“FARBE BEKENNEN”: CHILDLIKE OBSERVATIONS AND PROBLEMS OF WRITING IN WALTER BENJAMIN’S MOSCOW DIARY (1926-1927)
Tamara Kamatović
University of Chicago
The *Moscow Diary* that Benjamin began during his visit to the city from the ninth of December, 1926, and ended upon his return to Berlin in February of 1927 is a remarkable text for several reasons. It is the longest existing autobiographical document to have been published in the Benjamin archive, and is an intimate account of his strained and complicated relationship with his Latvian Communist lover Asja Lacis. However it is clear that the personal conflicts in the Diary are also offset by penetrating political and social analysis, reflections on medial-linguistic problems, historical materialism, and art criticism of a certain sort. There are many possible readings of the Diary: one could see it in connection with Benjamin’s other cityscapes and constellate it with his portraits of *Naples* (1924), *Weimar* (1928), *Marseilles* and *San Gimignano* (1929). Another possibility would be to pigeonhole it under the rubric of his “Marxist phase,” which began with his first encounter with Lacis in Italy in 1924, and became central to an understanding of much of Benjamin’s work after his meeting with Brecht in 1929 (a meeting arranged by Lacis, at Benjamin’s request). While these different groupings of Benjamin’s Diary are certainly possible and fruitful, insofar as they, more generally, pry loose the different works from Tiedemann’s editorial vice-grip, this essay will only consider the Diary implicitly with the *Denkbild*, literally a “thought image,” he prepared on Martin Buber’s commission for *Die Kreatur* regarding his experiences in Moscow as well as a short piece on “Russian Toys” first published in the “Südwestdeutsche Rundfunkzeitung.”

It will, however, not be the focus of this presentation to separate the wheat from the chaff, or to discard the “autobiographical” in favor of the “analytic” or “objective” passages of the text. Indeed, this kind of a reductive reading is entirely impossible if one takes Benjamin’s own reflections on his writing practices and concerns into consideration: he stresses over and over again that his Moscow Diary aims at concreteness, or wants to “refrain... from any theoretical prognostication” (Diary, 132). Rather, this paper endeavors, more generally, to demonstrate the possibility and the usefulness of viewing Benjamin’s “autobiographical” text— and, indeed, the most “personal” and intimate details of that text — as in dialogue with the different historical, social, and political concerns that evolve from the portrait he gives of Moscow: a “resounding mask of an environment that has been totally transformed” (Ibid.) More specifically, the goal will be to develop a reading that accounts for this “regime of sight” (the practices that typify Benjamin’s writing on seeing), whose origin lies in a scene of trauma symptomatized by the presence of the color red. This mode of seeing develops in response to many of the challenges Benjamin faced in the Hyperborean Muscovite winter and witnesses the birth of a new kind of writing, what Benjamin calls a “creational writing.”

In his essay “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (1939), Benjamin cites Georg Simmel’s historicization of the division of perceptual labor that demonstrated the ascendancy of the “optical” over the auditory in modern, urban environments. For reasons related to climate, these observations hold exceptionally true for an interaction with Moscow, where vision plays a decisive role in Benjamin’s image of the city. Benjamin even notes that the “soundscape” of Moscow is a muted one: “Moscow is the most silent of great cities, and doubly so when there is snow. The principal instruments in the orchestra of the streets, the automobile horn, is rarely played there; there are few cars” (Diary, 66). The icy streets, in addition, circumscribe both a field of vision, as well as the eventual portrait that evolves out of Benjamin’s Diary:

> Some words on Moscow’s characteristics. During my first few days I am above all struck by the difficulty of getting used to walking on the sheet ice of the streets. I have to watch my step so carefully that I cannot look around me very much...the paint jobs are often multicolored, pale in hue: above all red, but also blue, yellow (and, as Reich also says) green”(Diary, 17).
Moscow is, moreover, a city whose history is at once preserved and repressed: the Czarist past remains, its different layers covering the city like a palimpsest, while the “village,” and the provincial, surrounding landscape that Benjamin finds in the outlying suburbs of Moscow remain peculiarly frozen under the sheets of ice: “The village character of Moscow suddenly leaps out at you undisguisedly, evidently, unambiguously in the streets of its suburbs...as if their expanse were always being dissolved by bad weather, thawing snow, or rain” (Diary, 112).

