

# Sensing the night between us: Benjamin's amorous wanderings through dark space

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## ABSTRACT

*It is remarkable that in fundamental and inspiring texts about the experience of the interior, the perspective is often that of a solitary dweller, as in in Bachelard's The Poetics of Space (1958) or Tanizaki's In Praise of Shadows (1933). However compelling their accounts are, they run the risk of forgetting the kind of spatial encounters that disrupt the distinction between one body and another, between the self and its environment.*

*This article considers the erotic effect of the night-time as a metaphor for understanding and exploring (interior) space. By using the works of Lakoff and Johnson, Handelman, and Kristeva as a constructed theoretical framework, the article sketches the outlines of a phenomenology of darkness, a skotology, that allows us to explore 'dark space,' a conceptualisation of space that confronts us with other subjective modes of perception, sensation, and cognition.*

*We will follow the wanderings of an amorous Walter Benjamin through different 'dark spaces' in Capri, Berlin, Moscow, and of course Paris. Benjamin's sensual writing about these intimate spaces provides us with some key elements of a possible skotology of space: a subjective process of gaining knowledge, based on a fusion with some of the bodies, spaces and cultural intertexts that surround us, a form of spatial research that also takes into account fictionality and non-linear temporality as important aspects of the experience of dark space.*

*'Wears not everything that inspires us  
the color of the Night?'  
Novalis, Hymns to the Night (1800)*

## IMMERSED IN THE BLACKNESS OF NIGHT: METAPHORS OF KNOWING

Capri, September 16, 1924. Walter Benjamin writes to his friend Gerhard Scholem:

The vineyards are also among the miraculous nighttime sights here. You will surely have experienced the following: fruit and leaves are immersed in the blackness of the night and you cautiously feel for the large grapes — so as not to be heard and chased off. But there is much more to it than that. Maybe the commentaries on the Song of Songs will shed some light on this.<sup>1</sup>

It is a cryptic passage, but the Song of Songs indeed provides us with the necessary subtext. This strange, atypical text, to be found both in the Hebrew Bible and in the Old Testament, is a passionate dialogue between two lovers, alternating with a chorus. It has been read as an allegory of the mystical relationship between God and Israel,<sup>2</sup> but the language is nonetheless very sensual and erotic: 'I said, "I will climb the palm tree;/ I will take hold of its fruit." May your breasts be like clusters of grapes on the vine,/the fragrance of your breath like apples,/and your mouth like the best wine.'<sup>3</sup> This biblical intertext indicates that for Benjamin, this is more than just the description of a nocturnal landscape — it is the account of an erotic encounter between two bodies; the other body is that of Asja Lacic, a theatre director from Riga, and a militant communist.<sup>4</sup> Benjamin fell in love with her that summer in Capri and, even if their love would soon turn out to be an unhappy one, his encounter with her would have a lasting influence on both his life and work.

However, it was not only out of a sense of discretion that Benjamin turned to the biblical metaphors of the *Song of Songs*. It also reflects the difficulty of describing the kind of experience Benjamin had in Capri. There always seems to be 'more to it than that,' which is also more than the actual event of two bodies touching each other among the vines. The erotic immersion 'in the blackness of the night' radically influences and alters the spatial experience, crossing the borders between the interior of our subjectivity and the actual places in which we dwell.

In the allegory of Cupid and Psyche, recounted in Apuleius's *Golden Ass*, the lovers can only meet in complete darkness. But one night, Psyche, incited by her envious sisters, wants to see her lover and lights an oil lamp. By accident, she spills some burning oil from her lamp on Cupid's sleeping body, making him flee.<sup>5</sup> The story is a good illustration of a cognitive paradox: how can one grasp intellectually what escapes the control of the intellect? Precisely the act of 'shedding light' runs the risk of losing a crucial condition of what is being investigated: a sense of darkness. This paradox holds especially true for phenomenology, in its efforts to analyse the different aspects of human experience, including those that seem to escape a clear understanding. It is a paradox that is rooted in phenomenology's very etymology: 'phainoo' means 'to shine, to give,'<sup>6</sup> so how can it possibly relate to those experiences that occur in the dark? Or as Don Handelman formulates this epistemological problem in his 'Dark soundings – Towards a phenomenology of night' (2005):

