

Globethics Repository



To Collect in Order to Survive

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see <https://www.globethics.net>. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see <https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy>.

Item Type	Article
Authors	Mitroiu, Simona
Publisher	The seminar of Philosophy of Culture and Axiology
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-07-13 22:27:07
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/187678

To Collect in Order to Survive: Benjamin and the Necessity of Collecting

Simona MITROIU

Human Sciences Research Department, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University
Lascar Catargi, 54, Iasi, Romania, Tel.: +40-232-202 346
simona.mitroiu@uaic.ro

Abstract. Following the distinctions made by Susan Pearce between souvenir collections, fetishism collections and systematic collections, the present study will underline the idea that, for Walter Benjamin, collection was a way to reconnect with the past and to reconstruct an image of what was destroyed. Every object collected by Benjamin was for him a souvenir of the European cultural identity.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin, fragments, collection, memory, European cultural identity

A collection is a reunion or a group of objects, interesting or with value. Among the most popular meanings of a collection, we can enumerate art works that are kept together, clothes or other products that are released during a certain period of time, and poems, stories or an ensemble of works or publications that have an internal unity. In our research we have as a starting point the way in which Roger Cardinal defines a collection, as a concerted gathering of selected items which manifest themselves as a pattern or set, thereby reconciling their divergent origins within a collective discourse (Cardinal, 1997: 71). But what is the motif that lies behind the collection? The answer may imply desire and nostalgia, or salvation and necessity to construct a new system, complete and permanent, that will resist in the face of the destruction brought by the passing of time. “Collecting is inherently a cult of fragment, a sticking together of material bits that stand as metonyms and metaphors for the world they may refer to but *are not*” (Elsner, 1997: 155), where metonymy is defined as one thing that stands for another adjacent to it in place, time or logic, and metaphor as one thing standing for another on the basis of similarity (Bal, 1997: 107). In their introduction of *The Cultures of Collecting*, John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, presenting the collection just from a systematic perspective, mention that Noah was the first collector. Adam named the animals and

classified them, but the task to collect them was destined for Noah. What is forgotten is lost forever; the collection became the only bastion against the deluge and Noah, maybe the only one from the collectors, managed to have the complete set. In Elsner and Cardinal's view, Noah represents the extreme case of collector – the one who suffers from the pathology of the completeness. His passion to collect is guided by the necessity to save the world. In this case, to collect means to save and the desire to save stays as the basis of the act of collection; the urge to evoke, sometimes even to fulfil, that myth of completion, a complete ancient world (Elsner, 1997: 155). Any collection is based on a classification and, if this is the mirror of collective knowledge, the history of a collection is a story of the permanent attempt to assimilate and enrich the taxonomy and the heritable system of knowledge. The social world has always been based on the official collectors, and civilization couldn't exist without the tax collectors, for example, or without those who have an official role to gather information. An example is that of the Roman Empire, whose fall coincided exactly with the failure to gather taxes and to sustain the economy and the structure of the state. The conclusion is that the social order is profoundly collective, based on classification, rules and systems. The governors of a state or empire are the leaders over a hierarchy of collectors, and the Church itself is based on a collection of souls (Elsner and Cardinal, 1997: 2).

In this context, we are trying to analyse Walter Benjamin's passion for collecting and to interpret this passion as a modality to reunite different parts of collection history, especially the cultural aspects of the European identity. I also have in mind the answer given by Benjamin when he was asked by Adorno why he delayed his departure from Europe to America – there are still positions that must be defended in Europe. Benjamin was sometimes pictured as a memory explorer who had worshipped history too much, but also as one who had written too much. Benjamin advised writers never to stop writing in order to preserve their ideas and not to destroy the thread of memory because a recollection represents an opened door to another image on the memories canvas. He himself never waited to write something, but always noted his ideas on the paper that was laid before him – his notebook, receipts or napkins. From this perspective the work of an author is a collection of thoughts and ideas, and for Benjamin the collection represented a way of completing and recovering a shattered memory. The analysis of Benjamin's way of collecting will be included in the frame constructed by Susan Pearce, who distinguishes between a collection of

souvenirs, fetishism and a systematic one. In which of these categories can we integrate the act of collection that characterizes Benjamin's life? As we shall see in this paper, the answer is the collection of souvenirs of the European culture, and if we define the collection just as a systematic collection, Benjamin's collection is not in fact a collection, but a collection of souvenirs (Schor, 1997: 256).

