

Walter Benjamin:

from the Ruins of the Past to the Rubble of the Present

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This text² was originally shared as an oral presentation at the 36th Congress of the *Comité International d'Histoire de L'Art*, held in Lyon, France, between 23 and 28 June 2024, in the session entitled “Ruins of Ruins. Materiality and Immateriality of Degraded Ruins 2/2”, organized by Peter Geimer, François-René Martin and Pierre Wat. In this text, I trace the itinerary of my doctoral research, entitled “Towards an Archaeology of Violence [*Gewalt*]: Walter Benjamin, from the Ruins of the Past, to the Rubble of the Present”. I propose to track the trope of archaeology through Walter Benjamin’s work, with the aim of 1. exploring the possibility of a “Benjaminian archaeology” and, consequently, 2. questioning the specificity of this archaeology – 2.1. Is it more or less metaphorical/allegorical? And, 2.2. What would be its methodological approach and its objects of interest? The analysis of a slip in translation in the best known of Benjamin’s so-called theses *On the Concept of History* (1940) – the ninth thesis, often referred to as the “Angel of History Thesis” – is central to this presentation and opens the possibility for an “archaeological reading” of what was the last work that Walter Benjamin completed before taking his own life in September 1940.

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² As this text was written to be read as an oral presentation, some relevant issues could only be sketched here. A more detailed elaboration on these issues will be available in my doctoral thesis to be defended in the coming months, as well as in my Master’s thesis “*Rafael Courtoisie enquanto arqueólogo do presente*” (2014), which contains the initial reflections that led to the present research. My Master’s thesis is available at the following link: <https://app.uff.br/riuff/handle/1/8748?show=full>.

„Die historische Methode ist eine philologische,
der das Buch des Lebens zugrunde liegt. ‚Was
nie geschrieben wurde, lesen‘ heißt es bei
Hofmannsthal. Der Leser, an den hier zu denken
ist, ist der wahre Historiker“.³
– Walter Benjamin

1. Archaeology as Metaphor

The metaphor of archaeology has a long history in the context of German and European philosophy, going back to Immanuel Kant, who in his text “On a Philosophical History of Archaeology”, proposes: “a philosophical history of philosophy is itself possible, not historically or empirically, but rationally, i.e. *a priori*. For although it establishes facts of reason, it does not borrow them from historical narrative but draws them from the nature of human reason, as philosophical archaeology”⁴. That is, for Kant, a history of philosophy cannot be described based on a chain of historical facts, but it is rather as the result of the exercise of human reason that the concept emerges.

The German philosopher and media theorist Knut Ebeling traces this “metaphor’s” path in the context of the German and European *intelligentsia* in his two-volume, monumental work “*Wilde Archäologie*”, or, in English, “*Wild Archeology*”. Starting from Kant and analysing Freud, Benjamin, Foucault and Agamben, up to the German media theorist Friedrich Kittler, Ebeling observes that an archaeology in the work of each of these authors is thought, as proposed in his title, in a “wild manner”, as none of these authors deals with the methods or objects of the discipline of archaeology.

³ BENJAMIN, W. Über den Begriff der Geschichte. Hggb. v. Gérard Raulet. My own translation: “The historical method is a philological one, based on the book of life. ‘Reading what has never been written’, Hofmannsthal once said. The reader to be borne in mind here is the true historian”.

⁴ Cf.: McQUILLAN, C. Philosophical Archaeology in Kant, Foucault and Agamben. In: PARRHESIA, n. 10. 2010. pp. 39-49. Original: “Eine philosophische Geschichte der Philosophie ist selber nicht historisch oder empirisch sondern rational d. i. A PRIORI möglich. Denn ob sie gleich Facta der Vernunft aufstellt so entlehnt sie solche nicht von der Geschichtserzählung sondern sie zieht sie aus der Natur der menschlichen Vernunft als philosophische Archäologie“. In: ALTEKAMP, S. & EBELING, K. (Orgs.). *Die Aktualität des Archäologischen: in Wissenschaft, Medien und Künsten*. Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer Verlag, 2004. p.33.

