The Principle of Interpenetration in Walter Benjamin

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Abstract: This article explores the concept of *Durchdringung* (interpenetration) in Walter Benjamin's work, tracing its presence across architectural, cinematic, and literary domains. Unlike Hegelian mediation, Benjamin's interpenetration blurs boundaries without resulting in uniformity, allowing for the coexistence of heterogeneous elements in what he calls a "dialectics at a standstill." Through dialogues with Wölfflin, Giedion, Auerbach, and Adorno, the paper identifies three key dimensions of *Durchdringung*: spatial, imaginal, and historical. These thresholds converge to redefine aesthetic experience beyond classical hierarchies and disciplinary limits, revealing their potential as a space for play (*Spielraum*).

Keywords: Threshold, porosity, *Stilmischung*, awakening, dialectics at a standstill

In the fragment P°, 4 of his *Passagen-Werk*, Walter Benjamin defines the quintessence of the method as "dialectics at a standstill" (*Dialektik im Stillstand*) (*AP* 865).[1] With this oxymoronic expression, Benjamin intended to emancipate dialectics from its reference to temporal succession, rethinking it as the sudden encounter of heterogeneous elements in a constellation.[2] When rereading his work through this dialectical lens, the frequent use—especially in his aesthetic and literary critical writings—of the term "interpenetration" (*Durchdringung*) becomes particularly significant. Benjamin uses this term as a noun or a verb already in his 1915 essay on Hölderlin, and he continues to employ it in various contexts into the 1930s, up to the unfinished *Arcades Project*, where, in fragment O°, 10, he explicitly identifies it as a fundamental category of the new expressive forms: "Interpenetration as principle in film, in new architecture, in colportage" (*AP* 858).

This is a concept rooted in the dialectical tradition: Hegel already employed it systematically, and Engels identified the "interpenetration of opposites" as the fundamental law of dialectics, alongside the "transformation of quantity into quality" and the "negation of the negation" (62). And yet, between Hegel's approach to interpenetration and Benjamin's, there lies the same difference that separates their conceptions of dialectics—one as development, the other as interruption. Whereas Hegel (*Aesthetics* 431–436) conceives it as a synthesis between content and form, meaning and expression, spirit and sensibility—typical of the classical form of art—, for Benjamin, interpenetration always concerns two forms—whether spatial, imaginal, or historical—which do not resolve into mediation but remain in tension in a "slight, imperceptible trembling, which assures me that it is alive" (*GS1* 1229).

Benjamin may have taken the term *Durchdringung* from Hölderlin, Schlegel, and Goethe, and may have intensified its use after reading Hegel's *Aesthetics* and Lukács; he might have drawn it from Ernst Bloch, who frequently employs it in *Spirit of Utopia*, though in a manner consistent with the Hegelian conception; or he may have borrowed it from architectural theory, as developed by Frankl and Giedion. In any case, tracing the origin of this concept—whatever it may be—is not a particularly fruitful task, because Benjamin appropriated the term by subverting its meaning. What matters, rather, is the attempt to outline this principle as it emerges in Benjamin's thought in its

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distinctiveness. By gathering the various passages in which *Durchdringung* appears, we can identify three main domains in which the term is employed: a spatial and architectural interpenetration, among forms, buildings, and environments; an imaginal interpenetration, involving the levels of personal experience and collective memory, body space (*Leibraum*) and image space (*Bildraum*), with examples traceable in theatre, cinema, and literature; and finally, a historical interpenetration, between past and present. These three levels are closely interconnected and can be distinguished only analytically. In all these cases, *Durchdringung* emerges as the principle of a dialectic that does not culminate in reconciliation: "dialectics at a standstill."

1. Spatial Interpenetration

In the essay on Naples, written with Asja Lacis during their stay in Capri in 1924, the concept of interpenetration appears repeatedly, as a complementary category to the more well-known notion of porosity (*Porosität*) (Smith 245; Cicchini 63–66).[3] By analogy with volcanic rock, the architecture of the city and the entire urban structure are conceived as permeable: courtyards, arcades, and stairways flow into one another, allowing for mutual passage. It is the porosity of space that makes possible the interpenetration of elements that are elsewhere kept apart. Thus, cafés—where families seem to intermingle freely at shared tables—are described as "true laboratories of this great process of interpenetration" (*SW1* 421). But the principle of *Durchdringung* in Naples extends to every sphere of experience: "Here, too, there is interpenetration of day and night, noise and peace, outer light and inner darkness, street and home" (*SW1* 420). Beyond the architectural, urban, and social dimensions, spatial interpenetration is immediately linked to temporal interpenetration, with all its theological resonance: "Irresistibly, the festival penetrates each and every working day. Porosity is the inexhaustible law of life in this city, reappearing everywhere. A grain of Sunday is hidden in each weekday. And how much weekday there is in this Sunday!" (*SW1* 417).

