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Introduction: Another Neapolitan Quartet

Graeme Gilloch¹

Naples' ['Neapel'] is a tale of two loves.

How so? Walter Benjamin's unofficial "Capri chronicle"² attests to the start of not just one but two ardent attachments. The first, of course, is well known and with consequences and complications that have received considerable attention, analysis and scrutiny: it was on Capri in the summer of 1924 that Benjamin first met Asja Lacis, the Latvian theatre director and Bolshevik whose impact on his life and thinking was

1 Graeme Gilloch is Professor in the School of Arts, Lancaster University, researching in Critical Theory, urban and visual culture, film and photography, and memory and haunting. The author of numerous articles, essays and reviews, he has published three monographs: *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City* (1996); *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations* (2002); and, *Siegfried Kracauer: Our Companion in Misfortune* (2015). He co-edited *The Detective of Modernity*, (with Georgia Giannakopoulou, 2020); *Siegfried Kracauer: Selected Writings on Media, Propaganda and Political Communication* (with Jaeho Kang and John Abromeit, 2022); and, special issues on 'Sociography: writing differently' (*Sociological Review*, 2022) and commemorating André Gorz (*Journal of Classical Sociology*, 2023). He has held research fellowships with the Leverhulme Trust, the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, the Korea Foundation and the Korea National Research Foundation. He was a visiting Research Fellow at Pusan National University (2010) and a BK Global Visiting Research Fellow at Seoul National University (2024). His writings have been translated into six languages.

2 Letter to Gershom Scholem from Capri dated 16th September 1924 in Walter Benjamin *Gesammelte Briefe Band II 1919-1924*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1996), p. 480.

Benjamin spent five months on the island from 10th May to 10th October 1924. For a pioneering discussion of Benjamin's Italian journey and sojourn on Capri see, for example, Momme Brodersen, *Benjamin auf Italienisch. Aspekte einer Rezeption*. (Frankfurt am Main, Verlag Neue Kritik, 1982), pp. 120-142. For an inventive and highly engaging discussion, see Martin Mittelmeier, *Naples 1925: Adorno, Benjamin, and the Summer That Made Critical Theory*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2024).

complex, profound and pervasive.³ Their intense and thorny relationship was an initiation of sorts for Benjamin into Marxist thought, into the convolutions of communism in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, into the necessities and transformative potential of theatre as pedagogic and political practice, and into the circle of another key figure and influence, Bertolt Brecht.⁴ This love would take Benjamin from the sun-drenched Mediterranean island to the Baltic port of Riga and eventually to the snowy streets of Moscow in the winter of 1926-27. And thereafter, an unhappy ever-after. The second 'love' might be seen as a more subtle and subterranean affair, though it is assuredly no less seductive, compelling and contradictory. It is a passion for the vibrant, vital and vexing city of Naples itself, a fervour that finds repeated expression in Benjamin's correspondence. On 10th May 1924, writing from Capri, he confesses to Gershom Scholem that: "The city once again overwhelmed me with the rhythm of its life."⁵ Just a few days later, in a letter to Richard Weissman on 14th May 1924, Benjamin writes:

the danger with the island is that once you have come here, you are unable to tear yourself away again and the power of its seduction increases still more through the great proximity of Naples, the most febrile city I have seen except for Paris. Of course, its beauties lie in the unfolding of the lives of the

- 3 Asja Lacis is first mention in Benjamin's letter to Scholem of 13 June 1924 from Capri: "there are hardly any noteworthy people here" he notes. But there is an exception: "A Bolshevik Latvian woman from Riga who performs in the theater and directs, a Christian, is the most noteworthy" (Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin* [Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994], p. 242; see also *Briefe Band II*, p. 466). Three weeks later, "most noteworthy" ["*meisten bemerkenswert*"] has become something rather more. Benjamin confides to Scholem: "I made the acquaintance of a Russian revolutionary from Riga, one of the most splendid [*hervorragendsten*] women I have ever met" (letter of 7 July 1924, Benjamin, *Correspondence*, p. 245; see also *Briefe Band II*, p. 473). For a discussion of Lacis and Benjamin's relationship, see Beata Paškevic, *In der Stadt der Parolen. Asja Lacis, Walter Benjamin und Bertolt Brecht* (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 2006), especially pp. 163-180).
- 4 Mittlemeier makes a convincing case for the transformative impact Lacis was to have on Benjamin's work: see *Naples 1925*, pp. 35-36.
- 5 Benjamin, *Correspondence*, p. 240; *Briefe Band II*, p. 449.

people, whereas the recent 700th anniversary of the University introduced one to the city's less benign aspects. [die Insel hat das Gefährliche, daß man, einmal gekommen, sich nicht wieder loszureißen vermag und die Kraft ihrer Verführung steigert sich noch durch die große Nähe Neapels, der glühendsten Stadt etwa außer Paris, die ich je gesehen habe. Freilich, liegen ihre Schönheiten in der Entfaltung des Volkslebens, während man sie bei der neulichen 700 Jahrfeier der Universität von weniger guten Seiten kennen lernte].⁶

This danger, this possible impossibility of leave-taking, is reiterated in a subsequent letter to Scholem written from Rome and Florence (written between 12 October and 5 November 1924). Homeward-bound, Benjamin has indeed managed to leave Naples, but it has not yet left him; the city still lingers in his mind:

As soon as I have finished a fair copy, 'Naples' ['Neapel'] will be published in Latvian and perhaps in German. I still have not bid farewell to this city, even with my stay in Rome. The restrained cosmopolitan atmosphere of Rome left me cold, especially after the highly temperamental way of life in Naples. Only now can I really judge how oriental a city Naples is.⁷

And a year later, Benjamin is back in the *unrestrained, uncosmopolitan* city that has left him anything but indifferent. Writing to Scholem from Naples itself on 21st September 1925, Benjamin expresses his enduring intoxication: "I will go to Capri for only a few days this year and I do not intend to stay even here much longer. The city has again completely filled the entire space in my heart."⁸

The essay 'Naples,' published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* on 19th August 1925,⁹ attests to this double passion: it is born from the experience of recurrent visits to the city, time and time again;¹⁰ and, appropriately and

6 Benjamin, *Briefe Band II*, pp. 451-2.

7 Benjamin, *Correspondence*, p. 253; *Briefe Band II*, p. 501.

8 Benjamin, *Correspondence*, p. 284.

9 On 15th August 1925 according to Benjamin himself (see *Correspondence*, p. 284).

10 "I saw Salerno on the same day" Benjamin writes, "And Pompeii for the sec-

significantly, it bears both names as authors: Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis.

To mark the centenary of the publication of 'Naples', the first of Benjamin's various city portraits, this special issue of the *Berlin Journal of Critical Theory* brings together four original articles specially and specifically written for the occasion, essays first presented at the always cosmopolitan but never cold Rome Critical Theory Conference held at St John's University in May 2025.

Benjamin's Italian journey, sojourn on the island of Capri, and various visits to Naples have long been recognised as marking and/or instigating important developments in his thinking:¹¹ finalizing details for the essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*; progressing the text of his ill-fated *Habilitationsschrift* on the seventeenth-century German play of mourning, the *Trauerspiel* and, in particular, struggling to compose its extraordinary and enigmatic 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue'; engaging with Georg Lukács's recently published *History and Class Consciousness*; encountering the aforementioned Lacis and Brecht; witnessing with gleeful scorn and unmistakable *Schadenfreude* the disintegration of a congress of academic philosophers held at the University of Naples as part of the city's historical celebrations; gleaning materials from 'temperamental' everyday urban life; and, accruing impressions and reflections from a distance on the conditions prevailing in inflation-hit Germany from which he himself was temporarily escaping, insights that would later appear in his 'One-Way Street' collection, a volume of fragments tellingly dedicated to Lacis. And, not least, there is the essay 'Naples'¹² itself, an essayistic experiment

ond time, and Naples perhaps for the twentieth time. I have collected a lot of material on Naples, noteworthy and important observations that I may be able to develop into something" (letter to Scholem 16 September 1924, *Correspondence*, p. 250; *Briefe Band II*, p. 486).

11 See, for example, Brodersen, *Auf Italienisch*, p. 143; Susan Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing. Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), p. 27. See also Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis. Walter Benjamin and the City*. (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1996), pp. 23-24. Most recently, see Mittelmeier *Naples 1925, 2024*.

12 See Walter Benjamin *Selected Writings Volume 1 1913-1926* (Cambridge MA,

whose significance and resonance continues to be unfolded a century later. Suffice to say, figures appear and are elaborated here that would preoccupy Benjamin and find echoes in his subsequent writings, not least in the 'Arcades Project' whose first initial essay and fragmentary sketches date from just two years later in 1927.¹³ Here in 'Naples' one encounters so many presentiments of future fascinations: constellations of outcasts (beggars, swindlers, prostitutes, ragpickers and pickpockets) and the cast-out (the refuse and detritus of the city); the temporal-spatial configurations of the cityscape manifest in the interpenetration of architectural forms and quotidian life (thresholds, labyrinths, ruins);¹⁴ the practices and possibilities of flânerie in the contemporary city and the spectacle of crowds of bodies and objects in perpetual circulation; the intense observation and critical interpretation of the ephemera and marginalia of the urban environment; an acute appreciation of inversions and reversals, the instability, indeterminacy, indefiniteness and inscrutability of the 'lived' metropolis. Naples, too, begins as "noteworthy" and becomes "most splendid". And most splendid of all is the leitmotif of the essay: the concept of 'porosity' – the envisioning of Naples as the preeminent site of urban permeation, interpenetration, saturation, absorption, co- and intermingling, de- and indifferentiation, of the hybridized, alloyed and impure.¹⁵ And as

Harvard University Press, 1996a) pp. 414-421. The city and its environs also provided the inspiration for two radio talks for young audiences: 'Naples' ['Neapel'] broadcast on Südwestdeutsche Rundfunk on 9th May 1931; and, 'The Fall of Herculaneum and Pompeii' broadcast on Berliner Rundfunk on 18th September 1931. See Walter Benjamin, *Radio Benjamin*. (London: Verso, 2014) pp. 145-151 and 152-157 respectively.

- 13 See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999a). The essay 'Arcades' dates from the summer / autumn of 1927, see pp. 871-872. The 'First Sketches' were composed between mid-1927 and 1930, see pp. 828-868.
- 14 There is even a mention of "arcades" (Benjamin *Selected Writings Volume 1*, p. 416).
- 15 For an extended and critical discussion of this key term, see Douglas Smith, 'Porosity and the Transnational: Travelling Theory between Naples and Frankfurt (Walter Benjamin, Asja Lacis and Ernst Bloch),' (in the *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 2021, 57, 2), pp. 240-259. See also Mittelmeier *Naples 1925* especially pp. 32-35.

such, Naples is a, perhaps *the*, ‘promiscuous city’: yes, licentious, sexually provocative, dithyrambic, but also more literally – from the Latin, of course: *pro-miscere* ‘for mixing’.¹⁶ Indeed, for Benjamin and Lacis, Naples proves a potent mixture, a heady love potion.

Each of the four contributions to this volume invites the reader on an excursion in ‘porosity’ and ‘promiscuity’, moving both within and without ‘Naples’; setting in motion flows and seepages betwixt and between texts, images, narratives; interleaving and interweaving authors, photographers and filmmakers for the purpose of creating “new, unforeseen constellations”.¹⁷

Jaeho Kang provides an original and insightful reading of ‘Naples’ in relation to the celebrated recent novels and other writings of Elena Ferrante. In foregrounding the correspondences and confluences of Benjaminian/Lacisian ‘porosity’ and Ferrante’s highly suggestive conceptualization of ‘*smarginatura*’ (‘dissolving boundaries’), Kang recognises her profound understanding and articulation of not just the ‘Naples’ essay itself, but of Benjamin’s wider *oeuvre* and, in particular, his own quasi-autobiographical reflections on Berlin from the early 1930s constituting the ‘Berlin Chronicle’¹⁸ and ‘Berlin Childhood Around 1900’.¹⁹ In so doing, ‘porosity’ and *smarginatura* are disclosed as encompassing not just temporal-spatial-architectural forms, but also as involving intimations of futures and memories of pasts. Cities bleed into, steep and stain one another, as texts mesh and merge. As Kang powerfully demonstrates, there are so many grains of the ‘Capri Chronicle’ in the ‘Berlin Chronicle’, and so much of a ‘Berlin Childhood’ in a Neapolitan girlhood.

16 For a discussion of the concept of ‘promiscuous modernity’ in relation to the city of Marseilles, see Grame Gilloch’s ‘Odysseus Impounded: Lost Sailors, Lost Times, Lost Loves’ in Maria Filomena Molder et al (eds) *Rethinking the City. Reconfiguration and Fragmentation* (London: Routledge, 2024).

17 Benjamin *Selected Writings Volume 1*, p. 416

18 See Walter Benjamin *Selected Writings Volume 2 1927-1934*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999b) pp. 595-637).

19 Walter Benjamin *Selected Writings Volume 3 1935-1938*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002) pp. 344-413.

In her exploration of viscosity and intermediality, Monika Perenyi sets 'Naples' in conversation with the images of the German photographer Thomas Struth (b. 1954) and the historical vestiges of the early Neapolitan film industry. Fascinated by Struth's Naples-inspired *Museum Photographs* (1989), she looks to how one might envisage porosity as montage, as moments of imagistic superimpositions and pictorial permeations, with the essay itself rendered as a form of urban optics.

In the company of Georgia Giannakopoulou we take a short excursion. Departing from Naples, we are transported around the Mediterranean coast to the south of France, arriving at Nice, another 'temperamental' city visited and discussed by Benjamin.²⁰ Yes, we manage to tear ourselves away from the pull of Naples, but we carry with us so many of the themes and preoccupations of 'Naples': in the carnival of Nice we once again encounter, albeit in different forms: swindles and deceptions; duplicitous surfaces, appearances and masks; processions and raucous festivities wherein "the stamp of the definite is avoided" and "No situation appears intended forever, no figure asserts it 'thus and not otherwise.'"²¹ While Benjamin's own comments make clear the uproarious qualities of Nice, it is the biting satirical envisioning of the city by the filmmaker Jean Vigo in his diminutive city-symphony *À Propos de Nice* (1930, 24 minutes) as discussed by Siegfried Kracauer that attracts Giannakopoulou's attention here. The cityscape of Nice is upended by Vigo's camera to excoriating effect, disclosing the empty idleness of the leisure classes set amid inescapable destitution. The film constitutes an indictment not only of the bourgeois class itself and its complacent cruelty ensconced in touristic spectacle, but also a more existential critique of a disenchanted modern experience bereft of higher purpose and meaning, of the 'spiritual shelterlessness' that Kracauer identifies as the existential condition

20 See his 'Conversation above the Corso. Recollections of Carnival-Time in Nice' (published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in March 1935) in Benjamin *Selected Writings Volume 3*, pp. 25-31.

21 Benjamin *Selected Writings Volume 1*, p. 416

of the burgeoning 'salaried masses'.²² For 'those who wait',²³ Nice is their last resort.

In the final essay by Graeme Gilloch, we return to Naples in the company of another film and another revenant. We follow in the footsteps of Felice Lasco, the lead protagonist in Mario Martone's 2022 drama *Nostalgia*, as he wends his way around the labyrinthine streets and alleyways of Naples after an absence of forty years. In his search for reconciliation with his erstwhile best friend, the now-feared criminal boss Oreste Spasiano, Felice wanders the city, visits former haunts, and is in turn haunted by memories and the life he could have spent here but never did. As both the interplay of presence/absence, and the melancholy occasioned by unrealized and long-lost potentialities, haunting is configured here as the quintessence of 'porosity'. And so we begin and end with Naples remembered, with a peculiarly Neapolitan nostalgia: a porosity of home and pain.

These papers are not involved in some sedate four-way café conversation, but rather, they speak to, speak across, speak over each other. They cut through and crisscross each other. They are entangled and embroiled, each with the others. A conversation to be sure, but perhaps something a little more 'temperamental'. After all, texts, like cities, are porous and promiscuous. And together, they compose our own Neapolitan quartet.

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²² See Siegfried Kracauer, *The Salaried Mass. Duty and Distraction in Weimar Germany*. (London: Verso, 1998), p. 88.

²³ See the essay 'Those Who Wait' ['Die Wartenden'] in Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament. Weimar Essays*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 129-140.

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Vanishing in the Porous City: Dissolving Margins in Elena Ferrante's Naples

Jaeho Kang¹

Abstract: This article examines Elena Ferrante's *Neapolitan Quartet* through the lens of Walter Benjamin's concept of urban porosity, as articulated in his foundational 1925 essay 'Naples' co-authored with Asja Lacis. Written during a crucial moment in the formation of his materialist and Marxist thoughts, Benjamin's Naples essay established porosity as both a spatial and social phenomenon that would influence his lifelong exploration of the urban spectacle in *The Arcades Project*. While Benjamin's porosity describes the interpenetration of boundaries in the Italian city, Ferrante extends this concept into psychological realms through her notion of *smarginatura* ('dissolving boundaries'). This essay argues that Ferrante's work represents a significant expansion of Benjamin's insight into Naples, transforming porosity from a primarily spatial phenomenon into a complex exploration of female subjectivity, friendship, and identity formation. Through analysis of both authors' engagement with the urban labyrinth and childhood memory, particularly Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, this article demonstrates how Benjamin's notion of porosity operates across multiple scales—from architectural space to psychological experience—revealing its continued relevance for understanding contemporary literary works in a critical way.

The Porous City in Benjamin's Naples

On 19 August 1925, the *Frankfurter Zeitung* published a brief essay entitled 'Naples' by Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis, marking Benjamin's initial endeavor to encapsulate the distinctive attributes of modern experience across various urban environments. In this essay, the authors employed the concept of 'porosity' (*Porosität*) as "the inex-

1 Jaeho Kang is a professor in the Department of Communication and a faculty affiliate of the Graduate Program in Comparative Literature and the Interdisciplinary Program in Gender Studies at Seoul National University. He is the author of *Walter Benjamin and the Media: The Spectacle of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014) and a co-editor of *Siegfried Kracauer: Selected Writings on Media, Propaganda and Political Communication* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022).

haustible law of the life of this city, reappearing everywhere.”² Nearly a century later, the concept Benjamin and Lacis introduced continues to resonate in contemporary urban discourse, finding perhaps its most profound literary extension in Elena Ferrante’s *Neapolitan Quartet*.³ Through her concept of *smarginatura*—literally “de-margination” or “dissolving boundaries”—Ferrante extends Benjamin’s spatial idea of porosity into the realm of psychological and affective experience. As Andrew Benjamin aptly points out, “reading Benjamin’s text today opens up the question of whether ‘porosity’ becomes the concept through which it may be possible to rework the nature of the border.”⁴

This essay examines the porosity of Naples as shown by Benjamin and Lacis, and Ferrante. While Benjamin and Lacis explore the interplay between architecture and daily life in the unique context of inter-war Naples, Ferrante investigates the fluidity and reconstruction of individual identity within the post-war urban landscape of the city, interpreting architectural porosity as a gendered, corporeal, and psychological experience. I contend that Ferrante’s work exemplifies not only a literary manifestation of Benjamin’s idea of urban memory but also a profound enhancement of it.

Benjamin’s encounter with Naples began through his relationship with Lacis, a Bolshevik theatre director and advocate of proletarian children’s

2 Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis, ‘Naples’ (1925), in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 1, 1913-1926*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 417.

3 The *Neapolitan Quartet*, written by the pseudonymous Italian writer Elena Ferrante, comprises four novels that chronicle the intertwined lives of Elena (“Lenù”) Greco and Raffaella (“Lila”) Cerullo from childhood through old age. The tetralogy traces the intellectual and emotional development of these two protagonists as they navigate the constraints of gender, class, and violence in their impoverished, working-class neighborhood on the outskirts of mid-twentieth-century Naples. The quartet consists of *My Brilliant Friend* (2011; English translation 2012), *The Story of a New Name* (2012; English translation 2013), *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay* (2013; English translation 2014), and *The Story of the Lost Child* (2014; English translation 2015).

4 Andrew Benjamin, ‘Porosity at the edge: working through Walter Benjamin’s “Naples”,’ *Architectural Theory Review*, 10(1) (2005): 33.

theatre whom he had met on Capri in 1924. Lacis introduced Benjamin to Marxist ideas, particularly Georg Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*, and later facilitated his meeting with Bertolt Brecht in 1929. The Naples essay thus represents the first outcome of this theoretical synthesis, combining Benjamin's earlier metaphysical thoughts with materialist theory. The collaborative nature of 'Naples' reflects Lacis's significant intellectual contribution beyond mere co-authorship. In Benjamin's dedication of *One-Way Street* to Lacis, he characterized her impact in architectural terms: "This street is named Asja-Lacis-Street after her who as an engineer cut it through the author."⁵ The metaphor of Lacis as 'engineer' proves particularly apt for understanding the Naples essay's method, which treats the city as a construction site where social relations are constantly being built, shattered and reformulated through improvisation. Lacis brought to the collaboration her experience in Soviet experimental theatre and her commitment to revolutionary education, having worked extensively with children's theater groups that she believed could serve as laboratories for new forms of social organization. This theatrical sensibility pervades the Naples essay, which treats the city as "a popular stage" where buildings "are all divided into innumerable, simultaneously animated theaters".⁶ Lacis also introduced Benjamin to the work of Soviet directors like Vsevolod Meyerhold, whose concept of theatrical "biomechanics" emphasized the physical interpenetration of actor and environment. The influence of this theatrical method appears throughout the Naples essay's treatment of urban space as inherently physical, physiological, and performative, evident in its famous observation that "everything joyful is mobile: music, toys, ice cream circulate through the streets".⁷

5 Walter Benjamin, 'One-Way Street,' in *Selected Writings, Volume 1, 1913-1926*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 444.

