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The Afterlife of Walter Benjamin in the Writings of Sergio Pitol

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The German-Jewish philosopher and literary and cultural theorist Walter Benjamin began, but did not always complete, a series of ambitious intellectual plans. Among them are—in his own words to close friend Gershom Scholem—"that I be considered the foremost critic of German literature."[1] Benjamin's dream was cut short to some extent by his truncated academic career, but was later reoriented as he would be forced to develop his critical work beyond the confines of the hallowed halls of the university. Not content with more traditional forms of literary and cultural criticism, Benjamin proposed and explored radical and innovative modes of representation informed by the new media of the period between the first and second world wars.

Influenced by cinema, journalism, magazines, radio, and the earliest stages of commercial advertising, Benjamin would dedicate his relatively short life to writing about a constellation of forms included in this emerging modern European culture: from reviews of detective novels to premieres of films, from radio broadcasts for children to translations of French literary giants such as Charles Baudelaire and Marcel Proust. Between difficult economic conditions and the specter of Nazi tyranny, between an affair with Latvian actress and theater director Asja Lacis and the development of

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an uncanny eye for the seduction of the cityscape, the case could indeed be made for Benjamin's eventual reputation as "the foremost critic of German literature," even if he does not limit himself to that area of expertise. As Graeme Gilloch indicates, Benjamin most fundamentally built up "an expertise in exile"[2] owing to the political circumstances that forced his emigration and an almost desperate need to reexamine its causes. Sergio Pitol was never forced to leave Mexico, yet his restless early years and inconformity with midcentury social and aesthetic models created a situation in which he needed to look at the nation from a new, critical vantage point. Using his diplomatic posts as springboards, Pitol's travels enabled him to write about Mexico as if from a Benjaminian exile.

Beginning with the decades of the 1940s and 1950s, Mexico found itself in a moment of a complex and problematic transition into modernity similar to that of Europe earlier in the century. The governments of Manuel Avila Camacho (1940–46) and Miguel Alemán (1946–52) had begun plans for economic development that would lift Mexico out of its agricultural past and propel it into an urban, industrial future. Alongside economic stability came ideological shifts occasioned through and addressed by young intellectuals in cafés, *tertulias,* bookstores, conferences, expositions, round tables, and theatrical spectacles. Past aesthetic models could not but be questioned, and there was an eagerness to meet head on European ideas that opened debates rather than affirming postrevolutionary national ideology.

The writings of Walter Benjamin and his reconfiguration of the role of the critic, and even the definitions of what cultural criticism entailed, spoke volumes to a number of the members of the *Generación de Medio Siglo.* Many writers among the generation that included Juan Vicente Melo, Inés Arredondo, Sergio Pitol, Salvador Elizondo, Sergio Fernández, Elena Poniatowska, Vicente Leñero, Carlos Fuentes, and Juan García Ponce took on Benjamin's projects as both literal and figurative ways of envisioning their own situation, as seen in their work from the 1950s through to the turn of the twenty-first century. In particular, Pitol, Fuentes, García Ponce, and Elizondo sought a reengagement with history in ways different from what postrevolutionary politics and rhetoric would dictate. Coming of age at a transitional time, publishers, novelists, poets, bookstore owners, and freelance cultural observers no longer assumed their tasks to be separate ones but conceived them as related enterprises built on the nucleus of the concept of criticism itself: critique. As suggested in this word's Greek origin, *krités,* the job of the critical intellectual was seen to revolve around a central axis of sharp analysis, clear judgment, and keen observation,

all of which offer the possibility—the seduction, for Benjamin—of dissent and disagreement. Benjamin showed that even a proposed rupture with tradition can turn into a pattern of modernist expectation. He uses the notion of *destruction* itself ("the paradoxical import of destruction"[3]) as both a repetitive force and a radical potentiality.

Benjamin's conclusion on the critic's plight is that "the foremost critic of German literature" (intended to imply the German culture in which it was, of course, embedded) needed to introduce a destruction of categories that would interrupt the flow of observation and not be easily reconstituted as institutionalized tradition. So the notion of authenticity so dear to previous postrevolutionary ideology in Mexico came under scrutiny by the midcentury, introducing a time of ferment and "progress" ideally suited to new generations and new critics. Benjamin proposed to wrench images out of their contexts and literature out of its limits; Sergio Pitol, Carlos Fuentes, and Salvador Elizondo assumed a similar critical vision in their writings, considering the author's role as both creative and analytical.

Catastrophic social and historical events placed European intellectuals in the difficult and heady position of rethinking the task of the writer as critic as they exercised their professions in what sometimes seemed a dreamworld of extravagant consumption and dizzying political chimeras. Such meditations would frequently take place on the road as enforced emigration and exile characterized the Weimar years, the rise of Fascism and National Socialism, and the descent of the Russian (later Soviet) nation into Stalinism amid the architectural highlights, industrial shows, and trade promises of World Exhibitions. (One telling example is the Second World Exhibition of 1929 in Barcelona that followed a much less successful one in 1898; it showcased national projects, "Ibero-American" constructs, and an infamous modernist "Pavilion of the German Reich" designed by architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.) Travel came to signify exile rather than pleasure, and so many utopian dreams became dystopian nightmares when a sense of permanent place disappeared. Human relations may have taken the place of a sense of rootedness in a city, but each successive metropolis was the site of a kaleidoscope of encounters with others outside one's home turf. It befell the refugees to address questions of community and identity, both for themselves and for their compatriots and companions. Totalizing systems and the onset of intoxicating and competing visions of modernity coincided to bring a focus on the issues of progress and alienation to a boil; homelessness accompanied the most fervent desires to

renegotiate homelands even as politicians such as Adolph Hitler were offering answers of their own.

