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 POETRY, THOUGHT,
 AND IMAGE INTERTWINED

El truco preferido de Satán by *Walter Benjamin and Alberto García-Alix*

ABSTRACT: This paper proposes an exploration of various points of intersection between poetry, thought and contemporary photography by means of a ‘parallactic’ analysis of the volume *El truco preferido de Satán*, a compilation by Spanish poet Jenaro Talens that features a selection of fragments from Walter Benjamin’s unfinished *magnum opus*, *The Arcades Project*, which have been paired up with photographs by Alberto García-Alix, arguably the most renowned artistic chronicler of the *Movida Madrileña* in the 1980s. The resulting relationship of intermediality and supplementarity is a complex one, with moments of proximity, but also of extraneation. In order to capture these nuances and to elevate the obtained insights to a more general level, the notion of parallax, particularly in one of Slavoj Žižek’s specific formulations, serves as this essay’s methodological framework, as it sets out to understand García-Alix’s photographs as the elusive, spectral, parallactic supplement that discovers what would otherwise remain hidden in Benjamin’s fragments.

KEYWORDS: Walter Benjamin, Alberto García-Alix, Slavoj Žižek, Parallax, Contemporary Photography.

The primary focus of this paper gravitates around what can be considered quite an unusual phototext:¹ the volume *El truco preferido de Satán*—“Satan’s favorite trick”—that is, succinctly put, a compilation of fragments from Walter Benjamin’s already fragmentary *The Arcades Project*, his unfinished *magnum opus* in which he contemplates the

¹ This paper takes no interest in terminological debates about different modalities of referring to artistic compositions that make use of both text and (photographic) image. Consequently, ‘phototext’ is used (infrequently) in this essay in a broad sense as ‘text that displays photographs, the purpose of which is not purely illustrational.’ It might still be interesting to note, nonetheless, that the collection discussed here is an unusual example of a phototext, insofar as the images have been added by the photographer at a later date and without advice or consent from the author of the literary part (i.e., Benjamin). As such, *El truco preferido de Satán* inscribes itself into what François Brunet has called “photographic involvements with literature,” as opposed to “literary ‘interactions’ with photography, to use Jane Rabb’s excellent term” (2009, 8).

commercial arcades of Paris, as he ventures into a broad variety of discursive directions, areas and themes (cf. Buck-Morss 1989, 8-43; Rolleston 1989, 16-17). The fragments have then been paired up with images by Spanish photographer Alberto García-Alix, chosen by the artist himself in a joint effort with the professor of literature and acclaimed poet Jenaro Talens, who serves as the book's editor (cf. Benjamin, Talens, and García-Alix 2012, esp. 5-11; Talens 2017).

The compilation itself is—at the very first glance—but a translation of the German title *Passagen, Kristalle: Die Axt der Vernunft und des Satans liebster Trick*, published in 2011 as a collection of certain passages from Benjamin's complex and insightful reflections on life in Paris, then selected by Joachim Otte. What is genuinely new about the Spanish edition, then, are two particular circumstances: first, and patently visible, the aforementioned addition of a selection of images by Alberto García-Alix, considered by many the most prominent chronicler of the *Movida Madrileña*, the (rather) hedonistic and (somewhat?) countercultural movement that burst forth in the 1980s in the wake of Franco's death.² García-Alix himself stood out as a protagonist of this *movida*, capturing its vicissitudes in numerous portraits, snapshots, street scenes and self-portraits, which has led to him acquiring a veritable cult status. As I have just pointed out, it was García-Alix himself who selected the photographs for this volume together with Jenaro Talens, a professor of literature and poet—as well as an assiduous scholar of Benjamin's thought—who is also the one accountable for what I consider the second remarkable circumstance of the Spanish version: as the editor of the volume, he decided to publish Benjamin's fragments not as philosophy, but as poetry (cf. Benjamin, Talens and García-Alix 2012, 5-11; Talens 2017). And although this decision is subtle and mostly symbolic in its effect (the text was published in a poetry collection instead of a philosophical one, but the text itself, the pure materiality of the letter obviously stays the same), it may be indicative of a specific 'point of access' to Benjamin's text: one informed by 'lyricism', as we might label it, which appreciates the more poetic and suggestive facets of Benjamin's text—its properly aesthetic dimension—, prioritizing a more associative, 'unencumbered' reading over a rigorously