2. *Ausgrabung und Erinnerung* [Excavation and Memory]

Echoing Sigmund Freud's description of the psychoanalytic method as an "archaeological excavation" on the terrain of the unconscious, Walter Benjamin writes in a short text from the early 1930s entitled *Ausgrabung und Erinnerung* [Excavation and Memory]:

Language has unmistakably made plain that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past, but rather a medium. It is the medium of that which is experienced, just as the earth is the medium in which ancient cities lie buried. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. Above all, he must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil. For the "matter itself" is no more than the strata which yield their long-sought secrets only to the most meticulous investigation⁵

The terrain that for Freud was the terrain of the unconscious, for Benjamin was the terrain of memory; and as the unconscious is not the instrument, but the *medium* from which the very object of psychoanalysis emerges – just as, for Kant, the history of philosophy emerges from human reason – for Benjamin, it is memory that is the *medium* as the object of investigation for those who want to know their own buried past.

This posthumous text is the only text in which Benjamin develops a reflection related to an archaeological method. But the relationship between his work and the trope of archaeology can be thought of from various approaches.

3. "Archaeologies" in Walter Benjamin's Work

In the early 1980s, Christine Buci-Glucksmann and Marc Sagnol in France, as well as Christian Emden in Germany in the mid-2000s, spoke of an "archaeology of modernity" in Benjamin. Also in Germany, Knut Ebeling, as mentioned above, carefully mapped this trope throughout Benjamin's work, shedding light on the fact

⁵ Translated by Rodney Livingstone based on a prior translation by Edmund Jephcott. Available at: <<https://garadinervi-repertori.blog/post/696487134004150272/walter-benjamin-excavation-and-memory-written>>.

that Benjamin was the great-nephew of Gustav Hirschfeld, an archaeologist who, together with Ernst Curtius, was responsible for the excavations of the temple of Zeus in Olympia, at the end of the 19th century. Nadine Werner, in turn, speaks about an “*Archäologie des Erinnens*” [“Archaeology of Remembering”], and carefully examines Freud’s influence on Benjamin, especially in his work “Childhood in Berlin”.

But even with such a detailed mapping of the various meanings of the trope of archaeology in Benjamin, one reaches the conclusion, as Ebeling once stated, that an archaeology related to the discipline of archaeology is only possible in Benjamin’s “*Ausgraben und Erinnern*” as a concept that need to be interpreted⁶. It is precisely this premise of Ebeling’s that I consider in my research. But, unlike these previous authors, my interest lies in insisting on searching for an archaeology beyond the metaphor in Benjamin – or, maybe, a step before: back to literality – back to the discipline of archaeology itself. It is in this sense that I propose an “archaeological reading” of Benjamin’s so-called theses *On the Concept of History* – the last text he completed before committing suicide in 1940.

4. *On the Concept of History* (1940)

The conditions in which this text was produced were the most adverse. It is likely that Benjamin wrote it motivated by his disappointment with the non-aggression pact between Russia and Nazi Germany, the “Molotov-Ribbentrop” pact, signed in 1939. Although Benjamin was never a member of the communist party itself and had a sceptical view of the Soviet Union, especially after his stay in Moscow in 1926, he still considered the Soviets to be the greatest allies in the fight against fascism in Europe.

The [theses] *On the Concept of History* are, to some extent, his last cry of despair, recalling Adorno’s comment that “Benjamin was not a talent that built

⁶ Ebeling states: “Archäologie ist hier [„Ausgraben und Erinnern“] nicht mehr eine Disziplin, die man definieren muss, sondern wird zu einem Begriff, der sich interpretieren lässt“. Cf. EBELING, K. “Ausgraben und Erinnern – Benjamins archäologisches Denkbild (Benjamins Blitzkrieg)”. Available in: https://www.archive-der-vergangenheit.de/vorlesung/text/denkbild_1024.html.

himself calmly, but a genius who found himself swimming against the current with the energy of despair”.