Phenomenology and anthropology are enlightenment projects dedicated to the cogito of life-worlds in modernity, however leavened by the sensuous. These are disciplines more dedicated than not to the lucidity of comprehension, which shows itself clearly to the analytic eye (and suspicious of ideas that curve out of sight, perceived as hiding within them the fanciful, as darkness tends to do).<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps the cognitive paradox is even more fundamental. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue in their *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1999) that even our most abstract thinking is always based on concrete bodily experiences, including our thinking about thinking. According to Lakoff and

*Opposite*  
Figure 1: A place in the 'e-city', 2015. Drawing by Emilio Lonardo.

Johnson, this embodied nature is revealed by primary metaphors, which are more than just ornamental figures of speech. Lakoff and Johnson refer to the work of Christopher Johnson, whose theory of 'conflation' emphasises the fusion in the emergence of consciousness between thinking and experiencing, between the subject and its environment: 'subjective (nonsensorimotor) experiences and judgements, on the one hand, and sensorimotor experiences on the other, are so regularly conflated — undifferentiated in experience — that for a time, children do not distinguish between the two when they occur together.'<sup>8</sup> For a child, such a 'conflation' also occurs between the subjective state of knowing and the fact of actually seeing an object: 'seeing what's in the box correlates with knowing what's in the box.'<sup>9</sup> And even after the child learns to distinguish between abstract cognition and actual perception, the visual metaphor — knowing is seeing — will continue to be the basic scheme for the mind to understand the act of thinking: we gain insight into something, someone who is kept in the dark is someone who does not know, and so on ...<sup>10</sup> This dominance of vision as a metaphor for knowing is also an important aspect of Cartesian philosophy. It is the 'light' of reason that allows a spectator (our cognition) to understand the environment from a clear and objective perspective.<sup>11</sup>

In *The meaning of the body: Aesthetics of human understanding* (2007), Mark Johnson argues that such a rationalistic Cartesian view ignores many other experiences that are crucial for a body to generate knowledge about its environment — particularly these elements that escape clear conceptual delineation, like feelings, affects, kinaesthetics or perceptions.<sup>12</sup>

Johnson's work is obviously very relevant for the study of spatial experience. Rational reflection reveals only a very limited aspect of what it means to actually be somewhere, of how a place is turned into a meaningful environment in which to dwell. We already find this focus on embodied experiences in some of the canonical studies of interior architecture. In *The Poetics of Space* (1958), Bachelard writes: 'I alone, in my memories of another century, can open the deep cupboard that still retains for me alone that unique odor, the odor of raisins drying on a wicker tray. The odor of raisins! It is an odor that is beyond description, one that takes a lot of imagination to smell.'<sup>13</sup> Decades before neuroscience would prove him right, Bachelard understood that sensuous experiences are a crucial aspect of how humans relate and give meaning to their dwellings. To know the interior, Bachelard argues, one has to be attracted by the sensual qualities of 'happy places,' and allow oneself to daydream about them. But the raisins of Bachelard are not the grapes of Benjamin. In Bachelard, the space is occupied by a solitary dweller (in Bachelard's case, a widower). What is missing in his account is the transformative intensity of a spatial setting, caused by the presence of a desired other.

The same can be said about Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows* (1933). In this essay, Tanizaki criticises the Western obsession with illumination, from electric lights to the shiny white porcelain of toilets and tableware, which destroys a more subtle awareness of our environment. But the dweller-narrator does not let himself be swept away by his sensuous experiences and keeps a reflective attitude

toward his surroundings. Tanizaki, like Bachelard, is alone and not in love. This becomes manifest in Tanizaki's description of the link in traditional Japanese culture between woman and darkness, woman whose presence is almost wholly determined by a (masculine) gaze. According to Tanizaki, this was still the case at the end of the 19th century, the generation of his own mother: 'I remember my mother's face and hands, I can clearly remember her feet, but I can remember nothing about her body. [...] For a woman who lived in the dark it was enough if she had a faint, white face — a full body was unnecessary.'<sup>14</sup> This is comparable to the story of Cupid and Psyche, where the encounter between lovers has to take place in the dark. Yet in this case, the (male) Psyche seems to be more scared than seduced by the presence of the other: 'This was the darkness in which ghosts and monsters were active, and indeed was not the woman who lived in it, behind thick curtains, between layer and layer of screens and doors—was she not of a kind with them?'

