



BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Leslie, Esther (2013) Homes for ghosts: Walter Benjamin and Kurt Schwitters in the cities. *Societies* 3 (4), pp. 414-426. ISSN 2075-4698.

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/25984/>

Usage Guidelines:

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html>
contact lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk.

or alternatively

Article

Homes for Ghosts: Walter Benjamin and Kurt Schwitters in the Cities

Esther Leslie

School of Arts, Birkbeck, University of London, Bloomsbury, London WC1E 7HX, UK;

E-Mail: e.leslie@bbk.ac.uk; Tel.: +44-203-073-8401

Received: 9 September 2013; in revised form: 22 October 2013 / Accepted: 28 October 2013 /

Published: 30 October 2013

Abstract: Under the influence of Freud’s dream analysis, Benjamin writes down a dream about Goethe’s house, which he has visited before and in whose visitor’s book he finds his name ‘already entered in big, unruly, childish scrawl’ and at whose dinner table he finds places set for his relatives, ancestors and descendants. This leads him to exclaim: when the ‘house of our life...is under assault and enemy bombs are taking their toll, what enervated, perverse antiquities do they not lay bare in the foundations!’. Benjamin’s other homes, his exile homes, real and those imaged—such as the cave-like arcades—are considered in this essay as repositories of ‘perverse antiquities’ and spaces inhabited by ghosts not just the ghosts of Goethe, but of friends who committed suicide in protest at war. These ghost-filled homes are set alongside those of a fellow exile, Kurt Schwitters, who built for himself three ‘Merzbau’ home-museums, each one as incomplete as Benjamin’s Arcades Project, each one wrecked by war, like that project too. Schwitters addresses the ghosts of the cities head on in his stories and artworks from exile—these are read alongside the effort to produce a safe domestic space, at whose centre is the death mask of his son.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin; Kurt Schwitters; Merzbau; Goethe; scraps; dreams

1. Dream Homes

Walter Benjamin’s *One-Way Street* was written in the 1920s. It is written out of the turmoil of the hectic streets of modern Germany. Its title intimates this, taking its name from one of those signs that litter the streets, directing traffic. It is a collection of vignettes, theses, anecdotes and aphorisms, which reflect on everyday life in the city according to themes such as the pressures of inflation, the developments of technology, and the new modes in which information is communicated—by neon

signs, posters, newspapers, pamphlets. The opening vignette in *One-Way Street* points to an urban setting, drawing readers' attention, through its heading, 'Filling Station', to a modern structure, necessitated by the world of cars and motorbikes. It is the place where vehicles tank up on fuel. It is a place where energy is bought. Under this title, Benjamin makes the polemical demand to abandon the book in favour of a writing born of action and embodied in the rapid responses of leaflets, placards, articles and brochures. Heeding this advice, litterateurs might acquire renewed energies. Benjamin adopts something of this procedure in writing a fragmentary book composed of aperçus, dream notes, postulations and bullet points. After an appeal to writers to be more like mechanics, injecting a little opinionated oil into this or that part of the vast apparatus of social existence, Benjamin's transcript turns suddenly inward. The public world of the streets is left behind and a series of interiors are evoked. Is this turning inward a fulfilment of the demand to be polemical? It appears to be an insistence that urgent, rapid prose is not to be confined to the world of politics, but that the articulations of subjectivity might also need to be couched in new forms.

First we find ourselves at morning time, inside a house. Under the heading 'Breakfast Room', Benjamin draws attention to the transitional space and time between sleeping and waking. He describes awakening, but the dream world is not left fully behind. He recounts a popular tradition urging that dreams should not be related on an empty stomach ([1], pp. 444–445). Our surfaces may be wiped clean with flannels, but our hidden depths are still suffused by the mire of the dream. Refusing to eat, Benjamin states, is the strategy of one who would shun the day. It is a tactic of someone who refuses to lose the sense of being under the sway of the dream. For the dream is productive. It is a source of energy. The resources retained from the tenacity of the dream might then, he notes, be combusted in a morning's work. The dream can be transmuted into creative work, perhaps into poetic writing, as the Surrealists well knew. Perhaps the dream can be translated into other types of knowledge, for example, into the necessary state of mind that would overturn the settled world of day, with its light of reason, in the name of an inspired life. But more likely the dreamer eats breakfast, dispels the dream, compacts it deep inside the self once more, and so reaches its further side, which Benjamin calls memory. Dream contents transmute into buried memories. It is these that Benjamin dredges up in the next vignette.