The exilic aspect of Benjamin's narrative voice during this time, as well as of his most creative texts such as *The Arcades Project* (1927–40), cements his individual condition and that of the errant narrative subject of the twentieth century. The role of "aesthetic engineer,"[4] as Benjamin suggests, is both beyond and outside what the "literary critic" might have been, since it involves not just the observance of modernity but also, simultaneously, its critique. The constantly changing cityscape offered him a perfect cultural laboratory: it is "the principal site of capitalist domination, and [he] saw the interrogation of the city's architectural forms, spatial configurations, and experiential modes as the key to unraveling the fantastical, 'mythological' features of modernity."[5]

Since Benjamin's observer is anchored in a particular historical instance and geographical place, any recording of the passing moment in the streets of the metropolis is by necessity part of that "flow of the river of life"[6] and is therefore fragmentary, fugitive, and circumstantial. Personal experience comes to the fore and provokes the reader into new and changing encounters with what often seem familiar and recognizable spaces as the narrator presents innovations, artifacts, and the tumult of the streets.

At home in urban environments but resisting the temptation to be subsumed by them, Benjamin's figure of the flâneur unites "the stroller, the pedestrian who finds delight and pleasure in ambling contentedly and unhurriedly through the city,"[7] with the surrounding very concrete architectural and commercial structures. The streets are made part of his own interior, and Benjamin's flâneur creates a landscape of his own devising, one that converts even the individuals who populate it into topographic features. For instance, Benjamin dedicates his collection of essays entitled *One-Way Street* (1928) to the actress Lacis, who has created a topography of the heart that parallels the urban constructs: "This street is named Asja Lacis Street after her who as an engineer cut it through the author."[8]

Somewhat "idiosyncratic"[9] in his secularizing of German anthropological traditions (one example is Wilhelm Dilthey), Benjamin "announced the fall away from religious, historical time into an . . . excessive preoccupation with space and spatialization,"[10] melding topology and temporality into one. Spatialized history would become in his writings "the temporality of transience as a dynamic, dialectical principle typical of modernity"[11] read in and on the chaotic porosity of cities such as Naples. In this southern Italian port, like he finds in the French port of Marseilles, "[s]paces

and buildings interpenetrate and merge . . . giv[ing] it a particularly labyrinthine quality."[12] Benjamin's observer passes the time, always looking in shop windows and mirrors, at the surfaces of old buildings and harbor fronts, at others and at himself, becoming one with the porous and grainy crust of the stone walls, and meandering down the winding streets and alleys as seductive as any woman he might meet by happenstance. Above all, the flâneur as an incarnation of the poet (modeled on Baudelaire) is both "marked and ruined"[13] by the experience of the modern. His encounters and memories fuse to produce the literature and the criticism of the moment, fused with circumstance but also with what lies beneath and behind it. The present is held in the stone, but the workers of the past and the child who ran down those corridors to school and to the park are traces preserved there to be unlocked and excavated by the observer.

Starting in 1924, on a summer sojourn in Capri, Benjamin finds the key to unlock what will be a link between his exilic writings and a new format for recording and transmitting a personal politics through the decoding of the stones of cityscapes. On the urging of German philosopher Ernst Bloch, Benjamin reads the Hungarian philosopher and literary critic Georg Lukács's recently published *History and Class Consciousness* (1923). Introducing him to a framework of materialist analysis of culture that will inform his subsequent writings, this volume offers Benjamin a new vocabulary for his flâneur's critique of modernity. Capri is an auspicious space for him as much in an intellectual sense as a personal one, since this reading coincides with his encounter with the actress Lacis; the two elements, when added to an exilic imagination, define Benjamin's tone in recording his voyages. In Benjamin's letters to Scholem, he writes, "The first and foremost thing [of becoming acquainted with the topography of any new place such as Rome, Florence, or Naples] you have to do is feel your way through a city so that you can return to it with complete assurance."[14] Benjamin does not refer to preparing himself for return visits but to the daily walks through the confusion and jumble of narrow streets that were not set out in the schemes of any urban planners or engineers. His arrival at this urban space, new to him, requires a critical exploration and orientation.

Joining him on the road in Capri, Lacis collaborates with Benjamin on an essay about Naples in the fall of 1924. This is just the first of many fragmentary city portraits he produces that reflect his urban experiences. Benjamin calls them *Denkbilder* (thought-images) and puts forth this concept as hands-on contact with the pavement, the stones, and the metalwork that form concrete cities.

These reconstructed images of real constructs cover a plethora of sites, including—maybe somewhat predictably for a European intellectual—Weimar, Marseilles, and Paris, but also San Gimignano, Italy, and, in 1926–27, Moscow. In the minutiae of accidental and fortuitous encounters, Benjamin and Lacis bring together the "rich barbarism"[15] of the people of Naples with the churches, police stations, universities, houses without numbers, fountains, and frescoes with which they interact. It is reported that Lacis coined the term "porosity"[16] for the process by which the tourist leaves behind the surface to come into contact with a different and more profound and personal vision of the city. Benjamin and Lacis write that otherwise "anyone who is blind to form sees little here."[17] In this brief essay–travel journal–diary, they conclude that "[a]s porous as this stone is the architecture. Building and action interpenetrate in the courtyards, arcades, and stairways. In everything they preserve the scope to become a theatre of new, unforeseen constellations. The stamp of the definitive is avoided."[18] In architecture, Lacis and Benjamin seek out the interstices in the stone, that permeable quality of what seems solid, as much as they do in the private life of the Neapolitans so as to begin a conversation with the entire city.