6 Benjamin and Lacis, 'Naples,' p. 417.

7 Benjamin and Lacis, 'Naples,' p. 417. For more details about Benjamin's notion of innervation in the context of biomechanics, see Jaeho Kang, 'The Phantasmagoria of the Techno-City: Walter Benjamin's Play-Space,' in *The Palgrave*

For Benjamin and Lacis, Naples's distinctive trait lies in its porosity. The city's volcanic foundation—its literal basis in porous tuff stone—provides a geological metaphor for a form of social organization that remains stable precisely through its flexibility. The notion of porosity originates in something “tangible” and material rather than purely metaphorical.⁸ According to Mittelmeier, while scoria, a type of volcanic rock, is often regarded as “a waste product,” tuff proves “extraordinarily useful” precisely because of its porosity, being “lighter,” providing “better insulation,” and being “easy to shape.”⁹ This material quality thus directly enables the architectural and social practices that Benjamin and Lacis observed: “as porous as this stone is the architecture.”¹⁰

Benjamin and Lacis's analysis of Neapolitan architecture reveals how this material foundation shapes both building techniques and social practices, demonstrating that porosity defines not only the raw material but also the spatial organization itself. Suggesting that the city's material foundation enables its social relations, they traced every last detail, delving into “balcony, courtyard, window, gateway, staircase, roof.”¹¹ In Naples, nothing retains its intrinsic identity; all entities become inter-

Walter Benjamin Handbook, Nathan Ross ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), pp. 713-735

- 8 Martin Mittelmeier, *Naples 1925: Adorno, Benjamin, and the Summer That Made Critical Theory*. Translated by Shelley Frisch (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024), p. 33. Mittelmeier notes that Ernst Bloch, who visited Naples in 1924, also underscored porosity as the city's intermingling character, observing a group of Neapolitans entering a restaurant and seamlessly integrating into ongoing conversations. It is “a true lesson in porosity; there is nothing aggressive about it, rather all is friendly and open, a diffuse, collective gliding” (cited in Mittelmeier, *Naples 1925*, 33). See Ernst Bloch, ‘Italien und die Porosität’ in *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 9, *Literarische Aufsätze* (Suhrkamp, 1965), pp. 508-15. Mittelmeier contends that the tactile characteristic of porosity, as defined by Benjamin and Lacis, contrasts with Bloch's abstract notion: “All it takes to experience this porosity is to skim your hands along the walls of the building in Naples, as Benjamin and Lacis did during their excursions there” (Mittelmeier, *Naples 1925*, p. 33).

- 9 Mittelmeier, *Naples 1925*, p. 33.

- 10 Benjamin and Lacis, ‘Naples,’ p. 416.

- 11 Benjamin and Lacis, ‘Naples,’ p. 417.

changeable and represent one another. Naples's porosity generates an urban space where "the stamp of the definitive is avoided. No situation appears intended forever, no figure asserts its 'thus and not otherwise.'"¹² Situating Benjamin's approach to Naples within a broader social theory of urban experience, David Frisby asserts that Benjamin's concept of porosity illustrates how "the city becomes legible not through grand narratives or totalizing perspectives, but through its fragments, its marginal spaces, and the interpenetrations that occur at the boundaries between seemingly distinct spheres."¹³ This legibility, however, is not immediate but frequently deferred, requiring what Frisby identifies as "both temporal distance and a willingness to attend to the seemingly insignificant details of urban life."¹⁴ This methodological insight—that urban meaning emerges through patient attention to margins and interpenetrations rather than through comprehensive surveys—would prove foundational for Benjamin's later work on nineteenth-century Paris.

Benjamin and Lacis further elucidate how domestic spaces arise directly from the permeable geological substrate. From a height "not reached by the cries from below, from the Castell San Martino,"¹⁵ the city's ruggedness and delineated grottos function as habitats and communal areas. Their approach to porosity subtly transitions from natural production to cultural application, highlighting that the city's inhabitants deliberately fashioned grottos by excavating cavities in stone. This transition from geological description to social analysis encapsulates a crucial conceptual leap from material properties to social structures, or as Mittelmeier terms it, "the transformation of a landscape into a philosophy" and "the transition from nature to culture."¹⁶

12 Benjamin and Lacis, 'Naples,' p. 416.

13 David Frisby, *Cityscapes of Modernity: Critical Explorations* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), p. 118.

14 Frisby, *Cityscapes of Modernity*, p. 271.

15 Benjamin and Lacis, 'Naples,' p. 416.

16 Mittelmeier, *Naples 1925*, p. 34.



Fig. 1. Naples, 2025. Photo by Jaeho Kang

Benjamin and Lacis then broadened the concept of porosity to encompass the lives unfolding within these buildings (Fig. 1): “Building and action interpenetrate in the courtyards, arcades, and stairways. In everything they preserve the scope to become a theatre of new, unforeseen constellations.”¹⁷ This architectural porosity extends beyond individual buildings to comprise the organization of urban space itself, generating multifunctional environments that resist single-use zoning and spatial segregation. Benjamin and Lacis’s observation that Neapolitan structures resist ‘well-defined function’ suggests an understanding of architecture as necessarily open-ended rather than strictly programmatic as in Nordic cities.

The essay’s critical examination of the indistinct borders between private and public reveals the class ramifications of porosity. The observation that “the living room reappears on the street, with chairs, hearth, and altar, so, only much more loudly, the street migrates into the liv-

¹⁷ Benjamin and Lacis, ‘Naples,’ p. 416.

ing room.”¹⁸ indicates a meltdown of bourgeois domestic privacy linked to urban poverty. Benjamin and Lacis further notice that “poverty has brought about a stretching of frontiers that mirrors the most radiant freedom of thought,”¹⁹ highlighting a significant insight on the connection between material conditions and spatial practices. From their critical perspective, porosity arises partly from material necessity rather than ideological preference: the impoverished Neapolitan lacks the means for the spatial segregation typical of bourgeois urban life, resulting in social mingling that wealthier residents may perceive as menacing. Benjamin and Lacis meticulously refrain from idealizing this poverty-induced porosity, acknowledging that economic deprivation influences spatial practices in both liberating and limiting ways. Their analysis recognizes that the same spatial permeability fostering creativity also permits exploitation; for instance, the intermingling of legal and illicit activity establishes conditions that allow criminal organizations like the Camorra to wield considerable influence over daily life. This recognition of porosity’s dark side inhibits the notion from serving only as a celebration of spatial openness or urban informality.

The political implications of the concept of porosity are elucidated when placed within the broader context of 1920s European politics. The essay was written at a time of intense political turmoil in Italy. As Smith notes, in January 1925, six months prior to the publication of the Naples essay, Mussolini’s administration enacted ‘exceptional laws’ to “circumvent constitutional restraints on executive power.”²⁰ Against this backdrop, the celebration of urban porosity assumes overt political implications, embodying a mode of spatial organization that defies authoritarian dominance. The essay’s focus on improvisation directly opposes the fascist ideology’s stress on permanence and monumentality. Neapol-

18 Benjamin and Lacis, ‘Naples,’ p. 420.

19 Benjamin and Lacis, ‘Naples,’ p. 420.

20 Douglas Smith, ‘Porosity and the transnational: Travelling theory between Naples and Frankfurt (Walter Benjamin, Asja Lacis and Ernst Bloch),’ *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 57(2) (2021): 251.

itan porosity exemplifies ‘ambiguity’ as the avoidance of the definite.²¹ This anti-monumental perspective on urban space would be prescient, providing a framework for comprehending how urban environments may counter authoritarian appropriation through their inherent instability. However, Benjamin and Lacis acknowledge the limitations and perils of porosity, rejecting any romanticized portrayal of Neapolitan urban existence. Their depiction of Naples is not only commendatory but also nuanced. Their insight into porosity—as both liberating and confining, subversive and oppressive—would be essential for Benjamin’s later analysis of urban experience under high capitalism, as analyzed in his study of Charles Baudelaire and the Paris arcades, and inspirational for Elena Ferrante’s *Neapolitan Quartet*.

Getting Lost in the Urban Labyrinth

Walter Benjamin’s reflection on the city’s labyrinthine nature is bound up with the necessity of learning the ‘art of getting lost’ for effective navigation. In the opening of ‘Tiergarten’ from *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, written between 1932 and 1938, Benjamin states: “Not to find one’s way around a city does not mean much. But to lose one’s way, as one loses one’s way in a forest, requires some schooling.”²² Benjamin here establishes disorientation not as failure but as a cultivated skill—a mode of urban perception that requires training and practice. The motif recurs throughout Benjamin’s urban writings and finds resonance in Ferrante’s novels, where both literal and metaphorical experiences of disorientation play crucial roles in the protagonists’ development. For both Elena and Lila, learning to navigate the labyrinth of Naples becomes essential to the transformation of their subjectivities and their negotiation of class, gender, and social boundaries (Fig.2). Drawing on Benjamin’s childhood memories, Ferrante expounds on this issue explicitly:

21 Benjamin and Lacis, ‘Naples,’ p. 416.

22 Walter Benjamin, ‘Berlin Childhood around 1900,’ in *Selected Writings, Volume 3, 1935-1938*. Translated by Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 352.

Learning to get lost in a city, precisely: hearing the names of the streets like the snapping of dry twigs, like mountains gullies that reflect the time of day. Benjamin talks about it in an anomalous sort of writing, a vortex-like writing that seeks to reach the difficult to express, what is deep down and barely visible. When does the city become the city of being lost? Where is the origin of the labyrinth, when is one schooled in the art of getting lost?²³



Fig. 2. Biblioteca “Giulio Andreoli” via Beato Leonardo Murialdo, Rione Luzzatti, Naples, 2025. Photo by Jaeho Kang

These questions frame getting lost not merely as spatial disorientation but as an epistemological and existential practice—a way of knowing the city and, through it, of reconstituting the self. In Ferrante’s *Neapolitan Quartet*, getting lost becomes a practice of disappearing, constituting not just an exploration of the city but a rebuilding of identity through the very practice of losing oneself. Ferrante further draws directly on

23 Elena Ferrante, *Frantumaglia: A Writer’s Journey*. Translated by Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2016), p. 143.

Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood around 1900* extending his meditation on the labyrinth's origins: "This art I acquired rather late in life; it fulfilled a dream, of which the first traces were labyrinths on the blotting papers in my school notebooks. No, not the first, for there was one earlier that has outlasted the others. The way into this labyrinth, which was not without its Ariadne, led over the Bendler Bridge, whose gentle arch became my first hillside."²⁴ Benjamin posits the labyrinth as intrinsically connected to childhood experiences, formative memories, and the emergence of desire—themes that reverberate throughout Ferrante's tetralogy. As such, Benjamin's insight into the urban experience guides Ferrante's grasp of Naples as a labyrinthine space that requires not just navigation but a willingness to surrender to disorientation as a form of perception and knowledge. In the concluding volume of her quartet, Ferrante constructs a modern myth through the character of Lila, who engages in a systematic investigation of Naples, pursuing literature, revisiting the city's history, traversing its streets, and endeavoring to reveal what has been obscured, altered, or neglected throughout centuries of devastation and renewal. This investigation of disorientation serves as both spatial practice and urban ethnography.

Furthermore, for Ferrante, as for Benjamin, the labyrinth is not merely a spatial formation but a temporal one, fundamentally bound up with childhood experiences and formative memories. Ferrante notes, quoting Benjamin: "The original urban labyrinth is in childhood. It's the labyrinth that in the form of the park at the zoo in Berlin in which the child Benjamin navigated a mysterious corner where 'in fact, or far away, must have lain the couch of that Ariadne in whose proximity I first experienced what only later I had a word for: love.'"²⁵ This temporal dimension of the labyrinth—its roots in childhood perception and desire—proves crucial for understanding how Ferrante's characters negotiate urban space as a site of identity formation. In a pivotal sequence in *My Brilliant Friend*, the

24 Benjamin, 'Berlin Childhood around 1900,' p. 352

25 Ferrante, *Frantumaglia*, p. 144, quoting Benjamin, 'Berlin Childhood around 1900,' p. 352.

children Elena and Lila venture beyond the boundaries of their neighborhood for the first time, attempting to pass through the railway underpass to reach the sea (Fig. 3). They reverse course in the midst of the underpass and proceed homeward, their mission unsuccessful.

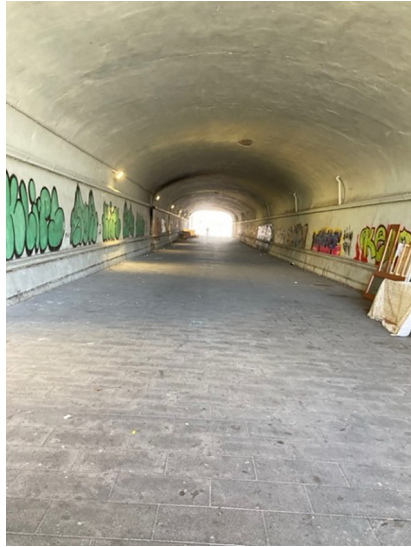


Fig. 3. Tunnel di Gianturco, Rione Luzzatti, Naples, 2025.

Photo by Jaeho Kang

Yet, this apparent failure, marked by physical disorientation among the unfamiliar streets of Naples, represents a critical incident of border transgression with profound psychological significance:

I was aware of the city for the first time. I felt it on my back and under my feet, it was running along with us, panting with its dirty breath, horns honking madly, it was alien and known at the same time, limited and boundless, dangerous and exciting, *I recognize it by getting lost*.²⁶

This scene illustrates a significant motif of *smarginatura* in Ferrante's works as women crossing borders. As Sarnelli remarks, "rather than a dissolution

26 Elena Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend*. Translated by Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2012), p. 73—Emphasis added.

or disappearance of margins, *smarginatura* proves to be a crossing towards ambivalent forms of belonging, always indistinct and undefinable, along multiple intersections of gender, class, culture, origins and place.”²⁷ This reframing of *smarginatura* as active border-crossing rather than passive dissolution elucidates the transformative power of Elena and Lila’s excursion beyond the neighborhood’s boundaries. Their physical navigation across Naples’ unfamiliar terrain serves as a metaphor for the transgression of social, psychological, and class boundaries that will characterize their relationship throughout the tetralogy, establishing a pattern of movement and resistance that defines their divergent trajectories.

In this vein, the experience of getting lost in the city becomes a key metaphor for Elena’s overarching path of self-discovery and personal growth. By transcending the familiar boundaries of her neighborhood, Elena initiates an exploration of new possibilities for herself, surpassing the constrained positions afforded to women in her community. Consequently, getting lost transforms into a means of emancipation, a way of escaping predetermined paths and uncovering novel modes of existence. Ferrante herself contemplates this phenomenon in *Frantumaglia*:

That impression remained. Ever since, every city has existed only when it abruptly enters the blood that moves the legs and blinds the eyes. I took the wrong street many times not because I didn’t know the way home but because the known space also felt my anxiety and opened up before me in erroneous routes.²⁸

Elena’s experience of getting lost suggests that disorientation stems not from ignorance but from affective engagement—the city responds to internal states, opening “erroneous routes” that paradoxically lead to self-awareness.

In the *Neapolitan Quartet*, the neighborhood functions as this original labyrinth, the primary space where Elena and Lila learn to navigate so-

²⁷ Laura Sarnelli, ‘Women crossing borders: Elena Ferrante’s *smarginatura* across media,’ *eScholarship*, University of California, 2020, p. 24.

²⁸ Ferrante, *Frantumaglia*, pp. 141-142.

cial relationships, gender expectations, and class dynamics. Their divergent paths—Elena leaving the neighborhood to pursue education, Lila remaining physically (if not intellectually) confined within it—reflect different strategies for negotiating this labyrinth. For Elena, the strategy involves physical escape and the construction of a new identity through education and writing, learning to navigate new labyrinths in the elite worlds of academia, publishing, and politics while carrying the original labyrinth of the neighborhood within her. For Lila, unable to escape physically, the strategy involves a kind of internal resistance, a refusal to accept the limitations imposed by her circumstances, creating her own internal labyrinths through intellectual pursuits, entrepreneurial activities, and complex manipulations of social relationships. Both strategies involve forms of getting lost—Elena in the unfamiliar social and cultural worlds she enters, Lila in her own brilliant but often destructive intellectual and emotional explorations—and both involve the tension between surrender and control, between allowing oneself to get lost and maintaining some thread of connection. The episode in which the children Lila and Elena drop their dolls into Don Achille's apartment hole and descend to the basement, thereafter ascending to confront him, marks the very first moment in which they dare to exceed the boundaries imposed by their violent, patriarchal society. Similarly, their aborted journey to the sea represents another attempt at boundary transgression. Since that time, they persistently transgress the boundaries of class, sexuality, and gender without cessation, establishing a pattern of resistance through repeated acts of border-crossing.

Affective Porosity: The *Stradone* as Urban Stage

Benjamin's notion of porosity in Naples exemplifies a unique urban phenomenon that defies the rationalized spatial arrangement characteristic of European modernity. Porosity denotes an absence of distinct borders between phenomena, an infiltration of one entity by another, a fusion of ancient and modern, and sacred and profane. Graeme Gilloch specifies key characteristics of Naples's porosity as "dislocation and disorientation,



Fig. 4. Stradone, Rione Luzzatti, Naples, 2025. Photo by Jaeho Kang

transience and instability, interpenetration yet hidden dimensions, and indeterminacy and improvisation.”²⁹ These qualities—spatial, temporal, and social—find concrete manifestation in Ferrante’s detailed rendering of Neapolitan street-life. The recurring presence of the *stradone* (main street) throughout Ferrante’s tetralogy provides a concrete example of how Benjamin’s understanding of urban space as “theater” manifests in contemporary Neapolitan experience (Fig. 4). This major thoroughfare functions as both literal and metaphorical stage where public and private life interpenetrate, creating the conditions for both community formation and social surveillance that characterize life in the *rione* (neighborhood). Elena’s observations of the *stradone* from her apartment window reveal how architectural elevation can produce both perspective and alienation, enabling critical distance while reinforcing social separation (Figs. 5 and 6):

As soon as lunch was ready and the table set, I looked out the window onto the *stradone*. I wanted to call them to say it was time to come home. But the stalls impeded my view, all I could see was Marcello walking with my sister on one side and Silvio on the other. The image of the *stradone* from above gave me a sense of anguish. Sundays had always seemed to me a paint

29 Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), pp. 25-6.

concealing the decay, but that day the impression was stronger. What was I doing in that place, why did I continue to live there, when I had enough money and could go anywhere.³⁰

Elena's perception of the *stradone* demonstrates how spatial position shapes social consciousness and emotional experience, with her elevated viewpoint both enabling her to see the street's theatrical quality—the Sunday performance that conceals underlying decay—and intensifying her sense of entrapment. The *stradone's* function as theatrical space becomes most apparent during moments of crisis and celebration, when the boundary between performer and audience dissolves and the street enables collective action while simultaneously exposing individual vulnerability.



Fig. 5 piazza Francesco Coppola, Rione Luzzatti, Naples, 2025.
Photo by Jaeho Kang

30 Elena Ferrante, *The Story of the Lost Child*. Trans. Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2015), p. 330.



Fig. 6 via Nicola Fraggianni, Rione Luzzatti, Naples, 2025. Photo by Jaeho Kang

Furthermore, the tragic disappearance of Tina on the *stradone* represents the dark side of urban porosity, revealing how the absence of clear boundaries can enable violence and loss. Elena's narration represents how porous urban space can transform into a site of trauma:

In the evening a rumor took hold that later prevailed. The child had left the sidewalk to chase a blue ball. But just at that moment a truck was passing. The truck was a mud-colored hulk, traveling at high speed, clattering and bouncing because of the holes in the *stradone*. No one had seen anything else, but the collision was heard, the collision that passed directly from the story into the memory of whoever was listening. The truck hadn't braked, or even tried to, and had disappeared at the end of the *stradone* along with Tina's body, her braids. On the asphalt not a drop of blood remained, nothing, nothing at all. In that nothing the vehicle was lost, the child was lost forever.³¹

31 Ferrante, *The Story of the Lost Child*, p. 332

The very holes in the *stradone* representing openness and flexibility become instruments of violence. Elena's narration emphasizes absence and nothingness: no witnesses, no blood, no trace—only the rumour that “passed directly from the story into the memory.” This transformation of event into narrative, of material reality into collective memory, reflects the porous boundary between fact and fiction, presence and absence, that characterizes both Neapolitan urban life and Ferrante's narrative method. The community's collective search for Tina—“We look for Tina along the *stradone*, then throughout the whole neighborhood, then again along the *stradone*. Many people joined us.”³²—demonstrates both the mobilizing capacity of porous urban space and its ultimate inadequacy in the face of loss.

