, drew on religious theology and placed his hope for the future in each past and present. As in the painting "Angelus Novus" discussed in Chapter 2 of this paper, the angel tries to experience the true meaning from the past, but the storm of progress prevents him from redeeming the present. The path to the future where the winds of progress blow away is accompanied by a wreckage.

With the same idea as Proust, Benjamin uses "involuntary memory" to answer the secret of the persistence of forgetting and passing things. In Benjamin's literary practice, the present, conscious, spatialized experience of time influences the form of representation of time- sensitization. Experience, in his literary practice, can be flowing rain, or a little girl's gray comb, a lullaby, a small puppet in the hands of a hunchbacked dwarf, a baked and burnt monument to victory, a sprinkling of white sugar on a childhood winter's day. What is important is that these occur in separate standstill in time and are calls to the endless *erfahrung* of the past. In contrast to Kant's concept of experience, "a higher experience" is not accomplished in Benjamin's literary practice. But with the real and concrete life embodied here, the experience as a whole is more profound and extensive, which still provides the real content density for his new concept of experience.

Conclusion

Through the arguments of this thesis, we perceive a tendency that the concept of experience, which Benjamin wanted to establish in his “Program of the coming philosophy”, was not enriched or developed exactly according to the path he had set. But it can be argued that this horizon of experience is relatively central to his theory both in his period of capitalist criticism and in his period of historical materialism. Especially, in his late work, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, he takes the experience theory further, linking theology to Historical Materialism in a way that focuses on a kind of temporal rupture between the past and the present. History is not continuous, but disconnected, but the redemption sought by Benjamin lies in the shock of present (*jetztzeit*), which involves the transformation of *erfahrung* and *erlebnis*. And his literary practice in “Berlin childhood around 1900” echoes the notion of time constructed by his dialectic at a standstill as a necessary complement to the new concept of experience. This thesis briefly sorts out these major specific aspects of his thinking. By arguing from religious, and historical-philosophical perspectives, he tries to make sense of the process by which a concrete totality of experience convey truth in general.

Besides, from a contemporary perspective, in the age of commodities, the ability to experience real fragments of reality becomes endangered. Those colors, smells and sounds have become luxury items in contemporary society. The capitalist mode of production has

caused the alienation of people, and individuals are labeled with infinitely subdivided occupations. But still, there are countless individual or collective experiences with integrity that constitute what makes a person who he/she is. History is being forgotten and homes will dissipate. Especially for the generation that left its homeland on its own initiative, experience has become more valuable than identity. The prolonged duration of the epidemic has led some scholars and critics to ponder how people can escape the shackles of consumerism, and to be wary of the deprivation of human rights by the state of emergency. While perhaps Benjamin's conception of experience, and especially his use of temporality, can also help us to revalue a respect for the totality of reality, making the subject of concrete states of life and existence important again in this period.

This theoretical organization of Benjamin's experience philosophy and analysis of his literary practice is merely a contemporary individual's attempt to resist the oppression of dominant discourses and ideological structure: to return the living to the living, the metaphysic to the metaphysic, the individual to the individual, the present to the present, and the concrete to the concrete. Compared with the messianic salvation, of which Benjamin himself also holds a pessimistic attitude, what may be more important for grasping contemporary experience is each individual's real attachment to food, seasons, beauty, intimacy, and collective memory.

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