In distinguishing three modes of collecting, i.e. "collections as souvenirs", as "fetish objects" and as "systematic", Pearce also maintains that the forming of the collection is part of the relation between the subject, conceived as each individual human being, and the object, conceived as the whole world, and the conclusion is that the collections are an important part of our effort to construct the world (Pearce, 1994: 194). Being defined as a sample of events that can be remembered but not relived, souvenirs have the power to carry the past into the future, using their identification as lost youth, lost friends, lost past happiness and tears of things (Pearce, 1994: 195–6). And in Benjamin's world the destruction was more evident and also included the loss of some European references. If the fetishist collection is defined as an obsessive collection, in which the intention is to acquire more and more of the same kind of pieces and is also characterized by the act of removing the objects from their historical and cultural context, and systematic collections depend upon the principles of organization and seriality, then Benjamin's collections can't be characterized using the systematic or fetishist aspects.

In her analysis, Pearce mentions the fact that systematic collections and their displays can be experienced as death-like, as mummification, and they do not show us the external reality but a picture of ourselves. Of utmost importance for our research is the analysis of souvenirs as intensely romantic and, before giving other explanations and details, I would like to mention the opinion of Robert Opie, founder of the Museum of Packaging and Advertising in Gloucester, who states that collecting is like putting together a gigantic jigsaw puzzle with millions of pieces and sometimes you see a picture forming but sometimes you get the pieces the wrong way round, and the philosophy that stays at the basis of this process is that everything is connected to everything else (Windsor, 1997: 54–5). The romantic view described by Pearce is based upon the same principle.

The romantic view holds that everything and, especially, everybody has a place in the true organic wholeness which embraces human relationships, the traditional continuity of past into present ... It asks us to believe that life is not fractured,

confused and rootless, but, on the contrary suffused with grace and significance. ... It to these hopes and feelings that the souvenirs belong. They are an important part of our attempt to make sense of our personal histories, happy or unhappy, to create an essential personal and social self centred in its own unique life story, and to impose this vision on an alien world (Pearce, 1997: 196).

In order to understand the meaning of collection from Benjamin's perspective, we must begin from his interpretation of Paul Klee's painting *Angel of History* or *Angelus Novus*, which Benjamin bought. It is useless to say that this interpretation became more famous than the picture itself. The angel of history looks at the fragments left behind – the recollections that will be formed not only under the sign of destruction but also under the sign of memory and oblivion; the angel would like to stay and reconstruct what was destroyed but this task is not his. In the profane historical world over which he watches, the angel is impotent (Osborne, 1994: 90). The angel of history cannot remain and reconstruct things, and neither can the collector; but this one can pick up the fragments and, as we shall see, reintegrate them in the circle of cultural life. To put together different fragments of the past can be interpreted also as an action of giving back the hope of the past and of the progress through technology, progress raised in the nineteenth century and horribly betrayed at the beginning of the twentieth (Leslie, 2000: 203). Benjamin, just like the angel of history, witnessed the wind of destruction, surrounded by the ruined fragments that crowded at his feet. He found a solution in gathering, in collecting, so he collected books, children's toys and also quotations; let us not forget that one of his ambitions, as Hannah Arendt mentions in her introduction to *Illuminations*, was to produce a work entirely made out of quotations, an ambition he almost accomplished in *The Arcades Project*. Collecting was for Benjamin a form of psychotherapy, a healing anamnesis, a means of re-remembering his fragmented past (Schor, 1997: 253) as well as the European cultural identity.