² While estimations of the actual political scope and impact of the *movida* vary considerably, there is no disagreement about the fact that its cheery, colorful intensity of self-expression is unparalleled in contemporary Spanish cultural history. An excellent example for this are Pedro Almodóvar's early films, which surely rank among the most notorious creations of this movement.

philosophical/intellectual one (which many other scholars of Benjamin's unfinished masterpiece propose).³

This mode of reading established for the Spanish edition—a gesture, as we have seen, by Jenaro Talens (the German 'original' makes no such differentiation)—also serves as an inspiration for the exploration this paper proposes, which is to say that the main interest and attention of my analysis is directed towards the interplay between Benjamin's fragments and García-Alix's photographs, the relation of mutuality and complementarity they establish with one another. The key category this examination of *El truco preferido de Satán* hinges on theoretically is the classical one of *perspective*, although I will introduce in the following section the notion of *parallax* as a conceptual device able to capture and express perspectival difference in a nuanced and informed way. To begin with, however, let us have a look at a kind of opening statement by Benjamin that also lends the collection its title, as it alludes to matters of perspective and reflection:

Let two mirrors reflect each other; then Satan plays his favorite trick and opens here in his way (as his partner does in lovers' gazes) the perspective on infinity. Be it now divine, now satanic: Paris has a passion for mirror-like perspectives (2002, 538).

Perspective, it seems, plays a vital part in Benjamin's reflections (cf. for example Buck-Morss 1989, 33 and 287). Hence, before we delve into the interrelations between image and text, it is undoubtedly opportune to have a closer look at the notion of parallax we have just introduced as the main theoretical framework/support for the reading this essay proposes. Although one encounters quite an ample variety of different approaches and methods for exploring phototexts, parallax (and the specific 'mode of seeing' it entrails) is, in my estimation, not only a productive, but also an innovative way of analyzing relations of intermediality and supplementarity in texts that operate on two different levels or through two different perspectives. A dual perspective, as implied by parallax, is

³ Scholarship about and around *The Arcades Project* is very prolific, with a great many publications and contributions examining a very ample spectrum of aspects and topics covered or barely brushed by Benjamin's text. Besides, for instance, Susan Buck-Morss' seminal 'archaeological' study (Buck-Morss 1989) and James Rolleston's inquiry into the role of quotation (Rolleston 1989) we have already alluded to, two more recent noteworthy approaches (among the many available) are those of Winfried Menninghaus and Michael Mack (both 2009, published in the accomplished anthological volume *Walter Benjamin and the Architecture of Modernity*). Menninghaus examines Benjamin's writings in an aesthetic context that concentrates on the notion of *kitsch* (Benjamin famously labeled his project a 'work of *kitsch*,' see 2002, 883), while Mack gives his analysis a more decidedly political spin.

particularly constitutive for phototexts in their reliance on the tangles of signification formed by the two levels, or layers, of text and image.

Parallax, at its most basic, is a phenomenon that can be perceived in the field of optics and particularly in a number of astronomical observations where it designates the apparent displacement of an object (a celestial body) when this object is contemplated from two different positions: while the object itself remains in the exact same location, the observers perceive it as though it moved. The first theorist to extricate the term from this immediate semantic environment and to employ it in a more decidedly epistemological context is Kant, who notes in his *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*:

Formerly, I viewed human common sense only from the standpoint of my own; now I put myself into the position of a foreign reason outside of myself, and observe my judgments, together with their most secret causes, from the point of view of others. It is true, the comparison of both observations results in *pronounced parallaxes* [emphasis added], but it is the only means of preventing the optical delusion (1900, 85-86).

The conclusion to draw here is, of course, not the platitude that one should always be mindful of the viewpoint of others, but rather that every subjective perspective—my own or that of others—necessarily results in, as Kant puts it, an ‘optical delusion’, so that in order for me to obtain ‘truer’, less distorted insights into the matter I am investigating, I will have to resort to the comparison of the two perspectives, to examining the tension of difference between them. Or, as Kōjin Karatani—who introduced parallax into contemporary thought—puts it succinctly: “to see things neither from [one’s] own viewpoint, nor from the viewpoint of others, but to face the *reality that is exposed through difference* (parallax)” (2003, 3).