Throughout each of the eighteen fragments that make up this text, Benjamin proposes a kind of program for a new writing of history, disconnected from the pretensions of historians – both those linked to historicism and those calling themselves “historical materialists” – to narrate historical facts as they would have occurred. He questioned the idea of a teleological, progressive, continuous writing of history, and proposed – as we can interpret when reading one of his notes in the drafts of this text – dynamiting [*Aussprengen*] the continuum of history.

In fact, it is possible to read some of these fragments in the light of this desire for *dynamiting* history, not to destroy it, but to expose what lies beneath it and give rise to a new history, or, to be precise, a new way of writing history [*Geschichtsschreibung*]. On the one hand, Benjamin exposes among so-called “historical materialists” (in quotes to emphasise they are not truly historical materialists) the hidden theology, which manifests itself as an ineffective messianism, incapable of redeeming the oppressed class they claim to defend; on the other hand, Benjamin exposes historicist historians’ sympathy only for what is grand and monumental, i.e. a sympathy for the victors of all times. Against these two ways of writing history, he postulates what we can understand as the central thesis of *On the Concept of History*, a sort of appeal, a categorical imperative, addressed to historians truly committed to historical materialism and a real messianism (i.e. to a messianism that will not only to redeem humanity, but also to defeat the Antichrist, the false Messiah). In summary, it is necessary to write the history not of the victors, but of the defeated.

5. The Ninth Thesis: *Angelus Novus*

“The value of bad translations: productive mistakes”⁷
– Walter Benjamin

But how would it be possible to write a history of the defeated?

⁷ My own translation.

My hypothesis is: we can only respond to Benjamin's provocation to write the history of the defeated if we are able to think more in terms of archaeology than in terms of history. The classical (and already outdated) delimitation between these two disciplines establishes that historians deal with written documents, while archaeologists deal with material culture produced before the advent of writing. However, considering that writing has always been a tool at the service of the victors, we can conclude that to write the history of the defeated, it is necessary to learn from archaeologists how to read "what has never been written": that is, the vestiges, the wreckages, the rubble, under which lie [the history of] the defeated.

Since I began this research, I have mapped a constellation of words, images, concepts, which have a relationship with archaeology itself in Benjamin's work, such as: "ruins", "rubble", "strata" etc. Starting from the best-known translation of *On the Concept of History* in Brazilian Portuguese, made in the 1980s by Sérgio Paulo Rouanet, I was urged to draw a parallel between the "ruins" that Walter Benjamin mentions in *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, and the "ruins" that, in Rouanet's translation, also appear in the ninth fragment of *On the Concept of History*, "angel of history thesis".

Only later, after a few years of studying German, was I able to compare the original and the translation, and understand that Rouanet's translation had led me to a somewhat "problematic" interpretation. Rouanet, probably reproducing the same mistake of the French translation by Maurice Gandillac⁸, published for the first time in 1971 for the French version of Benjamin's complete works, translated the German word "*Trümmer*" ["rubble"], as "ruins"; a translation slip that is especially intriguing, as Benjamin himself had worked on a self-translation into French, in which he translated "*Trümmer*" as "*décombres*"⁹. Furthermore, within the context of his work, it

