



Citation: M. Montanelli (2020) Baudelaire Laboratory. Brief History of a Project by Walter Benjamin. *Aisthesis* 13(2): 17-29. doi: 10.13128/Aisthesis-12087

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Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Baudelaire Laboratory. Brief History of a Project by Walter Benjamin

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Abstract. The article intends to retrace, from a historical-philological point of view, the main steps of Walter Benjamin's unfinished research and works, conducted during his later years, dedicated to Charles Baudelaire. Setting Benjamin's translation of the *Tableaux parisiens* as the first result of his interest for the poet, the text delves into the composition process of *The Arcades Project*, from which the idea of a book on Baudelaire then takes shape. The article examines the crucial stages of this second project's development through the correspondence between Benjamin and Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer especially: from the 1935 *exposé* for *The Arcades Project* to *The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire*, to the 1939 essay *On some Motifs in Baudelaire*. The focus is set, in particular, on the dialectical-constructive method that guides Benjamin in the composition both of the *Passagen-Werk* as of the *Baudelaire-Buch* and the essays. Finally, the article looks back over the transmission history of the project on Baudelaire, intimately bound to the one of the *Passagenarbeit*: the vicissitudes and findings of various manuscripts, of which the complete restitution of the *Kritische Gesamtausgabe* is soon expected. Therefore, the peculiar relationship between philology and philosophy of Benjamin's experimental method is then examined further in depth; the configuration of the research object's *monadic structure* according to a *historical perspective*, albeit in the context of a work that remained unfinished.

Keywords. Benjamin, Baudelaire, arcades, dialectics, archive

If I might use one image to express what I am planning, it is to show Baudelaire as he is embedded in the nineteenth century. The impression he left behind there must emerge as clearly untouched as that of a stone that one day is rolled away from the spot on which it has rested for decades.

Walter Benjamin to Max Horkheimer, April 16, 1938

1. PRELIMINARY STEPS

It's during his time at university, between 1914 and 1915, that Walter Benjamin shows his first interest for Charles Baudelaire and,

therefore, decides to start working on the translation of the *Tableaux parisiens*. The volume, enriched by the essay used as a programmatic premise on *The Task of the Translator* (1921), shall then be published only in 1923, with the title *Charles Baudelaire. Deutsche Übertragungen mit einem Vorwort über die Aufgabe des Übersetzers von Walter Benjamin* (Benjamin [1921]; Benjamin [1923]).

Four years later, a brief two months trip to Paris marks the start of *The Arcades Project* and, along with it, a return to the study of Baudelaire: in fact, Benjamin intends to write an article on the Parisian arcades, together with Franz Hessel. However, once he has returned to Berlin, he continues his work autonomously, gathering notes and materials: planning an essay that should be called *Pariser Passagen. Eine dialektische Feerie [Paris Arcades: A Dialectical Fairyland]*, but then noticing that the project is starting to gain the substance of a book. *Pariser Passagen II [The Arcades of Paris]*, written between 1928 and 1929, is the first draft of the new and more consistent project (Benjamin [1927-1940a]: 930-932; 919-925; 871-884). Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer probably find out about it in September or October 1929 (maybe Adorno already in 1928), assisting the lecture of some of its parts during the course of their meetings with Benjamin at Frankfurt and Königstein. Shortly after, in 1930, the research comes to a halt, to then start again in 1934, when Benjamin is already in exile in Paris (on the other hand, the only place where he could carry out his study and work on documentation is the Bibliothèque nationale de France). So, in May 1935 the first *exposé* with the title *Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century* is ready (see Wohlfarth [2011]: 255-260). It is a particularly important moment: in fact, on one hand, with the 1935 *exposé* *The Arcades Project* is accepted in the program of works sponsored by the Institute for Social Research (with the title: *The Social History of the City of Paris in the 19th Century*), on the other, it marks the start of the crucial theoretical debate with Adorno. An epistolary correspondence, around which the work for the project on

the *Arcades* develops, undergoing continuous changes and rewordings (see Eiland, Jennings [2014]: 483-575). On this account, the letters exchanged by the two philosophers between 1928 and 1940 are of fundamental value: they are not only a historical testimony, a «paratextual document», key for understanding the development of the project, but, in their peculiarity, they acquire the status of a literary work, one of the «most important ones of 19th-century philosophy», as it has already been pointed out (Desideri [2002]: 76-77; Wohlfarth [2011]: 261-269).

