

The Framework of Urban Landscape Reading from Walter Benjamin's View

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes Walter Benjamin's views to provide a useful framework and methodology for reading urban landscapes located at the interdisciplinary cross of environmental sciences, aesthetics, sociology, and cultural geography. Benjamin views the city as a place that offers a different modern experience, and the city and urban places are read both as a sign and a small world of their community. The relationship between history, the experience of presence, memory, and built environment is the basis of such a framework of reading urban landscapes, in which the present and the past time in a system together could narrate the urban experience every moment. In such a view, describing the modern experience is not essential, but rather how this experience can be fulfilled.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin; urban experience; urban narrative; cultural landscape

ABSTRAK

Kerangka Penafsiran Lanskap Perkotaan Berdasarkan Pemikiran Walter Benjamin.

Makalah ini menganalisis pemikiran Walter Benjamin untuk memberikan kerangka pemikiran dan metodologi yang berguna untuk menafsirkan lanskap perkotaan yang terletak di lintas disiplin ilmu lingkungan, estetika, sosiologi, dan geografi budaya. Benjamin memandang kota sebagai tempat yang menawarkan pengalaman modern yang berbeda, dan kota serta tempat-tempat di perkotaan diinterpretasikan sebagai tanda dan dunia kecil komunitas mereka. Hubungan antara sejarah, pengalaman kehadiran, ingatan, dan lingkungan yang dibangun merupakan dasar dari kerangka interpretasi lanskap perkotaan, di mana masa kini dan masa lalu berada dalam suatu sistem, yang secara bersama-sama dapat menceritakan pengalaman perkotaan di setiap saat. Dalam pandangan seperti itu, mendeskripsikan pengalaman modern bukanlah hal yang penting, melainkan bagaimana pengalaman tersebut dapat terpenuhi.

Kata kunci: Walter Benjamin; pengalaman perkotaan; narasi perkotaan; lanskap budaya

Introduction

Social and cultural theories, using geographical concepts and metaphors, obtain a spatial form to explain the complexities of the present and plural world. As a result, spatial thinking considers a two-way exchange between the role of geographical ideas and the effects that motivate spatial sensitivities in

different theories. Human geographers take views of philosophers and social thinkers and a wide range of disciplines and use and interpret them in their own spatial context and format. How these theories look to spatial ideas, what role the spatial ideas have in their thinking, and how these ideas can provide a tool for how we think not only in theory but also in space itself.

In an attempt to theorize the economics and social life of cities, Walter Benjamin used the urban landscapes as a reference and, combined literature, urban sociology, and human geography in an arena called the city. The fascination with modernity and its new world life offered to citizens enabled Walter Benjamin to study the consumption culture. Benjamin not only sees the issues between work and capital, as Marx mentioned but also looks at them in the representation and the meaning of the showcase of shops and graveyard stones (Parker, 2004:5). His particular image of the mother of the modern city is shaped by the distinction between the city as a form of local government and the city as the image and subjective experience that is the product of modernity (Donald, 1999:73).

The key issue that has led us to Benjamin's works to read urban landscapes is the value of interdisciplinary cultural approaches to urbanism that have attracted a lot of attention in recent years (For example, works by Giddens, 1981; Mellor, 1977; Saunders, 1981). Widely influenced by post-structuralists, there was a growing interest in reading cultural artifacts as texts, and the city was no exception.

Keith & Cross (1993) state that the urban narrative re-emerged as a style and a fusion of art, social and spatial thinking, in which the city can be read both as a sign and as a small world of society (Soja, 1989). And it seems that a useful framework can be achieved by reading Walter Benjamin's thoughts. Benjamin talks about the city in different ways, and in any case, explaining his vision is not an easy matter. What follows is an expression of an idea in which Walter Benjamin defines the city as a place that offers a distinctive and different modern experience. And sociologically, the different nature of the urban experience is the basis of the definition of the city, and the interesting part of this definition goes back to the part of how Benjamin looks at the relationship between history, experience, memory and built environment. A confluence of environmental psychology, social thinking, art, literature and history in urban areas can present a framework for a reading urban landscape.

For this reason, we first try to explain Walter Benjamin's view of history so that this is the basic

definition for the proposed framework and then describe Benjamin's urban modern experience. He lives in such experience and then uses the city as an instrument for questioning the ruling narrative. He also explored how the city and urban landscapes can be the critical tools and crystallization of thinking that question ruling narratives with successive images. Finally, we explain our conclusion from Benjamin's thinking and the critical framework that can be derived for reading urban landscapes.