Smarginatura

Ferrante extends the spatial, temporal and social aspects of porosity into the psychological realm through her notion of *smarginatura*, or “dissolving boundaries,” demonstrating how urban spatial forms shape inner experience. In the *Neapolitan Quartet*, Lila experiences episodes where the boundaries between herself and the external world, between individuals and objects, and between the past and present abruptly disintegrate. These occurrences are characterized as both terrifying and revelatory, moments when the constructed nature of social classifications and personal identities is exposed with visceral intensity. The initial instance of *smarginatura* occurs during a New Year's Eve festivity, as the adolescent Lila witnesses the Solara brothers discharging firearms into the air:

Lila had seen the contours of her brother, the metallic outline of her mother and father dissolve. [...] She had felt herself dissolving; she had perceived, in terror, the profound transparency of the plaster that held together the defenseless organisms that we were.³³

For Lila, this sense of dissolution transcends metaphor, presenting itself as a corporeal sensation akin to an ailment or pathology that physically

32 Ferrante, *The Story of the Lost Child*, p. 331

33 Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend*, p. 176.

overwhelms her. Ferrante elucidates thus: “In Lila it’s a bodily reaction, in a certain sense a pathology. *Smarginatura* is the word she uses to designate an earthquake whose epicenter is a sudden dysfunction of the five senses.”³⁴ Ferrante’s characterization emphasizes the physical, uncontrollable nature of the experience, distinguishing it from intellectual recognition or metaphorical understanding.

The notion of *smarginatura* thereby broadens the concept of porosity from the external, urban environment to the interior, emotional, psychological, and affective realm. Similar to Naples, a city where the boundaries between interior and exterior, private and public, are perpetually dissolving, Lila’s experiences of *smarginatura* reveal a self whose boundaries are permeable and vulnerable to collapse. The porous city manifests its psychological dimension in a permeable identity, with the fragmented self aligning with Lila’s *smarginatura*, wherein the ostensibly rigid boundaries of identity are exposed as artificial constructs momentarily containing fragments that perpetually risk overflowing or disintegrating.³⁵ Lila’s *smarginatura* captures the traversing movement and moment across scales and domains, from urban architecture to individual psychology, from collective social space to intimate bodily experience.

A later episode on the earthquake demonstrates this traversal more explicitly. When Lila undergoes *smarginatura* while riding in the vehicle of her loathed husband, Marcello Solara, the depiction highlights both the physical intensity and the resulting cognitive problem:

She exclaimed: Oh Madonna, an expression I had never heard her use. What’s wrong, I asked. Gasping for breath, she cried out that the car’s boundaries were dissolving, the boundaries of Marcello, too, at the wheel were dissolving, the thing and the person were gushing out of themselves, mixing liquid metal and flesh.³⁶

³⁴ Ferrante, *Frantumaglia*, p. 85.

³⁵ According to Sarah Chihaya, Ferrante’s work shows “the two edges of *smarginatura*”: “joyfully endless production and violent limitation” (Sarah Chihaya, ‘Uniform,’ in Sarah Chihaya, Merve Emre, Katherine Hill, and Jill Richards, *The Ferrante Letters: An Experiment in Collective Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), p. 143).

³⁶ Ferrante, *The Story of the Lost Child*, p. 175.

Lila's subsequent attempt to explain this experience to Elena reveals the difficulty of articulating such dissolution within conventional language and conceptual frameworks:

She used the term: *dissolving boundaries*. It was on that occasion that she resorted to it for the first time; she struggled to elucidate meaning, she wanted me to understand what the dissolution of boundaries meant and how much it frightened her. She was still holding my hand tight, breathing hard. She said that the outlines of things and people were delicate, that they broke like cotton thread. She whispered that for her it had always been that way, an object lost its edges and poured into another, into a solution of heterogeneous materials, a merging and mixing.³⁷

This passage establishes *smarginatura* as both a perceptual crisis and an epistemological challenge, questioning the stability of categories that normally organize experience. The distinctive aspect of *smarginatura* lies in its emotional tactility, a corporeal engagement with affect that refuses the distinction between physical sensation and psychological state:

She exclaimed that she had always had to struggle to believe that life had firm boundaries, for she had known since she was a child that it was not like that—it was absolutely not like that—and so she couldn't trust in their resistance to being banged and bumped. ...A *tactile emotion* would melt into a *visual one*, a visual one would melt into *olfactory one*, ah, what is the real world, Lenù, nothing, nothing, nothing about which one can say conclusively: it's like that.³⁸

This sensory interpenetration—tactile melting into visual, visual into olfactory—mirrors the spatial interpenetration Benjamin observed in Naples, where intimate, concrete space migrates into public, abstract one and vice versa. Lila's question "what is the real world?" echoes Benjamin's recognition that in porous Naples, "nothing remains itself"; both formulations challenge realist epistemologies that assume stable, bounded objects and identities. Furthermore, the dissolving boundary provides

37 Ferrante, *The Story of the Lost Child*, pp. 175-6

38 Ferrante, *The Story of the Lost Child*, p. 176—Emphasis added.

crucial insight into the interpersonal dimensions of porosity. As narrator, Elena reflects on the difference between herself and Lila:

*I was I and for that very reason I could make space for her in me and give her an enduring form. She instead didn't want to be her, so she couldn't do the same. The tragedy of Tina, her weakened physical state, her drifting brain surely contributed to her crises. But that was the underlying cause of the illness that she called dissolving boundaries.*³⁹

Elena's writerly identity depends on maintaining boundaries—on being securely 'I'—precisely in order to contain and represent Lila's more fluid, boundary-dissolving subjectivity. The relationship between the two female subjects thus enacts a dialectic between containment and dissolution, that structures the entire tetralogy. Lila's final vision of Naples in *The Story of the Lost Child* synthesizes the geological, historical, and psychological dimensions of porosity into a comprehensive urban philosophy:

Ah, what a city, said Aunt Lina to my daughter, what a splendid and important city: here all languages are spoken, Imma, here everything was built and everything torn down, here the people don't trust talk and are very talkative, here is Vesuvius which reminds you every day that the greatest undertaking of powerful men, the most splendid work, can be reduced to nothing in a few seconds by the fire, and the earthquake, and the ash, and the sea.⁴⁰

Here Ferrante extends the volcanic foundation of porosity that Benjamin and Lacis identified as the material basis of Naples to encompass linguistic multiplicity, historical layering, paradoxical social practices, and the ever-present threat of natural catastrophe. The city's porosity emerges as simultaneously creative and destructive, enabling speech while undermining trust in language, building up structures while constantly threatening their dissolution. Lila's ultimate disappearance—"She had often

³⁹ Ferrante, *The Story of the Lost Child*, p. 371

⁴⁰ Ferrante, *The Story of the Lost Child*, p. 440.

expressed that idea of eliminating herself"⁴¹—represents the logical endpoint of *smarginatura*, the complete dissolution of boundaries between self and world. Crucially, *smarginatura* is not merely a personal affliction for Lila; it is profoundly linked to the social and cultural circumstances of post-war Naples, where violence, poverty, and rapid social transformations generate an environment in which solid identities and distinct social boundaries prove difficult to maintain. The Solara brothers, emissaries of the burgeoning *Camorra*, effectively obliterate the neighborhood's boundaries through violence, rendering the social porosity that Benjamin noticed increasingly indistinguishable from criminal penetration and corruption.

Elena, the novel's narrator, does not undergo *smarginatura* in the same visceral, pathological manner as Lila. Instead, she experiences border-crossing by constantly transgressing urban boundaries, moving from Naples to Pisa, to Florence, to Milan and to Turin, and eventually returning to Naples. For Elena, *smarginatura* transforms into what Ferrante describes as "forcing oneself, overflowing the neighborhood, crossing borders, becoming something else and something else again, a tearing of veils with the suffering but also the pride that goes with it."⁴² This formulation suggests an active, almost violent relationship to boundaries—not passive dissolution but forceful transgression. Consequently, while Lila perceives porosity as a bodily dissolution of the self, Elena transforms her identity through education, reading, and writing, facilitating her escape from the neighborhood's limitations. The juxtaposition—yet integration—of these two experiences of porosity (one corporeal, the other intellectual; one involuntary, the other willed) emerges as a pivotal tension in the tetralogy, illustrating the multiple modalities of corporeal and psychological porosity and their relationship to questions of female subjectivity.

41 Ferrante, *The Story of the Lost Child*, p. 455.

42 Ferrante, *Frantumaglia*, p. 87.

The Porosity of the Female City

A significant aspect of Ferrante's reinterpretation of Benjamin's city involves its explicit gendering. While Benjamin's account of Naples notes the public presence of women in the streets and their role in mediating between private and public life, it does not explicitly theorize porosity in gendered terms. Ferrante, by contrast, deliberately connects porosity to female experience, suggesting that women have a particular relationship to boundaries and their dissolution that stems from both biological and social conditions. In *Frantumaglia*, Ferrante reflects on Naples as a "female city," noting:

Even a feminine city—a future that redeems the past—risks not knowing how to completely reckon with itself. It's a shortcut to set aside what is formidable about women, to imagine us merely as organisms with good feelings, skilled masters of gentility.⁴³

Ferrante refuses sentimental feminization, insisting instead on women's complexity and power—qualities that the porous city both enables and threatens. Ferrante further elaborates that:

women still entertain ghosts, we have long experience with exhausting secret negotiations with revenants that sink their teeth into you as they caress you, and we don't avoid them, we know that they are true inhabitants of that tangle of veins, blood, liquids, flesh that is our body.⁴⁴

This image of the body as inhabited by ghosts—as porous to the past, to the dead, to that which should be exterior but persists within—establishes a specifically female relationship to boundary dissolution rooted in corporeal experience, that is, the phantasmagoric experience of the modern city.⁴⁵

The relationship between Lila and Elena represents the most sustained

43 Ferrante, *Frantumaglia*, pp. 151-152.

44 Ferrante, *Frantumaglia*, p. 121.

45 For more details about Benjamin's idea of phantasmagoric experience of ghosts in public spaces, see Jaeho Kang, *Walter Benjamin and the Media: The Spectacle of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), especially, Chapter 5.

exploration of this gendered porosity, embodying what Toni Morrison, in her essay 'Home,' identifies as the dual nature of porous boundaries. Morrison asserts: "Porous borders are understood in some quarters to be areas of threat and certain chaos, and whether real or imagined, enforced separation is posited as the solution."⁴⁶ Both Ferrante and Morrison acknowledge that permeability is frequently pathologized or militarized, yet they also recognize its inevitability and value.⁴⁷

Throughout the *Neapolitan Quartet*, female bodies and female relationships incorporate this porosity in multiple registers. The physical transformations of puberty, pregnancy, and aging; the blurry boundaries between mothers and daughters, between female friends; the ways women's identities are shaped by and resist male definitions—all these represent forms of porosity that are specifically gendered, rooted in the experience of bodies that are expected to be penetrable, that are socially constructed as porous to male desire, reproductive processes, and patriarchal definition. Lila and Elena's identities are so intertwined that clear boundaries between them often dissolve, creating what Elena describes as an almost mystical interpenetration:

It was as if, because of an evil spell, the joy or sorrow of one required the sorrow or joy of the other; even our physical aspect, it seemed to me, shared in that swing. When did it begin? What was the origin of that bad habit? I couldn't say. We grew up that way; it was enough to lessen the distance between our two faces, to stare intensely at each other, for me to become her, for her to become me.⁴⁸

46 Toni Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), p. 19.

47 Morrison further observes: "The chameleon-like characteristic of global economy provokes the defense of the local and raises newer questions of foreignness—a foreignness that suggests intimacy rather than distance (Is he my neighbor?) and a deep personal discomfort with our own sense of belonging (Is he us? Am I the foreigner?)" (Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard*, p. 22). This resonates throughout Ferrante's exploration of the relationship between Elena and Lila, where questions of belonging and foreignness persist despite—or because of—their intimate connection.

48 Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend*, p. 268.

This porosity between the two women is both intimate and threatening, enabling profound connection and mutual understanding while also leading to jealousy, competition, and the fear of being absorbed or effaced by the other. The relationship thus embodies the dual nature of porosity as both a form of connection and a threat to individual identity—a duality that takes on particular resonance in the context of female friendship under patriarchy, where women's relationships with each other often exist in tension with their relationships to men and their struggles for individual autonomy.

Likewise, the gendering of porosity emerges particularly in the novels' treatment of female authorship and creativity. Elena's development as a writer involves incorporating Lila's voice and perspective into her own, creating a kind of porous text where boundaries between authors dissolve—the narrative we read is simultaneously Elena's and Lila's, individual and collaborative. Elena frequently acknowledges her dependence on Lila's ideas, energy, and perspective, suggesting that her own voice emerges from their porous relationship rather than from autonomous individual genius. This mutual dependence and boundary dissolution reflects the broader social porosity of Naples, where, as Benjamin and Lacis observed, no individual or element exists in isolation but is always part of a dynamic network of relationships and forces.⁴⁹

49 Matteo Pericoli's architectural drawing of *My Brilliant Friend* translates Ferrante's imaginary community into designs that embody their structural and thematic elements, depicting two interlinked volumes—one suspended from the other—showing Elena and Lila's intertwined relationship. Pericoli describes the architectural structure: "With its mass and swirled dynamism, the suspended volume (that we will call Lila) seems to be slipping away from the one that is holding it up (that we will call Elena) making it extend and stretch as if it was Lila that was shaping Elena and providing her with her dynamic energy, so vital to any piece of architecture." This visual interpretation adeptly captures the porous boundaries between the two women, where one cannot exist without the other, yet each constantly threatens to break away or consume the other. Pericoli emphasizes that "if one of the two elements were to be missing, the other would have no reason to exist. Without Lila there would be no Elena, and vice versa" – a formulation that captures the mutual constitution of these two female subjects through their porous relationship. Matteo Pericoli, 'Architectural reading of Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend*,

Drawing on Benjamin's insight into the urban experience, Ferrante extends the porous character of the city as a spatial and social phenomenon into a deep exploration of female subjectivity, gendered friendship, and reciprocal identity formation. For Ferrante, Naples transforms into a realm where boundaries—between self and other, past and present, reality and imagination—are perpetually challenged, negotiated, and redefined. Yet this extension is not merely application but transformation: where Benjamin's porosity remains primarily spatial and social, Ferrante's *smarginatura* becomes psychological, affective, and explicitly gendered, rooted in female bodies and female relationships. In Ferrante's Naples, porosity serves as both a condition to be traversed and a potential catalyst for transformation and development, even as it threatens dissolution and loss. The city is constantly changing, perpetually porous, neither fully stable nor completely dissolved—and through it, Ferrante suggests, so are we.

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Porous City: Porous Pictures

Monika Perenyei¹

Abstract: In the creative image of *porosity* Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis not only portrayed Neapolitan experience: they set a visible concept in motion in 1925, whose speed of transmission accelerated upon its second publication (1972), and was utilized as a discursive aid in the cultural hybridity of the 1990s. The porosity that characterizes many aspects of the Southern metropolis is also a transformative principle. Naples proves to be an effective agent in the creative process of writers and artists: beside the scholars of the Frankfurt School, Roberto Rossellini, and Thomas Struth, to evoke some; next to the *Naples essay* and Rossellini's *Journey to Italy*, Struth's *Museum Photographs* were conceived in the fruitful atmosphere of volcanic Naples, too. In a previous work on Struth's photographic tableaux made in art venues, I argued the intermedial, in-between character of them in accordance with the artist's Naples experience in 1988, which I amplified, and contextualized through Benjamin's and Lacis's text on the porous city. In this paper I turn again to the concept of *porosity* to argue that the Naples essay itself becomes significant not only as a seminal text, but also as an image: it works as a *surface* that has preserved the imprint of the now-disappeared early Neapolitan film culture, one which was a formative socio-cultural element in Benjamin and Lacis's time. Through the tunnel of images and using the methods of the "archaeology of intertextuality", I follow the traces of the "Naples effect" to arrive at the "unconscious of history", i.e. at the mosaic-like city of ordinary history, which is resistant to the stratification of historicity.

1 Monika Perenyei is an art historian based in Budapest. She is Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Art History (ELTE RCH), researching theories of photography, arts in-between media, and montage as art practice and epistemological orientation. She earned her doctoral degree in 2018. She is the Chief Curator at the Psychiatric Art Collection of Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Her research interest includes surrealism, history of art and care, psychoanalysis and creativity. She is the author of the book *A Médiumok velünk vannak / The Media are with us* (2012), and her new book *Lélekképek (Pictures of Psyché)*, published by Kijárat, is forthcoming.

Prologue²

This paper has evolved from a persistent – albeit for a while tempered – passion for Thomas Struth's large scale *Museum Photographs* (1989-2005), images which seemingly make their beholder travel between the virtual and actual, offering a surface between the depicted fiction and the museum visitors' real space.³ The enthusiasm of the art historian, (mine) was rekindled due to the anniversary of Walter Benjamin's 'Naples' essay. Years ago this played a crucial role in my journey to the genesis of Struth's dazzling photographs⁴, since they were conceived in Naples, too. The Berlin-based artist's *Museum Photographs*, which mediate between life and art, present and past, emphatically revitalized the traditional model of the Western picture – the upright picture plane (tableau) of modernism originating from the Renaissance – which had been elaborated in the paradigm of painting and for centuries had served as a main theme in the narrative of European modern art.⁵ With their specific treatment and definite framing, Struth's *Museum Photographs* expanded the scale and site associated with

- 2 The works by Thomas Struth referenced in this paper can be viewed on his website. https://www.thomasstruth32.com/smallsize/photographs/museum-photographs_1/index.html The titles, technical specifications, and catalogue numbers of his pictures are indicated in square brackets in the text.
- 3 The interplay between fiction and non-fiction is a conventional practice in aesthetic reception. Wilhelm Jensen's *Gradiva, a Pompeian Fantasy* (1902) reveals an extreme case of dwelling in fiction, which offered Sigmund Freud the opportunity to start interpreting literary works based on the lessons of psychoanalysis: *Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's Gradiva* (1907). Freud's instructive *Gradiva* essay is put into the context of the German speaking literary tradition by the Hungarian philosopher Sándor Radnóti. Radnóti's elucidatory study (*Gradiva I-II, Case Study*, 2001) is key to the argument developed in the next section of this paper.
- 4 Monika Perenyi, „*The Holding Gaze*“, *Thomas Struth Museum Photographs and the Photographic Tableau*, dissertation, Doctoral School of Philosophy, ELTE, Budapest, 2017. manuscript
- 5 For more on the crisis in panel painting, see Leo Steinberg, *The Flatbed Picture Plane*. From a lecture at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1968; First published in 'Reflections on the State of Criticism', in *Artforum* in March 1972; in *Other Criteria*, 1972, pp. 61-98.

the photograph: in their vertical museum, presentation they act like, panel painting in confronting human posture. [*Art Institute of Chicago II, Chicago 1990*, Chromogenic print, Cat.4141 180,0 x 215,0 cm] That is why, beyond their absorbing quality, these photographic re-animations⁶ of old paintings sparked lively discussions at the turn of the millennium concerning the encounter of old and new media; medium specific versus intermedial art praxis; and, autonomy and heteronomy in arts, i.e. „absorption and theatricality“ in the tradition of picture form.⁷ From today's perspective we can see clearly how the questions of permeability and hybridization had emerged with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain simultaneously in the fields of humanities & arts, and social sciences.⁸ Subsequently, in the space of some three decades, the previously fevered discussions on the photographic tableau have calmed down. These seem to be dissolving in the computerized and globalized media environment,⁹ and we are

6 In an interview by Elena Cué, Struth mentions his attempt to *resurrect* old paintings: bringing them back to life by taking into account the socio-cultural embeddedness of them, and their drives and desires as part of the creative process. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/elena-cue/interview-with-thomas-str_b_7869912.html, last download 1 June, 2026.

7 For the rise of the autonomous picture form in modernism, see Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality, Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1980). Informed by his earlier research, Fried finds critical value in the photographic tableau since it can be interpreted as a reaffirmation of the modern artistic tradition. In: Michael Fried: *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*. Yale University Press, New Haven, London, 2008. Jean-François Chevrier takes a radically different approach: he tests the concept of the picture (*tableau* in French) against the ceaseless evolution of media and Lacan's theory of the image; he sees the photo-based tableau in conjunction with intermedial art practices. See, Jean-François Chevrier, *The Adventures of Picture Form in the History of Photography* (1989). Trans. Michael Gilson. In: *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography, 1960-1982*. Exhibition Catalogue. Minneapolis, Los Angeles, Vigo, Winterthur, 2004-2005. pp. 113-128. First published in: *Photo-Kunst: Arbeiten aus 150 Jahren*. Exhibition Catalogue. Graphische Sammlung, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, 1989. pp. 47-81.