Consequently, Karatani has to be credited with the (re)introduction of the notion the parallax into the current philosophical discourse, but it is nonetheless Slavoj Žižek who has contributed most to its ascent and expansion as a philosophical concept and an analytical category (cf. 2004, 2006). In his personal formulation, then, Žižek conceives parallax primarily as a “constantly shifting perspective between two points between which no synthesis or mediation is possible. Thus there is no rapport between the two levels, no shared space—although they are closely connected, [...] they are, as it were, on the opposed sides of a Moebius strip” (2006, 4).

On the basis of this still quite broad definition, Žižek goes on to expand the notion in order to make it suitable for a wider range of contexts and applications. For the present parallactic reading of Benjamin’s fragments

and García-Alix's photographs, one of these evolved definitions proves especially interesting and productive:

The parallax is not symmetrical, composed of two incompatible perspectives on the same X: there is an irreducible asymmetry between the two perspectives, a minimal reflexive twist. We do not have two perspectives, we have a perspective and what eludes it, and the other perspective fills in this void of what we could not see from the first perspective (2006, 29).

This particular Žižekian modality of *parallax* implies a kind of hierarchy: no longer are there two irreconcilable, competing perspectives that together form a symmetrical spiral, but one primary perspective and *what eludes it*. We could then very well decide, of course, that García-Alix's photographs are the main perspective on our X and Benjamin's fragments supplement them—and that, of course, would also be feasible as parallax suggests reciprocity—, but this paper sets out to examine the phototextual compositions of *El truco preferido de Satán* the other way around: to conceive of Alberto García-Alix's photographs as the elusive, spectral, parallaxic supplement that discovers aspects which remains hidden, 'buried' in Benjamin's fragments. As will become apparent in the next section, at times this relation of supplementarity develops in quite a harmonious, congenial way, but on other occasions, it actualizes, challenges or subverts the (explicit, 'tangible') content of Benjamin's fragments. In any case, this new perspective offered by García-Alix's photographs fills in—to quote once again Žižek's words—the “void of what we could not see from the first perspective.”

Three paradigmatic examples have been selected from *El truco preferido de Satán* for the subsequent analysis, in the hope that they may serve as suitable stand-ins able to reveal the overall *modus operandi* at work in the collection. At the same time, the approach this article suggests may prove to be a style of analysis that is at least concomitant (or perhaps even complicit) with the structure and orientation Talens and García-Alix gave their adaptation of Benjamin's thought, which is, as we have seen, that of an associative, free and (even more) non-linear approach to a fraction of the monumental *Arcades Project*.

Our first example returns the motif of mirror, reflection, and gaze we have already encountered in the brief 'opening statement.' As a matter of fact, it is a rather frequent, recurring motif in the entirety of Benjamin's text (cf. Benjamin 2002, 537-542, *passim*), which qualifies this first selection as a suitable and representative point of departure from which to begin our exploration. As a general rule, I have opted to cite the fragments (coupled with their respective images) in full, so as to preserve the integrity and,

frankly, the beauty of Benjamin's formulations.⁴ Thus, the following pages on the one hand propose a kind of simulacrum of three of the compositions comprised in *El truco preferido de Satán*, while offering, on the other hand, and more importantly, a parallax reading of the tense relations that arise from the difference between photograph and text, image and letter.