On the Presence of History

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Benjamin expressed the theory of history that was artistically replace the acquired experience and knowledge (which is the factor in progress in historical trends) by observing and experimenting. Questioning the boundaries between past and present and putting aside the linear history expressed by historical narratives were Benjamin's strategy.

Benjamin's historical interpretation is often expressed as anti-history, because from his point of view, history is always viewed by the present time, and it is not possible to conquer the past to explain events in those circumstances. Of course, this does not mean that the past depends on the present, but rather a precaution about the view that the past should be reread the way it really was (Benjamin, 1999:247).

One of the fundamental prejudices of modern historiography under the idea of recounting a realistic narrative of the story of history finds itself. This idea suggests that we can assemble all the facts in an orderly manner, and they are able to tell the truth or at least provide clues as to what really happened in the past (Chavashian, 2013:244). Accordingly, the facts speak on their behalf, and the historian merely investigates and puts the facts together. Thus, all known facts come together and then tell their story, without having to explain or interpret the researcher and essentially deny the voice of the historian (Haman.,245).

Benjamin considers the process of historiography in historical materialism as the role of Angelus Novus in Paul Klee's painting:

The painting shows an angel staring past with his eyes too open, his mouth open. The angel has opened his face to the past. He wants to wait, stay in his place, wake the dead, bring the dead back alive twice and in his first state. (And observe them in the same situation). But a fierce storm is blowing in a way that prevents the wings from closing and prevents the angel from stillness. Although the angel has turned his back on the future and is constantly added to the ruins (past events), the storm flies the angel into the future and does not let the angel resurrect the victims twice (Benjamin, 1999:249). Facing this reality, history is not homogeneous and timeless, and filled by the presence of the now (Benjamin, 1999:253). Here, urban landscapes (prospect) are like the great mystery of the past life which show us historical monuments at the base of daily life.

According to Pierce, we collect observations and shape semi-conscious expectations. This continues until we face an experience that violates our expectations. At this time, we try to put our memories in a new arrangement and look at them from a new point of view in order to reduce the unexpectedness of the experience we have been through.

Our systemization is for this new layout. A method in Benjamin's project, which prompts historians to explain phenomena that were unexpected in the previous logic, was similarly imposed on them by a reading that established no specific and historical relation to that phenomenon (Chavashian, 2013:246).

Ultimately, Benjamin's labyrinth proposes a tracing of possible routes through the past. It is a spatial arena dedicated to the "art of straying" amidst twisting and overlapping memories. In the meantime, the city and memory are presented to him as a labyrinth in which the circular and not linear movement prevails, the past and the urban monuments are not left behind, but the person continues to refer to it (Tajbakhsh, 2004:10). In return, a new past is formed in combination with the present, and a coherent experience and a permanent and unchanged form give way to a vivid and discontinuous experience. The city and the urban arenas become a text that each time a

person refers to it makes a new and vivid experience according to the present, and the eternal thing takes its place in a transient affair. Benjamin, in his urban works, could have a permanent space reference for putting things together in time. The city could have been used to bring about a new and old idea, concluding that the Old Testament would be revealed in modernity and that modernity would manifest itself in the Old Testament.

Benjamin's urban image, which depicts urban growth, presents a stubborn rejection of "history as progress," while at the same time providing a rich experience and memory for the social construction of urban life (Parker, 2004:17).

Walter Benjamin Urban Experience

Benjamin looks at the city as a modern product (for example, Turner, 1994:25). In such a view, he seems to follow the Orthodox tradition in the social theory. An idea based on the difference in modern urban experience and urban lifestyle that has, since Zimel and Lewis Worth, the center of attention of the sociology of urban culture. Transferring to modernity, which led to certain changes in the nature and quality of social relations, which, both Tonnies (1988) and Simmel (1950), are stating that these changes should be seen in more cities. The city against small communities was the main place where non-specific social relations, monetary economics, and social turmoil could be observed.

In the previous period that is observed in Pre-industrial society, knowledge gained through habits and repetitions of action was achieved without conscious attention. Such knowledge is limited to legitimate traditions and procedures that gained their credibility from their exclusion and their uniqueness. In the next period, which is observed in modern industrial societies, massive mass production and symbols have released traditions and values and people react to environmental stimulus, and the Instrumental intellect shows itself (Robert, 1982, 157-186).

Benjamin tries to focus on creating a communication between the modern city and increasing the experience of shock. Shock and momentum every moment that people are

experiencing in the modern city due to the mass of goods and rapid changes in the environment. This constant and everyday bombardment of people's senses with different shocks, in urban areas, makes it possible for the artist to be in direct contact with the crowd and make it possible for the artist to meet the experience of modern shock. Therefore, the city is not important in Benjamin's view because it is the primary place of the modernity experience, but rather because it is a place where the possibility of realizing such an experience; what has caused the difference between Zimmel and Benjamin in referring to the modern city.