Perhaps owing to the reading of Lukács's essays on the study of culture with new visions of history and class, and with a growing consciousness of the importance of postrevolutionary Russia in the modern European imagination, Benjamin's travels to the Russian/Soviet capital occupy several important writings of the 1920s. The Russian "experiment" takes hold of his cityscapes, and Moscow appears at the center of a constellation of urban fragments he compiles. Unlike the banal tourist narrative voice so commonly reflected in guidebooks and references he has discarded as models since making his own voyages through Italy with Lacis, Benjamin's *Moscow Diary* (written between December 1926 and January 1927) focuses on the details of the concrete and the everyday, on events and particularities of people and their constructs, through the evocation of tactile impressions and, as Gilloch observes, "cinematic montages"[19] or constellations of *Denkbilder,* those thought-images that remained as traces of his encounters with walls and buildings. Benjamin rearranges the sights and sounds of Moscow to form a kaleidoscope of a real panorama filtered and articulated—as is the filmic montage—through the consciousness of the observer.

In *Moscow Diary*—in which he proposes to record reflections and commentaries each day and which he also revisits and edits periodically—Benjamin writes, "I hope to succeed in allowing the 'creatural' to speak for itself: inasmuch as I have succeeded in seizing and rendering this very new and disorienting language that

echoes loudly through the resounding mask of an environment that has been totally transformed. I want to write a description of Moscow at the present moment."[20] Moscow is represented as a live "creature," a being-in-progress always in conversation with its past, a revamped city whose social and economic structures speak or echo "loudly" through both citizens and buildings. Benjamin is not judgmental, nor does he propose to be objective in his observations. Like the subsequent *Arcades Project,* his entries are meant to be primarily evocative and personal. The diary contains discreet chronological entries, but it is not a formal and official recording of information. This stylistic turn will have great impact on future readers, among them Sergio Pitol, who will open new panoramas of Eastern European cities such as Prague but also revisit Benjamin's Moscow and the Georgian city of Tblisi.

Benjamin's diary records his visit in written as well as visual form (photographs of bazaars, public squares, and streetcars), and it is meant to promote thought and reaction, both by himself at a later date and by his readers. His two months in Moscow produce material that will appear later in other form such as essays on Russian theater, film, literature, and popular culture. He broadcasts a radio program on emerging Russian poets,[21] writes travel reports for contemporary newspapers, and introduces audiences to a new Russia/Soviet Union, always starting with his own notes that develop in constellations of what he calls "urban pen pictures."[22] As Gary Smith concludes, one can trace the connections and convolutes between "the private Benjamin of this diary and the public Benjamin"[23] who later emerges in other, published formats. The diary overflows its borders and limits as Benjamin turns his sketches and notes or "pen pictures" toward other genres that mine the imagination of the writer for connections between human beings and their communities. If we engage the porosity of the cityscape—those tiny spaces of air into which Lacis and Benjamin penetrate as they explore each other and their environs—with the equal interpenetrability of the literary and critical enterprise, *Moscow Diary* (and later the essay "Moscow" published in *Die Kreatur,* a magazine edited by Martin Buber) opens the door to a reconsideration of the urban environment, of metropolitan modernities, of a new Soviet Union, and of the task of the constantly mobile and perspicacious writer and critic.

There is little doubt that the intellectual ferment in Mexico during the 1920s and 1930s would begin to bring postrevolutionary Mexico into a certain proximity with postrevolutionary Russia/the emerging Soviet Union. Students and critics of nation-states and revolutionary enterprises shared that detailed vision of concrete places and belonging that held Benjamin enthralled; he was not

alone in pursuing the paths of experimental urban projects and their modernist promoters. In 1927, a decade after the Russian Revolution, and more than a decade after Mexico's revolution of 1910, writers and artists such as the Mexican painter Diego Rivera traveled to Eastern Europe to see for themselves the revolutionary reforms of the new governments. Many were invited to participate in the tenth anniversary celebrations of Russia's monumental social change. Anatoly Lunacharsky, the Russian Minister of Culture and creator of "revolutionary silhouettes" or sketches of comrades with whom he had fought, approached Rivera and a caravan of international writers and artists to attend these landmark activities. The travelers made their way to Moscow at the same time Walter Benjamin did. Firsthand observation of the new Soviet culture was enticing to many—and of different political persuasions—since Moscow was a laboratory[24] of a new vision of civil society: Bertrand Russell, André Gide, H. G. Wells, and, of course, Walter Benjamin took their views to test in Moscow. Some, such as the conservative writer Wells, returned home confirmed in their negative judgment, since they found what they considered an obvious dissolution of previous society and a breakdown of recognizable social relations predicated on the new (rejected outright) Soviet order.

Benjamin, on the other hand, juxtaposes realities on the ground with earlier forms in a dialogue in which forms change from day to day: offices become shops, streetcars change their routes, restaurants appear out of nowhere, and generals become theater directors.[25] The archaeological layers of present culture form a sort of crust under which there is much to be found. Benjamin writes of the juxtaposition of the banal and the intoxicating on the streets of Moscow: "During my first few days I am above all struck by the difficulty of getting used to walking on the sheet ice of the streets. I have to watch my step so carefully that I cannot look around very much." This cautionary note mixes with fragments and commentaries about the state-run stores stocked with provisions that excite the eye: "[a] profusion of breads and other baked products: rolls of every size, pretzels, and in the pastry shops luscious tarts."[26] There is a tone of fascination in his comments to himself, one that is meant to be used later on to reveal anomalies and not preserve a tourist destination. His need to interpret everything through his companion Asja was another guiding force in his desire to travel to Moscow since he felt a personal connection to her through Latvia and its proximity to Russia. During the walks and explorations of his journey, Benjamin finds in theatrical productions and the bright windowpanes of the shops a glimmer of new commodities for shoppers, from cultural items to music to

paper animals sold in market stalls both legal and illegal. In these details, the Moscow of Benjamin and the Paris of Baudelaire are not that far apart. Both are places of display for the commodities and wares available, the new systems coming into being, and both ragpickers (Paris) and homeless children (Moscow) sleep under the archways of cosmopolitan development.