In the 1935 *exposé*, the fifth chapter goes under the title *Baudelaire, or the Streets of Paris*: the main topics regarding Benjamin's interpretation of the lyric poet are already stated. The allegorical genius, the *flâneur*, the crowd, the *bohème* and the conspiracy, the modernity, the *spleen* and the *idéal*, the ever-selfsame and the new, *l'art pour l'art* and the art market (Benjamin [1927-1940a]: 10-11). Adorno's opinion of the text, however, is extremely critical. It's the so called *Hornberger Brief* of August 2, 1935, in which Adorno disputes Benjamin's formulation of the concept of *dialektisches Bild*, precisely, as exposed in the chapter on Baudelaire: the fetish character of the commodity as dialectical image internal to consciousness and intimately ambiguous is the main problem. For Adorno, thinking the *dialektisches Bild* as being contained in a collective consciousness means to risk in proximity of Carl Gustav Jung and Ludwig Klages' theories, of archaic-archetypal images, immanent to a supposed and timeless «collective ego». Benjamin's *exposé* would still be lacking a theory that is able to dialectize both the ambiguity of the dialectical image and the relationship between society and the alienated individual. In other terms, the text, unlike the previous sketch of *The Arcades of Paris* that had found Adorno's strong approval, insists excessively on the oneiric-mythical dimension rather than on the critical-dialectical one, taking the risk of becoming embroiled in the enchantments of the 19th century (Adorno, Benjamin [1928-1940]: 104-114).

In his first brief reply to this letter, Benjamin clarifies that the first draft of *The Arcades of Paris*,

has not at all been set aside, rather, in the overall project of the book, it provides the *thesis* and the *exposé* is the *antithesis*. The planned structure is already triadic and dialectic. Benjamin has «the two ends of the bow in hand», but what is still missing is the strength to arc it and shoot the arrow of the synthesis: the critical interpretation of the materials, that is to say of the 19th-century dreams. He is already basing his method on the constructive principle: «what the constructive moment means for this book must be compared with what the philosophers' stone means for alchemy». It is within the construction that Benjamin seeks his very particular dialectics between image and awakening (Adorno, Benjamin [1928-1940]: 117-119).

As a result of the intense debate with Adorno, Benjamin is convinced of the importance of carrying out a critical confrontation with Jung and Klage's «mythology», in order to make the weapons of their «Fascist armature» less effective (Benjamin [1910-1940]: 542). However, Horkheimer doesn't agree. On March 28, 1937 Benjamin tries to persuade him one last time: the problems encountered in the 1935 *exposé* would be faced and solved by making the plan of the book result from two preliminary «fundamental methodological analysis». First of all, from a materialist critique of pragmatic history and of the history of ideas; secondly, from an enquiry on what psychoanalysis means – and what role it plays – for the subject of materialist historiography (and therefore, also from a confrontation with Jung and Klages' conceptions). Finally, in case of denial, Benjamin introduces another possibility: to penetrate *in medias res*, by anticipating the draft of the chapter of the *Arcades* on Baudelaire. Horkheimer is in favour of this last proposal: in fact, in his view, the first methodological analysis would have ended coinciding in many aspects with the essay on Eduard Fuchs; the second, would deal with a matter that is both decisive and delicate for the Institute, that could only be faced after in-depth and shared discussions (Benjamin [1935-1937]: 489-490; Benjamin [1927-1940b]: 1158-1159). The text on Baude-

laire should have then been published on the «Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung».

Therefore, Benjamin starts to write a central chapter of the book while its plan isn't yet clear, his overall «construction» (methodological thoughts necessarily have a metatextual nature at this stage, redefining the order of materials, thus the structure of the book, many times). A year's work later, he writes back to Horkheimer to bring him up to date on the evolution of the text: the dimension of the article has exceeded the limits stated for publishing on the journal (apart from the specific materials on Baudelaire collected in convolute J, other materials have merged into the work)¹. This, Benjamin writes, might be as easily attributed «to the subject as to the fact that the section that had been planned as central to the book is being written first». After all, he had already anticipated to Adorno, during their discussions, that the «subject Baudelaire» was taking the shape of a «miniature (*Miniaturmodell*)» of the work. Benjamin then exposes the structure of the essay to Horkheimer. It is once again triadic: the first part, under the title *Idea and Image*, shall address the issue of «how the allegorical vision in Baudelaire is constructed [...], the fundamental paradox of his theory of art», that is animated by the «contradiction between the theory of natural correspondences and the rejection of nature»; the second, *Antiquity and Modernity*, antiquity surfacing into modernity and vice-versa through the allegorical vision; here the figures of the mass and the *flâneur* shall cover a key role; the third and last part, *The New and the Ever-Selfsame*², shall deal with the topic of «the commodity as the fulfilment of Baudelaire's allegorical vision», the aura of the commodity as the experience of the ever-selfsame that leaks through the new (here Louis-Auguste Blanqui's *Eternité par les astres* and Friedrich Nietzsche's eternal return shall come into

¹ By February 1938, Benjamin has collected almost two-hundred pages of materials in section J on Baudelaire, including notes, quotations, comments, and extracts (Schmider, Werner [2011]: 567).

² T/n. Translation modified [The New and the Immutable].

play)³. In Benjamin's eyes, Baudelaire is by now the *exemplum* of modernity: his «unique importance consists in having been the first one, and the most unswerving, to have apprehended [...] the productive energy of the individual alienated from himself—agnosticized and heightened through reification»⁴ (Benjamin [1910-1940]: 555-558; see also Bernardi [2001]; Sauter [2019]).