During his stay in Capri and Naples, Benjamin was working on the *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* and had devoted several readings to the history of Baroque art and architecture— understood in its own specificity, rather than merely as a moment of decline from the Renaissance. The notions of porosity and interpenetration find strong parallels in this tradition, initiated by Heinrich Wölfflin's *Renaissance and Baroque*, whose lectures Benjamin had attended in Munich in 1915.[4] According to Wölfflin and his school, the most distinctive feature of the Baroque style is "this very antipathy to any form with a clear contour" (Wölfflin 64). This is expressed through a tendency to trespass limits, which leads matter to overflow its frame, insert itself, and disrupt the lines—ultimately resulting in a "blurring" of defined boundaries (*Verwischung der bestimmten Grenzen*) (68). Against the Renaissance tradition of linearity, marked by proportion and form, Wölfflin sets the Baroque principle of the painterly (*malerisch*), characterized by masses of light and shadow, impressions of movement, and blurred, indeterminate contours.

Anticipating the notion of porosity, Wölfflin explains the Baroque preference for travertine—in which light "penetrates deeply"—over rigid marble, writing that "its spongy (*spugnoso*) character is very much in the spirit of the Baroque treatment of form" (47). In the same vein, the Baroque's typical depiction of ruins can be understood as a strategy to break lines, walls, and frames, opening passages between interior and exterior and imparting movement to the image. But this is not merely a formal aspect: the interpenetration of ruin and construction seems to correspond to the typically Baroque conception of the transience of all creatures, according to which nothing is given once and for all—"all ephemeral beauty completely falls away and the work asserts itself as ruin" (*OGT* 194). Similarly, in Naples, "one can scarcely discern where building is still in progress and where dilapidation has already set in. For nothing is concluded" (*SW1* 416). Wölfflin himself observed that "the baroque never offers us perfection and fulfilment" (62). This creatural conception may be seen as the premise of the principle of interpenetration: "The stamp of the definitive is avoided. No situation appears intended forever, no figure asserts it 'thus and not otherwise'" (*SW1* 416).[5]

It is within Wölfflin's school that the term interpenetration appears to have been systematically employed for the first time in the field of architecture. In 1914, Paul Frankl published *Principles of architectural history*, a study on the development of architectural forms from 1400 to 1900, which can be understood as both a compendium and a critique of the work of his former supervisor, Wölfflin. According to Frankl, what characterizes Baroque architecture is the interpenetration of different parts and spaces. In the Church of the Gesù, in Sant'Ignazio, and in Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome, for example, the gallery becomes a balcony by penetrating the nave's space: "We can say that we experience it twice, since it is simultaneously part of two different spaces. It is an interpenetration" (Frankl 39). Similarly, in the choir of the Redentore in Venice, the apse defined by free-standing columns is "embedded within it" (Frankl 39), and in late Baroque churches in Germany, where square and circle unfold simultaneously and where dark chapels and luminous spaces are juxtaposed, we find further examples of interpenetration. Baroque architecture creates a unified "space by the interpenetration of two spatial forms" (Frankl 69).

But it is Sigfried Giedion, a student of Wölfflin and Frankl, who makes *Durchdringung* the fundamental principle of his theory—this time, however, not of Baroque architecture, but of contemporary architecture.[6] In *Building in France* (first published in 1928), Giedion offers a genealogy of the architecture of Le Corbusier and Gropius that traces back to the anonymous iron and ferrocement constructions of 19th-century French industrial engineering—thus breaking down the rigid distinction between art and technology developed by modern aesthetic thought: "The boundaries of individual fields blur [*verwischen*]. Where does science end, where does art begin, what is applied technology, what belongs to pure knowledge? Fields permeate [*durchdringen*] and fertilize each other as they overlap" (Giedion 87).[7]

Having received a copy of the book from Giedion, Benjamin responded with enthusiasm, in a letter dated February 15, 1929: "you are able to illuminate, or rather to uncover, the tradition by observing the present" (Georgiadis 53). The search for an intimate relationship between the present and the past, the micrological gaze capable of grasping in the most marginal details the image of an era, led Benjamin to make Giedion's book a fundamental point of reference for his *Arcades Project*: not only as a repository of information on 19th-century architecture, but also as a stimulus for developing the relationship between infrastructure—technical as well as economic—and superstructure (Déotte 8).

According to Giedion, those 19th-century engineering experiments are characterized precisely by the principle of *Durchdringung*: the interpenetration of every part of the building—of interior and exterior, of air, light, and iron. In structures such as the Marseille transporter bridge or the Eiffel Tower, "floating relations and interpenetrations" are established, and "boundaries of architecture are blurred" (Giedion 90). These are buildings as open and traversable as possible, in which one simultaneously experiences different spaces that thereby become a single space: "a great, indivisible space in which relations and interpenetrations, rather than boundaries, reign" (Giedion 93). The same applies to Le Corbusier's architecture, in which "the shells [...] between interior and exterior" fall away, as Giedion notes (169) in a passage cited by Benjamin (*AP* 423 [M 3a, 3]): the space traditionally reserved for private, individual life and that of public, collective life interpenetrate to the point of merging (Giedion 99). Already in 19th-century Paris—as Benjamin notes regarding the flâneur while quoting Giedion—there occurs an "intoxicated interpenetration of street and residence" (*AP* 423 [M 3a, 5]).