One-Way Street's next section, headed '113', is divided into subsections, or rooms. The first room is the cellar, which appears under the motto 'The hours that hold the figure have run their course within the house of the dream'. This line is one of Benjamin's own compositions, from a cycle of sonnets that he wrote upon learning of the death of a boyhood friend, Fritz Heinle. Heinle, a comrade in the Youth Movement, killed himself in protest at the outbreak of the World War in August 1914. The figure—Heinle—and a house of dreams are evoked. Time has run out for this dream-house. The time of the figure it sheltered has gone. The vignette that follows this line of poetry develops this sense of the house as a shape from a dream and as a repository of memory. The house is a place in which things, objects, treasures are stored away, perhaps in cellars or strongboxes, just as are dream thoughts and memories. These hidden items only re-emerge after a ransacking or similar violent act. The course of our life is like a house built over time, but begun long ago. Much of what has occurred in it is lost to memory. It is fallen into crevices or under piles of other clutter. Benjamin writes:

We have long forgotten the ritual by which the house of our life was erected. But when it is under assault and enemy bombs are already taking their toll, what enervated, perverse antiquities do they not lay bare in the

foundations. What things were interred and sacrificed amid magic incantations, what horrible cabinet of curiosities lies there below, where the deepest shafts are reserved for what is most commonplace. In a night of despair I dreamed I was with my first friend from my school days, whom I have not seen for decades and had scarcely ever remembered in that time, tempestuously renewing our friendship and brotherhood. But when I awoke it became clear that what despair had brought to light like a detonation was the corpse of that boy, who had been immured as a warning: that whoever one day lives here may in no respect resemble him ([1], p. 445).

We do not track constantly how our life came to take on the shape it did, generated from a million tiny events and encounters. Foundational for the house of the self is the cellar, which is the oldest part. More is stored there than we care to know. Brutally and compulsorily, old work is shoved in there—such is the character of ritual. Ritual involves the sacrifice of other possibilities. Ritual is the name for the life that came to be, unconsciously. Dreams and failures are archived in the cellar too. Much is forgotten, until the moment when the house of the self is under sustained assault. When this occurs, our very foundations are rattled. Benjamin suggests that once this assault has occurred, we are cut adrift from our pasts and become fully transformed.

War, in this case, the Great War, produces a rubble and ruination of the physical world. Destroyed too is the psychological world. As the familiar structure of the self shatters, ‘perverse antiquities’ come to the fore. The old stuff in the basement is exposed to the light of day. These antiquities may be habits, that which is most commonplace and most unconscious, whose origins have never been questioned. They may be forgotten experiences, people, relationships or objects, unremembered until now, but once decisive for a life and its forming. Benjamin dreams of a friend. He dreams of someone who formed an axis of his universe, but is now lost. The friendship that shaped Benjamin’s world when he was young is a ruin. The perverse antiquity, which becomes clear to him on awakening, is the corpse of a friend, the husk of a relation. It forms the foundation of his being, but is a died-off part of him, until the moment when an existential threat arises and the foundations need examination. In his being smashed to smithereens, Benjamin looks back across the decades to find that who he was is someone else, as are those he knew or knows no longer. The corpse of the boy may be his friend’s or his own. In either case, in its reassembly, it is no longer anyone that he resembles, though it forms part of his foundations. We are also who we are not. In dream, the past can be innocently inhabited. We live the lives we used to live. Chronology has lost its power. Development goes into reverse. The house of the self carries in it a mausoleum or museum. Awake again all is detonated. There is no going back to what we were, but in detonating it we can pick up the shards and scraps and attempt to make meanings from them. To make meanings of them would be to wake up, to lose the sway of the dream. This is not in order to compress ourselves into the rationality of banality, but so that we may perceive the present as the culmination of all that has gone before. The recognition of awakening arrives after a descent into the depths, such as into a cellar, in order to confront the past, or to find the clichéd skeleton in the cupboard. Benjamin realises that he too is dead in relation to his previous self. The dream conveys a flashing recognition: the Benjamin of the present cannot claim a unity with the past, neither a personal nor a collective one. He is different. The world is altered.

There are many instances, for example, in the *Arcades Project*, where Benjamin shows that it is necessary to enter into the depths, the underworld or the unconscious, in order to awaken to the

present. Benjamin's thoughts may be individualised and of significance to all dreaming humans at all times, but they are also historical. Industrial capitalism, modernity, the modern: these have generated powerful dreams. The commodity phantasmagoria has seduced many into imagining lives of plenty, beauty and wealth. But what this economy and this society engendered alongside its endless arrays of goods are war and imperialism, violence and penury. The dreaming hordes have to awaken to the disappointing actuality of the world, as prelude to its overturning. Such insight pervades Benjamin's sense of historical movement. For him there is no continuity of past and present, no progressive development from one thing to the next, one event to the next. Rather there are episodes, zigzags, discontinuities, breakages. We dream of fullness, but wake up to a few shards and scraps that we hold in our hands.