But let us see step by step what the meaning of collection is for Benjamin and what the forms are through which it is materialized. We cannot begin without mentioning Benjamin's observation from "Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting", that ownership is the most intimate relationship one can have to objects, not that they come alive in him but that it is he who lives in them (Benjamin, 2007: 67). Collecting, as Benjamin asserts, is a passion of children or rich people; this is the reason why an object that is part of a collection has only an amateur

value and not necessarily a pragmatic one – the collected object stops being an instrument and gains its redemption by becoming part of a collection with an intrinsic value. The work of the collector is that of selecting his precious fragments from a pile of debris; he doesn't need to destroy the context anymore in order to extract the objects that will become his collection because the history and the break in tradition, as result of the "progress", have already accomplished that.

In a text dedicated to excavation and memory, Benjamin mentions that the one who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging and, most of 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 oil. Every research must be very well prepared, "to plan excavation methodically", but the man who merely makes an inventory of his findings, while failing to establish the exact location of where in today's ground the ancient treasures have been stored up, cheats himself of his richest prize (Benjamin, 1999, vol. 2: 2). As we shall see, for Benjamin every piece of his collection must be situated on a map, in this case a map of the European identity, because a good archaeological report, as Benjamin mentions, not only informs us about the strata from which its findings originate but also gives an account of the strata that first has to be broken through; so it is not only the object, the fragments collected, but also the story behind this and the relationships between different elements of the collection. In the preface of *Walter Benjamin's Archive*, Erdmut Wizisla remarks on Benjamin's archivist care and the fact that his entire work can be conceived as an archive of thoughts, of perceptions, of history and of arts. "These would not be Benjamin's archives if the materials did not communicate with one another ... Fine threads lead from one to another" (Marx et al., 2007: 3).

Collecting was Benjamin's central passion; it started as a book collection and became a quotation collection. From his point of view, to collect meant to save things, their redemption being seen as a complement to man's redemption. Culturally speaking, to collect means to survive and to maintain a bond with the past. Wieseltier states that all the things written by Benjamin represent only a commentary and, like the great medieval commentators, Benjamin demonstrated that commentary can be an instrument of originality and, in his case, of redemption. The interpretation becomes a reconstruction of the memory, of the fragments seen by the angel of history. In "Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book

Collecting”, Benjamin shows that every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector’s passion borders on the chaos of memories, and in *The Arcades Project* he mentions very clearly that collecting is a form of practical memory. Benjamin considered that the basis of collecting does not lie in “exactness” or the utilitarian value of the objects being useful.

What were the objects that attracted Benjamin’s attention? The list included: postcards, Russian toys that Benjamin acquired in Moscow, puzzles, even fragments of a childish lexicon – having his son Stefan as a source – books and also quotations.

In its most general sense to quote means to restate what has already been stated. Any citation therefore must also re-cite. And yet with citation there is a convention: the presence of tradition ... The quotation marks indicate that what is cited (and recited) is not new but is the reiteration of what has already been; an intended repetition of the Same in which the singularity of the past’s content is itself maintained (Benjamin, 1994: 242–243).

For Benjamin, quoting means naming, bringing the truth into the light, pulling out the recollection from the shadow of oblivion. To cite means also to repeat something that was said before. To quote becomes an act of resituating the tradition, a bond with the past. Hannah Arendt shows that Benjamin knew that the break in tradition and the loss of authority that occurred in his lifetime were irreparable; this is the reason Benjamin considered that he had to discover new ways of dealing with the past, and he became a master when he discovered that the transmissibility of the past could be achieved by its citability. The quotation is a way of accessing the canvas of memory and collecting is seen as a form of practical memory.

In his work Benjamin also became a follower of construction and reconstruction, his method of working being based on the fragments of paper, because he not only worked on the sheet but also with the sheet. “He cut it crosswise to units which each represent one motif of building block of text” (Marx et al., 2007: 199) and also the notebooks were very important tools of his work, “for they stored and structured his material and thoughts; every single square centimetre of them seems to have been used” (Marx et al., 2007: 3). Reconstruction is used by Benjamin regarding the travel journal as well, that is why the postcards sent from his travelling are required back from his friends as material that can be used in order to write down the journey, the things becoming the keepers of the memory.

“The diary, up until now a private travel journal with precise details written up every day, was to become a literary compendium, composed only in retrospect using letters, notes, and postcards” (Marx et al., 2007: 172).