In the same context, as an attempt to overcome the opposition between public and private, one finds the most radical—and in some cases imaginary—projects for developing a glass architecture: the one conceived by Sergei Eisenstein for his unrealized film *Glass House* (Somaini), or the one described by the science fiction writer Paul Scheerbart (*SW2* 734), which would go on to inspire the work of architect Bruno Taut:

> We live for the most part in closed rooms. These form the environment from which our culture grows. Our culture is to a certain extent the product of our architecture. If we want our culture to rise to a higher level, we are obliged, for better or for worse, to change our architecture. And this only becomes possible if we take away the closed character from the rooms in which we live. We can only do that by introducing glass architecture, which lets in the light of the sun, the moon, and the stars, nor merely through a few windows, but through every possible wall, which will be made entirely of glass—of coloured glass. The new environment, which we thus create, must bring us a new culture. (Scheerbart 26)

The same pursuit of transparency can be found, according to Giedion (169–170), in Cubist painting, which also produces effects of interpenetration. It is clear, however, that for Giedion, as for Benjamin, *Durchdringung* is not limited to the geometric-spatial dimension, but directly involves the socio-political sphere. The industrial engineering of the 19th century reveals a "strange interpenetration of individualistic and collectivistic tendencies" (Giedion 99; *AP* 455 [M 21a, 2]): the era of the psychology of the subject, of an aesthetics of inwardness, of the ideology of the nation (a category only seemingly collective) clashes with the masses' need for meeting spaces. Stations, pavilions, and warehouses gave form to a demand that the architecture of interpenetration would come to address: that of overcoming the isolation of private space in order to create room for collective action.

This space, where boundaries are crossed and blurred, is at times defined by Benjamin as a *threshold*: between the home and the street, the passage is par excellence a zone of both transit and transition (Costa 87–89). "The threshold must be carefully distinguished from the boundary. A *Schwelle* [threshold] is a zone. Transformation, passage, wave action are in the word *schwellen*, swell, and etymology ought not to overlook these senses" (*AP* 494 [O 2a, 1]). The passage itself seems to allude not only to a space of transit but also to a rite of passage. Yet the transformative dimension Benjamin has in mind is not the archaic one of folkloric ceremonies (death, birth, coming of age)—though these places still bear their traces—but rather the revolutionary potential inherent in a field of action (*Spielraum*).[8]

Already in his essay on Naples, Benjamin wrote that those porous environments—where courtyards, arcades, and stairways interpenetrate—"preserve the scope for play [*Spielraum*] to become a theater of new, unforeseen constellations" (*SW1* 416). The term *Spielraum* denotes a margin of manoeuvre, a field of action, but Benjamin sometimes writes it as *Spiel-Raum*, explicitly meaning "space for play." In this way, the concept takes on the full philosophical weight that the notion of *Spiel* (play) holds in Benjamin's thought—namely, its capacity to "repeat the new," that is, to reproduce the identical while allowing a deviation to emerge within it (Montanelli 82–92). The concept of *Spielraum*, taken up systematically in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*, appears here alongside the concept of "constellation" from *The Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, revealing another shade of meaning. If a constellation is something that flashes into appearance—like the dialectical image—and cannot be drawn, because "truth is the death of intention" (*OGT* 12), then interpenetration can be conceived as an indirect route (*Umweg*) for creating a space in which surprising configurations can take form. It is in this sense that one might also understand the "making room" and "clearing away" of *The Destructive Character* (*SW2* 541), who by tearing down walls and boundaries opens up a space for play.

2. Imaginal Interpenetration

In some cases, the principle of interpenetration comes to involve not only physical space but also image space (*Bildraum*). Reflecting on the toponymy of Paris, Benjamin observes how a name like Place du Maroc can become superimposed upon our experience of that location, to the point of producing a collision between the plane of imagination and that of lived experience. During a Sunday afternoon stroll, this square in the working-class neighbourhood of Belleville becomes for Benjamin "not only a Moroccan desert but also, and at the same time, a monument of colonial

imperialism" (*AP* 518 [P 1a, 2]). This is not merely a case of evocation, of moving from the physical space of the square to the imagined space of the desert through associative thought, in sequence; rather, the two images are *simultaneously* present and intertwined (*verschänken*): "what is decisive here is not association, but the interpenetration of images" (*AP* 518).

