

Walter Benjamin's Dwellings

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Abstract

The present article presents what might be called “benjaminian geography” and relates it to Walter Benjamin’s urban philosophy. Besides introducing the philosopher’s addresses in Paris, the article speculates on such choices as well. It proposes to present elements of the complexity of benjaminian spatiality.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin - Paris – urban philosophy – benjaminian geography – dwellings.

Walter Benjamin’s urban philosophy is first of all a philosophy of location. His urban analyses consist of private and particular worlds, architectural aspects, small inner worlds with their drama, desire and dreams. Benjamin pays close attention to those particularities and condemn – in urban – overall and practical views, such as the great destructive and disciplinary Haussmann’s renovations of Paris in the XIX century, marked by neglect and lack of interest in realities of the past and different city versions.

Benjamin chooses the private and, in urban, very particular locations. Thus, whenever he mentions Paris, he is referring to cafés, galleries, boulevards and other niches of these sort. His search is for the universality which such places are full of and for the legacy they represent. The study of the modern city does not appear in Benjamin thinking as a totality but as elected parts, pieces. They are monads, exemplar individualities, considering the fact that they reveal an era. Benjamin deals with time and space in transition and as tension. There is a perspective of time and space (a social, political, economic, archeological, historical, artistic, technical world).

The benjaminian interpretation of city is against the contiguity and for the ruptures. In the author’s perspective, the continuum and uninterrupted mean a certain unwanted uniformity, so that the ruptures are able to indicate the possibility of something new. Indeed the continuity, the harmony, the totality have been constructed almost always by unique and winner perspectives. This criticism of the continuity concept can be transferred to the city, in which the expression would be the contiguity. The continuum and uninterrupted can also mean a certain passivity regarding the diversity. Taking for instance Paris urban renovation by Hussmann, in the XIX century, which represented a great step towards the development of the “modern progressist”, it is possible to observe – facing such unilateralism – that the fragment represents the denunciation of the continuum. It is the scream against the universal pretensions of such concepts and reforming practices in the city. In this fragment, which differs from the late or post-modernist conception __ and in which imposes itself as unilateral universality absent of utopia __ is represented through the greater and greater distance between the man and his work, as well as the accelerated devaluation of the human being as a result of the mercantilization of social relations. In such a perspective __ as details, weird elements and aspects __ the fragments can become source of denouncement and version.

Considering the benjaminian “geography”, we outline some spatial representations __ geographic scheme images __ which we believe are important for the later development of his philosophy of space.

In any case, it is necessary to emphasize that this philosophy is not explicit by the author, inasmuch as according to Michael Löwy, there is no philosophical system clearly structured in Benjamin: “*There is not, in Benjamin, philosophical system; all his reflections are in the form of essays and fragment [...].*” (LÖWY, 2001, p. 5)

Geography in life: the cities

In alliance with the urban philosophy, the benjaminian geography __ his place and itinerary in the world __ is rooted in a specific concretism (the between wars Jewish), fine-tuned with an interpreting outline: the romantic vision of loss, rupture and fragment.

The benjaminian journey [...] is depicted in an image that is dialectic between the man's duty in remaining or also in quitting a conquered home. Traveling in History and in Geography (Moscow, Capri, Naples, Paris, Berlin), Benjamin find the roots of modernity: the journey is an invitation for the absence, it is the "palace of time": 'time in which inhabits the one who does not have house becomes to the traveler __ the one who has nothing left behind __ a palace'. (MATOS, 1993, p. 48)

Such geography dialogues with the urban philosophy of the author. Walter Benjamin, the Jewish philosopher from Germany who chose France, traces several itineraries and sets many other locations to his life and work.

Relating to urban, his main itinerary goes from the city of the non choice, his hometown (Berlin), to the city of choice for living and studying (Paris).

In the present article, we highlight the cities in which he lived, even briefly, those cities which he made little remarks about, and those he dedicated himself to profoundly, such as Berlin, Moscow and Paris. The last one was the author's main concern and our focus.