Moscow is much more of a mixed bag for Benjamin than it is for Wells, and it is less of a utopian society than Rivera wishes to find in it. Instead, the city is a gateway to understanding European cities in a more generic sense, much as, decades later, it will inspire Sergio Pitol to look at Mexico City with new eyes upon his return. For Rivera, Moscow is a model of revolutionary art to take home and reinterpret in Mexican state-sponsored murals. For Benjamin, it is merely the beginning of a broader exploration of culture and contradictions as objects pile up but human alienation spreads among them. Benjamin himself is the focus of the diary's entries, many of which open with a remonstrance or exhortation to Asja rather than a nod to architecture or street life. Although these details often do follow—after he notes Asja's absence, he goes on to write of school children, museums, and peasants—he even includes a lamentation on the difficulties of personal grooming as part of the successes or failures of the day. He writes, "My hair is very electric here,"[27] with the next entry containing references to cafés, dime novels, and the young Soviet troops whistling in the streets. Everyday life includes both the observer and the observed, the collector of images and faces and his own face, as well.

Perhaps as a nod to what the diary format traditionally is expected to be, or maybe to remind himself of his response to a particular moment or stimulus since they would be left behind once he returned home, Benjamin prowls the avenues while seeking the disappeared Asja as many times as he changes money, visits St. Basil's Cathedral, or sees Konstantin Stanislavsky's production of *The Days of the Turbins* performed. As he writes in the diary, and Asja returns unexpectedly, he ceases his melancholic recollections and turns toward her: "I was writing my diary and had given up hope that Asja would stop by. Then she knocked. As she entered the room I wanted to kiss her. As usual, it proved unsuccessful." Benjamin's frustrations are linked more to his personal infatuation with Asja than to a blind infatuation with the social regime; without one (Asja) there isn't access to the other (Moscow). By the beginning of his second month in Moscow, the new metropolis "is the most silent of great cities,"[28] much as Asja is turning into the most silent and absent of women. By the time Benjamin returns to Berlin and composes the essay "Moscow" for Martin Buber, Asja is

long gone. The memories of his Moscow linger on, however, in his thought-images.

The enticement of Moscow remained in the consciousness of generations to follow, particularly among the Mexican intellectual travelers of the *Generación de Medio Siglo*. While the Soviet state underwent drastic reorganizations and ideological purges under Joseph Stalin between the 1930s and 1953, Moscow as a trope did not die and Walter Benjamin's private version of Moscow was widely read. The Puebla-born writer and diplomat Sergio Pitol (1933–), a member of that group of young intellectuals who challenged the official turn of the Mexican state inward (and backward, extending into the future the same project that Diego Rivera and the muralists had contributed to in earlier stages), picked up Moscow where Benjamin left off. Seeking to illuminate for himself the midcentury growth of Mexico's capital, and later on a continued, difficult transition to democracy at the end of the century, in the 1950s Pitol sees a bridge to Europe that Benjamin can help him construct, and at the beginning of the twenty-first century he finds in the German writer a source of metaphors for the failed political projects of the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) and the PAN (Partido de Acción Nacional).

As Pitol later writes, when facing the prospect of closed narrative spaces and predictably rigid genres with little inducement to look outside home for alternative forms, the publication of Carlos Fuentes's 1958 novel *La región más transparente* served as the changing of a chronotope (in Bakhtinian terms) in the intellectual understanding of the city, for Pitol and other members of his generation. Just as Benjamin expanded the temporal into a union with the spatial through his intimate contact with chaotic, bustling, and exuberantly porous European cities, Fuentes exploded the image of the surface of Mexico City into whose interstices many of the members of the *Generación de Medio Siglo* interjected themselves. Fuentes seemed to invite a reaction to what Pitol refers to as his novel's "puesta en evidencia de la ignorancia, mojigatería, aldeanismo y mala fe de una sociedad" (exhibiting society's ignorance, prudishness, provincialism, and bad faith).[29]

Based on what were considered by many as an invasion of inappropriate and foreign models, and an irreverent vision of a national project, Mexico City was not only—or not merely—the laboratory of a national revolutionary project but also the door to a different understanding. Pitol and others read the first sentence of Benjamin's essay "Moscow" and took it to heart. Benjamin writes, "More quickly than Moscow itself, one gets to know Berlin through Moscow."[30] The return from an unknown city to a purportedly familiar

one begins a conversation about projects of modernity themselves, a process to which Benjamin's Berlin and Pitol's Mexico would contribute. Benjamin's view that the object of inquiry is not discovered—that is to say, found intact—but created or "constituted in the moment of perception or reflection"[31] resonates with Fuentes (at the moment when the "región" of the city was potentially but not always "transparente," be it in politics or elsewhere) as it does with Pitol and his contemporaries. It is a generation of exploration both at home and abroad, a continuation of Benjamin's model of flânerie that would produce hybrid texts that reflect a similar inconformity with the restrictions of tradition.

Not content to remain in the provinces when state propaganda touted Mexico City as the model of the future, nor interested in wallowing in the narratives of the national program of urbanization, Pitol and other writers of his generation seek objects of inquiry in the spaces of contradiction in other world cities on the path to modernity. Their careers and fortunes allowed for travel to the familiar and the exotic, and Pitol's diplomatic portfolio opened many doors to explorations of personal and political impact. As Mexican Ambassador in Prague in the 1980s, Pitol was invited to Moscow to present a paper. Pitol explains the enticement of the trip:

> Fue un viaje inesperado. A principios de 1986, cuatro años después de mi llegada a Praga, recibí sorpresivamente una invitación de la Unión de Escritores de Georgia para visitar esa república. . . . Georgia se había hecho célebre de pronto por el tono subversivo de su cine, y se la consideraba como una de las plazas fuertes de la *perestroika,* palabra que denotaba la transformación iniciada por Mijaíl Gorbachov en la URSS. . . . No se trataba de participar en ningún congreso ni celebrar el centenario de ninguna gloria nacional. . . . empecé a recordar cosas. Una franja de la Georgia actual fue en otro tiempo la Cólquide famosa, la patria de Medea, el lugar perdido hasta donde llegó Jasón con los argonautas para apoderarse del Vellocino de Oro.[32]
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> [It was an unexpected trip. At the beginning of 1986, four years after I had arrived in Prague, all of a sudden I received an invitation from the Georgian Writers' Union to visit that republic. . . . Out of the blue Georgia had become a celebrated place owing to the subversive tone of its cinema, and it was one of the important sites of *perestroika,* a word that referred to the transformation begun by Gorbachev in the USSR. . . . It wasn't about taking part in any symposium or being part of a centennial celebration of any national glory. . . . I began to recollect things. A tiny strip of modern Georgia used to be Colquide, the homeland of Medea, a lost place until Jason and the Argonauts came to recover the golden fleece.]

A few days later, Pitol received an official invitation from the Union of Soviet writers asking that he visit Moscow as what he calls an "alcance a la carta de Georgia," a follow-up that he sees as

containing a political message: "para que el mundo supiera que la metrópoli seguía siendo quien decidía enviar las invitaciones y lo demás un vago y amplio espacio periférico"[33] [so that the whole world understood clearly that the metropolis was still the place from where invitations were extended and the rest was only a vague and broad periphery]. What began as an unofficial encounter between an individual and the periphery of an empire—somewhat akin to Benjamin's private sojourn in Capri and Naples that later took on a more public form—linked Pitol to two centers of urban growth and two models of modern states.

Of course, Moscow cannot possibly be the city of 1926 that Benjamin explored, nor does Pitol have an expectation of such a reenlivening of a past life. Its aura is long gone with the death of Stalin, the advent of the Cold War, the coming of perestroika, and the now everyday status of the potentially radical industries Benjamin saw only the birth of—cinema, radio, advertising, etc. Yet the genre that Benjamin proposed sixty years earlier has an effect on Pitol parallel to that of Fuentes's novel. Pitol's encounter with Soviet bureaucracy in acquiring the necessary documents for his trip precipitates an encounter with culture that the diary format will help him to formalize—as it did for Benjamin—since he can both recount and critique culture in its pages. As a Benjaminian "aesthetic engineer," Pitol comes across contradictions, deceptions, and hidden meanings in all the places he visits. Pitol inherits from Benjamin's writings this figure who "juxtaposes disparate and despised artifacts, forms, and media, so as to generate an electrifying tension, an explosive illumination of elements in the present."[34] What Pitol adds to the mix is a rhythmic component reminiscent of the musical fugue composition; it is just another way to break the confines of the diary through fragmentary "silhouettes," *Denkbilder,* and images resuscitated in the mind of the observer.

The connection between the two writer-critics is not at all arbitrary. Pitol had written on Benjamin's visit to Moscow in essays such as "Walter Benjamin va al teatro en Moscú" (1999). Here Pitol's experiences with the postal system, the intellectuals, and the public offices of the Soviet state connect to what he sees as the comedy of errors of Benjamin's visit to form a thought-image from which to construct a literary essay. In this piece, Pitol takes one portion of Benjamin's *Moscow Diary* as the center of his own encounter. He begins with what he calls Benjamin's tone of "desolation" at the loss or absence of Asja Lacis after leaving Capri, the increasing "deterioration" of their relationship, as the point of departure for a similar tension in Benjamin's own political relationship, all of which will end in "una fatigosa comedia de equivocaciones" (a tiring comedy

of errors). In effect, going to the theater is a pretext for a reconsideration of Benjamin's affiliation with the Communist Party, as well as for the conflicts he feels toward Lacis and toward the play he was to attend. The three pieces come together in a melancholic fugue: the turn of the Communist Party in directions he may not follow, the turn of Lacis toward dementia, and the turn of Stanislavsky's direction into a "provocación absolutamente escandalosa"[35] (completely scandalous provocation) of Bulgakov's play. The aesthetic turns—theatrical, political, and personal—are fodder for Pitol's investment of these episodes with his personal commentary and exposé, seeking the underlying crust of ideological and aesthetic constructs beneath the solid surface of Soviet culture.

A three-volume work called by the author "La trilogía de la memoria" (the memory trilogy)—*El arte de la fuga* (1996), *El viaje* (2001), and *El mago de Viena* (2005)—constitutes Pitol's most sustained homage to Benjamin's proposals for the writer and critic. Not a political exile but a cultural attaché and traveler, Pitol nevertheless writes from positions in Rome, Belgrade, Warsaw, Paris, Beijing, Moscow, Budapest, and Barcelona to revisit people and places in Mexico that are recreated as *Denkbilder.* No longer there in person but conjuring up his memories, he works up notes, diaries, photos, and other traces of life from his travels into hybrid texts that are very reminiscent of Benjamin's use of *Moscow Diary* for later essays, radio programs, and newspaper articles. In his trilogy, Pitol includes works of theater (another link to Benjamin in Moscow), translations from a variety of languages, film scripts, and volumes by other writers into what has been called "the alchemy of self-fiction, the essayistic novel, and the stream of literariness."[36] And much as Asja Lacis functioned as Benjamin's muse for his encounters with Italy, Russia, and Latvia—and later melancholia over the loss of all of them—Pitol relives cities and their stones through the circumstantial and often intimate acquaintances he makes in each of them. More often a loner than Benjamin was (although Benjamin would lose many of his friends over time to political and other circumstances), Pitol creates texts of even more precarious and fragmentary encounters with the porosity of European cities. Structured on the model of Benjamin's fragmentary convolutes as evidenced in *The Arcades Project,* as well as *Moscow Diary,* Pitol's hybrid travelogue/diary in three volumes is in essence a conversation with cities and with Benjamin.