Despite Bachelard's and Tanizaki's emphasis on the dream and the darkness, urging their readers to go beyond a rational, disembodied understanding of space, they seem to miss some crucial element of Benjamin's spatial experience in the vineyards of Capri: a fundamental, intrusive experience of otherness.

It is at this point that the basic metaphor of the experience of light, of seeing, as the bodily experience that underlies our thinking about thinking, should be supplemented with another metaphor. The embodied experience of night-time, of actual darkness, can provide us with such an alternative. Thinking becomes then not a kind of 'shedding light,' but a fusion with what is other; just as Handelman describes the experience of night-time: 'Its tactile presence enveloping and embracing, night is the medium that banishes the "thereness" of horizon, so that the "hereness" of otherness (and the beings who live in this otherness) come to us with such immediacy.'<sup>16</sup>

## OUTLINES OF A SKOTOLOGY: EXPLORING LOVE'S DARK INTERIOR

In order to explore the 'hereness' of 'otherness' we would like to propose a specific form of phenomenology, a *skotology* (from *skotos*: 'darkness').<sup>17</sup> Skotology would try to gain knowledge, not of what appears, but of what belongs to this dark space, even in broad daylight. As a research method, it of course still belongs to the larger project of existential phenomenology, which is to explore human experience in all its aspects and nuances. Like Psyche, skotology cannot resist the urge to comprehend what fascinates it, but what it tries to do differently from a more 'classical' phenomenological approach is to find alternative 'ways of speaking' that do not capitulate before the ineffable, and to take into account the non-conceptual, non-rational aspects of spatial experiences. In order to do this, it wants to explore forms of meaning making that cannot be grasped by the metaphor of seeing. It is a kind of knowing that emerges in the conflation, in the fusion between different zones of experience. Not only the fusion between body and mind (Johnson already pointed out that this Cartesian dichotomy is untenable), but also the fusion between a subject and the 'otherness' that he or she is confronted with. A skotology of space takes into account these immersive, transformative encounters that alter one's existential space.

At this point, the experience of night-time strongly resembles and conflates with the affect of love. Handelman's description of the night is indeed very close to Julia Kristeva's description of the enamoured psyche in her *Tales of Love*: 'The psyche is one open system connected to another, and only under those conditions is it renewable. If it lives, your psyche is in love.'<sup>18</sup>

And just like Benjamin in his letter to Scholem, Kristeva refers to the *Song of Songs* as an important intertext that helps to understand the implications of such an erotic encounter. For Kristeva, the setting of the *Song of Songs* provides us with a scenography of subjectivity: 'the space of a *psychic innerness* is sketched out here, inseparable from amorous space.'<sup>19</sup> And this amorous space is in its turn inseparable from the sensual experience of an actual environment. Being in love can thus be interpreted as a strong kind of conflation: an ongoing fusion between a subjective inner state and a perceived outer environment, between self and other. A fusion that for Kristeva, just as for Lakoff and Johnson, reveals itself *metaphorically*: 'As intersection of corporeal passion and idealization, love is undisputably the privileged experience for the blossoming of metaphor (abstract for concrete, concrete for abstract) as well as incarnation (the spirit becoming flesh, the word-flesh).'<sup>20</sup>

As one of the commentaries on the *Song of Songs*, Kristeva's interpretation can be used anachronistically to understand how Benjamin's biblical metaphor of the vine involves much more than simply a perceptual similarity between grapes and breasts. The metaphor links an erotic activity both to the wanderings through an actual night-time landscape and to a virtual landscape of religious imagination, the idea of a soul longing for mystical union with the Beloved, with wine as the symbol of this mystical extasis. The metaphor is the expression of these obscure perceptual connections with our environment, including our cultural environment, 'going from drives and sensations to signifier and conversely.'<sup>21</sup> As such, the metaphor allows the subject to explore different zones of subjective experience as being precisely an encounter with 'otherness,' be this other a body (that of Laci), an environment (that of a nocturnal Capri), or a text (that of the *Song of Songs*).