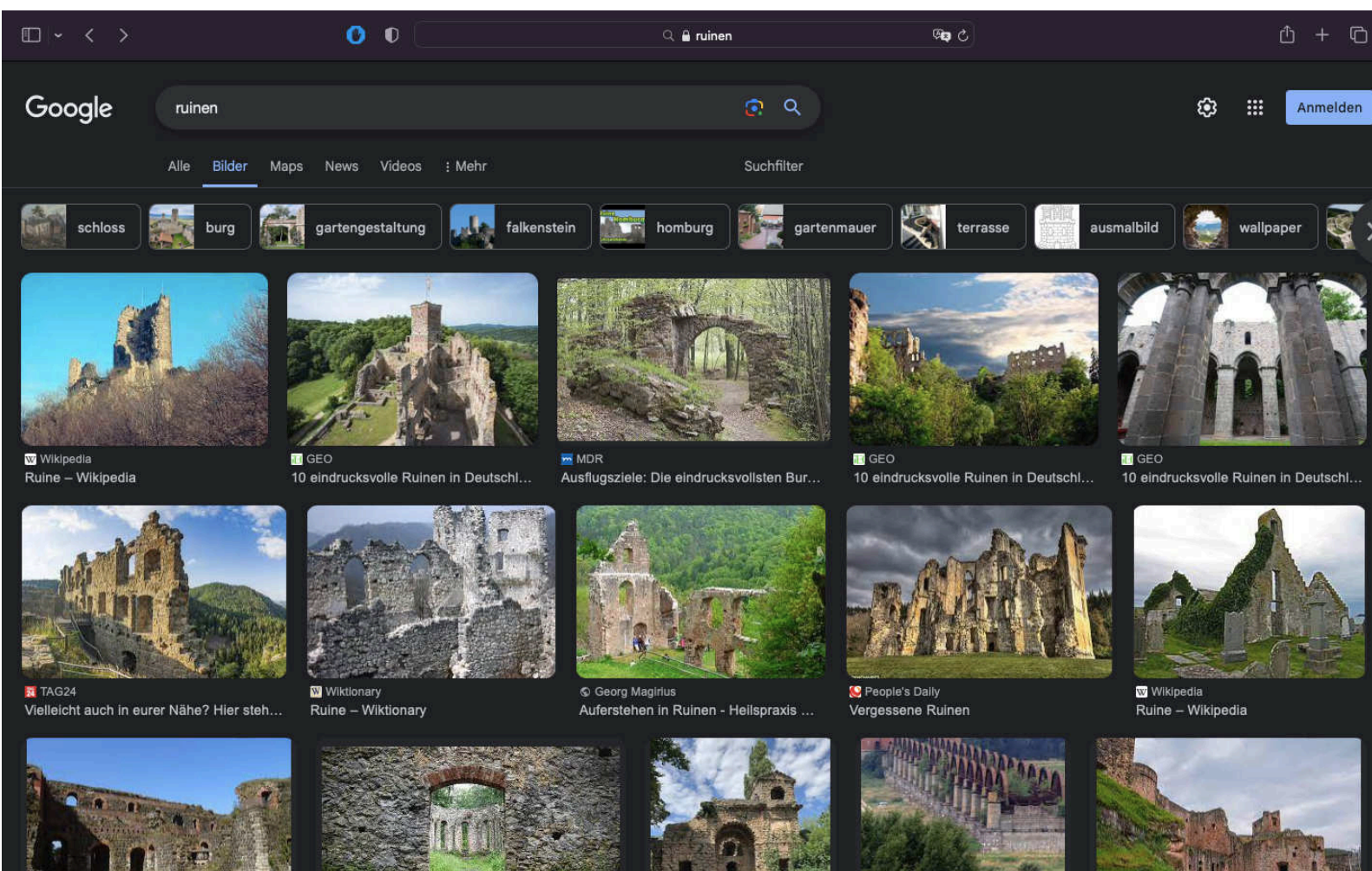
⁸ In France, *On the Concept of History* was first published in *Les Temps modernes* in 1947 in a translation by Pierre Missac, who was also responsible to name its fragments as "theses" in his presentation to the text: "J'ai nommé ces pages des thèses : cet mot est imparfait par ce qu'il a de dogmatique. Aucun autre cependant ne convient mieux d'après moi à ces dix-huit brefs chapitres dans lesquels la pensée n'est jamais close ni repliée sur soi, mais se poursuit et se dépasse en ouvrant à chaque instant, de sa démarche bondissante, d'inépuisable perspectives." Unlike Maurice de Gandillac's translation and like Benjamin himself, Pierre Missac translated "*Trümmer*" as "*décombres*".

⁹ This mistranslation can be seen, as I will show in my PhD thesis, in well-known translations of *On the Concept of History* in other Romance languages: "*ruinas*", instead of "*escombros*" in Spanish; in Italian, sometimes "*rovine*" instead of "*macerie*". The first translation to mention "*escombros*" instead of "*ruins*" in Brazil, was Jeanne Marie Gagnebin & Marco Lutz Müller's translation – published in Michael Löwy's "*Aviso de incêndio: uma leitura das teses 'Sobre o conceito de história'*", the Portuguese version of

is not a minor detail. When Benjamin wrote *On the Concept of History* in 1940, he was not conflating the rubble of war with the ruins he wrote about in *Origin of German Tragic Drama* in 1928.