Although similar in content, the works in the trilogy exhibit increasing intensifications of the Benjaminian diary—travel narrative and *Denkbilder* with additional fictional forms. The three works elaborate in a first-person narrative the revisiting of other

texts and other readings, other cultures and historical times, and other languages in a very personal and constantly evolving style. The arrangement of material fragments reflects, as Benjamin writes, a metaphorical figure: "Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars."[37] The constellations of ideas in *The Arcades Project* left incomplete by Benjamin is a gold mine of bits and pieces united in whirling frenzy by the mind of the writer-critic who articulates his encounters with Berlin and other cities as if in a whirlwind of stellar matter. For Pitol, the visual image turns slightly to the metaphor of a musical form that moves in point and counterpoint, unrolling and expanding in ever-growing permutations. Like a fugue, a contrapuntal composition or the technique of composition for a fixed number of parts or voices, Pitol's narratives contain themes, counterpoints, and imitations alternated and woven together. Even when travel itself is linear and historical, the fugue represents it as a looping back, as a constant return, as a recurrence of motifs. Like Moscow and Berlin, the cities of Pitol's diplomatic posts are part of a process of recovery of both self and origins. Without Moscow, there is no new vision of Berlin; without Prague, Moscow, Paris, etc., there is no envisioning the new Mexican city. The metaphor of the fugue, the *cajas chinas,* the *muñecas rusas* (stories within stories) articulated through a combination of essaylike prose, autobiographical diaries, historical settings, travel literature, and personal memoirs allows Pitol to elaborate and reelaborate experiences. Previous stories—historical narratives, tall tales, memoirs, and pure fiction, diary entries—appear as expository components that are then open to related versions with varying degrees of reconfiguration. As Gilloch points out for Benjamin, "[t]he constellation involves a fleeting but irrevocable shift in the perception of phenomena which preserves both their individual integrity and their mutuality."[38]

This triptych of history and memory that covers a national and personal history of over forty years exhibits a constant narrative movement (fugue and flight, woven strands of melodies and elements) as a way to articulate the vicissitudes of singular and collective memory. Sandwiched between *El arte de la fuga* and *El mago de Viena, El viaje* is the most overt reference to both the form and the content of Benjamin's writings. Although Benjamin does not refer specifically to the fugue, his convolutes speak to similar nuances and combinations that he deems the tools of the intellectual. Pitol's texts are finished and published projects, not the loose bunches of sheets, or bundled notes, of the convolutes that form the manuscript of Benjamin's *The Arcades Project,* yet their collected and somewhat randomized (although actually set in careful orchestration) constellations of narrative echo Benjamin's proposals.

El viaje is a series of recollections not grouped into categories but into a time line starting on the 19th of May and ending on the 3rd of June 1986. Like the entries of a diary, this format appears chronologically but allows for the writer to compose the fragments and then (possibly) intersperse them with letters, family portraits in prose, "hazañas de la memoria" (Denkbilder or "word thoughts"), and his invention of an alter ego, "Iván, niño ruso" (Ivan, the Russian child), that allowed him to escape the stilted and structured atmosphere of public school as a child. Inspired by Benjamin's *Moscow Diary,* Pitol uses this work as a road map for his own detailed encounter with a chronotope of Moscow and other Soviet cities, into which family portraits and dreams are interpolated. He begins in the present, as does Benjamin in Paris, Berlin, or Capri, and from that vantage point of the historical and the contemporary, moves back and forth to the past, ending with childhood. Both adult men close their narratives with their earliest years.

Using historical dates and real-life times, the chronicle of Pitol's thoughts and his travels uses what in the cinema would be referred to as jump cuts between inner and outer worlds, forming a montage of fragmentary episodes (or convolutes). Stones and ruins abound in Benjamin's Marseilles (*One-way Street*); sugar mills, cafés, and old city neighborhoods in Karlsbad, Vienna, Moscow, and Tbilisi recover Pitol's diplomatic posts and deepest literary inspirations. The first sentence of the book reads as follows: "Y un día, de repente, me hice la pregunta: ¿por qué has omitido a Praga en tus escritos?"[39] [One day, suddenly, I asked myself, why have you left Prague out of your writings?]. In a personal interrogation, he asks himself why in his personal history one such detail would be omitted and, by extension, why certain details in Mexican history are likewise left out of the story of the nation. It is not just the stay in a city that Pitol reflects on, it is the lingering remnant of an experience, a *Denkbilder* constructed on and through the past of other nations and other national projects. If Benjamin writes that Berlin is revealed to him through Moscow upon his return, then Mexico is unveiled for Pitol with each successive return from elsewhere, and history becomes a constant recreation and rereading from new vantage points and critical spaces. The flight of travel (as hinted at in the Spanish word *fuga*) turns into a kaleidoscope of motifs when the musical tradition is evoked. Benjamin's convolutes are coiled springlike, and Pitol's stories folding back upon themselves reminds the reader of both fugue and convolute.

Several particular and interconnected aspects of *El viaje* respond to Benjamin's predominant themes: the flâneur, the value of the dream, and the longing for the perspective of childhood

(while simultaneously demystifying that false innocence). One important aspect of Benjamin's thinking is the introduction of the figure of the flâneur. In the urban *Denkbilder,* the male gaze is situated in the trope of a sort of sociologist of the city, both "made and ruined" by his experiences within the metropolitan universe. In that jungle of commodities, electrifying encounters occur that, when stripped from their original historical time, turn into terrifying cultural signs that both attract and repel the observer. Like Asja, who was both Benjamin's seducer and betrayer, Moscow and Georgia, Mexico and Prague, entice (seduce) Pitol into a constellation of experiences that spin around him and ultimately cast him out. Beyond the enticement of street tableaux, the afterlife of the flâneur and his objects unites in the *mémoire involontaire* of the dream. Essays on Proust and on surrealism preceded Benjamin's composing of *The Arcades Project,* and these reflect his deep intrigue with the notions of dreamworlds and wakening. Benjamin's enchantment with what he calls "Asiatic time"[40] rests on its dismissal of Western notions of measurement, allowing for an infinite expansion of waking life into the dream. The two interpenetrate as Benjamin works his way into the porosity of solid material to find cracks and discontinuities.