2. FROM THE MINIATURMODELL TO THE BAUDELAIRE-BUCH

On September 28, 1938 Benjamin sends Max Horkheimer the essay under the title *The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire*. Again, something has changed: he has come to «realize as the summer went on that a Baudelaire essay more modest in length that did not repudiate its responsibility to the *Arcades* draft could be produced only as a part of a Baudelaire *book*» (Benjamin [1910-1940]: 573). Therefore, the essay-chapter would no longer be part of *The Arcades Project* (specifically it should have been the penultimate one), but it would form part of a new book project dedicated to Baudelaire: *Charles Baudelaire. Ein Lyriker im Zeitalter des Hochkapitalismus* [*Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Age of High Capitalism*] (Benjamin [1938-1940]: 159; see also Eiland, Jennings [2014]: 575-646). The 19th-century allegorical poet has provided such «optimal opportunities for the basic conceptions of the *Arcades*» that, «for this reason, the orientation of important material and constructive elements of the *Arcades* to this subject occurred on its own». The three sections of the essay – *The Bohème*, *The Flâneur*, *Modernity* – are «relatively independent of each other», but, together, they converge into what shall become the second part of the *Baudelaire-Buch*. A second part, Benjamin points out, that doesn't at all set «the

philosophical bases of the *whole book*». Its function, in fact, returning to the triadic-dialectical structure, is that of the antithesis: it «provides the requisite data», whereas the first part – *Baudelaire as Allegorist* – presents the thesis, that is to say the problem, and the third – *The Commodity as Poetic Object* – should solve it, fulfilling the purpose of the synthesis. The scheme presented in the letter written on April 16 is confirmed, although with different titles. Therefore, *The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire*, «undertakes a sociocritical interpretation of the poet»: as antithesis, this is where «criticism in its narrower sense, namely Baudelaire criticism, has its place», that of the «limits of his achievement». Therefore, Benjamin further specifies, this part of the book only offers «a prerequisite of Marxist interpretation, but does not on its own fulfill its conception». The interpretation of Baudelaire, related to «the basic theme of the old *Arcades* project, the new and the ever-selfsame»⁵, shall only be covered in the third part of the book (Benjamin [1910-1940]: 573-574).

In spite of these preliminary explanations, the essay is strongly criticized by the Institute for Social Research with Adorno's famous letter of November 10, 1938. Benjamin's research methodology, elaboration and presentation is attacked in an even harder and more drastic way in 1935: the one shown in the *The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire* is an «immediate», almost «romantic», materialism that leaves out the moment of dialectical mediation. For Adorno, the words Benjamin uses to accompany the essay in the letter to Max Horkheimer make no difference: it is the «wide-eyed presentation of the mere facts» to guide the work that, therefore, places itself at the unique «crossroads of magic and positivism». In order to pay «tributes to Marxism», Benjamin would have harmed Marxism as well as his essay: the phantasmagoria – panorama and «traces», *flâneur* and arcades, modernity and ever-same –, end up, once again, tangling the text in their spell rather than being understood in an objective way

³ In fact, it is between the end of 1937 and the beginning of 1938 that Benjamin discovers Blanqui's unique text that shall deeply influence his considerations on eternal return and modernity (see Benjamin [1910-1940]: 549; see also Schmider, Werner [2011]: 567).

⁴ T/n. Translation modified [concretization].

⁵ T/n. Translation modified [The New and the Immutability].

with the use of critique, through the examination of the commodity form in Baudelaire's epoch. The «ascetic discipline», that, once more, has lead Benjamin to silence the theoretical interpretation of the essay, makes it something quite different from a «model» of *The Arcades Project*, at the most it is its «prelude»: a collection of undeveloped reasons, of cultural facts arbitrarily put into direct relation – not mediated «through the *total social process*» –, even causal, with spheres of economic structure (the example of Baudelaire's poem *L'âme du Vin* about the duty on wine) (Adorno, Benjamin [1928-1940]: 280-287).

I believe that speculation can only begin its inevitably audacious flight with some prospect of success if, instead of donning the waxen wings of esotericism, it seeks its source of strength in construction alone. It is the needs of construction which dictated that the second part of my book should consist primarily of philological material. (Adorno, Benjamin [1928-1940]: 291)