The following chart of cities (dwelling, study and leisure) is useful for reflecting about the urban worlds in Walter Benjamin.

Berlin Times (1892-1933): other stays

1905-1907	Tubingen (studies)
1912	Tubingen (philosophy: university)
1913	Paris
1913	Freiburg
1915-1917	Munich
1917-1920	Berne (studies)
1924: May to October	Capri
1926: December to 1927: January	Moscow
1932: April to July	Ibiza

Source: KOTHE, Flávio R., 1976, pp. 117-120.

Paris Times (1933-1940): "escapes"

1933: April-September	Ibiza
1934: July-October	Skovbostrand
1934: October to 1935: February	San Remo
1936	Skovbostrand
1936: final	Ravenna
1937: July	San Remo
1938: July-September?	Skovbostrand
1938: end of the year	San Remo
1939: September-November	Nevers (France: concentration camp)
1940: September	Port Bou (border of Spain death)

Source: KOTHE, Flávio R., 1976, pp. 117-120.

Another way of considering the "benjaminian cities" is displayed in the chart below:

Cities he visited	Munich, Berne, Ibiza, San Remo, etc
Cities he wrote about	Marseille, Naples, Weimar, San Gimignano, etc
Cities-theme for his greatest work	Paris, Moscow, Berlin

Among the cities-theme for his greatest work, the importance of his choices can be presented in levels related to some specific moments:

1 st level	Paris	Adult life: <i>Paris, capital of the XIX century</i>
2 nd level	Berlin	Childhood: <i>Berlin childhood around 1900</i>
3 rd level	Moscow	The future? The past?: <i>Moscow Diary</i>

The focus on location in Benjamin work is done through a process of choosing towards the understanding of the modern world.

Firstly, France: the land of revolution, of the great newest utopia, but also land of an exploding consumer society since the XIX century.

In France, Paris choice: “the capital of the XIX century”, the capital of a place and of a time, the cradle of modernity¹. It’s the urban world choice as revealer of our time.

In Benjamin’s writings on his unfinished master-piece __ the called Arcades Project __ there are countless references to Paris, symbol of urban modernity and there is also an intense concern in including the great city as support for his reflections about modernity. It can be noticed in an evident manner in “Paris, capital of the XIX century”, as well as in the main part __ the only one concluded __ named “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire”.

The “scales” in such benjaminian spatiality affect not only his experience as well as his philosophy. Therefore, even if the spatial panoramas in Walter Benjamin are essentially those from Paris, it is possible to present a classification incorporating distinct spatial scales: 1. two great national spaces, Germany and France; 2. European geography; 3. three “villes” of Paris.

Regarding the Parisian space other scales become evident: 1. the city, which is not presented as a whole, except in those paragraphs about Haussmann; 2. The ones traced, as the boulevards², the alleyways (the arcades), the parks; 3. places, such as the cafés, the taverns, the panoramas.

Moreover, the city of Paris depicted by Benjamin is composed of various cities. It dialogues with several other cities of Paris mentioned in the body of the text: the one revealed by Baudelaire; by Victor Hugo; by Haussmann; by Simmel; by Balzac; by Aragon; and, maybe in a less explicit manner, the city described by Splenger.

