

Original Research Article

Reading the Text as Flanerie across Urban Landscapes (The Case of *One Way Street* and *The Arcades Project*)

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Abstract | Walter Benjamin, a philosopher, and theorist associated with Frankfurt School, is known as one of the leading figures in studies about urban modernity. The point that “modern city” is the central theme of many of Benjamin’s works, has been investigated in several studies. However, what has been mostly neglected is the influence of visual/spatial qualities of the modern city on shaping Benjamin’s method for thinking, thereby writing, and forming the perceptive experience of readers while facing such texts. The present research, which is qualitative and fundamental research based on qualitative content analysis, correlates the origins of visual and spatial qualities in Benjamin’s writings with his interest in images and his studies on visual arts and the visual culture of the modern city. Concentrating on two chief works by Benjamin about city, *One Way Street* and *The Arcades Project*, the article tries to review the specifications of this method of writing. It is discussed that as Benjamin considers “flaneur” as the archetype of modernity who wanders across the urban landscapes, his writing method recalls a reader who seeks flanerie among textual landscapes. This research seeks to understand what perceptive qualities emerge for the audience-flaneur among the urban landscapes of Benjamin’s texts that distinguish this experience from the experiences of reading traditional forms of text? Thereafter, it is concluded that in opposition to traditional forms of reading based on the perception of an isolated, motionless, concentrated subject, the flanerie-like encounter with the text is a distracted reading which is shaped in an absent-mindedness condition. The subject of such a reading is a collective, corporeal, and moving subject. In this regard and while reading, the audience experiences the text through collective corporeality, similar to the mass experience of the modern metropolis.

Keywords | *Walter Benjamin, Urban Landscapes, Flanerie, Montage of Images, One Way Street, The Arcades Project.*

Introduction | In recent years, the ideas and writings of German thinker and theorist, Walter Benjamin, have been central to studies associated with urban modernity¹; studies that specifically deal with the visual/spatial features of modern metropolises². Benjamin himself believed that the ideal manifestation of modernity could be found in the modern metropolis. He thought that by concentrating on the phenomena of everyday life and studying the urban popular culture, a more accurate understanding of the concept of modernity and modern perception³ could be achieved. The point that “modern city” is the central theme of many of Benjamin’s works, has been investigated in several studies. Meanwhile, what has been mostly neglected is the influence of visual/spatial qualities of the modern city on shaping Benjamin’s method for thinking, thereby writing, and forming the perceptive experience of readers while facing such texts. This article focuses on the fact that Benjamin’s texts which are related to the city, possess high similarity with modern urban landscapes and spaces, and his writings represent particular visual and spatial characteristics inspired by cityscapes’ qualities. The article traces back the origins of such a textual visuality in Benjamin’s personal interest in images and modern cityscapes and his studies on visual arts as well. Concentrating on two chief works by Benjamin about the city, *One Way Street* and *The Arcades Project*, the article tries to review the specifications of this method of writing. It is discussed that as Benjamin considers “flaneur” as the archetype of modernity who wanders across the urban landscapes, his writing method recalls a reader who seeks flanerie among textual landscapes. The research attempts to answer this question: While meeting cityscape-like texts provided by Benjamin, which perceptive qualities appear for a flaneur reader that makes such a distinguished experience compared to traditional forms of reading texts? Stated differently, in comparison to the mental experience of the reader while facing a traditional text, how does such a corporeal and multi-sensory experience of a flaneur reader floating amid Benjamin’s texts affect the process of perception? How does the flaneur reader interacting with urban-like texts by Benjamin transform from a mere receiver into an active contributor to the formation of meaning?

Regarding recent great acceptance of the idea of “flanerie” in social, philosophical, cultural, urban, and cinema studies, it seems important and necessary to research the characteristics of flanerie in relation to the experience of reading literary works. Moreover, since many theorists of cinema and urban studies have recently reread the distinct perceptive features of flanerie, the present research tries to examine the specifications of flanerie amid textual cityscapes with the aid of such rereadings.

Literature Review

In Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City, Graeme Gilloch draws attention to the characteristics of experiencing urban spaces as one of the principal themes in Benjamin’s works. From Gilloch’s perspective, not only Benjamin attempted to present a report of urban experience and urban relations in his writings, but also he was trying to imprint the metropolitan experiences through his texts and motivate some effects similar to the experiences of a flaneur in his readers (Gilloch, 1996, 19). Gilloch observes the correspondence and similarities between the characteristics of Benjamin’s writings and those qualities generated in the city and believes that Benjamin adopts a different creative method of writing as “the text-as-city” in confrontation with “the city-as-text” (ibid., 5). In the same manner, in *Body and Image Space: Rereading Walter Benjamin* Sigrid Weigel states that Benjamin imports the urban spaces and landscapes into his textual geography and makes them the structural elements of his works (Weigel, 1996, 35). Another example is the book *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* where Miriam Hansen focuses on the outcome of such assimilation of urban features in Benjamin’s texts and concludes that through Benjamin’s writings, the text turns into a “three-dimensional, public” urban space which is stimulated by urban rhythms (Hansen, 2012, 152). From Hansen’s standpoint, in Benjamin’s works, the text calls the reader for movement and flanerie and the act of reading transforms into something “Kinetic” based on “haptic experience” (ibid., 152). As mentioned by Keith Tester in the introduction of *The Flaneur*, prior to Benjamin, flanerie was seen as a “literary style” in Baudelaire’s works as well and had been applied by Baudelaire as “one of the main narrative devices of the Paris Spleen” (Tester, 2014, 1). Regarding Benjamin’s essay about Naples, Susan Buck-Morss argues in *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* that this text is about the images “gathered by a person walking the streets of a city” (Buck-Morss, 1989, 27). Also, in her comprehensive study on this subject, *The Art of Taking a Walk*, Anke Gleber draws attention to Benjamin’s writing method “by way of images” (Gleber, 1998, 6).