This is the same fundamental idea found in the essay on *Surrealism*. According to Benjamin, "image space" (*Bildraum*)—the poetic plane of imagination sometimes referred to as "dream"—is not, for the Surrealists, a hallucinatory escape or a compensatory withdrawal from an unsatisfying reality. Rather, it permeates the "body space" (*Leibraum*) to the point of enabling reality to surpass itself (Weigel, *Body* 14–27; Tavani 275)—and this is possible "only when […] body and image space […] interpenetrate" (*SW2* 217).[9]

Returning to Place du Maroc, Benjamin underscores the simultaneity of the experience of *Bildraum* and *Leibraum*, writing that "topographic vision was entwined with allegorical meaning in this square, yet not for an instant did it lose its place in the heart of Belleville" (*AP* 518). It is particularly significant that, at least in this context, the allegorical reference does not cancel out the concreteness of the square, which belongs at the same time both to image and body space. A similarly dialectical conception of allegory is presented in *Dante, Poet of the Secular World* by Erich Auerbach, whom Benjamin knew and explicitly cites in the essay on *Surrealism*. Reflecting on the question of whether Beatrice should be interpreted as a historical person or as an allegory, Auerbach writes:

> The notion of a simple alternative—either Beatrice really lived and Dante really loved her, then the *vita nuova* treats of a real experience, or else the whole thing is an allegory, consequently a deception, a mechanical fiction, and one of our finest ideals is shattered—any such notion is both naïve and unpoetic. (Auerbach, *Dante* 60)[10]

Beatrice can be conceived of as "an allegorical figure standing for mystical wisdom," and at the same time, "she embodies so much personal reality that we have a right to regard her as a human being" (*Dante* 60). In the same way, the *flâneur* who loses himself in Place du Maroc finds himself in a North African desert and, at the same time, remains in a square built as a monument to colonial imperialism, in a working-class neighbourhood of Paris.

Years later, Auerbach would find a name for this form of allegory that retains its historical concreteness, in contrast to the Hellenistic allegory that dissolves into moralizing abstractions. He would identify it in the Christian tradition of *figura*, or *typos*, which, from Paul and Tertullian through Augustine, reached as far as Dante (Auerbach, *Figura*; *Mimesis*). Originally, *figura* denoted the typological relation between a past event—understood as a "real prophecy"—and its fulfilment in the equally historical event of Christ's incarnation. This connection rested on an inner affinity rather than a continuous causal chain. Beginning with Irenaeus, and especially with Augustine, however, it was also used to indicate the connection between earthly things and heavenly realities. Benjamin's allegory, at least in this fragment of the *Arcades Project*, seems to share some features with Auerbach's *figura*, without, however, fully coinciding with it.[11]

Beyond the experience of space, the interpenetration of images can also be found on the level of representation: this is how Benjamin seems to conceive of montage. In Eisenstein's cinema, for example, the sequential juxtaposition of diegetic and non-diegetic images aims at their interpenetration, in such a way that the historical meaning is not erased, even as it is intertwined with the imaginal one. The "ethnographic" scenes depicting the celebration of the *Día de los Muertos* in the unfinished project *¡Que viva México!* were meant to interpenetrate with the narrative ones concerning the death of the protagonist Sebastián (Eisenstein 44–47). The same applies to montage in the visual arts (Dadaist collages) or in literature (Döblin). One may think, for instance, of the interpenetration of image and writing to which Benjamin often refers, such as in the relationship between caption and scenic image in the *Trauerspiel* (*OGT* 233), or between legend, calligraphy, and painting in Chinese art (*GS4* 601–605), later reappearing in Giedion's book, where the visual apparatus is no longer a mere illustration but a true counter-text.[12]

Benjamin also reads "the passionate phonetic and graphic transformational games that have run through the whole literature of the avant-garde for the past fifteen years, whether it is called Futurism, Dadaism, or Surrealism" (*SW2* 212) through the lens of interpenetration. The deformation of words—intentional, as in the experiments of Apollinaire and Breton, or unintentional, as in children's misunderstandings—alters the world by cutting and reorganizing it, offering a different gaze upon the same things. "The misunderstanding disarranged the world for me. But in a good way: it lit up paths to the world's interior" (*SW3* 390). This disarrangement is achieved through an interpenetration of "slogans" and "magic formulas" (*SW2* 212), as well as of "sound" and "image" (*SW2* 208).

In several of his literary essays, Benjamin uses the concept of interpenetration in relation to language, relating stylistic and aesthetic choices to broader philosophical perspectives. In his essay on Friedrich Hölderlin, for instance, he notes how the "intensive interpenetration" of all the elements of the hymn —which means "that the elements are never purely graspable; that, rather, one can grasp only the structure of relations"—is tied to the sublation of the "traditional and simple superiority [*Überordnung*] of mythology" (*SW1* 24). In an essay on Johann Peter Hebel, Benjamin states that his artistic mastery lies in the way the German of Luther's Bible and dialect interpenetrate (*SW1* 430); in the third essay on the same author, he adds that the secret of the "incomparable concreteness" of his work lies in the way "theological and cosmopolitan attitudes interpenetrate" (*GS2* 636). In the essay on Gottfried Keller, Benjamin writes that "it is in his prose that the interpenetration of the narrative and the poetic […] has been most consummately achieved (*SW1* 56–57); and in his critique of the aestheticizing and fetishistic notion of "true poetry" promoted by Heinz Kindermann, one of the main Nazi literary scholars, Benjamin writes: "No wonder he overlooks the most important feature of contemporary literature: the intimate interpenetration of every great poetic [*dichterischen*] achievement with that of prose writing [*schriftstellerischen*]— whether one thinks of Brecht or Kafka, of Scheerbart or Döblin" (*GS3* 302).