Benjamin writes under the sway of Marx and Freud. Both Marx and Freud deny strict linearity or dull chronology. Both set in motion an understanding of the ways in which the action of the past works on the present and the present works on the past – for example, Freud's notion of *Nachträglichkeit*, deferred action, in which the past influences the present. There is also the Freudian idea that memory's fragmented format highlights the role of forgetting and creative reconstruction of pasts in the present, as part of a shaping of a dynamic notion of the self. For Marx, the world has long dreamed of something of which it has only to be conscious in order to possess it in reality. The present emerges out of a past that took one route and not another. Past actions make the present, but past dreams resonate in the present, and demand yet to be realised. The present can be seen through the past. Through the past the present may come to be known. Marx, for example, studies so-called primitive societies in order to expose the historical and non-eternal, non-natural character of the contemporary capitalist mode of production, of private property and individualism. This is what a consideration of the olden days can do. It allows a moment of critical relation to the present. It recalls that there have been other ways, even if they too were not the best, and it can give us somewhere else to imagine ourselves into, away from the blighted and suffocating now. It is about engagement. The Marxist Ernst Bloch expressed his mobilisation of the dream and the ancient spirits in the following typically enigmatic terms in his book on Thomas Müntzer published in 1921:

Thus we certainly do not look back, even here. Rather, we involve ourselves vigorously. And the others also come back, transformed, the dead return, their acts want to be fulfilled once again with us ([2], p. xi).

Bloch evokes old work that needs yet to be completed. The dead return and they are not passive, but demand historical justice, or a historical part in the future. The ghosts are activists.

The next vignette in *One-Way Street* takes place under the sign of another room, or dream of a room. It is a vestibule. The exploration of the house becomes a tour of a house, such as one might make in a house that has become a museum. Benjamin is our guide. The house into whose vestibule he steps is Goethe's home in Weimar, or its dream analogue. Here we encounter a ghost in the shape of a reanimated poet, Goethe. Benjamin transposed a dream from his 'Dream Almanac' to *One Way Street*.

Vestibule. A visit to Goethe's house. I cannot recall having seen rooms in the dream. It was a perspective of whitewashed corridors like those in school. Two elderly English lady visitors and a curator are the dream's extras. The curator requests us to sign the visitors' book lying open on a desk at the farthest end of a passage. On reaching it, I find as I turn the pages my name already entered in big, unruly, childish characters ([1], p. 445).

Benjamin's dream-visit to Goethe's house takes him to the home of German letters. In this home, the tradition finds its origin. Benjamin visits, in his dream, the deeply buried layers of German literary Classicism that formed him. This was the substratum of his education, which may explain the big unruly childish letters of his name that he finds in the visitors' book. This seems to acknowledge that this poetry had formed him when he was young. This part of literary Classicism arrives in his present adulthood as something that no longer resembles itself—as becomes ever truer of the Classical legacy of *Humanität* once it is distorted in the epoch of National Socialism. The old work is not completed, or is wrongly completed. Benjamin had fought over the legacy of Goethe in the 1920s. His first substantial piece of literary criticism was a study of Goethe's late novel *Elective Affinities*, wherein he mercilessly attacked other, much more established critics for their focus on the author and his biography, rather than the work. Moreover the picture of the author that is built up assimilated him into a non-contradictory historical continuity, which is no sort of history at all, for it eternalises the image of the past ([3], pp. 320–321).

In a letter to a friend on 30 January 1928, Benjamin stated baldly that his engagement with German letters was finished ([4], p. 322). In 1925, he had had an unhappy experience with his teaching *Habilitation*, which he had, upon advice, withdrawn from submission, before it could be failed. This excluded him from a teaching post in a German university. *One-Way Street* represented the beginning of a new, non-literary more Parisian—or Surrealist—cycle. It also signalled a move away from the relative security of academia and towards the precarity of reviewing and journalism. To return to an origin that is to become a closed off passage is poignant.

The dream lands him in Goethe's house in Weimar. Goethe lives there still, but only just—there is a visitors' book and a curator. Musealization is in process. The house of the self is a museum. The place in which Benjamin finds himself, in this dream, is also his school with its long white corridors. The school represented something harrowing for Benjamin, for it was pervaded by Prussian discipline and militarism. The city of Weimar was bound up with military questions for Benjamin. Benjamin had visited Weimar when he was a teenager and again as a student, in June 1914, speaking on behalf of the Free Student Movement, two months before his generation's significant encounter with death, the outbreak of the Great War. The war occasioned his break with the Youth Movement's pro-war leader Gustav Wyneken and the suicides of his comrades, the lovers Fritz Heinle and Rika Seligson. To dream of Goethe's house is to dream of childhood, or youth with its heady mix of promise and disappointment. It is a return to the borderline between the possibilities of that moment and the actuality of a historical nightmare of war. It is no surprise that Benjamin finds his infantile signature in the guestbook. He encounters his earlier self there, and presumably, upon awakening finds much that is corpselike about it and much that is deadly about the world that came into being, as he grew into an adult.

