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# Through the Ambiguous Objects of Benjaminian Thought:

## Politics and Affect in Design of Heritage Architecture

Katarina ANDJELKOVIC<sup>1</sup>

*Abstract.* There is a poetic force initially created by a desire to recontextualize the image of war through architectural atmospheres enabled by panorama<sup>2</sup>. This research reconstructs and deconstructs discourses that understand architecture as affect, but also illuminates the narrative approach with the aim to speculate experience of affect as meaning making in design of heritage architecture. By inscribing heritage architecture into the register of ambiguous objects of Benjaminian thought, I will contemplate the Gaza war case (2014) and the Böttcherstraße project in Bremen (1922-1931).

**Keywords.** *Heritage Architecture, Dialectical Image, Affect, Historical Experience*

### Introduction

“It’s not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on the past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation”  
 (“Awakening,” Walter Benjamin’s Arcades Project, 1927-1940)

In his writings, Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) introduces the dialectical image as part of the description of a radically alternative conception of time and of historical experience. Adopting the dialectical image as a method for distancing an image from the reality it represents, we can observe how our experience of the (history of the) war is conditioned through images. In this paper, I ask if Benjamin’s method can become a mechanism for rejecting any emphatic representation of the war. To be able to do that, I will start by investigating Benjamin’s dialectical image as a method for enabling ‘affect’. The dialectics will be addressed through a two-fold viewers’ reception: 1) image of the past - photographs made during the war as places of memory and which serve for contemplating past events in relation to their historical outcome; 2) image of the present - panoramas made for contemplating past events and their historical outcome in the present. In other words, affect - as the most *immediate response the viewer* experiences when reading dialectics in panoramas and photographs - will lead the past to bring the present into a critical state. Using this method,

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2. Panorama offers distant views in form of a 360-degree continuous viewing experience, to reflect on the modifying perception of space. It uses its properties to transport past into present, to abolish the feeling of linear duration. What if panorama, which is fundamentally atmospheric rendition of distant spaces, introduces the atmosphere of time through the presentation of the unexpected?

I will demonstrate how the power of affect to bring together a dialogue between past and present can be applied in design of heritage architecture.

### Image of the Past

Photographs made during the war serve for contemplating past events in relation to their historical outcome. Vast body of images taken during the war events enter the public discourse. Taken in different times and places, in different resolutions and representations, these photographs form a critical pile of a thousand of viewpoints from not only professional journalists but also from ordinary observers. Instead of allowing interpreters to see the war first hand and thus help them clarify the historical narrative, these photographs lack the means to directly illustrate the events whose course and features they depict. Omitting more than they can possibly include, their frames constrain perception to expose the weakness of the critical tools with which these historical images are comprehended. As a result, the image is distanced from the reality it represents and histories it narrates. They make photograph a visual language that exposes a dialectic feature through the layers of time. Mediating between the past and the present in order to unravel the course of history, it is the concept of *dialectical image* that distances the image from the reality it represents to rather confuse the historical narrative. Observed through the nineteenth century Benjaminian lens, things were coming to seem more entirely material than ever and, at the same time, more estranged. And from the historical materialism perspective, which cuts through historicism, the true picture of the past fits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again (Benjamin, 1968). For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably (ibid., 1968).

In the “phantasmagorical” tone of *Passagen-Werk* (The Arcades Project, 1927-1940), Benjamin documented in an extremely detailed and precise manner the scene of revolutionary change that was the nineteenth century. Moreover, his discussion offered the description of a radically alternative conception of time and of historical experience. Dialectical thinking required operation through the juxtaposition of different stances, most notably, a thesis with an antithesis. The product of their synthesis could become a new thesis. As a thesis, Benjamin put that the arcades of 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris present residues of a dream world and temples of commodity capital (Benjamin, 2002). As an antithesis, Benjamin put that the desire for arcades is lost in the early twentieth century under the onslaught of modernism. Namely, critiquing the bourgeois experience of nineteenth-century history, Benjamin suggested that we can recognize the suppressed “true history” that underlay the ideological mask in the arcades. What is normally meant by progress, through these monuments of the bourgeoisie becomes a ruin. As a synthesis, the arcade represents a dialectical image: the picture of “the dialectic at a standstill that brings together the present with a past wish or dream in an image to make possible the (revolutionary) experience of a historical truth” (Missac, 1995). Benjamin’s dialectical image is far from the linear progress of time and differs in an attempt to withhold the dialectical contradiction at the moment in the form of a visual image or object, instead of developing arguments over time: “dialectics at the standstill creates an image” (Tiedemann, 2002).

In the manner of Baroque drama of the nineteenth century, melancholic reflection on the transience of human and materialistic existence turns the dialectical image into politically instructive concept. Benjamin hoped for a shock from the recognition offered by the dialectical images, as he believed that every epoch precipitates the

awakening of a political collective. For Benjamin, the key quality of dialectical images is the ability to “shock.” The dialectics affect both the content of the tradition and its recipients. As the most immediate response the viewers experience when reading dialectics, affect appears to be a way to neglect usual mode of thinking, as thinking means not only establishing a causal connection between things but also “where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, which gives it a shock effect” (Benjamin, 1968). Benjamin’s aim was to juxtapose disparate fragments of historical experience and freeze them in a suspended historical constellation that he called a *dialectical image* (Cvoro, 2008), enabling it to become a method for inducing affect. The image functions as a standard for estimating significance of historical reality, i.e. the way of thinking about the issues of time and experience through visual, material, and spatial registers. As such, the dialectical image method is well aligned with contemporary architectural design practice which tends to reach the world of the senses, and which is governed through the experience of the image. Likewise, Benjamin’s dictum “history is broken down into images” gives past a new meaning: it excavates the past to shake up the present. This method of the dialectical image through affect is generated as a modern reaction against the representation of the nineteenth century ‘commentary on a reality.’