Benjamin seems to favour literary contexts in which an intermingling of high and low takes place, both in terms of style and content: a mixture of elevated language and dialect, of theological and worldly, of poetic and narrative, of poetry and prose. Moreover, he appears to oppose the principle of interpenetration to a conception based on hierarchy and separation, characteristic of the mythical worldview—both in its ancient form and in the fetishistic version of modern aestheticism.

In all the above cases, we are dealing with something akin to what Auerbach (*Mimesis*) called the "mingling of styles" (*Stilmischung*). In the pagan tradition, which was marked by a strict hierarchy, a correspondence between stylistic register and social or ontological status had to be maintained: humble characters and everyday events were narrated in a low, often comic style, whereas elevated language and epic-tragic seriousness were reserved for noble figures and events of great import. In this sense, we speak of a separation of styles (*Stiltrennung*). The Jewish tradition, and especially the Christian one, subverted this order and made it porous. If all creatures stand on the same level before the Creator, and even the smallest events can serve as figures (*typoi*) of messianic time, then the hierarchies of this world can be transgressed in order to restore the complexity of the real: it becomes possible to perceive tragic seriousness in humble characters and everyday events, and to discover a comic element in the noblest courts and the most exalted occasions. At one point, Auerbach explicitly describes this mingling in terms of interpenetration: in the liturgical drama *Mystère d'Adam* (12th century), "the scenes which render everyday contemporary life […] are, then, fitted into a Biblical and world-historical frame by whose spirit they are pervaded [*durchdringt*]" (*Mimesis* 156).

According to Auerbach, this logic has survived the process of secularization throughout modernity, and even in Virginia Woolf one can find the same intermingling of the humble and the sublime that characterizes the Gospels and Dante. Shakespeare's plays would embody the unity of comedy and tragedy already prophesied by Plato at the end of the Symposium but made possible only by the "mixture of styles which the Christian Middle Ages had created" (Auerbach, *Mimesis* 330). It is significant that Benjamin, in his book on the *Trauerspiel*, refers to the very same passage from the

Symposium about "the genuine poet who bears within himself tragedy in the same measure as comedy" (*OGT* 114), linking it to the language of modern drama, which he considers a secularized form of the medieval mystery play (*OGT* 65). Equally significant is the fact that for Benjamin too, the interpenetration of comedy and tragedy is what makes the works of Shakespeare and Calderón the highest examples of modern drama. "In Shakespeare," he writes, quoting Novalis, "poetry alternates throughout with anti-poetry, harmony with disharmony, the common, abject, and ugly with the romantic, lofty, and beautiful, the real with the invented; it is precisely the opposite with Greek tragedy" (*OGT* 126).[13]

Both Auerbach and Benjamin trace this mingling of styles back to a creatural worldview. Montaigne's motto that "upon the most exalted throne in the world it is still our own bottom that we sit on" (Montaigne 406) is an expression of creatural realism (*kreatürlicher Realismus*), albeit stripped of the "Christian frame within which it arose" (Auerbach, *Mimesis* 310). And it is the same secularized Christian logic that Benjamin recognizes in the sovereign portrayed in the *Trauerspiel*: "As highly enthroned as he is over his subjects and his state, his status is circumscribed by the world of creation; he is the lord of creatures, but he remains a creature" (*OGT* 72).

The interpenetration of the high and the low has two aspects: not only the desacralizing one, but also that which is capable of discerning an element of mystery in the everyday. It is precisely this aspect of the Christian-medieval tradition, Benjamin notes, that has survived in movements such as Surrealism—an aspect that the Romantics, by contrast, failed to grasp: "Histrionic or fanatical stress on the mysterious side of the mysterious takes us no further; we penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday" (*SW2* 216).

Interpenetration and the mingling of styles, while following a similar logic, cannot be fully equated. If Benjamin shows a preference for the experiments of the avant-gardes over the realist classics studied by Auerbach, it is because he is less concerned with representing the current state of reality than in its conversion. Nonetheless, the transformative potential of Auerbach's creatural realism should not be underestimated: by treating even the most humble and everyday events with seriousness, it is able to narrate "events without distinguishing between major and minor ones" (*SW4* 390), giving voice to the defeated—those to whom Benjamin turns his thoughts in the theses *On the Concept of History*.

3. Historical Interpenetration

The third level on which the principle of interpenetration operates—beyond physical space and image space—is history. It is here that its dialectical character emerges most clearly. In the *Exposé* of the *Arcades Project* from 1935, Benjamin devotes a paragraph to Fourier's utopia, in which he writes: "Corresponding to the form of the new means of production, which in the beginning is still ruled by the form of the old (Marx), are images in the collective consciousness in which the old and the new interpenetrate" (*AP* 4).[14] The paragraph is prefaced by a quotation from Michelet: *Chaque époque rêve la suivante*—"Each epoch dreams the one to follow." It is the images an era forms of its own future that interpenetrate with the old. Thus, the rapid development of iron construction at the beginning of the 19th century led the illustrator Jean-Jacques Grandville to imagine, in a vignette, a bridge linking the planets, allowing one to realize that Saturn's ring "was nothing other than a circular balcony on which the inhabitants of Saturn strolled in the evening to get a breath of fresh air" (*AP* 885). Yet the vignette is full of elements, such as gas lamps, that already appeared outdated in Benjamin's time.