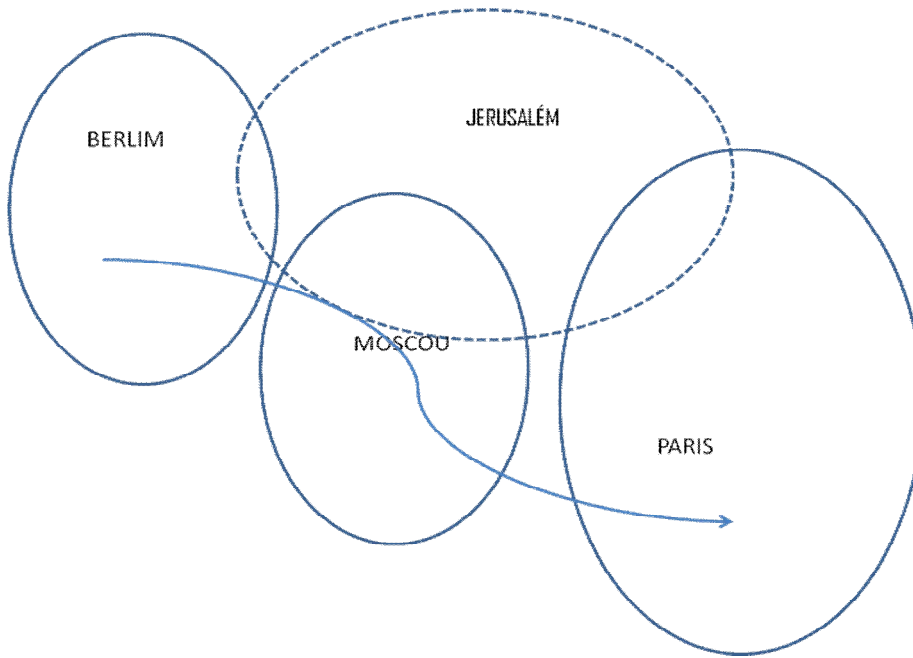
By such few considerations, one can notice the complexity of the benjaminian spatiality and its relation with distinct theoretical dimensions.

Regarding the national spaces of Germany and France there is a geographic way of thinking in Walter Benjamin that unify the *romantic philosophy to the experience* towards a solitary society. They are the German and French spaces, which he lived and searched for. Germany and its romantic philosophy, his mother tongue: from anti-modern and conservative it becomes, in the author’s work, anti-modern and revolutionary. This happens after the *prearranged* meeting: a meeting looked forward to France because of its revolutionary experience, both in general sense and in the specific one, with Charles Baudelaire.

It’s a thought that links itself to an experience in the re-interpretation of modernity, though positioning itself by individuality. Instead of opposing the geography/philosophy to the Germany/romantic philosophy and the France/enlightenment supplants the dilemma of defending or condemning modernity, through an interpretation that is able to see redeeming positivities in modern society. Between the geography (Germany and France) it’s possible to metaphorically include a third, mediator. This one, not so evident, is Jerusalem, the presence of tradition. In the graphic below the question is raised:

¹ To Robert Alter (2001, p. 74), Paris is revealed to Benjamin as “the ideal space of his project” and he makes this city “not the capital of a country but of a century”. Thus, according to the author, there’s “the desire for moving to this temporality national geography”.

² The boulevards also present a symbology of the exteriority-interiority. The paths surrounding the city, encircling the wall, became interior with the population growth.



Dwellings and places as a choice

The dwelling — the “house” — lead us to many interpretations. Religion and Theology have particularly worked on them. Philosophy and other areas of knowledge (such as psychoanalysis also have dealt with this theme. In the *Dictionary of Symbols*, Chevalier and Gheerbrant (1995) make reference to house:

“Like the city, like the temple, the house is in the center of the world, it is the image of the universe [...] The house means the inner self according to Bachelard; its floors, its basement and attic symbolize several states of the soul. The basement corresponds to the unconscious, the attic to spiritual elevation (*L'eau et les rêves, essai sur l'imagination de la matière*. Paris, 1942, p. 18). [...] The house is also a female symbol, with shelter, mother, protection and natural maternal womb meaning. (*La terre et les rêveries de la volonté*. Paris, 1948, p. 14). (p. 196-197)

In Walter Benjamin's thought the concept of dwelling plays a meaningful role. It's remarkable how his philosophy embraces spatial, architectonic and urbanistic aspects. His thinking deliberately opens way to a modern urban philosophy.

His motives for reflection and his methods make use of the urban modernity, particularly from the emblematic Paris. The author's greatest work, the unfinished Arcades Project, is centered in Baudelaire's Paris, who, in turn, made the city and its inhabitants the theme for his poetic construction.