His initial attention to the concept of *flaneur* (stroller), the street tramp that challenges common meanings and values, is critical of the Interpersonal idea of the "mass". Benjamin's interest in flaneur also relates not to its designation as a real social model that exists in certain urban historical sites, but as a critical and theoretical counter-strike on the idea of "mass". Benjamin's impression was not a form of abandonment of Zimmel's thoughts or contemporary sociologists such as the Chicago School. The interest of Benjamin in the city was unlike to Zimmel. He associated with the role of the city as a labyrinth where all types of dreams, hopes and missed works are abandoned by the current modes and development. Although this probability is still accepted, the urban experience (urban explorer) may be able to access the pre-history of modernity in urban experience or reaches any kind of evolutionary belief in progress towards the past.

In this way, he puts arenas against the symbols of the modern age, which want to induce immortality, as they reflect the transient and instability in the modern city. Passing, railway stations, global exhibitions, museums, and etc. are dream arenas and structures of a metropolitan, and they are the remains and memorials of the world of dreams and modern imaginations and a piece of our way of life in the world (Harvey, 2006:279). The framework of urban landscape reading from Benjamin's view is the moment of that kind modernity. Such a reading is dynamic and escapes linear temporality. They are formed by linking through various fields that are pervasive. For this reason, they require versatile and keen

historians to wander through the pages of history and documents, literature, songs, story lines, dialogues, images, theories, ideals, alleys, tastes (In the Benjamin meanings); he sees the origin of the presents (Chavashian, 2013:262).

Urban Landscape as Fluidity and Transient Life

If Benjamin did not use the city as a means of describing the urban experience, why did he use it? The possible alternative may be that his urban writing is a means of questioning common and formal values. This seems like a more radical textual approach to the city. In such a view, Benjamin is not interested in the city and the urban experience per se, rather, in his urban writings these are used as a critical tool to describe his view of how allegory can place objective forms of thinking.

This opinion has been taken on Benjamin from Gregory (1994), who states that Benjamin's interest in the city is related to his attempt to criticize historical narratives. Common historical narratives provide a linear impression of the history of progress, and their shedding causes breaking this template. Benjamin replaces historical narratives with spatial time through a text tool in which moments are hooked together like magnets, thereby breaking the chain of historiography (Gregory, 1994:243) and the history is interpreted every time and, in each interpretation, the present of now links to the past. The use of the city provides Benjamin with a tool to subvert meanings by putting words together; and offers rejection of conventional historical narrative, with tools and techniques such as visual images and diagrammatic tools. This also explains Benjamin's fascination to the stroller; a picture of non-targeted wanders that can remove the mask from the face of narrative and purposeful history. In many aspects, Benjamin simply provides a picture of the city, which is in accordance with the surreal stream of early 1920s. Surrealists themselves were drowned in the city, especially in Paris, and used the turmoil and diversity of urban experience to destroy tradition and order. The surrealist approach is best reflected in Benjamin's urban landscapes and provides a surrealist interpretation of the city.

No face is as much as the city of Surrealism (Benjamin, 1979:230). The interest of Benjamin in his work is based on his concern about the experience: his work literately focuses on his experiences and not on theories and less on imagination (Benjamin, 1979:231). Surrealist experiences are a base for urban landscape readings, or what Benjamin calls profane illuminations. The use of artistic techniques, shocking and turbulent which question wisdom and tradition to expand the critical perspective. Benjamin uses the surrealist as an image to display what is behind the outer views. But the fundamental issue is that his main concern was not breaking of meaning, but being a revival, which separates him from some of the circles within the surrealist.

The language clearly shows that memories and references are not a tool for discovering the past, but the theater and stage of its display. The medium is the past experience like the land as a medium that is occupied by dead cities. Benjamin acknowledges a view that truth cannot be obtained through a concept by intentional intellectual effort. Instead, he supports an idea in which the truth is self-representation (Benjamin, 1977:30). People cannot seek the truth and find it, but the truth must reveal itself. Proust states that voluntary memory, which people are consciously trying to remember past events, do not have the same quality of that memories and are influenced by certain non-abusive stimuli that seems to be separated from its place in the past. It will eliminate the boundary between the past and the present and revive the lost hopes and brings the dreams to mind. In Proust's view, these kinds of memories are located in certain places where people live. What it seems is ended, continues by these places. Revisiting them at the same time awakens a past, and at the same moment, the hopes and desires of the past are opened (Szondi, 1988).