The idea of an interpenetration of the old and the new is not aimed solely at critiquing the seemingly novel aspects of the present; it also leads Benjamin to reflect on the potential that a certain mode of rediscovering the past may hold for the emergence of a truly unprecedented constellation. On the one hand, it is precisely the new that appears as old—not only because of the inevitable

obsolescence to which all technologies are condemned, but because every novelty merely confirms and repeats the old law of progress. On the other hand, the new renders the recent past aged, ultimately pointing "to the most ancient past," or even to our "primal history" (*Urgeschichte*) (*AP* 4).[15] This explains the return, or survival, of archaic elements within the most characteristic configurations of modernity. For example, riding a tram through Moscow—as Benjamin observed—one can experience "the complete interpenetration of technological and primitive modes of life" (*SW2* 32).

It is evident that this archaic element carries a certain ambiguity: it may involve, on the one hand, the survival of a mythical dimension; on the other, the rediscovery of a model that offers an alternative to that of the recent past. After all, Benjamin defines ambiguity (*Zweideutigkeit*)[16] as "the manifest imaging of dialectic, the law of dialectics at a standstill" (*AP* 10): the present is both the newest and the repetition of the oldest logic, just as a moment in the past may emerge as the most relevant for the present. This is why Benjamin seems to reassess the potential of dreams and utopian fictions, which can profoundly affect the configuration of history and the construction of reality. In other words, dreams and desires must be understood as part of the productive forces (Weigel, *Risveglio* 98).

It is precisely this intertwining of the archaic and the modern that lies at the heart of the extraordinary correspondence between Benjamin and Adorno regarding the *Arcades Project* (Tiedemann). In the so-called Hornberg letter, in which he comments on the 1935 exposé, Adorno criticizes the expression "the new interpenetrates with the old" for two main reasons. First, because Benjamin appears to associate it with a conception of dialectical images as contents of consciousness—dreams—whereas, in Adorno's view, they should be understood as "objective constellations in which the social condition represents itself" (*SW3* 58). Second, because this way of thinking about the premodern past is, in his opinion, overly indulgent. Adorno seems convinced that the interpenetration of past and present lends itself to a critique of the present—revealing the mythical (archaic) character of the production process (the new)—but cannot serve as a principle for constructing an alternative, which would amount to yet another dream merely replacing the previous ones.

Benjamin undoubtedly attempted to free the concept of the dialectical image from any ontological-objectivist connotation (Desideri 293), grounding it instead in the dimension of collective consciousness—and here lies, perhaps, one of the main differences between the two thinkers. In his reply to Gretel and Theodor Adorno dated August 16, 1935, Benjamin seems to respectfully accept most of the critiques. However, he stands by the relevance of dream figures and cautiously suggests that he has been misunderstood on at least one point:

> The dialectical image does not simply copy the dream—I never remotely intended to suggest that. But it certainly does seem to me that the former contains within itself the exemplary instances, the points of irruption of awakening, and that indeed it is precisely from such places that the figure of the dialectical image first produces itself like that of a constellation [*Sternbild*] composed of many glittering points. Here too, therefore, a bow needs to be stretched, and a dialectic forged: that between the image and the awakening. (Adorno and Benjamin, *Correspondence* 119).

The dialectical image emerges by crystallizing its elements at the threshold between dream and waking and its constructive principle is precisely that of interpenetration. Awakening cannot be conceived as the overcoming of an old illusion by a new awareness, as this would merely reiterate the same dynamics between old and new that recurs in every era: "There has never been an epoch that did not feel itself to be 'modern' in the sense of eccentric, and did not believe itself to be standing directly before an abyss" (*AP* 545 [S 1a, 4]). Awakening, therefore, can occur only through the interruption of this dialectic: not in the transcendence of dream into waking, but in their interpenetration, which allows for "the realization of dream elements, in the course of waking up" (*AP* 13).

The awakening of collective consciousness through a dialectical image does not merely reveal the phantasmagorical nature of modernity; it also entails a kind of activation of the potential that lies immanent within the historical object. In a fragment from the convolute on the dream city—which reads almost like a response to Adorno's objections—Benjamin returns to the principle of

Durchdringung, writing: "This dialectical interpenetration and actualization of former contexts puts the truth of all present action to the test. Or rather, it serves to ignite the explosive materials that are latent in what has been" (*AP* 392 [K 2, 3]).