This is what Benjamin writes in his long and precise answer to Adorno, a month later. The dispute is based on a different understanding of the relationship between philology and philosophy: if «the philological interpretation [...] should be [...] overcome in the Hegelian manner by the dialectical materialist», on the other hand, according to Benjamin, this is possible only if the object of research «is construed from a historical perspective»; therefore, only if it is constructed as a *monad* that is able to make the «given text» that «formerly lay mythically petrified» come to life (291-292). Concerning the matter of his methodological procedure, in a draft of the introduction to *The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire*, Benjamin writes: «Sundering truth from falsehood is the goal of the materialist method, not its point of departure. In other words, its point of departure is the object riddled with error, with *doxa*» (Benjamin [1938a]: 63). Appearance, ambivalent mixture of true and false, only starting from here philology can turn into philosophy. Baudelaire's figure, therefore, is once more emblematic: it is itself, in its ambiguity, a model of the Benjaminian

critical-materialistic method. After all, Benjamin is well aware of the Marxian difference between *Forschungsweise* and *Darstellungsweise*, quoted and written down in fact in convolute N:

Research has to appropriate the material in detail, to analyze its various forms of development, to trace out their inner connection. Only after this work is done can the actual movement be presented in corresponding fashion. If this is done successfully, if the life of material is reflected back as ideal, then it may appear as if we had before us an a priori construction. (Benjamin [1927-1940a]: 465)

The constructive-dialectical principle – that also answers to the method of montage (460) – is immanent to the material itself, that is not at all still but alive, and the object of the research derives from its very movement according to «historical perspective».

The documentation of *The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire*, its material, therefore, moved across three levels of *doxastic ambivalence* towards the critical-constructive view: the first concerned Baudelaire's *physiology*, the social outline of his profile, in the intersections and differences with the figures of the conspirator, the ragpicker, the *flâneur*; it observed Baudelaire as a somehow unaware representative of the *bohème*, the fragile foundations of his political position that make him cheer once for the revolution and once for its repression, his compliant behaviour with the new context of the literature market (Benjamin [1938a]: 4, 16-17). The second level concerned Baudelaire's rather particular relationship with the *flâneur*, with the crowd, with the commodity: differently from the *flâneur*, he sees the «horrible social reality» reified, he doesn't transfigure it with the «veil» of the mass; however, that same horrible reality becomes enchantment to his eyes – it's the hero that moves away from the crowd – that doesn't allow him to criticize the social appearance (34, 39). The third level concerned the relationship between antiquity and the new in Baudelaire's allegorical vision of modernity: a relationship that is not yet dialectical – the modern hero-poet, «Hercules with no labors», seizes antiquity in the

decrepitude of modern times and phenomena (60, 50) –, but that, nevertheless, indicates the character of appearance of each novelty that wishes to be autonomous from the past. *The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire* aimed to grasp Baudelaire's outline in the *medium* of French 19th-century society, and the 19th century in the *medium* of Baudelaire's *physiology*.

3. ON SOME MOTIFS IN BAUDELAIRE: A MORE PRECISE ARTICULATION OF THE THEORETICAL STRUCTURE

It is precisely Adorno to ask Benjamin not to follow through with the publication of the essay, whereas other members of the Institute had suggested publishing the second chapter and part of the third (Adorno, Benjamin [1928-1940]: 285). As a consequence, Benjamin restarts to work on the text: the result shall be *On some Motifs in Baudelaire*. The intermediate steps are the French translation of the 1935 *exposé* and the *Notes sur les Tableaux parisiens de Baudelaire*. The first work is requested by Horkheimer in February 1939: a New York banker, Frank Altschul, is interested in funding high quality studies, preferably in French; *The Arcades Project* might be of his interest, also because the Institute is facing poor economic conditions and may not be able to guarantee Benjamin's grant much longer (Benjamin [1927-1940a]: 957; Benjamin [1927-1940b]: 1168-1169; 1172-1173).

While translating the *exposé*, Benjamin makes significant modifications, reworking on Adorno's critiques and introducing further theoretical novelties based on their most recent debates. He includes an *Introduction* and a *Conclusion* as theoretical summary for the text – «the comparison between appearance and reality predominates all the way» (Benjamin [1938-1940]: 233); in the chapter dedicated to Baudelaire, the passage on the dialectical image that had been so strongly criticized by Adorno in 1935, is removed. The polarities between *spleen* and *idéal*, between “type”, ever-selfsame and novelty come forth as canons of modernity (Benjamin [1927-1940a]: 14-26).