Notwithstanding the fact that through mentioned studies, the corporeal nature of perception and the quality of readers’ bodily dynamism and movement while meeting Benjamin’s city-related texts are observed and some theorists have acknowledged the perceptive resemblance between what happens to the audience of Benjamin’s texts and the stroller of the modern city, the author of this article believes that there are still undiscussed possibilities for more detailed study and analysis concerning the perceptive features of the reader wandering among

textual images and cityscapes. Hence, and by rereading the theorists' ideas on the concept of flânerie, the article tries to assess the characteristics of such a meeting with text. Highlighting the image-based nature of Benjamin's thoughts and the representation of this nature in his writing method, the article attempts to compare the readers' encounter with textual images in two chief works by Benjamin with what a flâneur experiences while encountering the modern city's images. Given the importance of the concept of flânerie in recent years, this research can contribute to literary, urban, cinematic, and philosophical studies and highlight an alternative type of text perception that does not focus on the meanings of the text but draws upon a distracting perceptive experience while meeting scattered and multiple textual images. It is also worth noticing that Benjamin's ideas and writings could be interpreted as a primary model for interdisciplinary studies which encompass a diverse spectrum of social and cultural issues relevant to modern life. Following such a model and by expanding the borders of knowledge, these interdisciplinary researches could provide an opportunity to examine issues through diverse perspectives from different fields. By opening the traditional borders of fields to each other, these kinds of researches develop the capacities of every participating field.

Research Method

The present study is a fundamental research "in foundation" and a deductive research "in logic". Fundamental research is conducted to create, clarify, and develop theories and is not concerned with executive issues (Hafeznia, 2018). The method for this study is based on content analysis. Generally, in content analysis, required data are compiled, classified, and analyzed. The content analysis could be quantitative, qualitative, or a combination of both. According to the research approach and the subject matter, the qualitative content is analyzed in this study. In fact, data for this study were collected from library resources, and data analysis, for the most part, is relied on qualitative interpretations. The criterion for analysis and interpretation is thinking and reasoning.

Theoretical Framework

Benjamin's focus on modern metropolises and subjects like flâneur, shapes a significant part of his massive exploration of modernity. In his writings, he regards the flâneur as "the mythological ideal type of modern subjectivity" (Jennings, 2013, 206) and associates the emergence of this concept with Baron Haussmann's renovation of Paris (Lynes, Kelly & Uppal, 2019, 4). Reading Benjamin's writings about the concept of "flâneur", several contradictions could nevertheless be noticed. In his texts, Benjamin sometimes

talks of the concentrated perception and astute look of the flâneur which is reminiscent of a detective and sometimes highlights his/her absent-mindedness and distracted perception. Sometimes he refers to the flâneur's contemptuous critical view of the phantasmagoric scope of the modern metropolis, and sometimes to his intoxication and bewilderment in meeting this phantasmagoric scope. In some of his writings, a stroller individual is depicted who knows the urban map in full detail, dominant over the urban scope, while in his other texts, he points out the flâneur's desire for getting lost in the chaos and delirium of the sensational geography within the metropolis. The flâneur, in one frame, is an isolated subject, distanced from the urban crowd, and in the next frame, we meet a flâneur absorbed in the flux of the urban crowd who is experiencing a mass body in amalgamation with the crowd. Such contradictory ideas about the identity of "flâneur" have resulted in the appearance of opposing readings and interpretations in some cases. Although these opposing and seemingly divergent ideas and perspectives shape one of the main features of Benjamin's thought and philosophy, in relation to defining the concept of "flâneur," his inspirations from diverse sources like writings of Charles Baudelaire, Edgar Allan Poe, Franz Hessel and Surrealists should not be overlooked. But Benjamin's ideas on distracted perception, the multi-sensory nature of the flâneur's perception, the experience of amalgamation with the urban mass, etc., have gained more attention by theorists in recent years. As the author of this article observes, this aspect of Benjamin's issues possesses more capacity for opening new horizons in urban, literary, and cinema studies. Furthermore, the author believes that instead of attempting to explain the concept of "flâneur" and presenting a certain precise definition for it, it seems more important to focus on the corporeal wandering nature of the act of "flânerie" and notice the distinct quality of "spectatorship" through flânerie walking. Notwithstanding several recent pieces of research conducted into a rereading of the characteristics of flânerie, the strolling encounter of readers with text has been rarely discussed. It is attempted in this study to figure out and analyze the experience of facing Benjamin's writings through an interdisciplinary approach derived from these multiple fields. Recent rereadings associated with the concept of flânerie, especially those done by theorists of urban studies and cinema studies, which emphasize the multi-sensory corporeal nature of flâneur, are central to the author of this article. On the other side, "flânerie" is one of the components of the theoretical framework for this study. Such a method of analysis possesses an "in-between" nature wandering between different study fields (Özgen-Tuncer, 2018, 15-16). From this standpoint, the research stands on the junction of urban studies, cinema

studies, literary studies, and cultural studies. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach, the present research attempts to reveal that Benjamin's visual method of thinking and writing, which itself has been greatly influenced by the visual and spatial qualities of the modern metropolis, creating an experience for the audience that is very close to the perception of the flaneur while encountering modern city images and landscapes. In this respect, the research explains the importance of flanerie for Benjamin initially as a new form of perception emerged from the heart of modern metropolises. Thereupon, the visual nature of Benjamin's thought, inspired majorly by his experiences of flanerie among images and landscapes of modern metropolises besides his personal interest in visual arts and vast studies in this field, would be studied and examined. In the following section, it is clarified how these two categories (the importance of flanerie and visuality in Benjamin's thought) have been effective in shaping the form and structure of writing of the two prominent urban works of Benjamin, *One Way Street*, and *The Arcades Project*. They have shaped a kind of text, which contrasts with the traditional and dominant patterns. The last part of the research examines the perceptive features and characteristics developed in readers while facing such visual texts that display similarities with the flanerie experience across the city. In other words, the effect of flaneur perception in constructing the meaning of the text is assessed and analyzed (Fig. 1).