Similarly, Baudelaire and Benjamin had troubled lives in the City of Light and, in hard moments, both lived like nomads, inhabiting several dwellings. Regarding Baudelaire, Benjamin states:

Hiding from creditors, he spent a lot of time in cafés or reading circles. It happened to live in two houses at the same time, but, the day he should pay the rent, he spent the night in third place, usually at a friend's house. He wandered, in this way, through the city, which was no longer the *flâneur's* homeland. Every bed he lied in had become risky. From 1842 to 1858, Crépet counts fourteen Parisian addresses of Baudelaire. (BENJAMIN, 1991, p. 44-45)

Therefore, ironically, Benjamin had several dwellings in Paris as well. Considering only the correspondence between him and Scholem, it's possible to count nine addresses.

Benjamin's many addresses in Paris has material and economical reasons. But there are other ones which make evident that it was a matter of choice, a way of living. In the present essay we try to speculate about such choices, relating it to the precariousness of Baudelaire's dwelling, Benjamin's *alter ego*, confronting it with the benjaminian urban philosophy, with his concrete and metaphorical geography.

Life in Paris

Paris is traditionally known by Seine River. Roughly, three cities is revealed: the city of the right bank, the city of the left bank and the one in the middle or the island. In the urban historic records to each of the cities is attributed a main functionality: on the left bank __ *université* __ the university symbolizing the thought; on the right bank __ *ville* __ it's the people's lively city, the secular city, of the urban society; in the island __ *ile de la cite* __ is the administration, the power, including the most religious and remarkable symbol of Paris, *Notre-Dame*. From such interpretation of the "three cities" it's possible to conceive not only a horizontal coexistence but also an interrelation, side by side, among thought/religion/city.

If we consider Benjamin's living (predominantly on the left bank, the one of the "city of thought"), and his reading (full of elements which take into account the sacred and the persistence of the sacred in modernity; the "city of the cathedral" or "of the religion"), his interest in urban lively society of Paris in the XIX century (the "city of the boulevards" or the "ville"), we can conceive the image of a concrete city, tripartite, that moves itself by the author's will, according to the following trajectory: from the city of thought to the lively city, passing through the city of the "cathedral". In this approach it will be considered the interpretation of Paris brought by Victor Hugo in "*Notre Dame de Paris*"³. This interpretation though medieval, remained vigorous until the urban reforms of the XIX century. But even in XX century Paris (the one known by Benjamin) the tripartite division still could be noticed. It's exactly over such urban scenery that we can place Benjamin and his city perspective. Noticing that to Walter Benjamin, as points out MATOS (1989): "the city is a 'forest full of symbols' ..." (p. 78).



Map/Source: Favier, Jean (2000), « Naissance d'une capitale ». *Les Collections de L'Histoire*, 9, p. 14.

³ Victor Hugo fixed in this work an image of Paris that became a reference. Hugo mentioned nostalgically a Paris which lost itself in the great modernity reforms, particularly in those reforms promoted by Haussmann. In the chapter named "Paris seen at a glance" he states: "In the XV century Paris was divided in three completely distinct and separated cities each of them having its unique characteristic, specialty, habits, privileges and history: the Cathedral, the University and the City itself. The Cathedral neighborhood, which occupied the island, was the smallest and mothered the others, compressed between them, the image is of an old lady between two tall slim young women, if it's permitted to say. The University covered the Seine left bank, from Tournelle to the Torre de Nesle, sites which, in today's Paris, correspond to Wine Square and to the Mint. [...] The city itself, bigger than the other parts of Paris, occupied the right bank. [...] As already mentioned, each division was a different city, but too special to be complete, a city that couldn't exist without the other two. They formed three perfectly separated perspectives as well. In the Cathedral neighborhood there were plenty of churches, in the University one plenty of colleges, in the other part, palaces. Putting aside the secondary originalities of old Paris and the whims of the inspection right, we can say, under a general point of view and taking only the whole and the mass in the caos of communal jurisdictions, that the island belonged to the bishop, the right bank to the tax collector of merchants and the the left one to the rector. (HUGO, Victor. *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, São Paulo, Otto Pierre Editores, s.d., p. 154-155).