The category of self-same (*Gleichheit*) and its phantasmagoric distortion into the form of the eternal return related to a commodity economy are at the heart of the discussion with Adorno at the moment. In addition: they are at the centre of the new essay on Baudelaire. Commodity that *empathizes* with price – this is the secret of its ever-selfsame trait – becomes a model, not merely of the condition of pure «saleability» in which the *flâneur* «makes himself [...] at home», but also of Baudelaire's poetic experience. It is the experience of the ever-selfsame that surfaces from the new, the experience of the mass, of the commodity as allegory (Adorno, Benjamin [1928-1940]: 308-312). Benjamin presents the first results of his reworking in May 1939 on the occasion of the *Notes sur les Tableaux parisiens de Baudelaire* conference held at Pontigny (Benjamin [1939a]: 740-748). He isn't reviewing the whole essay, but only the central section about *The Flâneur*. On June 24, he writes to Horkheimer about the structure that the new essay should have followed, it is again triadic: the first chapter should have been about the *arcades*; the second about the mass, with a part dedicated to gambling; the third about the «decipherment of *flânerie* as the ecstasy produced by the structure of the commodity market» (Benjamin [1938-1940]: 303-304). Shortly after, he realizes that, once again, he shall not be able to deal with all the topics planned within the limited number of pages allowed by the Institute's journal: the article shall develop the part on the crowd exposed in the previous letter, therefore leaving out the topic of *flânerie*. It corresponds to a third of the second chapter on *The Flâneur*, referring to *The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire*. However, this time the «theoretical structure» is developed throughout the whole text (Benjamin [1938-1940]: 312-313). This is a great novelty. Benjamin even shares the news with Adorno on August 6, 1939 (five days after having sent the manuscript to Horkheimer), highlighting the key role their correspondence has played for the achievement (Adorno, Benjamin [1928-1940]: 316-317). In order to complete the work Benjamin forced himself to a «strict

seclusion» (therefore postponing the attempt to sell Paul Klee's aquarelle meant to pay his eventual trip to America), but in the end, satisfied, he tells Stephan Lackner [Ernst Morgenroth]: «it has truly become *what* I had in mind» (Benjamin [1938-1940]: 323). With «a more precise articulation of [...] [the] basic theoretical structure (*theoretische Armatuur*)» (Adorno, Benjamin [1928-1940]: 316), the studies conducted over the last ten years converge: the ones on the work of art, on the aura and the technological reproducibility (1935-1936), on the issue of the experience and its radical modification (in particular the essays *Experience and Poverty* (1933) and *The storyteller: Observation on the Works of Nikolai Leskov* (1936)) (see Benjamin [1910-1940]: 609)⁶.

A crystal of Benjamin's latest production is *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*. The social-historical reflection is rearranged on the base of a very refined theory on modern subjectivity (see Schmider, Werner [2011]: 574). At the heart of this theory there is the scheme of the perceptive shock, the atrophy of experience: that is to say, the difference between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*; the prevalence of the first on the second with the advent of modernity, of factory work in large-scale industry, of radical technological change, with the first (and by now almost the second) world war. Baudelaire is the poet of modern times, because he made shock, experiential catastrophe his poetic object. He hasn't removed history, unlike Wilhelm Dilthey's philosophy of life, or of Bergson's, both in the quest for a supposed pure experience; nor as the soul in Klages' philosophy or the archetypal images in Jung's. Unlike Proust, he hasn't limited the contact with what can still be (involuntarily) grasped of the *Erfahrung* to «the inventory of the individual who is isolated in various ways»

(Benjamin [1939b]: 313-316). The lyrical gesture of Baudelaire is configured as a daily «fencing» with the metropolitan shocks – as he chants in the first stanza of *Le Soleil* –, a permanent «duel» in which, while he defends himself against the hits, he can glimpse the «blank spaces», the conditions that could make «the emancipation from isolated experiences (*Erlebnisse*)» possible (322, 321, 319, 318). This is where, according to Benjamin, the intimately dialectical trait of Baudelaire's poetry emerges: the descent into the world of commodities – to the extent of thinking poetic originality itself as «market-oriented» (Benjamin [1938b]: 168) – coincides in Baudelaire with the «distortion» of this same world «into an allegory» (173)⁷. Like the baroque allegorist, he steps into the equivocality of the signifiers, that is to say among the price tags of the products, but unlike him, he cannot solve their enigma. No redemption surfaces from a playful overturning. Nor do we assist an *Aufhebung*. On the contrary, the contradiction remains. Although he isn't caught in the spell, like the *flâneur* is, by the transfiguring veil of the crowd or by other phantasmagoria of capitalist modernity, although he comes close to the truth, to history, Baudelaire is missing the final act of critical awakening. Time remains broken, stretched between the two extremes of *spleen* and *idéal*. To «the multitude of the seconds», to the unstoppable rhythm of «production on a conveyor belt» and of metropolitan life, to the melancholic metronome that beats the litany of sameness exposing «the isolated experience in all its nakedness» with no aura (Benjamin [1939b]: 335, 328, 336), Baudelaire opposes «the power of recollection» dispensed by *idéal*, «data of prehistory», of an «earlier and bygone life» (335, 334). In fact, the theory of the *correspondances*, as it has already been pointed out, represents the «strategic climax» of Benjamin's essay (Schloß-

⁶ In *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire* we also find the reformulation of the concept of aura, related to the gaze and the ability to look back (Benjamin [1939b]: 338-339); redefinition, exposed in the famous note *Was ist Aura?* and in other brief notes now collected in the critical edition in volume 16, among the materials to continue *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* (Benjamin [1935-1936]: 303-306, 363-365).