Benjamin is a guest in the house. A guest is no straightforward thing, and, if one stares far into the word, all sorts of words stare back. Guest is related to ghost, as well as host, hospes, hospitality, hostility, hostage. Here, as elsewhere, the antithetical nature of language is pushed to the fore. Hans Dieter Bahr, a student of Ernst Bloch, theorised the guest, teasing out and revealing the historical interstices of the word, which, he notes, 'apparently gets right to the core of all possible anthropologies' ([5], p. 74), that is to say beyond our merely and male human ones. In a contribution to the catalogue for Joseph Kosuth's Frankfurt installation 'Gäste und Fremde: Goethes Italienische Reise', 'Guests and Foreigners: Goethe's Italian Journey', Bahr begins by finding a politically

significant linguistic connection, or misconnection: the first syllable of the word for guest in German *Gast* and Latin *Hospes*, *ga* and *ho*, point to the word for human being, *gomo*, in Old High German, and *homo*, in Latin. All that comes subsequently in the catalogue essay is to show how, through further investigation of the word, the reduction of guest to human, and more specifically to its subpart, man, can be counteracted. The word guest, as he twirls and twists it, always contains what he calls ‘an unavoidable remainder’, which goes beyond the mere-ness of man. Guest, for Bahr, ‘is an old word on whose behalf we have always skirted the unsynthesisable dilemma of the opposition between implicit and explicit, between immanence and transcendence, between construction and method: namely the guest who is neither only at home, with himself, nor only on the road, beyond himself. He not only transcends the oppositions. He cuts across them’ ([5], pp. 80–81). There is, in relation to this, only one form of guest. It covers all, notes Bahr, adult or child, friend or stranger, lord or knave, a parasite or provider, a helper or menace, wanted or unwanted, an enemy or protector. And guest has to refer to a male or a female. There is no female form of guest, no guestess to match hostess. There is also no negative form: unguest or inguest. Hospitality and inhospitality refers only to the host’s acceptance or refusal of the role. Bahr argues that to be a guest is to be involved in an exchange. The guest accepts a gift or an outlay and may or may not give thanks or something in return. What is ultimately exchanged is the self. Guest belongs to another—this Bahr derives linguistically too, from the fact that women have for the most part belonged to an other, as evidenced in the word spouse, which also stems from *hospes*, guest. What Bahr finds in the word guest and in its linguistic permutations is that the guest is not reducible to a man, but is another, even another within the self to which one is open. Benjamin as guest is not himself, or not himself alone, but other to himself, and already ghostly.

The next room into which Benjamin ushers the reader of *One-Way Street* is a dining room. Again he recites a dream about Goethe.

Dining Hall. In a dream I saw myself in Goethe’s study. It bore no resemblance to the one in Weimar. Above all, it was very small and had only one window. The side of the writing desk abutted on the wall opposite the window. Sitting and writing at it was the poet, in extreme old age. I was standing to one side when he broke off to give me a small vase, an urn from antiquity, as a present. I turned it between my hands. An immense heat filled the room. Goethe rose to his feet and accompanied me to an adjoining chamber, where a table was set for my relatives. It seemed prepared, however, for many more than their number. Doubtless there were places for my ancestors, too. At the end, on the right, I sat down beside Goethe. When the meal was over, he rose with difficulty, and by gesturing I sought leave to support him. Touching his elbow, I began to weep for emotion ([1], pp. 445–446).

Benjamin is in a dream house again. It is the translation of an actual room in Weimar into a room that apparently does not resemble itself. In this unfamiliar room, Goethe is old. Elderliness suffuses the house, as if to emphasise Benjamin’s own youthfulness, if only this be the youthfulness that is recovered in the dream. Goethe hands Benjamin something antique, possibly a perverse antiquity. It is an urn. He is passing something on, perhaps a connection to the tradition of German letters. The bequest is perverse because it marks Goethe as a man who resides in the train of Antiquity, rather than the bourgeois industrial society, at whose threshold he stood. Perhaps it signals another type of world, a counterfactual one that Goethe represented as possibility, in his merging of art and life, as Benjamin put it in his essay on ‘Goethe, The Reluctant Bourgeois’, commissioned in the second half of

the 1920s for the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* [6]. The energy generated by the exchange is vast, much as is the energy generated by the undispersed dream which combusts into writing. The study where writing occurs is a bewitched space of creative forging and passionate experience. Benjamin, the German Jew, his relatives and ancestors are invited to gather at the festive board. This may be a reflection on the long-standing mutually assimilative drive of a certain strain in German culture, one that would be violently suppressed within ten years. Benjamin is touched and so touches the old man. In helping him move, Benjamin is moved beyond measure. Weimar literature, and the humane ideals it represented, is frail. *Humanität* is rescued only for the dream, for the dream house, for the museum. The tradition of *Humanität* is interred. It has no existence in the present and is but a historical ghost.