8 Wim Wenders' *Lisbon Story* (1994) is the epitome of this cultural transformation: crossing national borders and shifting the prevailing balance between the components of filmmaking simultaneously.

9 See David M. Berry's blogpost on *computational porosity*, i.e. „the interpenetra-

searching for old-new concepts to think about the transformations of the traditional form of the Picture, and to enhance our capabilities to include and apply more globally-relevant picture forms. Indeed, my tempered passion for the Naples-inspired *Museum Photographs* and 'Naples' essay has been revived by Giuliana Bruno's exploration of early Neapolitan film industry, focusing on Elvira Notari's extensive production, which was lost to the historical archive.¹⁰ Bruno's approach, described as an archaeology of intertextualities, drew my attention again to the palimpsest-like layers of images being preserved not only in visual artefacts, but, following Benjamin's own suggestion, in texts, such as the century-old 'Naples' essay itself. In *The Arcades Project*, in a convolute on 'Theory of Knowledge and Progress' Benjamin cites the following passage from André Monglond: "'The past has left images of itself in literary texts, images comparable to those which are *imprinted by light on a photosensitive page*. The future alone possesses *developers* strong enough to reveal the image in all its details'" [emphasis added].¹¹

In my previous work on Thomas Struth's photographic tableaux made in art venues, I argued the intermedial, in-between, and *performative*¹²

tion of human and machine agencies through layered infrastructures of code, data, and automated decision making". Berry's concept „draws upon Benjamin and Asja Lacis's analysis of Naples' urban architecture", the pervasive description of their shared Neapolitan experience, to formulate it in a more emphatic way. <http://stunlaw.blogspot.com/2024/12/porosity-and-computation.html>, last download 14 November 2025

- 10 Giuliana Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map. Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1993. p. 3. „Elvira Notari's extensive production has not only been forgotten but lost to the historical archive. The fragmentary textual body, and the silence surrounding this work, called for an „archaeological" intertextual approach."
- 11 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Belknap Press and Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England, 2002, p. 482. [N15a1]
- 12 *Performative* in the sense introduced by Margaret Iversen, who makes a distinction between *descriptive realism* and *performative realism* inspired by André Breton's novel *Nadja*. In a photographic mode analogous to the writing of the surrealist novel, the camera does not record what is already given, but follows a process unfolding in the present. Margaret Iversen: 'Following Pieces.

character of them in accordance with the artist's inspirational Naples experience in 1988. I amplified, and contextualized this through Benjamin's and Lacis's text on the porous city. It is as if Struth's *Museum Photographs* were unconsciously embedded in Benjamin's and Lacis's decisive encounter and hallucinatory collaboration in formulating the influence of Naples and the *porous*. In this paper, I turn again to the concept of *porosity* to argue that their essay on the Neapolitan cityscape becomes significant not only as an urbanistic textual document but also in its experimental qualities: it captures and conveys, in a cinematic way, suggestive images from the „plebeian metropolis“¹³ testifying to the stubborn impact of this idle city-mother¹⁴; it works as a *surface*, a celluloid film that has preserved the imprint of the now-disappeared early Neapolitan film culture, one which was a lively and formative socio-cultural element in Benjamin and Lacis's time.¹⁵ In short: I see the 'Naples' essay itself as a chain of images, or, more precisely, as one image which has been awaiting the proper time to flash up for a sudden moment in its interpreters' sight and show our

On Performative Photography', in *Photography Theory*, ed. James Elkins, Routledge, New York, London, 2007, pp. 91–108.

- 13 Pier Paolo Pasolini's expression for Naples, cited in Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map*. p. 38. „During this period [urbanisation] Naples developed its characteristic persona, so aptly defined by Pier Paolo Pasolini as a „plebeian metropolis“: extremes of wealth and poverty, a rich intellectual life and illiteracy, the coexistence of high and popular culture.“
- 14 „'Metropolis' itself carries with it an etymological pregnancy of meaning: meter-polis, from the Greek 'mother-city.'“ In Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map*. p. 8. See also, István Hollós, *My Farewell to the Yellow House*: „War arises from the same psychological need the two enemies share. Every war is a war against culture. Against the city. And the city is a symbol of the mother.“ Translated by Adrian Courage, 1968 Press, London, 2024, p. 116. The text of this Hungarian psychoanalyst and forerunner of radical psychiatry was published first in Hungarian in 1927, and in German in 1928 (*Hinter der gelben Maurer. Von der Befreiung der Irren*, Stuttgart-Berlin-Zürich).
- 15 „In the early days of Neapolitan cinema the Galleria Umberto I (the biggest arcade in Naples) served not only as the center of film exhibition but also as the main location of cinematographic activities.“ In Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map*. p. 39.

future in the past.¹⁶ This future perhaps speaks of a particular, old-new understanding of photography in our computerized media environment that Benjamin anticipated in his 'Short History of Photography' (1931), and which we can enjoy in its full radiance in Struth's Naples-inspired *Museum Photographs* from 1988.

The Porous City: the City of the Unconscious

„One may write or paint as much as one likes, but this place (...) *defies description*. (...) Now I can forgive anyone for going off his head about Naples, and think *with great affection* of my father [emphasis added], who received such lasting impressions from the very same objects as I saw today. They say that someone who has once seen a ghost will never be happy again; vice versa, one might say of my father that he could never be really unhappy because his thoughts could always return to Naples.”¹⁷ Goethe, following in the footsteps of his father and of Johann Joachim Winckelmann¹⁸ articulates a particular spiritual disposition and penchant. This is a genuine German tradition that began with *Wilhelm Meister*, writes the philosopher Sándor Radnóti (student of George Lukács) in his case study on Freud's 'Gradiva' (1907), in which romantic calling and sensible bourgeois life, often symbolized by marriage, come into conflict, only to be reconciled or antagonised. „In addition to Theodor Storm's *Immensee*, Wilhelm Jensen's *Gradiva*, a *Pompeian Fantasy* (1902) is another characteristic, albeit less successful example of this. Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, Jensen's *Gradiva*,

16 On the dialectic image of Walter Benjamin and his concept of history see Tim Dant & Graeme Gilloch, 'Pictures of the Past: Benjamin and Barthes on Photography and History', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* (2002) Vol. 5 (1): pp. 5-25.

17 J. W. Goethe, *Italian Journey*. Naples, 27 February 1787. Translated by W. H. Auden and Elizabeth Mayer. North Point Press, San Francisco, 1982. P. 176.

18 Johann Joachim Winckelmann (traditionally the founder of the disciplines of archaeology and art history) reported first on the discoveries in Herculaneum and Pompeii in 1762 and 1764. Johann Joachim Winckelmann: *Letter and Report on the Discoveries at Herculaneum*, Translation, introductory and commentary by Carol C. Mattush, Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 2011.

and of course *Tonio Kröger*, are also part of a tradition that is uniquely German and not only literary but also cultural in a broader sense (and incidentally, very characteristic of Freud), that it topographically depicts the contrast between bourgeois reality and romanticism, between ordinary life and Spirit: this is the contrast between North and South, between the Cisalpine home and the nostalgic spiritual home of the Transalpine."¹⁹

A good hundred years after the publication of Goethe's *Italienische Reise*²⁰ German social scientists and philosophers with ties to Frankfurt (after having metabolized the first lessons of psychoanalysis) spontaneously set out on a journey and gathered on the island of Capri and around the Bay of Naples. Just as Goethe's enthusiastic account is inspired, and his experience is enhanced, by the joy of joining his late father through the „signs of sensuous qualities“, and „signs of love“,²¹ seeing with his own eyes the monuments and landscapes that his father had seen, and which had endowed him with lifelong ability for gaiety, so Benjamin and Lacis's essay was born out of joy; the joyful promise of a budding love. But there is something in which Benjamin, swept up in this new affection, surpasses Goethe's narrative travelogue, the master's diary entries on Naples, which probably echoed in Benjamin's state of mind and which had saturated German literary culture by that time. In their 'Naples' essay, unfolding in a series of clearly cropped images, or

19 Sándor Radnóti, *Gradiva (I), Case Study*, Holmi, 2001, November, <https://www.holmi.org/2001/11/radnoti-sandor-gradiva-i> last download 1 June 2026

20 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Italienische Reise* was published in 1816-1817. The book was based on his diaries, which he kept during his travels through Rome, Naples and the Sicily. The book is an edited version of his diary entries augmented with reminiscences and afterthoughts.

21 See Gilles Deleuze: *Proust and Signs. The Complete Text*, Trans. Richard Howard, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2000, Originally published in French under the title *Proust et les Signes*, 1964. Deleuze understands Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* as a process of learning, a search for signs, of which there are three types: signs of wordliness, signs of love, and signs of sensuous qualities. „The Search is presented as the exploration of different worlds of signs that are organized in circles and intersect at certain points, for the signs are specific and constitute the substance of one world or another.“

more precisely scenes, Benjamin and Lacis leave the tropes of ineffability behind, and by stretching the boundaries of the medium of writing they configured a haunting image, which is an integrative motif in the sequence of their ideas; a pervasive metaphor appropriated from the geographical properties of the city: Naples is porous like its natural ochre stone used for construction, the absorbent tuff formed from lava flows. In this creative image of *porosity* the co-authors not only portrayed Neapolitan experience, which unfolded in a new wave in the 1920s: they set a visible concept in motion in 1925, whose speed of transmission accelerated upon its second publication, after 1972, and was utilized as a discursive aid in the cultural hybridity of the 1990s, in times of upheaval and the collapse of the bipolar world order. Struth's *Museum Photographs* were conceived in the fruitful atmosphere of volcanic Naples exactly at the zenith of these radical changes that would bring both euphoria and crises.

The porosity (permeability) that characterizes many aspects of the Southern metropolis and the Neapolitan way of life is not only a peculiar feature, but also a transformative principle. Naples proves to be an effective agent in the careers of writers and artists: the city exerts irresistible and profound influence on the creative process of so many of them. How? Victor Burgin recognizes the „Naples effect“ in Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*, especially in the unrestrained blending of quotations with Benjamin's own thoughts. “The *permeability* [emphasis added] that Lacis and Benjamin saw in the streets of Naples is also found in *One Way Street*, a street that will eventually lead to the *Passagen-Werk*. We will remember that Benjamin named this street *Asja Lacis Street*, after she who, like an engineer, cut it through the author.”²² Benjamin and Lacis's Naples experience, condensed into a persistent image, was revived with a renewed intensity and became a transdisciplinary operational concept in the 1990s. The “Naples effect” has begun working also retrospectively and not just among contemporary artists. We also recognize porosity

22 Victor Burgin, ‘The City in Pieces.’ In: Victor Burgin, *In / different Spaces. Place and Memory in Visual Culture*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1996, p. 140.

(*permeability*) in pictorial media and genres in the art historians' field, especially in the work of the great image magicians, filmmakers such as Roberto Rossellini, Pier Paolo Pasolini and, before them, the Neapolitan Elvira Notari. Active from 1908 until 1930, Notari's visual source was Neapolitan realism, a style developed basically in painting, which drew on the legacy of Michelangelo da Merisi Caravaggio.²³ This scandalous "avant-garde" Baroque painter, was keen on transgressing the academic principle of *decorum* in his pictorial representations: he made prostitutes, or the most humble, the model of Virgin Mary and the saints; he composed the beholder's gaze theatrically in his biblical and mythological scenes. His art was celebrated in Naples and publicly cursed (and secretly adored) in Rome.²⁴ Before we proceed further on this path in the fields of visual arts, and turn to Thomas Struth's photographs, let us linger a little longer on the scenes of the Naples essay themselves: firstly, because Benjamin and Lacis's image-text resonates with a psychoanalytic approach leading us into "regions" (spiritual realms), where opposites do not exclude each other, but coexist; and secondly, since in framing the scenes of the "scenario", i.e. the 'Naples' essay, we can recognize in them, as in a palimpsest, the fading images of Elvira Notari's filmography – popular films once upon a time, which were projected in the cooling breeze of the arcades in blazing summer days during Benjamin's stay, some of which he might have seen.²⁵ This latter idea is a speculation on my part, but can we really imagine that during his five-month stay on Capri and around the Bay of Naples, Benjamin would have overlooked the plebeian city's impressive architectural achievements, those magnificent arcades with

23 Giuliana Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map*. p. 201: „The realistic representation that characterizes Elvira Notari's cinema originated in the realism that is a strong component of Neapolitan painting; at least from the time of Caravaggio's brief stay in the city (1571-1610)."

24 One of Caravaggio's most scandalously sensual compositions, which plays with the viewer's emotions and provokes the viewer's gaze, is kept in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin: *Amor vincit omnia*, 1601-1602.

25 Benjamin stayed in Capri and in the Neapolitan Bay from May to October 1924, and returned the following year.

huge glass cupolas (namely, the majestic Galleria Umberto I), where audiences flocked and watched in enchantment such entertaining pieces as the Notari family's movies?

Film Dora – a studio run by the writer-director Elvira Notari and her husband, the cameraman Nicola Notari – was an active contributor to Neapolitan popular aesthetics, especially to the melodramatic cinema nourished by the distinctive Neapolitan dialect. This was censored and marginalised in the discourses of early film culture dominated by the North during the process of national unification and cultural standardization, the *Risorgimento*.²⁶ These particular products of the Southern film industry were mainly shot *dal vero* in the streets and in the *bassos* of palazzos, or on the roofs of houses. Their sequences recorded the awesome panorama of the Neapolitan bay stretching along the line of Limbo as the setting for everyday passionate melodramas: love, jealousy, blood, poverty and crime, cripples, jokes, and hilarious laugh *re-staged* in the courtyards and performed by amateur actors and actresses.²⁷ Movie screenings were accompanied by live performances of Neapolitan songs (*sceneggiata*). These cinematic distillation of Naples were to be viewed in the movie theaters of the Neapolitan arcades. Watching the Neapolitan panorama and melodrama in Naples' cinemas provided a remarkable *mirror-effect*, part of the popular culture of the Mediterranean South which flourished for two decades in the era of silent movies,²⁸ and then

26 „...standardization, nationalization, and unification were carried out at the expense of a „part“ of the nation, the South“ Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map*. p. 16.

27 In Bruno's book we can see a standphoto made during a shot, showing a „studio“ in the streets of Naples (*Streetwalking* p. 15): it is like an open box revealing the mechanisms of shooting to the public. It is particularly intriguing in light of Benjamin's 'Work of Art' essay (1936) in which he also offers insight into the process of cinematography.

28 Film Dora's city films recording Naples were popular not only in their place of origin, but also in New York, where they offered the Neapolitan diaspora a virtual return, thereby alleviating a nostalgia for home. The 'Naples films' arrived in New York rather quickly, sometimes they were screened there before (uncensored), or immediately after the Roman (censored) release. „This fact is particularly significant in terms of the circulation of cultural codes between

disappeared suddenly, leaving hardly any trace behind, except in the work of filmmakers who remained passionate about the Southern Metropolis – above all, in Roberto Rossellini's *Journey to Italy* (1954), a film inspired by the re-started excavations in Pompeii after the Second World War. In this film Rossellini pays tribute with a lavish documentary of the Neapolitan panorama and its everyday life: the Vesuvius-dominated bay, sulphur fumes drifting, frequented tuff caves full of skulls, ancient constructions underground, excavations, Pompeii integrated into the daily life as workplace for archaeologists; the cheek-by-jowl proximity of the living to the souls of the dead, the cohabitation of luxury and poverty, embarrassing swindlers as tourist guides, the amalgam of superstition and common sense. In the Neapolitan environment Rossellini submits himself to an idle, expectant disclosure instead of active creation in terms of filmmaking. In the spontaneous fabric of the narrative, Naples gradually assumes the leading role. The city acts not as a temporary location in the lives of fictional characters, but as a catalyst for their inner journeys, a facilitator of spiritual development both for them and for the actual performing actors: fiction and life overlap. Rossellini submits to all this, and with his directorial artifice, according to Laura Mulvey, he protests against the Hollywood conventions that champion a strictly scripted dramaturgy, a dynamic, linear narrative, and star status.²⁹ From

Naples and New York." Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map*. pp. 122-125.

- 29 On Roberto Rossellini's *Journey to Italy* see Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second, Stillness and the Moving Image*. London, Reaktion Books, 2006, "For Alex [the English upper-class husband in the plot] there is something demasculinizing about southern time and his recurring rant against the 'laziness' of Naples is, on some level, a complaint about the filmic plot, its lack of energy and direction" p.112. In her volume of essays, Mulvey decomposes old celluloid films, among them *Journey to Italy*, and from the optical layer of celluloid, which lies beneath the film's narrative, she digs up the secular wonder of the anachronistic photographic imaging, the mesmerising effect of the interplay between nature and technology, which keeps coming back to haunt us. In order to liberate not only the photographic medium, but also the spectator from the control dictated by the narrative film, Mulvey frames and analyses the photographic still, conceptualizing possessive and pensive spectatorship. Bruno sees the film still as palimpsest: she recognizes painterly iconographies in the few surviving stills. Mulvey in her *pensive* analysis (*delayed cinema*) halts and

another perspective, in the light of Bruno's media-archaeological exploration, Rossellini – as if casually, with a certain nonchalance – masters and re-animates the Naples-inspired *modus operandi* and aesthetics of the vanished popular cinema of South Italy: *dal vero* shooting, re-staging everyday drama with amateur actors and actresses, granting the city the leading role, resounding Neapolitan song (*sceneggiata*), blurring the boundaries between actual and virtual life, documentary and fiction, allowing a mirror-effect to emerge.

Of course, Benjamin might have missed this whole excessive movie experience, but the similarities between the haunting *modus operandi* and the highlights of the Notaris' cinematography and the scenes of the 'Naples' essay are conspicuous.

The Naples essay³⁰ opens with a powerful scene depicting a sinful priest giving his blessing. "Should it [Catholicism] disappear from the face of the Earth, its last foothold would perhaps be not Rome, but Naples." Rich barbarism lives on here in the lap of the Church. The following image is dedicated to the hapless traveller arriving from Rome, "who gropes his way as far as in Rome from one work of art to the next, as along a stockade, loses his nerve in Naples." Here the famous historical monuments listed in the Baedeker are not easy to find, and the starred sculpture always stands in the locked wing of the museum. Just as the sacral and secular worlds intertwine, poverty pervades the roads and courtyards. In Naples the accomplishment of nineteenth-century Europe, prioritizing clothing and shelter over food among essential needs, has been abolished. In a next scene of the essay "a beggar lies in the road and waves his hat like a leave-taker at a station", and "cripples put their deformities on show, and the shock given to the day-dreaming passers-by is their joy." And here comes the centuries old magic word: Pompeii! "Everything that the foreigner desires,

freezes filmic narrative, and in the still she lets us recover the temporalities of photography, making the linear-chronological time, the time of history, collapse.

30 Walter Benjamin – Asja Lacis, *Naples*. In Walter Benjamin, *Reflections. Essays, Aphorism, Autobiographical Writings*, Trans. Edmund Jephcott, HBJ Book, New York, London, 1978, pp. 163-176.

admires, and pays for is 'Pompeii.'" And swindling and wretchedness are also part of the parcel. Contrary to the "fantastic reports of travellers who have touched up the city, in reality it is gray". This disheartens the tourist, for anyone who is blind to forms sees little here. The city is craggy. And as porous as tuff is the architecture. "Building and action interpenetrate in the courtyards, arcades, and stairways", since in everything the Neapolitans preserve the scope to become "a theatre of new, unforeseen constellations" (and, as Bruno reveals in her exploration of the Notari family's cinematography, to become a film studio too). Synesthetic images follow in the sequence of Benjamin and Laci's scenes, which evoke music, the Neapolitan song: in the humming streets, the "residue of yesterday's music still resounds, constituting the prelude to the next feast day" (and here it is difficult not to think of silent movie screenings accompanied by live performances of Neapolitan songs). There are no boundaries: festivals are inseparable from working days, and the everyday feeling also seeps into Sundays (as we can also see in Rossellini's *performative* realism, in his idle *modus operandi*). Joy, we are told, pulsates in every pore: music, toys and ice cream circulate through the streets, and the all-encompassing porosity springs not only from Southern laziness, but, they write, also from a passion for improvisation, which in Naples demands that opportunity be preserved. And an unexpected image inserted in the rhythm of these lines: that of the African *kraal*. This, it is claimed, has much in common with the 'oriental' Neapolitan private life, since both are permeated by "streams of communal life." Such an analogy resembles a sudden cut, a montage that leads to the flash of a concluding thought: existence is a collective affair in the South, draped in the veils of meta-communication that is difficult for a visitor to see through.