⁷ The quotation is from *Central Park*, a collection of notes that are likely to have been first composed in the spring/summer of 1938, while Benjamin is working on *The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire*, even though it is probable that he then continued adding more notes and observations to it (see Benjamin [1974]: 1217; Espagne [1996]).

mann [1992]: 550). Baudelaire wants to wrest the new – a new that lives of the past – from the ever-selfsame, but he remains still with «in his hands the scattered fragments of a genuine historical experience» (Benjamin [1939b]: 336).

Even though he anticipates the theoretical-interpretative structure, here Benjamin doesn't offer the materialistic solution to the problem of the awakening from the dream, from the myth. Only the conclusion of the project could have fulfilled this purpose (see also Kaulen [2000]: 645-653). However, it can reasonably be stated that the thesis *On the Concept of History*, just like section N of *The Arcades Project*, left us an adequate tool in this sense.

On Some Motifs in Baudelaire is received with great enthusiasm by Theodor and Gretel Adorno and by Max Horkheimer – the reaction reaches Benjamin by telegram while he is shut in the “Centre des travailleurs volontaires” at Nevers –, so in January 1940, the essay is published on the “Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung”.

4. THE ARCHIVE OR THE SOURCE OF CONSTRUCTION

In 1940 Benjamin has to leave Paris due to the advance of the German troops in France. He entrusts his papers to Georges Bataille, that, dur-

MAIN STAGES OF THE BAUDELAIRE PROJECT	
April-October 1927	Beginning of the work on <i>The Arcades Project</i>
May 1935	First <i>exposé</i> , <i>Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century</i> . The fifth chapter is on <i>Baudelaire, or The Streets of Paris</i> . In the work's project the <i>exposé</i> should be the <i>antithesis</i> and the first draft of <i>The Arcades of Paris</i> (1928/1929) the <i>thesis</i> .
April 1937	Benjamin starts to work on the chapter of <i>The Arcades Project</i> on Baudelaire, to be later published on the “Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung”.
April 16, 1938	Benjamin writes to Horkheimer: the essay-chapter on Baudelaire is taking the shape of a <i>Miniaturmodell</i> of <i>The Arcades Project</i> . Triadic structure of the planned essay: 1. <i>Idea and Image</i> 2. <i>Antiquity and Modernity</i> 3. <i>The New and the Ever-Selfsame</i> .
September 28, 1938	Benjamin sends Horkheimer <i>The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire</i> , made up of three sections: <i>The Bohème</i> , <i>The Flâneur</i> , <i>Modernity</i> . However, this is no longer the chapter of <i>The Arcades Project</i> but of a book on Baudelaire. Triadic structure of the planned book: 1. <i>Baudelaire as Allegorist</i> (thesis) 2. <i>The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire</i> (antithesis) 3. <i>The Commodity as Poetic Object</i> (synthesis).
November 10, 1938	Adorno asks Benjamin to withdraw his essay to rework it. New phase of revision of the text.
February-March 1939	French translation of the <i>exposé</i> of 1935 (requested by Horkheimer, for a possible new sponsor for <i>The Arcades Project</i>). Important changes to the chapter on Baudelaire.
May 1939	Benjamin anticipates his new work on Baudelaire with the conference <i>Notes sur les Tableaux parisiens de Baudelaire</i> held at Pontigny.
April-August 1939	Benjamin only reworks the central part on <i>The Flâneur of The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire</i> . He announces the new triadic structure he has imagined to Horkheimer: 1. theme of <i>passages</i> 2. the mass 3. <i>flânerie</i> and the commodity market. The article shall then only develop the part on the mass. On the 1 st of August he sends Horkheimer <i>On Some Motifs in Baudelaire</i> . With a great novelty: the essay anticipates the whole dialectical-interpretative structure.
January 1940	<i>On Some Motifs in Baudelaire</i> is published on the “Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung”.

ing the Nazi occupation, hides them in the Bibliothèque nationale, and later hands them to Pierre Missac in 1945. Through Missac, following the author's will, they have to reach Adorno. This happens in 1947. However, in 1981 the material handed over will reveal itself incomplete: it is only the one of the *Aufzeichnungen und Materialien* of *The Arcades Project* (the future fifth volume of the *Gesammelte Schriften* edited by Rolf Tiedemann), part of the thesis *On the Concept of History*, and (unprinted) parts of the work on *Baudelaire*. Furthermore, Benjamin had left some of his works in his Parisian apartment on *rue Dombasle*.

When Adorno returns from his American exile (1950), having been nominated administrator of Benjamin's legacy, the works and materials that are in his hands are collected in the "Benjamin-Archiv" in Frankfurt. The ones that had been left in the Paris apartment, first confiscated by the Gestapo and then brought by the Red Army to Moscow, are later handed over by the Soviet Union to the "Deutsches Zentralarchiv" in Potsdam in 1957. From here, they are transferred first to the "Akademie der Künste der DDR" in East Berlin in 1972, then, in 1996, to the "Theodor W. Adorno Archiv" in Frankfurt (Marx [2011]). Among these, there is also a manuscript of *The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire*.