All these experiential 'zones' are in a way connected with each other by this metaphor of the grape. Based on similarity, it introduces difference, transformation. Because of the similarity between grapes and breasts, the scenery becomes erotic, the body of the beloved merges with the landscape, and a collectively shared cultural artefact — the *Song of Songs* — is charged with the intense memory of an intimate experience. 'Love is darkness' is indeed a very apt metaphor to describe these fusions: a series of movements in the dark, when the open system of subjectivity cannot discern itself from what it is not. The night, according to Handelman, is the moment in which 'each of us enters (and is entered by) radically different dimensions of being, as nightness seeps within us.'<sup>22</sup>

In 1924, Benjamin was still unable to describe to Scholem how the night experience at Capri seeped within him. But in *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, written between 1932-8 and only published posthumously, we find a passage in which Benjamin was finally able to formulate how the event at Capri became one of the crucial elements of his existential space:

Nothing has fortified my own memory so profoundly as gazing into courtyards, one of whose dark loggias, shaded by blinds in the summer, was for me the cradle in which the city laid its new citizen. The caryatids that supported the loggia on the floor above ours may have slipped away from their post for a moment to sing a lullaby beside that cradle—a song containing little of what later awaited me, but nonetheless sounding the theme through which the air of the courtyards has forever remained intoxicating to me. I believe that a whiff of this air was still present in the vineyards of Capri where I held my beloved in my arms; and it is precisely this air that sustains the images and allegories which preside over my thinking, just as the caryatids, from the heights of their loggias, preside over the courtyards of Berlin's West End.<sup>23</sup>

This powerful passage provides us with some key elements of a possible 'skotology of space.' First of all, the passage reveals

the embodied aspect of meaning-making, not only in the daily interactions with an environment, but also when it comes to more abstract reflection. It discloses that to understand Benjamin's intellectual development, we need to do more than just reconstruct his reading list: his thinking was equally influenced by the actual places in which he lived or which he visited, and by the emotions and sensations that these different places evoked.

What we get here is not only a conflation between thinking and experiencing, but also between different bodily experiences, creating a sense of movement along different zones of experience. We move in this passage from the dusky atmosphere and the sight of columns in the shape of caryatids to the sound of a lullaby, the olfactory and tactile sensation of moving air, a feeling of intoxication and the touch of an erotic embrace, to return to the image of the caryatids, no longer slipping away or singing, but presiding.

In this synaesthetic flow we also notice a fusion of reality and imagination. The movement of affect from one sense (the visual), to another (the auditory) is presented in a fictive scenario in which the caryatids move from their place to sing a lullaby. This fictionalisation is, just like the caryatid herself, not merely ornamental: it structures and carries the affective and perceptive movements described here. Fictionality is indeed at the core of metaphor itself: it is *as if* the lullaby is like a breeze, it is *as if* the beloved is like a vine. These fictional elements, while giving a sense of irreality to a specific place, allow the subject to express an intimate, embodied relationship with this environment. In this process, the imagination also creates virtual landscapes, superimposed layers in space: the birthhouse in Berlin and the vineyards of Capri merge to become a virtual environment for Benjamin's thinking.

And again, the actual experience of the night helps us to understand the cognitive value of such a process of fictionalisation. The absence of light and activities reduces the number of external stimuli during night-time, which has an impact on consciousness: 'Experiments with extreme sensory deprivation demonstrate the speed with which individuals in these conditions begin generating interior worlds even as their exterior ones are shut down.'<sup>24</sup> In

fact, the creation of fictional worlds seems to be a biological necessity. Dreaming allows us 'to remain sane,' while 'insomnia, the holding back from alternative realities, can be so **destructive**.'<sup>25</sup> Of course, Handelman refers here to actual REM sleep, but the active creation of 'alternative realities' in our imagination can also be interpreted as a similar way of processing relevant information that escapes the rational observation of our environment. In this sense, Bachelard's daydreaming becomes more than just a leisurely act; creating alternative realities is necessary to fully relate to what is happening in actual space.