Benjamin’s work is also a form of collection, full of various aspects that perhaps no one else could manage to assemble; for example *One-Way Street*, so well analysed by Michael Jennings in “Walter Benjamin and the European avant-garde”, contains aphorisms, jokes, dream protocols, descriptive set pieces, cityscapes, landscapes, mindscapes, pieces of writing manuals, trenchant contemporary political analyses, prescient appreciations of children’s games, behavioural patterns and moods, decodings of bourgeois fashion, living arrangements and so on – it is a vast collection (Jennings, 2004: 23). He never stopped collecting, not even in writing. His writings approach a wide variety of subjects, a result of his tendency to collect. On the other hand, all around him there was a world of destruction that began before the Second World War, so we can easily understand why the author concentrated on the notion of memory and its correlative notions.

Le flâneur, one of the figures used by Benjamin in order to explain his conception and his analysis, is a collector of experiences who wanders through the city using the passages as roads to access the collective memory. The memory is a large collection of information and the art of memory is based on mnemotechnic methods, which involve the activity of ascribing a set of information to one specific place, *topos*, the order of the places maintaining the order of information. The art of information is an internal writing (Yeats, 1999: 6). In order to memorize a large set of information a large number of places are also necessary, even if the same place can be used for different information; therefore the one who rules the art of memory is not only a collector of information but is also a collector of places. These places must be carefully chosen in order to be easily remembered and to assure rapid access to the information. I would like to draw a parallel between the collection and the necessity of placing the fragments of memory on a cultural map, a technique used by Benjamin, and the destiny of a man who has lost his memories and is trying to regain access to his personal memory using the collective memory, especially the different places or landmarks of memory. This is the case of Giambattista Bedoni, the main character from Umberto Eco’s *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*. Suffering from an accident, Giambattista doesn’t know his identity anymore but has some memories

of his professional life, his profession being that of a second-hand bookseller. He doesn't remember his name but can cite whole fragments from different works. Without the memories of his life, Giambattista defines his past using the citations and, in order to regain his memory he decides to start with his childhood, walking in the footsteps of the first memories and using different external signs, books, childhood drawings, journals, etc. The regaining of the lost objects from his past becomes synonymous with the regaining of his memory and identity. As Elsner and Cardinal mention, when someone becomes conscious of one's self, he/she becomes a conscious collector of identity, projecting his/her self onto the objects chosen to be a part of his/her life, the collector's taste being a mirror of self. In his attempt to collect fragments of the collective memory, Benjamin uses the space in order to find his way; he designs a map of his memories, putting each piece of information in a certain place, just as the art of memory was practiced in antiquity. His memory map contains, like any spatial map, arcades, passages and crossroads because, as he shows in *One-Way Street*, not to find one's way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal and it requires only ignorance, but to lose oneself in a city – that calls for quite different schooling. Benjamin's recurrent themes are, characteristically, as Sontag mentions, means of spatializing the world, for example his notion of ideas and experiences as ruins. To understand something is to understand its topography, to know it is to chart it, and to know how to get lost (Sontag, 1983: 116). Benjamin constructs cultural maps in which we still can find the signs of memory that stay at the foundation of these maps, and they are not a *route* to be traversed but a *state* of cultural knowledge (Connerton, 2009: 51).

The collector is the other face of *le flâneur*, because both of them gather what we can call a form of collective experience; whether they make their way through culture or city, they both access the collective memory using their personal memory and experience. *Le flâneur's* task is also to interpret the world and his work is sustained by the remembrance because, in the face of the rapid changes of the city, as Howard Caygill shows in *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience*, *le flâneur* remembers, and folds this memory into the experience of the present, changing the experience of the city, transforming the lived moment into a citable experience. And what were the arcades that occupied Benjamin's mind in the last years of his life, if not another piece of his collection, but also key elements that can be used to find the direction in a labyrinth of memory? These passages

don't have a fixed meaning and they don't define a place; they were described by Benjamin as a residue of a dream world in which natural and social constraints were all suspended.