The past that Benjamin now has in mind is no longer solely the archaic one of *Urgeschichte*: each historical moment, in its own time (thus discontinuously and intermittently), can be brought "into the higher concretion of now-being [*Jetztsein*] (waking being!)," attaining "a higher grade of actuality than it had in the moment of its existing" (*AP* 392). In the dialectical image, the principle of interpenetration between past and present must be understood in a strong sense, analogous to spatial and imaginal interpenetration: it is not merely a form that evokes certain features of the past, or a situation in which there is a bit of the old and a bit of the new, but a constellation in which both past and present are fully realized—a configuration in which the past is made present with a level of actuality it had never previously reached. It is in this strong sense of *Durchdringung* that we must also understand the *Dialektik im Stillstand* described in fragment N 3, 1: "It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill" (*AP* 463). The dialectical relation of what-has-been to the now is described not as temporal, but as "figural," imaginal in nature (*bildlicher Natur*). The term Benjamin uses to express the figural relation one can encounter in thresholds, between body and image spaces and within dialectical images, is interpenetration.

It is significant that in the first essay on Baudelaire (the one rejected by Adorno), Benjamin repeatedly defines allegory as an interpenetration of antiquity and modernity (*SW 4* 50, 54), taking up an idea already present in the book on *Trauerspiel*, which again suggests a possible analogy with the typological relation between the *figura* and its fulfilment. In any case, Benjamin must consider *Durchdringung* a concept of theological origin, if he defines the practice of the collector as the most binding "of all the profane manifestations of the interpenetration of 'what has been'" (*AP* 883 [h°, 3]), thereby implying an even more binding, non-profane relation of what has been to the now — one in which we may discern a reference to the messianic.

Interpenetration as a principle in architecture, art, film, and literature cannot be understood apart from the historical interpenetration of what has been and the now. Benjamin's *Durchdringung*, so different from Hegel's conception, is not only radically anti-classicist but also compels us to think aesthetics beyond its disciplinary boundaries. Just as the *flâneur* experiences a Parisian square and, at the same time, a Moroccan desert, and just as the reader of Dante is confronted both with an allegory of mystical wisdom and with the concrete human figure of Beatrice, so too the historian who approaches 19th-century Paris dialectically perceives it at the same time in its now-being (*Jetztsein*). Whether it concerns a physical space (*Raum*), an image space (*Bildraum*), or a historical period (*Zeitraum*), the principle of interpenetration demonstrates its emancipatory potential in destroying both their diabolical separateness and their infernal uniformity—in order to open, within the threshold thus created, a space for play. Only by considering these three forms of interpenetration together can one fully bring to light its dialectical character.

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Notes

[1] All quotations from Benjamin are taken from the English editions of the *Selected Writings* (*SW* followed by volume number), *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* (*OGT*), and *The Arcades Project* (*AP*), if the passage is included in these volumes, otherwise the reference is to the German edition of the *Gesammelte Schriften* (*GS* followed by volume number). Translations have sometimes been edited. All excerpts from works in the original language (by Benjamin or other authors) have been translated by me.

[2] Adorno, somewhat forcefully attributing this category already to Hegel, describes the dialectics at a standstill by comparing it to "the experience the eye has when looking through a microscope at a drop of water that begins to teem with life; except that what that stubborn, spellbinding gaze falls on is not firmly delineated as an object but frayed, as it were, at the edges" (Adorno 133).

[3] On porosity, see also: Andrew Benjamin, Bruno, Ujma. According to Déotte (139), Benjamin had already shown an interest in the spatial interpenetration of interior and exterior before his trip to Naples, when in 1912 he visited Palladio's theatre in Vicenza. He found it "truly significant in that it clearly allows for a transition from the street into the building to be staged in the open scene, as the actor moves from the street backdrop to the expansive gate architecture, which can be viewed as a room wall" (*GS6* 277).

[4] Benjamin was disappointed by Wölfflin's lectures, whom he in fact tends not to cite; however, the references to Baroque architecture in the *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* draw on passages in Karl Borinski's book where the latter discusses Wölfflin's concept of the painterly (*malerisch*) (*OGT* 188–189, 202; Borinski 191–193). For more on the relationship between Benjamin and Wölfflin, see Levin.

[5] A few months after the publication of the essay on Naples by Benjamin and Lacis, Ernst Bloch—who had shared their stay in Capri—took up the concept of porosity and applied it to the entire Italian peninsula (*Italy and Porosity*). In doing so, he attempted to subvert the classicist conception of Italy that had dominated German culture since Winckelmann, uncovering instead a Baroque soul whose defining feature lies not in the impermeability of the ideal and its pure lines, but in the blending of diverse traditions. In this "ductile" and "porous" Mediterranean, Bloch also sees a political potential: an alternative to the rigid separation produced in Northern European societies by the division of labour characteristic of advanced capitalism. As has been noted (Smith 247), Bloch employs the notion of porosity in a more generalized, defined and systematic way—elevating it to a philosophical category—but for that very reason Bloch's text loses the porous quality that Benjamin and Lacis' *Denkbild* had.