The dreamlike state is linked to another important night-time characteristic mentioned by Handelman, and which a skotology of space should take into account: a sense of non-linear temporality. 'In English, night, unlike day, is rarely called new, nor is night, unlike day, called old. Linear time as we experience it during the day-time may be entirely suspended during sleep, while non-linearity pulsates within us.'<sup>26</sup> This experience of non-linearity has been very accurately described by Marcel Proust in the famous opening scene of *In Search of Lost Time* (1913), where the narrator describes the experience of falling asleep and waking up:

... for then I lost all sense of the place in which I had gone to sleep, and when I awoke in the middle of the night, not knowing where I was, I could not even be sure at first who I was; I had only the most rudimentary sense of existence, such as may lurk and flicker in the depths of an animal's consciousness; I was more destitute than the cave-dweller; but then the memory—not yet of the place in which I was, but of various other places where I had lived and might now very possibly be—would come like a rope let down from heaven to draw me up out of the abyss of not-being, from which I could never have escaped by myself.<sup>27</sup>

We encounter a similar uncertainty about the exact time-space in Benjamin's description of the loggias of Berlin's West End. While reading the passage, it is difficult to determine where and

when we are, as we are caught in one sweeping movement, traversing different time-spaces, ranging from very distant childhood to the present. And this temporal distortion goes well beyond the personal history; just as the reference to the *Song of Songs* links the event of Capri to a larger historical frame, the caryatids link Berlin at the beginning of the twentieth century to Greek antiquity. Something similar happens to the narrator of *In Search of Lost Time*:

I had gone on thinking, while I was asleep, about what I had just been reading, but these thoughts had taken a rather peculiar turn; it seemed to me that I myself was the immediate subject of my book: a church, a quartet, the rivalry between François I and Charles V. This impression would persist for some moments after I awoke.<sup>28</sup>

Temporal confusion can also be induced by intoxication. Benjamin and some of his friends experimented with hashish and carefully noted the impact this had on their perception of the environment. In a passage from 15 January 1928, we read:

The room dons a disguise before our eyes, assumes the costume of each different mood, like some alluring creature. I experience the feeling that in the next room events such as the coronation of Charlemagne, the assassination of Henri IV, the signing of the Treaty of Verdun, and the murder of Egmont might have taken place.<sup>29</sup>

However, it would be wrong to suppose that such a night-time experience of non-linearity, the merging of fiction and reality, the synaesthetic fusion between sensory perceptions, is restricted to a drastically reduced sense of self-control or a radically altered state of consciousness. Even the quite lucid activity of reading a book can turn into a passionate encounter with another dimension of existence that alters existential space. As we will see, Benjamin's reading of some surrealist novels was such a textual encounter with a transformative sense of otherness.

#### THRESHOLD EXPERIENCES: BETWEEN LOVER AND ENGINEER

On May 31, 1935, Benjamin wrote to Adorno how Aragon's *Paris Peasant* (1926) inspired him for his famous, never completed *Arcades Project*, in which he explored the specific architectural and cultural environment of nineteenth century Paris:

Evenings, lying in bed, I could never read more than two to three pages by him because my heart started to pound so hard that I had to put the book down. What a warning! What an indication of the years and years that had to be put between me and that kind of reading.<sup>30</sup>

The passage is another example of the importance of sensations in meaning-making. The spatial and temporal setting — reading in bed in the evening — and the sense of a pounding heart, the

impossibility of reading on, are not related to Benjamin's intellectual engagement with the surrealist movement. They provide the embodied setting for a transformative experience that went beyond an intellectual reflection. Reading Aragon was for Benjamin just the beginning of a movement of thoughts and experiences that took years to crystallise in his own writing. In the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin links such a transformative experience to the spatial experience of the threshold:

We have grown very poor in threshold experiences. Falling asleep is perhaps the only such experience that remains to us. (But together with this, there is also waking up.) [...] The threshold must be carefully distinguished from the boundary. A *Schwelle* <threshold> is a zone. Transformation, passage, wave action are in the word *schwollen*, swell, and etymology ought not to overlook these senses.<sup>31</sup>

Here the transformation process is to be understood metaphorically in a spatial sense, as a zone that one has to cross. The threshold implies a body moving from one place to another, and is also linked to (sexual) arousal; desire forces us to cross the lines that separate us from the other. A similar threshold-scenario can be found in the loftier context of the *Song of Songs*: 'All night long on my bed I looked for the one my heart loves; I looked for him but did not find him. I will get up now and go about the city, through its streets and squares; I will search for the one my heart loves.'<sup>32</sup>

In a beautiful, yet cryptic and unfinished note of the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin offers us what seems to be a secular, urban variant of this scene, with a flaneur who is looking for love in the streets of Paris:

The will turns down the wide street into the teeth of pleasure and, as lust, drags with it into its gloomy bed whatever it finds in the way of fetish, talisman, and gage of fate across its path, drags with it the rotting debris of letters, kisses, and names. Love presses forward with the inquisitive fingers of desire down the winding street. Its way leads through the interior of the lover, which opens up to him in the image of the beloved who passes lightly before him. This image opens up his interior to him for the first time. For, as the voice of the truly beloved awakens in his heart an answering voice which he has never before heard in himself, the words which she speaks awaken in him thoughts of this new, much more hidden ego that reveals to him her image, while the touch of her hand awakens [unfinished].<sup>33</sup>

This passage provides us with the same kind of scenography that Kristeva finds in the *Song of Songs*: through the passionate, multisensory encounter with the 'truly beloved' (images, kisses, voice) an interior, intimate space is opened up in the lover, and a 'hidden ego' emerges. This scenario is in fact similar to the plot of Breton's *Nadja* (1928), together with Aragon's *Paris Peasant*, one of the key novels of surrealism: the narrator falls in love with a girl and follows her through the urban landscape of Paris, fascinated by her erratic, elusive behaviour. In an article on the surrealist movement, 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia' (1929), Benjamin discusses Breton's novel:

Breton and Nadja are the lovers who convert everything that we have experienced on mournful railway journeys (railways are beginning to age), on Godforsaken Sunday afternoons in the proletarian quarters of the great cities, in the first glance through the rain-blurred window of a new apartment, into revolutionary experience, if not action. They bring the immense forces of 'atmosphere' concealed in these things to the point of explosion.<sup>34</sup>

Nadja indeed functions for Breton as a threshold creature, opening the gates of the imagination that lead him to an altered atmospheric experience. But in this transformative process of discovering the 'hidden ego,' the beloved may appear to be only an impetus for a transformation of everyday space: 'The lady, in esoteric love, matters least. So, too, for Breton. He is closer to the things that Nadja is close to than to her.'<sup>35</sup>

In Benjamin's own transformative love story however, the beloved played a much more active role. Asja Lacis was an intelligent, emancipated woman, who introduced Benjamin to Bolshevik activism and would be a strong catalyst in his transformation from a literary scholar into a Marxist cultural critic. This becomes evident in the dedication at the beginning of Benjamin's *One-way street*: 'This street is named Asja Lacis Street, after her who as an engineer cut it through the author.'<sup>36</sup> The metaphorical personification of Asja Lacis as an 'engineer' is obviously not very romantic, but in line with the favourite imaginary of communism: the desire for a *tabula rasa*, the destruction of bourgeois culture in favour of a rational reorganisation of society. The title of the book also suggests that for Benjamin, there was no turning back from the transformative process initiated by Asja Lacis.