In June 1928 Benjamin wrote about his experience of Goethe's actual house. This journal article considers the space in which the poetic work went on: the study. It is a primitive room, which rejected any luxury.

Here the old man celebrated the vastness of the nights with his anxieties, guilt and despair, before the hellish dawn of bourgeois comfort began to cast its light in at the window ([7], p. 149).

Goethe stands at a threshold in time between a modest world and a decadent one to come. In the modest world, a cell, as Benjamin puts it, there is only a small step from bed to desk, from sleeping to writing.

Anyone who has had the good fortune to be able to collect his thoughts in this space will have experienced in these four little rooms, in which Goethe slept, read, dictated and wrote, the forces that bade a world give him answer when he struck the sounding board of his innermost being ([7], p. 150).

The calm and simplicity of the room mirrors the interior of the poet, which, struck by the forces held within its small domain, rings out clearly and loudly across the world. Goethe demands interlocution. The relation, notes Benjamin, is now reversed. The contemporary interior is drowned out by the noise of the world, by the street signs on one-way streets, and the clatter of cars and the prattling soundtracks of films. Now the whole world must be projected into the self, in order to elicit a small response from our inner being. That small chime is heard by few. On the one-way streets, communication is constant, but it is things, signs, posters that have become so loquacious.

We, however, have to make an entire world resound in order to cause the feeble overtone of our inner being to ring out ([7], p. 150).

We find ourselves only where our small shreds of self batter against the things world that talks.

Our houses form us and we form our houses. Our dreams, the ghosts of our past, and our things are stored in us and in our houses. This process is not simply an individual one, but a collective act, and it is subject to historical pressures. The pressures of the present drown out the individual. There is a pun to be made across languages: the German *Bildung* means formation, education. It interested the liberal progressive bourgeoisie as an ideology. The sound of the word echoes the English building. In fact, both have their origin in the proto-Indo-European verb 'to be', 'to exist' or 'grow'. Inner world and houses intermingle but the lesson of modernity is that city environments cut across this relation. The modern street cuts through the self and its houses, as the dedication of *One Way Street* suggests, in its mention of a dual cutting. One cut is made by Benjamin's Bolshevik lover, Asja Lacis. This is an emotional, formational one, and it evokes the other one, the one sliced by the engineers of a modern world:

This street is named Asja Lacis Street after she who, like an engineer, cut it through the author ([1], p. 444).

If houses form the self, cradling dreams and the transmission of dreams into work, Benjamin's experience after the publication of *One-Way Street* was aptly enough that of a succession of selves and a succession of incomplete and interrupted projects, and homes after homes. Benjamin by and large abandoned Germany at this point, in 1927, living from then on in France, Ibiza, Denmark, Italy, Moscow and elsewhere. Given his precarious mode of employment as a freelance writer, he was always searching for the cheapest place to exist—eat, sleep—and read and write. He reports in his diary in 1932 that, having spent all his money, he seriously considered living in a cave in Capri. He recognised he would endure any deprivation not to have to return to Berlin ([8], pp. 470–471). Benjamin was blown by historical forces from the cushioned bourgeois home of his childhood to the comfortless cave of the dispossessed.

Benjamin turns the fact of lack into a modernist gesture, as perversely affirmative as it could be under the circumstances. In a diary entry, and in its revised form in an essay from 1933 titled 'Experience and Poverty', Benjamin compares the sleek rooms of Bauhaus to the cluttered bourgeois apartments of the late nineteenth century. These rooms heaved with valuable ornaments and objects, keepsakes, knick-knacks, collectibles, art works. Benjamin insists that all of this clutter is not there in order to be cosy and inviting. Rather it exudes possession. It shrieks out to any incomer, 'you have no business here' ([8], pp. 472, 734). The modernist dream, engineered of glass and steel, was to prevent traces, to eschew the mark of possessions and the formation of habits. He contrasts a horror vision of the cluttered bourgeois parlour with the shiny and translucent potential lives to be lived amidst glass and steel. He notes:

Holding onto things has become the monopoly of a few powerful people, who, God knows, are no more human than the many; for the most part they are more barbaric, but not in the good way. Everyone else has to adapt, beginning anew and with few resources ([8], p. 735).