There is, however, another point of fundamental importance — something that might seem almost too evident to merit extended discussion, but that is nevertheless crucial for understanding the privileging of the optical in Benjamin’s panoramas of Moscow: namely, that Benjamin did not understand the Russian language. The extent to which this influences his Moscow Diary and his later commissioned writings for Buber and others on Russian culture cannot, under any circumstance, be underestimated. This dimension of linguistic helplessness is, naturally, entirely elided in his Denkbild on Moscow, the majority of which is lifted directly from the diary passages, with the references to the presence of Reich or Lacis removed.ii

At the level of “autobiographical reconstruction,” one might characterize the entirety of the Diary as a series of failures. One “typical day” in Moscow for Benjamin might have had Benjamin visiting a poorly disposed Lacis in the sanatorium, shortly after which Bernhard Reich has a heart-attack, and Benjamin is left to wander alone into a theater to watch a play he does not understand. Another variant might be: Benjamin goes to visit Lacis, waits in her room with Reich and her neighbors from the sanatorium, and grows sleepy and moody from not understanding their conversations in Russian. The point is that without Lacis, Reich, or some other German or French (or sometimes, indeed, Yiddish) speaker, Benjamin was entirely isolated, both linguistically and psychologically — moreover, he depended on Lacis and Reich for admittance to different cultural institutions. In the afterword to the translation of the Diary into English, Editor Gary Smith writes:

> Often he attends the theater, only to chafe under his dependency on an interpreter. Nevertheless, he relies almost exclusively on Lacis and Reich, and not only for translation; it is they who decide where he is taken, whom he meets, and what he is shown. (Smith, 138)

The result of this linguistic isolation is that the exclusive focus on vision is not only historically conditioned, but stems from personal limitation. The Russian language is reduced to an indecipherable medium (to hieroglyphics, in the case of the Cyrillic script, as is evident from Benjamin’s shaky and inconsistent transcription of Russian words into German). What is foregrounded by Benjamin’s linguistic isolation is a Systematik of perception that, if it is to be autonomous, depends entirely on vision.iii Out of this writing about vision emerges a discrete and important phenomenon, a focus on color that abandons itself to childlike observations.

Color, as Howard Caygill in his *The Colour of Experience* and others have noted, is an absolutely essential part of the historical and political landscape of Moscow, as well as a subject that extends throughout Benjamin’s oeuvre. Just as красный can mean both red and beautiful in Old Russian, the motif of the color “red” in Benjamin’s notes on Moscow refers to a contained past that gestures also toward the future. Red covers the surfaces of many of the abandoned churches Benjamin observes in Moscow, and the fruit and primitive wares of different peasant stalls: “the glass orbs, yellow and red, glinted in the sun, it was like an enchanted basket of apples, each fruit shot through with different reds and yellows. There is also a more direct relation between wood and color here than elsewhere” (Diary, 20).
In this case, the relationship between color and wood is so “essential,” that it can exist as absolutely unmediated (“direct” in this translation misses the German root medium or ‘Mittel’ in the German unvermittelt]The color red is later completely “frozen” historically in a vision Benjamin has of a funeral procession: “Even more curious was the “red” funeral procession I came across on the street that day. The coffin, the hearse, the horse’s bridles were all red. On another occasion I saw a streetcar painted with propaganda images, unfortunately it went by so quickly I was unable to make out the details” (Diary, 104). Indeed, in the rites of the dead, red acquires a certain strangeness, for its duty in these processions is to patrol the regions between the living and the dead: the present and the past. Whereas the flashing by of the streetcar, the political “red” whooshes by like one of Benjamin’s dialectical images that carries the dust and wind of history with it.

Color, in its capacity of outlining the dimensions of the future, seems to cling to the edges of a nimbus crowning different political institutions in the Soviet Union. With this in mind, Benjamin’s following characterization of the Kremlins perhaps makes more sense:

The guards at the Kremlin gate stand watch in the blinding light, outfitted in bold ochre furs. Above them shines the red light that regulates the traffic passing through the gate. All the colors of Moscow converge here prismatically, at the center of Russian power (Diary, 63).

The Kremlin is first penetrated from its outside borders, where it is populated by human guards. But the guards are unimportant to Benjamin — he does not, for example, like Kafka does with his own Russo-guards, describe the Tatar beards hanging from the men’s chins, or go into any great detail on the material of the furs that envelop them. Instead, these guards are prismatically subsumed into the twinkling red of the Kremlin walls — they are shot through into the nimbus of power. And even before they are “shot through,” they are nothing but “ochre-haloed,” or little blots of color.