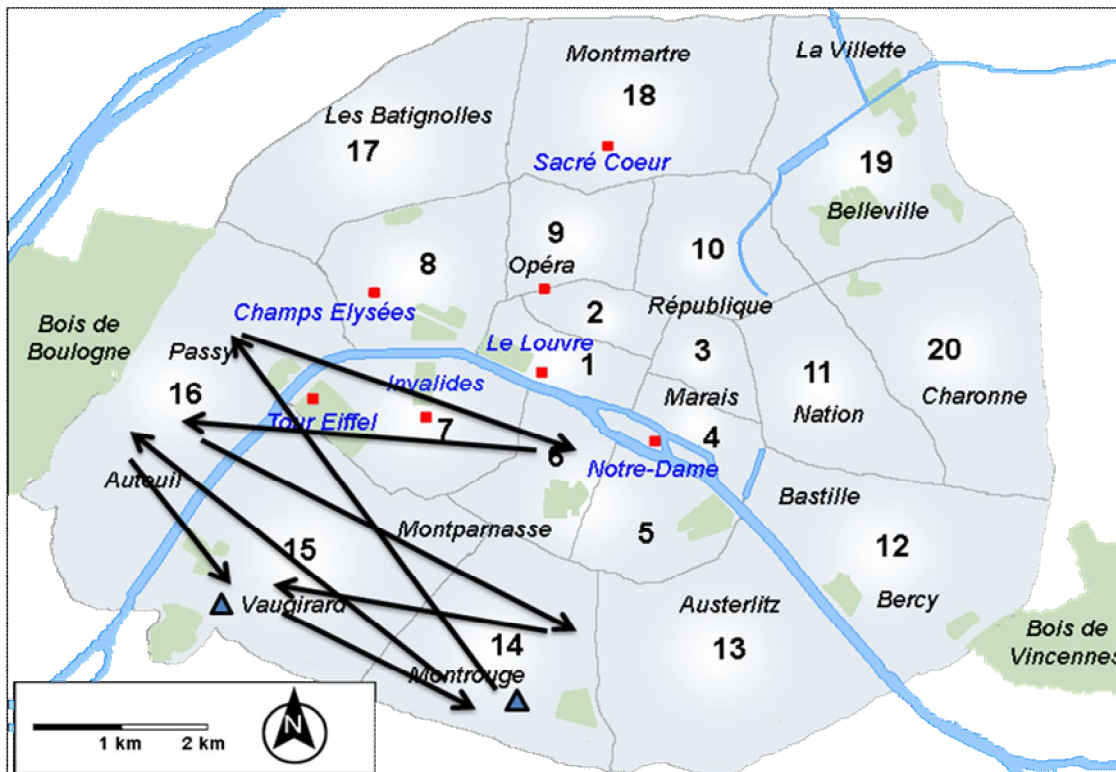
The positioning from the *Université*, passing through the *Cité* and reaching the *Ville* corresponds the one from the Thought, passing through the Sacred and reaching the Burg. It's convenient to point out regarding the sacred positioning that the benjaminian studies about Paris were done basically through research in the old National Library of Paris (rue Richelieu, 1er. Arrondissement), in the *Cité*. Canevacci cites a sacred definition of Benjamin (apud CANEVACCI, 1997, p.109) about his own work: “[...] the vitreous surface before the position I occupy in the National Library; not violated magical circle, virgin land reserved for the characters I invoke”.

Such tripartite Paris, which moves itself according to the author's will, might be confronted with his concrete positioning in Paris, his dwellings. Though Benjamin went to Paris in 1913, by the age of 21, his reference to the city is more remarkable after a long intellectual reorientation since the translation of Baudelaire's poems in 1923. 1927 is considered the beginning of the *Arcades Project*. But it's from 1933 on, with the project in course, that Paris grows in the author's life. The city becomes his home even with his staying in other places for leisure.