The Importance of Flanerie and Visuality in Benjamin's Thought and Ideas

During the 19th century, the emergence and development of modern metropolises had formed a novel visual and

spatial culture which held distinguished characteristics compared to traditional communities and cities. Plurality, chaos, movement, and dynamism were the features of this novel visual culture of urban modernity: "Amid the unprecedented turbulence of the big city's traffic, noise, billboards, street signs, jostling crowds, window displays, and advertisements, the individual faced a new intensity of sensory stimulation. The metropolis subjected the individual to a barrage of impressions, shocks, and jolts" (Singer, 2001, 35). Visual and spatial qualities of the modern metropolis had caused a totally distinctive perceptual state for citizens and Charles Baudelaire described those specifications in his writings and poems in a fine manner. Baudelaire himself strolled around the modern Paris observing its emerging visual cityscapes as a flaneur and enjoyed facing its attractions. The particular qualities of modern urban images and landscapes provided Baudelaire with not only the "visual and mobile but also fleeting and ephemeral" perception (Schwartz, 2001, 1733). Such ephemerality and momentariness of the modern city are depicted perfectly in the piece "To a Passerby (A une passante)" by Baudelaire. Amid the urban mobile mass, a black-dressed woman appears unexpectedly in front of the poet, makes him fall in love with her, and then disappears; it is an image that its appearance is intertwined with its disappearance (Weber, 1996, 41). It is a fleeting beauty that sparkles at once and instantly fades away. In his writings, Walter Benjamin frequently refers to this piece by Baudelaire and introduces it as a brilliant manifestation of the essence of modern experience. In *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*, Benjamin mentions a crucial point concerning this piece. He claims that the passing woman is the emergent manifestation of

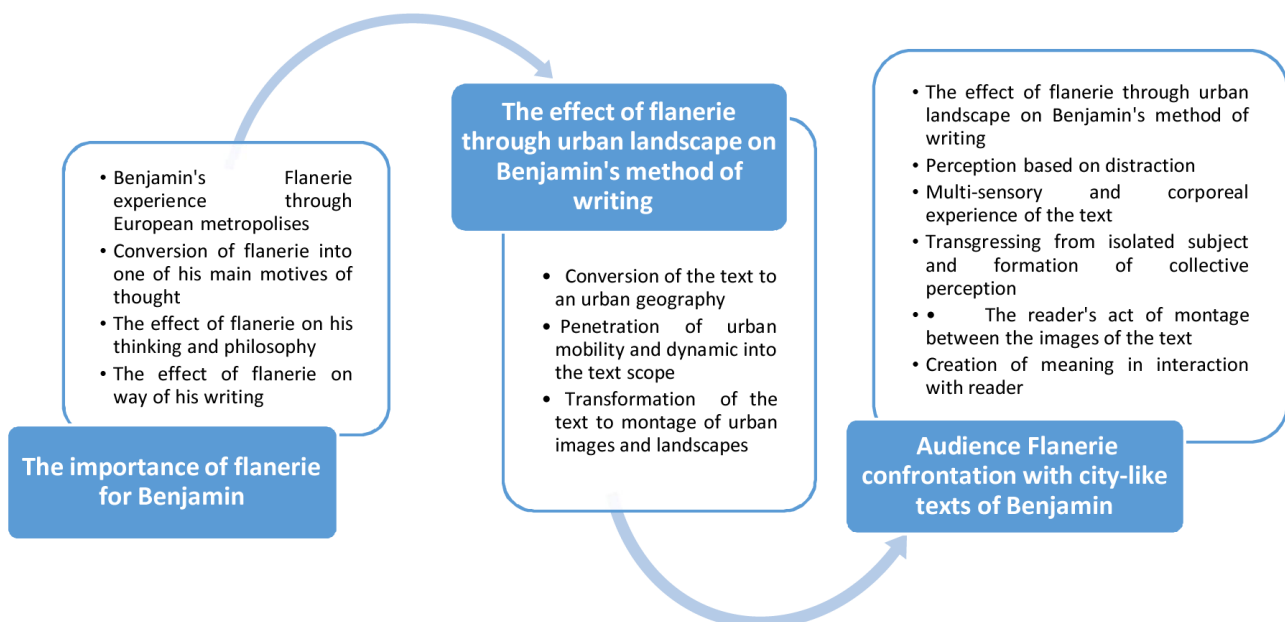


Fig. 1. Conceptual Model of the Research. Resource: Authors.

