

Between a Silenced Past and Lost Futures. Walter Benjamin and the Critical Potential of Memory*

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Abstract. Within the critical approach of the Frankfurt School, and in the original interweaving of Marxism and Judaism, Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) is in search of an authentic memory, a memory that engages in a critical comparison between the past and the present in order to recover the past in its entirety (including the silenced aspects of history) and the lost futures (the unfulfilled expectations of the past). In order to argue this claim, the contribution proposes a reading of the texts in which Benjamin variously, though not always explicitly, addresses the question of memory and historical knowledge, arriving, on the one hand, to explore the concepts of *Eingedenken* (an active memory that recovers from the past what has been forgotten or suppressed) and *dialectical images of memory* (understood as the outcome of the process of active memory), in particular in the texts *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1940) and in the chapter ‘Theory of Knowledge and Progress’ contained in the famous volume devoted to the *Parisian Passages* (*Paris. Capital of the 19th Century*, 1935); on the other hand, proposing the theme of the loss of experience correlated to an idea of memory as tradition as a thread running through his intense reflections on the condition of the individual in mass culture and society (*On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*, 1939). Within this second reflection, Benjamin also draws the images of the city as a mental reification that is expressed, in practice, as evidence of a social reification that holds a memory that feeds on “collective dreams” and the “illusion of the commodity”. This is particularly the case in the writings *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (1950), *Images of the City* (1925) and, once again, in the volume *Paris. Capital of the 19th Century*. Ultimately, criticising the empty historiographical continuity, Benjamin opposes the mystification of the collective consciousness with the figure of the awakening, which is, for him, made possible by the urban “actualisation” of the collective memory that makes the *Eingedenken* possible. It will be highlighted how this perspective offers itself today as a useful conceptual tool for deciphering the traces of memory that dot our cities. When applied to the urban landscape, Benjamin’s concept of the *dialectical image* means that an element from the past suddenly enters into a relationship with the present, enabling us to see simultaneously *what has been*, *what has become*, and *what might have been*.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin - Critical Memory - Urban Space

Riassunto. Nell’ambito dell’approccio critico della scuola di Francoforte, e nell’originale intreccio tra marxismo ed ebraismo, Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) è alla ricerca di una memoria autentica, una memoria che opera un confronto critico tra il passato e il presente per giungere al recupero del passato integrale (che comprende anche i contenuti tacitati della storia) e dei futuri perduti (delle aspettative del passato rimaste irrealizzate). Per argomentare questa affermazione, il contributo intende proporre una lettura dei testi in cui Benjamin affronta variamente, pur non sempre in maniera esplicita, la questione della memoria e della conoscenza storica, giungendo, da un lato, a disegnare i concetti di *Eingedenken* (una memoria attiva che recupera dal passato ciò che è stato dimenticato o sconfitto) e di *immagini dialettiche di memoria* (intese come esito del processo di memoria attiva), in particolare nei testi *Tesi di filosofia della storia* (1955) e nel capitolo “Teoria della conoscenza e del progresso” contenuto nel celebre volume dedicato ai *Passages parigini* (*Parigi. Capitale del XIX secolo*, 1982); dall’altro lato, proponendo il tema della perdita dell’esperienza correlata a un’idea di memoria come tradizione come filo conduttore delle sue intense riflessioni sulla condizione dell’individuo nella cultura e nella società di massa (*Di alcuni motivi in Baudelaire*, 1955). Entro questa seconda riflessione, Benjamin disegna altresì le immagini della città come una reificazione mentale che si esprime, in pratica, come testimonianza di una reificazione sociale che custodisce una memoria che si nutre di “sogni collettivi” e dell’“illusione della merce”. Ciò in particolare negli scritti *Infanzia berlinese* (1950), *Immagini di città* (1955) e, ancora una volta, nel volume *Parigi capitale del XIX secolo*. In definitiva, criticando la vuota continuità storiografica, Benjamin oppone alla mistificazione della coscienza collettiva la figura del *risveglio*, il quale è ad esempio reso possibile, per lui, dall’“attualizzazione” urbana della memoria collettiva che rende possibile l’*Eingedenken*. Verrà messo in evidenza come questa prospettiva si offra oggi come strumento concettuale utile a decifrare le tracce di memoria che costellano le nostre città. Applicata al paesaggio urbano, l’idea benjaminiana di immagine dialettica indica che un elemento del passato entra improvvisamente in rapporto con il presente e ci permette di vedere, contemporaneamente, *ciò che è stato*, *ciò che è diventato* e *ciò che avrebbe potuto essere*.