In 1981, as it is known, Giorgio Agamben, finds a letter dated August 1945 in the Manuscript Department of the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris, where Georges Bataille wrote to his friend Jean Bruno that Walter Benjamin's manuscripts, along with the ones belonging to Alexandre Kojève, were in the Bibliothèque. The letter came with a note, at the side, in which Bruno had written: «Les papiers de Kojève et de Benjamin sont (en novembre 1964) au Dépôt des Manuscrits» (see Agamben [1982]: 4). The five envelopes, found after a long search, contained the materials of Benjamin's last five years of work: the ones concerning *The Arcades Project* and the *Baudelaire-Buch*, the comments to Brecht's poems, a version of *Berlin Childhood around 1900* with its drafts attached, a copy of the *Storyteller*,

the sonnets dedicated to his friend Heinle, typescripts with the transcription of dreams, a series of notes referred to *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*, letters exchanged with Adorno between 1935 and 1938, the *Hand-exemplar* of the thesis *On the Concept of History*, and newspaper clippings and copies of various articles (by P. Missac, P. Valéry, S. Kracauer, J. Cassou) (5-6).

The Paris manuscripts mark a key advancement in the reception of *The Arcades Project* and of the book on Baudelaire, making the connection between the two projects clear (see Espagne, Werner [1984]; Espagne, Werner [1986]; Espagne, Werner [1987]; Bolle [1999]; Bolle [2000]). Thanks to these it is in fact possible to state that *The Arcades Project* as we have known it in the reproduction of the convolutes of the fifth volume of the *Gesammelte Schriften* (that was then due in 1982) is only a part of the initial phase of Benjamin's research: the one where he copies all the passages that are useful for his work from the many texts he consults in the Bibliothèque nationale, keeping his theoretical-methodological reflections for section N, that then should have been included in a genealogical premise. All this divided into the 36 thematic units we know. The Paris findings show that Benjamin continued his documentary research and work on the convolutes between 1937 and 1940; that the materials, the texts consulted for *The Arcades Project* and for the book on Baudelaire are even more than the ones identified by the editors of the *Gesammelte Schriften* (see Espagne, Werner [1984]; Espagne, Werner [1986]). Most importantly, the further phases of revision and reordering of the documentation come to light. The so called *fiches* – lists that group together notes, texts, quotes extracted from *The Arcades Project* under broader concepts –, located by Michel Espagne and Michael Werner in the *Baudelaire corpus*, reveal the access to the plan of definition and *construction* of the texts and the book that were to be dedicated to the lyric poet of the age of high capitalism.

While he starts his work on *The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire*, Benjamin decides

on a scheme made up of 30 categories – no longer thematic, but dialectical –, each one marked with a coloured geometrical signet, under which some of the *Aufzeichnungen und Materialien* for the *Arcades* are included. As it has been said, these signets aren't barely marks that are necessary to point out transfers, but, in their pictographic nature, they allow us to enter (even though not at all easily) Benjamin's laboratory (Bolle [2000]: 425-440). They are in themselves symbols of the «paradigm of a constellative aesthetics and historiography» (427; see also Bolle [1999]). *Denkbilder* of Benjamin's philosophical method – along with many other manuscripts, notes, diagrams, and fragments, presently collected in the Archive –, they are the testimony of the *autographic trait* of his thought⁸, of his experimental procedure, starting from philology and documentary research as originating source (Desideri [2018a]: 189).

In the midst of his summer work on *The Paris of the Second Empire*, when the essay is turning into a part of a book on Baudelaire, Benjamin reviews the dialectical scheme he prepared shortly before, the «structure (*Schematisierung*) of the project» (see Benjamin [1910-1940]: 569-572), deleting some categories, though moving their themes under others. Finally, in the third and last phase, he deletes other categories and reorders the materials in the so-called Blue Papers (sixteen).

Following the work of who analysed and studied the manuscripts (Espagne, Werner [1984]; Espagne, Werner [1986]; Espagne, Werner [1987]), and waiting for the volumes 17 and 18 of the new critical edition⁹, what is certainly clear from these

⁸ Here, the graphyc icon is intended as the trace of thought and language intimately belonging to one another, it is what Benjamin discusses also in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* when he reflects on the hieroglyph and the relationship between orality and writing (see Benjamin [1928]: 159-215); for the “autographic trait” the reference is also to Nelson Goodman's *Languages of Art* (1968) and to the difference between autographic arts and allographic ones (see Desideri [2018a]: 186-187).