One

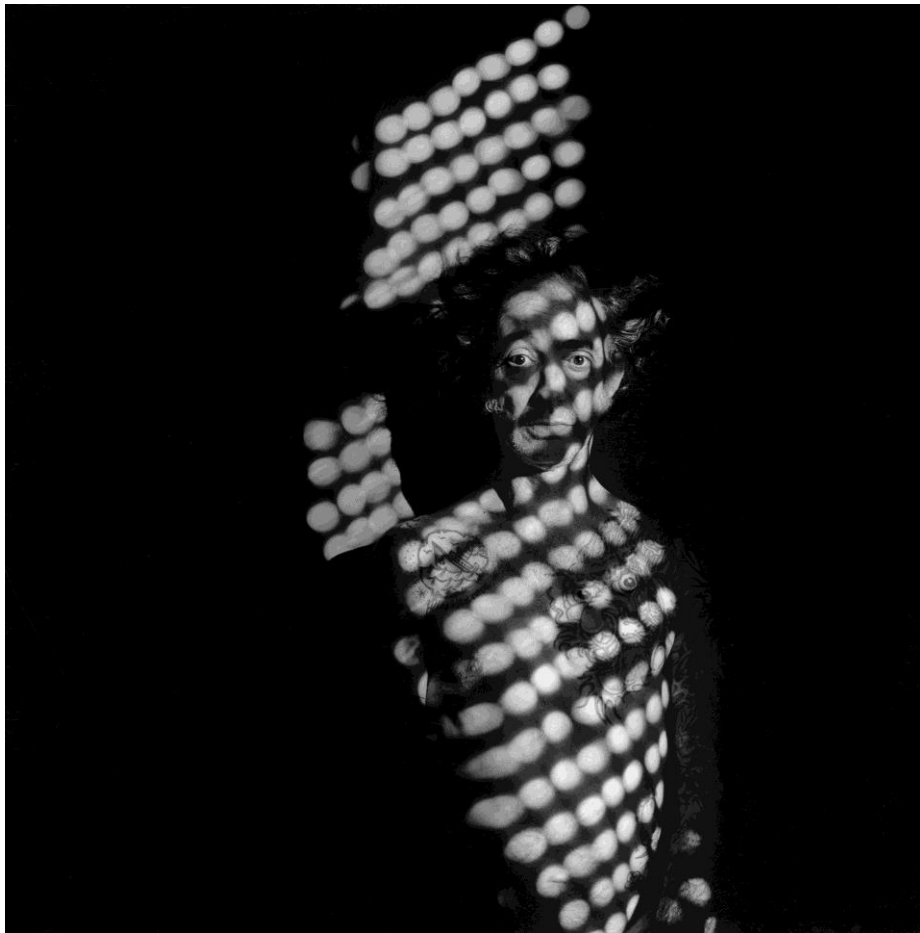


Fig. 1. Benjamin, Talens, García-Alix 2012, 136.

Paris is the city of mirrors. The asphalt of its roadways smooth as glass, and at the entrance to all *bistros* glass partitions. A profusion of windowpanes and mirrors in cafés, so as to make the inside brighter and to give all the tiny nooks and crannies, into which Parisian taverns separate, a pleasing amplitude. Women here look at themselves more than elsewhere, and from this comes the distinctive beauty of the

⁴ At the risk of stating the obvious, the English versions of all of Benjamin's fragments have been extracted from the accomplished translation by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, published by Harvard University Press in 2002 (Benjamin 2002).

Parisienne. Before any man catches sight of her, she already sees herself ten times reflected. But the man, too, sees his own physiognomy flash by. He gains his image more quickly here than elsewhere and also sees himself more quickly merged with this, his image. Even the eyes of passersby are veiled mirrors, and over that wide bed of the Seine, over Paris, the sky is spread out like the crystal mirror hanging over the drab beds in brothels. (Benjamin 2002, 537-538).

The image we see here paired up with our first fragment is a self-portrait of Alberto García-Alix, which supplements Benjamin's musings on gaze, reflection, and self-contemplation in an engaging manner. In a way, we can conceive the reflection in the mirror and the contemplation of one's own body in a photograph as two perspectives that themselves result in a parallax; an observation pointed out by Karatani:

In the mirror, one sees one's own face from the perspective of the other. But in today's context, photography must also be taken into consideration. [...] Although the mirror image can be identified with the perspective of the other, there is still certain complicity with regard to one's own viewpoint. After all, people can see their own image in the mirror as they like, while the photograph looks relentlessly 'objective.' Of course, the photograph itself is an image (optical delusion) as well. What counts then is the 'pronounced parallax' between the mirror image and photographic image. (2003, 2).