Parole chiave: Walter Benjamin, Memoria critica, Cultura di massa, Spazio urbano

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1. The Unfinished Past

In this article, we aim to investigate the foundations of Benjamin's perspective on memory¹ and then focus on the reasons for the urban 'actualization' of collective memory and the conceptual tools that Benjamin offers to decipher the traces of memory that dot cities.

Among the critical theorists who animated the Frankfurt School, Benjamin stands out as the most original member. As is well known, his enigmatic thinking is articulated in a *unique* intertwining of Jewish tradition and Marxism (a more vulgar Marxism, less tied to Hegel's philosophy than the members of the Frankfurt Institute).

Benjamin was a singular philosopher, sociologist, and literary critic, widely recognized as a particularly representative figure of the generation of Jewish-German intellectuals born in the second half of the 19th century, whose thinking profoundly marked European culture in the 20th century². Between the 1920s and 1930s, and until his tragic death in 1940 while fleeing Nazi persecution, Benjamin placed at the center of his intellectual work the novelty of mass society and consumerism, the radically changed conditions of life and experience, and above all their consequences for the processes of knowledge, art, and culture in general. These are themes that, moreover, permeate the Frankfurt School's reflection on modern society - on the new phenomena present in it, on its elements of crisis and contradiction - in the light of the famous *Critical Theory*, the theory developed by the Frankfurt group starting from a revision of the foundations of Marxism, whose Hegelian origins were reevaluated, integrating into it various elements of Freud's psychoanalytic theory.

Benjamin's contribution to the study of memory processes in the social sciences essentially refers to the critical perspective he opens up on the knowledge of the past and, therefore, to a new way of looking at the relationship between past, present, and future. In fact, he outlines an operation of knowledge of the past that aims to grasp the difference between the past as it is known *now, in the present*, and how it really was *then*, in order to bring to light those contents that have been forgotten or silenced. Thus, if we consider that what a society celebrates about the past does not concern the past in its entirety and does not involve all the traces that remain of it, Benjamin's perspective opens up the possibility of "liberating" the past in its entirety to make room for another present, suggesting that in order to *truly* understand the past, it is necessary to look beyond its official narratives; that is, it is necessary to bring to light those contents that have been lost or prevented from being visible.

To best explain this process of knowledge, it is useful to follow the reasoning that Benjamin articulates in various ways throughout much of his work, particularly in his unfinished work on the *Parisian Passages* - specifically in the section "Theory of Knowledge and Progress" - and in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*³, written in the late 1930s. In these texts, we find the theme of historical knowledge and memory developed in a direction that, while on the one hand welcoming the effort to escape absolutist promises and illusions of the future, also opens up to the possibility of

¹ For a discussion of Benjamin's contribution to the study of the collective past – defined "critical-emancipatory paradigm" – in light of a reading from the perspective of forgetting, see Grande (2022).

² This generation of intellectuals experienced a profound conflict with their world of origin, mainly due to a conflict with their fathers' generation over the ambiguous attitude they assumed towards Judaism. In fact, while on the one hand they lived in accordance with Jewish tradition, on the other hand they were ready to welcome complete assimilation into German society. This conflict, together with the historical and social conditions of the society in which they lived (suffice it to recall the First World War, German inflation, and Nazi persecution in the 1930s), instilled in them a desire for change and revolt: it was therefore a generation that had faith in the role of the avant-garde and revolutionary forces, a generation of utopians and aspirants to a radically 'different' world, to a new and better order of reality. In his work, Benjamin seems to concentrate all the tensions, problems and contradictions of the Jewish-German cultural universe of this generation. See Arendt, 1981, pp. 141-144.