The distribution of light, the prismatic “rule” that governs the shooting into color (the Kremlin is here treated as an autonomous source of color) shows something about the caution with which Benjamin approaches this structure and, indeed, the historical transience of the emblematic fortress that Benjamin endeavors to describe in this one historical moment. This nearly paradoxical “image” — at once stable and temporally in flux— demonstrates a special kinship to Benjamin’s “dialectical images” as he later conceives of them and on which he elaborates in Central Park, Theses on the Concept of History and other texts. Dialectical images are, to begin, a contradiction of terms: as images, they are static, and cannot therefore be “dialectical.” The Benjaminian “dialectical image,” is however recast as a “dream image,” (chaque époque rêve la suivante) the great moment of awakening (Erwachen) in which the entirety of humanity’s desire and the unconscious of human history cross over a threshold into the present in the moment of awakening: it is from the move from the dreaming to the present that the temporal continuum is established, but the form of the image is necessarily preserved as an oneiric one. In this regard, the flashing (Aufblitzen) of the dialectical image can indeed be read as compatible with the plays of light and the color schemes that Benjamin adumbrates in his description of material objects and political institutions in Russia, insofar as they are then later converted into historical “dream images.”

But in order to focus on color, Benjamin must renounce a specific relationship with language. In a letter to Martin Buber on his Denkbild “Moscow,” Benjamin writes: “I can assure you of one thing with certainty — it is negative: my presentation will be devoid of all theory. In this fashion I hope to succeed in allowing the “creatural” to speak for itself ... in which ‘all factuality is already theory’” (Diary, 132). But at whose or what expense is this “creational writing” possible? Through the renunciation or
repudiation (*Verwerfung*) of language and the surrendering to childlike observations. This is only possible through the medium of color, because color is the home of memory without yearning, as he writes in his notes on the children’s books illustrator Johann Peter Lyser, where “because the fantastic play of colors is the home of memory without yearning, it can be free of yearning because it is unalloyed. In that sense, the Platonic anamnesis is not quite the form of memory specific to children” (Reflections on Lyser, 264). Language, on the other hand, as articulated in Benjamin’s earlier essay “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” communicates through itself and always also about itself: every message with content is in itself language, and language is the unmediated expression of that which communicates itself through language. When, in a conversation Benjamin has with Reich, the latter accuses him of guarding his manuscripts too long before publication, Benjamin answers by way of recourse to his earlier essay:

> In the evening Reich and I had a long conversation about my work as a writer and about the future direction it should take. He was of the opinion that I tended to belabor the things I was writing ... All this is correct ... But I did have to disagree with him when it came to certain ideas that have never been in doubt for me and that date all the way back to my early essay on “On Language As Such and the Language of Man.” I referred him to the polarity that exists in every linguistic entity: to be at once expression and communication. This clearly related to something we had often discussed together, “the destruction of language” as a tendency of contemporary Russian literature ... I did, however, concede that I was in a critical situation as far as my activity as an author was concerned. I told him that I saw no way out for myself here: mere convictions and abstract decisions were not enough, only concrete tasks and challenges could help me make headway. Here he reminded me of my essays on cities. This was most encouraging to me. I began thinking more confidently about a description of Moscow. (Diary, 46-47)

“Concrete” or “creatural” writing alludes to the possibility of the non-existence of language in the way in which Benjamin conceives of it. This kind of language would leave only the inner life of the material existence of things themselves. In another conversation with Reich, Benjamin writes: “Dialectic in fact inevitably moves toward representing each thesis or antithesis that it encounters as the fresh synthesis ... and in this way it penetrates even deeper into the interior of the object and only via the latter does it represent a universe” (Diary, 38). This triggers a move in Benjamin’s writing into the world of pure color which inhabits objects whose “inner lives” fluctuate between the past and the present. The intensification of seeing is then linked to the desire to completely inhabit these objects of which Benjamin takes note in his historical and urban panoramas.