the urban crowd mass: "The masses were an agitated veil, and Baudelaire views Paris through this veil. In the sonnet *A une passante*, the crowd is nowhere named in either word or phrase. Yet all the action hinges on it, just as the progress of a sailboat depends on the wind" (Benjamin, 1998, 41). The meeting of poet and the woman, and subsequently the meeting of poet and the urban mass, exhibits the most significant characteristic of the modern urban experience for Baudelaire. As he states, the urban experience is substantially intoxicating (Salzani, 2009, 54-55), and in his writings, the modern city is regarded as an environment for dreaming and poetic creation before the eyes of the flâneur. In the essay "*The Painter of Modern Life*," Baudelaire respects the flâneur as the hero of modern life and writes: "For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite" (Baudelaire, 2005, 143). Influenced by Baudelaire, Benjamin claimed that the character of flâneur is the real subject of modernity. The curious look of flâneur was after revealing the beauty of modern city's landscapes; a beauty derived by modernization processes and the development of metropolises. In his real life, Benjamin was "a peripatetic philosopher" constantly traveling from one European city to another (Berlin, Paris, Naples, Moscow, etc.) (Hanssen, 2006, 2). Hannah Arendt argues that flânerie was Benjamin's mindset and even the tempo and rhythm of his thinking was set to this attitude (Salzani, 2009, 61). Benjamin highlights the cinematic quality of flânerie experience and writes: "Couldn't an exciting film be made from the map of Paris? From the unfolding of its various aspects in temporal succession? ... And does the flâneur do anything different?" (Benjamin, 1999, 83). Benjamin believed that facing the plurality and multiplicity of the modern city's visual/spatial attractions, the flâneur loses the ability to concentrate on a certain image or subject and instead, experiences a kind of perception based on transience condition and confusion among images and cityscapes. He calls such a novel perceptive state arisen through the rise of metropolises, as "distracted perception" and notices the similarities between the distracted perception of the modern city's flâneur and the reception in the distraction of the film spectator. As the film spectator is not given the opportunity to focus on a single image while watching the rapid succession of cinematic images, the urban flâneur cannot consequently concentrate on a certain image and is relentlessly subjected to a sense of distraction while facing the raid of urban images. Distracted perception is a kind of prelinguistic⁴ and sensational perceptive state that prevents the flâneur from logical rational distinction. Benjamin's concept of flânerie was also influenced by Surrealists' ideas about the

perceptual experience of modern metropolises. Surrealists supposed the delirium-like intoxicating characteristic of the modern city, makes it appear as a dreamy spectrum before the flâneur's eyes. They also observed the intoxicated state of flâneur, which resulted in "loosening" the boundaries of identity and mingling the flâneur's subjectivity with urban spaces (Hanssen, 2006, 6). The flâneur was passing from his distant isolated status to mingling with and absorbing in the urban landscapes. Benjamin also notices the flâneur's passion for getting absorbed in the sensational intensity of the modern metropolis; therefore, it could be argued that from Benjamin's perspective, the flâneur's perception is not a mere visual perception and includes a corporeal multi-sensory experience (Berard, 2018, 103). Benjamin's approach toward reading city as a text was flânerie itself. He believed that before the eyes of flâneur, the city turns into an open book consisted of discrete, ephemeral momentary images. In addition, flânerie could be considered as a writing strategy for Benjamin. Such a writing method based on images and cityscapes, helped Benjamin incorporate the visual and sensory features of the modern city into his text and impart them to his readers. Since Benjamin was influenced considerably by Baudelaire, who was himself a fervent advocate of modern city images, images acquired a fundamental status in Benjamin's thought. Baudelaire's passion for images derived mostly from the environment he used to live in: the emerging visual manifestations of modern Paris that he would walk across them as a flâneur and get engrossed in the effects and attractions. Benjamin's fascination with and devotion to images is a key point in his way of thinking and method of writing that stands against the Western philosophical tradition in which images were denied in favor of words. Humiliating images and preferring the verbal to the visual have been ingrained in Western philosophy and date back to ancient Greek philosophy. In his turn to pay tribute to images, Benjamin was especially influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche, who praised image, imagination, and imagery in philosophy (Hanssen, 2006, 8 & Salzani, 2009, 16). Rolf Tiedemann, who edited some of Benjamin's works, mentions that what distinguishes the mid and late work periods of Benjamin from the early periods is the presence of some kind of visuality in Benjamin's late style for thinking and writing (Weber, 1996, 28). While early works of Benjamin (during the first years of the 1920s) are complicated and hard-to-understand in literary style, his interest in the city and urban culture reshaped gradually his writing method and domains of interest (Jennings, 2013, 208) his writing method and domains of interest (Jennings, 2013, 208) gradually. Benjamin's obsession with urban popular culture is generally neglected in dominant academic

discourses associated with him and this aspect of Benjamin's thought is regarded as "a black hole" (Jennings, 2009, 320-321). Nevertheless, Benjamin was an advocate of urban popular culture: "He loved old toys, postage stamps, picture postcards, and such playful miniaturizations of reality as the winter world inside a glass globe that snows when it is shaken" (Sontag, 2010, 104). He was also keen on reading detective novels, children's picture books, and serial writings. He gradually turned his personal interest in urban popular culture into a serious subject for reflection on urban modernity, arguing that these seemingly mundane cultural objects had a revealing power in relation to the nature of modernity. Children's picture books were of great importance in Benjamin's collection. He was captivated by the childish gaze dedicated to the magical images of such books. He thought the pictures in these books presented a "mysterious topography" that absorbed the reader-child, and the border between reader and text would be faded as a result. Leaving the contemplative status and observable distance, the child moves toward the magical scope of images. Such an encounter of child-reader with the magic of these books seemed appealing to Benjamin and played a key role in shaping his writing method (Hanssen, 2006, 7 & Jennings, 2013, 206).

"Thinking-in-images" was Benjamin's unique technique in confronting modernity that signified "the encoding of meanings in images" (Weigel, 1996, 8). Such a technique emerged through his studies and interest in painting, visual arts, and especially, new technologies of photography and cinema, and evolved progressively (Weigel, 2015, 345-347). Benjamin's writings are replete with references to different painters: Giotto, Grünewald, Bosch, Raphael, Rembrandt, Holbein, Hokusai, Courbet, Ensor, Cézanne, Kandinsky, Chagall, de Chirico, Dalí, Grosz, etc. Moreover, he has written pieces about photographers like Nadar, Atget and Sander as well (Ibid, 346). Inspired by his obsession with thinking through images, the concept of "Thought-Images" becomes a pivotal idea in Benjamin's following writings. The piece "Angel of History" is one of the most famous of these thought-images in "Theses on the Philosophy of History", which Benjamin shapes using the painting of *Angelus Novus* by Paul Klee. Two of Benjamin's celebrated works associated with the city, *One Way Street* and *The Arcades Project*, have been composed through organization and montage of thought-images.