³ The *Theses* were formulated by Benjamin a few months before his suicide on the French-Spanish border. On the one hand, they are a reflection on the contemporary historical situation; on the other, they represent a sort of maturation of the theoretical problems linked to his latest works, those concerning, broadly speaking, the broad and in-depth analysis of the conditions and consequences of modernity. It can therefore be argued that the *Theses* constitute a synthesis of the main themes of Benjamin's philosophy.

tracing back to the past the root of any desire to reveal what in the future may be different from the present.

The original idea of the *Theses* is to construct another history. But constructing another history essentially means proposing a new conception of time. Reflection on time is dominant in Benjamin's work; it is inseparable from it. In general, we can say that he does not think of time as continuity, in terms of a 'before' and an 'after'; for him, time is not a simple projection forward, nor is it expressed in an evolution. Instead, it is texture and discontinuity, clots and interruptions. In this perspective, the three dimensions of time (past, present, and future) do not follow a continuous development: the past is not the "already been" and the future is not far from the present. Benjamin seems to express this aspect in a phrase by Karl Kraus that he uses as a motto for the fourteenth Thesis: 'the origin is the goal', whose meaning leads directly to the heart of Benjaminian time, to the point of discovering its Jewish origins. Inspired by Jewish tradition, Benjamin imagines a time in which the fundamental event is always ongoing, in which the goal is not located far in the future but is always already present. Thus, he contrasts the empty and quantified instant with a *Jetztzeit*, a time-now (understood as an instantaneous contraction of time) that is realized in the messianic arrest of historical events, in a sudden conjunction of past and present that challenges and interrupts sterile temporal continuity. In its deepest sense, the meaning of the term *Jetztzeit* is closely linked to Jewish theology and the specific way of understanding history, as an act of birth, as something that is accomplished with the messianic times. As has been clearly explained Consigli (1986) in his careful reading of messianism as the hidden but fundamental core of Benjamin's critical theory:

«In the Torah, Toldot is the word that designates 'history' and at the same time 'the thing that must be given birth to'; history represents the act of birth, the birth of an identity that is fulfilled with the messianic times [...] according to the Torah, history conceived as Toldot will generate what the prophets call the 'Ben Adam', the Son of Man, that is, the Messiah who is born of a human identity» (Consigli, 1986, p. 161).

Jetztzeit and *Toldot*, then. It can be said that, in some respects, *Jetztzeit* is for Benjamin what *Toldot* is in Jewish tradition: a challenge to homogeneous time. In *the Theses*, Benjamin chooses history conceived as *Toldot* as the ultimate image of "time-now." Thus he writes in the eighteenth *Thesis*:

«It is well known that Jews were forbidden to investigate the future. Instead, the Torah and prayer instruct them in memory. This freed them from the fascination with the future that those who seek information from fortune tellers are subject to. But this did not make the future a homogeneous and empty time for Jews. For every second in it was the small door through which the Messiah could enter».

It is on this foundation that Benjamin grafts the question of memory.

Benjamin addresses the theme of memory precisely from the point of view of historical understanding, and the dominant motif refers to the possibility of critically recovering an integral past; this is based on the idea that the past does not correspond to something definitively concluded in itself, but presents a margin of incompleteness on which it is possible to intervene: Benjamin essentially envisages a rewriting of history from the point of view of the 'vanquished', according to a perspective which, in an attempt to 'save' the past, or rather to grasp it as it truly was, offers a radical critique of cumulative and quantified time and of the very idea of progress, typical of historicism. This operation of knowledge, strongly imbued with utopian impulses, 'goes against the grain of history', that is, it proves capable of opposing the discontinuous and tacit history of the oppressed, of those who find themselves in conditions of subordination and who have been excluded from the official versions of history and the dominant narrative of the past, to the triumphant and consolidated history of the victors.