The 'Naples' essay is not only a document of a formative encounter (Laci, Benjamin, and Naples) and persistent attachment, but also a manifestation of the particular writing technique that employs cinematic devices like scenery, editing, cuts and synaesthesia not, perhaps, to transgress media boundaries intentionally, but rather to involve the readers, to immerse them, or carry them away, as in the cinema, in a hallucinatory

mirror-world that appeals to multiple senses simultaneously. In a few years, of course, Benjamin would become a committed theorist of photography and cinematography, media in which he envisaged pathways toward collective art. The mirror-effect linking virtual and actual, bursts to the surface in a spectacular way in Naples, where diverse imageries of the past and present intertwine and live on. Benjamin and Lacis identify with this excessively visual and sensual world in the plebeian metropolis: in the depiction of certain scenes the desire for assimilation shines through (joy course through every pore), while the double perspective and the ironic distance of the astonished travellers are also palpable: in and out, far and close, sensing Naples skin-close, and seeing *her* distanced as in a picture, in a mirror. I suggest that in the popular culture of this chaotic city, in which the mirror-effect plays a prominent role, which preserves and mingles distinct visual worlds of the past and today, producing mirror-effects under the spell of photo-based cinematography, we can surmise one of the sensuous sources of the concept of the *optical unconscious* introduced six years later in Benjamin's 'Short History of Photography' [*Kleine Geschichte der Photographie*] of 1931: „Photography makes aware for the first time the optical unconscious, just as psychoanalysis discloses the instinctual unconscious.”³¹

“...and this city is nothing but history in its ordinariness” writes the psychoanalyst Bice Benvenuto. „Naples is the unconscious of history.”

The unconscious is not a remnant hidden in the oldest, deepest layer of the soul, which comes back into action when excavated, but the coexistence, ever conflictual, of the most diverse moments of our spiritual life, the coexistence of different world views. „This is the *Naples-effect*: the demolished palaces and other fragments that, like a mosaic, have the secret ability to be part of the same fresco or symphony.”³²

31 Walter Benjamin, 'Kleine Geschichte der Photographie'; 'Short History of Photography', 1972. 7. Trans. Stanley Mitchell, first published in the *Literarische Welt* of on 18.9., 25.9. and 2.10.1931.

32 Bice Benvenuto: 'Naples, the city standing on its head'; the Hungarian trans-

Now we are arriving at the point where that “genuine German tradition”, bringing to the fore the duality of romanticism and sensible bourgeois life, once again demands our attention. Why does Winckelmann prefer Rome to Naples, and why are Goethe and Benjamin so enthusiastic about Naples? And why it is that, as we can read in Benjamin’s rhythm of thoughts, Pompeii is appreciated not as a trove of art pieces, but more as source of living for swindlers and cripples?

„Even before the actual museum era,” writes the philosopher Radnóti, „Winckelmann approached works of art with a museum-like perspective, and he separated them from the context in which they came into being and existed: from the personal representation of palaces and villas, from the ordinary history of collections and cities. In order to develop his own new principles of arrangement of the archaeological objects, he had to radically separate the finds and art pieces of private collections from their historical context and view them as a disorderly mass, a kind of raw material for art history being developed by him.”³³

Rome was Winckelmann’s museum, and thanks to the art history that springs from his work, ironically, with the decline of the Eternal City and the progress of new cultural capitals, the mass allocation of artworks could have been ideologically and aesthetically justified. By contrast, Herculaneum and Pompeii enriched cultural memory with the experience of a persistent way of life, according to Radnóti.³⁴ Contrary to Winckelmann’s initial hopes, some of the finds in the South did not have such a direct and frenetic artistic and cultural impact as the discovery of the Laocoön at the beginning of the 16th century, the presentation of

lation is based on the chapter entitled ‘Napoli sottosopra’ from the book *Della dei Misteri o dei Riti della Psicoanalisi*, Liguori Editore, Naples, 2003. I use the Hungarian translation by Márta Csaba published in *Thalassa* (15) 2004, 1: pp. 60-72. (p. 67)

33 Sándor Radnóti: *Jöjj és láss! A modern művészetfogalom keletkezése, Winckelmann és a következmények*, Atlantisz, Budapest, 2010. (Come and See! The Origin of the Modern Concepts of Art – Winckelmann and the Consequences, Budapest, Atlantis Publishing, 2010.) 224-225.

34 Sándor Radnóti: *Gradiva (II), Case Study*, Holmi, 2001, December, <https://www.holmi.org/2001/12/radnoti-sandor-gradiva-ii> last download 1 June, 2026.

the Elgin Marbles in London at the beginning of the 19th century, or the emergence of the Riace Bronzes from the sea in the second half of the 20th century. The art of Pompeii has remained intact, and its significance does not deprive it from its context. „Unlike Rome – a city built, more or less, on layers of ruins from previous centuries – *Naples is not stratified*, but a place where history is compressed from the outset, with centuries living side by side in chaotic coexistence. While the historicity of Rome is revelatory and undeniable, *Naples is characterised by the art of living with monuments*“ [emphasis added], writes Bice Benvenuto.³⁵

Two Benjaminian concepts (or, more precisely, a pair of interrelated concepts) introduced in his essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ (1936), are associated here: *cult value* and *exhibition value*. Applying this conceptual framework we can say that Naples serves as an exceptional site, where *cult value* is preserved (*aura* is not broken by *shocks*), or even, appears as if naturally sustained. The distinctive Neapolitan quality, *idleness*, that resists historicity (or more precisely human-devised stratification of historicity), takes shape visually in mosaic-like form, accepting the spontaneous re-arrangements of fragments in the wake of inevitable natural disasters. And this mosaic-like quality is manifested in Thomas Struth’s black-and-white Neapolitan cityscapes, envisioned and captured by his camera in 1988. [Via del Parco Margherita, Naples 1988, Cat. 2861, Silver gelatin print, 66,0 x 84,0 cm] https://www.thomasstruth32.com/small-size/photographs/naples_and_rome/index.html.

The gray-ochre porous city of Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis, which only reveals itself to those who are not “blind to forms” shows up the *Naples-effect* in the camera-work, which is based on the geometry of the central perspective,³⁶ as a prototype of “non-subjective interest”.³⁷ The

35 Bice Benvenuto: ‘Naples, the city standing on its head’. Again, I use the Hungarian translation by Csaba published in *Thalassa* (15) 2004, 1: pp. 60-72 (p. 66).

36 See Ervin Panofsky’s seminal study, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, Zone Books, New York, 1991, originally published as *Die Perspektive als symbolische Form*, Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg 1924-1925, Leipzig & Berlin, 1927.

37 Struth’s description of his concept and his devised process in making city-

principal idea informing Struth's cityscapes is the central perspective's distinguished role in composition: the large-format camera placed on tripod is positioned at deserted street junctions (square angles) at dawn, so that the inbuilt optical geometry of the camera, like a mirror, becomes marked (not concealed) in the emerging view. The highlighted use of the central perspective as a non-subjective prototype creates a stage-like effect in the photograph: familiar places seen distanced. This *mirror-effect* (not incidentally, an integral part of psychoanalysis) is a pivotal component in the aesthetics of Neapolitan popular culture. „It is indeed a different nature that speaks to the camera from the one which addresses the eye – Benjamin's ideas concluding to the concept of *optical unconscious* echo in our mind – different above all in the sense that instead of a space worked through by a human consciousness there appears one which is affected unconsciously”.³⁸ [Crosby Street, New York 1978, Cat. 281, Silver gelatin print, 66,0 x 84,0 cm] https://www.thomasstruth32.com/small-size/photographs/streets_of_new_york_city/index.html.

What is captivating is that Struth's photo-program of cityscapes was conceived in New York in 1978, and since the first comprehensive exhibition of the cycle of his black-and-white cityscapes in 1987, they have been named *Unconscious Places*.³⁹ With this title Struth wanted to emphasize, partly due to his experiences with misunderstandings up to that point, that he was not interested in the history of architecture nor reports on different cultures, nor the stylistic aspects of buildings, but rather in the „collective unconscious” manifested in the built environment; in the ordinary history that can be read from urban spaces.⁴⁰ In 1988, Struth

scapes. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, 'Thomas Struths Archiv'. in: *Texte zum Werk von Thomas Struth*, Schirmer/Mosel, München, 2009. p18. „Die Zentralperspektive, so Thomas Struth nach eigenem Bekunden, wurde von mir unbewusst gewählt als ein Prototyp des nicht-subjektiven Interesses”.

38 Benjamin, 'Short History of Photography', 1972. p. 7.

39 Thomas Struth, *Unbewußte Orte / Unconscious Places*, Kunsthalle, Bern, 1987.

40 See footnote 26 on the rapid exchange of cultural codes between New York and Naples in the days of Elvira Notari's filmmaking, in the era of silent movies.

arrived with this devised program of 'Unconscious Places' to the city of the unconscious, Naples, to pursue his committed work. In these black-and-white photographs, the enchanting Naples of Elvira Notari, Benjamin, Laci, Rossellini, and Struth himself, vibrates and discloses itself in mosaic-like pictures of diverse details. [*Vico dei Monti, Naples 1988*, Cat. 2851, Silver gelatin print, 66,0 x 84,0 cm] https://www.thomasstruth32.com/smallsize/photographs/naples_and_rome/index.html

And this *Naples-effect* flashed up suddenly as an afterimage, illuminating a striking contrast simultaneously, when Struth, just returned from the plebeian metropolis, was strolling in the museum displays of the Cisalpine cultural capital, Paris, in the very beginning of 1989.⁴¹

The Porous Picture: Surface between Art and Life

"There's perhaps a particular personal or societal necrophilia at play. (...) I felt a need to make these museum photos, because many works of art, which were created out of particular historical circumstances, have now become mere fetishes (...) What I wanted to achieve with this series, (...) is to make a statement about the original process of representing people leading to my act of making a new picture, which is in a certain way a very similar mechanism: the viewer of the works seen in the photo is an instance which finds itself in a space to which I, too, belong when I stand in front of the photo. The photos illuminate the connection and should lead the viewers away from regarding the works as mere fetish-objects and initiate their own understanding or intervention in historical relationships".⁴²

I am musing upon the picture made in the refectory of San Lorenzo Maggiore in 1988. This is one of the last photographs Struth took before

41 „I got the first ideas in the Louvre around Christmas time; it was very crowded and thought that the world of visitors in the Louvre, people of the most diverse ages and ethnicities, were incredibly similar to the themes in the paintings. And the other conclusion was that I wondered: why are the people there...?“ 'Thomas Struth. Interview' with Benjamin H. D. Buchloh (1990) in *Art and Photography*. ed. & intr. David Campany. London, Phaidon, 2003. 252.

42 Buchloh, 'Thomas Struth. Interview', p. 252.

leaving Naples, and the first color large-format photograph that would become the starting point for the then-unfathomed *Museum Photographs*. Old paintings line the long wall, standing in this solemnly simple space alongside the restorers. One of them, wearing a pink blouse and pair of jeans is still touching the corner of the table, as if it had just been placed there. The paintings also seem to be lined up neatly, as if waiting for something. How did they get here? The setting was chosen by the restorers, Struth's friends, who hosted him in his stay in Naples, and they collaborated with the artist on how they wished to be seen. The spacious and light refectory is their current workplace being used as a temporary shelter for paintings from the surrounding area that had been damaged in a recent earthquake: a spontaneous re-arrangement of „fragments“ into the same Neapolitan „fresco“ after a sudden natural disaster. All of the paintings depict dramatic scenes in dramatic close-up: epiphanies, ascensions to heaven, reaching down from the upper spheres, encounters between saints, the venerable and the vulnerable, journeys between worlds, and the Virgin Mary holding and nursing the Child. The scenes in the paintings seem to burst out of their curved frames. The restless natural forces detach them from their original environment, and in their temporary home, as in a refuge, they crowd together closely. Tumultuous scenes of revelations and transfigurations; the crucifixion, with the cityscape in its background mirroring the eternal drama; closest to us, the roughly torn canvas standing next to the table, depicts the encounter between the resurrected Jesus and his unbelieving disciple, Thomas: “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe!”⁴³ Restorers at San Lorenzo Maggiore, in Naples, in 1988, like archaeologists in Rossellini's documentary sequence immortalizing the Pompeii excavations in his film, in 1953: Neapolitan people during their everyday life; they are merely rescuing pictures and remnants of the past living on, whether among the ruins of ancient Pompeii or in the district of San Lorenzo, where an ancient marketplace lies several levels below this magnificent refectory. The *Naples-effect* at work:

43 *New Testament*, John 20:27

the demolished palaces and other fragments that, like a mosaic, have the secret ability to be part of the same fresco or symphony;⁴⁴ let it be a film, Rossellini's *Journey to Italy*, or a picture made by Struth as a farewell gift, a joint work of joy, that has, however, proved to be a beginning. Love at last sight. Because joy courses through every pore, and the passion for improvisation, which in Naples demands that opportunity be preserved. At any price.⁴⁵ [*Restorers in San Lorenzo Maggiore, Naples 1988*, Chromogenic print, Cat. 3711, 119,0 x 159,5 cm] https://www.thomasstruth32.com/smallsize/photographs/naples_and_rome/index.html.

Naples, pulsating in the continuity of the past, revealed itself in several forms for Struth. On the one hand, he was caught up in the proximity of the distant past in this city, where the art of living with monuments is cultivated; but on the other, he was also haunted by his own recent past. During his stay the artist gained close insight into the daily lives of his hosts, the restorers, often accompanying them to the places where they were working. These visits "offered a very thought-provoking encounter with the medium I had given up a decade ago," recalls Struth, "Restorers get closer to a painting than anyone has ever been since the work was originally painted. They have an intimate proximity with the manufacture of the painting, with the way the material had been maneuvered on the surface of the canvas or wall."⁴⁶ Restoring a picture extends its life, keeping it vibrant for the present-day beholder. Such an "intimate proximity," acquired through an empirical study of the process by which the work was produced, makes for an acute and intense involvement with the long-deceased painter. In Naples, where secular and sacral, past and present, material and spiritual are so tightly condensed, the work of the young restorers, living so casually together with paintings from the distant past, may not appear to be such an extravagant vocation, but it had

44 Benvenuto: *Naples, the city standing on its head*; Hungarian translation by Csaba pp. 60-72.

45 Walter Benjamin – Asja Lacis, *Naples*. pp. 166-167.

46 [http://www.thomasstruth32.com/smallsize/photographs/naples_and_rome/index.html](https://www.thomasstruth32.com/smallsize/photographs/naples_and_rome/index.html) last download 1 June 2026

a disruptive effect on Struth. The photographer's own past as a prospective painter was a significant factor in this experience. We can imagine that perhaps the fresh experience of the living and breathing naturalness in this relation with paintings enthused and inspired Struth, whose relationship with pictures had for over a decade been more intimately affected by the connection to the present represented by photography. On the last day of his Neapolitan sojourn, Struth took the photograph that became known as *The Restorers in San Lorenzo Maggiore, Naples, 1988*. He then left the city, but the Naples-effect truly began to exert its influence at his next station: the impulses that had stimulated him in Naples took hold in the Louvre, when he visited the Parisian museums during the winter holidays.

„In my museum work, I wanted to connect with the paintings I chose in a particular way, through photographing groups of visitors corresponding with the figures in the paintings I photographed. It was maybe like an attempt of resurrection, to give people a hint that these master works or so-called master artworks were not created as such when they were made. They were made by artists in particular circumstances of their daily life and these works were not born as the famous artworks that they are now. I wanted to make them look like more contemporary works. The interesting question is: why do works of art speak to us? Why do we even want to look at them? Because they were made with condensed information about love and desire and beauty and all kinds of complex emotional qualities? Because of their artistic craftsmanship? (...) I think what happened was that the artworks in my photographs became a little bit more contemporary and the visitors were pushed back into history, because once I've photographed them, the moment has of course already passed. It created this double reflection of consciousness.”⁴⁷

Struth spent the winter festivities of 1988-89 in Paris. He visited the Louvre and also the then-recently rearranged Musée d'Orsay. After Naples,

47 Interview with Thomas Struth by Elena Cué
https://www.huffingtonpost.com/elena-cue/interview-with-thomas-struth_b_7869912.html last download 1 June 2026.

where he had directly acquired knowledge of the everyday work done by painter-restorers, in the museum of museums he was struck by the fetishistic fever that he saw in the relation between the paintings and the visitors. However, alongside the phenomenon of the *fetish cult* (possessive spectatorship in other words⁴⁸) that he perceived infiltrating the museum, Struth also noticed something else. In the throngs that gathered among the artworks, which reminded him above all of the colourful hubbub of a railway station,⁴⁹ the spontaneous groups formed by the visitors of diverse ages and ethnicities occasionally seemed – under Struth’s deadpan view⁵⁰ – to correspond to the groups depicted in the paintings hanging on the museum walls. It was as though the view appearing before the artist would suddenly break apart into multiple planes of images, before coming back together again as one.⁵¹ [*Louvre 4, Paris 1989, Cat.*

48 More about possessive and pensive spectators see Mulvey, *Death 24× a Second*, pp. 161-196.

49 Struth’s analogy of the railway station in the case of the Musée d’Orsay converted from the Gare d’Orsay, is particularly telling. The analogy of railway station and museum resonates with Wolfgang Schivelbusch’s description of so-called *panoramic perception* as one of the effects of the experience of travelling by train; panoramic perception also deserves consideration in the case of visiting the museums. See Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*. The University of California Press, Berkeley, 1986, p. 59.

50 Deadpan aesthetic of photographic art: a committed distance as giving space to the other, associated with the Düsseldorfian School of Photography initiated by Bernd and Hilla Becher in the 1970s.

51 In his introduction to an unabridged edition of Gustave Flaubert’s diary of his journey to Egypt, Pierre-Marc de Biasi writes about how Flaubert’s way of seeing was shaped by the intensity of physical sensation: “...besides the enormous and the monstrous, Flaubert’s archaeological curiosity was also driven spontaneously towards what for him constituted the fundamental link between Antiquity and the three other sources of his most powerful visual emotions: the present, nature, and eroticism. (...) Sometimes, the visible offers in a single glance a sort of panorama in which Antiquity, nature, and daily life become merged. (...) with joyous wonder resulting in a similar [temporal] eclipse, Flaubert discovered in the ruins of Ancient Egypt the immutable modernity of desire and of eroticism.” In Gustave Flaubert, *Voyage en Egypte*, édition intégrale du manuscrit original établie et présentée par Pierre-Marc de Biasi. Bernard Grasset, Paris, 1991, pp. 59-60. Noteworthy that in Hungarian translation (2000) there are more pictorial idioms, for instance: “sometimes

4041, Chromogenic print, 179,3 x 213,2 cm] https://www.thomasstruth32.com/smallsize/photographs/museum_photographs_1/index.html.

To put it another way, in Struth's detached and intensively 'sensational' glance, simultaneously taking in both the paintings and the viewers of them, the spontaneously formed groups of visitors looking at the pictures correspond to the compositions of the paintings displayed on the walls. In Struth's perception, the scenes depicted in the paintings, as figural compositions, seemed analogous to the actual group compositions as they arranged themselves, involuntarily, in relation to each other and to the pictures in front of them.⁵² "Sometimes, the visible offers in a single glance a sort of panorama in which Antiquity, nature, and daily life become merged. (...) with joyous wonder resulting in a similar [temporal] eclipse."⁵³ The pictures on the wall seemed to come alive in the viewers' arrangements in the museum interiors, and at the same time, the visitors themselves, as a part of the spectacle, also become a visual composition, i.e. a picture in the view of the camera and finally ours: mirror-effect disclosing and evolving in the actual looking of the beholder standing in front of the tableau made by Struth and hung on the wall of the museum. One can sense a kind of permeability, the inexhaustible operation of the law of porosity between the fictive world and pictorial space of the paintings housed in the museum, and the physical space of the museum

the view opens apart as a fan of times"

52 The photographer Evelyn Richter also was captured by this tautological and repetitive act seen in the museums and art exhibitions. See: *Do not Refreeze. Photography Behind the Berlin Wall. Catalogue to accompany the touring exhibition.* 2007-2008. Cornerhouse Publications, p. 32.

53 Pierre-Marc de Biasi's words on Flaubert's experience of time-eclipse on his journey to Egypt, see footnote 49. Struth himself refers to Flaubert in an interview: "... aspects of the history of photography interest me in so far as they represent an attitude towards people and their history. I am uninterested in whether it's painting, literature, photography, film or some other medium. (...) I see that a connection does exist between works by Atget, Hilla and Bernd Becher, Sergej Eisenstein, Flaubert, Freud and my work. I don't just work with the history of photography, my work refers to the phenomena of the world in which I live now." Buchloh, 'Thomas Struth. Interview' p. 252.

housing the paintings. The borderlines between old art and our everyday experiences get blurred: the desired continuity seems to overcome the discontinuity of the objectified items, of the paintings, removed from their original context. [*Galleria dell'Accademia 1, Venice 1992, Cat. 4841, Chromogenic print 184,5 x 228,3 cm*] https://www.thomasstruth32.com/smallsize/photographs/museum_photographs_1/index.html

The subject of Struth's *Museum Photographs* is the act of beholding, "adoring" art pieces as if part of a secular pilgrimage. However, as these photographs are presented in rich colour (strikingly different from Struth's earlier black-and-white cityscapes), installed in large format, and shown in the very art institutions in which they were made⁵⁴, they anticipate the actions of the viewers who will look at them. What can be seen in the photographs is doubled in real time by the interactions between the photographic tableau made by Struth and their actual viewers. The mass congregations in front of the paintings exhibited in museums are not simply the subject of the *Museum Photographs*, but also the reason for their existence: the actions of the visitors caused the making of the photographs. The viewer of the picture and the act of viewing are both the originating reason and the objective. The *Museum Photographs* do not become museum pieces, they do not eventually enter the institutions of art, but rather they were conceived and emerged exactly there: their primary context is the art museum, where our relation to pictures revealed. In Struth's creative process, the Benjaminian "exhibition value" seems to unfold into "cult value": we will be involved in an experiment in recuperating "aura" or at least reflecting on its lost. [*Audience 1, Florence 2004, Cat. 8701, Chromogenic print, 179,5 x 286,5 cm*] <https://www.thomasstruth32.com/smallsize/photographs/audiences/index.html>.