García-Alix's image and Benjamin's fragment thus entwine in a parallaxic spiral that evolves over the theme of self-observation, with one supplying thoughts on its 'human side' through detailing the Parisians' curious relationship with mirrors and reflective surfaces in general, while the other illustrates a second possibility of human self-contemplation: through the lens of a camera. Beyond this first differential relationship, we may even encounter in this fragment, albeit in a germinal form, a certain duality that opens up between the human gaze and the 'mechanical gaze' of the lens. At the same time, García-Alix's quiet, even somewhat reticent image distances itself markedly from the text by setting a diverging mood, so to speak, which contrasts with the atmosphere of velocity and over-exposure that Benjamin describes. The idea of over-exposure may then, on the other hand, be present in the numerous little circles of light that cover his body to the point of shrouding it. These might even be seen as visual renditions of the points of impact of the other's gaze, or, and this is an ever broader conjecture, approximate the image of the photographer to that of the thousand-eyed Argus, the mythological creature whose body consists solely of eyes.

Two

Fig. 2. Benjamin, Talens, García-Alix 2012, 73.

For the first time in history, with the establishment of department stores, consumers begin to consider themselves a mass. (Earlier it was only scarcity which taught them that.) Hence, the circus-like and theatrical element of commerce is quite extraordinarily heightened. (Benjamin, 2002, 43).

Streets are the dwelling place of the collective. The collective is an eternally wakeful, eternally agitated being that—in the space between the building fronts—lives, experiences, understands, and invents as much as individuals do within the privacy of their own four walls. For this collective, glossy enameled shop signs are a wall decoration as good as, if not better than, an oil painting in the drawing room of a bourgeois; walls with their *'Défense d'afficher'* are its writing desk, newspaper stands its libraries, mailboxes its bronze busts, benches its bedroom furniture, and the cafe terrace is the balcony from which it looks down on its household. The section of railing where road workers hang their jackets is the vestibule, and the gateway which leads from the row of courtyards out into the open is the long corridor that daunts the bourgeois, being for the courtyards the entry to the chambers of the city. Among

these latter, the arcade was the drawing room. More than anywhere else, the street reveals itself in the arcade as the furnished and familiar interior of the masses. (Benjamin 2002, 423).

The photograph García-Alix and Talens selected to enrich these two fragments —which in turn constitute a genuinely new blend since both of them are located in different sections of Benjamin's actual work⁵—is one that the photographer took on a journey to China (cf. Talens 2017). It establishes an even more striking counterpoint to Benjamin's text, in a gesture we could perhaps refer to as a form of negative supplementation. The brand-new high-rise apartment building stands out in the fog as a solitary monolith, contrasting starkly with the bustling, cheerful scene that Benjamin develops through the comparison of a bourgeois salon to a street scene as the 'home' of the masses. In his description he evokes the dynamism, power, and restlessness of the collective, referring to it as 'eternally wakeful, eternally agitated being' that fills the interstices of the urban scenery with life. García-Alix, on the other hand, in a photo that may well be understood as an actualization of Benjamin's text, shows no 'real' collective whatsoever, merely a massive apartment building—the petrified dwelling of the masses, so to speak—that lacks any signs of actual, social, communal life. He thus conjures up a somber image of gentrification, of pacification of the collective; an impression we can fittingly link to the geographic origin of the photograph. Historically, China has valued the mobilization of the masses very highly, but today many Chinese to some may appear more than ever sedated by the 'joys' and amenities of modern consumerism. The choice to supplement a description of the busy life in the streets of Paris with this sterile, bleak photograph of a Chinese apartment building engulfed in smog might then, in a final step, even be conceived as a commentary on the fluctuations of global power relations, as a historical actualization, a shift from 'the capital of the 19th century', as Benjamin famously called Paris, towards a new world order that functions, desires and articulates itself in a fashion that differs considerably from 'the old ways'.

⁵ This statement must of course be taken *cum grano salis*, as Benjamin's compilation of ideas, quotations, notes, and other textual items was never published in a 'final', definitive form.

Three



Fig. 3. Benjamin, Talens, García-Alix 2012, 82.