Artists and thinkers should not disregard or lament the impoverishment of experience, Benjamin suggests, but communicate it. He applauds those who do so. He points to the constructors who clear the decks—the cubists who follow the examples of the mathematicians, Brecht with his social-political dramaturgy of alienation, Adolf Loos with his unornamented buildings, Paul Scheerbart with his utopian fantasies of glass buildings and science fiction stories that think about how technologies transform people and fit them into the new homes. Honoured too is Paul Klee, whose figures, notes Benjamin, are designed on the drawing board like a car. These possess not innerness but an interior, just like a car too, and have something inhuman about them. Such figures he thinks might be suited to the new stripped down homes, which were no more than bare lodgings, unfilled rooms, often modifiable in a flash. Even more reduced versions of these—ones whose starkness was not by design—had been Benjamin's habitat for some time. These were homes for people who might need to leave them suddenly in the dead of night. They were homes for those who had to disappear without trace, those for whom citizenship or even a secure sense of subjectivity was an unavailable luxury.

The home becomes a temporary lodging. The objects it holds are pared down. Much has become the stuff of memory alone. Things return in dreams but may no longer resemble themselves, are not what they once were. Or they are filled with the junk of everyday existence, the stuff gathered simply to fill a space in the absence of a life, or at least one worth living. There was an artist, unmentioned by

Benjamin (and whose fate born strange parallels—exile, internment—until it diverged through his escape and Benjamin’s capture), who communicated strikingly the impoverishment of contemporary experience through the poverty of materials: Kurt Schwitters.

2. Scrap Merchant

Kurt Schwitters, until his exile from Germany in January 1937, lived in Hanover. Increasingly over the years he lived inside an inhabitable sculpture called the Merzbau. Its eight or so rooms had been worked on for over twenty years and in that time had enveloped to varying degrees Schwitters, his wife, their son, his parents, their lodgers and their pets. From 1934 Schwitters slept inside of his Merzbau, which was originally called The Cathedral of Erotic Misery. In 1919 Richard Huelsenbeck, the dadaist, described the Merzbau in its early stages:

Schwitters showed us his workroom, which contained a tower. This tower or tree or house had apertures, concavities, and hollows, in which Schwitters said he kept souvenirs, photos, birthdates and other respectable and less respectable data. The room was a mixture of hopeless disarray and meticulous accuracy. You could see incipient collages, wooden sculptures, pictures of stone and plaster. Books whose pages rustled in time to our steps, were lying about. Material of all kinds, rags, limestone, cuff links, logos of all sizes, newspaper clippings.

We asked him for details but Schwitters shrugged: ‘It’s all crap’ ([9], p. 66).

When Hans Richter visited Kurt Schwitters’ house in 1925 the column had expanded to fill almost all of the room on the second floor, where it had been placed. Richter described it as a ‘living daily-changing document on Schwitters and his friends’ ([10], p. 152). In Schwitters’ workroom there are objects, scraps, pile-ups of stuff, but none of it has value. It is all junk, which levels it all, even as it soars upward towards the ceilings. Everything that modern consumer society could throw up might find a place here. None is categorised or sorted. It is simply stuff, or the remains of stuff, or, even stuff become ghostly, a permanent guest in the house, so permanent, in fact, a whole series of rooms must be built to host it.

The home is re-invented as a repository, a museum or anti-museum. In 1931 Schwitters noted that the Merzbau encompassed ‘the development into pure form of everything that has struck me as important and unimportant over the last seven years’ ([11], pp. 340–341). These scraps are not rubbish. Each is rescued from the tip, having caught the eye of the collector. Each signals some stage in a creative act of reappropriation, or realignment. This act has produced ‘pure form’, though surely it has not, even as it lends its materiality and shape for formal purposes. This was an environment built of memories and personal associations, riddled with grottoes, niches, facets and caves, crammed with souvenirs and relics in glassy corridors. This was an attempt to hold onto a world of experience that threatened to disappear into memory or worse. Schwitters hosts the debris of modern life. All this becomes an emblem of everything that is consumed and forgotten, kicked underfoot in the grind of the everyday. It was an effort to document, record, transform, generate experience amidst the shards of modern life. This act of salvage becomes an attempt to hold onto something, anything, that might prove one still lives. It is a futile insurance against the becoming ghostly that ever threatens in the city, where the sense of self seems to be both built and smashed in the alienating flux of existence.

Prominent position was given in Schwitters' habitable sculpture to the youthful death mask of his first-born son. Death was at the heart of this living building. 'These fragments I have shored against my ruin' is a line in T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* from 1922 ([12], p. 69). How futile the efforts are becomes only starker with the violent disruption of home and public life instigated by the Nazis from 1933. Nothing can stave off the ruin.