With this "performative realism" we arrive at the experience of sensing art *in situ nascendi*: Struth, after positioning his large format camera,

⁵⁴ Thomas Struth, *Making Time*: a project presented in the Museo Nacional del Prado (Madrid, 2007), where Struth's photographs made at the Prado have been installed in the Prado's galleries, placed alongside the paintings of Velázquez to create an infinite mirror effect and a privileged experience of time. Thomas Struth, *Making Time*, Schirmer/Mosel, München, 2007.

submits himself to the museum visitors' behaviour, and lets photography work, as a natural phenomenon, allowing photographic shots to emerge. This 'idle' performative realism cultivated by Struth, and the correspondence with Benjamin's and Lacis's description of the Neapolitan passion for improvisation in the streets and balconies as spontaneous stages, is, of course, no coincidence. Here the "theatre of new, unforeseen constellations" ensures "The stamp of the definitive is avoided".⁵⁵ The art historian Margaret Iversen illustrates the distinction between descriptive realism and performative realism in André Breton's novel *Nadja* to enhance the interpretive vocabulary of photographic practices that liberated photographic imaging from the ghetto of fine art photography. In a photographic mode analogous to the automatic writing of the surrealist novel, the camera does not record what is already given, but follows a process unfolding in the present, the conclusion of which cannot be known in advance. In performative photographic practices, the camera is a tool of discovery. Iversen does not simply associate performative photographic practices with performance, but also distinguishes between them by emphasising the photographic techniques of repetition and delay – by engaging the other, by repeating and re-enacting the actions of the other, by following another person.⁵⁶ And, we might add in the case of *Museum Photographs*, by expecting what is unfolding in the interplay between the figurative pictorial representations and the museum visitors as beholders.

We are approaching our conclusion: that Neapolitan visual culture – marked by porosity as the inexhaustible law of life – permeates both the *Museum Photographs* and the 'Naples' essay. This is further supported by the compatibility that can be discerned between Struth's performative realism and Benjamin's understanding of photography; not with what he expressed in a technological determination in his 'Work of Art' essay in 1936, but in his earlier paper, the 'Short History of Photography'. In

55 Walter Benjamin – Asja Lacis, *Naples*, p. 166.

56 Margaret Iversen: 'Following Pieces. On Performative Photography', in *Photography Theory*, ed. James ELKINS, New York, London: Routledge, 2007, 91–108.

the first half of this 1931 essay, writes Kaja Silverman, Benjamin privileges pre-industrial instead of industrial photography and „associates it with a disclosive rather than an evidential truth. He also attributes it to the world, instead of to technology, treats it as an analogy, instead of an index or a copy, and associates it with development, instead of fixity.”⁵⁷

To complete the circle, it is worth seeing Struth's performative realism within the frame of the Düsseldorf School formed by Bernd & Hilla Becher in the middle of the 1970s at Düsseldorf Academy. The Bechers' Class, of which Struth is a prominent member, emerged with the introduction of digital photography, and during a time of prophecies announcing the „end of photography” they stepped forward with bold artistic programs that considered photography not only as a medium, but utilized the „thingness” („Dingcharakter”) of the photographic picture. They connected to the pictorial tradition and conceptualized the photographic tableau („das große stille Bild”⁵⁸). These art students, however, did not constitute a homogeneous group. They essentially viewed the relationship between photography and the world in two different ways according to Maren Polte: through the medium of photography artists can explain, analyse the world, or re-create it.⁵⁹ Some of them, within the framework of photographic possibilities, take photographs that maintain a close connection to the depicted, physical reality; they are the „picture finders” („Bilder-Finder”), who let the images provided by the world manifest themselves through the photographic process; and there are those, who break with the purely photographic origin of the picture, and combine the photographic process with graphical tools: they are the „pictorial fabricators” („Bild-Erfinder”). There is no doubt that Struth

57 Kaja Silverman: *The Miracle of Analogy*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 2015, p8.

58 Norbert Bolz & Ulrich Rüffer, eds. *Das große stille Bild*, Munich, Fink, 1996.

59 The Becher Class established photography as „a de facto quantity”, a „captured object”, i.e. a thing. See: Polte, Maren: *A Class of Their Own. The Düsseldorf School of Photography*. Leuven, Leuven University Press, 2017. First German edition: *Klasse Bilder. Die Fotografieästhetik der „Becher-Schule*. Berlin, Gebrüder Mann Verlag, 2012. pp. 186-189.

enriches the ranks of 'picture finders', who facilitate the photographic image gifted by the world to manifest itself, since photography can be seen not only as a technology changing in time, but as „the world's primary way of revealing itself to us — of demonstrating that it exists, and that it will forever exceed us.”⁶⁰ This is the old-new understanding of photography in our computerized media environment that Benjamin anticipated in his 'Short History of Photography' (1931), and which we can enjoy in its full radiance in Struth's Naples-inspired *Museum Photographs*.

Afterwords: Leaving the White Cube

The concise titles of the *Museum Photographs* are also worthy of comment: each consists simply of the name of the museum and of the city where the museum (or church) is located. The picture titles evoke geographical places and architectural spaces with the potential to become those theatrical stages for the unscripted scenes briefly played out by the passing crowds, for all those “unforeseen constellations.”⁶¹ Also of integral importance to these photographed museum scenes are the architectural modules that define the space, the (inter)actions of the viewers partly captured and partly composed in it during the act of fleeting looking or absorbed beholding, and the paintings precisely embedded in the picture plane: the classical form of the *picture-within-the-picture* (*mise en abyme*). But nowhere in Struth's photographs (nor in their titles) can any information pertaining to the historic paintings themselves be found: there are no labels, no vestiges of the paintings' titles or dates, or of the painters' names, or of any description supplied by the professionals.

“What resonates in us during the observation, which is a playful process, and one thing that destroys play is too much re-

60 Silverman: *The Miracle of Analogy*, p. 11.

„...photography isn't a medium that was invented by three or four men in the 1820s and 1830s, that was improved in numerous ways over the following century, and that has now been replaced by computational images. (...) Photography is also an ontological calling card: it helps us to see that each of us is a node in a vast constellation of analogies.”

61 Walter Benjamin – Asja Lacis, *Naples*. p. 166.

spect. When you have too much respect you cannot play, you are intimidated, you become passive. I felt that people would go to museums with too much respect. They don't really know what they're allowed to think. Maybe in the end they only go to those museum galleries because they know the artists or the specific paintings are famous."⁶² [*Museo del Prado 7, Madrid 2005*, Chromogenic print, Cat. 9461, 177,5 x 218,6 cm] <https://www.thomasstruth32.com/smallsize/photographs/museo-del-prado/index.html>.

What matters is the sheer abundance of visual input: the colour spectrum of the photographs faithfully echoing that of the remarkable paintings, and the similarly charming appearance of the viewers corresponding to the embedded pictorial works. In sum, the sensually appealing optical details generously "stored" in the large-format photographs act to seduce the actual visitors to the museum into stopping and pondering the pictorial schemes, triggering emotional and cognitive responses. With their pristine lack of those lexical notes conventionally provided to support the lessons of education or to engender interpretations, the *Museum Photographs*, as simultaneously the primal source and the mirror of joyous and pensive looking, invite playful and liberated approaches to the objects of the art galleries, institutions from which we have become alienated due to their venerated theoretical, art historical status. Seeing the exhibited paintings and seeing their viewers simultaneously: that is what Struth's *Museum Photographs* offer us, and this is the most that we can have in line with Roland Barthes's double sensual experience conveyed in his essay on viewing movies: "I complicate a 'relation' by a 'situation'. What I use to distance myself from the image [i.e. the film] – that, ultimately, is what fascinates me: I am hypnotized by a distance; and this distance is not critical (intellectual); it is, one might say, an amorous distance: would there be, in the cinema itself and taking the word at its

62 Interview with Thomas Struth by Elena Cué

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/elena-cue/interview-with-thomas-struth_b_7869912.html last download 1 June, 2026.

etymological suggestion, a possible bliss of discretion?"⁶³ Indeed. Would there be, in the art museum itself and taking the word at its etymological suggestion, a possible 'bliss of discretion'? Struth's *Museum Photographs* make us practise amorous distance while beholding the artworks and the looks of others simultaneously, and they make us enjoy *discretion* in every sense: we are leaving the white cube behind and learning to live with the ever-changing mosaic-like constellations of images of all kinds of media. [*Tokyo National Museum, Tokyo 1999, Cat. 7701, Chromogenic print, 179,5 x 277,0 cm*] https://www.thomasstruth32.com/smallsize/photographs/museum_photographs_2/index.html

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63 Roland Barthes: 'Leaving the Movie Theatre', *Communication*, 1975.

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Siegfried Kracauer and Jean Vigo: Analysis of Another City Map

Georgia Giannakopoulou¹

Abstract: Siegfried Kracauer's 1926 article 'Analysis of a City Map' hints at a grotesque and disenchanted metropolitan modernity crowned by ever-masked social inequalities. Such a discrepancy between bourgeois leisure and everyday poverty, those just "getting by" in life in the back alleys of society, explodes visually in Jean Vigo's first film. With one exception: the angel in *À Propos de Nice* is not the 'angel of history' and does not have two faces. He has one name only, Death, and abandons us in wonderment of a society surrendered to emptiness and untruths. A mirror reflecting the horror of what is perceived as fun in the carnival as much as in what is equally perceived as life in a carnivalesque Nice where we can see all the nakedness of that society. And then laugh. In despair, dread, disrespect, disdain or with an outright call to arms.

"The Head of Medusa"

"The cinema," writes Siegfried Kracauer, "is conceivably animated by a desire to picture transient material life, life at its most ephemeral. Street crowds, involuntary gestures, and other fleeting impressions are its very meat."² Films "cling to the surface of things"³ – or do they? And if they do, does this mean that they propagate a superficial view and experience of the "most ephemeral" as the most ephemeral? Films, he notes,

1 Georgia Giannakopoulou is the Director of the International Honors Program and an Assistant Professor of Sociology at ACG – Deree, the American College of Greece. She specializes in the sociology of architecture, and sociological theory with emphasis on Friedrich Nietzsche, Georg Simmel, Max Weber, and first-generation Frankfurt School authors. She has translated works by Noam Chomsky, David Frisby, and Pyotr Kropotkin, holds the David Frisby Athens archive and is the editor of three books on Frisby's social theory. Her latest publications include *Building Modern Antiquity – Hymns and Laments for Athens* and *The Detective of Modernity – Essays on the Work of David Frisby* (co-edited with Graeme Gilloch) by Routledge, Taylor & Francis.

2 Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, (Oxford University Press, 1960), p. ix.

3 *Ibid.*, p. x.

"tend to reveal things normally unseen."⁴ For Kracauer, "the cinema, then, aims at transforming the agitated witness into a conscious observer,"⁵ an observer, that is, whose gaze is purposeful. More than a spectator or a mere gaper, the observer becomes an active agent. To such an observer, celluloid tells tales of "objects too small to be readily noticed or even perceived by the naked eye and objects so big that they will not be fully taken in either,"⁶ the "transient," the "evanescent, like dream elements," "impressions" that "may haunt the moviegoer long after the story they are called upon to implement has sunk into oblivion,"⁷ and the "phenomena which figure among the blind spots of the mind; habit and prejudice prevent us from noticing them"⁸ – objects that "stubbornly escape our attention in everyday life," the "refuse," the "familiar"⁹ that we so often overlook and, thus, leave them "unseen."

Among other things, "Kracauer's point is this: by means of de-familiarization and estrangement, the film camera should disturb habitual conditions and circumstances, familiar things which appear as 'natural' and unalterably given, so as to discover them as contestable social constructions."¹⁰ The camera becomes "a means of debunking."¹¹ But this requires a – specific – "documentary quality," that "lies not with corroborative imagery but with images which question our notions of the physical world."¹² And so "the film screen" becomes "Athena's polished shield"

4 *Ibid.*, p. 46. For Kracauer, these include, "phenomena overwhelming consciousness," such as "elemental catastrophes, the atrocities of war, acts of violence and terror, sexual debauchery, and death," as well as, consequently, "certain aspects of the outer world which may be called 'special modes of reality,'" such as "mental disturbance." See *ibid.*, pp. 46, 53, and 58.

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*, p. 46.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 52.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 53.

9 *Ibid.*

10 Graeme Gilloch, *Siegfried Kracauer – our Companion in Misfortune*, (Polity, 2015), p. 167.

11 Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, p. 307.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 306. According to ancient Greek mythology, crowned by her snake

that helped Perseus cut off the head of the Gorgon Medusa; “the cinema alone holds up a mirror to nature” – and hence, as Kracauer writes, “our dependence on it for the reflection of happenings which would petrify us were we to encounter them in real life.”¹³ Of all the directors featuring in Kracauer’s film writings, there is one who dared look at Medusa’s head without a shield – and then showed us the horrors of her power, calling us not to be petrified.

In his albeit limited writing on Jean Vigo, Kracauer mostly focused on *Zéro de Conduit* and *L’Atalante*.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Vigo’s minor cameo appearance in Kracauer’s film writings may help us trace Kracauer’s sometimes neglected study of the intersections between documentaries and social cinema specifically as well as his, also sometimes neglected, interest in satire. Moreover, Kracauer’s interest in Vigo may reveal his own love of various “ways of seeing” surface-level phenomena through the camera and beyond. For instance, when discussing cinema in relation to social criticism in the works of Sergei Eisenstein and Vsevolod Pudovkin, Kracauer offered a single but telling reference to Vigo’s first work and noted that “it is not the Soviet cinema alone which favors camera exercises in social criticism. John Ford bares the plight of migratory farm workers in his *THE GRAPES OF WRATH*, and Jean Vigo in *A PROPOS DE NICE* stigmatizes the futile life of the idle rich by depicting random moments of it’.”¹⁵

hair, Medusa had the power of immediately petrifying anyone who stared at her directly. The Goddess Athena gave Perseus a shield through which he could look at her indirectly and, thus, decapitate her.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 305.

14 For example, in *Theory of Film*, Kracauer turned his attention to the former and suggested that, “films make us undergo similar experiences a thousand times. They alienate our environment in exposing it. One ever-recurrent film scene emerging from the abyss of nearness. The opening sequence of Jean Vigo’s *ZERO DE CONDUIT* shows two boys travelling back to school by train. Is it just an ordinary night trip? Vigo manages to transform a familiar railway compartment into a magic wigwam in which the two, drunk from their boasts and pranks, are floating through the air.” See *ibid.*, p. 55.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 307. In this context, Kracauer also mentions Georges Franju’s *Hotel Des Invalides*.

“Privileged Leisure”

In 1925, Kracauer’s friend, the author and journalist Joseph Roth, painted a satirical image of Nice where “the only way someone finds any excitement will be if he has a lot of money sitting on red or black,” and where “the sun makes a point of shining without clouds or interruption, on such good society.”¹⁶ Five years later, Vigo’s eye and Boris Kaufman’s camera captured the everyday life of that “good society” parallel to the working day and pastimes of the poor and the workers in Nice during the preparations for the carnival. Close yet contrary to Roth’s sun, whose blinding light exposed the blissful leisure of the privileged class, and “despite the legend of the sunny Riviera, so zealously guarded by the tourist bureau, Jean Vigo’s masterpiece was set in a cloudy Nice.”¹⁷ Unique in its “poetry of realism,”¹⁸ *À Propos de Nice* unmask an obscure social life in a cloudy city that emerges festering in perpetuity within, as much as behind, the carnival and beyond all that is considered fun in time considered ‘free’.

Vigo’s work included two documentaries *À Propos de Nice* (1930) and *La Natation par Jean Taris, champion de France* (1931) and two films *Zéro de Conduit* (1933) and *L’Atalante* (1934), a quartet that has now canonized him amongst the great *avant garde* cinematographers of his time.¹⁹ Today, few could dispute “the awe and enthusiasm that those four films [...] have inspired filmmakers, critics, historians, archivists and fans ever since the tragic death of their creator.”²⁰ For some, the documentaries are “experiments in form and style which, though touched with Vigo’s unique visual poetry, are not fully realized and self-contained aesthetic statements, as

16 Joseph Roth, *The White Cities*, (Granta, 2004), p. 62.

17 Gyula Zilzer, ‘Remembrances of Jean Vigo,’ *Hollywood Quarterly* 3 (1947-1948), p. 126.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 125.

19 See, for example, Jennifer Wild, ‘For a Concrete Aesthetics: Against Avant-Garde Film c. 1930,’ *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 58 (2017), pp. 67-78.

20 Michael Temple, *Jean Vigo*, (Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 2.

Zero clearly is.”²¹ Hence the usual focus on the two later works.²² Nevertheless, *À Propos de Nice* has gradually claimed its own value as *both* film and documentary; as *neither* film *nor* documentary; and, as simultaneously a manifesto and a pioneering work of art. Vigo’s first filmic creation invites us to, and tells the story of, Nice – a city envisioned as an exemplary instance of urban space, as a unique constellation of the modern metropolitan capitalist universe. With time, *À Propos de Nice* has been hailed “as the most lyrical of city symphony films [...] as much poetic as it is polemical, as much avant-garde experimentalism as it is documentary exposé.”²³ Contrary to other “city symphony films” such as Walter Ruttmann’s 1927 *Berlin: Symphony of a Metropolis* or Dziga Vertov’s 1929 *Man with a Movie Camera*, *À Propos de Nice* “seems more caustic than commemorative in its appraisal ... [and] presents the energy of Nice as manic and superficial,”²⁴ accentuating Vigo’s “disdainful view of Nice.”²⁵ In dissecting the city “between rich and poor, decadent and mundane, tourist and migrant,”²⁶ this peculiar city portrait may serve “as a case study to illustrate how city films created segmented views of quotidian urban life in both form and con-

21 David Baldwin ‘L’ *Atalante* and the Maturing of Jean Vigo,’ *Film Quarterly* 39 (1985), pp. 21-27.

22 See, for example, Jonas Mekas ‘On Jean Vigo,’ in *Movie Journal – The Rise of New American Cinema, 1959-1971*, (Macmillan, 1972), 56-57, Jonathan Rosenbaum, ‘Jean Vigo’s Secret: L’ *Atalante*’ in *Placing Movies – The Practice of Film Criticism*, (University of California Press, 1995) 272-280, Brian Hunt, ‘Cinematic Borderlands: Jean Vigo’s L’ *Atalante* and the Allure of *entre-deux*,’ *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 21 (2017), pp. 266-273.

23 Barry Keith Grant and Jim Hillier *100 Documentary Films, BFI Screen Guides*, (BFI, Bloomsbury 2018), pp. 7-8.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 9. Grant and Hillier attribute this not to Vigo’s own but to “the anarchist views of his father.”

26 Micah Trippe, ‘The Segmented Quotidian made Visible: Jean Vigo’s *A Propos de Nice*’ in *Research in Urban Sociology* Volume 11 *Everyday Life in the Segmented City*, edited by Camila Perrone, Gabriele Manella and Lorenzo Tripodi (2011), p. 123.

tent.”²⁷ Indeed, even though “like all city films,” *À Propos de Nice* too, is “unquestionably about everyday life,” it decidedly “seems on the verge of renouncing the everyday life it finds, detecting and damning the social injustice inscribed in everyday activities.”²⁸ Vigo’s “contempt for the city,”²⁹ ultimately “dooms it to fire.”³⁰ Realist, surrealist,³¹ or beyond such categories and traditions, *À Propos de Nice* remains a “cinematic poem,”³² even “a mordant social statement against the corruption of the idle rich who vacation [in Nice] and the working poor who serve them.”³³ Vigo, we read, “captured [...] the boredom of the rich and the enthusiasm of the poor, eager to entertain them.”³⁴ In his own words:

- A. Nice is a city which thrives on gambling.
- B. Everything in Nice aimed at foreigners...
- C. The natives are basically no more interesting than the foreigners.
- D. Besides, everything in Nice is dedicated to death.³⁵

Vigo underlines a rigid social stratification wherein class defines not just the everyday but social life at large. In juxtaposing “the Nice of wealth and luxury, big hotels and casinos [...] with the Nice of poverty, filth and

27 *Ibid.*

28 *Ibid.*, p. 137.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 128.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 124.