Montage of Images and Metropolitan Cityscapes in *One Way Street* and *The Arcades Project*

In *One Way Street*, Benjamin focuses on the characteristics of visual culture in the modern city and examines the form of thought-image for the first time. The book is primarily

published in 1928, consisted of sixty short pieces, sixty thought-image. The pieces deal with subjects like spaces and cityscapes of the modern city, everyday life dreams, and in general, the urban modern life experiences. The influence of Surrealists' ideas and works on Benjamin's method of writing is obvious. Not following a linear narrative order, thought images in this book are juxtaposed in a non-systematic order resembling the distracted images and discrete landscapes of the city (Richter, 2006, 134). In the "Construction Site" piece, Benjamin notices the euphoria of kids who ramble through the ruins of a construction site, getting pleasure from joining the destroyed fragments to form a new structure (Ibid, 135): "In using these things, they do not so much imitate the works of adults as bring together, in the artifact produced in play, materials of widely differing kinds of a new, intuitive relationship" (Benjamin, 2010, 14). Similar to children who connect the fragments of ruin and build up a new configuration in their joyful play, in *One Way Street*, Benjamin accumulates detached irrelevant items and shapes his work's structure accordingly. He also invites his audience to personally establish links between the scattered pieces of the text, like the child playing with the fragments of ruin, and reach different meanings and ideas from those of the author's intention by assembling the pieces and creating new compositions. In other words, while reading the text "the readers do not read words in the conventional meaning. They create it, or they must rather create it" (Ahmadi, 2010, 51).

Benjamin believed that the traditional writing methods had lost their authority in facing the chaos and delirium of modern metropolises. Such an emerging situation triggered the demolition and disintegration of traditional borders of books. Benjamin mentions the effects of being bombarded by modern city's images and landscapes on the audience's perception and writes: "And before a contemporary finds his way clear to opening a book, his eyes have been exposed to such a blizzard of changing, colorful, conflicting letters that the chances of his penetrating the archaic stillness of the book are slight" (Huysen, 2015, 145). Adopting a special strategy in *One Way Street*, Benjamin tries to incorporate urban dynamism and mobility into the text's environment and break the traditional order and stillness of the book. By this means, the flat space of the book turns into a multi-dimensional complicated active space; the experience of urban shocks and emotional impressions are reproduced for readers, and finally, the experience of reading text reminds the experience of flanerier across the city.

One Way Street indicates the evolution of Benjamin's image-based writing style in generating a dynamic interaction between *the visual* and *the verbal* (Huysen, 2015, 118-130). László Moholy-Nagy, the Hungarian

artist and one of the Bauhaus schoolmasters, had chiefly influenced Benjamin in this regard. Benjamin would follow and read meticulously the works and writings by Moholy-Nagy. This influence is apparently seen in *Little History of Photography* where Benjamin discusses issues on the image, photographic image, and camera's optical unconscious (Molderings & Brogden, 2014, 323). Referring to the importance of "reading images" in the modern world, Benjamin quotes from Moholy-Nagy: "The illiteracy of the future ... will be ignorance not of reading or writing, but of photography" (Benjamin, 2019, 202). Combining textual and visual elements and through a cinematic approach, Moholy-Nagy in *Dynamic of the Metropolis* had attempted to provoke the audience by the sense of encountering urban landscapes. Facing such a text, the reader-spectator would not be able to focus on any of the separate distracting elements. It is a writing style that generates the state of absent-mindedness and distraction of reading in readers. The relation between the verbal and the visual in *One Way Street* reveals the influence of Moholy-Nagy on Benjamin vividly. In this book, the very existence of text mutates from the systematic state of language to the chaos of urban visuality. What comes to the front level of significance is not merely the transfer of meaning, yet inducing a sense of urban mobility and dynamism in the audience. Benjamin, in *This Space for Rent*, writes: "The 'unclouded,' 'innocent' eye has become a lie... Today the most real, mercantile gaze into the heart of things is the advertisement. It tears down the stage upon which contemplation moved... What, in the end, makes advertisements so superior to criticism? Not what the moving red neon sign says—but the fiery pool reflecting in the asphalt" (Benjamin, 2010, 63-64). In this respect, what is of great importance for Benjamin in the modern world's perception is "not language, but image" (Taussig, 1991, 147). Benjamin's fascination with and devotion to prelinguistic perception through the experience of the modern city is evident in another piece of *One Way Street*. He observes in "Si Parla Italiano": "I sat at night in violent pain on a bench. Opposite me on another, two girls sat down. They seemed to want to discuss something in confidence and began to whisper. Nobody except me was nearby, and I would not have understood their Italian, however loud it had been. But now I could not resist the feeling, in face of this unmotivated whispering in a language inaccessible to me, that a cool dressing was being applied to the painful place" (Benjamin, 2010, 71).

Benjamin had alluded to the connection and similarity between *The Arcades Project* and *One Way Street* in many cases. They are specifically similar in the montage of thought images and they both represent "a veritable gallery of modernity's visual culture" (Bruno, 2008, 152).