It should, therefore, be no surprise that a crucial pendant to the Diary is a small essay Benjamin wrote on toys. Indeed, during his trip to Moscow, Benjamin purchased many of these objects to bring back to with him to Berlin, and he frequently visited the Moscow Museum in order to see the special exhibitions on toys. In his essay, “Russian Toys,” Benjamin notes a threat to the existence of the Russian toy, whose life is already historically outdated by the year 1926: “And it’s good that they have found a safe asylum in the Moscow museum. For who knows how long even this kind of folk art can withstand the triumphant progress of technology which today sweeps across Russia (Diary, 124). The toy, in its primitive and material existence, is at once a relic, but also, because of its “primitive” constitution and its humble origins in “making,” or in craftsmanship, a token of the way that children understand the world. Benjamin writes:

> If only our artisans would not so often forget ... that it is not the constructive, schematic forms that appear primitive to the child, but rather the total construction of his doll or his toy dog,
insofar as he can imagine how it is made. This is just what he wants to know; this first establishes his vibrant relationship with toys. (Diary, 123)

The curious and almost essential reception of art works here described, in the context of “process,” of “fabrication” or of factuality is, if not exactly analogous, useful for an understanding of Benjamin’s own reception of Moscow and of the way in which that reception is shown in his writing. In wandering through different art and toy museums, Benjamin, the man of the pen, surrenders himself to the perspective of the child: “I was able to walk around this museum as I had never previously been able to do in an unfamiliar collection, completely relaxed, giving myself over to the childish desire simply to observe what stories the pictures were telling” (Diary, 76).

This short reading of the Moscow Diary has attempted to show the futility of weeding out a private Benjamin in order to better protect the reputation of the “theoretical” or the public one (“the man of letters”). In the Moscow Diary, as well as in the writings of others visiting Moscow at the time, like Joseph Roth and André Gide, political judgment cannot be read merely as a function of the author’s relationship to some objective reality. Rather, it is the case that writing itself delivers the answers necessary to understanding the place of the political and judgment in these and other authors’ works. In a conversation with Roth, Benjamin notices the latter’s political “conversion” from committed Bolshevik to Royalist. In order to better understand the historical transience of the political situation in Russia, Benjamin, again, takes recourse to the motif of color, and challenges Roth to “confess to his colors”:

...I pressed him to put his cards on the table (Farbe zu bekennen). The long and the short of it: he had come to Russia as a (nearly) confirmed Bolshevik and was leaving it a royalist. As usual, the country is left footing the bill for the change in color (Umfärbung) that occurs in the convictions of those who arrive here as scintillating reddish-pink politicians (under the banner of “leftwing” opposition or idiotic optimism). (Diary, 29-30, my insertion of the original German)

The process of changing color (Umfärbung) to which Benjamin alludes could just as well be applied to his own writing during his stay in Moscow—a shift from the perceived sterility of theoretical speculation, from which (like the dark and empty streets of Berlin) Benjamin sought refuge into the sensuous immediacy of creatural writing.
REFERENCES


ENDNOTES

i There have been arguments made to the effect that there is a “private” and “public” Benjamin that can be read out of the pages of the Moscow Diary, or even that the precarious political situation in Moscow forced Benjamin to confront problems of “private” bourgeois existence. For more on the subject, see Evgenii Bernstein’s “The Withering of Private Life: Walter Benjamin in Moscow in Kiaer, Christina and Eric Naiman. Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia: Taking the Revolution Inside. (Bloomington: 2006).

ii The works that were the product of his stay in Moscow, in particular the essays published for Die literarische Welt, among them “Die politische Gruppierung der russischen Schriftsteller,” “Zur Lage der russischen Filmkunst,” his review of Gladkov’s Cement, and the “Erwiderung an Oskar H. Schmitz,” were only possible due to the mediated circumstances of interpretation and translation.

iii This is not to say that Benjamin’s writings on different cultural institutions, on authors, and on Russian film are “mediated” to the degree that they are only transcriptions of Reich’s or Lacis’ interpretive work. Indeed, the article Benjamin publishes about Meyerhold upsets Reich to such an extent that Benjamin is, for a long time, incredibly uncomfortable around him: “An extremely disagreeable argument with Reich took place this morning. He had decided to take me up on my proposal to read him my report on the debate at Meyerhold’s. I no longer had any desire to do so, but went ahead anyway with an instinctive reluctance. Given the previous conversations about my contributions to the Literarische Welt, nothing good could certainly come of it.” (Diary, 73). Similarly, Asja accuses him, at times, of complete ignorance of Russian culture (when he reads to her from his diary): “Da griff ich auf das »Moskauer Tagebuch« zurück und las ihr auf gut Glück vor, worauf mein Blick gerade fiel. Das ging aber weniger gut aus. Ich war gerade auf die Ausführungen überrrussinistische Erziehung geraten. »Das ist ja alles Unsinn« sagte Asja. Sie war unzufrieden und sagte, daß ich Rußland garnicht kenne” (Tagebuch, 367).