This reasoning emerges clearly in the seventh *Thesis*:

«[...] But the masters of each era are the heirs of all those who have won. Identification with the victor therefore always benefits the masters of the moment. This is enough for the historical materialist. Anyone who has won to date participates in the triumphal procession in which today's rulers pass over those who now lie on the ground. The prey, as has always been the custom, is dragged along in the triumph. It is designated by the expression "cultural heritage." In the historical materialist's view, it must be viewed with a detached eye. For

all the cultural heritage that he embraces with his gaze inevitably has an origin that he cannot think of without horror. It owes its existence not only to the efforts of the great geniuses who created it, but also to the nameless slavery of their contemporaries. It is never a document of culture without also being a document of barbarism, nor is the process of tradition by which it passed from one to the other. The historical materialist therefore distances himself from it as far as possible. He considers it his task to go against the grain of history» (Benjamin, 1962b, pp.78-79).

At the heart of this discourse we find *Eingedenken*, the term he uses in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*⁴, which he places at the center of his idea of an authentic vision of history, made up of a discontinuous time, filled with *Jetztzeit*, with significant historical facts (a work, a life...), which, taken from reified historical continuity, become moments not of a description of the past, but of a peculiar experience of it. *Eingedenken* is therefore an active form of remembrance, which recovers from the past that which has been forgotten or suppressed. Through *Eingedenken*, the past is removed from the continuity of history and can manifest itself in the present in the form of a *dialectical image*, which arises when a fragment of the past enters into a constellation with the present; within this constellation, the present and the past illuminate one another:

«[...] an image is dialectic in stillness. For whilst the relationship between the present and the past is purely temporal and continuous, the relationship between what has been and the present moment is dialectical: it is not a progression but a discontinuous, jump-like image. Only dialectical images are authentic images (that is, not archaic); and the place where they are encountered is language» (Benjamin, 2000, p. 516).

Eingedenken can therefore be described as a rather atypical form of memory, as a model of utopian temporality that originates from a past to be saved, in which the dialectic of restitution between past and present is realized in something more than a pure descriptive reconstruction of the past: it configures the possibility of protecting the right that the past has over the present, or what Benjamin distinguishes as a 'lost future' waiting to be reactivated. According to Benjamin, the past encompasses what has been defeated and forgotten, and the power of *Eingedenken* lies precisely in its ability to assign a critical quality to the present, to reactivate this unredeemed character of the past, to leverage what has remained unfulfilled in history to open up new perspectives on the future⁵. This is a dialectical shift which, as Marchesoni (2017, p. 18) points out:

«consists in completely rethinking the relationship between past and present, as well as the very status of the past. If it is true that in traditional historiography “the past was considered a fixed point and the present was assigned the task of groping its way towards this fixed point,” Benjaminian archaeology aims to read the past in the light of the potentialities that make it, in a certain sense, non-past and from which alone a perspective on the future can unfold».

The *dialectical images of memory* therefore suggest a perspective which, while on the one hand welcoming the effort to escape absolutist promises and illusions of the future, on the other hand opens up to the possibility of bringing back to a critical re-examination of the past the root of any desire to

⁴ For further information on the concept of *Eingedenken*, which appeared in Ernst Bloch's philosophy before Benjamin's reflection, see the volume edited by Marchesoni (2017).