### Image of the Present

To pursue dissecting this ‘commentary on a reality,’ *panorama* will be revealed as a method for contemplating past events and their historical outcome in the present. In other words, affect - as the most immediate response the viewer experiences when reading dialectics in panoramas - will lead the past to bring the present into a critical state. In this way, the panorama image depicts not only a representation of objects or events, but rather material replicas of objects and situations. In this case, remote sensing the political background of reality. This method is seen as a way to contemplate past events in relation to their historical outcome, enabling panorama to show its deeper political manifestations in an artistic format. In addition, it introduced “a new standard of evidence” as an opportunity to better understand how society’s political processes in each era decisively influence the type and use of representational agendas of the architectural heritage.

This is visible in contemplating Gaza today, in the recontextualization of a war narrative through the prism of panoramic image. The procedure draws from the basic function of a panorama to contemplate inaccessible locations in a way to transport historical events into the image, and capture them for the re-examination at some other time. In the case of Gaza, the panorama maps past events and raises the question of the political connotation of war, hypothesizing that whoever wins the battle of media determines history, i.e. controls the way we perceive the past. Namely, the case of panoramas today makes it possible to reveal the space consisted of numerous images it integrates and therefore to come closer to the reality, if not truth. Thus, it triggered the re-examination of what is incomprehensible and intangible for the recipient, which exists in as many versions as there are participants, and what is now open to further contemplation, negotiating that coming closer to the reality of the war event is possible exactly by visual means.

London-based research unit Forensic Architecture was recently hired to undertake spatial and media analysis to clarify the historical narrative around the Gaza war, in particular *The Image-Complex* from “Rafah: Black Friday” case (2014). In a renewed attention to informational modes and models, as David Joselit has pointed out, contemporary visual culture “shifted from object-based aesthetics in both architecture

and art to a network aesthetics premised on the emergence of form from populations of images,” which constitute “dynamic mechanisms for aggregating content” (Joselit, 2013). In light of this trend, further reflection on the Gaza war was no different: it took shape based on hundreds of videos and images produced during these events. Namely, the project aimed at locating and reconstructing the story of events in Rafah, Gaza, that took place on the first of August, 2014, by using hundreds of images and video clips existing in disparate locations, on the smart phone of the activists, press and social media posts (Varvia, 2018). The assemblage of evidence (photos of witnesses to those events) were analyzed to establish the perceptual field of each of hundreds of images. By framing the scene, the photograph puts limits to our field of perception and thus becomes the first parameter distancing the image from the reality it represents (Varvia, 2018). In this context, the role of panorama is to replace a single photograph by putting all data around the historical narrative into one view. This is in accordance with the way human perception functions: it blends images together through time (Deleuze, 1986). Accordingly, image creators are operating in the panoramic format to narrate historical events in spatial and temporal terms, and to reconstruct space from the image. In comparison to the limited use of photographs in preservation, conservation, restoration and reconstruction tasks, the panorama image can stand as an image that was crafted to help us understand the whole sites instead of a single building. Diverting from the traditional forms of visualization, these images will offer observation and visual communication of scientific evidence in a way to address the whole heritage sites in a wider perspective. Moreover, the panorama image helps us contemplate past events in their historical outcome in the present, in order to establish a dialogue between past and present in the process of creating an agenda for the protection of heritage architecture. As such, panorama image can be used as a basis for future heritage actions in a broader cultural, political and aesthetic context.

### **The Continuum Past-Present in Heritage Architecture**

However, the instrumentalization of affect for creating new representational agendas has established a critical position in design of heritage architecture. It opened a remote sensing the political background of reality to further contemplation only at specific points, i.e. dialectical images. To realize current tendencies, architecture seeks to renew the means of conceptual thinking by using the dialectical image as a method. One of the most prominent examples, Böttcherstraße in Bremen (fig. 1), is a rare architectural ensemble belonging to a variant of the expressionist style. Böttcherstraße gives the impression of a “walkable sculpture” unrolling a line of buildings and artistic works on the façades with many important contributions to the preservation of the street before and after the Second World War. Namely, the layers of the façades are inverted contrary to the time logic of their formation, so that the first layer we see on the surface is the oldest layer of the façade. Searching for the past that will “shake up” the present, the observer is exposed to an image that does not represent reality. On the contrary, by examining the way of thinking about issues of time through visual, material and spatial registers of heritage architecture, the dialectical historical vision - in which the perspectives of past and present would mutually inform each other - becomes the standard for assessing historical reality. In this way, experiencing the concrete material forms of the past in the original façades is juxtaposed with the changes brought about by the present, in a way that this architecture constantly actualizes the past by renewing its meaning. In conclusion, allowing us to construct an affirmative understanding of fragmented images from the past-present continuum, Benjamin’s method demonstrated the power of affect to bring together a dialogue between past and present, as a critical potential in design of heritage architecture.



**Figure 1.** Example of a panorama image: Ludwig Roselius with architects Eduard Scotland, Alfred Runge and Bernhard Hoetger, Böttcherstraße in Bremen (1922-1931) © <http://www.boettcherstrasse.de/architektur/>

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