As Susan Sontag mentions in her beautiful essay *Under the Sign of Saturn*, the street, the passage, the arcade and the labyrinth are recurrent themes in his work and the reminiscences of self are reminiscences of a place and how he positions himself in it. In all his writings Benjamin is loyal to his passion as a collector, a passion that is not strange within his family, among whose members were archaeologists and antiques traders. Therefore he assumed the task of excavating not in the earth, but in the ground of memory. For Sontag, Benjamin is not trying to recover his past, but to understand it and to condense it into its spatial forms, its premonitory structures. And *le flâneur* and the experience of the city are also correlated with this spatiality. The way Benjamin had chosen is that of *le flâneur*; from the personal memory to the collective one, the memory is a space in which the fragments become parts of a whole. His goal, Sontag argues, was to be a competent street map reader who knows how to stray and to locate himself with imaginary maps. Benjamin collected fragments but he also created maps that can be used to find a way through the European legacy. The experience as *Erfahrung* was his goal. As Freud was an archaeologist of the mind, Benjamin assumes the task of excavation at the level of the European cultural identity.

Acknowledgements. This research was funded by the Human Resources CNCSIS project PD 345, no. 64/2010 and by the Sectorial Operational Program "The Development of Human Resources" through the project "Development of the innovation capacity and increase of the research impact through postdoctoral programs" POSDRU/89/1.5/S/49944. I would like to thank Dr Anne Hogan for her help during my research at the London Metropolitan University.

References

- Adorno, Theodor. "A portrait of Walter Benjamin". In *Prisms*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1997: 227–241.
- Bal, Mieke. "Telling objects: a narrative perspective on collecting." John Elsner and Roger Cardinal (eds.). *The Cultures of Collecting*. London: Reaktion Books, 1997: 97–115.
- Benjamin, Andrew. "Time and Task: Benjamin and Heidegger Showing the Present." David S. Ferris (ed.) *Theoretical Questions*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994: 216–250.

- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Preface by Leon Wieseltier and Introduction by Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books, 2007.
- Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Harvard: Belknap, 1999.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Selected Writings*. Michael W. Jennings (ed.) Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard, vol. 2, 1999.
- Benjamin, Walter. *One-Way Street and Other Writings*. Introduction by Susan Sontag, London: NLB, 1979.
- Caygill, Howard. *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience*. London and New York: Routledge, 1998.
- Cardinal, Roger. "Collecting and Collage-making: The Case of Kurt Schwitters." John Elsner and Roger Cardinal (eds.) *The Cultures of Collecting*. London: Reaktion Books, 1997: 68–96.
- Connerton, Paul. *How modernity forgets*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Eco, Umberto. *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*. New York & London: Harcourt, Inc., 2005.
- Elsner, John and Roger Cardinal (eds.). *The Cultures of Collecting*. London: Reaktion Books, 1997.
- Elsner, John. "A Collector's Model of Desire: The House and Museum of Sir John Soare." John Elsner and Roger Cardinal (eds.) *The Cultures of Collecting*. London: Reaktion Books, 1997: 155–177.
- Hanssen, Beatrice. "Language and mimesis in Walter Benjamin's work". In *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*. David S. Ferris (ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004: 54–72.
- Jacobs, Carol. "Walter Benjamin: Topographically Speaking". David S. Ferris (ed.) *Theoretical Questions*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996: 94–117.
- Jennings, Michael. "Walter Benjamin and the European avant-garde". David S. Ferris (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004: 18–34.
- Leslie, Esther. *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*. London & Sterling, Virginia: Pluto Press, 2000.
- Marx, Ursula, Gudrun Schwarz, Michael Schwarz and Erdmut Wizisla. *Walter Benjamin's Archive: Images, texts, signs*. London & New York: Verso, 2007.
- Schor, Naomi. "Collecting Paris." John Elsner and Roger Cardinal (eds.) *The Cultures of Collecting*. London: Reaktion Books, 1994: 252–274.
- Sontag, Susan. *Under the Sign of Saturn*. London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, 1983.
- Steinberg, Michael P. *Walter Benjamin and the demands of history*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996.
- Windsor, John. "Identity Parades." John Elsner and Roger Cardinal (eds.) *The Cultures of Collecting*. London: Reaktion Books, 1997: 49–67.