⁵ Benjamin's reflections find an original development in Jedlowski's (2017) discourse on the 'memories of future pasts', which simultaneously bring into play social, historical, and biographical temporality: memory of the future is, in essence, the recollection I make, in the present, of a future I imagined in the past (it is the difference between what was and what could have been). It is, therefore, a comparison between yesterday's expectations and what actually came to pass. In fact, if the redemption Benjamin refers to essentially concerns the past that speaks of the future of the oppressed and demands their redemption, the full meaning of the question that the past poses to the present can be extended to all 'past futures', i.e. the past futures that concern each subject immersed in the flow of historical time, as well as everyday time, with their own aspirations and plans (for example, the kind of life I imagine having in the future when I am young), which each of us is called upon to confront at some point in our lives. Understood in this way, redemption also becomes a daily practice for everyone, interwoven with responsibility and hope: that we have been awaited on earth, as Benjamin writes, speaks of the responsibility to remember what we have hoped for. That each generation has received a weak messianic force as a gift means that each generation has possessed the capacity to hope, and still possesses it: if we remember the hopes of those who preceded us on earth, by hoping in turn we become their heirs.

establish what in the future may be different from the present, including in this a sort of reparation and assumption of responsibility.

Eingedenken is the mean by which lost futures can be reactivated, and only in this way we can arrive at an authentic memory, to be traced back through the integral time. This is a critical view of the historical *continuum* that is very close, moreover, to the more general one proposed by the Frankfurt theorists, who understood the development of self-awareness and the resurgence of the lost past as an integral part of the process of emancipation, or rather, of man's reconciliation with his own existence. More precisely, we understand emancipation as a particular form of knowledge of oneself and one's condition, which constitutes a form of knowledge that is, at the same time, a reinterpretation of the past and a critique of the present, specifically aimed at breaking the self-enclosure of a present that offers nothing but its tragic and normative repetition, in order to open up to concrete change and the future. In this regard, Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) observed that one of the highest prices paid for progress was the repression of pain and suffering produced by the domination of nature, understanding the latter not only as something external to man, but also as an internal reality. Every reification, they argued, corresponds to an oblivion. A few years later, in *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse clearly summarized this perspective:

«Remembering the past can give rise to dangerous insights, and established society seems to fear the subversive contents of memory. Remembering is a way of dissociating oneself from facts as they are, a form of “mediation” that briefly breaks the omnipresent power of given facts. [...]. And in the personal events that reappear in the individual's memory, the fears and aspirations of humanity are affirmed - the universal in the particular» (Marcuse, 1964, p. 110).

In this sense, the wounded memory of the defeated is the memory that demands recognition, that demands accountability, and that imposes on new generations – often strangers to those events – the need to remember and process that “lost future” that the past contains.

It should also be considered that the assumption of responsibility in remembering transcends generations and represents the basis for the recognition of traumas and forms of oppression that demand reparation and justice. When speaking of memory, responsibility must obviously be assumed as an ethical expression, as both a 'response' and a 'promise', built around the idea of a continuous time that links past, present, and future: I am responsible today for my yesterdays' actions, just as I am responsible for the future consequences of my actions (Leccardi, 2007, p. 121)⁶. Therefore, the processes of elaborating the past, when considered from the perspective of Benjamin's critical-emancipatory paradigm (and more broadly that of the Frankfurt School), do not correspond to a 'weakened memory' (Adorno, 1959, p. 27) that rejects bonds of meaning, responsibility, and critical quality: rather, they present themselves as an individual and collective endeavor animated by the desire to revisit what has happened, in the awareness of the tensions and contradictions that inhabit the present and in the possibility of constructing new horizons of expectation.

2. The urban reification of collective memory

The theme of memory returns, with a rather literary perspective, in the texts *City Images* (1925) and *Berlin Childhood* (1950). Here, the theme of memory is also linked to the theme of the loss of experience related to an idea of memory as tradition, a discourse that is the common thread running through Benjamin's intense reflections on the condition of the individual in mass culture and society. It is precisely within this reflection that Benjamin draws images of the city as a mental reification that

⁶ Taking responsibility (both individual and collective) for an uncomfortable past is not a very popular path; similarly, the transmission of memory across generations is not always a harmonious process. The generational transmission of memory is in fact strongly imbued with tension when the legacy to be passed on is steeped in forms of violence, as is the case with events linked to catastrophes (including natural ones), wars, totalitarianism, and forms of abuse perpetrated or suffered. In cases such as these, the processing of the past through the work of mourning brings individual pain into play, bringing memory to the fore as a precious source of survival, awareness, and the rewriting of identity: individual pain thus becomes a prerequisite for an ethic of responsibility towards memory (Yerushalmi, 1988; Siebert, 2007).

is expressed, in practice, as evidence of a social reification that preserves a memory nourished by 'collective dreams' and the 'illusion of commodities'.