31 Whilst Zilzer frames Vigo within the realist tradition, Ungar reads the film in relation to the Second Surrealist Manifesto, See Steven Ungar ‘Jean Vigo, *L’Atalante*, and the Promise of Social Cinema,’ *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 35 (2009) p. 66. For Noheden, surrealism is also fundamental in understanding Vigo. See Kristoffer Noheden ‘The Wild Medium: Anarchism and Surrealist Cinema’ in *Anarchist Developments in Cultural Studies*, 1 (2024), pp. 45-86. On the other hand, Rosenbaum suggests that “terms like ‘surrealism’ – or ‘realism’, for that matter – prove to be wholly inadequate in dealing with Vigo.” See Rosenbaum, ‘Jean Vigo’s Secret,’ p. 275.

32 Charlotte Hooker, ‘Jean Vigo’s *A Propos de Nice*: Documentary Film and Cinematic Poem’ *Literature/Film Quarterly* 4 (1976), p. 256.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 251.

34 Zilzer ‘Remembrances of Jean Vigo,’ p. 126.

35 Vigo cited in Hooker ‘Jean Vigo’s *A Propos de Nice*,’ p. 126.

pitiful street urchin,"³⁶ in contrasting "the life of the rich visitors at the casino with that of the poor inhabitants of the old city, the well-nourished limbs of the holidaymakers playing on the beach with the stunted and crippled limbs of the slum children, the carnival with the cemetery,"³⁷ he invites us into the spleen of the French Riviera.

On the one hand, as is evident, Vigo attacks the manners and life-style of the rich; leisure is no longer 'free time' but 'all of the time' all of the time. On the other hand, as is perhaps less obvious, he "stripped any romantic allusions from the representation of working-class poverty."³⁸ When describing social cinema specifically, and having refused to pretend any absolute or all-encompassing framework, Vigo suggests that "the cinema suffers more from flawed thinking than from a total absence of thought;" and he adds that "a camera, after all, is not a pump for creating vacuums."³⁹ Instead, for him, "to aim at a social cinema would simply be to agree to say something and to stimulate echoes other than those created by the belches of ladies and gentlemen who come to the cinema to aid their digestion."⁴⁰ Favoring Luis Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou* as "an accurate and a courageous film,"⁴¹ he proposes that "to aim at a social cinema is therefore simply to underwrite a cinema that deals with provocative subjects, subjects that cut into flesh."⁴² Consequently, "a social documentary should open our eyes": for Vigo, "*A Propos de Nice* is only a simple rough draft of such a cinema."⁴³ Vigo concludes that:

36 Elizabeth Grotte Strebel, 'French Social Cinema and the Popular Front,' *Journal of Contemporary History* 12 (1977), p. 500.

37 John Ellerby, 'The Anarchism of Jean Vigo' in *Anarchy*, 6, (1961), pp. 167-168.

38 Steven Ungar 'Jean Vigo' p. 70.

39 Jean Vigo, 'Towards a Social Cinema' (1930) in Scott MacKenzie, *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures* (University of California Press 2014), 448. For the whole text see *ibid.*, pp. 448-452.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 449.

41 *Ibid.*

42 *Ibid.*, p. 450.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 452.

In fact, no sooner is the atmosphere of Nice and the kind of life one leads there – and elsewhere, alas! – evoked than the film moves to generalize from the gross festivities by situating them under the sign of the grotesque, of the flesh and of death; these are the last convulsions of a society so little conscious of itself that it is enough to make you so nauseated that you will become an accomplice to a revolutionary solution.⁴⁴

Neither dismissing possible problems with the analysis of “the ill-defined category of ‘anarchist cinema’,”⁴⁵ nor ignoring the “very great danger in reducing a number of complex works of art to a label,”⁴⁶ Vigo does not tolerate any stigma purposefully diminishing his work. Vigo’s cinema is shot through an unapologetic political lens: it is the work of an anarchist, it cherishes “ill definitions” as opposed to rigid scientific categorizations, it “is immediately relevant to our world of power states, mass murder, torture, protests and revolts”.⁴⁷ Exemplary of such artistic production, “*À Propos de Nice*, is at its best in the attack [Vigo] makes on the life of the ‘internationally idle’ class there.”⁴⁸ Vigo “is using the camera like a weapon,” he “is like a saboteur in enemy territory, darting amongst people.”⁴⁹ What is that “enemy territory” then? Mikhail Bakunin once wrote:

It is quite true that a certain amount of leisure is absolutely necessary to the development of the mind and the arts and sciences, but this leisure has to be earned, it has to follow the healthy tiredness of daily labour, it has to be a just leisure, its potential depending solely on the energy, ability and good will

44 *Ibid.*

45 Richard Porton, *Film and the Anarchist Imagination*, (University of Illinois Press, 2020), p. 176.

46 Allan Lovell, *Anarchist Cinema*, (Peace News 1962), p. 38. In acknowledging differences and similarities amongst the three directors, Lovell discusses the works of Vigo, Luis Buñuel and Franju.

47 Lovell, *Anarchist Cinema*, p. 40.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

49 *Ibid.* For Vigo and anarchism see also David Weir, *Jean Vigo and the Anarchist Eye*. (On Our Own Authority! 2014) and James Newton, *The Anarchist Cinema*, (Intellect, 2019).

of the individual, equally available to all, whereas privileged leisure, far from reinforcing the mind, enfeebles, demoralizes and chokes it.⁵⁰

Shooting individuals as mere shells that represent the classes whose pleasure in leisure justifies and perpetuates the sacred-like appearance of empty yet pompous social institutions – the church in the religious procession, the economy on the roulette table, the state that has transformed into the carnival king – Vigo's portrait of Nice moves beyond a cinematic city portrait, documentary, or reportage as mere representation of a cityscape preparing for a festivity. The opposite of "reportage, this modern method of evading political realities under the guise of left-wing phraseology,"⁵¹ Vigo's film presents Nice as "enfeebled, demoralized and choking," carnivalesque ad infinitum. Vigo said that in his Nice, "we witness a certain world on trial."⁵² The verdict is this: capitalist metropolitan modernity is "depraved in mind and heart" year-round.⁵³

The verdict is a beginning, not an end. We have arrived at Nice. What kind of a city is this? And what views does Vigo offer? – aerial views; the birds-eye view of the city from within; zooming in and out of details; panoramic shots and frames; and, ultimately, inversion by means of the hand-stand view later perfected in *Zéro de Conduit*. À *Propos de Nice* too, may "bear witness to the world anew."⁵⁴ Time to return to Kracauer.

50 Mikhail Bakunin in *Michael Bakunin – Selected Writings*, edited by Arthur Lehning, (Jonathan Cape, 1973), p. 80.

51 Walter Benjamin in *Walter Benjamin – Selected Writings*, Volume 2, edited by Michael W. Jennings, (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 306.

52 Vigo 'Towards a Social Cinema,' p. 452

53 See Bakunin: "the privileged man, whether politically or economically, is a man depraved in mind and heart," in Bakunin, *Bakunin*, p. 131.

54 Gilloch, *Siegfried Kracauer*, p. 178.

“Emptiness today is Real”

In 1947, the *Hollywood Quarterly* published Siegfried Kracauer's 'Jean Vigo'.⁵⁵ The article was introduced by Vladimir Pozner who maintained that, “as a rule, rebels are not popular, and in the motion picture industry probably less so than anywhere else. And Vigo was a rebel, on two counts: against the screen formulas and, even more intensely, against the established order of things. He used the camera as a weapon, not as an anesthetic;”⁵⁶ Vigo's work is not meant to help audiences digest their dinner but to upset their stomachs. Kracauer's review of Vigo borrowed a quotation from Maurice Bardèche and Robert Brasillach's 1938 *The History of Motion Pictures*: “Jean Vigo, who died all too early, made a documentary film about Nice, romantic but full of magnificent cruelty, in which the absurdities of amorous elderly ladies, of gigolos and of the decadent bourgeoisie were fiercely stigmatized.”⁵⁷ Other than that, because “for years it has been inaccessible,”⁵⁸ Kracauer offered only some brief observations on *À Propos de Nice* and, instead, focused on *Zéro de Conduit*. As a general comment, he noted that “although Vigo lacks [René] Clair's wonderful lightness, he surpasses him in his profound concern with truth.”⁵⁹ This “profound concern with truth” – Vigo's approach to “objects as silent accomplices of our thoughts and feelings”, to “situations in which their influence predominates”⁶⁰ – might be a *rendezvous* between Vigo and Kracauer.

55 Siegfried Kracauer 'Jean Vigo,' *Hollywood Quarterly* 2 (1947), pp. 261-263.

56 Pozner in *ibid.*, p. 261.

57 Bardèche and Brasillach cited in Siegfried Kracauer, *Siegfried Kracauer's American Writings Essays on Film and Popular Culture* edited by Johannes von Moltke and Kristy Rawson, (University of California Press 2012), p. 240. For Kracauer's “appreciation of Jean Vigo” see also Martin Jay's 'Afterward' in *ibid.*, p. 233.

58 Kracauer, 'Jean Vigo,' p. 261.

59 *Ibid.*

60 *Ibid.*

In 1930, the year when Vigo's *À Propos de Nice* was released, Walter Benjamin writes that Kracauer "refuses to play the game. He declines to don a mask for the carnival mounted by his fellow human beings."⁶¹ On the contrary, for Benjamin, Kracauer was "a troublemaker" whose "passion" was "unmasking others."⁶² Kracauer unmasked the untruths of the modern metropolis – "progress," "freedom," "hope" to mention but a few. In revealing everyday life, social life itself, as a carnival, by revealing the carnival masks as more masks over the masks that already veil reality, Vigo accomplished the same task in *À Propos de Nice*. Exposing "things normally unseen", "transforming" the cinema spectator "into a conscious observer" that resists the "absence of thought," Kracauer and Vigo both sought possible remedies to "flawed thinking."

For Kracauer, "Vigo's brilliant, if immature, *A PROPOS DE NICE*, [is] so expressive of revolutionary ardor, and a constant awareness of death."⁶³ True, "cityscape and dreamscape" imbue one another here, just as Kracauer characterizes Marseilles and other cities as possessing "'something of a dream'."⁶⁴ But this is contrary to those "stupid and unreal film fantasies [that] are the *daydreams of society*."⁶⁵ Indeed, Vigo's *Nice* calls for the 'observer' to awaken in the face of the fundamental "know thyself": mortality, Death, a motif that dominates commentary on

61 Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, p. 306.

62 *Ibid.*, pp. 305-306.

63 Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, p. 181.

64 Graeme Gilloch, 'Fragments, Cityscapes, Modernity. Kracauer on the Cannebière,' *Journal of Classical Sociology* 13 (2012), pp. 21-22.

65 Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, edited by Thomas Y. Levin. (Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 292. Though I cannot, alas, dwell on this more fully, "dreams" in Kracauer manifest in various structures and social phenomena and carry varied meanings ranging from daydreaming as a way to imagine a free society, daydreaming as escapism, dreaming as the hypnotic state of alienation, dream as the hypocrisy of capitalism that identifies itself with "progress" etc. For Kracauer, amongst others, Benjamin too "wants to wake the world from its dream." See *ibid.*, p. 262.

the film. In Vigo, there is “mockery”⁶⁶ as well as a reminder of death; “the carnival procession becomes the death march of a decadent culture;”⁶⁷ ultimately “death is then extended from the physical death of individuals to the death of an entire system.”⁶⁸ But that is not all. In the conclusion to his ‘Analysis of a City Map’, Kracauer observes:

Wide streets lead from the faubourgs into the splendor of the center. But this is not the intended center. The good fortune in store for the poverty further out is reached by radii other than the extant ones. *Nevertheless, the streets that lead to the center must be traveled, for its emptiness today is real.*⁶⁹

Clearly, this is an image similar to the primal experience of Vigo’s Nice. Vigo proclaims this (very real) emptiness, even speaking of death. Can we risk all for a “profound concern with the truth” if all it comes down to is emptiness and death? And if so, with no Athena or shield to protect us, (how) can we look at such a Medusa, such emptiness and death, and not be petrified?

Commentators on Vigo’s work have pointed to, but have not underlined, the significance of satire in *À Propos de Nice*.⁷⁰ By contrast, however brief his review, in defining it as a “satirical documentary,”⁷¹ Kracauer accentuated this dimension in Vigo’s first play with the camera. In this light, we may even enjoy *À Propos de Nice* as a satire providing a distinct

66 See Hooker, ‘Jean Vigo’s *A Propos de Nice*,’ p. 256.

67 Grotte Strebel, ‘French Social Cinema,’ p. 500.

68 Trippe, ‘The Segmented Quotidian,’ p. 139.

69 Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, p. 44.

70 See for example, a note on Vigo’s “satiric view of the urban bourgeoisie at leisure in *A Propos de Nice*” in Bill Nichols ‘Documentary Film and the Modernist Avant-Garde,’ *Critical Inquiry* 27 (2001), p. 596; a note on “the satirical edge achieved in *A propos de Nice*” in Ungar “Jean Vigo” p. 75; or, the suggestion that “with *À propos de Nice*, [Vigo] had already made a satirical city symphony that deflated that genre’s celebratory gestures,” in Florian Deroo, *Barge Life: On Jean Vigo’s L’Atalante*. (Babel and Punctum Books, 2025), p. 3.

71 Kracauer, ‘Jean Vigo,’ p. 261

“invitation” to a particular sociological view whose “game [...] goes on in a spacious playground”⁷² in Nice and the great cities of the world. Perhaps in “society” too. In case we missed it and got lost in that horror of a city on screen, *À Propos de Nice* closes with people laughing thus reminding us that it is a *satirical* documentary with a “profound concern with the truth.” This is the shield that protects us. We must awaken – awaken against the tight hold of the twin children of the Night; we need neither sleep nor death.⁷³ We need to think. And think again.

When writing about *Zéro de Conduite*, Kracauer noted that “satire still manifested itself, and perhaps he indulged in the magic of mute objects and dark instincts only in order, some day, to pursue more thoroughly and knowingly the task of disenchantment.”⁷⁴ Vigo died in 1934; he had no time to pursue “the task” further. But not unlike “Kracauer’s own lightness of touch and deft satirical skills,”⁷⁵ or “Kracauer’s distinctive tone, one that is both enlivened and enlightened by wit and humour and yet, at the same time, imbued with a sense of melancholy,”⁷⁶ the satire of *À Propos de Nice* is, ultimately, an exemplary instance of “the revolutionary, transformative vision of the film medium,”⁷⁷ one more dimension that Kracauer’s eye never overlooked.

Vigo invites us to laugh – or smirk – at life and death, at all we are taught to perceive as serious and ridiculous, important or unimportant. In his Nice, laughter becomes an “expression of human freedom,”⁷⁸ itself a means to a “strong unmasking and de-ideologizing force” and one that serves to “sharpen our awareness of the comic and tragic aspects of

72 Peter Berger, *Invitation to Sociology*. (Penguin, 1991), p. 29.

73 In ancient Greek mythology Ὕπνος (Hypnos-Sleep) is the twin brother of Θάνατος (Thanatos-Death).

74 *Ibid.*, p. 263. Kracauer saw this promise fading in *L’Atalante*.

75 Gilloch, *Siegfried Kracauer*, p. 54.

76 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

77 Graeme Gilloch ‘Urban Optics: Film, Phantasmagoria and the City in Benjamin and Kracauer,’ *New Formations* 61 (2007), p. 116.

78 Anton Zijderfeld ‘Jokes and their Relation to Social Reality.’ *Social Research* 35 (1968), p. 311.

human socio-cultural life.”⁷⁹ Though experienced unequivocally, powerlessness too, is a mask. We can reclaim agency:

Unlike the puppets, we have the possibility of stopping in our movements, looking up and perceiving the machinery by which we have been moved. In this act lies the first step towards freedom.⁸⁰

In showing carnival puppets, people like puppets, in piercing through backstage and front stage as easily as he depicts the human body as a carcass, flesh and blood, Vigo invites us to laugh a particular laughter, a bitter laughter, a disrespectful laughter that neither redeems nor makes us “forget [our] hardships.”⁸¹ Vigo’s laughter too, “encourages [us] in [our] striving for a better life.”⁸² Eventually, in turning the ‘camera’ to us and asking, much as Kracauer did, that we do not “go completely blind,”⁸³ *A*

79 *Ibid.*, pp. 287-288.

80 Berger, *Invitation to Sociology*, p. 199.

81 See Kracauer’s 1949 ‘The Mirror Up to Nature’, a review of Preston Sturges’ 1941 *Sullivan’s Travels* in Kracauer *American Writings*, 107. In his 1950 ‘Preston Sturges, or Laughter Betrayed,’ Kracauer alerts us as to the possibility that laughter may oversimplify understanding: “I do not intend to say that laughter without social significance is evil. The straight film farce, produced for its comical effect alone, is just as valid and welcome an entertainment as any other juggler’s act. But the farce in the disguise of satire is dangerous. It dulls the edges of a first-rate weapon of human liberation. And it is dangerous at a time when, along with the means of mass communication, methods of psychological manipulation have been developed to an extent unknown before.” See *Ibid.*, p. 115.

82 This is part of Kracauer’s assessment of laughter in the works of Charles Chaplin. See *ibid.*, p. 263.

83 Kracauer writes: “Unlike most fiction films, *documentary* films have to deal not with artistically constructed scenes but with a reality they are supposed to understand. One might think they would aspire to present the world as it is, but just the opposite is the case. They cut us off from the very life that is our only concern, inundating the audience with such a profusion of irrelevant observations that it becomes indifferent to the important ones. Someday this audience will go completely blind.” See Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, p. 311.

Propos de Nice is a call to arms for life. For, though emptied, it does not have to be empty.

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Happy Returns: *Nostalgia*, Porosity and the Minotaur of Naples

Graeme Gilloch¹

Abstract: Drawing on motifs from the 1925 essay by Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis on the city of Naples, and, in particular, the central concept of ‘porosity’, this essay provides a reading of Mario Martone’s evocative film *Nostalgia* (2022). Shot on location in Naples, the film follows the figure of Felice Lasco (Pierfrancesco Favino), a middle-aged, married, and seemingly successful businessman now based in Cairo, who returns to the city of his birth after an absence of forty years. He cares for his aged mother (Aurora Quattocchi) in her last days and then, following her death, seeks out his erstwhile best friend, Oreste Spasiano (Tommaso Ragno), now a ruthless and feared criminal boss holed up in one of the city’s impenetrable neighbourhoods. An object of suspicion and surveillance, Felice nevertheless persuades and finds guides to and through the urban maze to confront Oreste, the Minotaur who sits waiting, brooding, for his arrival.

The camera joins Felice as he wanders the Neapolitan streets, squares and alleyways, capturing the labyrinthine and uncanny qualities of this unhomey city, a city that he still calls home, and, curiously, where he is determined to make his home once more. Through the use of flashbacks and point-of-view shots, the complex work of time, memory and image are configured here as permeable, as the past seeps into and stains the present, and as the revenant now looks to atone at last for a long-forgotten, long-remembered crime.

- 1 Graeme Gilloch is Professor in the School of Arts, Lancaster University, researching in Critical Theory, urban and visual culture, film and photography, and memory and haunting. The author of numerous articles, essays and reviews, he has published three monographs: *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City* (1996); *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations* (2002); and, *Siegfried Kracauer: Our Companion in Misfortune* (2015). He co-edited *The Detective of Modernity*, (with Georgia Giannakopoulou, 2020); *Siegfried Kracauer: Selected Writings on Media, Propaganda and Political Communication* (with Jaeho Kang and John Abromeit, 2022); and, special issues on ‘Sociography: writing differently’ (*Sociological Review*, 2022) and commemorating André Gorz (*Journal of Classical Sociology*, 2023). He has held research fellowships with the Leverhulme Trust, the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, the Korea Foundation and the Korea National Research Foundation. He was a visiting Research Fellow at Pusan National University (2010) and a BK Global Visiting Research Fellow at Seoul National University (2024). His writings have been translated into six languages.

Here, in the figure of Felice, the gaze and motivations of the ‘newcomer’ / ‘stranger’ and of the ‘native’ are not counterpoised – as famously formulated in Benjamin’s ‘The Return of the Flaneur’ review of 1929 – but coalesce, collude, conspire. They are porous, leaking into and out of one another. Indeed, *Nostalgia* provides us with a subtle blending of Benjamin’s ‘Naples’ and his quasi-autobiographical reflections on his own home city of Berlin: Martone’s film is a ‘Neapolitan Chronicle’ perhaps. Cities may be porous too: they interpenetrate, inform and imbue each other.

The involutions of time and memory, the convolutions of space and flânerie – these combine to make of Naples a haunted city in which love and longing are tinged with guilt, violence and death. The presence of the absent; the absence of the present – haunting is, one should remember, a form of porosity. And while Oreste has long cast a sinister shadow over the city, it is a ghost from the past, Felice, who returns to haunt him. Pity the poor Minotaur, who listens in patient dread for the echoing footsteps of Theseus.

‘Vedere Napoli e poi Mori’²

Felice Lasco: “I was born here and I want to die here.”