Paris Times (1933-1940): addresses

1933: March	XIV, Rue Campagne Première, Hotel Istria
1933: October	XVI, 6, rue de la Tour, Hotel Regina de Passy
1933: October to 1934: March	VI, 1, rue du Four, Palace Hotel
1934: April	XVI, 25, rue Jasmin
1934: April-October and 1935: March-July	XIV, 28, Place Denfert-Rochereau, Hotel Floridor
1935: August	XV, 7, Villa Robert Lindet
1935: October to 1937: August?	XIV, 23, rue Benard
1937: September	XVI, rue Nicolo, Villa Nicolo (sister's residence)
1937: November to 1939: November?	XV, 10, rue Dombasle

Source: BENJAMIN, Walter e SCHOLEM, Gershom (1993)



mapa: www.hyadex.fr/villes/paris

The dwelling: conclusions

Though human being is essentially free as a category, the social reality imposes limitations on the choice of places to live and interact. Still, there is the space of choice which is also motivated by his cultural and intellectual preferences, besides the simply economical and emotional ones. And such choice has fundamental repercussions in its existence. The choice for the neighborhood in the city is not totally random and mechanical, but, with wide subject to subject variation. It's the result of a choice, even if limited by concrete economical, emotional and even health matters. The more or less conscious choice for a place has a diversity of motivations, but when studying intellectual individuals it's interesting to find specific reasons for that, relating it to the production of. The choices are many: the city, the neighborhood, the commute, the specific experience sites. The intention here is to associate the subject's dwelling in the city with the concept of willingness in (the most important human faculty according to Descartes), the free choice ruled by the reason.

About Benjamin, the residences in Paris show the opposite of a weak willingness, an *akrasia* (Aristotle's concept), even facing an avalanche of material difficulties. Such relativization of will power, in Descartes' meaning is false: man is always free to choose or not. There's no gradation. The rational choice here remarked is closely related to the Kantian vision which states that man is a being submitted to desires (inclinations) while at the same time an intelligent being capable of deciding through reason, independently of his desires, characterizing the autonomy of the will. Therefore, it's considered here a concept of willingness different from Schopenhauer's (and Nietzsche's) for whom will is a blind and absurd force, lacking knowledge and inflexible before education.

The inventory of his residences, beginning by the letters addressed to, reveals a great presence in Montparnasse, on the left bank of Seine. Even if the economical conditions impose choices and the proximity of Sorbonne and the intellectuality surrounding it can be pertinent explanations to that, it is interesting to consider spatially the dwelling addresses.

In his fixed addresses it's possible to identify some remarkable neighboring places. Three residences remained longer. One of them is the Floridor Hotel, still existing nowadays as an one star hotel, in Place Denfert-Rocherou 28. He was next to the catacombs (placed "*Les Carrières de Paris*" underground) with Danton and Robespierre's graves and 300 meters from *Cimetière de Montparnasse*, where is Charles Baudelaire's grave. He was also 1500 meters from Sorbonne.

Because of economical reasons he moves to other residences in Montparnasse, staying longer in *Rue Benard*, where now it's a relatively modern apartment building. This address was 500 meters from the cemetery and far from Sorbonne.

Besides the spatial dimension another temporal-spatial dimension is included. The author's Paris of departure is the one from 1927 to 1940, daily lived between 1933 and 1940. And it's from this moment that he drives himself to another spatial-temporality, the one from 1845 to 1864⁴ read by Charles Baudelaire, and running into Aragon's spatial temporality.

Chronology of Benjamin's Parisian writings

1927	Beginning of the called <i>Arcades Project</i>
1927-1929 1934-1940	<i>Paris, capital of the XIX century</i> (collection of texts and notes for the project of the great book about XIX century Paris)
1929	<i>Paris, City in the mirror</i>
1935, May	<i>Paris, capital of the XIX century</i> (exposé)
1939, March	<i>Paris, capital of the XIX century</i> (exposé, 2 nd version)
1939	publishes " <i>About some Motifs in Baudelaire</i> "
1940	works on " <i>Theses on the Philosophy of History</i> "

⁴ The reference is regarding the *The Flowers of Evil* master-piece. The first poem to be written and, later, incorporated to this collection is *To a Créole Woman* and was first published in 1845. In 1864 his condemned poems are published, but before reserved for *The Flowers of Evil* in 1857. Baudelaire was born in 1821, from 1842 on he begins to live Paris intensely in his own way, until his death in 1867.