3. Scrappy Knowledge

Knowledge comes in scraps, at least for those for whom scraps are all they get. Walter Benjamin had made an epistemology of the scrap. The subheadings of *One-Way Street* were salvaged from street signage and hoardings, and its photographic jacket by Sasha Stone was an energetic, hectic urban array of street furniture, vehicles, crowds and advertisements. In its opening vignette on the 'Filling Station', Benjamin insists that writing should 'nurture the inconspicuous forms that better fit its influence in active communities than does the pretentious universal gesture of the book—in leaflets, brochures, articles and placards. Only this prompt language shows itself actively equal to the moment' ([1], p. 444). Benjamin proposed the urgent communication of the telegram, postcard, leaflet or the economically articulate photomontage. Quotation was at the core of this. The languages around us are the vehicles of communication, but, after the crushing experience of war and capitalism, they need to be re-imbued with uncorrupted meaning. We speak using the words of others—but Benjamin hopes that somehow new resonances might be drawn out of them. In a letter to his friend Gershom Scholem, in August 1935, Benjamin revealed how he still set such redemptive quoting—a salvaging of scraps—at the heart of his method. He described his efforts, in his researches for the *Arcades* project, 'to hold the image of history in the most unprepossessing fixations of being, so to speak, the scraps of being' ([13], p. 685). Being is scrapped. The self is a remnant. The German word for scrap in this context is '*Abfall*', something that falls off, garbage, a clipping, torn-off, a thrown away piece of urban detritus. Scraps of everyday urban life find refuge in the *Merzbau* and the *Arcades Project*, as in the dream.

Schwitters had engaged in his own experiments on urgent writing, on a reinvigoration of the word and the letter. In 1925 Kurt Schwitters collaborated with Theo van Doesburg on a fairytale book called *The Scarecrow: Fairy Tale* (*Die Scheuche: Märchen*) ([14], pp. 71–84). The object was to revolutionise the children's story by the use of energized typography and an absurd, yet provocative storyline. The characters in the story—a scarecrow, a rooster, some hens and chickens, a farmer, a boy—are built out of letters, and the letters that form the words of the story shoot dynamically across the twelve pages of the pamphlet. All are engaged in a brawl over a lace scarf, a hat and a tuxedo. Even these inanimate objects join in the struggle. It ends when the ghosts of the former owners of the shawl, hat and tuxedo reclaim their objects and a boy, made of typographic elements, runs off with a cane stolen from the scarecrow by the farmer. The past takes back its old stuff; it re-appropriates it. The boy expropriates the farmer, and then, the fairytale concludes, the day turned very bright. The future, it would seem, is yet to be written. Objects, their places, their uses, their recycling, their theft, their salvage and salvation are approached in an object lesson for children by Schwitters and Doesburg.

If the fairytale thematised the having and the losing of objects, the *Merzbau*—indeed the whole *Merz* project of artworks, sculptures and so on—was a practical means of holding on to things and throwing away their old uses. Or it was a way of making them useful for art, or something else

altogether unprecedented. The object is a ghost to itself—with a past life overwritten by a new context. The ghost objects had to relinquish their passionate collector when he was compelled to leave Germany.

It must have been as hard to leave the Merzbau as the cave that Benjamin built for himself, a cave of writings and ideas. Benjamin built his cave in Paris. In fact it was a study of cave-like interiors, the arcades of Paris. The arcades were passages through blocks of buildings, lined with shops and other businesses. Montaged iron and glass constructions gave shelter to hectic juxtapositions of shop-signs, window displays of merchandise and mannequins, illuminations and reflective glass panes. For the *Arcades Project* Walter Benjamin organised thousands of transcribed quotations and notes into files, called *Konvolute*. He developed a symbol-system of cross-references. The files comprised a vast array of interlinked scraps, which Benjamin added to and investigated from 1927 until the time he was prised out of his Parisian cave. His friend Gretel Karplus-Adorno once joked that Benjamin inhabited the ‘cavelike depths’ of the *Arcades Project* and did not want to complete it ‘because you feared having to leave what you built’ ([3], p. 583).

Modern life catapults everything rapidly into oblivion. It makes ghosts of everything: traditions and objects alike. Schwitters and Benjamin found ways of making the ghosts of the city gather—in the Merzbau and in the *Arcades Project*. They gave the detritus of the past and the present lodging, an afterlife. They brought the ghosts to voice, allowing them to speak lines not heard in the usual chaos of city life. Benjamin made articulate the historical and social traces of objects, ideas and phenomena. Schwitters won from his lowly cast-offs an aesthetic power, a new beauty. Neither Schwitters nor Benjamin sought to ensconce their rescued objects in museums. It would not have been their proper home. New lodgings, new institutions, new modes of art making and scholarship were to be founded. The old work of art and literary scholarship was to be completed differently, transforming both.

The experience of Benjamin and Schwitters makes clear how people become ghosts too—ghosts to their former selves, uprooted, impact upon by new technologies and arrangements. Their modes of being are rendered obsolescent. The politicians and power-mongers of their world were active at making ghosts of people: men, women and children were to be wiped out, or sent, if lucky, into exile, to begin life anew.