[6] Although Giedion employs the term *Durchdringung* for the first time in relation to contemporary architecture, on several occasions he compares the latter with Baroque architecture, particularly that of Borromini (Altenhof 826). In his studies on the late Baroque, he anticipates some of his later reflections by referring to a spatial, open architecture that develops relationships between inside and outside, dissolving the individual and leading to an "interlinkage" of the whole of a monadological kind—like Benjamin, Giedion also cites Leibniz (Altenhof 844–845). In a letter to Giedion, Wölfflin writes that "secret lines" lead from his own *Renaissance and Baroque* to Giedion's *Building in France* (Georgiadis 77). Benjamin too, in the *Arcades Project*, thinks of an affinity between the Baroque era and his own time (as well as between the *Trauerspielbuch* and the *Passagen-Werk* itself). It has also been noted how Benjamin's reflections on "Baroque" Naples anticipate those on iron-and-glass Paris (Distaso 13; Buck-Morss 25–27).

[7] In *The Rigorous Study of Art*, the review of Linfert's *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen* in which Benjamin engages with Wölfflin and Riegl, he writes that the new researcher is characterized by being "at home in marginal domains [*Grenzgebieten*]" (*SW2* 670). Again, in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* (5th version WuN), he states that the greater analysability of the performance represented in film "tends to foster the interpenetration of art and science" (*SW4* 265). Also in *The Author as Producer*, Benjamin points to the need to overcome a series of sterile antinomies: 1) re-establishing fruitful contrasts between sciences and fine arts, politics and culture; 2) overcoming the divisions between author and audience, writer and poet, researcher and populariser, author and reader, performer and listener; 3) transforming readers and spectators into collaborators; 4) abolishing the adialectical opposition between individual and mass; 5) breaking down the barrier between writing and image; 6) eliminating the opposition between technique and content. In this text, one can discern a broader—methodological—need to abolish rigid barriers and compartmentalisations, which, however, does not aim at mediated reconciliation, but rather at keeping "fruitful contrasts" alive (*SW2* 771–772).

[8] In Fourier's utopia, Benjamin notes, the arcades become spaces of dwelling rather than mere spaces of transit. In the image of the phalanstery as a "city of arcades" (*AP* 5), one finds another model of the interpenetration between collective spaces—where iron-and-glass architecture had been experimented with—and spaces of dwelling, the domain of the *intérieur*. Significantly, it is again through Fourier that Benjamin rethinks in a playful form the relationship between first nature (love and death) and second nature (society and technology) (*AP* 134–135).

[9] In this essay, body space is understood in a strongly haptic sense. Benjamin also connects interpenetration to "innervation," a concept he draws from Freud's early writings (Freud 539).

[10] This is the passage immediately preceding the one quoted by Benjamin. In the one that follows directly after, we read that only Dante, among the poets of the *stil novo*, "was able to describe those esoteric happenings in such a way as to make us accept them as authentic reality even where the motivations and allusions are quite baffling."

[11] Agamben (73–75) had already pointed out the affinity between Benjamin's conception of history and Paul's typological paradigm. More recently, Arigone argued that the allegory described by Benjamin in *Origin of German Trauerspiel* can be identified with the *figura* studied by Auerbach—an identification that has been at least partially challenged by Guastini. Like *figura*, Benjamin's allegory possesses a historical index and retains its material (despite the destruction of its organic connections); yet, like Hellenistic allegory, it has an arbitrary, erudite, and rhetorical character, having been stripped of the theological framework that grounded *figura*.

[12] This instance will be taken up and reworked especially in novels such as *Austerlitz* by W.G. Sebald (in which photographic images serve as a counterpoint to the text) and in the films of Harun Farocki, whose voice-over commentary and overwritten text interpenetrate almost all the images (Pantenburg).

[13] In particular, it is characters such as Iago or Polonius—whose genealogy can be traced back to figures like the fool (*Narr*) and the rogue (*Schalk*)—that allow comedy to pass over into drama (*OGT* 125). Cassirer (referring, among other things, to the *Symposium*) likewise attributes to the English tradition, and to Shakespeare in particular, a conception in which comedy is not separate from tragedy but interpenetrates with it (Cassirer 177). On this, see Trotta (232), who identifies Hermann Cohen's *Aesthetics* as a possible shared source. For more on Benjamin and Shakespeare, see Barale.

[14] In an earlier version, Benjamin refers to "wish images in which the new and the old interpenetrate in fantastic fashion" (*AP* 893).

[15] Giedion (120) sees in the museum an example of the 19th century's "inclination to allow itself to be interpenetrated by the past," with "its gaze turned backward" (like the angel of history!). Commenting on this quote, Benjamin adds: "This thirst for the past forms something like the principal object of my analysis" (*AP* 407 [L 1a, 2]).

[16] Szondi was among the first to observe the importance of the concept of ambiguity in Benjamin, from *The Origin of the German Trauerspiel* to the *Arcades Project* (Szondi 51–52): *Zweideutigkeit* would represent the necessary but not sufficient condition for the dialectical leap that the young Benjamin called paradox, and which in the *Arcades Project* he names 'awakening'.

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