It's necessary to remark how the city is presented in Benjamin's Parisian writings through characteristic elements. But it's necessary to raise the question: why Paris? Why Paris as a concrete city?

According to Robert Alter (2001), Paris choice would have represented a "geo-spiritual orientation", an European option. Writing about the definitive giving-up of learning Hebraic __ in 26.06.29 in a letter addressed to Hugo de Hofmannsthal, Benjamin had announced that he would commit to studying Hebraic and would go to Jerusalem in September; however, in 20.01.30 in a letter to Scholem he renounces to this project __ he concludes that in a first point of his life, two poles fought for his attention: one is Moscow and the other Jerusalem. But, in Alter's point of view, neither of them became Benjamin's first reference, besides Paris⁵.

By choosing Paris, Benjamin has in mind several meanings that are important for his theory configuration:

1. Concretely, two elements, both extern and intern, place Paris close to the author's philosophic assumptions, very interested by the dense "small words", universalities revealer microcosm. One of them is the own "capsule" form of the city, grown between walls, preserving a circular spreading. The other, in part related to the first, is the presence of the dense mass, present in every big city, walking on the sidewalks, but, of course, containing individuals and dreams: "*The city buzzes, full of dreams ...*" (Baudelaire, Parisian Scenes, poem dedicated to Victor Hugo. Cited in BENJAMIN, 1991, p. 56). Another aspect of the city that also involves the universal and the particular is the presence, metropolis of crowds, of unique stronghold, small installations and unique public spaces.
2. The modernity as desacralization issue, as secular world, as profane world. Paris concretely lived, after French Revolution, a "desacralization", expropriation and incorporation process, by the Estate, by the secular world, of all Catholic properties. Old temples became public spaces for common usage as administrative, educative and many other functions. This is another feature that only Paris keeps. Benjamin had been in Moscow to observe the revolution process, which held some similarities with the Parisian one. But in that case it was a historical moment not elect by the author.
3. The modernity of the desacralization and the re-sacralization of new kind, besides the "religiosity" presented in the merchandise world (the cult and the phantasmagoria). Paris, at the height of the revolutionary period, banned the catholic religious cult and all its structure. Temples were destroyed or utilized in a secular manner. Priests were "dismissed", even killed, and even obliged to live a civil life (forced to marry, for instance). However, still in Robespierre's time, people's necessity of worship starts to manifestate. It's established, thus, a new religion with worship of values considered important, such as the cult of filial and other kinds of love. The most remarkable one is the "cult of reason", which becomes a "goddess" and for this reason, an authentic religion. Nevertheless, soon this worship starts to turn into a pre-Christian cult of a goddess that protects Paris. Through this new Notre Dame, by degrees, the worship to the only god is back and, with such conciliatory change, also the catholic cult.
4. In a most personal perspective, Paris represented, regarding Berlin, the needed distance, according to Robert Alter's analysis. The distance that enables a balance between reason and emotion, so remarked by Brecht. Paris allowed him to express the difficult things: "*The letter he addresses to Scholem in 20.01.1930 to justify his renouncement [about studying Hebraic] was re-written in French, an "alibi form" giving his friend authority to say hard things to express in the intimacy of his mother tongue.*"⁶.
5. Through a path towards universalism, as already stated, Paris choice represents an European/universal choice facing a German/particular one, according to Alter (the "European geo-spiritual definition" and not a German one). On the other hand, in a certain way, the choosing of Paris is the meeting of a universal language, which is not Hebraic, announced in his first writings on language theory.

⁵ Alter, Robert, 2001, p. 72.

⁶ Alter, Robert, 2001, p. 72-73.

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