The difference between these two terms can be easily seen by searching *Google Image* in Germany, where we see the following results:

“Ruinen”



Löwy’s “Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin’s ‘On the Concept of History’” – was the first translation to mention “*escombros*” instead of “*ruínas*”. Adalberto Müller & Márcio Seligmann-Silva’s translation, first published in 2020—in that that could be considered a Brazilian version of Suhrkamp’s critical edition of *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* organized by Gérard Raulet—, also mentions “*escombros*” instead of “*ruínas*”. Although in Márcio Seligmann-Silva’s presentation, there is no indication of a conceptual delimitation between ruins and rubble; rather he treats these two terms as synonyms, as we can read here: “A ruína, os escombros, surgem como metáfora dessa memória que guarda em si destruição e inscrição mnemônica”. Cf.: BENJAMIN, W. *Sobre o conceito de história: Edição crítica*. Trad. e Org. de Adalberto Müller & Márcio Seligmann-Silva. São Paulo: Alameda, 2020.

is not nature's violence that Benjamin is telling us about, but that of the human against the human: the violence of war itself. The rubble [*Trümmer*]¹⁰ resulting from this destruction is not like those fragments of high significance on the Baroque stage; they are, rather, the manifest symptom of human misery – of the human who, with his unshakable faith in the ideology of “progress”, ends up under the rubble. No. Unlike the ruins of the past, there is no beauty in this rubble of the present. There is no pedagogy in rubble, because those who are dead underneath, can no longer learn a thing.

In an essay from the beginning of the 20th century, Georg Simmel elaborates a concept of the ruin, pointing out that the ruin results from the friction between human will, that aspires to build upwards, and the force of nature, that aims to overturn what humans built. In this sense, the ruin is, for Simmel, the point of tension between these two antagonistic forces that, together, give shape to a new and characteristic *unity*. It is because of this perception of unity, that we can find beauty in the ruins. But also, as Simmel notes, some Roman ruins, however interesting they may be, lack the fascination inherent in ruins because there you can see the vestiges of the destruction caused *by humans*.

To conclude...

To conclude, I am convinced that the precise delimitation between these two categories, *ruins* and *rubble* – the latter, to be developed from a philological reading of the “theses” *On the Concept of History* – contributes not only to a more in-depth reading of Benjamin's work, but also to what in my PhD thesis, I have been calling an

¹⁰ In the German post-war context, “Trümmer” even approached an aesthetic category that was used to describe the work of writers (Heinrich Böll, Paul Celan, Günther Grass, Nelly Sachs, etc.) and film directors (Wolfgang Staudte, Milo Harbich, Gerhard Lamprecht, Helmut Käutner, etc.) as “Trümmerliteratur” and “Trümmerfilm” respectively. [In “Bekennitnis zur Trümmerliteratur”, Heinrich Böll wrote: “The first literary attempts of our generation after 1945 were described as “literature of the rubble, and people tried to dismiss them as such. We didn't object to this label because it was right: in fact, the people we wrote about lived in rubble, they came from the war, men and women equally injured, including children. And they were sharp sighted: they saw” (my own translation). Cf.: Böll, H. Bekenntnis zur Trümmerliteratur. In: Hierzulande. Aufsätze zur Zeit. Sonderreihe dtv, 1. Auflage Januar 1963]. Furthermore, the myth of the so-called *Trümmerfrauen*, the “women of the rubble” who were said to have rebuild the country from the rubble of the war, plays a powerful role in the postwar German imagination as national heroic figures.

“archaeology of violence [*Gewalt*]”, furthering a new writing of history committed to Benjamin’s appeal for us to write “a history of the defeated”, a sort of “archaeology” that takes on the challenge of dealing with “material culture”, even when it appears to us to be the rubble of the barbarism of our present.

Thank you!

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