Schwitters was at home in his self-made environment of the Merzbau. It gave refuge to the rubbish of the past, and modelled new futures for it all. Benjamin was at home in his Parisian confection. He had spent years mobilising all the ghost lives of the city and its objects: its lamps, cults, fashions, ideologies, dream houses, tourist guidebooks and the rest. Why should either of them leave? Because they had to. The cities were under assault again. The scraps would be shattered again. When Schwitters arrived as an exile in Norway, he set about making his second Merzbau, ‘Das Haus am Bakken’, a new lodging for the dislodged. He wrote in 1938 about how he intended to make it dismantle-able and transportable ([15], p. 365). That is, it should be a dwelling for one who might need to move it all very suddenly to who knows where. Like scraps in a collage or a montage, the Merzbau is stuck down in an available or possible place. It forms a whole, built out of ruins, like the dream does. Haus am Bakken had no building permit and so, to obscure it, the building was covered with camouflage and pine needles. Unfortunately it was made too much under the eyes of the police—in view of the Lysaker police station—for comfort. But these exile homes were not homes built for comfort. They would never, it seems, provide adequate cover. Schwitters had to and could move on, to England. He made his way to Scotland, was compelled into internment on the Isle of Man, found his way to London and

later to the Lake District. In a short story from September 1946 titled ‘Der schnelle Graben’, ‘the quick grave’, he gave a hopeful sign that all that had occurred in Germany, with its death regime of the 1930s and 1940s, might be left behind. History could begin again and differently. It was set in his home town of Hanover. He imagines, in this city he has not set eyes on for some time, the direction of the water channel being reversed, ‘as a sign that after the last war everything might be different’ ([16], p. 271.) Its unforeseen but happy side-effect is the chucking out of the water of all the people who have gone there to fling themselves to their deaths, for it is a notorious suicide spot. They spring back into life, happy to live again. Wiedergeburt—re-birth. There is another chance, until the channel is drained, as what turns into a circularity of jumpings in and flingings out occasions too much disruption. The waterfall’s reversal was, he says, a ‘triumph of technology’. It is, furthermore, the ‘suicide of suicide’ ([16], p. 330). Time is reversed, the wheel spins the other way. The negation is negated, as Hegel would have it. But only in the stories. Schwitters died, aged only 60, in 1948. In death he became far more successful as an artist than in life. In September 1940, Benjamin reached an ‘impassable frontier’, as Brecht wrote ([17], p. 184). He passed over to ‘a passable one’ in the only way he could, through suicide, or becoming ghostly.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

1. Benjamin, W. *Selected Writings, Volume 1*; Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, USA, 2004.
2. Tomba, M. *Marx’s Temporalities*; Brill: Leiden, The Netherlands, 2013.
3. Benjamin, W. *Selected Writings, Volume 1*; Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, USA, 1999.
4. Scholem, G.; Adorno, T. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin: 1910–1940*; University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL, USA, 1994.
5. Kosuth, J. *Gäste und Fremde: Goethes Italienische Reise* (in German); Stroemfeld/Roter Stern: Frankfurt/Main, Germany, 1999.
6. Benjamin, W. Goethe: The Reluctant Bourgeois. *New Left Review*, May–June 2010, pp. 69–93.
7. Benjamin, W. *Selected Writings, Volume 2.1*; Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, USA, 2004.
8. Benjamin, W. *Selected Writings, Volume 2.2*; Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, USA, 1999.
9. Huelsenbeck, R. *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer*; University of California Press: Berkeley, CA, USA, 1991.
10. Richter, H. *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*; Thames and Hudson: London, UK, 1965.
11. Schwitters, K. Ich und meine Ziele (1930/31). In *Das Literarische Werk* (in German); DuMont Buchverlag: Cologne, Germany, 1981; Volume 5.
12. Eliot, T.S. *Collected Poems: 1909–1962*; Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Boston, MA, USA, 1963.
13. Benjamin, W. *Briefe 2* (in German); Suhrkamp: Frankfurt/Main, Germany, 1978.
14. Schwitters, K. *Lucky Hans and Other Merz Fairy Tales*; Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, USA, 2009.
15. Schwitters, K. Bogen 1 für mein neues Atelier. In *Das Literarische Werk* (in German); DuMont Buchverlag: Cologne, Germany, 1981; Volume 5.

16. Schwitters, K. Der schnelle Graben. In *Das Literarische Werk* (in German); DuMont Buchverlag: Cologne, Germany, 1981; Volume 5.
17. Wizisla, E. *Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht: The Story of a Friendship*; Yale University Press: New Haven, CT, USA, 2009.

© 2013 by the author; licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>).