undisciplined thinking_

2/2020_text

Yael Almog_ Transforming

@Hadas Tapouchi

Transforming

In winter 2013, I held a Skype call that turned out to greatly influence my thinking. On one side of the line was a group of scholars calling from Berlin. In the early evening, it was already dark in Germany. On my end, in Berkeley, the Californian sun was bright at an early morning hour. In agreeing to hold a job interview via a transatlantic Skype call, the research team led by Sigrid Weigel has already dispelled many of the prejudices I had had on German professors—particularly their ostensible conservatism and close-mindedness. The conversation we held and the many more that were to follow proved the opposite.

Having joined the Center for Literary and Cultural Research (ZfL), I came to think about critical theory, a school of thought most readily associated with the Frankfurt School, as a window to the present. In 2014-2016, the period of my employment at the ZfL, we were eager to understand the conditions for interpersonal empathy in the present. Empathy was under threat in the face of rising fascism and terrorism. Located at the centre of Berlin, the ZfL was an especially apt place to consider life in a metropolitan in the present political climate. Berlin's urban setting accommodated inquiries into the changing conditions for impersonal relationships, intimacy or estrangement.

Reflections on our Cities

In her 2015 exhibition “Transforming,” photographer Hadas Tapouchi revisited former sites of forced labor camps, documenting their present-day appearance. Sweatshops have given way to sites that seem organic to Berlin’s landscape, such as buildings and parks. Locations of forced labor nowadays accommodate institutions with a mundane function: schools, gas stations, governmental institutions, restaurants, cinemas. Since exhibiting her work on Berlin, Tapouchi has taken similar photos in other cities in Eastern and Central Europe.

The exhibition’s name solicits a dual understanding of “transformation.” Berlin’s vibrant urban setting leads the viewer to think, on a first glance, that sites of violence, terror and surveillance have disappeared from the city. A second look at the photos dispels this impression. Their close analysis reveals that the photos focus on the economic logics of the metropolitan. Situated next to one another, state institutions, businesses and shops compose a network that is ostensibly set to satisfy the individual’s numerous needs: consumption, enjoyment, entertainment. In presenting the economic logics behind our cities’ infrastructure, the exhibition provocatively equates the war industry—the production and dissemination of weapons—with mechanisms of advanced capitalism. Tapouchi portrays the individual’s movement in the city as driven by economic interests in their diverging historical contexts.

The satisfaction of human needs and the self-sufficient economy of our cities parallel, Tapouchi suggests, the coercion of the individual in totalitarian regimes. Capitalist economy relies on the vision of the city as self-contained: the modern city is an entity that opts to fulfill all of the individual’s needs. Mobilized by this vision, the inhabitants move incessantly between the city’s sites. The city’s structure thus subjects its inhabitants to incessant motion from one site to the next.

The ambiguous meanings of the title “Transforming” echo Walter Benjamin’s portrayals of Berlin and Paris. His seminal works on the changing configuration of the urban sphere, the *Arcades Project* and *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, correlate pedestrians’ movement to the changing conditions of bourgeois life. Benjamin’s images of the city concentrate on liminal moments in urban history, moments that reveal the fault lines of an economic order on the verge of its decline. In her broad and multifaceted oeuvre, Sigrid Weigel has done more than any other critic to elucidate Benjamin’s understanding of images and its grounding in his conception of history, art and media. She has stressed, in this context, the echoes of the Freudian theories of memory and trauma in Benjamin’s thought.[1] This contribution sheds light, among others, on the shuttering shock effect of technological developments and on the echoes of this effect in one’s perception of the body.

Elaine Scarry’s classic study *The Body in Pain* supplies tenets into the perseverance of the self-sufficient structure of the modern city. Scarry draws a connection between the body, architectonic units and the inflicting of pain on individuals. The relationship between the human body and spaces that the body cohabits emerges through the allocation of rooms to different bodily functions (a kitchen is for eating; the bedroom is for sleep). This allocation, Scarry argues, is expanded to embody the distinctive image of a city:

[1] See for instance Sigrid Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space: Re-Reading Walter Benjamin* (London/New York: Routledge, 1996) and her *Walter Benjamin: Images, the Creaturely, and the Holy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

> [A]s the elemental room is multiplied into a house of rooms and the house into a city of houses, the body is carried forward into each successive intensification of civilization. In western culture, whole rooms within a house attend to single facts about the body, the kitchen and eating, the bathroom and excreting, the bedroom and sleeping; so, too, entire cities become attentive to single facts about the body, as movement is visible in the car industry in Detroit, or eyesight and memory in the film and copying of Rochester. It is, though, back in the inward and enclosing space of the single room and its domestic content that the outward unfolding […] of civilization originates. One can get accustomed to the function of the room as a part of the civilization. One can begin to acknowledge the manufactured objects inside the room, like the furniture, as well as the position of the room as a part of the building, and the building as part of the city.[2]

Scarry refers to moments of torturing where the room's architecture and the common object it encompasses are used to transgress the so-called superiority of the body over inanimate objects.[3] Doors and windows are slammed, opened and closed at once against the prisoner's will or choice. Such violent actions intensify the power of the prison guards as they mark their ultimate control over the human body through the homology between bodily and architectonic functions. In the same way that the windows and doors are opened and slammed violently against the prisoner's will, the prisoner can no longer shut off his or her own body to the outside world by closing the eyes or the mouth.

The act of torturing the prisoner dismantles the homology between bodies and coherent units. The moment of reversing the body's coherence illuminates the ways in which architectonic and self-contained structures—such as the room, the apartment and the city—function in biopolitics to delineate the contours of the human body and modulate, thereby, human spatial orientation. Tapouchi's photos remind us, similarly, how cities delineate our physical properties.

But there is also another way in which Tapouchi's artworks expose human finitude as volatile or impossible—in temporal, rather than physical terms. Building on the construction of the self through the body's orientation in space, Tapouchi's exhibition transgresses not only norms of historical documentation that aim to present an authentic picture of individuals' suffering. The photos also expose the biopolitical presumptions behind the very perception of individuals as independent bodily units. As in Benjamin's achronological analysis of

---

[2] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 15.
[3] Ibid., 40.

domestic and urban spaces, the exhibition expresses a return to a world that has been left behind—the so-called world of the dead which is traced down, in the case of Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, through the liminal position of the child as not-yet living.

The city's architectonic structures pose the limits of one's agency. The organization of the city across various settings reflects diverse functions: nurturing, relaxing, socializing. The city's structure, Tapouchi's photos remind us, is aimed at accommodating activities of leisure, enjoyment and pleasure. It is important to note, however, that the power which the city's structure exercises on its inhabitants derives from the promise to conduct human life in a rational, efficient manner. The inhabitants of the city come to think that their needs are accommodated by the spaces where they live and work. Similarly, the city's structure is taken to foster the easy and smooth transition from one space to another, a motion that is meant to maximize the fulfilment of inhabitants' wishes. What is powerful about these photos is that they deal with the recollection of how the motion toward civilization holds a dangerous potential: the mass mobilization of bodies, a mobilization that is immanent to the city's structure. Tensions engrained in human finitude are generated constantly by the city's structure: architectonic units inhabit the city, outliving the individuals whom they have modulated.

Benjamin's conceptualization of the city unearths attempts to secure its continual function, to promote such large-scale motions as the mass transport of workers and the rapid journey

between cities—movement monitored by bridges, streetlights and signs. The urban infrastructure that emerges shepherds the individual, as the city inhabitants learns to recognize themselves as a physical unit.

Yael Almog
Assistant Professor of German
Durham University