The theme of experience and its decline in the modern age is addressed, in particular, in the text *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire* (1939). With various references to Proust, Bergson, and Freud, Benjamin emphasizes the role that tradition plays in authentic, integral experience and points to the modern processes that undermine the conditions of its existence. To do this, he distinguishes between two types of experience: *Erfahrung* (authentic experience that takes place in memory and is rooted in tradition) and *Erlebnis* (experience that imposes itself vividly on consciousness). These are two contrasting terms: *Erlebnis* is the term used in phenomenological philosophy that we can equate with 'lived experience', understood as vivid, precise experience, as the presentation of a certain content to consciousness; *Erfahrung* is accumulated experience, which requires time and duration: it corresponds to a process of sedimentation of content in memory and its return as self-consciousness. For Benjamin, the deterioration of *Erfahrung* and its replacement with *Erlebnis* is a characteristic of modern mass society. An example he gives in this regard is the replacement of coherent narrative with disjointed and fragmentary information that increasingly involves the modern individual, particularly the metropolitan individual (cf. Jedlowski, 2002).

In addition to his original way of understanding historical knowledge, Benjamin's reflections on the city are also set against the backdrop of the transformations that have taken place in the meaning and value of experience.

In Benjamin's reflections, the city represents a privileged prism through which the *critical-emancipatory* paradigm is expressed and to which the categories of *Eingedenken* and *dialectical images of memory* can be applied: for Benjamin, cities represent the world. Magris (2007, p. V) writes:

«For him, the world is the city: the Berlin of his childhood, the Moscow or Marseille of his travels, the Paris of the 19th century with its *passages* leading from one era - and one life - to another. The cities, captured by him in snapshots that freeze the ephemeral in the eternity of the image, are alive, melancholic, or lovable; their aura is the seduction of the sensible and the present. But their houses, their streets, and the faces of their passers-by have cracks which, although concealed, announce, like wrinkles on a face, the crumbling of life and history, their collapse and irredeemable fall into the heap of ruins of the past».

In the cities he visited, Benjamin sought to capture, through the categories of *name* and *image*, a past that remained buried in the present, which contains redemptive possibilities for the future. It is possible to think of dialectical images, in fact, as a sort of "arrest of thought" in which an image of the past illuminates a moment in the present that finds meaning in that image and manifests, in a monadic construction, a messianic arrest of events and thus a revolutionary *opportunity* in the struggle over the past (Tagliacozzo, 2025, p. 33).

As we have seen before, Benjamin's philosophy proceeds, in fact, through images, rendered dialectical by tearing them away from conformism and habit, through the reactivation or reactualization of their emancipatory potential. The image is elusive, and only in it the past can be fixed. In the search for lost time, however, the *name* acts as both an obstacle and an ally: thanks to *the name*, in fact, we appropriate what we find, but at the same time it represents a sort of "glass screen" that acts as a barrier to our subsequent perception of reality.