Benjamin, through *The Arcades Project*, regards Paris as the capital of the 19th century and concentrates on the characteristics of Parisian urban life. For Benjamin, the experience of Paris was a mediated experience based on rereading Baudelaire's experiences in Paris. Expressed in different words, Baudelaire acted like a Virgil whom Benjamin, like Dante, walked after him through the labyrinths of Paris. The onset of the project was an essay on Parisian arcades, arising and developing during the first half of the 19th century, covered with glass and iron ceilings. This work, like *One Way Street*, contains a vast spectrum of titles and subjects: "the poor, revolution, gaslighting, urban renewal, fashion, trains, catacombs, apartments, panoramas, the Stock Exchange, department stores, photography, museums, exhibitions" (Schwartz, 2001, 1730). The delightful experience of flânerie among Parisian cityscapes had excruciatingly mesmerized Benjamin that he confessed in a letter that even his reading time had been captured by it and there had been no time left for reading (Richter, 2006, 136). To Benjamin, Paris was a city imbued with dreams; a city that taught him "the art of straying" (Sontag, 2010, 93). Prior to Benjamin, Nietzsche had a similar experience in facing Paris. As he writes in *Ecce Homo*: "As an artist, one can have no other home in Europe than Paris; the délicatesse in all five artistic senses ...the psychological morbidity, is only to be found in Paris" (Nietzsche, 2002, 79). In a letter, Benjamin mentions clearly that "the entire project of the Passagen-Werk is seemingly entirely dependent on his actual physical presence in Paris" (Marder, 2006, 188); a constantly fluid city, "the city that never stops moving" (Newmark, 2018, 18). Writing the pieces, the dynamic atmosphere of Paris penetrated the atmosphere of the text by degrees, distributing across the book's geography. It is necessary to mention that the physical city of Paris and its characteristics are one side of the city considered by Benjamin and the other Paris existed in Benjamin's mind through his studies in books and documents (at Paris National Library). Therefore, *The Arcades Project* is the product of two kinds of flânerie undertaken by Benjamin: strolling among the modern spaces of Paris, and simultaneously, wandering across the textual city erected from National Library resources (Salzani, 2009, 61 & Marder, 2006, 188-189 & Richter, 2006, 136).

The Arcades Project, as a process of collecting scattered pieces of different texts, is formally at odds with the traditional concept of book writing. In the section "On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress", Benjamin explains his writing method in *The Arcades Project*: "Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't say anything. Merely show" (Benjamin, 2017, 97). He alludes to this method of montage once more in this section: "The first stage in this undertaking will

be to carry over the principle of montage into history. That is, to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components” (ibid., 99). Benjamin applied such a method based on compiling and assembling heterogeneous components and fragments, primarily in a work submitted to earn the qualification of a university instructor. Entitled *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* (1925), the work was rejected by the academic community. A few months prior to the academic judgment session, Benjamin writes in a letter to Gershom Scholem (1924): “Yet what surprises me most of all at this time is that what I have written consists, as it were, almost entirely of quotations. It is the craziest mosaic technique you can imagine and, as such, may appear so odd for a work of this kind that I will probably touch up the fair copy in places” (Benjamin, 1994, 256). Such a writing style was in blatant contrast with the accepted method of writing and thereupon, the academic community, with its traditional criteria, found Benjamin’s work impenetrable. Being disapproved by the work, one of the community members announced: “unable, despite repeated efforts, to get any understandable meaning out of it” (Schwartz, 2001, 1724). This critical quotation suggests a momentous point concerning Benjamin’s text: Despite the focus and concentration applied while reading the text, the reader would not be able to seize and capture the meaning. In other words, the text eludes being dominated by the audience.

Since montage is a cinematic technique based on the ordering of images, Benjamin’s montage-based method of writing, puts the emphasis on *the visual* through the text. The technique emerged essentially as a result of developing modern metropolitan spaces. Applying such a technique, Benjamin succeeded in reproducing a sense of modern urban experience in his text. The achievement of Benjamin’s montage-based methodology is a self-explosive text founded on distraction and discontinuity. This semi-cinematic writing style recalls a montage-like reading method and a perception similar to that one of the cinema audience as well.

Reading Benjamin’s works as flanerie across urban landscapes

Incorporating metropolitan characteristics into the books’ atmosphere, *The Arcades Project* and *One Way Street* obtain distinctive textual specifications that make them impenetrable if read in a static, distant, concentrated state. To feel the essence of the text, it is needed to wander across its spectacles. Applying such a writing method, Benjamin calls up a kind of reading experience in which the reader turns into a part of the urban environment. It is an environment in which the boundary between the subject (reader-flaneur) and object (text-city) becomes faded. The

reader “... must literally stroll through the labyrinthine, city-like text, collecting his or her booty amid Benjamin’s notes, transcriptions and aphorisms” (Salzani, 2009, 61). The text melts the urban chaos in itself and possesses “a mysterious geometry” (Gourgouris, 2006, 203). This chaos and mysterious geometry disintegrate perspectives ruthlessly and prevent the reader from holding a certain standpoint based on distance. Encountering such an agitated “textual sea” with persistently changing directions and patterns of tides, reaching a permanent stable status for reading seems impossible (Ibid, 202). A sense of agitation in orientation and dissolution of time and space is generated in the audience in a way that the text becomes unconquerable. The reader is obliged to adopt a new position in every moment of this agitated encounter. According to Benjamin, meaning should not be something predetermined and confined in the text that is obtainable by the intelligent concentrated audience, but the meaning is constructed through intertwinement of text and audience and the emergence of meaning, subsequently, recalls an interactive process, as the interactive two-sided relation between the flaneur and city, both playing a key role in the shape and completion of the other. This kind of interactive, participatory process resists the dominant pattern of perception for writing and producing knowledge in the academic systems, which recalls the audience’s concentration, attention, and soberness. There is no chance to capture the meaning; the text must be “felt”, “touched” and “experienced” in its transient disappearing condition. Benjamin believed that the presumption for the modern experience and cognition is the sensational perception and tactile knowledge of the city’s labyrinths. It is a kind of instinctive perception based on touch and unmediated corporeal and sensational experience, which does not leave a room for rational analysis or perspective distancing. Applying Benjamin’s ideas on flaneur, the difference between a mole’s perception and a bird’s could be regarded as well (Gunning, 1997, 38). Whereas the panoramic sight of the bird sees everything from a distance and organizes the whole landscape in a single frame, the mole moves in dark, gloomy tunnels and burrows, and its perception is mostly based on touch rather than sight and vision. This type of approach helps to analyze the flanerie-like encounter with the text. Through this experience, the analyzing look based on distance and wisdom loses its dominance and other senses come onstage. The audience experiences a sort of perception in blindness that is founded on imagination, Sensationalism, and creation, rather than ocular wisdom. Baudelaire had also regarded this point when he declared that the flaneur’s passion for seeing urban images and landscapes makes him hunted by the plurality and abundance of modern city images:

he has “condemned himself to see nothing”. Baudelaire recalls the eyes that “have lost their ability to look” (Buci-Glucksmann, 1994, 75).

Baudelaire believed that flânerie was defined by homelessness, and the flâneur builds up his home amid the chaos and turmoil of the city. Inspired by Baudelaire, Benjamin also emphasizes this point: “The street becomes a dwelling place for the flâneur; he is as much at home among house facades as a citizen is within his four walls (Benjamin, 1996, 19). For Benjamin, the experience of flânerie is mingled with bewilderment, suspension of dominance and control, and demolition of the distance between the subject and object. Encountering the images and cityscapes of these two works by Benjamin, the importance of unconquerable perception based on the bewilderment of the reader-flâneur, becomes palpable; a perception in a devoted fascinated state similar to the flâneur’s perceptive method facing urban landscapes. Whereas the traditional reader, critically analyzes and examines the text from his isolated safe privacy (guarded by his identity, philosophical position, etc.), it is impossible to adopt such a strategy while encountering Benjamin’s texts. Facing the text, the audience, like the flâneur, experiences a condition of homelessness. It is not possible to read the text from a controlling status based on dominance and distance. The audience would not be able to rely on his grounds since the text does not surrender to his understanding and perception. As distinctions and boundaries fade away for the flâneur and he melts his subjectivity within the urban atmosphere, the audience would also abandon his distant position and settle in the middle of urban chaos. “Textual shock” (Gilloch, 1996, 182), result in the destruction of the contemplative reflective atmosphere and generate the experience of “distraction” in the audience. Referring to this concept, Benjamin uses the German term “Zerstreuung” which implies “dispersion” as well. From a terminological standpoint, such a distraction should not be considered solely as a mental-psychic issue, but also a physical-corporeal subject (Weber, 1995, 92). In Benjamin’s thought, the term signifies the corporeal and physiological distraction of flâneur among the spatial layers of the modern city (Eiland, 2003, 62-63). Benjamin writes: “the human body in a state of distraction has no distinct boundary” (Weigel, 1996, 24). He accentuates the physiological entity of this concept in the piece “Theory of Distraction”: “Distraction, like catharsis, should be conceived as a physiological phenomenon, Distraction and destruction [word conjectured] as the subjective and objective sides, respectively, of one and the same process, The relation of distraction to absorption must be examined” (Benjamin, 2006, 141). The connection Benjamin draws between “distraction and destruction”

needs more critical observation. His discussion on the modern flâneur’s distracted perception should be traced back to his explorations around the meaning of “baroque” and his studies associated with German Baroque tragic drama (Vidler, 2000, 87). Samuel Weber, thereupon, argues that: “the tendency toward dispersion that Benjamin discerns in the collective structures specific to the 19th-century metropolis no longer appears to originate with the emergence of urban masses but to go back at least as far as the 17th century in Germany (Weber, 1995, 94–95). Benjamin highlights the notions of “ruin” and “decay” as the shared points of these two eras. In this respect, for him (and prior to him, for Baudelaire), “The baroque becomes modern” (Buci-Glucksmann, 1994, 77). There are multiple examples where Benjamin mentions the connection between *One Way Street* and *The Arcades Project* with the aesthetics of Baroque and refers to the significance of Baroque’s destruction in shaping the structure of this book. He states in *The Arcades Project*: “The book on the Baroque exposed the seventeenth century to the light of the present day. Here, something analogous must be done for the nineteenth century, but with greater distinctness” (Benjamin, 2017, 95). Moreover, based on applying the montage method, the concept of ruin becomes central to the literary style of Benjamin. In such a method, “the fragment” takes priority “over the finished work”, “waste products and detritus” take priority “over the carefully crafted”, and the ruin takes priority over the perfectly completed structure (Jennings, 2013, 209). Through *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin draws attention to the connection between destruction and construction (Gourgouris, 2006, 214-218), and his writing form is shaped through this dialectic relation. In this regard, *The Arcades Project* is called “a massive and spectacular ruin” (Schwartz, 2001, 1721). The destructive components of the text ceaselessly disintegrate the book’s structure. Distracted among the ruins, the text evokes a different reading strategy from the reader. What matters is how the audience interacts with the scattered ruins of the text. Benjamin believed that it was the remains and debris of the ruins that the flâneur of the modern city “is fascinated with collecting” (Emadian, 2017, 77.) Hence, similar to flânerie, the experience of reading could be explained by this condition of being amid the ruins. In other words, reading Benjamin’s writings about the city is analogous to childish strolling and playing among the ruins. Childish play and perception were of magnificent importance for Benjamin’s thought (Leslie, 2018, 145-153). The concept of “play”, from Benjamin’s perspective, was the child’s strategy to overcome the limitations of the real world. He observes two substantial principles in children’s play: destruction and creation. Benjamin believes that children’s play is not only replete with creative