In summary, Benjamin's criticism of the narrative history was a means of constructive memory. This criticism did not merely include the disturbance of the meanings of the constraints for the history, but by putting together in the past and present in a system, it also provides release of such narratives. Benjamin describes not a

sociological idea of urban experience as a way of life, nor suggests that the city of his writing is merely a deconstruction method to question the conventional thought. Instead, he saw the city as a tool that would allow him to restore certain types of experiences that could have resources for the present action and in this process, and in this process, the past and the present are in a new relationship with each other. Such a view of the history and live historical narrative of cities is a key in his ideas. Certain memories are placed in special places in the city, where people have experienced them. These urban places carry past experiences with their own. It is likely that the revisited them at the same time recall the past, and the hopes and desires seem to be subjected to time, is opened. Benjamin's reading of the city was not really a textual tool, but a practical tool that could be practiced by people in everyday life.

The passages show a picture of the genuine and real expansion of technical and material advances for the population and become a source for the creation of imaginations and aspirations (Falk and Campbel: 1997, 34). Large advertising emerge and create a new layer of visual language. The display of goods creates a space, which makes it possible to forget and unlearn more than any time. (Donald, 1999:47). Modern metropolis is nurturing dreams and imaginations (Zukin, 2006, 109), streets and sidewalks are rolled with their popular flow and their use (Buck-Morss, 1989:8). The experience of the metropolis and its perspectives are filled with opportunities and failures for those who memorize each moment, and the masses are the final visualization of the transient, unstable, accidental, and unpredictable subject. The masses are a sign of broken and torn experiences, which can be euphoric on the one hand, and on the other hand, boring. Although at an apparent level, the modern society is decorated to rationality and demythology, but at an experimental level (in the unconscious), the industrial world has become a new city full of re-produced legends, which this is not just in the dreamy and surreal images of passages, billboards, shops, and streets, but even in uniformity of the rows of its own buildings (Frisby, 1985:143).

Conclusions

Benjamin provides a different look at urban landscapes that emphasize the relationship between the environment, personal and collective memory and history. From Benjamin's view, the environment has made a qualitative set of qualities, which makes it difficult to encrypt and decrypt meanings in the environment. Benjamin stressed an understanding of the urban views in the same way as experienced. With this decisive insight, these urban experiences are unique and different depending on persons. With this conclusion, it tries to criticize the methods and schools that follow the timeless and transhistorical interpretation of urban experience and, in his view, such interpretations were defeated. To some extent, Benjamin's approach of the city is closest to the idea of a perceptual map discussed by Jameson, (1988). Benjamin's analysis is also closer to urban writers under the influence of Surrealists, such as Lefebvre (1991), especially in examining how many habits and practices depend on the problem of strength and resistance to change. Of course, Benjamin explains clearly how perceptions affect the political meanings of the built-in environment.

Such a critical reading of urban landscapes is needed to understand the process of facing a person within a built-in environment; where the person is influenced by personal and collective memories, desires, dreams, and hopes, and on the other hand, the past reopens itself and the connection between the inbuilt environment, personal memory, collective memory, and history becomes possible in one system.

The body of the city has the ability to show eternal sparks of development and growth while also also hiding it at the same time. Accordingly, we argue that the reading framework of the urban landscape is a kind of dialectical images, which questioned the historical linear narratives. The urban place cannot separate itself from the black space of time in motion or studied separate from the time in order to discover its meaning. A place is only a critical crossing that has already had a meaning that has now and the meaning for which it will come at the moment. The basis of history is merely

a narrative of the past, and to reach its purpose, it needs to be actively re-created and addressed. Such a look at the readings of the urban views is a reminder of the Gademaer's *Hermeneut Dialog*, in which the place is continuously produced and read through interpretive space. The interpretive space is where we move inside and move with us. The environment is made of a fixed sign and meaning goes back to the intention of the author and the ruling authority. It provides dialectical images which can only be read through the continuous change of frames, and by this continuous change, the framing of urban landscapes is forming critical perception that is achieved by mental and historical consciousness. The concept of the perspective is in a constant hermeneutics flow that avoids the integrity of ideological frameworks and is seen as an apparent autopsy that goes beyond the form-content paradigm. With an emphasis on the need for observation as an alternative tool for the interpretation of urban landscapes, each time one meaning is actively created. In different urban sequences, one encounters bodies, relics and monuments of different eras, and this is a vision of the past in the present moment, and then creates a unique meaning in connection with individual memories, aspirations, the individual and collective unconscious. With a critical look at the dialectic of urban perspectives, one can remove the mask of narratives based on the ruling power that seek to instill eternity and permanence, and break the spell of promises of freedom, progress, and liberation from exploitation.

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