Oreste Spasiano: “We can arrange that.”³

The Revenant

In ‘The Return of the Flaneur’, Walter Benjamin’s review of his friend Franz Hessel’s 1929 *Spazieren in Berlin*, one reads:

The superficial pretext – the exotic and the picturesque – appeals only to the outsider. To depict a city as a native would calls for other deeper motives – the motives of the person who journeys into the past rather than to foreign parts. The account of the city given by a native will always have something in common with memoirs; it is no accident that the writer has spent his childhood there.⁴

One finds the most exquisite rendering of this urban walking amid memories in the ‘Preface’ to Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Master of Ballantrae: A Winter’s Tale* (1889), a curious novel which held a particular fascination

2 A traditional pun cited in Walter Benjamin *Selected Writings Volume 1 1913-1926*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996a), p. 421.

3 *Nostalgia*, dir. Mario Martone, 2022.

4 Walter Benjamin *Selected Writings Volume 2 1927-1934*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 22.

for Benjamin.⁵ Returning to his native Edinburgh after a long absence, our nameless narrator muses:

Outside, in foreign spots, he comes by surprise and awakens more attention than he had expected; in his own city, the relation is reversed, and he stands amazed to be so little recollected. Elsewhere he is refreshed to see attractive faces, to remark possible friends; there he scouts the long streets, with a pang at heart, for the faces and friends that are no more. Elsewhere he is delighted with the presence of what is new, there tormented by the absence of what is old. Elsewhere he is content to be his present self; there he is smitten by an equal regret for what he once was and for what he once hoped to be.⁶

Nevertheless, a few drinks at the house of a friend restore his spirits such that: “he was already almost consoled, he had already almost forgiven himself his two unpardonable errors, that he should ever have left his native city, or ever returned to it.”⁷

The revenant, homecoming, errors, regret, expiation, sacrifice – these are the leitmotifs of Mario Martone’s 2022 film *Nostalgia*.

We join Felice Lasco (Pierfrancesco Favino) aboard a plane and then in an airport taxi as he returns after an absence of forty years to the city of his birth, Naples. His two ‘unpardonable errors’: the bungled burglary that he committed with his closest friend Oreste Spasiano (Tommaso Ragno), a petty crime that leads to the death of a man (Costagliola) and ultimately to Felice, then aged just 15, hastily leaving the city, spirited away to a new life in Beirut by his Uncle Constantino who ran a Lebanese construction company.

5 Benjamin ends his letter to Werner Kraft from San Remo of 12th November 1934 with: “Before I close I want to recommend to you a little-known book I recently read and which, in terms of its importance to me, I rank ahead of almost all great novels, and right behind *The Charterhouse of Parma*. It is Stevenson’s *Master of Ballantrae*. Do get it if you can.” *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin of Walter Benjamin 1910-1940*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 464.

6 Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Master of Ballantrae. A Winter’s Tale*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 5.

7 Stevenson, *Master of Ballantrae*, p. 5.

And his second mistake: this very act of returning to the city, where he himself will eventually die in a dark alley at the hands of Spasiano in a calculated assassination.

There is a third death, too: that of Felice's mother, Teresa (Aurora Quattrocchi), the person perhaps for whom he has come back after all these years, so as to care for her tenderly, to bathe her and comb her hair, to find her a bright and airy apartment, to make her last few days more comfortable, to say a final goodbye to her. A skilled seamstress, she is his Penelope, the one to whom and for whom he returns. Meanwhile, his wife Arlette (Sofia Essaïde) remains in Cairo, waits for him in the city where he has long prospered but which seemingly means so little to him now, has no hold on him. "I love you, come back my love" she writes to him. But he has other plans: She should book a flight and join him, here in Naples, for a new life. But neither of them will get their wish.

Into the Labyrinth

Yes, there is something here of Odysseus, but it is another set of threads that lead through this paper, two ways of thinking of tangled times and spaces, of cities curdled by memories, that may seem dissimilar, contradictory even, but which are intimately, inextricably entwined: the labyrinth, the figure of convolution and disorientation; and the concept of porosity, an appreciation of indeterminacy, impermanence and impurity. Not so much Odysseus and Penelope, then, as Theseus and Ariadne.

Tellingly, Walter Benjamin begins his radio broadcast for children 'The Fall of Herculaneum and Pompeii' with a question: "Have you ever heard of the Minotaur?"⁸ And, after briefly recounting the myth, he concludes: "People visiting modern-day Pompeii could certainly use one of Ariadne's threads: it's the largest labyrinth, the largest maze in the world."⁹ Perhaps. But a keen rival for this title is surely just a stone's

8 Walter Benjamin, *Radio Benjamin* (London: Verso 2014), p. 152. The script for this radio talk on Pompeii is immediately preceded by one on the city of Naples itself: see 'Naples' in *Radio Benjamin* pp. 145-151.

9 Benjamin *Radio Benjamin*, p. 152.

throw away – the city of Naples itself. Not the ‘largest’ perhaps but at least it is a living labyrinth, a mobile maze, the very antithesis of a “dead city”¹⁰ like petrified Pompeii.

In Martone’s film, and in Felice’s company, we are taken on a tour of the vital and vibrant warren that is Naples. The camera follows in the revenant’s footsteps as he reacquaints himself in, and with, this disorienting and disquieting urban complex. And as he wends his way through this half-remembered, half-forgotten cityscape, where “each street is a vertiginous experience”¹¹ of past and present moments, we, the viewers of the film, are not the only ones who train eyes upon him, keep silent watch. From windows, balconies and galleries, from the tops of steps and stairways, wherever he wanders, his every move is observed and scrutinized. In his 1925 essay on the city Benjamin writes:

Buildings are used as a popular stage. They are all divided into innumerable simultaneously animated theaters. Balcony, courtyard, window, gateway, staircase, roof are at the same time stage and boxes.¹²

Such surveillance is part of the unnerving uncanny experience of Naples. Like Hessel’s revenant flaneur, Felice becomes a ‘person of interest’, an object of suspicion – his opening chapter is tellingly entitled ‘The Suspect’.¹³ And this is especially true for one person in particular – Oreste Spasiano – who never left the city, who has remained in Naples for the same forty years that Felice has been away,¹⁴ and who has in that time risen to the top of his own illegal ‘business’ ventures: the brutal, bloody

10 Benjamin *Radio Benjamin*, p. 152.

11 Benjamin *Selected Writings Volume 2*, p. 262.

12 Benjamin *Selected Writings Volume 1*, p. 417.

13 Benjamin *Selected Writings Volume 2*, p. 265.

14 The one who leaves and the one who stays; the one who is benign and the one who is malevolent – this contrast and conflict constitutes the central premiss of *The Master of Ballantrae* too, and its tale of the contrasting characters and fates of the Durie brothers, James and Henry. In Stevenson’s story, of course, it is the one who departs and (continually) returns, James, who is the demonic figure.

dealings of organised crime, of the *Camorra*. He has become the feared criminal boss, the 'Badman' of the neighbourhood, La Sanità. Just the mention of his name, 'Spasiano', has become a watchword engendering, ensuring, silence. No-one dares to speak of him; no-one except Felice that is. He does not share such fears of Oreste: on the contrary, he deliberately seeks him out. He has returned to Naples precisely for this, too. Felice wanders the winding backstreets, courtyards, and alleyways, climbs up and down steps and passageways, in search of his erstwhile and long-lost, but never-forgotten, best friend. He looks to be reconciled with him, to explain and expiate the guilt he has carried with him for four decades, the guilt they share and about which they have never spoken.

To find Oreste he needs and seeks out guides. Padre Luigi Rega (Francesco di Leva), the local priest, a staunch and fearless opponent of the criminal gangs, is one. After Teresa's funeral, he reluctantly agrees to make some introductions, to point Felice in the right direction, to lead him, in so far as he can, to the neighbourhood where Spasiano lives, rules with fear, dwells in fear. The good Padre has other concerns though: he offers a refuge and alternative path for the young people of the locality, teenagers in whose smiling faces, happy-go-lucky demeanour and cheerful company Felice recalls traces, after-images, of his own carefree youth forty years before. One of them, a young woman, Adele (Virginia Apicella), a modern-day Ariadne, even takes him underground on a brief excursion, a guided tour of the city's catacombs.¹⁵ Here, amid the long-dead of Naples, she shines a torch upon a wall to illuminate a fragment of a fresco: the picture of a North African woman from centuries ago. The image has a *punctum* for Felice, it resembles Arlette. The film cuts to an image of her. And Felice is right to be cut to the quick by this: he has neglected to take her calls. He has no intention of returning to Cairo now. Not so much Odysseus and Penelope, more Aeneas and Dido. We could add this perhaps as a third 'unpardonable error'.

15 Benjamin himself visited the Neapolitan catacombs on at least two occasions. He relates his own experiences and impressions in a letter of 10th June 1924 to Gottfried Salamon-Delatour. See Walter Benjamin, *Briefe Band II* 1919-1924, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1996b. pp. 461-462.

The labyrinth is not just a spatial and architectural figure, of course, but also one of time and memory. As a successful businessman Felice has travelled widely (Lebanon, South Africa, Egypt); he has certainly known other cities, made them his home. Yet it is Naples which imbues Felice's memories. Wherever he has been, he has perhaps never truly left this city behind; or rather Naples has never left him, never left him alone. And now he returns to his once-familiar haunts, ones which have in turn haunted him these many long years. Felice is back and has no intention of ever leaving again. He is seduced by this city, led astray. And this is why he must die.

Porous-city

This brings us to 'porosity', the key motif, the 'red thread', in Benjamin's 'Naples' essay.¹⁶ He writes: "Porosity is the inexhaustible law of life in this city, reappearing everywhere."¹⁷ Porosity is spatial, architectural:

As porous as this stone is the architecture. Building and action interpenetrate in the courtyards, arcades and stairways. In everything they preserve the scope to become a theatre of new, unforeseen constellations. The stamp of the definite is avoided. No situation appears intended forever, no figure asserts it 'thus and not otherwise.'¹⁸

Benjamin observes, for example, how the Neapolitan house is turned inside out,¹⁹ as domestic furniture, objects and activities spill out onto the streets and into popular view such that: "the house is far less the refuge

16 In her pioneering study *Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), Susan Buck-Morss points out that this term was suggested by Asja Lacis (p. 26). Martin Mittlemeier also emphasises the intellectual importance and contribution of Lacis in his insightful and extended discussion of 'porosity' and its wider significance for Benjamin's thought. See Mittlemeier, *Naples 1925. Adorno, Benjamin, and the Summer that Made Critical Theory*. New Haven CT and London: Yale University Press, 2024. See especially Chapter 4 'Charnel Houses' pp. 29-39.

17 Benjamin *Selected Writings Volume 1*, p. 417.

18 Benjamin *Selected Writings Volume 1*, p. 416

19 Benjamin *Selected Writings Volume 1*, p. 420

into which people retreat than the inexhaustible reservoir from which they flood out.”²⁰

Neapolitans are flâneurs in reverse: transforming interiors into exteriors, just as the Hessian stroller in Berlin reconfigures public space – pavements, cafés, news-stands – as a personal, private salon.

This is a city of instability, improvisation,²¹ illegibility. Naples does not permit itself to be read.

Porosity involves profusion and confusion: one cannot be sure, Benjamin observes, if buildings in this city are in the process construction or already falling down – are they new-build or ruins, or perhaps both: instant ruins?²² This is a temporal as well as an architectural conundrum. Indeed, porosity is about the blending and bleeding of time, of past and present, of the sacred and profane, the one into the other: “the festival penetrates each and every working day” Benjamin notes, adding “A grain of Sunday is hidden in each weekday. And how much weekday there is in this Sunday!”²³

In *Nostalgia*, Martone looks to capture this cinematographically through the use of flashback sequences as montage, montage understood here not as the superimposition or the layering of images but rather as the intercutting and the juxtapositioning of the present and the past, inserting one into the other like the grains of days. Scenes and moments from forty years ago appear to Felice and to us in washed out, faded, polaroid-style home-movie images. The change of aspect places a black border around them, as if in mourning, or as we have been afforded only a tunnel-vision of these scenes

We see how the cityscape is transformed in Felice’s eyes into a series of mnemonics. Gazing kindly upon a young couple canoodling on a motor-bike, Felice is transported to his own youthful adventures, remembering himself now as a youth riding the city’s streets with Oreste as pillion,

20 Benjamin *Selected Writings Volume 1*, p. 419

21 Benjamin *Selected Writings Volume 1*, pp. 416-417

22 Benjamin *Selected Writings Volume 1*, p. 416

23 Benjamin *Selected Writings Volume 1*, p. 417

now careering around corners and competitors to win an improvised street race. He buys an old second-hand motorbike in an attempt, perhaps, to relive such past pleasures. He takes a ride through the city and out to the seashore, a sequence that is intercut with precisely this same ride, this same route, that he took years earlier with Oreste seated behind him. He stands now on the same beach where the two of them once stripped off and ran laughing into the sea. He stands on the shore and remembers: we were here once.

Felice's new motorbike does not last long: it is deliberately torched by persons unknown, but assuredly at Spasiano's bidding, not just as a warning but as an act of symbolic violence, as the turning of such memories into smoke and ashes.

The work of memory? Perhaps the play of memory is better, for here it is a game of hide-and-seek. Spasiano hides; Felice seeks. But one does not find memories, they find you. Finders and keepers: memories keep you, keep with you, keep troubling you. This is what haunting is.

Old ways start to seep back into the present. His years in Lebanon and Egypt have led Felice to embrace Islam: he prays, he refuses alcohol. He speaks Arabic. But here in Naples we see how his Neapolitan vernacular, his Catholic upbringing slowly but unmistakably seep back in, childhood habits return, they become revenants for the revenant. Tastes, practices, faith, language, the sense of self – these are porous too. Grains are seeds; they grow and flourish, take root and take hold. Like guilt and remorse. They are fragments of potential life, of what might be, of another life. And of what might have been if Felice had not gone along with Oreste on that fateful night, if the senseless killing had never taken place. Another life altogether, another life spent here in Naples. This haunts Felice, too: the 'this could have been', the 'this might have been', the 'if only'.

This is what haunting is, this is what ghosts are: not just memories of the past, of the lives we have led, but memories of how the past might have been otherwise, of the lives we never got to lead, of all our manifold

and untold 'lost futures'.²⁴ Haunting, ghosts – these are themselves forms and moments of porosity.

"Sometimes distant memories are like ghosts" Padre Luigi tells Felice.

In Naples, the "living room reappears on the street," Benjamin tells us.²⁵ And not just the 'living room,' the room of the living: the spaces of the un-lived and of the once-lived and the no-longer-living, too. These demand space, take up room, accommodate themselves, occupy and pre-occupy. These spill out, across, through and over this city, turning it into a labyrinth of superterranean catacombs.

On porosity

Let us pause a moment, draw breath and reflect. What is 'porosity' exactly?

Porosity: from the Latin *porus* ('an opening') from Greek *poros* ('passage', 'way').

Also, from the proto-Indo-European *perk* meaning 'to pierce' or 'bore holes'.

So: 'porosity' is about passages and ways, passageways, '*Passagen*' – arcades! Indeed, Benjamin's essay on Naples, like Martone's film, is a work of passages in time and space, a *Passagenarbeit*.

'Porosity' refers to 'an opening', a threshold, a cusp, the fold wherein our *genius loci* resides. It is about *ways through*, channels permitting flow, seepage, staining. Porosity is about a substance as permeable, as a *medium*.

Naples, then, as the inexhaustible city of porosity is the city as medium – and a medium is someone, one should remember, who calls forth and channels ghosts, provides them with a passage, a way, into the present.

And let us not forget film itself: film as a medium is porous, of course, in a double sense: the aperture of the camera is an opening that lets light *in* to create a chemical stain, the image; and film as a transparency allows light *through*, to project it onto a screen.

²⁴ The term is Mark Fisher's. See his *Ghosts of My Life. Writings on Depression Hauntology and Lost Futures*. (Lond: Zero Books, 2014)

²⁵ Benjamin *Selected Writings Volume 1*, p. 420.

Pores are tiny holes, perforations: one wonders – is it through these microscopic openings that Benjamin’s ‘tradition of the oppressed’ can come through, shine through? Perhaps, it is through a pore that the Messiah will return, and through ‘divine violence’ end the ceaseless, senseless violence of humankind?

Porosity is certainly not without its violence, its pain: pores are piercings, punctures and punctuations in a surface. They are *puncta*. And, here memory and images (of film and photography) themselves coalesce. For Benjamin’s Naples as city of porosity is, for Felice, a city perforated with mnemonics and memory images which pierce and wound him, just as, in *Camera Lucida*,²⁶ Roland Barthes is afflicted by the images which fascinate him – photographs which prompt his love and which lead him to understand the special resonance of the ‘wintergarden photograph’ of his mother as a young girl.

In its use of flashbacks, Martone’s film, too, screens for us the ‘that-has-been’, the *ça a été*, of Felice’s life. And more: as Felice gazes upon those young people in Padre Rega’s care, as he smiles wistfully at that tentative, hesitant motorbike romance, as he finds himself smiling and dancing their midst, we, like him, can imagine (turn into an image) the *ça aurait pu être*, the ‘that-might-have-been’. If only. And for him, and hence for us, this is so very bitter-sweet. It is the pain (*algia*) for and of home (*nostos*). Perhaps “elsewhere”, in Cairo, Felice “is content to be his present self”; but here, in Naples, “he is smitten by an equal regret for what he once was and for what he once hoped to be.”²⁷

Once more: the labyrinth

The channels and passages of porosity, like memories, are not linear or direct. Rather, they are coiled and complex, recursive, doubling back, labyrinthine. Like Naples itself, they are “anarchic, embroiled.”²⁸ The manifold

26 Roland Barthes *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York and London: Vintage Classics, 1993).

27 Stevenson, *Master of Ballantrae*, p. 5.

28 Benjamin *Selected Writings Volume 1*, p. 416

ways and byways of porosity are ones in which to lose oneself. Here in Naples Felice hopes perhaps to lose himself, to dissolve himself, to merge with this city, to come home; Oreste has been lost for forty years.

Martone's film takes us on a tour of, an odyssey around, Naples as Felice searches for an opening into the realm of Spasiano. And Oreste waits for him. He sits brooding in his lair. Felice is without fear: it is Oreste who is afraid. There is nothing murderous or violent in Felice. He means no harm. When the two men finally meet, after Felice undergoes a blindfolded ride in the back of a henchman's car, he tries to make this clear. But there is also no doubt that Felice means to stay; he wants to make Naples his home once more. And Spasiano fears him, fears what he might reveal, what he might say and to whom: the truth of those crimes, the sins of the past. What if Felice were to confess, to implicate him? (indeed, he has confessed already, twice in fact: to his benevolent Uncle, all those years ago; and now, to the shock and outrage of Padre Rega).

Oreste warns Felice: "If you don't leave, you and I will begin a game. You enter my kingdom, I enter yours. And we'll see who finds their way out."

But it is then Oreste, the Minotaur at the heart of the labyrinth of this city, who cannot endure this game; he can wait no longer. He must act. Like the child playing hide-and-seek who cannot wait to be found, he emerges, reveals himself, ventures forth. Hood up, head down, he sallies out in search of Felice: as darkness begins to fall, 'sought' and 'seeker' swap roles. Forsaking his squalid citadel, the Minotaur hunts for Theus, encounters him on an empty Neapolitan backstreet and, embracing him like the old friend he truly is, holding him tight, fires two bullets into him.

Oreste heads off into the shadows, back to the heart of the labyrinth that he has made his unhomely home. He returns to his self-incarceration to serve out the rest of his life sentence. One should never forget: the labyrinth was built as a prison, an architecture of disappearance, a panopticon in reverse. Oreste asks Felice, asks and answers himself: "What am I? I am the king of all that rubbish down there, but it is as if I'm in prison."

Happy returns

Felicie, 'Happy', returns to Naples. But in this city, there is no happy ending.

Or perhaps there is: Felice fulfils his wish to die in Naples, to 'see Naples and die', the city caught 'at last sight'. And he is no fool: surely, he knew all along it would end like this, which is indeed why he sought out Oreste in the first place, which is why he was never afraid of the monster his friend has become. Felice goes looking for death and finds it. He offers himself up, he sacrifices himself. Why? As a form of expiation, to exorcise his ghosts, to find absolution. He begs pardon of his 'two unpardonable errors', and, in this curious tale, who would have the heart to refuse him? Felice is forgiven. At least he is now at peace. Death is a homecoming.

And yes, of course, we must mourn him. But spare a thought, save your pity, for Oreste Spasiano. His 'two unpardonable errors' remain *unpardoned*. There is no forgiveness, no rest, no redemption for him. 'See Naples and die' – if only it were that simple. He must go on, as ghosts do, the wandering undead. He is condemned to the labyrinth, to all the rubbish over which he rules. For Oreste there is no happy ending, nor even a sad one. There is something much worse: no ending at all. His life is like a labyrinth. Alas, the poor Minotaur of Naples.

Film

Nostalgia (2022). Directed by Mario Martone. Writers: Ermanno Rea, Mario Martone and Ippolita di Majo (Italy, 117 minutes).

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