As we know, Marcel Proust's *La recherche du temps perdu* influenced Benjamin in the writing of his Berlin childhood memories. There is, however, a fundamental difference between Proust's search for lost time and the Benjamin one: in the former case, the search is directed towards the past, towards recalling what has been, while in the latter case, the past is recalled in order to be projected into the future, in an attempt to bring out those feelings charged with possibility that are now dormant and unexpressed. Therefore, for Benjamin, lost time is not the past, but the future. As Szondi (1982) points out in an article dedicated to Benjamin, significantly entitled 'Hope in the Past':

«Proust listens to the sounds that come from the past, Benjamin to those that anticipate a future that has itself become the past. Unlike Proust, Benjamin does not want to free himself from temporality, he does not want to contemplate things in their ahistorical essence, but aims at historical experience and knowledge; however, he is rejected into the past, into a past that is not closed, but open and promising a future. Benjamin's tense is not the recent past, but the future perfect in all its paradoxicality of being a future and yet also a past» (Szondi, 1982, p. 18).

The images of cities that Benjamin offers us are full of wonder and remarkable insights, often colored by the use of evocative metaphors that, in some way, represent both “the premonition of the child and the cognitive ability of the adult”. These are not simple descriptions of the cities he visited: in each of them, Benjamin captures social peculiarities, such that through the city it is possible to read the experiences of those who live there against the backdrop. The dialectical image, therefore, represents a portrait through which it is possible to arrest the course of events, the ephemeral: it is a snapshot through which to bring out the ruins and victims fallen in the march of progress and history, or rather that typically modern concept of history that consists in 'connecting the seemingly confused multiplicity of events, of different particular stories, into a coherent whole' (Beonio-Brocchieri, 2022, p. 37) or, in other words, the modern regime of historicity (Hartog, 2007). This is why cities lend themselves well to this dialectical operation of re-emerging 'aborted' futures, as they represent a symbol of power shrouded in transience (Magris, 2007). The image is not a simple description of what the author sees or experiences through the senses: the dialectical image is, in a sense, a 'dream image' that flashes before the scholar's eyes when he manages to grasp its meaning, a snapshot that is in constant danger of vanishing if it is not promptly captured. Benjamin is, after all, searching for lost futures through research and memories of his childhood: in particular, the theme of truth is at the heart of his investigation, that primal experience that can no longer be repeated as it was, but can only be dreamed.

The city represents the place - and the time - in which to seek out what is unrealized and outdated in the present. Works such as *Berlin Childhood* (1950) and *City Images* (1925), as well as the large collection dedicated to Parisian *passages*, feature the cities where the author stayed for varying lengths of time during his life: Berlin, Naples, Marseille, Moscow, San Gimignano, Bergen, and Paris. A journey within a city is both a spatial and temporal experience, as mentioned above: on the one hand, it is in the names of the streets, points of interest, and monuments that our gaze primarily lingers on and through which we experience it; on the other hand, however, the city is a journey through time, in that what has already been experienced has now changed into memory, even though the city may be materially the same as it was then. This is especially true when the city is experienced either by a native or by someone visiting for the first time: the exotic element inherent in the names and snapshots captured by the stranger does not have the same effect on those who have already lived in those streets and places. The native does not travel in the geographical sense of the term, but rather travels through the experiences of their childhood in that city. Describing and understanding one's own city therefore implies taking a journey into the distance of time. In other words, the stranger's gaze is similar to that of a child who does not yet know what is around them: it is the primal experience, what one experiences for the first time. Those who have grown up and lived in a city, on the other hand, must describe it and search for traces of a future past waiting to be revealed. They have no choice but to travel through their memories, or rather, to search for that primal gaze capable of evoking the 'never before experienced' and projecting it into the future. For those who live in a particular city, name and image merge inextricably, as the mechanism of habit, of the usual, *of the obviousness* of everyday life (Schutz, 1979) comes into play, in which distance and proximity cancel each other out: this is why, between the two poles of name and image, a certain distance, both spatial and temporal, is necessary, and this is why it is necessary to travel in memories rather than on the streets, as those who travel in their own past are able to separate name and reality (Szondi, 2007). As Benjamin demonstrates in *Berlin Childhood* (1950), the gaze of the adult, who travels through their childhood memories and retraces the places and times they experienced, is such as to disrupt the usual: in some ways, it is potentially an antidote to today's presentification, which engulfs memory and hope (Beonio-Brocchieri, 2022).