desire to destroy the older order but also is capable of originating new constructions and creations (Gess, 2010, 685-690). Analogous to children who wander freely across the ruins and joyfully create new structures from destroyed pieces and detritus, the audience could also collect and reconfigure the constantly dissolving fragments of the text and reach novel constructions. The reader turns to a child who is a creator, rather than a mere consumer, and, like Dionysus, creates and destroys repeatedly. In this regard, the process of reading these texts could be considered as a dialectic between destruction and creation. Benjamin regards the interaction and dialogue between destruction and creation in relation to the notion of subjectivity and emphasizes “the reconstruction of modern subjectivity out of a ruin aesthetic” (Moltke, 2010, 402). The next step after destruction is the creation of the new subjectivity, but this time, in connection and assimilation with the collective mass. Influenced by Baudelaire, the concept of mass becomes a crucial concept for Benjamin to understand the aesthetics related to modernity. Regarding the flaneur, Baudelaire discussed: “The crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes. His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd” (Baudelaire, 2005, 143). In his reading of Baudelaire’s views on the metropolitan experience, Benjamin points out that Baudelaire’s subjectivity (as the archetype of subjectivity in urban modernity) is essentially in relation to the collective masses of metropolises. The masses that have penetrated his body and become a constructive part of his existence: “As for Baudelaire, the masses were anything but external to him... The masses had become so much a part of Baudelaire... His crowds are always the crowds of a big city...” (Benjamin, 1998, 40). It could be argued that in contrast with the traditional reflective form of reading based on the isolated, motionless, concentrated subject, the flaneur form of reading is shaped in distraction and absent-mindedness. The subject of such a reading is a collective, corporeal, mobile subject. Therefore, through the reading process, we encounter collective corporeality reminiscent of the metropolitan masses’ experience. The experience of reading Benjamin’s texts is the neurostimulation of a collective body. The physical energy and corporeal echo of this collective body distribute over the text and stimulate it. In this way, the sense of distance and separation between reader and text is replaced with a sense of oneness and unity. The audience is no longer a distant contemplative subject. He no longer experiences as an individual but as a collective mass.

Conclusion

In his books related to the city, *One Way Street*, and *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin seeks to integrate the spatial

and emotional qualities of the modern city into his text and writing style. Enjoying these qualities, while the readers face the text, it is as if they are encountering the urban landscapes of a modern city. In the article, it was argued that the perception of Benjamin’s urban texts, more than anything else, requires the audience to do the act of flaneur through the textual-urban spaces and landscapes. As the flaneur moves aimlessly through the urban spaces, and scattered images and urban landscapes distract him from pursuing a predetermined path at any moment, for the wandering audience among the landscapes of these texts, it is possible to move to new and unpredictable paths at any moment. In the face of such a pattern of text writing based on scattered and discrete images, the audience loses the power to focus on a particular image and subject and, like the urban flaneur, experiences a perception based on the state of transition and bewilderment between images and landscapes. Hence, like the distracted experience of the urban flaneur in the face of the multiplicity of images in the text, the reader also feels confused and distracted. Also affected by Surrealists’ ideas about the dreamy quality of the modern city, the dream becomes a key concept in *One Way Street* and *The Arcades Project*. Benjamin incorporates the urban dreamlike quality into his text, and the complexity and multifaceted nature of dreams play a key role in the structural deconstruction of his text. Encountering such a dreamy text, the audience also becomes a dreamer, who subconsciously interacts with the text. As discussed, Benjamin compared flaneur to filmmaking, emphasizing the similarities between flaneur and the process of producing images. Therefore, in the face of the dreamy phantasmagoria of these urban texts, the audience’s imagery power is activated, and they become the creators of dreamy images by settling in the dreamy realms of text images. In addition, for Benjamin, the distracted experience is based not only on mental experience but also on corporeal experience, which is accompanied by physical distraction. It can be argued that Benjamin’s textual images provide the audience with an experience of corporeal dispersion. This experience contrasts with the dominant reading position based on the uniqueness and physical coherence of the audience of traditional texts. As discussed, for Benjamin and Baudelaire, flaneur makes sense as being a part of the mass and shaping a collective subject. Therefore, it can be argued that with the disappearance of boundaries, the audience-spectator enters the text space and integrates it. Benjamin believed that this is formed in the fusion of the reader’s body and the space of the text, in a collective state, and in the process, a collective body is formed. Hence the experience of reading the text is an experience based on feeling and touching as a mass body.

Endnote

1. Studies and topics related to urban modernity deal with the formation and emergence of modern urban environments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and examine the distinctive perceptual qualities created by the emergence of these environments.
2. The term modern metropolis is used in connection with large and densely populated cities that emerged and expanded especially after the Industrial Revolution. These metropolises experienced an unprecedented expansion, especially from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards.
3. The modern period refers to the post-classical period in Europe, which begins approximately around the 15th century with the Renaissance. The emergence of the Renaissance perspective is considered a key cross-section in the emergence of the modern world. This system establishes the position of the human subject as a symbolic unit of measurement of existence and produces a

kind of visual ideology in the face of the environment in which the point of view of the human subject is at the center of the concept of spatial perception.

4. Language, and in particular the manner in which grammatical structures are used, are rooted in the subject, and explain experience through the lens of subjectivity. Linguistic thinking therefore presupposes the agency of a subject. The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche criticizes this tradition of linguistic thinking, and in his philosophy, he praises emotion, sensuality, and instinct. Nietzsche states that the free mind is guided by instincts instead of concepts. He believes that the world can be experienced on a pre-linguistic level, through the body, before the language, outside the limits of language. In recent discussions, some theorists have pointed to the pre-language capacity of images in communicating with the audience (Kennedy, 2002, 87-88).

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