And yet, a passage in the book reveals that Benjamin's actual position was perhaps more ambiguous, as if the encounter with Asja Lacis forced him to think against himself; she introduced an otherness in his own thinking that never was fully assimilated. In a short text on 'Child hiding,' Benjamin gives a perceptive description of a child playing hide-and-seek in an interior:

Standing behind the doorway curtain, the child becomes himself something floating and white, a ghost. The dining table under which he is crouching turns him into the wooden idol in a temple whose four pillars are the carved legs. And behind a door he is himself door; wears it as his heavy mask and as a shaman will bewitch all those who unsuspectingly enter. At no cost must he be found.<sup>37</sup>

This interior experience of the child involves a fusion of spaces, of identities. It is a metaphorical game of the imagination, whereby a table can be turned into a temple, and a door can be used as a shaman's mask. The passage ends in a totally different mindset: 'Yet once each year, in mysterious places, in their empty eye-sockets, their fixed mouths, presents lie. Magic discovery becomes science. As its engineer the child disenchant the gloomy parental apartment and looks for Easter eggs.'<sup>38</sup>

Benjamin's depiction of an interior as experienced (and transformed) by a child is very similar to the transformative fictionalisation of surrealism, exploring an environment enchanted by the imagination. It was this kind of transformative magic Benjamin found so appealing in Aragon's *Paris Peasant* and other surrealist writings, and which inspired his own exploration of the Parisian arcades. But such an enchantment is of course at odds with the kind of Marxist critique of bourgeois culture Benjamin wanted to develop. Inspired by Lacis, Benjamin saw himself rather as an engineer looking for 'Easter eggs' in the capitalist dreamscapes of the outmoded arcades and the bourgeois interiors, and as such revealing their hidden revolutionary potential. This paradox in Benjamin's own thinking did not escape Adorno's attention when he wrote a critical letter to Benjamin about his *Arcades* project in 1938: 'If one wished to put it very drastically, one could say that your study is located at the crossroads of magic and positivism. That spot is bewitched. Only theory could break the spell.'<sup>39</sup>

This 'bewitched spot' was not just a mental construction, an intellectual conflict between two sources of intellectual inspiration, surrealism and Marxism. In a way, we could say that Benjamin himself existentially 'dwelled' in this paradoxical spot. He

was romantically in love with a woman who as a revolutionary was not very interested in the intimacy of a bourgeois love story and precisely this ideology made her 'out of reach,' and thus ironically even more suited to fulfil the role of an unreachable beloved. Benjamin was hoping for a communist revolution, yet also nostalgic about his childhood in Berlin's bourgeois interiors. Tracing Benjamin's conflicting feelings can thus be more relevant to understand his intellectual position than searching for an intellectual error in his use of Marxism.

Benjamin's affective paradox crystallises in the (again very bodily) metaphor of 'intoxication.' The intoxicating air of the courtyards of Berlin's West End, as well as the air of the vineyards at Capri, was a crucial 'ingredient' of his thinking, but the effect of this intoxication was paradoxically the desire to break the toxic spell of the bourgeois sense of interiority: 'the nineteenth-century interior is itself a stimulus to intoxication and dream.'<sup>40</sup>

At this point, we should recall that in the passage quoted earlier on the threshold, Benjamin remarked in an aside that 'waking up' is also a threshold experience. And as Rolf Tiedemann states in his afterword to *The Arcades Project*, it is this need to wake up that separated Benjamin from the surrealists, something Benjamin himself was also well aware of: 'whereas Aragon persists within the realm of dream, here the concern is to find the constellation of awakening.'<sup>41</sup> Benjamin's effort can thus be seen as an attempt to link the character of the Marxist engineer to that of the surrealist flaneur:

What linked his methods to Surrealist ones, the immersion of what has been into layers of dreams, represented not an end in itself for the *Passagen-Werk*, but rather its methodological arrangement, a kind of experimental setup. The nineteenth century is the dream we must wake up from; it is a nightmare that will weigh on the present as long as its spell remains unbroken.<sup>42</sup>

The aesthetic realm of surrealism should thus be politicised, explored for the promise of progress that it contains: 'In every

true work of art there is a place where, for one who removes there, it blows cool like the wind of a coming dawn.'<sup>43</sup> We can compare this sensation of a 'cool wind' with the 'whiff of air' that blew in Berlin's loggia's during summertime, but in this case the affect is ambiguous; is it a cool breeze that brings relief at the end of a hot summer night, or is it a chilly wind that makes a winter morning even colder? In any case, it is another example of how thinking is always thinking through sensations — and not only sensations of vision. These metaphorical references to bodily experience are not secondary, but structure knowledge and link it to actual experiences.