3 Conclusion

In the wake of Benjamin's reflections, we note that the names of the streets and squares of our cities today often contain a past unknown to most people and genuine *intentions of memory* (Jedlowski, 2016) promoted by institutions or solicited by civil society. How many of us are fully aware of the meanings of the names of the streets that make up our cities? In other words, there is a hidden memory waiting to be reactivated, there is a call for a 'reawakening' of memories and consciences that not all of us are always willing or ready to accept.

In other words, the concrete aspect of those grand narratives we call "memory" refers to their visibility in social space, their condensation, their objectification in all those traces that crisscross our urban spaces and impose themselves on us in everyday life: examples include the names that identify various places in the city, monuments, commemorative plaques, and official commemorations that take place on "remembrance dates".

But these material traces of memory that inhabit our daily lives do not always tell us something; more often than not, they become invisible. This invisibility is also described by Calvino in *Invisible Cities* (1972), a book presented as a series of travel reports by Marco Polo to the Tartar emperor Kublai Khan. Calvino, with a literary gesture, shows how cities are a combination of many things: places of exchange, signs of language, desires, promises and, along with all this, memories. As Tota (2001) observes, the cities Calvino describes are cities of memory, invisible memories of relationships and events that transform the physical space of a city, its buildings, squares, and streets, into the social space of its memories and the experiences of its inhabitants, both past and present. The streets of the cities we walk through every day take on a new light when street names, plaques, and monuments begin to speak, or rather, when we begin to pay attention to them: it is at that moment that the obviousness of our daily gaze can be overcome and the meanings of the traces of memory can be recovered from the invisibility that surrounds them.

Based on these reflections, Benjamin suggests that urban space is the site of a "not yet conscious knowledge," a sort of involuntary collective memory that persists, crystallized, in urban space. In other words, it is a *reification*⁷ of collective memory, an autonomization of social meanings inherent in the past in "objects" of the city that live a life of their own. Urban artifacts therefore inscribe the collective and social past which, in Benjamin's sense of the term, must be dialectically recovered *for* and *in the awakening*. The memories that the city objectively represents constitute a concrete starting point for those who want to recover what has been lost, and whose ruins evoke the forgotten world. In this sense, Benjamin seeks dialectical images that, by relating the city to memory, allow *authentic memory* to emerge. The latter corresponds to a phenomenon through which the 'prehistoric dream' that came from full time meets the 'historical dream' inserted into empty time, charged with the explosive tensions of the dreams of the former, from which the latter had separated it. This presupposes a policy of transmitting the promises of happiness of the past that empty and homogeneous time has silenced.

From this perspective, we may conclude by arguing that Benjamin can rightly be regarded as a sociographer of collective memory (Berdet, 2005). His reflections are, in fact, particularly useful, on the one hand, for understanding how certain historical events are remembered and celebrated at the expense of others, which are instead consigned to oblivion (through monuments, urban structures, commemorations and, more generally, through the actions of political and cultural institutions); on

⁷ In the Hegelian sense of the term, reification refers to the historical separation of the subject from the object. The objects that man has created stand as things foreign and external to him. For Benjamin, architecture is the reification of collective memory. In his work on *Passages*, iron constructions, transitory and functional monuments that temporarily materialize the industrial ghosts of 19th-century man (goods, world fairs, railway stations, etc.) become, at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the stable and formal monuments of everyday life.

the other hand, they enable us to interpret urban space as a repository of lost futures, that is, of unrealised historical possibilities: ruins, abandoned or transformed buildings and neighbourhoods, and unfinished urban projects preserve traces of the expectations that past societies harboured for the future. When these traces are examined critically, past and present merge, producing what Benjamin defines as a *dialectical image of memory*. In this sense, from a Benjaminian perspective, the city preserves not only the memory of what has happened, but also the memory of what might have happened.

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