Pitol shares Benjamin's fascination with the dream, finding in it an illumination of contradictions and fortuitous encounters. In *El viaje,* Pitol wanders the streets of the Soviet empire but also spends time pursuing the metaphorical alleys of dreams. The two work together to cast light upon elusive moments and feelings embedded in them. In their respective social situations, Benjamin and Pitol join the flow of events, hoping to later become new types of poetic "painters of modern life"[41] who seek the horrible beauty of the passing moment. In the entry under "26 de mayo," Pitol recounts that

> En ningún lugar he soñado tanto como en Rusia. Los apuntes en mi época de agregado cultural así lo prueban. Despertaba en la noche y anotaba el bosquejo de un sueño, me subía en un coche y, aunque el trayecto durara sólo diez minutos, soñaba algo, soñaba en la siesta, en una reunión aburrida, en una película, en cualquier parte, los sueños aparecían a granel. En el tope de la extravagancia. "Vals de Mefisto", née "Nocturno de Bujara," surgió de aquellos sueños. Y en este viaje va pasando lo mismo. Ya en el avión, al venir de Praga soñé que me encontraba con un compañero de la Facultad de Leyes, un muerto haciéndose pasar por vivo . . . y anoche tuve otro que interrumpí para ir al baño, y que compendié al volver a la cama en una capsulita de cuatro o cinco líneas.[42]
>
> [There is no other place where I have had so many dreams as in Russia. The notes from my time as cultural attaché prove it. I used to wake up and scribble my dreams in a notebook; I used to get into a car, and

> even during a trip of ten short minutes, a dream came to me, I dreamed during the siesta, in a boring meeting, in a movie theater, everywhere, dreams were a dime a dozen. Even in extravagant productions. The story "Vals de Mefisto" (earlier titled "Nocturno de Bujara") was a product of those dreams. Traveling right now the same thing is happening. Even as I left Prague, as I got on the plane, I dreamed I met up with an old friend from law school, a dead man coming back to life. . . . And last night I had another dream that I interrupted by getting up to go to the bathroom, a dream whose images I jotted down as I went back to bed, getting the gist of it in a capsule version of four or five lines.]

Lunacharsky's silhouettes, Benjamin's convolutes, and Pitol's "capsulitas de cuatro o cinco líneas" are all remembrances of things past. Sometimes the evening is the time for recollections, but as both Benjamin and Pitol note, the intensity of the moment lives on in the *mémoire involontaire* to surface in new forms and new contexts. It can bring an object of desire into view, or it can evoke the melancholic ghost of a desire lost or betrayed.

In the essays, aphorisms, and autobiographical writings of *Reflections,* Benjamin recreates his own childhood. This piece of writing, "A Berlin Chronicle" (1932), opens the collection, a choice perhaps by an editor but an obvious once since it reflects Benjamin's earliest days. On the other hand, Pitol himself chooses to close *El viaje* with a similar paean to the perspective of childhood. Benjamin starts by "call[ing] back those who introduced me to the city,"[43] for he knows that the innocent gaze of the child sees only what is closest at hand and needs adults to introduce the wider streets to him. Mixed in time with remembrances of "the Zoo—although I recall it only from much later," he tries to resurrect the objects of his gaze as if he were once again there and once again innocent. Longing for connections between contemporary life and the past (his own this time), Benjamin reveals a secret: "I have long, indeed for years, played with the idea of setting out the sphere of life—bios—graphically on a map"[44] in an attempt to spark correspondences between places and personal life. Instead of a Berlin set out on a cartographic plan, Benjamin finds inspiration in the French writer Léon Daudet and his *Paris vécu* (1929–30). "Lived Berlin" and not the city on a map is the form he proposes. In it, he joins Proust and Daudet in prying memories out of their past shells by embedding them in new dreamscapes. Always aware of the pitfalls of sympathetically resurrecting the past, Benjamin reminds himself that he must wrap himself into the story:

> But this vista would indeed be delusive if it did not make visible the medium in which alone such images take form, assuming a transparency in which, however mistily, the contours of what is to come are delineated

> like mountain peaks. The present in which the writer lives is this medium. And in it he now cuts another section through the sequence of his experiences. He detects in them a new and disturbing articulation.[45]

At the end of *El viaje,* Pitol sets his childhood and adolescence in both the center and the periphery, in Córdoba, Veracruz, and Mexico City amid the provincial crisis of the 1930s and 1940s, and what he now knows as the lure of the capital city. Like Benjamin, Pitol "lives" his small towns and sugar plantations (Potreros), dreaming them back into being through his memories and notes (the *capsulitas* of dreams he records in the night). Flights to Moscow, chats with acquaintances across the aisle of the plane, readings of Lizardi's *El Periquillo Sarniento* (*The Mangy Parrot,* 1816), memories of bad movies, telephone calls to friends, voyages to Leningrad, and details of the emotions of his grade-school years, all come together in the pages of this volume. "Es tan fuerte el encuentro con la ciudad [Moscú] que no puedo escribir nada coherente sobre ella" [My experience of Moscow is so strong that I cannot write anything coherent about that city]; he writes this as a judgment that might be extended to the entire topography of a life when placed in front of one's eyes.[46]