Paris created the type of the *flâneur*. What is remarkable is that it wasn't Rome. And the reason? Does not dreaming itself take the high road in Rome? And isn't that city too full of temples, enclosed squares, national shrines, to be able to enter—with every cobblestone, every shop sign, every step, and every gate-way—into the passerby's dream? The national character of the Italians may also have much to do with this. For it is not the foreigners but they themselves, the Parisians, who have made Paris the promised land of the *flâneur*—'the landscape built of sheer life;' as Hofmannsthal once put it. Landscape—that, in fact, is what Paris becomes for the *flâneur*. Or, more precisely: the city splits for him into its dialectical poles. It opens up to him as a landscape, even as it closes around him as a room.

That anamnestic intoxication in which the *flâneur* goes about the city not only feeds on the sensory data taking shape before his eyes but often possesses itself of abstract knowledge—indeed, of dead facts—as something experienced and lived through. This felt knowledge travels from one person to another, especially by word of mouth. But in the course of the nineteenth century, it was also deposited in an immense literature. Even before Lefeuve, who described Paris '*rue par rue, maison par maison*'; there were numerous works that depicted this storied landscape as backdrop for the dreaming idler. The study of these books constituted a second existence,

already wholly predisposed toward dreaming; and what the *flâneur* learned from them took form and figure during an afternoon walk before the *apéritif*. (Benjamin 2002, 417).

My third and last example revolves around the—supremely Parisian— notion of the *flâneur* that also constitutes a significant part of Benjamin’s musings. The counterpart to the *flâneur*—the object to his subject, if you will—is, of course, the cityscape, the urban environment that acts simultaneously as his ‘medium’ and as the main focus of his attention. García-Alix’s photograph selected to supplement this last fragment does, in fact, show a type of urban environs, although unambiguously discernible as ‘fake,’ with buildings that exist as pure surface, as part of a movie set or a stage decoration. Thus, both in contrast and convergence with Benjamin’s text, García-Alix’s image highlights the superficiality, the planeness—and perhaps, to some extent, also a certain artificiality—with which the *flâneur* is confronted on his promenades through the capital, insofar as he can only capture what is on the outside of the architectural and urbanistic tapestry that makes up a city: it becomes a “storied landscape,” a mere “*backdrop* (emphasis added) for the dreaming idler.” The idea of vitality evoked by Benjamin through the words of Hugo von Hofmannsthal (“sheer life”), nevertheless, is already lost in García-Alix’s image, insinuating perhaps the increasing difficulty of really connecting to an urban setting, of immersing oneself in the complex tangle of city life. (Charles Lefeuvre, in a way *the proto-flâneur*, still had the chance to get to know the residents and neighbors who actually inhabited the spaces he so meticulously registered;⁶ something that presumably had become already very difficult by the time of Benjamin’s observations).

If we extend this initial observation towards a more critical vantage point, we can even read the photo as an actualization, similar to the one identified in the previous example, that highlights how the centers of the great European metropolises—and in particular, in our present context, Paris—have been increasingly subjected to different forms of gentrification, which may also include ‘touristification’ and ‘museification’; developments that preserve the beautiful outer shell of a city, but that void it of its human activity, of its life.⁷ If we thus conceive the *flâneur* as a kind

⁶ Cf. in this regard for example the first (or, in actuality, one of the other four) tome(s) of Lefeuvre’s multi-volume work *Histoire de Paris, rue par rue, maison par maison*: a fascinating, incredibly detailed register of each and every house, building and structure in Paris in the 1870s and 1880s; that is, at the beginning of what is commonly dubbed the *Belle Époque* (see Lefeuvre 1875).

⁷ If you allow me a brief digression into the spheres of contemporary French literature: Patrick Modiano’s latest works give an excellent account of precisely this feeling of

of forerunner of the *tourist*—both certainly share the passion of wandering around and simply perceiving their environments, but, arguably, add little to the actual life of an urban space (cf. Urry and Larsen 2011, 97-118)—we can see how García-Alix's photograph (showing us a cityscape composed of mock buildings that are beautiful to look at, but devoid of any life) lends Benjamin's text a critical and very contemporary spin.

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estrangement and failure to identify with an urban environment once considered to be a warm, authentic and bustling 'home.'