The metaphor of dawn itself is of course at odds with the experience of the night, and also with the experience of love. In courtly love poetry, the arrival of dawn has a negative meaning. Because of the illicit nature of their relationship, daybreak indicates the moment the lovers have to separate in order to avoid being caught. This literary topos of courtly love poetry is perhaps most famously used by Shakespeare in his *Romeo and Juliet* (1599):

What envious streaks  
Do lace the severing clouds in yonder east:  
Night's candles are burnt out, and jocund day  
Stands tiptoe on the misty mountain tops.  
I must be gone and live, or stay and die....  
(Act 3, Scene 5, 7-10)

Yet in a Marxist version of the tale of Cupid and Psyche, critics like Benjamin have to play the role of the envious sisters, urging Psyche to light a lamp and wake up from her harmful infatuation with the charming yet devouring monster of capitalism. The nightmare that is capitalism had to be transformed into the dawn of communism: a rational, classless society, the kind of society Asja Lacis dreamed of and as a revolutionary also tried to realise. But ironically, it was also the kind of society that sought to eradicate the kind of bourgeois self-indulgence in love, the retreat into private daydreams that Benjamin found so attractive. In 'Surrealism,' Benjamin seemed to defend this destruction of bourgeois values:

To live in a glass house is a revolutionary virtue par excellence. It is also an intoxication, a moral exhibitionism, that we badly need. Discretion concerning one's own existence, once an aristocratic virtue, has become more and more an affair of petty-bourgeois parvenus.<sup>44</sup>

But here too, we notice Benjamin's own ambiguity in his use of the metaphor of 'intoxication.' It is unclear how such revolutionary intoxication differs from the intoxication of bourgeois ideology; it is in any case not something that 'fits' with the unclouded, rational assessment of the engineer. Again, we stumble upon the unresolved paradox that haunts Benjamin's intellectual work and gives it its tragic dimension: a paradox that we can only understand within the context of Benjamin's actual, embodied experiences.

Another text in which this paradox becomes manifest is Benjamin's *Moscow Diary*, describing his visit to Asja Lacis in the winter of 1926-7. It is the sometimes tragicomical story of his desperate attempts to have some private moments alone with her. And it is not only the collective nature of Soviet life that frustrated Benjamin in his efforts. Asja Lacis was recovering from a mental breakdown, and acted in a rather aloof and detached way. Another problem was the presence of Bernhard Reich, Asja's companion and Benjamin's rival. Here we are a far cry from the warm summer nights in Capri: the atmosphere had become much cooler; both physically and emotionally. And the darkness of lovers was now almost impossible to find, as Benjamin concluded in the entry of January 27: 'We took a sleigh back to her apartment, hugged closely together. It was dark. This was the only moment in the dark that we had shared in Moscow — out in the middle of the street, on the narrow seat of a sleigh.'<sup>45</sup>

In passages like these, Benjamin confronts us with a subject that cannot take a clear, univocal stance toward his environment; haunted by an otherness, he is put off balance, suffering from inner conflicts that strongly influence his experiences of a specific place, and this place in turn influences his experiences and his thinking. The kind of negative, sad feelings we find in Benjamin's descriptions of Moscow are sometimes called 'dark feelings.' This

is a synaesthetic metaphor so commonly used we overlook its perceptual origin and the conflation of inner feelings (sadness, despair) with the atmospheric sensation of darkness. So indeed, this emotional landscape is also part of the 'nightly' experience of space, for a passionate relationship with our environment also includes strong negative affects, gloomy feelings of despair and melancholy; the force of becoming-other that lies in a passionate encounter with what is other than me is not always gentle or harmonious. Our human interaction with the environment is strongly determined by our darker feelings, just as by the metaphorical blurring of our sensual input, by the irreality of imagination and by the fusion of past and present. And it would be a Cartesian fallacy not to take these apparently irrational characteristics of 'dark space' experiences into full account when we try to understand and explore all the nuances of our existential sense of being-here.

## NOTES

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