By the last chapter, Pitol is, like Benjamin, back at the beginning. Among the minutiae of his school years is his returning to the classroom after the death of his mother, rejoining ten or so of the other children and reading out loud, dancing, and singing. Long after he has spent a lifetime in the diplomatic corps, Pitol recalls what he was asked to read for oral practice that day. It is a book entitled *Razas humanas* (*Peoples of the World*) with sketches of different places and children. One of the drawings captures his attention: it is a boy with high cheekbones and full lips, dressed in a huge fur hat. At first glance, this is something the young Pitol cannot take his eyes off of, but at the time he could hardly imagine the connection he would later make. The caption read "Iván, niño ruso." Without starting a new paragraph, Pitol goes on to recount his afternoon wanderings around the plantation and his fateful encounter with the recently arrived son of the foreman. A bully from birth, the boy asks Pitol his name and, without hesitation, the answer is "Iván, niño ruso." Of course, this is an unbelievable response since he has never yet left Veracruz, but Pitol's identification with all that is Russian is grafted onto that previous spark of difference from the space around him. Not so much "loco" as he proposes on the next page, this is a convolute (or fugue-like fragment) performed from the vantage of the future. He ends the last fragment of the piece with these words: "Por intuición, presiento que mi relación íntima con Rusia se remonta a esa lejana fuente"[47] [Intuition tells me that I can

see the start of my intimate relationship with Russia in that distant moment]. Like Benjamin decades before, Pitol's intimate links with cultures and cities are the bonds of personal experience, and they tend to appear and reappear as evoked by involuntary memory, triggered by events or sights or sounds. The same intuition that Pitol experiences about a moment in his past is echoed in Benjamin's urban wandering mirroring childhood fears of certain streets or his rereading of the power of lint. Benjamin's "projection of the historical into the intimate"[48] envisions such connections raised to the "aesthetic of the engineer" whose memories return when least expected. The chronology of the diary-fiction-travel format lends itself as a laboratory for life, the perfect hybrid genre for convolutes. Shoshana Felman underscores that this worked for Benjamin as I believe it does for Pitol: "[I]t is productive to retain what cannot be assimilated. And it is crucially important in my view that what cannot be assimilated crystallizes around a date. Before it can be understood, the loss of narrative is *dated*."[49] The diary format records such chronology, but understanding comes from revisiting and rereading, from the entering of a fugue at different moments as its melody keeps evolving. The personal trauma of the present is fixed, then, in the traces of narratives of the past, not necessarily cast into a coherent and singular narrative vision but into a coiled collection of constellations and fragments that can be grouped and regrouped. Following Felman, a Freudian evocation of earlier times and places illuminates the enigmatic present without offering a complete explanation of it, just the possible remote strains of a chord from which the fugue began. The writer-critic engages with the fragments and thought-images that constellate in the texts, intuiting their linkage and finding in them an individual way to relate to the historical through the *Denkbilder* of personal observation.

Notes

[1] Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin,* ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor Adorno, trans. Manfred Jacobson and Evelyn Jacobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 359.

[2] Graeme Gilloch, *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2002), 1.

[3] Cited in ibid., 88.

[4] Gilloch, *Walter Benjamin,* 2.

[5] Ibid., 7.

[6] Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism,* trans. Harry Zohn (London: Verso, 1983), 11.

[7] Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1996), 152.

[8] Walter Benjamin, *"One-Way Street" and Other Writings,* trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: Verso, 1985), quotation on 45.

[9] Beatrice Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 53.

[10] Ibid., 54.

[11] Ibid., 65.

[12] Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis,* 25.

[13] Gilloch, *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations,* 213.

[14] Benjamin, *Correspondence of Walter Benjamin,* 254.

[15] Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis, "Naples," in *"One-Way Street" and Other Writings* (see note 8), 167–76; quotation on 167.

[16] Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 26.

[17] Benjamin and Lacis, "Naples," 169.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Gilloch, *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations,* 93.

[20] Walter Benjamin, *Moscow Diary,* ed. Gary Smith, trans. Richard Sieburth (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 132.

[21] Gary Smith, afterword to *Moscow Diary,* in ibid., 137.

[22] Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis,* 3.

[23] Smith, afterword, 138.

[24] Benjamin, "Moscow," 185.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Benjamin, *Moscow Diary,* 17–18.

[27] Ibid., 18.

[28] Ibid., 27, 66.

[29] Sergio Pitol, "Nuestra primera cronotopia," in *Pasión por la trama* (Murcia, Spain: Huelga y Fierro, 1999), 205–14, quotation on 207.

[30] Benjamin, "Moscow," 177.

[31] Gilloch, *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations,* 38.

[32] Sergio Pitol, *El viaje* (Madrid: Anagrama, 2001), 25–26. All translations from Pitol in this essay are mine.

[33] Ibid., 26.

[34] Gilloch, *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations,* 4.

[35] Sergio Pitol, "Walter Benjamin va al teatro en Moscú," in *Pasión por la trama* (see note 29), 47–51, quotations on 47, 51, 49.

[36] Will H. Corral, "El mago de Viena," review of *El mago de Viena* by Sergio Pitol, *World Literature Today* 80, no. 4 (2006): 79.

[37] Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama,* trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1985), 34.

[38] Gilloch, *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations,* 71.

[39] Pitol, *El viaje,* 9.

[40] Benjamin, "Moscow," 190.

[41] Gilloch, *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations,* 213.

[42] Pitol, *El viaje,* 91.

[43] Walter Benjamin, "A Berlin Chronicle," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings,* ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 3–60, quotation on 3.

[44] Ibid., 5.

[45] Ibid., 10.

[46] Pitol, *El viaje,* 31.

[47] Ibid., 165, 166.

[48] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project,* trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), xii.

[49] Shoshana Felman, "Benjamin's Silence," *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 2 (1999): 201–34, quotation on 206; italics in original.