⁹ The *Pariser Passagen / Paris, die Hauptstadt des XIX. Jahrhunderts* shall be volume 17 of the *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, while volume 18 shall be *Charles Baudelaire. Ein Lyriker im Zeitalter des Hochkapitalismus*. As we know, as at the moment the Paris manuscripts were found the first volume of the *Gesammelte Schriften* – that contained the works on Baudelaire known at that time – had already been finished (1974), the editors then published in volume 7, tome II (1991), some of the Paris manuscripts in the form of extracts. In 2012 in Italy and in 2013 in France, Giorgio Agamben, Barbara Chitussi and Clemens-Carl Härle proposed an edition of *Charles Baudelaire. A Lyric Poet in the Age of High Capitalism*. It's a «historical-genetic edition», the editors pointed out, certainly not a «historical-critical» one, being a translation. However, it has the ambition of laying out the plan of the work on Baudelaire as that Benjamin had traced, reordering the materials based on the lists and the indexes found in the Bibliothèque nationale. Furthermore, the basis of the interpretation of the edition – that is here considered to be unlikely – is that the *Baudelaire-Buch* operated in time as a «disruptive principle», «of erosion and progressive emptying of the overall work» on the *Arcades*, finally coming to substitute it (see Benjamin [2012]: 12, 10, 8; see also Benjamin [2013]).

three phases of revision is the *constructive principle* that guides Benjamin, the one that Pierre Mis-sac (1986) defined the dialectical-Benjaminian *dispositio* (see also Buck-Morss [1991]). The triadic structure exposed to Horkheimer in the letter dated April 16, 1938 (even though at the time Benjamin was still referring to the chapter form) is confirmed. The first part of the schemes (the *thesis*) is always dedicated to Baudelaire's character, considered in his «monographic isolation» (Benjamin [1910-1940]: 557) – to his *Sensitive Anlage*, to his sensitive disposition, aesthetic and allegorical passion, and melancholy. The second part (the *antithesis*) deals with the subjects and categories developed in *The Paris of the Second Empire* with a critical-social objective – the *flâneur*, the mass, the literature market etc. The third part – a very peculiar *synthesis* – exposes the contradiction that lived and remained unsolved in Baudelaire and his poetry: commodity as allegory of modernity, loss, or, better still, modification of aura, a swinging movement between two ends – *nouveauté* and eternal return, *spleen* and *idéal* – that Baudelaire cannot break. Emblem of modernity itself, even when coming close to the truth of his times, Baudelaire fails in the search for a differential repetition that

laire. Ein Lyriker im Zeitalter des Hochkapitalismus. As we know, as at the moment the Paris manuscripts were found the first volume of the *Gesammelte Schriften* – that contained the works on Baudelaire known at that time – had already been finished (1974), the editors then published in volume 7, tome II (1991), some of the Paris manuscripts in the form of extracts. In 2012 in Italy and in 2013 in France, Giorgio Agamben, Barbara Chitussi and Clemens-Carl Härle proposed an edition of *Charles Baudelaire. A Lyric Poet in the Age of High Capitalism*. It's a «historical-genetic edition», the editors pointed out, certainly not a «historical-critical» one, being a translation. However, it has the ambition of laying out the plan of the work on Baudelaire as that Benjamin had traced, reordering the materials based on the lists and the indexes found in the Bibliothèque nationale. Furthermore, the basis of the interpretation of the edition – that is here considered to be unlikely – is that the *Baudelaire-Buch* operated in time as a «disruptive principle», «of erosion and progressive emptying of the overall work» on the *Arcades*, finally coming to substitute it (see Benjamin [2012]: 12, 10, 8; see also Benjamin [2013]).

is able to grasp the new from the ever-selfsame, to produce the critical awakening¹⁰.

The *Baudelaire laboratory* – the whole of his finished and unfinished works, the manuscripts, the documents, the notes, the fragments, his intimate relationship with the *Arcades Project* – can be therefore considered the highest example of the constructive procedure that Benjamin's materialist method is based on. The model of a construction in which philology and philosophy act together, they run parallel then leaving the material and the theory to intervene on each other (see Espagne, Werner [1984]: 602). Better still: allowing the *theoretical structure* to surface from the movement within the actual material – and here we can hear the echo of the concept of *Ursprung* of the *Epistemo-critical Prologue on The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (Benjamin [1928]: 45-46; see also Desideri [2018b]: 18-28). The constellative figuration as another methodological key, therefore, also expresses a peculiar way of representing the density and the multiple articulation of an author's thought, even more so if the author in question is Walter Benjamin and the work is an unfinished project as the one on Baudelaire or on the *Arcades*: it is not so much a case of reclaiming the structurally fragmented and unfinished charter of the thought, it is rather, to manage to grasp the *continuum* in the discontinuity, in the diversity of form, statute and nature of the materials, precisely by following the constructive principle that drives them; to successfully seize, as far as possible, the *monadic structure* of the research object according to a *historical perspective*, through the fragments, the letters, the sketches and patterns. Therefore, with the new critical edition, we expect to soon be able to fully move through the constellations of the *Arcades Project* and the *Baudelaire-Buch*.

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¹⁰ On the repetition in Benjamin see Montanelli 2018.

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